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Unaccompanied minors in Italy

The disparity in access to welfare system for migrants and refugees

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Abstract.

Title: Unaccompanied minors in Italy - The disparity in access to welfare system for migrants and refugees

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Globally, more than 218,000 unaccompanied and separated children were registered in 2024, and Italy – the primary Mediterranean point of arrival – received 69% of all unaccompanied minors landing in EU mediterranean countries. Although Italy's Law 47/2017 (the Zampa Law) formally guarantees equal protection for all unaccompanied minors regardless of migration status, significant disparities in access to welfare services persist in practice. This study aimed to analyze the extent to which migration status influences unaccompanied minors' access to the Italian welfare system and to identify the main barriers and facilitators shaping their trajectories within child protection structures.

The study addressed four research questions: how different migration statuses influence UAMs' access to welfare services; what factors shape their decisions regarding asylum applications and other legal pathways; what structural, legal, and social factors determine their inclusion in or exclusion from welfare services; and how frontline professionals interpret their roles and how professional education and institutional conditions affect their practice.

A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining secondary quantitative analysis of official data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, Eurostat, and UNICEF for the period 2023-2025, with qualitative analysis comprising legal and policy document review and eighteen semi-structured interviews with key actors – including staff from NGO, UN agencies, government and institutional actors, academic researchers, social workers and voluntary guardians. Qualitative data were analyzed using codebook thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) with MaxQDA, organized around four themes: migration policy, organizational culture, intercultural sensitivity, and academic culture.

The findings confirmed that migration status – including legal category, nationality, gender, age and region of reception – functions as structural determinant of welfare access despite the formally universalist framework. The most direct evidence was found in the differentiated treatment of Ukrainian unaccompanied minor under the EU Temporary Protection Mechanism, who accessed services through an expedited pathway unavailable to peers from other nationalities. Nationality-based stratification in asylum recognition rates, a critical SAI second reception capacity deficit, severe staffing shortages in first reception facilities, delayed guardian appointments, and sharp regional inequalities – most starkly illustrated by the contrast between Sicily (0.6% integration pathway access; 32.4% voluntary

abandonment) and Lombardy – collectively produced a "colander state" in which formal rights are structurally perforated. Street-level bureaucratic discretion by frontline professionals was found to generate further differential access under conditions of resource scarcity and institutional constraint.

The study concluded that bridging the gap between the Zampa Law's progressive architecture and its uneven implementation requires multi-annual funding commitments, expansion of SAI capacity, reform of the guardianship system, protection of the transition to adulthood, and mandatory specialized training for professionals. These findings contribute to debates on citizenship and social rights (Marshall & Bottomore, 1992), Southern European welfare regime characteristics (Ferrera, 1996a), and the intersection of social work and migration (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023) with concrete implications for policy and professional practice in Italy and across the European Union.

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Even in the darkest moments you have been next to me.

In highs and lows you are faithful

What a privilege it is to continue worshiping and giving you all that I have

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You never fail, you are Elohim and my desire is to be in your presence.

Every single day of my life

***

To my family, friends, colleagues, classmates, professors… everyone has had a special role, and I have learnt so much from each of you.

To this master and the scholarship because it was a blessing and opportunity to achieve one of my dreams and have joy during this journey.

Chapter 1: Introduction - Understanding migration flows.

Migration has historically shaped human societies, contributing to economic development, cultural exchange, and demographic transformation. Today, migration remains a defining global phenomenon, involving temporary or permanent displacement within and across national borders (Migration data portal, 2024). While mobility may represent opportunity, it is also deeply embedded in global inequalities, conflict dynamics, environmental crises and structural vulnerabilities.

The right to freedom of movement is recognized under the Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966), which affirms that individuals lawfully within a territory have the right to liberty of movement and the right to leave any country, including their own. However, for millions of people worldwide, migration is not a matter of choice but of survival. Individuals fleeing persecution, armed conflict, generalized violence, or severe human rights violations are entitled to international protection under the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol[1].

According to the Migration Data Portal (2025), there were approximately 304 million international migrants worldwide by mid-2024. Among them, 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced, including nearly 49 million children – representing approximately 40% of the displaced population (UNHCR, 2024). In 2024 alone, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025) reported 42.7 million refugees and asylum seekers globally, 41% of whom were children. These figures highlight the growing feminization and juvenilizing of forced displacement, raising urgent child protection concerns.

Within this broader migratory context, particular attention must be given to children who migrate without the presence of a parent or legally responsible adult. Commonly referred to as unaccompanied minors (UAM), these children face heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, detention, and exclusion from essential services (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2025). Globally, more than 218.000 unaccompanied and separated children were registered in 2024 (UNHCR, 2024), though actual numbers are likely higher due to underreporting an inconsistent registration system.

In the European Union, Mediterranean entry routes continue to constitute significant points of arrival for children on the move. In 2024, over 41,000 children arrived in Greece, Italy,

[1] According to international refugee law, a person becomes a refugee the moment they meet the definition, even if they are still awaiting formal recognition by a state or UNHCR [common referred to as asylum seekers]. These definitions have been consolidated in key international frameworks such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, New York Declarations for Refugees and Migrants, the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Migration(UNHCR, 2018).

Spain, and Bulgaria, more than half of whom were unaccompanied (UNICEF et al., 2025). Italy reported the highest proportion of unaccompanied minors among child arrivals (69%), with the majority originating from Tunisia, Syria, and Guinea (European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 2025). Eurostat data indicate that approximately 34,000 unaccompanied minors applied for asylum for the first time in the EU in 2024, predominantly boys aged 16-17.

From a human rights perspective, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) has clarified that State obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child apply to all children within a State's jurisdiction, irrespective of nationality or migration status. This includes asylum-seeking, refugee, undocumented, and stateless children. Central to this framework is the principle of the best interests of the child (Article 3 CRC), which must guide all administrative, judicial, and social welfare decisions affecting children.

Despite this robust normative framework, significant disparities persist in the implementation of child protection standards across European welfare systems. Migration status frequently operates as a structural determinant shaping access to housing, healthcare, education, legal representation, and psychosocial support (Humphris & Sigona, 2019; Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). In practice, bureaucratic categorization (asylum seeker, refugee, undocumented minor, holder or subsidiary of protection, etc.) may condition entitlements, procedural timelines, and access to services. These distinctions may produce differential treatment within welfare systems that are formally grounded in universal child protection principles (UNHCR, 2023).

Italy represents a particularly relevant context for examining these tensions. As one of the main Mediterranean arrival countries, Italy has developed specific legal and institutional mechanisms for the protection of unaccompanied minors, including guardianship systems and reception structures (UNICEF, 2025a). However, fluctuations in migration policies, reception capacities, and administrative procedures continue to shape how unaccompanied minors experience access to welfare services (CESPI & Defence for Children, 2022; Giovannetti, 2017b; Marabello & Parisi, 2021).

Although international and European legal frameworks establish equal protection for all children regardless of migration status, evidence suggests that migration status may significantly influence unaccompanied minors' effective access to welfare systems (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Chase, 2013; Humphris & Sigona, 2019; UNICEF, 2025b). The gap between formal rights and practical implementation raises critical questions for social work with children and youth, particularly regarding equity, non-discrimination, and structural vulnerability (Bove et al., 2025; IFSW, 2018).

The research object of this study is the relationship between migration status and access to welfare services for unaccompanied minors in Italy. Specifically, the study examines whether

legal categorization and administrative status shape access to child protection measures, social services and integration pathways.

the purpose of this study is to analyze the extent to which migration status influences unaccompanied minors' access to the Italian welfare system and to identify the main barriers and facilitators that shape their experiences within the child protection structures.

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1. How different migration statuses influence unaccompanied minors access to welfare services.
RQ2. To explore the decision-making processes of UAM regarding applying for Asylum or other legal pathways, from the perspective of front-line professionals and social workers, and the factors influencing the outcomes of these applications.
RQ3. To identify the main structural, legal and social factors that shape UAM's inclusion or exclusion from the Italian welfare services.
RQ4. To understand how social workers and other frontline professionals interpret their roles, navigate ethical dilemmas, challenges and capacities supporting UAM and how professional education and institutional conditions affect their practice.

By addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to the field of social work with children and youth by critically examining how welfare systems respond to structurally vulnerable migrant children and be identifying areas for policy and practice improvement.

Chapter 2: Literature review/ knowledge basis

2.1 Migration routes and fluctuating arrivals in the Mediterranean context:

Migratory routes refer to the geographical pathways used by individuals to move across territories, either through regular or irregular channels. While many migrants travel through authorized and regulated routes using conventional means of transportation, others rely on irregular pathways shaped by restrictive visa regimes, border externalization policies, geopolitical instability, armed conflict, economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and human rights violations (International Organization for Migrations [IOM], 2024). These routes are not static; rather, they shift in response to political decisions, enforcement measures, and crises (FRONTEX, 2025).

Within the European context, five principal migratory routes have been identified and monitored by different institutions[2]:

1. Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR): Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece
2. Central Mediterranean Route (CMR): Italy and Malta
3. Western Mediterranean Route (WMR): Peninsular coasts of Spain, Balearic Islands, Ceuta and Melilla.
4. Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR): Canary Islands of Spain.
5. Western Balkans Route (WBR): Belarus

Italy occupies a central position within the Central Mediterranean Route, one of the most active and dangerous corridors toward Europe. It is geographical location renders it a primary country of arrival, particularly for migrants departing from North Africa (International Organization for Migrations [IOM], 2024).

According to UNICEF et al. (2025), approximately 41,800 children arrived in Mediterranean EU countries in 2024. More than half (21,323) were unaccompanied minors (UAM), with Italy registering the highest proportion (69% of child arrivals, representing 8,752 children). These figures confirm the structural relevance of Italy within European migration governance.

Migration flows to Italy are dynamic and influenced by international crises, regional instability, bilateral agreements, and climate-related displacement. As Terzera & Bonomi (2024) note, fluctuations in arrivals result in changing nationalities, sociodemographic characteristics, and protection needs among unaccompanied minors. This variability has direct implications for reception systems, child protection services, and welfare provision.

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[2] Such as: Frontex, International Organization for Migrations (IOM) and the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).

2.2 Identification and entry into the protection system:

Unaccompanied minors may be identified through multiple entry points into the Italian territory:

- During maritime rescue and disembarkation operations in the Mediterranean sea, conducted by state authorities or NGO search and rescue vessels. However, NGO operations have faced restrictions following Law 15/2023[3] (Bove et al., 2025).
- Through land crossings, particularly along the Western Balkans Route and the northeastern border with Slovenia (UNHCR, 2026).
- Through direct presentation at a *Questura* (police headquarters), where minors may declare their status (Schreieck et al., 2024).

The point and manner of arrival can influence initial reception conditions, age assessment procedures, documentation processes, and timely appointment of guardians. Research indicates that delays and inconsistencies at this early stage may significantly affect minors access to rights and services (The Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI), 2021, 2024; Giovannetti, 2017a)

2.3 The Zampa Law and the formal child protection framework.

In 2017, Italy adopted Law No. 47/2017, commonly known as the Zampa Law, a landmark reform in European child protection policy for unaccompanied minors. The law explicitly affirms the principle of non-refoulment and guarantees equal rights between unaccompanied foreign minors and Italian minors, in alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The Zampa Law introduced (LAW 7 April 2017, n. 47 - Regulations, 2017):

- Prohibition of refoulment at borders
- Standardized age assessment procedures
- Strengthened guardianship systems.
- Residence permits for minors.
- Possibility of extending protection until age 21 ***(***also known as ***prosieguo amministrativo)***

Scholars have recognized the law as one of the most comprehensive child-centered migration frameworks in Europe (Giovannetti, 2017a). However, legal recognition does not automatically translate into effective protection.

2.4 Implementation gaps and welfare fragmentation

[3] Which established higher obligations and sanctions stipulated in a new "Code of Conduct" for NGOs supporting SAR activities.

