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Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:

2021-11-04

Deposited version:

Accepted Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Moleiro, C. & Roberto, S. (2021). The path to adulthood: A mixed-methods approach to the exploration of the experiences of unaccompanied minors in Portugal. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. 34 (3), 3264-3287

Further information on publisher's website:

[10.1093/jrs/feab033](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab033)

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**The Path to Adulthood: A Mixed-Methods approach to the exploration of the experiences of Unaccompanied Minors in Portugal**

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This paper is a postprint version of the manuscript published in the Journal of Refugee Studies (2021). [10.1093/jrs/feab033](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab033)

## Abstract

Unaccompanied minors who reach the age of majority often experience this transition as a complex stage. Insecurity and helplessness may arise and, in some cases, survival without the support of the institutions and services that previously protected them as minors in the host country may mean becoming at risk for social exclusion. The objective of the present study was to characterize unaccompanied minors in Portugal (N=67) and understand the processes of transition into the age of majority, using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interviews on autobiographical narratives) methodologies were used as a means of acknowledging the voice of minors/young adults in their trajectories and experiences. Two groups were included, with minors (in residential care) and youths who had already reached adulthood (living independently). Results illustrate diverse reasons for arrival in Portugal and distinct strengths and struggles in the integration experiences, with both positive and negative aspects being identified in the transition to autonomy.

*Keywords:* Unaccompanied minors; refugees; integration; adulthood; mixed-methods; narratives.

The Path to Adulthood: A Mixed-Methods approach to the exploration of the experiences of  
Unaccompanied Minors in Portugal

There are more than 25.4 million refugees worldwide and approximately half of them are younger than 18. By 2017, reports stated that unaccompanied children who applied for asylum, or that were already considered refugees, had reached 138.700. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 45.500 asylum requests by children in 67 countries.

Refugee minors are defined as those children younger than 18 years of age that are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, would have been responsible for doing so or children that have been separated from both parents (UNHCR, 1997). This definition is based on the refugee declaration (as referred to in the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention) used by the United Nations and adopted by many countries to determine eligibility for admission to states, where it has been determined that the term refugee applies to any person who “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR, 2007 [1951]).

Since the late 1980s, in European countries, unaccompanied children have been considered to be and classified as a new group that differs from those in migration history and policy (Enenajor, 2008; Halvorsen, 2002). Some authors consider that this group faces the greatest dangers when in transit (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick & Stein, 2012), and have been granted the right to receive special protection due to their specific status under the Convention on

the Rights of the Child (1989), which granted all children the equal right to safety, protection, the right to be heard, to be treated fairly, and to a childhood. These attributions have clearly contributed to the dissemination of specific reception and care facilities for these minors (Derluyn, 2018). In addition, this status guarantees refugee children equal rights to those of national children, whether they have a residence permit or are in the process of obtaining one (Kalverboer, Beltman, van Os & Zijlstra, 2017). According to this Convention, the best interests of minors must be guaranteed and be a primary consideration of States (Article 3). These may include housing, health care and reception. When children apply for asylum, they need to be provided with certain information and, as such, interaction procedures should be appropriate and take into account their emotional state, maturity and age (UNHCR, 2017).

In the European context, depending on the country in which they are located, the status granted to minors that apply for asylum may vary, such as refugee status (guaranteed by the Convention), specific temporary protection for unaccompanied minors, or another type of status (e.g. subsidiary protection) (EMN, 2015). In most European countries, children may also request protection as victims of trafficking. Research on unaccompanied minors has received some attention within a context of refugee studies and child rights studies (Chase, et al. 2008), psychosocial studies (Groark et al. 2010; Seglem et al. 2011), research on the pre-migration experiences of these minors (Thomas et al., 2004; Hopkins & Hill, 2010), and studies highlighting the prospects of unaccompanied minors (Hessle, 2009; Luster et al., 2009a, 2009b). A number of studies have focused on the views and intervention practices of professionals and institutions involved in working with unaccompanied minors (Kohli & Mitchell, 2007; Hopkins & Hill 2010). Fewer are the studies that have focused on what these children and youths have to say.

Most of the research regarding refugees, including unaccompanied minors, has centred on trauma as the main focus of attention (Miller et al. 2006; Steel et al. 1999). Psychopathological dimensions are often studied, namely post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety among children and young refugees (e.g. Murray, Davidson & Schweitzer, 2010). Several authors (e.g. Kirmayer et al., 2004) have criticised these approaches, stating they are a violation of these minors' human rights requiring alternative approaches that extend beyond the traumatic condition. Contrary to this trend, the importance of understanding individual stories and experiences has been studied (Neuner, Schauer, Klaschik, Karunakara, & Elbert, 2004), where a great deal of violence and persecution generally exist (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006), but, at the same, a resourcefulness that sustains these stories and allows past and present to reconfigure themselves into individual identities (Miller, Kulkarni, & Kushner, 2006).

During studies of this population, systemic or transactional approaches (e.g. Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993) have been suggested where the individual and family relationships of minors and, most importantly, the community and social settings in which they live are included, as well as the study of the impact of these actors on the reception and integration of unaccompanied minors (Papadopoulos, 2007).

For minors seeking asylum, the experience of childhood has often been shaped by contradictory experiences such as displacement, separation, fear and poverty (Hopkins & Hill, 2010). Youths who have been subjected to many adversities during childhood, both before and during reception, can face great challenges, such as feelings of loneliness, isolation, environmental and emotional instability (Hiles, Moss, Wright, & Dallos, 2013; Webb et al., 2017; Stein, 2006).

In the country of transit and origin, an unaccompanied minor's experience with the authorities (e.g., police, government or non-governmental actors) may have been negative or even traumatic. The way they recount their experiences can be significant for those who decide on their status (authorities) and are at the same time difficult because they recall the reasons that led them to flee from their countries of origin (Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff, 2008). It is therefore important that decision makers have a good understanding of the country of origin in the context of the children's narrative. In some cases, children hide information out of shame and a desire of not having to describe situations where they have resorted to some type of deception to survive. They often fear that this information may affect how they are perceived by those making the decision regarding their protection and reception (Given-Wilson et al., 2016).

The experience in the host country, including the refugee status determination process, is generally considered to be a source of stress. Furthermore, youths and children in host countries may be socially isolated and may be victims of racism and discrimination (Bhabha & Young, 1999; Lustre, Qin, Bates, Johnson & Rana, 2009a; Jakobsen et al., 2017).

Youth's transition to autonomy of life implies leaving the previous form of care, namely, institutional protection – as biological and developmental changes seen to ground bureaucratic and legal procedures by reaching 18 years of age, rather the psychosocial processes of becoming an adult and its social construal (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006; Côté, 2000). According to Valle and Bravo (2012), minors who reach the age of majority often experience this transition as a complex stage where feelings of insecurity and helplessness arise. In some cases, survival without the support of the institutions and services that previously protected them may mean becoming at risk for social exclusion. Studies (Stein & Munro, 2008; Stein, Wazard & Courtney, 2001) suggest that the transition into the age of majority is one of the more important issues that

should be researched in order to understand the living conditions of these youths and the type of resources needed to ensure their support.

According to Stein (2006), research has shown that the process of transition into adulthood of unaccompanied minors tends to be shortened and hastened, leading to situations of unemployment and marginalization. Indeed, experts recognize that youths may take longer to enter adulthood and to enter the job market (Settersten Jr. & Barbara, 2010). Considerable effort has therefore been placed into recognising that many youths still need specialised care and support after the age of 20 (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001).

A review of the literature has showed the importance of professional intervention during the transition out of residential care (Hiles et al., 2013; Hek, 2007; Chase et al., 2008) and stresses the importance of some levels of support, especially emotional support (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017), as well as the importance of preventing negative long-term effects (Duke, Farruggia & Germa, 2017).

Based on studies undertaken, Vervliet et al. (2014) stressed that it is necessary to follow-up on these minors during their period of stay in the country so that the difficulties and characteristics of the minors can be assessed during the various stages, and not only at the beginning of the stay or when they are admitted into an institution. Researching information relating to the characteristics of this population was therefore considered essential, by which the objective of this project was to gain in-depth understanding of the current reality of unaccompanied minors in Portugal and their experiences regarding their transition into the age of majority. The importance of this research project is significant due to the change in the global context of population mobility (different contexts of conflict on a global scale, new and different reasons to seek asylum, for example, sexual orientation and gender identity, and different



characteristics of the minor population seeking asylum), and because the number of minors has increased considerably in recent years. And finally, it should be noted that no systematic collection of information, or studies relating to minors who reach the age of majority and move on to an independent living protective measure, or even to independent living itself, thus leaving the *Casa de Acolhimento para Crianças Refugiadas - CPR* (Foster Home for Refugee Children - Portuguese Refugee Council) has been undertaken.

### **Method**

The objective of this study was to characterize unaccompanied minors and understand the processes of transition into the age of majority using mixed methodologies (quantitative and qualitative), with the help of a survey and autobiographical narratives, as a means of also acknowledging the voice of minors/adults in addressing their trajectories and experiences in the country.

### **Participants**

A total of 137 youths were contacted, including unaccompanied minors in residential care and older youths living independently. Of all youths contacted, 67 agreed to participate in this study: 15 were in residential care and 52 living independently. Based on the answers to the previous questionnaire, 35 minors were asked to participate in a more in-depth study by providing autobiographical narratives. Two groups were created: 1) 15 unaccompanied minors under protective measures and living at the Shelter for Refugee Children - Portuguese Refugee Council (CPR) who had been in Portugal for at least 6 months; 2) 20 unaccompanied minors who were now above 18 years old and living independently.

**Instruments**

1) Survey on personal and social characterisation of the youth: demographic characterisation data was collected as well as information on topics such as: i) requesting and granting asylum or subsidiary protection; ii) the relationship with the institutions involved in the process; iii) contact and integration at school and/or in the work environment; iv) access to the national health system; v) interaction with the Portuguese population; vi) and means and resources made available during protective measures and/or independent living.

2) Autobiographical narratives focusing on important issues, such as: i) the experiences of unaccompanied minors before and during their departure from their country of origin; ii) the impact of those experiences on their physical and emotional health; iii) the impact of arriving on their health and well-being, and their treatment upon arrival, in Portugal; iv) resources called upon during the various stages of the journey; v) the transition to independent living: vulnerabilities and resourcefulness; and vi) projects for the future.

**Procedure**

Data was collected in the project during the year 2019. Survey results were analysed using appropriate statistical procedures with SPSS software. For the current paper, the transcripts were analysed using content analysis, taking the most significant topics and subtopics into account. Our goal was to examine patterns across participants, in an empirically grounded, exploratory process (Krippendorff, 2018). The procedure undertaken followed the consensus-seeking method by means of the inter-judge agreement. The units of analysis were coded using NVivo software, using the topic as the statistical unit. The most frequent topics and subtopics were analysed and compared with the information collected during the various interviews.

Presenting findings with illustrations of categories was privileged (over their frequencies), as it was richer and more consistent with the method of narrative interviews.

All participants were provided with the initial information regarding this study, what its objectives were, an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, and informed about free participation. The elaboration of questions and the clarification of potential doubts was encouraged. After receiving this initial information, they were given a few days or weeks to reflect on the proposal. They were contacted again later to find out their decision. If they agreed, a date and time was scheduled to fill out the survey and/or to collect the narratives. In the case of unaccompanied minors in residential care who agreed to participate, someone from the institution confirmed that the youth understood what the study was about and that they participated freely. With regard to confidentiality and anonymity, the data collected was anonymised, stored safely and used exclusively for the purposes of this study. Participants were identified numerically, and any type of information relating to the country of origin, age, place of residence or school was removed in order to minimize any risk of identification. All youths who agreed to participate in the collection of the autobiographical narratives carried out in this study received a compensation for participating in the form of a small voucher that could be used in various stores for 1 year (as per funding of the project by the AMIF Action Grant “From minors to adulthood: integration and autonomy of unaccompanied minors” PT/2017/FAMI/153).

## **Results**

### **Survey Data**

The following results refer to the answers provided on their country of origin, migratory background, arrival in Portugal and reception experiences. The youths’ perspective regarding school, health, the relationship with the Portuguese context and the job market was also sought.

***Sociodemographic Characteristics.*** The results of this study refer to a sample of a total of 67 participants, with an average age of 20.3 years, where most respondents were male (n=56; 83.6%).