Despite its progressive legal architecture, multiple reports from UN agencies, NGOs and academic studies document significant challenges in implementation (Behrendt et al., 2025; Conigliaro et al., n.d.; The Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI), 2021, 2024a, 2025; Uzureau et al., 2022, 2024)

Reported issues include:

- Delays in guardian appointment
- Overcrowded reception centers
- Uneven quality of services across regions
- Administrative bottlenecks in residence permit procedures
- Difficulties during transition to adulthood

These disparities reflect structural characteristics of Italy's welfare system. Drawing on Ferrera (1996b) classification of the Southern European welfare regime – often described as a "fragmented" or "colander" model-social protection in Italy is territorially uneven, with strong local variations in service provision. This territorial polarization may lead to unequal access to child protection resources depending on municipal capacity and regional governance.

Bousiou (2024) and (Allsopp, 2022) further notes that in contexts where formal welfare provision is weak or overstretched, informal networks – including religious groups, charities, and civil society organizations – frequently compensate for institutional gaps. But also, the interaction of different actors in the implementation of migration policies can create barriers and challenges as they might have different values, ethics and points of view fragmenting and having territorial differences, resulting in the Italians colander. While such support may provide immediate relief, it can also generate inconsistencies and dependency on non-state actors but also barriers in the integration process of migrants and refugees and stigmatization.

European-level research similarly demonstrates that migration status and asylum procedures influence access to housing, healthcare, education, and psychosocial services (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022; Humphris & Sigona, 2019). These fundings suggest that although the legal framework guarantees equal protection, still challenges ensuring the access to the welfare system prevail.

2.5 Social work in Italy: historical development and professional positioning

Social work in Italy emerged later than in Anglo-Saxon countries and initially developed within Catholic charitable traditions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its early orientation was marked by moral assistance and philanthropy. Following World War II and the consolidation of the Italian welfare state, professional training expanded and social work gradually institutionalized (Ferrera, 1996a).

The profession gained formal recognition in 1987, and the Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine degli Assistenti Sociali was established in 1993 (Benassi et al., 2021).

In the field of unaccompanied minors, social workers operate at the intersection of child protection and migration governance. They are embedded within multidisciplinary teams and must balance: the best interest of the child; Legal and administrative constraints; institutional capacity limitations; and migration control frameworks (Giovannetti, 2017b; Marabello & Parisi, 2021).

As unaccompanied minors continue arriving in Italy creating systemic pressures, including staff shortages, high caseloads, and limited specialized resources (Terzera & Bonomi, 2024). Frontline professionals may struggle to provide individualized, long-term support plans aligned with children's psychosocial and developmental needs.

While different reports and research highlight the implementation challenges of the Zampa Law, territorial disparities in welfare provision and mention professional and institutional pressures, there remains limited empirical analysis specifically examining whether and how migration status itself shapes access to social services within the Italian welfare system. Furthermore, the mediation role of social workers in navigating legal categories, administrative procedures, and participatory approaches remains underexplored.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework – Concept of welfare state and migration

This study is informed by theoretical debates on the development of the welfare state, the role of social workers within public institutions, and the relationship between migration and welfare systems. These perspectives provide the analytical lens through which empirical findings of this research are interpreted. Additionally, the framework incorporates insights from the intersection between social work and migration, as well as ecosystem theory and the knowledge-production model proposed by Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023).

The concept of the welfare state has been widely analyzed from historical and sociological perspectives. This study draws primarily on the work of Marshall & Bottomore (1987), who conceptualize the welfare state as the result of a historical expansion of citizenship rights. According to Marshall, citizenship develops through three dimensions: civil, political, and social rights. Social rights – such as access to education, healthcare, and social protection are central to the functioning of modern welfare states and are institutionalized through public systems designed to reduce inequalities.

The welfare state, therefore, represents an institutional response to the inequalities generated by capitalist systems, aiming to ensure a minimum standard of well-being for citizens (Güler, 2019). However, this framework is inherently bounded by the concept of citizenship. As noted by Owen (2011, as cited in Schwarzer Beatrix et al., 2016), access to social rights is not determined solely by residence, but by legal status. This introduces a fundamental tension when considering migrants, particularly those with uncertain or temporary legal status.

The relationship between migration and welfare systems has been widely debated. Migration can contribute positively to host societies by addressing labor shortages, particularly in aging populations such as some in the European Union (Razin et al., 2011). However, it also raises political and economic concerns regarding access to welfare resources.

A central debate in this field is the perceived tension between open borders and welfare sustainability. As discussed by Razin et al. (2011), welfare states may impose restrictions on migrants' access to benefits due to concerns about fiscal pressure and social cohesion. This perspective aligns with broader political narratives that frame migrants – particularly low-skilled migrants – as potential "burdens" on welfare systems.

At the same time, migration produces profound transformations at both individual and societal levels. As argued by Rutter (2006), migration reshapes identities, social relations, and opportunities, contributing to the formation of increasingly diverse and hybrid societies. These transformations challenge traditional welfare models, which are often based on assumptions of cultural and social homogeneity.

Furthermore, governance of migration operates across multiple levels. Local authorities, for instance, often adopt more pragmatic approaches to migration management compared to national governments, focusing on immediate service provision rather than political control (Bousiou, 2024). This multi-level governance structure can result in uneven access to welfare services across territories.

Within welfare systems, social workers play a key role in mediating access to services. This study draws on the concept of street-level bureaucracy developed by Lipsky (2010), which conceptualizes frontline public service workers as actors who exercise discretion in the implementation of policies.

Social workers, as street-level bureaucrats, operate under conditions of limited resources, high workloads, and institutional constraints. As highlighted by Ellis (2011), Evans (2013), and Munro (2011), increasing standardization, proceduralizing, and performance targets have reduced professional autonomy and limited the ability of social workers to adopt person-centered approaches (as cited in Dennler, 2019).

Despite these constraints, social workers remain central actors in the welfare system. They act as gatekeepers to services, translating policy into practice and making decisions that directly affect individuals' access to rights and support. This position is particularly relevant in the context of migration, where legal categories and administrative procedures strongly influence access to welfare (Behrendt et al., 2025; Dennler, 2019).

The intersection between social work and migration represents a growing but still underdeveloped field of research (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023). Traditionally, social work has been rooted within the nation-state, with welfare policies designed for a relatively stable and homogeneous population (Schwarzer Beatrix et al., 2016). However, increasing migration challenges this framework, requiring professionals to adapt to more complex and diverse realities.

Social workers must navigate tensions between:

- Human rights principles
- National migration policies
- Institutional constraints
- Individual needs of migrants

Empathy and advocacy are essential components of professional practice in this context. As highlighted by MacLaughlin (2012, as cited in Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023), an empathetic and rights-based approach enables social workers to advocate for individuals even when legal frameworks restrict access to service.

In the Italian context, the need for intercultural competence has become increasingly evident. As discussed by Ciabatti (as cited in Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023), social work education still

lacks sufficient integration of intercultural perspectives, which can affect the quality and accessibility of services for migrant populations.

On the other hand, migration status also plays a critical role in shaping access to welfare services. Legal and administrative barriers may limit access to healthcare, housing and social support, particularly for individual with uncertain status (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023).

For unaccompanied minors, however, access to services is formally grounded in the principle of the best interests of the child, as established in international frameworks. Despite this, research shows that institutional practices and standardized procedures may fail to address the complex and individualized needs of these minors (Behrendt et al., 2025; Uzureau et al., 2022, 2024).

Moreover, the intersection between migration governance and child protection systems creates conflicting mandates. As argued by Bhabha (2019), migration control is typically centralized and state-driven, while child protection involves multiple actors and governance levels. This overlap can generate contradictions that hinder the effective realization of children's rights.

To analyze these dynamics, this study incorporates ecosystem theory (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1987), which conceptualized individuals as embedded within interconnected systems (micro, meso, exo and macro). This perspective allows for the analysis of how structural, institutional and interpersonal factors interact in shaping unaccompanied minors' access to welfare.

Additionally, the study draws on the four elements influencing knowledge production in social work with migrants proposed by (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023);

1. Intercultural sensitivity
2. Academic culture
3. Migration policy
4. Organization culture

These elements provide a framework for understanding how professionals interpret and respond to the needs of unaccompanied minors. they also guided the development of the interview questionnaire and the interpretation of empirical findings.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to analyze the extent to which migration status influences unaccompanied minors' (UAMs) access to welfare services in Italy, and to identify the main structural, legal and social factors shaping their inclusion in or exclusion from the Italian child protection system. The primary mode of inquiry is qualitative, drawing on semi-structured interviews combined with a legal and policy document analysis and secondary quantitative data. The analysis of these different sources helped to enrich the final insights and aims to prevent or minimize the bias in sense of the researcher's perspective and background.

This approach reflects a qualitatively driven study with supplementary qualitative contextualization (Creswell & Poth, 2018), consistent with the established tradition of combining primary qualitative inquiry with secondary statistical documentary sources in social research (Bowen, 2009; Bryman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)

4.1 Research Desing and Methodological foundations

The research design is grounded in the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 3. It draws specifically on:

- Framework of social citizenship and welfare rights (Güler, 2019; Marshall & Bottomore, 1992)
- Lipsky (2010) theory of street-level bureaucracy
- The intersection between social work & migration (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023).
- Ecosystem theory (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1987)
- Ferrera (1996a) Southern European Welfare regime classification.

These perspectives provide the analytical lenses through which empirical findings are interpreted. The four elements of knowledge production in social work with migrants identified by Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023) – intercultural sensitivity, academic culture, migration policy and organizational culture – directly informed the interview guide design and the construction of the analytical codebook, ensuring coherence between the theoretical framework and the empirical strategy [see: Figure 5: Research methodology in Annex].

4.2 Quantitative Component: Secondary Data Analysis

The quantitative component draws on secondary data analysis, following Crabtree and Miller's (1999) and Silverman's (2000) guidance on the use of existing datasets to identify 'where, what, who, and when' dynamics (as cited in Thomson & Srivastava, 2009). Descriptive statistics and trend analysis were applied to disaggregated data organized by gender, nationality, age, region of reception, legal status, and asylum outcomes, covering the period 2023 – 2025. This three-year window was chosen to capture relevant trends and policy changes, including the impact of Decree-La 133/2023 and the EU Temporary Protection

Mechanisms for Ukrainian minors. However, is important to mention that they come from different sources, some of the variables had different timeframes that would be explained and clarified in further chapters.

Data were drawn from the following official sources [see Table 2: Variables and data sources in the Annex]:

- Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies: national reports on UAM presence reception placements, guardian assignments, and dropout data (SIM, 2025)[4].
- Eurostat: disaggregated data on asylum applications and first-instance decisions for UAMs in Italy (2023 – 2025)
- UNICEF et al. (2025): Mediterranean child arrival data disaggregated by country, gender and accompanied status.
- EUAA, UNHCR and FRONTEX: regional migration monitoring, route analyses, and protection statistics.

4.3 Qualitative Component : Document Analysis and Semi-structured interviews

4.3.1 Legal and Policy Document Analysis

A systematic review of EU directives, Italian national legislation, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) governing UAM protection and reception was conducted, following Bowen (2009) document analysis methodology. This integrates content analysis matrix [see: Table 3: Legal framework Analysis in Annex]. Documents reviewed include Law 47/2017 (the Zampa Law); Legislative Decree 142/2015; Decree-Law 130/2020 (Law 173/2020); Decree-Law 133/2023 (Law 176/2023); the Dublin III Regulation; EU Directives 2013/32/EU and 2013/33/EU; and SAI national guidelines. This legal analysis forms the structural backbone of Theme 1 (Migration Policy) in the findings chapter.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Eighteen (18) virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2025 and April 2026 with key actors in the field of UAM protection and reception in Italy. Participants were drawn from the following professional contexts:

- Staff from national and international NGO specializing in child protection and migration advocacy.
- Representatives from UN agencies operating in Italy.
- Institutional and government actors.