With regards to protective measures, 52 of the respondents were living independently. Corresponding to the characteristics of this measure, these participants were at least 18 years old, with the oldest participant being 27 years old, and an overall average of 21.15 years for this group.

The remaining 15 participants were still in Residential Care and their average age was 17.33 years, with ages ranging between 16 and 19. Although minors are expected to leave when they reach the age of 18, it is possible for them to stay longer if the conditions for transition to an independent life have not yet been met, or due to the competent authorities (Child and Youth Protective Services or the Juvenile Court) not having ruled on their autonomy yet. These youths had been in Residential Care for a maximum of 3 years, and 33% of them had been there for less than 1 year. The majority (66.7%) had been in the country for more than 2 years.

Considering the group as a whole, without taking protection measures into account, most of the youths came from Guinea Conacri (n=19; 28.4%), Mali (n=9; 13.4%), Sierra Leone and Congo (n=8; 11.9%). The sum of youths from these three countries corresponded to approximately 65.7% of the total sample. As far as religion is concerned, the majority were Muslim (67.2%), with only 29.9% being Christian. The most relevant legal status among the individuals that were Living Independently was subsidiary protection (n=24; 46.2%), while temporary authorization was the most frequent status among the minors in Residential Care (n=8; 53.3%). Overall, approximately 62.7% of the participants fell under either these two legal categories. The remaining participants had been granted Asylum (n=8, 11.9%), or had a

Residence Permit (n=8, 11.9%). It should be noted that 8 participants did not have any documentation (11.9%) and the legal status of 5 of the total number of respondents (7.5%) was unknown.

***Country of Origin.*** The majority of the youths surveyed came from urban backgrounds (59.7%), either from large cities (34.3%) or small towns (25.4%). In their country of origin, more than half was studying (60.6%) and 24.2% of these were also working. In fact, only 13.4% of youths did not have any schooling, the majority had completed basic education, either at a 4<sup>th</sup> grade (33.3%) or 9<sup>th</sup> grade level (34.8%).

The main motivation referred by them for leaving the country of origin was the feeling of personal insecurity (n=26; 41.3%), followed by ethnic conflict (n=17; 27.0%) or armed conflict (n=5; 7.9%), and political persecution (n=5; 7.9%).

With regards to household composition, 20 of these youths (35.1%) were orphans of both parents, and another 23 (40.4%) had lost their father. This topic also revealed a high rate of non-response (10 did not answer), with 8 of these youths not knowing whether their parents were alive or not. Still on the subject of family, it should be noted that none of the youths had attempted to reunite with their family. Regarding the possibility of returning to the country of origin, 42.4% did not wish to return to their country of origin, others replied “perhaps” (30.3%) and the rest wanted to return (27.3%).

The family background of these youths in their country of origin had consisted of parents with low schooling and occupations linked to agriculture and commerce. Fathers and mothers with higher education only made up approximately 10% of the sample and a large percentage of mothers had no education (n=30; 46.2%) or only basic education (n=11; 16.9%). It should be noted, however, that a considerable number of these youths did not know their father’s

(26.6%) or their mother's (18.5%) qualifications. More than half of the mothers of these youths were either housewives (46.2 %) or unemployed (13.8 %). The most frequent occupation among the mothers was in the sales and commercial sector, while among the fathers it was in agriculture (n=15; 23.4%).

**Reception.** The majority of the youths living independently that were surveyed had subsidiary protection status (53.8%) and only 15.4% had asylum status. The majority of youths in residential care were waiting for an answer (42.9%). Particularly, it should be noted that the most frequent response time for an international protection request was more than 12 months, either for youths living independently (59.6%) or in residential care (38.5%). As a result, many youths leave the residence without an answer. Both groups of youths had had on average of +2 meetings at the Child and Youth Protection Commission, up to a maximum of 5 meetings. As a rule, youths are assigned a case worker (from several possible backgrounds such as social work, psychology, education, or other) from the refugee centre or another organism; nonetheless, the support entails mostly administrative, legal and financial support, and there is a change to a different case worker every time the process is assigned to a distinct organism (as it is the case once the participants reach 18).

During this reception process, the youths referred this experience with the various entities involved as relatively positive (M=3.43 by youths living independently, and M=3.71 by youths in residential care, on a scale of 1-5). As far as the CPR (Portuguese Refugee Council) is concerned, its institution received a very positive assessment from the group of youths living independently (M=4.1), with a slightly lower assessment being made by the youths in residential care in comparison with the assessment average of other entities (M=3.54).

Regarding monthly financial support, the situation was different for the two groups. Most youths living independently received between 250 Euros (23.1%) and 426 Euros (30.8%) a month, and 57.1% considered that these amounts were not enough to cover their expenses (the value corresponds, roughly, to 1/3 to 2/3 of the minimal national wage). However, the most prevalent opinion among youths in residential care was that the amounts received were not sufficient (78.6%), especially because they received 16 Euros a month, the official amount established for monetary support (a very small allowance).

**School.** For most participants, classes of Portuguese as a foreign language were made available, both at the refugee centre and at school. Youth were provided this opportunity a few hours per week; however, as the learning process was slow, an initial period of time elapsed in school where they reported to not understand most class contents and interpersonal interactions. Class placements were mostly done based on school transcripts from the countries of origin, when those were available; otherwise, placements in a grade/class or in professional training was conducted based on an initial brief assessment. With regards to the Portuguese language, youths in general understood Portuguese better than they spoke it. The youths living independently (3.8 and 3.4, respectively) understood and spoke Portuguese on a slightly higher level than those in residential care (3.46 and 3.20).

Regarding the educational development aspects, approximately 55.2% of the youths surveyed strongly agreed that school was a place where they felt safe, with only 4.5% disagreeing with this idea of being safe at school. Similarly, 47.8% of the youths strongly agreed that teachers make an effort to help them keep up with the subjects taught, which provides a positive image of the relationship with teachers. However, not everyone felt comfortable approaching them to ask questions (10.4% disagreed and 35.8% strongly disagreed). Youths also had divided opinions

regarding their relationship with their schoolmates. Approximately 43.7% of the youths agreed that it was easy to make friends with schoolmates (14.9% agreed and 28.8% strongly agreed), while others had some difficulty in doing so (23.9% disagreed and 7.5% strongly disagreed). A point of consensus among all was the feeling of non-discrimination due to their refugee status within the school context (68.7% strongly disagreed that they felt discriminated against in school).