[4] Limitation to acknowledge: A known sub-registration issue exists in the SIM database. The total UAM count (17,011 in Decembre 2025) differs from the disaggregated by nationality/region figure (~15.400), suggestion incomplete municipal-to-national data transfer. This limitation should be acknowledged explicitly in the findings and triangulated with the regional-level NGO or UNHCR data where possible.

- Academic researchers with expertise in migration, child protection, and social work in Italy.
- Frontline social workers and educators in first and second reception facilities.
- Voluntary guardians appointed pursuant to Law 47/2017.

Sampling was conducted in two stages. First, purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) was applied through stakeholder mapping to identify individuals with relevant expertise. Subsequently, snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) expanded the sample through professional networks to reach hard-to-access actors. All interviews were conducted virtually (primarily via Microsoft Teams) after informed consent and participant briefing. The interview guide was structured around the four thematic areas of Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023) framework: migration policy, organizational culture, intercultural sensitivity, and academic culture [see: Table 1: Participants summary].

Table 1: Participants summary

Code	**Type of actor**	**Years of experience**	**Region – comments**
P1	Association	+15 years	National (Presence in all regions)
P2	Researcher	+10 years	National (M.F[5] south Italy)
P3	NGO	+5 years	North Italy
P4	NGO	+ 5 years	South Italy
P5	NGO	+ 5 years	Central Italy
P6	Government	+ 5 years	South Italy
P7	Institution	+15 years	South Italy
P8	NGO	+10 years	National
P9	Institution	+10 years	National
P10	INGO	+10 years	National (M.F Italian borders)
P11	INGO	+15 years	National (M.F Italian borders)
P12	UN	+ 15 years	National
P13	Association	+10 years	Central Italy
P14	Association	+30 years	South Italy
P15	Association	+30 years	National
P16	Researcher	+2 years	North Italy
P17	Government	+30 years	National
P18	Researcher	+10 years	South Italy

Interviews were conducted in the language preferred by each participant – English, Spanish, or Italian - to facilitate open and comfortable communication and ensure the richness of participants' accounts was not constrained by linguistic barriers. While the researcher is native in Spanish and working knowledge in English, Italian represents a challenge as its

[5] Mayor focus/experience

proficiency is under development. To address this challenge, AI tools were used as a supplementary resource to support comprehension and confirm accuracy of interpretation. However, the coding and segments were kept in the original language to guarantee the original meaning, and specific segments were translated and reviewed as quotations that were introduced as part of the analysis within the chapter 4.

4.3.3 Data Analysis: Codebook Thematic Analysis

Interview data were analyzed using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Miles et al., 2014), which combines the systemic rigor of a theory informed codebook with the openness to inductively emerging categories. The codebook was developed in two stages. First, an initial set of deductive codes was constructed based on the theoretical framework and research questions – specifically drawing on the four knowledge production elements of Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023): migration policy, organizational culture, intercultural sensitivity and academic culture. Second, the codebook was inductively refined through iterative and close reading of interview transcripts, allowing additional codes and sub-themes to emerge or being renamed and reallocate accordingly to the analysis from the participants responses (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The coding process was conducted using MaxQDA, which facilitated the organization of segments, visualization of code co-ocurrences, and identification of intersections between themes. The analysis produced four main themes, reflected in the structure of Chapter 4: (1) Migration Policy; (2) Organizational Culture: (3) Intercultural Sensitivity; and (4) Academic Culture. Cross-theme analyses [see Figure 25 - Figure 29 in the Annex] reveal intersections between codes that enrich the interpretive complexity of findings.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in compliance with applicable ethical standards for social research. All participants provided voluntary informed consent and were briefed on the academic purpose of the research, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the confidentiality of their responses. Interview data were anonymized and are reported using participant codes throughout the analysis to protect professional identities. Data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes in accordance with applicable data protection regulations (GDPR).

4.5 AI Use disclosure:

Artificial intelligence tools such as Claude, ChatGPT were used to (1) improve the narrative clarity, syntax and academic coherence of written sections; and (2) assisting with the translation of selected interviews especially those in Italian and to ensure that the meaning and understanding of the participants answers were completely understood by the researcher and accordingly coding the segments where it corresponds. AI tools were not used at any

stage to generate data, produce analytical codes, develop themes or contribute to the interpretation of findings. All analytical decisions – including codebook construction, thematic categorization, and interpretative conclusions – were made exclusively by the researcher. The empirical integrity and analytical authorship of this study remain entirely the researcher's own.

Chapter 5: Findings and Analyses

This chapter presents and analyzes findings from the quantitative secondary data review, the legal and policy document analysis, and the qualitative semi-structured interviews, organized

around four thematic areas derived from Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023) analytical framework: (1) Migration Policy; (2) Organizational Culture; (3) Intercultural Sensitivity; and (4) Academic Culture. Each theme integrates quantitative evidence, documentary analysis, and professional testimonies, following the enriched qualitative analysis design described in Chapter 4. The chapter is structured to respond directly to the four research questions (RQ1 – RQ4), and cross-cutting intersections between themes are identified where they reveal significant structural dynamics.

Theme 1: Italian Migration Policy and the Formal Framework for UAM Protection:

1.1 The legal framework: Progressive architecture and regressive amendments

By 2026, the primary legislative instruments governing UAM protection in Italy are Law 47/2017 (the Zampa Law) and a series of complementary and partially modifying decrees [see: Table 3: Legal framework Analysis & Figure 1: Diagram about the Law 47/2017 in Italy]. The Zampa Law constitutes one of the most comprehensive child protection frameworks for unaccompanied minors in Europe. It is foundational principles include: explicit prohibition of refoulment at borders; equal treatment with Italian and EU citizen minors in all child protection matters; issuance of a temporary residence permit valid until the age of majority; standardized age assessment; strengthened guardianship with a maximum ratio of three minors per guardian (European e-Justice Portal, n.d.); possibility of extending the temporary permit until age 21; and guarantee of healthcare, education, psychosocial support, legal aid, and cultural mediation regardless of documentation status (Giovannetti, 2017b; Official Journal, 2017).

Complementing the Zampa Law, Decree-Law 130/2020 (Law 173/2020) transformed the reception architecture into the Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione (SAI), extending integrated reception services to refugees, asylum seekers, UAMs, and other vulnerable groups, with individualized socioeconomic integration pathways coordinated between local authorities and third-sector organizations.

However, Decree-Law 133/2023 (Law 176/2023) introduced significant qualifications to the Zampa Law's child-centered approach: extension of maximum stay in first reception facilities to 45 days, and authorization – as an extraordinary measure – to place minors aged to 16 and above in adult CAS facilities when dedicated UAM places are unavailable. This legislative evolution reflects a tension between administrative management imperatives and the best interest of the child, a tension that was explicitly raised by interview participants across professional backgrounds.

"… I know that according to law, they can request for an extension until the age of 21. But this is true for minors that have chosen yet to have a training course, and if they are yet on a training course, they could ask to have it [PA[6]]. But now, they [politicians] are trying to change this point. They don't want that minors…when they become adults can request for the PA[7] and we are trying to stop this risk, but it is very difficult because the majority has the vote in Parliament to change this point" (P17, Pos. 150 – 152, National).

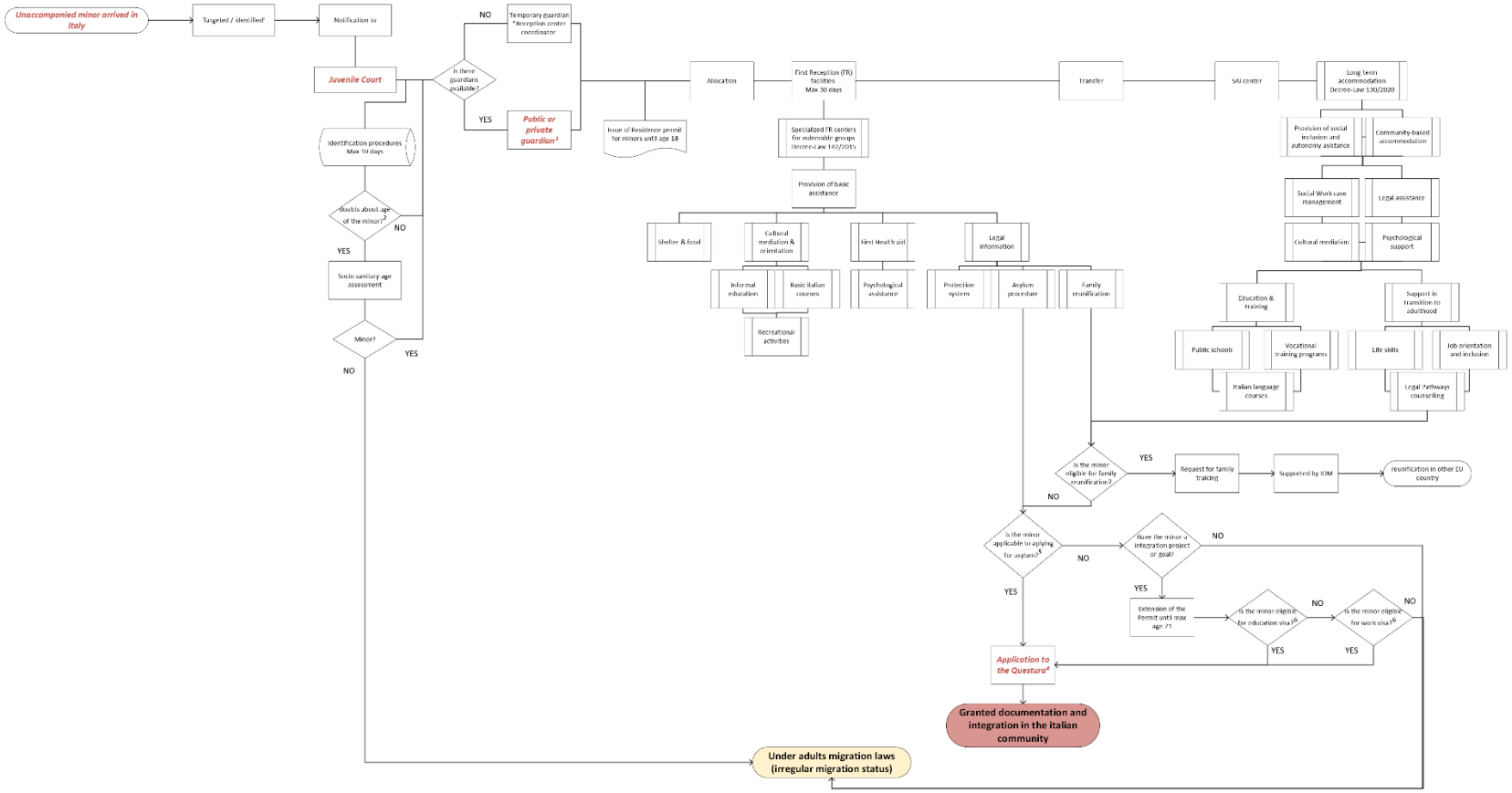
"In theory, minors should have access to all services simply by virtue of being minors, and they cannot be expelled from Italy, so theoretically they cannot be considered irregular. In practice, however, it often happens that public services do not take responsibility for minors; a long time passes before they do so, or the minors are entrusted to reception facilities that lack proper services. Some of these places are essentially just 'parking spaces where young people are left without being properly supported or followed up. Moreover, in the last two years, minors — especially those over the age of 16 — have also been placed in temporary centers together with adults." (P1, Pos. 138–148, National)

The legislative framework – including both the Zampa Law's protection and Decree-law 133/2023's restrictions operate at the macro level of the ecosystem. A weakening of macro-level legal protections does not remain at the policy layer: it directly propagates downward. When the law authorizes placing 16-years-old in adult facilities, it disrupts the meso-level reception environment, exposing minors to unsuitable conditions. At the micro level, the individual minor loses access to age-appropriate support, stable relationships with trained professionals, and the sense of safety necessary for engagement with integration processes. The macro-level legislative erosion thus produces micro-level harm in a direct and traceable cascade.