**Health.** With special regard to their health, the data showed that these youths perceived they were relatively healthy, and 71.2% reported not having been ill in the past 6 months. However, more than 50% had visited their primary care physician at least once ( $M=1.37$ ;  $SD=1.12$ ). Of those, 40.3% referred that the visit was motivated by an illness; however, a number of the visits to the health centres were the result of routine check-ups (28.4%). Nevertheless, most referred to their health as excellent (58.2%), even when compared to other people of the same age.

The relationship with physicians was evaluated positively, despite a high number of non-responses (22.4%). Well over half of the youths felt they were understood with regards to their problem (16.4% agreed and 46.3% strongly agreed); however, this percentage decreased to 47.8% when asked about their confidence in the physicians and their health problem being solved (1.5% agreed and 46.3% strongly agree). An important part of understanding these relationships was the degree of trust these youths placed in the physician's ability to understand their contexts and values (4.5% agreed and 32.8% strongly agreed), an ability regarding which 31.3% had shared reservations (neither agreed nor disagreed). Similarly to the educational context, youths did not feel discriminated against for being refugees in their relationship with the



physician (68.6% - of whom 11.9% disagreed and 56.7% strongly disagreed with having been discriminated against).

***Individual well-being.*** The perceived individual well-being was reflected in the youth's answers to items that relate to satisfaction with themselves as well as with others. As such, in questions related to self-worth, these youths demonstrated high satisfaction with themselves (88% - 31.3% agreed and 56.7% strongly agreed), as well as being highly confident that they are capable of doing the same things that most other people can (89.6% - 28.4% agreed and 61.2% strongly agreed), and strongly disagreeing that they "feel worthless" (86.6%). Only on the subject of personal pride did a wider range of opinions appear, where approximately 31.3% felt that they had little to be personally proud of (20.9% agreed and 10.4% strongly agreed). With regards to being satisfied with their relationship with others, despite an equally positive assessment, 29.8% of the youths disagreed with having someone who they could count on (17.9% disagreed and 11.9% strongly disagreed), or simply someone who made them feel better (31.3% - 20.9% disagreed and 10.4% strongly disagreed).

***Community context.*** Regarding the community life aspects of the youths in Portugal, only 17.9% reported belonging to youth organisations, and the overwhelming majority (91%) did not know of refugee organisations in Portugal. Despite an apparent weak political involvement - only 10.4% indicated a relationship with political groups/parties - a large proportion (58.2%) reported they would consider voting in future elections. In their opinion, the building of friendly, or close, relationships with Portuguese people seemed relatively easy to the youths (44.8% - 14.9% agreed and 29.9% strongly agreed with this idea). With regards to their treatment by the Portuguese society, the youths did not consider there to be any rejection (20.9% disagreed and 50.7% strongly disagreed), or unfair treatment of refugees (13.4% disagreed and 50.7% strongly

disagreed). However, even when people appeared to accept refugees, participants indicated that they believed some distrust existed (22.4 percent agreed and 16.4 percent strongly agreed with this expression). When asked whether rejection was not expressed but revealed by treating them differently, although the majority disagreed, 19.4% of youths agreed and 11.9% strongly agreed with this expression of discrimination.

**Job Market.** Of the 67 youths surveyed, 23 were in the job market, which corresponded to 34.3% of the total number of participants. The largest number of workers was concentrated in the Construction sector (n=5; 35.7%), followed by Agriculture (n=3; 21.4%) and the Catering Industry (n=3; 21.4%). Of those remaining, 3 reported working in commerce, one in car repairs and another in the cleaning sector, while others did not refer the sector. With regards to pay, most of the youths considered the amounts they were paid for the work they performed to be fair (82.9%); however, only 65.2% of the youths considered this amount to be enough to cover their expenses. In this work context, the youths reported being reasonably satisfied with work (M= 3.7).

### **Qualitative Data**

The qualitative data resulting from the autobiographical narratives was organized sequentially according to the life events, starting with a description of the country of origin and decision for leaving, continuing with the process of arrival and the experience in the host country over time, focusing on some specific areas and, finally, the transition to the age of majority by going to live independently.

#### **Country of Origin.**

a) *Reason for leaving.* The youths interviewed during this study described what, in a significant way, led to their departure from their country of origin. Regarding this topic, a wide

range of situations and circumstances came to light. The main reasons were situations of family conflict related with the death of a family member that posed a risk to the subsistence and survival of the remaining members, or a dispute between family members over material goods and wealth due to the disappearance of one of the members (mostly, the disappearance of the father).

*“First, my father died, then my mother died too... I lived alone with my brother, and my father’s sister and brother, they didn't like me because my father left me a house... They wanted the house for themselves, so they were trying to get me out of that place.”* (E9).

*“My father died, it's just my mother. My mother's brother, he died too, and I have nobody else aside from my mother. I'm the one who helps my mother. I had to come to help.”* (E21).

*“My father was a businessman, he sold diamonds. After he died, my uncle wanted to keep the business and thought I knew where the diamonds were. I said I didn't know anything about the business. He got angry and started threatening me... then came the death threats... I ran to a house with the help of a friend, but he started chasing that friend and threatening him. I realized I had to flee the country...”* (E14).

Among the life stories of these youths, situations of deprivation of liberty in a work context were found, some were still in their country of origin and others were already migrating from another country.

*“I went to work somewhere else and the boss said that he was going to help me, but then he locked me up on his farm and would not let me leave, all I did was work and he gave me food, but not every day. One day I ran away.”* (E2).

*“We were many women living in a house and we had to clean the things that this man brought and he forced us to do other things that we did not want to do. I saw many women being killed in*

*front of me. I myself was supposed to have died many times but I was lucky (...). Another woman and I managed to escape.” (E30).*

Among the reasons for leaving the country of origin, war contexts and scenarios were also mentioned, which constituted situations that were life threatening or situations of potential aggression. Also in this context, the fear and pressure to become part of the military factions involved in conflict were highlighted.

*“It was like this in front of my house, watching the war. I was afraid to be there at night, very afraid to die, of the blood, I am afraid. I did not feel comfortable, living there was very difficult for me.” (E17).*

*“Everything was going well, but in the end it went wrong. From 2012 until 2015 there was war there and everything was wrong. The soldiers said I had to go and fight with them, and they meant it. So, I ran away.” (E5).*

b) *Way out.* In all the trajectories and life paths of these youths there was direct or indirect reference to the figure of the “smuggler”. This figure appeared as a means for leaving the country by sea, land or air. Their services would include the purchase of tickets, the issue of personal documentation and entry visas (usually forged). In some situations, the destination was agreed upon with the “smuggler”, but in other cases the destination was not known until the moment of arrival.

*“I paid more than 8000 Euros for one person, one man, to get me out. He promised documents, a ticket, everything... It's a lot of money, don't you think?” (E4).*

*“I worked in [country redacted] for a while and in [city redacted] it was very difficult to work, but I managed to get the money together to pay for the boat. I gave the money to two men who told me to wait one week and one night they said: “Get ready, you're going tomorrow.” (E28).*

*“A man, a friend of my mother’s, said that he would help me and my brother to escape, but he did not say anything about leaving the country. Only when we got to the airport did I understand his plan.” (E15).*

*“A man saw me sitting in the street and said “why are you so worried?” and I said “I need to get out of this country”. He said “I know a person who can help you, I have a friend in [island redacted] [country redacted]”. “If you have money, I’ll take you to [island redacted], I’ll help you to live there”. I paid him 200 dollars or something, and he took care of everything, the visa too. He took everything and brought a passport and a ticket to my house, and then I travelled to [city redacted] at night.” (E7).*

c) *Choice of destination.* In general, for most youths, choosing a country was based on whether they knew someone there, such as other family members or friends, usually places where language would not be a problem. This was frequently found to be the case for youths from French-speaking African countries who wanted to go to France, and the same was true for English-speaking countries with regards to the U.K. In these situations, Portugal was only a place of passage for connecting flights to the final destination, but where the youths were detained due to false documentation.

*“This was not my destination, I was going to France, except things got complicated with the documents because of the man who made the papers there. False documents and everything” (E1).*

*“I didn’t know anything about Portugal or the name Portugal. I knew I was going to stopover in Lisbon because it was written on the ticket. It was a person who took care of everything and lied. He said “you’re just going to stopover in Lisbon.” (E3).*

For some of the youths the destination would be Europe, without any specific choice of country. Others had vague references of the country, namely as a potentially easier destination to stay, or soccer references of internationally known players.

*“I thought “when I get to Portugal, my life will get better”. It's the country where Luís Figo, Ronaldo, grew up, I saw that on television. If I'm going to go to Europe, my favourite country is Portugal.” (E33).*

*“I would have gone to any country in Europe. But the country that was easiest for me was Portugal.” (E18).*

*“He said: “Here are the documents, get on the plane. There will be someone waiting for you when you land.” We didn't know we were coming to Portugal.” (E6).*

*“Most people go to England or other countries like that, but I wanted to go to Portugal because I thought I there would be fewer people from my country.” (E14).*

Among the youths mostly coming from Asian countries, but from African countries also, the arrival in Portugal came after a long journey through several European countries, where they had sought international protection but had been rejected.

*“The first time in Europe was when I arrived in [country redacted]; I lived there for 2 years in a refugee home. I applied for protection and waited a long time. Everyone said there was no problem, but after some time I was told I couldn't stay and I had to go back to my country. I left and went to live in [country redacted] for some time, then a few more months in [country redacted]. Then I was told to try Portugal because it was friendlier to refugees.” (E20).*

**Route to the host country.** As mentioned above, the paths and routes taken by these youths were not linear. Some arrived by air while others arrived by sea or land, or a combination

of various routes. In general, air routes represented less of a danger in terms of travel; the youths reported more and greater dangers and threats while travelling by sea and land.

a) *Dangers and threats.* The adverse conditions reported by the youths referred to threats to their physical integrity, either due to the demanding circumstances that required extreme effort and deprivation, or due to the real possibility of not being able to survive the dangers involved.

*“I travelled 52 hours inside the truck, in the part of the wheels. I laid in that space, almost always without moving, listening to the sound of the road. I thought I was going to die. It was very difficult; I had no water or food. When the truck entered the boat, I was afraid to breathe because there were police there.”* (E8).

*“The hardest thing was to cross the sea. I thought I was going to die. All the time it was death. It was the hardest time of my life. I will never forget it for rest of my life, being at sea, darkness all around, and knowing that I might not reach the other side.”* (E28).

The youths also reported the violence and aggression inflicted on them by other people throughout the journey. They reported other refugees, police, border guards or “smugglers” to be among the aggressors.

*“I went to [country redacted]... When the policemen in [country redacted] came they hit us, they hit us a lot, and told us to go back to our countries again, then they said we were going to [country redacted]. In [country redacted] there were many refugees from many countries. I was scared because everyone was always fighting and I didn't understand what was happening.”* (E10).

*“I stayed on the property of a man who organized the boat crossings for a long time because I had no money to pay. I worked there for over a year to pay for the boat trip. The things I saw there are not even done to animals. One day they lined up some men that were naked and tied up,*

*and they killed them at random, with a machete, and some lived. I lived... I think it was for us to always live in fear... (E12).*

(b) *Resourcefulness in the face of dangerous and risky situations.* Regarding their resourcefulness when faced with difficulties during the crossing, the youths, in general, referred God's will in protecting them, or their faith and belief in God.

*"God. Only God. I walked for 5 to 6 days straight, a long time almost without stopping. I no longer felt anything, my feet, my body, nothing. Only God helped. It was because he didn't want me to die." (E35).*

*"What helped me was God. God helped me with everything I asked of him to help me solve the situation. I would say: "Look at this God, please help me. And he helped." (E5).*

Some of the youths stressed the importance of meaningful relationships with people with whom they faced similar risks and dangers, or with whom they shared part or the whole of the journey to the host country.

*"It also helped me to learn how to survive, to learn how to help others who were in the same situation. That was how my mother taught me. There were two other boys on the boat, almost on top of me and the sea was very rough and I was holding them so they wouldn't fall into the sea. In the end they pointed to me when we arrived in [country redacted], saying that I was a minor. I was almost passed out." (E2).*

*"I also made friends along the way. It was a friend who told me he was coming to Portugal, that it was a good place to live. He already had a friend here. That boy helped me find work when I left the Centre to live by myself, and also gave me money at the beginning. He's a very good person." (E23).*



Finally, one of these youths highlighted the importance of dreaming, of finding personal strategies to withstand the suffering.