The formal legal architecture thus presents a dual character: a comprehensive, child-centered rights framework that is formally among the most protective in Europe; alongside a fragmented and resource-constrained implementation system increasingly incorporating measures that erode its own guarantees. This duality constitutes the structural backdrop against which all subsequent findings must be interpreted, additionally and to truly understand the assisting flow process according to the laws, the bellow visualization was made by the researcher aiming to provide the reader a better understanding of the process line and how all system and actors are integrated.

[6] *prosieguo amministrativo*
[7] *ibid*

Law 47/2017 regarding Protection and assistance of Unaccompanied Minors in Italy



Notes:

This diagram does not represent the full law or it has been approved by any institution, it was developed as a visual tool to understand the process under an academic master research

[1] Identification could be at the time of disembarkation, when the unaccompanied minor present himself at the questure or by any other civil or organization actor who reports the presence of UAM within the Italian Territory.

[2] According to interviews with key actors, the person must be considered a minor until proven otherwise (presumption of minority)

[3] Italian Citizens (civil) can apply to become a guardian and a maximum of 3 unaccompanied minors could be assigned after completition of formal training.

[4] Questura is the Immigration Office of the Police Headquarters

[5] According to the Law 251/2007 - https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2008/01/04/007G0259/sg

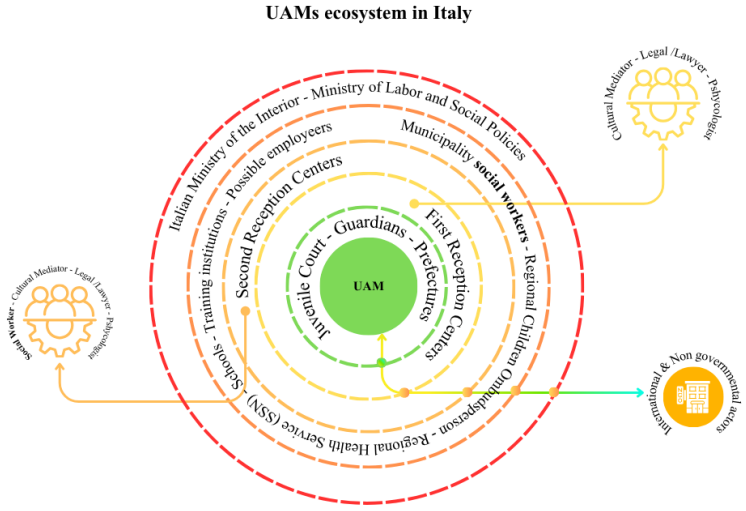
[6] According to the Law 286/1998 and the Presidential Decree 394/1999 https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1998/08/18/098G0348/sg ; https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1999/11/03/099G0265/sg

Figure 1: Diagram about the Law 47/2017 in Italy

1.2 Systemic fragmentation and lack of coordination

The UAM protection system in Italy is characterized by a dense multi-layered ecosystem of actors operating across legal, social, educational, psychosocial, and administrative domains. Drawing on the ecosystem model (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1987), **¡Error! No se encuentra el origen de la referencia.** visualizes the multiple systemic levels at which actors operate and interact. Central actors include: the Ministry of Interior (migration control and first reception coordination); the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (child protection coordination and SIM management); Prefectures (first reception activation); Municipalities (local law implementation); the Juvenile Court (legal protection decisions and prosieguo); the Children's Ombudsperson (guardian selection and oversight); social workers (in municipal services and SAI centers); cultural mediators; legal advisors; and psychologists. Voluntary guardians operate across multiple levels simultaneously, bridging the exosystem and microsystem.

Figure 2: Ecosystem diagram of actors involves in the protection and assistance of UAM in Italy



Note: Authors elaboration. The information presented is based on the author's analysis of legislation, public reports, and legal documents. It should not be construed as a definitive or authentic interpretation of the law.

Through the interviews, participants consistently described fragmentation and lack of coordination in the protection system as a defining feature, closely correlated with territorial disparities and identified as a key factor generating incentives for UAMs to abandon the system or to go unrecognized as minors [see: Table 9: Co-occurrence between systemic fragmentation with code system]. As illustrated in Figure 1: Diagram about the Law 47/2017 in Italy, guaranteeing proper implementation of the law requires each actor to fulfill their role not merely by following bureaucratic procedures, but by actively seeking the best interests

of the minor. When the coordination between actors at macro and meso level breaks down, the impact on the wellbeing of the minor at the micro level can be decisive and permanent.

> *"the system doesn't communicate between actors… so that your previous setting doesn't tell anything to your new settings, so you need to start from zero". (P2, Pos. 801-804, MF South Italy)*

> *"The reception system in Italy is fragmented, despite being governed by the same legislation. Territorial and social resources often differ. Southern Italy, however, faces a complex situation, with a high level of vulnerability and general poverty among (Italian) families. Therefore, social services must address the needs of a large portion of the population, and human and economic resources are insufficient. (P7, P. 3, South Italy)*

The fragmentation documented here operates primarily at the meso level – the breakdown of institutional communication, coordination, and shared protocols between reception centers, social services, juvenile courts, and guardian networks. However, its effects are felt acutely at the micro level. Trust, which is a prerequisite for effective social work engagement, is destroyed each time (Rutter, 2006). The ecological concept of transactions – the ongoing, reciprocal exchange between a person and their environment that enable growth and development – is systemically interrupted by this fragmentation(Allen-Meares & Lane, 1987).

1.3 Quantitative Overview: UAM arrivals, profiles, and trends 2023 – 2025

Italy's geographic position as the primary Mediterranean entry point renders it structurally central to European UAM reception. According to UNICEF et al. (2025), approximately 41,800 children arrived in Mediterranean EU countries in 2024, of whom more than half (21,323) were unaccompanied. Italy registered the highest proportion of UAMs among child arrivals (69%), equivalent to 8,752 children. Data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies indicate that during 2025, over 16,000 UAMs arrived in Italy, primarily from Egypt (35%), Bangladesh (13%), Eritrea (11%), and Somalia (7%). Across 2023-2025, while 2023 recorded the highest absolute arrivals, 2025 shows an increase of approximately 9% compared to 2024, indicating a continuing upward trend (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2025) [see Figure 6: Arrivals in Italy per in Annex].

Consistent gendered and age-based patterns characterize the UAM population throughout the study period [see Figure 7 to Figure 9 in Annex]. Of the 17,011 UAMs present in Italy in December 2025, 88.63% (15,077) are male, predominantly aged 16-17. Females represent 11.37% (1,934) of the total and present a distinct age profile: while male UAMs are heavily concentrated in the 16-17 age group (83.4% of males), female UAMs show a more distributed pattern, with 46% aged 7-14 and 20.3% aged 17. This age divergence carries

significant protection implications: younger girls arriving without a family or legal guardian face heightened risks of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence, yet may be systematically less visible in monitoring systems calibrated around the predominant male adolescent profile (Save the Children, 2023; The Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI), 2025).

Nationality profiles also diverge sharply by gender. Among males: Egypt (34.16%), Bangladesh (11.28%), Ukraine (9.72%), Gambia (7.26%), Tunisia (5.99%). Among females: Ukraine overwhelmingly dominates (77.46%), followed by Ivory Coast (3.62%), Eritrea (2.48%), Guinea (2.28%), Nigeria (1.50%). The high concentration of Ukrainian girls reflects the specific regime under the EU Temporary Protection Mechanism (Council Implementing Decision 2022/382; Decree-Law 201/2025), which granted immediate, expedited access to protection, education, healthcare, and social services without the standard asylum procedure. This constitutes a clear empirical demonstration of the study's central argument – here, Temporary Protection status tied to nationality – produces qualitatively different welfare pathways for a different group within a formally universal system, directly confirming the research hypothesis and responding to RQ1 [See: Figure 10].

1.3 Territorial distribution and regional disparities in integration outcomes

The regional distribution of UAM reception reveals pronounced territorial inequalities that function as a structural determinant of welfare quality and integration outcomes – a finding that directly reflects the theoretical lens of Ferrera (1996a) Southern European welfare regime. By December 2025, the main regions of reception are Sicily (21.6%), Lombardy (13.5%) and Campania (11.5%), reflecting both geographical proximity to Mediterranean disembarkation points and urban pull factors (Terzera & Bonomi, 2024). However, quantitative reception shares do not translate linearly into integration outcomes; regional analysis reveals sharp divergences in the capacity to support the transition from reception to protection.

This divergence is most starkly illustrated by the contrast between Sicily and Lombardy. Sicily, which hosts the largest share of UAMs nationally (21.6% of the total, and 30% of SAI places dedicated to minors) records the lowest proportion of minors accessing integration pathways upon reaching age 18: just 0.6%. Furthermore, Sicily presents the highest voluntary abandonment rate of reception centers – 32.4% of all voluntary exits nationally in 2025. In contrast, Lombardy, the second-largest region of reception, achieves substantially higher integration pathway access rates, demonstrating that scale and capacity do not correlate in the current system [see: Figure 18 in Annex].

These findings reflect what Ferrera (1996a) describes as the foundational characteristic of Southern European welfare regimes: territorial fragmentation and uneven service provision

as structural features, not exceptional failures. For UAMs in Sicily, the system operates as what Ferrera terms a "colander state" – formal universalist principles alongside structural perforations through which the most vulnerable fall. As Bousiou (2024) argues, local governance structures that operationalize national welfare policy in highly variable ways produce territorial lotteries for vulnerable populations, where outcomes depend as much on geography as on legal entitlement.

> *"Well, it depends a lot on where they arrive. There are a lot of differences if they are arriving by sea in Sicily or in Calabria, or if they are crossing the borders in the mountains in the north. There are associations and NGOs on these territories. So, when they arrive they meet the people working for this organization that give all the information to start because it's really a long path. When they arrive alone we made the research about the borders between Italy and France in Ventimiglia as well as in Trieste. Sometimes it's not easy to find organization and so they are alone, …and they normally follow other minors of the same countries coming from the same countries" (P9, Pos. 314-326, National).*

> *"…some centers can be very well organized, so you know that for example, there are always at least three to four people in rotation. Some centers, no, also the insufficient places available within the reception facilities where you can guarantee that certain standards are always met and in place. So, you have a very big diversity. You have centers with one operator and fifty children. You have strong centers with 12 operators and 50 children. You can have second reception centers where there are like 12 children living together and there are three operators in rotation with others. So, this is like the variability that at the end. Doesn't give to the child the perspective of building strong relations…" (P11, Pos. 580-593, MF Italian borders)*

Other key aspect is regarding the differences with the assistance for unaccompanied minors from Ukraine, where through the EU decree decision 2022/382 provide a holistic assistance for unaccompanied minors from Ukraine, and in that sense they were located in a more distributed manner but with higher presence in Lombardy and most of them in private or family housing accommodation (95,9%). While for those from other nationalities the main type of reception centers is first and second reception centers prevailing the regions before mentioned [see Table 6: Analysis of UAMs by nationality and type of reception center and region].

1.4 Asylum applications, first-instance decisions, and legal pathway access

Asylum constitutes the primary legal pathway through which UAMs may regularize their status beyond age 18. The data, however, reveals a complex and concerning picture. According to EuroStat (2026), 2,205 UAMs submitted asylum applications in Italy in 2023,

decreasing to 2,025 in 2024 – an 8% reduction despite growing UAM arrivals. Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (2025) reports approximately 950 international protection requests by UAMs in 2025, representing only 5,6% of all UAM present in Italy during that year. These figures are strikingly low given the scale of UAM presence and the legal entitlements available and suggest that the majority of minors are either not applying for asylum or are being channeled toward alternative pathways [see: Figure 12 to Figure 14 in Annex].

Among those who did apply, first-instance decisions show a positive rate of 62% as of 2025 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2025), with subsidiary protection[8] as the most common form of recognition. However, the data reveal a de facto nationality-based stratification in recognition patterns: nationalities most frequently granted subsidiary protection include Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Mali, Pakistan, and Somalia; nationalities most frequently refused include The Gambia, Guinea, Pakistan, Côte d'Ivoire, and Bangladesh. This pattern reflects the operational influence of safe country of origin designations, which – despite being formally inconsistent with the refugee convention's individual assessment principle – condition recognition probabilities in ways that create systematic inequalities (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

> *"In Italy there is a debate that I personally find very problematic in many ways, because it is instrumentalized and used by right-wing parties in the country to argue something like this: if you are fleeing from war, 'I protect you, my brother.' But if you are not fleeing from war, then you do not have the right to stay in Italy. This argument shapes public attitudes and influences the reception system itself.*
>
> *This then has consequences for minors as well: the fact that they arrived in Italy and have the right to stay because they are minors, but the moment they become adults, that right becomes conditional... So, if I fled from war and I could prove it well, then perhaps I can stay. But if I did not flee from war, but from hunger, or if I simply want to pursue life goals that my country cannot guarantee , then I have to leave..." (P8, Pos. 11, National)*
>
> *"...So, they decide that certain groups are less or more deserving."(P2, Pos. 1047 – 1048, M.F south Italy)*

[8] Unaccompanied minors applying for international protection may receive different forms of legal status depending on the nature of the risks they face in their country of origin. **Refugee status (asylum)** is granted to minors who demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on reasons such as race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, in accordance with Legislative Decree No. 251/2007, which implements the Geneva Convention 1951. **Subsidiary protection** is granted when the applicant does not meet the criteria for refugee status but would face serious harm if returned, such as torture, inhuman treatment, or threats resulting from armed conflict. **Humanitarian protection or special protection** was historically granted to vulnerable individuals, including minors, based on humanitarian grounds or protection of fundamental rights under Legislative Decree No. 286/1998 and later reforms such as Decree Law No. 130/2020.

These nationality-based patterns directly address RQ1 and RQ2: nationality, as a proxy for likely asylum eligibility, functions as a structural determinant shaping both the decision to apply and the likelihood of a positive outcome. For nationalities with historically low recognition rates, the prospect of rejection may discourage application, contribute to reception abandonment, or incentivize onward migration – outcomes that are quantitatively visible in the dropout data analyzed below.

The second legal pathway – conversion of the minor residence permit into a study, employment, or self-employment permit upon reaching age 18 (Article 32, Legislative Decree 286/1998; Zampa Law Article 13) – shows a 26% increase in applications in 2025 compared to 2024, with 4,367 total applicants representing 11% of UAMs present. Egypt (42.2%), Tunisia (11.3%), Albania (10.8%), Kosovo (8.2%), and Bangladesh (7.4%) are the main nationalities, with 99% of applicants being male. The dropout data from the SIM system are also analytically crucial: during 2025, 19,268 UAMs exited the reception system, primarily through reaching age 18 (66%), voluntary exit (31%), and other reasons (3%) including foster care, family reunification, and repatriation [see: Figure 16: Leaving the reception center by reason and gender]. Zooming in Ukrainians, the 96.2% leave the protection system reaching the age 18 but with a refugee status already granted as it was mentioned by law followed by 1.6% that were returned to their country of origin. This also confirms the disparities in different outcomes according to the migration status and the services that minors could have access.

Voluntary exit rates are particularly high among older adolescents (41% of voluntary departures aged 17; 36% aged 16) and among Egyptian (28%), Eritrean (16%), and Tunisian (11%) nationalities. The high voluntary exit rate among Eritreans is analytically noteworthy given Eritrea's generally strong recognition rates: this likely reflects onward migration strategies toward countries with larger Eritrean diaspora communities, rather than system disengagement per se. This illustrates how the migration project (RQ2) interacts with legal status and nationality to produce different behavioral outcomes within the same formal system, but also the impact of discrepancies between micro and macro level can affect at the end the wellbeing of the minor, unknowing the processes at the meso level as well as other bureaucratic barriers such delays in the appointments, times for interviews in dates and times that also are not flexible for guardians make it hard and more delays and affect the minors future.

Theme 2: Organizational Culture – Barriers and facilitators in welfare access.

2.1 The reception architecture and its implementation gaps

Italy's UAM reception system is structured into two tiers: first reception centers (CAS[9] minors and government first reception facilities, intended for stays of 30-45 days) and second reception facilities, specifically the SAI system [see: Table 4: Type of reception centers for refugees and migrants in Italy]. The SAI constitutes the more comprehensive level, providing individualized socioeconomic integration pathways through a network of local authorities supported by third-sector organizations. In practice, the 30 - 45 days transition from first to second reception is frequently delayed, and many UAMs remain in first reception well beyond the prescribed duration.

In terms or region distribution differences are also noticed, according to the in-depth report from Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali (2025), first reception centers are mostly located in Sicily region where a quarter of those facilities are located and aims to respond of the continual arrivals as being one of the entry points to Italy, followed by a lower incidence in regions such as Lombardy and Liguria. Regarding second reception centers, the data reported that are widely distributed throughout the Italian territory, being the largest presence around big cities such as Milan, Rome, Naples and Bologna in terms of regions will be Sicily (15%), Lombardy (14%) and Campania (13%) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2025).

As of December 2024, only 5,977 places for UAMs were financed within SAI projects nationally – substantially below documented need, given over 2,900 UAMs in first reception and over 8,400 in second reception facilities outside the SAI system. Repeated requests by municipal associations for at least 4,000 additional SAI places have been rejected. This deficit forces reliance on CAS facilities, prolonged first reception stays, and emergency municipal placements – each providing qualitatively inferior services compared to the SAI model (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2025).

> *"…many of the organizations and facilities that emerged out of nowhere during the emergency were not properly trained and did not have the capacity for reception and integration.*
>
> *They were created on the spot. It is an ugly term, but they were almost like money-making machines whose purpose was simply to provide a roof and a plate of pasta for these people. Then politics exploited this situation by talking about waste — for example, not considering things like Ramadan, or more generally the lack of knowledge about these people's countries of origin, their habits, and the kinds of food they are used to eating. All of this creates waste and leads to poor integration, and we realized this very clearly.*

[9] By their name in Italian – Centro di Accoglienza Straordinario

In Italy it became like this, and so this too is a barrier. In the end, the migrant says: 'You know what? I'll take advantage of the situation, I'll run away, I'll go find some work — undeclared work — and that's it." (P14, Pos. 613–620, South Italy)

The funding of architecture underpinning the system is itself a source of instability. Since 2015, the Fund for UAM reception has been managed by the Ministry of Interior and requires annual refinancing, with fluctuations that directly affect service planning: €46.9 million (2023), €172 million (2024), €269 million (2025), and €185 million (projected 2026). The reduction projected for 2026 risks destabilizing services at a critical moment of continued high arrivals. Non continuity of funding produces staff shortages and high turnover – conditions particularly damaging for UAMs, who require stable relational environments and consistent professional support.

"…the European Union decides that this is a team that they're not interested in anymore. And then, associations have no funds. Also, community municipalities have less funds. And then everything stops. And maybe for five years there will not be such things [programs]. So, this is sad because you cannot have a sustainable system if it depends on the political line… of the European Union. So, the national ministries decide where to allocate the funds". (P4, Pos. 163, South Italy)

"…In the last —less than 10 years — the budget allocated for reception and protection has been continuously reduced. And when the budget is reduced, the reception centers have to cut costs, and one way of cutting costs is by reducing the working hours of professionals..." (P18, Pos. 516–521, South Italy)

"…So, you have not enough money, you have not enough community, you have not enough guardianship…". (P17, Pos. 199, National)

2.2 staffing, service provision, and the structural scarcity of care

The staffing deficit in UAM reception facilities is one of the most consistently documented findings across reports, institutional assessments, and participant testimonies in this study. As documented by Bove et al. (2025), staff-to-minor ratios are critically low: social workers are allocated 26 hours per week in collective centers housing 41-50 UAMs, and 32 hours in non-collective structures; linguistic mediation averages just 14 hours per week per collective center. In practical terms, this translates to approximately 16 minutes of linguistic mediation per minor per week in collective centers – a figure that renders meaningful communication, needs assessment, and rights information effectively impossible at scale [see: Table 5: Reception centers, hours per professional].

These conditions are particularly consequential for the identification of psychosocial needs and protection risks. As documented by Gruppo CRC (2023), first reception centers as currently organized produce 'serious negative effects on the psychosocial health of individuals at a young age, a strong detachment from rules, and significantly increased risks

of absconding'. UNICEF (2023) similarly reports that high minor-to-caseworker ratios create important gaps in the identification and referral of the most vulnerable cases, compounded by the frequent absence of basic goods and specialized services in many reception settings.

The staffing deficit operates at the meso level of the ecosystem – it is an organizational and institutional failure – but its consequences are felt exclusively at the micro level by the individual minor. With 16 minutes of linguistic mediation per week, a minor cannot explain their fears, understand their rights, or communicate their needs. From an ecological perspective, this serves the transactional relationship between the minor and the meso-level systems that are meant to support their development. The minor is physically present within the system but functionally isolated from it. This isolation increases the probability of dropout, undocumented departure, and exposure to exploitation outside the formal welfare system. The absence of a meaningful relationship with a social worker is therefore not an accidental omission but a structurally produced outcome of meso-level organizational constraints.

> *"I think what happens is that there are very strong limitations for everyone, very strong limitations for this… for the work itself. It's very rotational — how should I put it — they do not have enough hours to attend to everyone, because there are limited resources for this." (P18, Pos. 472–476, South Italy)*

> *"…the social worker often is not able to build a relationship because they change, one day you have one social worker, the day after you have another people…" (P17, Pos. 449-451, National)*

> *"Unfortunately, mediators are not always available, nor are available for the entire process, for example in schools and hospitals. Reception centers are required to include this figure on their staff, but this is not always enough…" (P7, P. 3, South Italy)*

> *"There is also the issue of the lack of agreements in place, and therefore the difficulty of obtaining things through consulates. Often you have to travel to Rome with your unaccompanied foreign minors, so the costs become very high" (P14, Pos . 649, South Italy)*

2.3 Guardianship: the gap between design and practice

The guardianship system established by the Zampa Law was designed to provide each UAM with a stable, legally recognized adult advocate – someone able to represent the minor's legal interests, facilitate service access, support integration pathways, and accompany the minor toward adulthood. In practice, implementation is characterized by significant delays, regional imbalances, and structural fragilities that undermine its protective function.

"The guardians themselves receive no financial reimbursement in Italy, so you are a volunteer — completely, absolutely a volunteer. And even then, you cannot be a guardian unless you belong to a group that supports one another and receives training together.

For example, just think about having to constantly drive an unaccompanied foreign minor around in your own car — insurance, car responsibility, everything. Imagine being a working person who constantly has to handle all the bureaucratic procedures for this young person; every single time you personally have to be present, which is something you certainly would not normally do in your own family context..." (P14, Pos 656 – 665, South Italy)

By December 2024, 4,588 voluntary guardians formally consented to registration on Juvenile Court lists (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2025), unevenly distributed across regions. In areas most affected by arrivals (Sicily, Calabria), acute shortages exist relative to the number of minors; in subsequent reception areas (Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Piedmont), turnover and actual availability remain uneven. Delays in guardian appointments mean that reception center coordination typically assumes temporary guardianship responsibilities, creating conflicts of interest and further stretching insufficient human resources.