*“Most of the time, I believe in my dreams. I put them in my mind and I know that I will never give up. I used to watch those movies that inspire people, and I know that sometimes you have to go through some difficulties to succeed in life.”* (E14).

**Reception and initial experiences in Portugal.** As was described, the majority of these youths referred they had not planned to come to Portugal or chosen Portugal as their final destination during their journey. As such, after a period of detainment for some, and arriving on Portuguese territory by land for others, a period of initial contacts, first impressions, and creation of expectations about the country followed.

*(a) Detainment at the airport.* In general, those youths who arrived in Portugal by airplane were detained at Lisbon airport for carrying false passports or visas or for not having any documentation. These reasons seemed to have been the most common form of contact with Portuguese authorities, who subsequently initiated the legal procedure to request protection. The majority of these youths said they were unaware of the possibility of applying for international protection and were informed of this possibility by the Portuguese authorities, given their account of life events, individual journeys and age. Detainment at the Lisbon airport was described by the youths as lasting a few days or weeks and felt frightening, both due to the possibility of being deported and by the feeling of intimidation during their interaction with the authorities.

*“When I arrived at the airport, they said I was not legal and then we contacted a lawyer and everything. We talked to him and then I asked for asylum. I stayed at the airport for two weeks.”* (E1).

*“I stayed for more than 2/3 weeks, some people stayed for 2 months and more. I think I only left because one day I got very sick and they had to call a doctor. That's when I left to go to CPR.”* (E5).

*“When I arrived in Portugal, they wanted to deport me back to my country. I got scared. I couldn't go back there. Anything but that... I was detained for a few days... I don't know how many...”* (E12).

*“When I arrived in Portugal, I felt like a criminal... All that confusion... The cops intimidated me a great deal. They said things to me like: “You're going back to your country.” They said a lot of things like that... They told me to stay at the detention centre with some women and their children. Some women were my mothers...”* (E25).

(b) *Creating the first impressions of the country.* After the strangeness and impact of arriving in a new country, some of the youths seemed to go through a period of confrontation with previously conceived ideas and imagery about the country, either regarding potential threats or being fearful of how they might receive refugees. For the majority of the youths, first impressions were positive, despite being confronted with the specific living conditions in the country (e.g. monetary support provided, discovery of cultural differences).

*“I was very afraid because I heard some people say that in Portugal they were sending people back to Africa again, but then it seemed that it was not the case and I began to think it was a good place to live in peace.”* (E1).

*“I thought that when I arrived in Portugal, in Tavira, everything was very peaceful. I thought Portugal couldn't be like that, it was impossible. I was always alert, to anticipate any attacks. I saw that Tavira didn't have many people, Portugal is still very peaceful.”* (E10).

*“It seemed like a very quiet country to me... Not very busy either! People are more like that... more conservative. They talk quietly, don't laugh loudly, don't argue in the street. They also seemed sadder; I can't explain it... It seemed like a good country to live in.” (E25).*

*“I read on the sign “Portugal”. So I asked: Where is Portugal?”. Because in my country they talk about America or Europe but we don't know the names of the countries. My brother saw on the internet that it was a rich country, with good conditions for people to live in, so I didn't understand when they said they were going to give us 16 Euros a month to live.” (E15).*

**Legal protection measures.** The legal protection measure refers to the request for international protection submitted by youths to the Immigration and Borders Service (SEF), and can be made at different times. For some youths, and especially those that arrived by air, the request was, in general, made first. However, other youths sought or were already placed in specific host institutions when they had their first contact with SEF.

*a) Relationship with the entity.* The relationship was described by the great majority of the youths as being very intimidating, due to the importance it has in the individual decision of the process, but also because of the real or imagined fear of being deported to the country of origin. The pressure felt by “telling their story” in a way that would satisfy the professionals involved was also referred, despite the difficulties experienced in doing so.

*“I was very afraid... Some people at the centre told me to be very careful what I was going to say, because I might have problems. The man spoke loudly and didn't seem to be friendly. He asked me many times why I was here and I didn't know what to say anymore. He said he could send me back to my country...” (E1).*

*“The hardest thing on that day was SEF. I couldn't explain anything about my case, my situation. And a lady here said: “you have to speak up, you have to tell them so they know, so they can*

*help.” But nothing came out of my mouth. And the man said: “You're not helping by not speaking...” (E15).*

The description given by one youth regarding the apparently coercive manner of conducting the international protection procedure, in the sense of it being compulsory and that it could not be refused due to the consequences, should be noted.

*“I did not understand anything at the airport. I said I was going to France to study, but they said that the visa was false and that I had to fill out some papers to apply for asylum because I was a minor. I stopped to think about that... They said that I could either fill them out or they would deport me to my country. I stopped thinking... I signed the papers... here I am today.” (E31).*

Finally, the experience of a youth who referred his positive relationship with SEF professionals and services is worthy of note.

*“When I arrived at SEF, they were very nice to me. They explained to me everything that was going to happen. They talked to me and listened to what I had to say, everything... It was a nice lady, who spoke nicely to me.” (E18).*

b) *Reply to the request for protection.* The reply to their request for international protection was unanimously considered by the youths as the main difficulty and a source of anxiety over time, and was the cause of a great deal of instability and insecurity with regards to the present and future.

*“I have been at the Centre for almost 2 years and every 6 months I go to SEF to update the document... it's the same as the last one I had and nobody knows when it will be different.” (E9).*

*“I don't have any documents, I don't have an answer from SEF, I can't go to school because of that. I will be 18 shortly. I'll leave the Centre without papers and then what?! What am I going to do?!” (E2).*

For youths living independently, the reply to the request for protection was described as having an even greater impact, because it resulted in situations of greater insecurity and instability, with greater uncertainty regarding future opportunities.