"…It is really about the idea of the 'pure guardian,' meaning a family that welcomes and supports a minor, a family that takes them in. In this sense… in some contexts where the numbers are very high, there is a great difficulty in identifying guardians because, these guardians do not receive any reimbursement; they are truly voluntary guardians in the purest sense. Therefore, the Juvenile Court often does not have access to the well-known list from which to appoint guardians, and sometimes the same guardian ends up handling multiple cases, which makes things very difficult. Right now, the current difficulty is that waiting times are increasing again…" (P14, Pos. 766–782, South Italy)

"…at the same time the tribunal for minors is facing the problems in matching between. Tutor and unaccompanied minors because now in Rome we should be about ±100 guardians but. Half of us have not matched…I finished my guardianship in August 2025 and until now (March 2026) I haven't received any call for being assigned…" (P13, Pos 458 – 462, Central Italy)

"…Because there are areas where people try to become a guardian, but they have to wait a lot because the offices do not have the time or they are understaffed. They do not have the staff to read and approve all the applications…" (P9, Pos. 863-871, National)

Participants described a systemic communicative fragmentation between guardians and interdisciplinary teams in reception centers. Guardians are frequently positioned institutionally as supervisory or administrative figures rather than as partners in the minor's life project. The GUIDE project assessment by CESIE ETS (2025) confirms that coordination between guardians and reception facilities is often fragmented, and that UAMs themselves frequently have limited understanding of their guardian's role and functions. This relational fragility undermines the protective function the role was designed to serve, and reflects the broader discretionary dynamics described by Lipsky (2010) street-level bureaucracy framework.

2.4 The transition to adulthood: A structural cliff edge

The transition from minor to adult status at age 18 constitutes one of the most analytically significant junctures in the UAM experience within the Italian welfare system. The Zampa Law provides the **'prosieguo amministrativo' [PA]** – extension of temporary protection until age 21 – subject to Juvenile Court approval, social services request, and the existence of an education, work, or self-employment project. However, this provision is systemically constrained by multiple overlapping factors.

Accessing employment requires professional training competition and employer coordination; study pathways require formal documentation (including birth certificates or passports, which may cost upward of €200); self-employment is unrealistic for most 17-year-olds without capital. Furthermore, participants reported that recent practice has increasingly shifted toward granting extensions of one year only rather than until age 21, effectively compressing the bridge to independent adult status and increasing the likelihood of legal irregularity upon expiry. This practice directly contradicts the Zampa Law's intent and was identified by participants as a critical systemic failure.

> *"It is a dilemma every time you have to make a minor leave the reception center simply because they have turned 18, even though you know perfectly well that they are not in a condition to live independently, that they have no resources, no one to rely on, and that you are essentially abandoning them… There is no way around it, there is no legal possibility to offer them anything else. Sometimes attempts are made — for example, you can write a report saying that the person is working, studying, and so on; you can try to do something — but I cannot do that for everyone." (P17, Pos. 659–666, National)*

> *"…Regarding the continuation of [PA[10]], where a young person simply does not show their resources or potential according to the system's criteria. Very often the system*

[10] Prosieguo amministrativo

is short-sighted — not malicious, but short-sighted. That is, it does not look deeply into the relational and personal dimension of the young person.

On the other hand, those who do this work authentically, passionately, from both an ethical and deontological perspective, can perceive the subjectivity of the young person, can see their story. So here there is almost a kind of short circuit rather than just a dilemma: between a formal evaluation made by the system and the bureaucracy, and the actual reality of the young person.

These 'short circuits' are often created when institutions or bureaucracy evaluate and decide the path to be taken with a young person based on standardized indicators and then implement and propose standardized pathways for them. But if you focus on the subjective dimension of the young person, you understand that this standardization — whether in the evaluation made about them or in the pathway proposed to them — is profoundly unjust…" (P8, Pos. 33, National)

The transition to adulthood illustrates with particular clarity the macro-micro cascade. The macrosystem defines age 18 as the categorical boundary between child protection and adult migration law. This macro-level boundary abruptly removes all meso-level supports simultaneously: the minor's place in the reception center, their guardian, their caseworker, their integration project. At the micro level, this means that a young person who was, the day before. Embedded in a network of institutional relationships and legal protections, it is suddenly without a residence, without support, and without legal statis if the PA has not been secured. As (Bhabha, 2019) argues, adolescent migrants caught between adult-centered migration laws and citizen-centered child welfare structures are routinely left outside the reach of effective child rights protection.

Interview participants also described ethical tensions arising from professional gatekeeping in the PA[11] application process. Several reported situations in which minors without a 'good' life project – due to drug use history, insufficient language skills, or proximity to age 18 – were not supported in applying for the extension, despite legal entitlement. This discretionary exclusion, even when unintentional, constitutes a form of a street-level bureaucratic decision-making (Lipsky, 2010) that produces differential access to formally universal rights.

Theme 3: Intercultural Sensitivity – Actors, profiles, and legal pathway decision-making

3.1 The ecosystem of protection actors and the centrality of relational support.

[11] Ibid

Interview participants consistently identified guardian, social workers, and cultural mediators as the three actor categories with the greatest practical influence on minors' decisions and trajectories within the protection system. However, the effective performance of these roles is contingent on structural conditions – workload, institutional support, training, professional autonomy – that are frequently insufficient. This finding confirms the theoretical framework's emphasis on how organizational culture and institutional conditions shape the delivery of formally universal rights (Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2013).

> *"…ideally the Guardian should be able to guide the minor also and to suggest the minor along with the social services… It should be seen as a team of people that seek for the best interest of the minor and assess together the situation…" (P3, Pos. 97, North Italy)*
>
> *"Legal guardian in theory should be the person that together with the educators at the reception center have day-to-day contact with a child… and are better equipped to follow up on his day-to-day needs and activities, social services and the social worker…" (P12, Pos. 334-340, National)*
>
> *"Another bureaucratic barrier is linked to the agreements that our State should make… they keep saying: 'We will deport them, they were criminals.' But how many agreements does Italy have? Or, through the consulates, how possible is it to obtain the documentation coming from their countries of origin — even for the most basic things, like vaccination records?*
>
> *They arrive in Italy, but we have no historical documentation of their previous life. So, who should they turn to? Who is supposed to understand even these basic issues?" (P14, Pos. 613–634, South Italy)*

In ecosystem terms, the guardian, social worker and cultural mediator together constitute the minor's primary mesosystem – the network of immediate settings and relationships that directly shapes development. Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) original formulation of the ecosystem model emphasizes that healthy development requires the mesosystem to be characterized by consistency, trust, and reciprocal communication across settings. The fragmentation documented in Theme 2 systemically destroys this mesosystem coherence. When the same minor encounters a different social worker each week, a guardian they barely know, and a mediator available for only 16 minutes per week, the meso system is effectively non-functional as a developmental support. Re-establishing the meso system coherence – through stable and close relationships with guardians, consistent case workers, and effective mediators – is therefore not merely a matter of service quality but of ecological necessity for the minor's protection and development.

3.2 Migration profiles, migration projects, and legal pathway decision-making from the perspective of frontline professionals and social workers

A central question of this research (RQ2) concerns the factors shaping UAMs' decisions to apply for asylum or pursue other legal pathways. The qualitative analysis, enriched with secondary data analysis, reveals that these decisions are shaped by an intersection of structural, relational, informational, and biographical factors that cannot be reduced to any single variable. Drawing on (Giovannetti, 2008, 2017b) typology of UAM profiles arriving in Italy, four analytically distinct migration profiles are identifiable, each associated with different legal pathway dynamics:

- Minors escaping violence, armed conflict, or persecution (predominantly Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia): typically, without a fixed migration project, with multiple transit stops, oriented toward asylum. Sense of integration in host community strongly influences decisions to stay or move onward.
- Economically dispatched minors with family sponsorship (predominantly Morocco, Egypt): migration projects conceived with family support and strong remittance obligations. Asylum may be perceived as inappropriate; integration pathways (education/employment permits) may be preferred, but these carry their own documentation barriers.
- Minors attracted by lifestyle models (predominantly Albania, Tunisia): motivated by aspirational peer narratives rather than persecution or economic sponsorship. Highly susceptible to voluntary exit if integration conditions do not meet expectations.
- Minors experiencing social de-structuring in home environments (diverse nationalities): leaving due to family disruption or attempted reunification across Europe with migration projects often unclear or evolving.

Cross-thematic qualitative analysis [see Figure 25 in Annex] reveals convergence across participant responses regarding factors influencing asylum application decisions: eligibility criteria (particularly the operation of safe country of origin lists); migration project orientation; nationality-based recognition patterns; length of administrative waiting times; and quality of legal information and counseling received. Participants also highlighted the role of informal peer networks through which information – often partial or distorted – about outcomes, waiting times, and conditions in other European countries circulates among UAMs, shaping decisions in ways that are invisible to formal monitoring systems.

> *"…there are incentives for people to remain outside [of the system]… they get into this prolonged limbo, which anyway ends at 18, leaving you on a street, while you get stocked into your migratory project, which often time is not a coherent project, because the journey is so fragmented and it's so multi-directional and so dependent on the kind of boundaries or border you need to cross that you don't really do big*

plans or you do plans and then you redo plans again…" (P2, Pos. 531-542, M.F South Italy)

"It does not help that the system for obtaining refugee status takes an extremely long time. The commission procedures take long time, and this opens the possibility for these young people to avoid using regular channels. Many times, they do not want to remain tied to the Italian institutional system while waiting for the process. So that does not help. There is also a very serious problem of school exclusion because access to fundamental rights is absolutely tied to having a residence permit. Even though it is obvious that an unaccompanied minor has rights — and there are various international legal obligations that should make them a priority for the system — in reality, they are not treated as such…This is absolute marginalization." (P5, Pos. 210–221, Central Italy)

The decision of whether to apply for asylum is often described as an individual choice. The ecosystem model reveals it as a response to exosystem conditions largely outside the minors' control: the processing time of the Commissione Territoriale (exosystem), the operation of safe country of origin lists (macrosystem), the quality of information received from professionals (mesosystem), and the peer narratives circulating in the minor's immediate social environment (microsystem). When the exosystem creates in average and depend on each case a two-year waiting period with uncertain outcomes, the rational micro-level response is to exit and pursue immediate economic goals. Understanding dropout as an ecological response to hostile exosystem conditions is essential for designing effective interventions(Acocella & Turchi, n.d.; Androff & Mathis, 2022; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

3.3 Gender, vulnerability and invisible profiles

A particularly concerning finding, confirmed by both quantitative data and qualitative testimonies, is the relative invisibility of female UAMs within protection and research frameworks. Despite comprising 11.37% of the UAM population in December 2025, female UAMs are underrepresented in asylum application data, integration pathway applications highlighted that female minors – particularly those from West Africa (Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Guinea) and the Horn of Africa (Eritrea) – might have or had face heightened risks of trafficking for sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, both during their journeys or at any stage of the assistance or could have higher probabilities to face them. The absence of gender-disaggregated referral protocols and specialized psychosocial support compounds these risks (Save the Children, 2023; The Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI), 2024b, 2025)

The emerging presence of Peruvian female UAMs – noted in 2025 data as growing nationality among female asylum applicants – signals a new and complex migration phenomenon requiring dedicated attention. Peru is a country not traditionally associated with

refugee flows, and the protection profiles of Peruvian UAMs requite individualized assessment rather than categorical processing. This finding underscores the theoretical argument that effective UAM protection cannot rely on standardized nationality-based assumptions but must remain sensitive to evolving and heterogeneous protection needs.

> *"…securitization is implicitly a racist practice. So, if you assume that certain individuals for how they are, for who they are, they are a danger and a potential burden. You are formally, but also informally, dehumanizing them. So, the idea is that with securitization we have created this kind of contradictory legal space. So, you have legal system of protection. Which overlaps with legal system of criminalization. So often time decisions are taken within that overlap. Where the two things overlap, you have a legal grey area. So, you have two opposite legal regimes regulating the same. It means that you can decide in whatever direction you want. So, protection is not anymore guaranteed…" (P2, Pos. 1090-1110, MF South Italy)*

> *"…We said about female children and how vulnerable they are and the many times, they are subject to different violences and have suffered different kinds of violations of their rights and many of them might be in the process of international procedure because of that. It's not again the country where you come from, but many times for children and female children. Particularly is the sufferance's you've been through that can give you access to an international protection procedure…" (P12, Pos. 663-671, National)*

Theme 4: Academic Culture – Professional education, training, and ethical dilemmas in practice

4.1 Professional regulation and institutional positioning

Social work in Italy is a formally regulated profession. Practitioners must hold a university degree (Laurea in Servizio Sociale, class L-39), pass the national state examination (Esame di Stato), and register with the Consiglio Nazionale dell'Ordine degli Assistenti Sociali (CNOAS), which currently counts over 45,000 registered members (CNOAS, 2025), regulated under Law No. 84/1993. Within the UAM protection system, social workers operate in two primary contexts: (1) Municipal Social Services, coordinating access to local welfare services; and (2) SAI center interdisciplinary teams, responsible for individual case management, integration plans, and multi-actor coordination with psychologists, educators, cultural mediators, legal advisors, guardians, schools, and healthcare providers.

4.2 Training gaps and the structural contingency of specialization

Despite formal regulation, the qualitative data reveals a persistent gap between general professional education and the specialized competencies required for effective practice with

UAMs. No mandatory national specialization in migration or UAM child protection exists. Postgraduate training is available at some universities and through third-sector organizations, but these are structurally contingent on external project funding (NGO or EU) rather than embedded in professional training pathways. Access to specialized knowledge is therefore unevenly distributed by region, organization, and individual initiative – reproducing the same territorial inequalities that characterize service provision.

> *"…Well, what is most difficult for a social work student is moving from the clinical level — the level of direct relationship with the person being assisted — to a broader level involving knowledge of laws, understanding local power dynamics, and the administrative processes required to manage funding calls and obtain resources.*
>
> *It is true that, up to now, people who study social work tend to think mainly in terms of relationships with people. It is seen as a profession centered on relationships and support. But when working with migration …it cannot be limited to working only with the individual, even though that is very important. It also means working with the whole network of actors, resources, and structures surrounding the host community and the reception center.*
>
> *For this reason, I believe that perhaps a greater investment is needed — although we do not really have it — in skills related to administrative management, network coordination, and the structure of public networks. Not politics in the partisan sense, but social policy, meaning a more coordinating role.*
>
> *In Italy the social work degree is three years plus an additional two years. So, these coordination functions, the more political and administrative management functions...are studied during the additional two years..." (P18, Pos. 602–631, South Italy)*

The GUIDE project assessment by CESIE ETS (2025) confirms that professionals and volunteers working with UAMs in Italy are not yet systemically or uniformly trained to identify and respond to the complex and layered vulnerabilities of this population. While some training exists at the local level or through EU-funded projects, there is no national structured system of mandatory capacity-building. Interview participants strongly echoed this finding, with several – particularly voluntary guardians – describing initial training as minimal and inadequately followed up.

> *"…Another significant limitation is that not all professionals have the same level of training in immigration matters. Working with minors requires specific training and significant experience... Our system also requires trained and up-to-date guardians..." (P7, P. 4, South Italy)*
>
> *"…You have a training course for guardians. It's totally free. And you have some days of a training course. They are very different from regions. In some region you have*

some types of training, but in others it is not so good, but you have normally 3 days of training…" (P17, Pos. 499-509, National)

Participants also raised concerns about the episodic nature of professional development. Training tends to be one-off events rather than sustained learning processes, and peer support mechanisms – particularly important for professionals working with traumatized populations – are largely absent or informal. The risk of secondary traumatization and burnout was mentioned by multiple participants, particularly in the context of the structural pressures described in Theme 2 (understaffing, high caseloads, organizational instability). As Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023) argue, sustainable practice with migrants requires not only intercultural competence but also institutional structures that support professional wellbeing over time [see: Figure 24: Theme 4 - Academic Culture code system &]. But also, through the ecosystem lens the lack of training are not individual professional failures but systemic inadequacies reproduced across all three levels [macro with the absence of mandatory national specialization; meso with the dependence of funds for training their staff within the reception centers and at micro level when the minor could encounter a social worker with lack of knowledge of law or intercultural sensitivity]

4.3 Ethical dilemmas: best interests of the child versus institutional constraints

Interview participants across all professional categories described ethical dilemmas arising from the tension between the best interests of the child principle – the foundational normative commitment of the Zampa Law – and the institutional constraints within which they operate. These dilemmas took several recurring forms, all of which connect to the street-level bureaucracy framework (Lipsky, 2010) and to the theoretical arguments of (Ellis, 2011) and (Evans, 2013) regarding the erosion of professional autonomy under conditions of proceduralization and resource scarcity.

The most frequently described dilemma concerned decisions about whether to support a minor in applying for PA[12] or international protection when the minor's life project was considered incomplete or "problematic". Participants described situations in which minors with drug use histories, behavioral challenges, or proximity to age 18 were not supported in applying – not because they lacked legal entitlement, but because professionals made discretionary judgments about likely outcomes under time pressure. This gatekeeping, even when unintentional, constitutes a form of discretionary street-level bureaucratic decision that produces differential access to formally universal rights.

"…We were talking with a guardian, and she had this minor under the guardianship, and it was turning 18. The guy wanted to go to work because he needed to earn money to send back to the country. But he was in the reception system in general, and

[12] Prosieguo amministrativo

it could go to school, it could learn Italian and it could do some train ships, but it just wanted to work, but it couldn't work like legally. The problem was that he was turning 18 and he couldn't have the PA[13] *because he wasn't inside the project of life, as he wasn't following the project of study.*

And the problem is that he couldn't get the working status either because he didn't have a job yet. So, it was very difficult for the Guardian and then the Guardian, she relied very much on the role of the cultural mediator... but at the end he just left when turned to 18" (P4, Pos. 105, South Italy)

A second ethical tension arose from interdisciplinary team coordination challenges. Participants described communication gaps resulting from part-time, rotating professional schedules within reception centers, which limit the accumulation of relational knowledge about individual minors and create discontinuities in care. Some participants – particularly guardians – described a tendency to defer to the advice of social workers or educators rather than exercising independent advocacy, raising questions about whether the multi-actor system reinforces rather than distributes accountability for UAMs' best interests.

"I would say that when he was turning 18 [as he is a fragile guy].. I asked the social assistant the chance to ask for him for an PA[14]*... And they told me that it was not possible for him because he was a problematic guy. He had not had a proficient experience in another community since he caused many problems… there are not many places in these communities for people that had already turned into 18, they prefer not to go through this process...So I had to trust them because I told myself what else can I do…They are professionals in this work and I have to trust them even if I knew that the guy was very problematic… I had an ethical dilemma with myself" (P13, Pos. 484-507, Central Italy)*

The discretion is not merely an administrative phenomenon but an ecological one. The professional's decision about whether to support a PA application is shaped by meso-level conditions (caseload, organizational culture, available time) and macro level conditions (the complexity of PA eligibility criteria, political signals about migration control). When these conditions are adverse, the micro-level consequence is that the individual legal entitlement goes unsupported. The minor's life outcome – integration or irregular status – is determined not by the law or by their own conduct, but by the intersection of systemic pressures on the professional who happens to be assigned to their case.

[13] Prosieguo amministrativo
[14] Prosieguo amministrativo

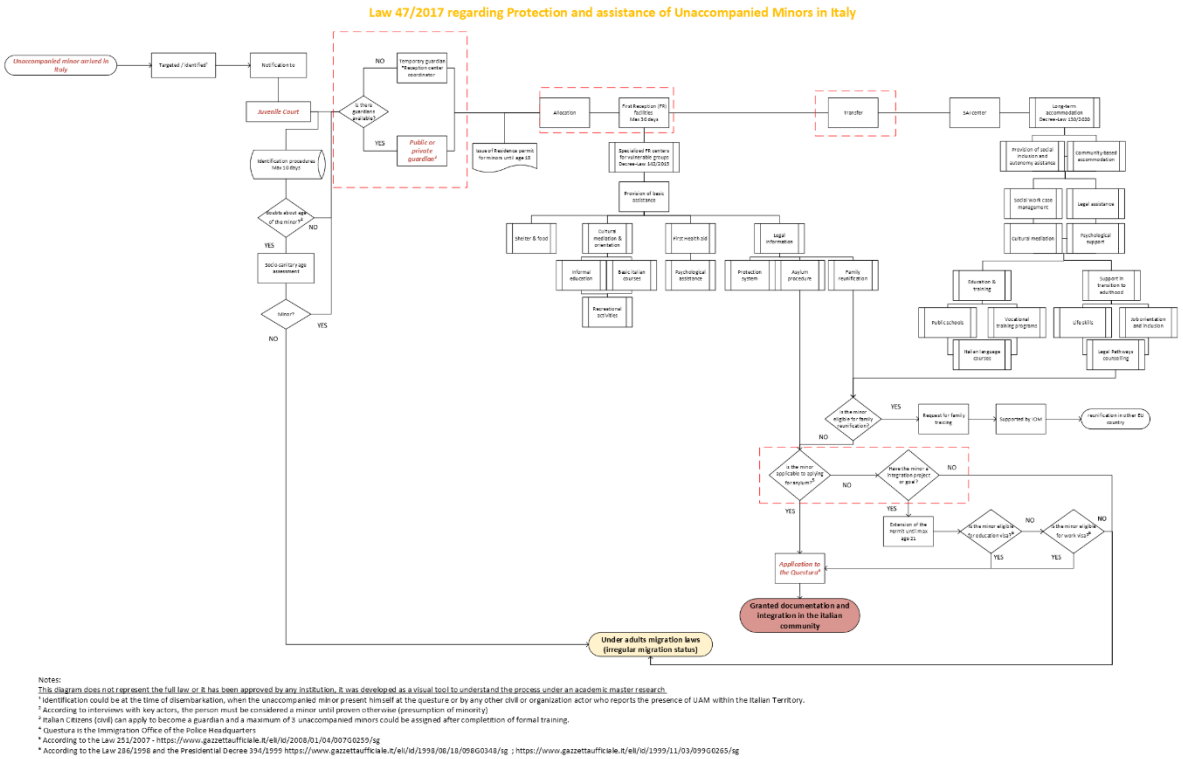
Chapter 6: Conclusions

This study set out to examine the relationship between migration status and unaccompanied minor's access to welfare services in Italy, and to identify the main barriers and facilitators shaping their trajectories within the Italian child protection system. Drawing on a mixed-methods design integrating secondary quantitative analysis, legal document review, and eighteen semi-structured interviews with key actors, the research has generated a multilayered set of findings organized around four thematic areas: migration policy, organizational culture, intercultural sensitivity, and academic culture. This chapter synthesizes the main findings in relation to each of the four research questions, reflects on theoretical contributions, addresses limitations, and offers concrete recommendations for policy, professional practice and future research.

5.1 Summary of findings in relation to the research questions

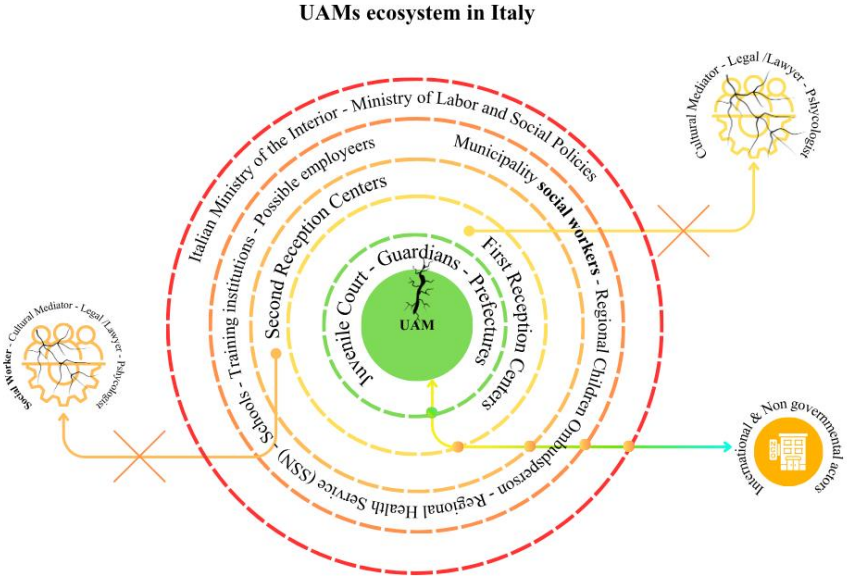
The bottleneck visualization [see: Figure 3: Steps identified as bottlenecks in the protection system for UAMs Italy], maps in red the stages where delays produce decisive impacts on the best interest of the minor. Through this research, two stages emerge as particularly consequential: the delay in guardian appointment and the prolonged stays in first reception centers. These bottlenecks do not operate in isolation. As the ecosystem fragmentation diagram [see: Figure 4: Fragmentation in the UAM] illustrates, they are the visible symptoms of a system in which the coordination and articulation between actors – at macro, meso, and micro levels – has broken down, leaving the minor without the stable relational network that the Zampa Law was designed to guarantee.