*“I was very lucky to get my document in 10 months; there are people who have been waiting for 4 years and still don’t have it, so it was possible for me to leave in October with the document and to rent a place.” (E2).*

*“My problem is this: I am here in [city redacted] living with the support of the Santa Casa, with little money, I can’t live on that. I can’t work without documents; I can’t do anything. It’s not possible.” (E12).*

*“They said no at SEF, I don’t know why. All this time spent here for this. The lawyer appealed, but I don’t know... More time in this situation. I’m thinking about going to [country redacted]. I have a friend with a good life there.” (E21).*

**Protective measures in residential care.** In the at-risk child and youth general protection system that these youths fall under, the residential care measure is almost always applied by default due to the absence of family or of legal representatives with whom other measures can be organised or planned. As a rule, the measure was applied for residential care at the Portuguese Refugee Council until the youths reach the age of majority.

*a) Experience in residential care.* Some youths felt welcomed and that their material and emotional needs were met, much like they were a family. However, the difficulty of dealing with the cultural and religious differences of youths that came from different countries and were of different cultures that were also living in the centre, was highlighted.

*“The most important thing for me was arriving in the country and going to the Centre, they were very welcoming and gave me a place to sleep, they give me everything I need, whatever I ask for*

*they give me, and I thank them very much because it shows that they are people who care.”*

(E21).

*“I was treated like a son here. They asked me what I wanted out of life. They helped me to get those things and when I didn't know something, they explained it to me: “This here means this or that is better.” (E32).*

*“Here at the centre, so so... There are people with different cultures, education, everything is different. Everyone has their own way of thinking, their own education, it's very complicated to bring different people together, from different countries and cultures, with a different education, in the same place.” (E25).*

The less positive aspects that were highlighted were compliance with the residential rules, namely the curfews and the dissatisfaction with the food served, as it is typical Portuguese cuisine and not appreciated by the youths. These aspects were the most frequently highlighted by the youths that were already living independently.

*“That is the problem, in Africa we can go home whenever we want, and that house is not a prison. They can't do everything they want. There are rules that could be changed. Having to be back at 7pm... we always play soccer nearby and everything.” (E5).*

*“Those times were sort of hard because there were rules, you have to respect everything there. You couldn't leave after 7pm. Thank God I did everything right and everything went well.” (E33).*

*“What I remember most about the Centre was that during the first months I was very hungry. I couldn't eat anything that was served, at lunch and dinner, and since I didn't have money to buy food, I was very hungry. I really couldn't eat, not even the rice. The problem was that I also couldn't cook the food I used to eat in my country.” (E4).*

b) *Development of meaningful relationships.* The youths in residential care or living independently were unanimous in highlighting the importance of having people from the same country of origin living in Portugal (other youths or adults and their families) who they could count on for help, understanding, and emotional support and with whom they could share the same values and customs.

*“The people who were with me at the airport were later released and we all met up again in the other Centre... There was a great deal of friendship, fondness, affection. They were so kind to me, they welcomed me like a sister. We still talk on the phone today; they call me to find out how I am doing.”* (E30).

*“A man from my country who I met at the other centre gave me a coat to sleep in because I was very cold. We became true friends. He gives me advice, don't do this, do that...”* (E22)

*“Here at the house I made two friends, two brothers, we will never leave each other. We are from the same country, we know the language, we talk about the difficulties here in Portugal. When one of us learns something new he tells the others.”* (E26).

*“They were the two friends I met in the House. I left first and then we went looking to live in the same house. We laughed together and spoke the same language and understood each other. We could not live with other people.”* (E16).

(c) *School integration experience.* Regarding their relationship with school, students and teachers, the youths referred different but complementary perspectives of the various aspects of school life and its functions aside from learning content. Regarding socialization with their peers, the majority of the youths mentioned that it was very difficult to establish relations with the Portuguese and that they only associated with other youths living at the foster home. On the other hand, some felt that the relationship with schoolmates was only possible if they hid the fact

that they were refugees and lived at the refugee centre. These aspects were most often mentioned by the youths still in residential care. Those already living independently, but still studying, seemed more comfortable with the possibilities of socialisation.

*“At school, I don’t have that type of connection with my classmates, I try but sometimes it doesn’t work out. I know that deep down they don’t want to take that step, to talk, to make friends.”*

(E25).

*“At my school nobody knows I’m a refugee. I never told any of my classmates. It’s easier that way. When they ask where I live, I say it’s in the neighbourhood, the one down there. And when they ask me out at night, I always make up an excuse, that I’m already going to a party or going out with other friends”* (E11).

School seemed to be a place where the language barriers and the poor command of Portuguese seemed to have a greater impact, especially on the youths who arrived more recently. Attending classes seemed to have little significance as there were difficulties in understanding the contents, naturally due to not understanding the language.

*“At school, I don’t understand anything the teachers are saying. Everything is spoken in Portuguese and I don’t understand anything. I listen but I don’t understand what they’re saying. I don’t know if it’s history or something else... During recess I join the others from the centre who are also at the same school.”* (E34).

Despite the language barriers, some youths mentioned having teachers who are concerned and attentive to their needs.

*“The teachers are very good to me. They listen to me and understand my situation.”* (E15).

**Experience of transitioning to living independently.** The transition to another at risk child and youth measure of protection happens regularly when the youths reach the age of 18,



although it can be extended when justified and necessary. This transition implies leaving residential care centre where the youths were staying and moving independently into an apartment or room under the supervision of another Institution, or ending the protective measure and living without any institutional support.

*a) Perception of autonomy.* For some of the youths, the transition to autonomy was experienced as the realization of the desire to live without previous rules. If for some this transition did not pose any difficulty, for others being under the supervision of another institution was perceived as a hindrance to being truly independent, a situation that seems to have occurred only when they entered the job market and, as such, did not have any institutional support.

*“Now I am studying in the same place, playing basketball, being supported by Santa Casa da Misericórdia and things are going well for me. I don’t think I’ve had much trouble.”* (E1).

*“I really wanted to get out of CPR and live my life, to do what I want and do it my way. I was happy when I left, but then there was Santa Casa, that provides the money, but it’s a prison. We have to show all the receipts, everything we spend the money on. We feel like children.”* (E4).

*“Because at the time I left, I was being supported by Santa Casa, and there was a lot of talk and I don’t like to talk that much [laughs]. It’s normal, it’s their job, but sometimes I don’t like it. It is much better without them now”* (E18).

*“I’ve wanted to live away from there for a long time. I think I knew everything, the language, my accounting, cooking. I already knew how to take care of myself to be able to live away from there. Those were the things I learned at CPR.”* (E30).

*b) Challenges of financial independence.* The financial situation of some youths seems quite compromised, especially those who are not studying and still do not have an answer regarding their request for international protection, which puts them in a situation of great

vulnerability. These youths tend to be sent to the outskirts of Lisbon, and are subjected to greater social isolation.

*“My life is very bad. I am living outside of Lisbon and do not receive much money from Social Security, it doesn't work. It is not enough to eat. I can't work because of the documentation.”*

(E34).

*“I've been living here for 9 months and I don't like it. It's very cold in winter. I have little money and I don't know anyone. I'm going to ask the CPR for help to go back to Lisbon and to have more money because I don't know anything about social security.”* (E13).

As a unique experience of financial independence, several youths who were studying and being supported found it easier to organise themselves at a financial level with the amount received inasmuch as they could cover their expenses and have some money for what they needed.

*“For me, it's alright like this. I pay for the room, together with my friends, and other expenses and I can buy food and some other things.”* (E10).

c) *Aspirations for the future.* The aspirations and plans for the future of these youths, regardless of the measure of protection, was to achieve better academic and economic conditions, to have children, to be able to help the family economically in the country of origin and to be close to their family.

*“I hope I finish school, get a job and I also want to see if I can work and go study at university. I really want to go to university, but for now I am plan on going to work next year and then get married, I want children. It's my dream.”* (E3).

*“I want to have money to send to my family.”* (E1).

*“To have a home. I want to save enough money to rent an apartment, anything, as long as it’s and mine alone! I really want to work to have my own things, my own house, a bank account, a car, work really hard, finish school, go to university.” (E27).*

*“At the moment I miss my mom and my brothers. I want to bring my family here, I want to be with my family. I want to be the one to go back, or bring them here.” (E18).*

### **Discussion**

The present study aimed to describe the trajectories of unaccompanied minors in Portugal and their transition to majority, highlighting their own experiences, perceived resources, and challenges. Data for unaccompanied minors in Portugal revealed that they constitute a very heterogeneous group in terms of characteristics and needs, life histories, past experiences, aspirations, countries and cultures of origin. In general, on leaving the country, it is poverty, associated with low social and educational levels and few employment opportunities, which led minors to migrate, with the majority already working, or working and studying in the country of origin. There was an expectation of improving the economic conditions of their families, in many cases, aggravated by the death of the father, provider of the family's livelihood. Conflict scenarios (armed, family) also contributed to the youths' insecurity in the country of origin. These results are in line with those of others (Martinez, 2009), previously reported.

Regarding the migratory trajectory, participants did not have structured projects with pre-defined expectations regarding Portugal as the country of destination, with arrival being made almost accidentally, or as a result of circumstantial opportunities and external contexts already in transit along the route. Most young people did not plan, or had no intention, to formalize an application for international protection, due to the lack of knowledge of this option. This request for protection became a main source of instability and insecurity regarding the present and the

future, due to the amount of time that the response takes. Residential care marked the initial experiences in Portugal, a place of familiarity and protection, but simultaneously one of control and dissatisfaction. In residential care it was possible to establish meaningful and trusting relationships, almost exclusively with people from the same country of origin. School was a space felt as safe and a stage for multiple possibilities of socialization. Language barriers and cultural differences tended to impose themselves, both in the relationship with the Portuguese students and teachers, and in the learning of school content. In addition to the relationship difficulties, there was the stigma of being refugees, although participants mostly referred not feeling discriminated against. Specifically, teachers are referred to as significant figures and concerned with their school learning. As Pastoor (2015, 2017) states, the availability and quality of education, the linguistic and cultural diversity of the host community, the functioning of schools and the relationship with teachers are key elements in determining the integration of unaccompanied minors. In the transition to becoming of age (> 18 years old), some youths reported receiving support by an institution or service to continue studying (for instance, college education). Those participants indicated having financial autonomy and a connection to institutional technicians that provided some comfort. Others, however, who sought living autonomously but did not yet have legal status regarding the request for protection, were in a situation of greater vulnerability, especially because they were not allowed to work. This situation could drag on for long periods of time, simultaneously with the fear of an eventual deportation. Overall, participants, thus, revealed the experienced tension in this developmental stage between, on the one hand, the need for formal support in the transition to adulthood and, on the other, the desire for autonomy, less control and supervision from (public) entities. As such, these findings support the argument of other authors (Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006; Côté,

2000) in that it highlights the distinction between the transition of rigid biological and developmental life-stages (associated with becoming 18 years old) and actually *becoming* an adult, as a dynamic positioning that happens in a cultural and social context. As stated by Christiansen and colleagues (2006, p. 11), adulthood comprises “a social position which is internally and externally shaped and constructed” (Christiansen et al, 2006, p. 11) and this may be especially relevant to consider in the support provided to unaccompanied youth as they become legally of age.

At a broader macro- and community level, individual involvement of the participants with the Portuguese context and social structures, close interrelations with Portuguese people, as well as the level of civic and political participation, did not seem to take place. It is mentioned by several authors (De Genova & Peutz 2010; Perreira & Ornelas, 2013) that unaccompanied minors in the host society may find themselves in situations of social isolation, discrimination and/or acculturation stress. In addition, these youths entered the labor market in precarious conditions and lower level undifferentiated positions. The difficulty for refugee populations to establish themselves in the labor market is widely referred to in the literature (e.g. Ager & Strang, 2008; Aldén & Hammarstedt, 2014), with young workers, such as youth and women migrants, particularly affected by precarious work - an indicator of poor integration and diminished well-being.

As a limitation of the present study we highlight the relatively low response rate (67 out of 103). Similar response rates have been found among vulnerable populations, possibly due a lack of confidence in the system, anonymity and confidentiality, as well as ambivalence in recalling emotionally distressing experiences, shame and fear of further discrimination experiences (Given-Wilson et al., 2016). While this might have limited representativeness, it also

shows informed and free consent was obtained as a large number of youths felt comfortable in refusing participation. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the study and retrospective account of experiences must be referred and taken into account in understanding the results. Longitudinal studies are still needed to follow-up children and youths to allow a deeper understanding of their paths to adulthood through in-depth narrative analysis of the experiences of some cases, as well as contrast how the experiences of transition to adulthood are lived in the host country with their representations on becoming adults in the culture of origin.

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