Figure 3: Steps identified as bottlenecks in the protection system for UAMs Italy



Notes:
This diagram does not represent the full law or it has been approved by any institution. It was developed as a visual tool to understand the process under an academic master research.
[1] Identification could be at the time of disembarkation, when the unaccompanied minor present himself at the questure or by any other civil or organization actor who reports the presence of UAM within the Italian Territory.
[2] According to interviews with key actors, the person must be considered a minor until proven otherwise (presumption of minority)
[3] Italian Citizens (civil) can apply to become a guardian and a maximum of 3 unaccompanied minors could be assigned after completion of formal training.
[4] Questura is the Immigration Office of the Police Headquarters
[5] According to the Law 251/2007 - https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2008/01/04/007G0259/sg
[6] According to the Law 286/1998 and the Presidential Decree 394/1999 https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1998/08/18/098G0348/sg ; https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1999/11/03/099G0265/sg

Figure 4: Fragmentation in the UAM ecosystem.



Note: Authors elaboration. The information presented is based on the author's analysis of legislation, public reports, and legal documents. It should not be construed as a definitive or authentic interpretation of the law.

RQ1: How do different migration statuses influence UAMs' access to welfare services?

The findings confirm, across multiple dimensions of analysis, that migration status – encompassing not only formal legal categories but also nationality, age at arrival, gender, and region of reception – functions as a structural determinant of welfare access for unaccompanied minors in Italy. Formally, Law 47/2017 guarantees equal treatment for all minors regardless of status. In practice, differential access is produced through a series of interacting mechanisms that operate at every systemic level.

The most direct empirical demonstration is the Ukrainian UAM case: minors granted Temporary Protection under the EU Temporary Protection Mechanism accessed welfare services through a streamlined, expedited pathway that bypassed the standard asylum procedure and its associated bottlenecks. The majority of Ukrainians minors left the reception system at age 18 with their legal status already resolved, and 95% were accommodated in private or family housing rather than collective facilities. This constitutes a two-speed welfare system in which legal status – tied to nationality as a political variable – determines the speed and quality of protection access.

As Marshall & Bottomore (1992) theorized, access to social rights in welfare states is not determined solely by residence but is mediated by legal status and its associated entitlements. The Italian case confirms and extends this argument by demonstrating that, even within the formally universalist framework of the Zampa Law, legal categories produce materially differentiated welfare outcomes. Viewed through the ecosystem lens, this differentiation operates at the macrosystem level (EU directives and national decrees creating separate regimes for different nationalities) and cascades directly to the micro level (the quality of the minor's daily life, their housing, their access to education, and the security of their future).

Nationality further functions as a determinant of asylum outcomes through the practical operation of safe country of origin lists, which condition recognition in ways that conflict with the individualized assessment principle of the 1951 Refugee Convention. This finding aligns with the theoretical emphasis on how administrative categorization produces differential treatment within formally universal systems (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Humphris & Sigona, 2019); (Catarci & Rocchi, 2017)

Territorial location constitutes a third structural axis of differentiation. The regional analysis reveals a stark disparity between Sicily – the primary arrival region, with just 0.6% integration pathway access and 32.4% voluntary abandonment – and Lombardy, which achieves substantially higher integration outcomes despite comparable scale. This territorial fragmentation reflects the structural features of Ferrera (1996a) Southern European Welfare regime: decentralized implementation, dependence on local fiscal and administrative capacity and the absence of equalizing mechanisms at the national level. As Bousiou (2024)

argues, high variable local governance structures produce territorial lotteries for vulnerable populations, where outcomes depend as much on geography as on legal entitlement.

RQ2: What factors shape UAM's decision-making on legal pathways from the perspective of frontline professionals?

The decision to apply for asylum or pursue other legal pathways emerges as a complex, multi-determined process shaped by the intersection of structural opportunity, informational access, biographical factors, and professional mediation. The migration project – the minor's own vision of their life trajectory, objectives, and obligations – is the foundational variable through which all other factors are filtered (Giovannetti, 2008, 2017a) and also is represented in the importance of articulation between social worker or the interdisciplinary team in the reception center and the guardian [see: Figure 4: Fragmentation in the UAM].

For minors whose migration project is protection-oriented, asylum is the natural pathway – provided their nationality is not structurally disadvantaged by safe country designations. For economically motivated minors, asylum may be perceived as inappropriate, and integration pathways may be referred to but constrained by documentation requirements. For minors oriented toward onward migration, neither Italian asylum nor integration pathways constitute attractive options, and voluntary exit is the most likely outcome.

The quality and accessibility of legal information and counseling emerge as critical mediating factors. Minors who receive timely, culturally appropriate, comprehensive information from legal advisors, guardians, or social workers, are better positioned to make informed decisions [good relationship between micro and meso level]. Conversely, minors whose access to professional support is structurally limited are more likely to decide based on informal peer networks, rumors, and fear (Kohli, 2011). This confirms the importance of the guardian's role as an individualized rights advocate and underscores the consequences of systemic delays and quality gaps in guardianship implementation (Bhabha, 2019).

RQ3: What are the main structural, legal, and social barriers and facilitators to welfare inclusion?

A constellation of interacting barriers operates at different systemic levels. At the macro level, the normative tension between the universalist child protection principles of the Zampa Law, and the restrictive logic of Decree-Law 133/2023 represents a legislative erosion of the protective framework. At the macro level too, annually refinanced and fluctuating funding creates systemic instability that undermines long-term integration infrastructure (European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2025).

At the meso level, the SAI capacity deficit, territorial fragmentation, delayed guardian appointments, and fragmented interactor coordination collectively produce a system operating as Ferrera (1996a) "colander state": formally comprehensive but structurally

perforated. As Bousiou (2024) and Allsopp (2022) document, informal and civil society actors partially compensate for institutional gaps, but at the cost of inconsistency and dependency on non-state actors.

At the micro level, street-level bureaucratic decision-making (Lipsky, 2010) by frontline professionals under resource scarcity and institutional constraint produces differential treatment that, while not necessarily intentional, is structurally determined. Ethical dilemmas documented by participants reflect the professional costs of navigating these contradictions without adequate support, training, or autonomy (Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2013).

Among the main facilitators, participants consistently highlighted the pivotal role of individual professionals – particularly guardians, social workers, and cultural mediators – who provide relational continuity and human advocacy in a proceduralized system. The SAI model itself. When adequately resourced and implemented, constitutes a genuine facilitator of integration, providing the multi-component support that research identifies as necessary for sustainable integration outcomes (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023; Sanfelici & Silvana, 2021). Civil society and community networks also function as supplementary facilitators in contexts of institutional underperformance.

RQ4: how do social workers and frontline professionals interpret their roles, navigate ethical dilemmas, and how do professional education and institutional conditions affect their practice?

Frontline professionals emerge as the primary mediating actors between the formal legal framework and the lived reality of UAMs within the welfare system. Their role, conceptualized through Lipsky (2010) street.level bureaucracy framework, is not simply one of policy implementation but of active translation, negotiation, and sometimes subversion of policy in response to individual needs. Under favorable institutional conditions, professionals can exercise advocacy, adopt rights-based approaches, and provide the individualized support the Zampa Law envisions. Under adverse conditions – which characterize much of the Italian reception system – even the most committed professionals are structurally constrained.

The ethical dilemmas documented by participants reflect a fundamental tension between the best interests of the child principle and the operational realities of a system under structural pressure. These dilemmas are not primarily the result of individual professional failures but of systemic conditions that force discretionally gatekeeping in the allocation of scarce resources and attention. As Evans (2013) argues, increasing proceduralization in welfare systems reduces professional autonomy and undermines the relational, person-centered approaches most effective with vulnerable populations – a dynamic clearly present in the Italian UAM context. Addressing these dilemmas requires not merely professional ethics training but structural reform of the conditions under which professional discretion is exercised.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study makes several contributions to the theoretical literature on welfare states, migration, and social work practice. First, it empirically confirms and extends Marshall & Bottomore (1992) framework by demonstrating that legal status operates as primary axis of welfare differentiation even within systems that formally guarantee universal child protection. The Italian UAM case provides a clear empirical illustration of how citizenship rights remain bounded by legal status in contemporary welfare states, even when formal children's rights frameworks seek to transcend this boundary.

Second, the study strengthens Ferrera (1996a) Southern European welfare regime model in the contemporary field of migration and child protection, demonstrating that structural features of the Italian welfare state – decentralization, fragmentation, and territorial unevenness – produce actively differential outcomes in the lived experiences of one of the most vulnerable populations within the system. This confirms that welfare regime characteristics constitute structural determinants of migrant welfare access operating independently of formal legal entitlements (Bousiou, 2024; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020).

Third, the application of Lipsky (2010) street-leval bureaucracy theory reveals the critical importance of professional discretion as both a resource and a structural vulnerability in child protection delivery. The study highlights the need for research attention not only to formal legal frameworks but also to the organizational, relational, and professional conditions under which discretion is exercised and its equity implications for structurally vulnerable populations (Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2013).

Finally, the study contributes to the analytical value of ecosystem theory (Allen-Meares & Lane, 1987) as an active interpretive framework for understanding how system failures cascade across levels. Additionally aims to contribute the developing field of social work with migrants (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023) by demonstrating the practical relevance of intercultural competence, legal literacy, and trauma-informed practice as components of effective professional frameworks. The identified training gaps have direct implications for social work education systems.

5.3 Policy and practice recommendations

5.3.1 Expanding and equalizing the reception and integration architecture.

The most urgent policy priority is the expansion and equalization of SAI second reception capacity. National authorities should commit to creating at least the 4,000 additional SAI places that municipal associations have repeatedly requested, with particular focus on regions most affected by the capacity deficit. Funding mechanisms should be multi-annual to ensure planning continuity and staff reliability – transitioning from annual refinancing to multi-year

budget commitments. The placement of minors aged 16 and above in adult reception facilities under Decree-Law 133/2023, even as an extraordinary measure, should be abolished and replaced with emergency child-specific alternatives, given the evidence that such placements compromise safety, wellbeing, and legal protection and increase risks of absconding and irregular status (Bhabha, 2019; Gruppo CRC, 2023; UNICEF, 2023).

Drawing on participatory social work theory (Folgheraiter, 2007), effective intervention required collaboration among professionals, minors, guardians, and community actors. Participation and inclusion are central not only to service access but also to empowerment and long-term integration (Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023; Sanfelici & Silvana, 2021). Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how migration status interacts with welfare structures and professional practices in shaping unaccompanied minors' access to protection in Italy.

5.3.2 Reforming the guardianship system.

The guardianship system requires structural reform across three dimensions: (1) accelerating guardian appointment through streamlined judicial procedures, with accountability mechanisms for delays; (2) equalizing territorial distribution of registered guardians through national coordination and regional incentive mechanisms, with targeted investment in Sicily and Calabria, and (3) developing a structured national support framework including comprehensive initial training, ongoing professional development, peer networks, access to legal and psychological consultation, and burnout prevention. The guardian's role should be explicitly maintained and supported through the transition to adulthood and, in line with the Zampa Law's provision, until age 21 – rather than terminating abruptly at age 18. The role should be repositioned institutionally as a collaborative partner in the minor's life project, not a supervisory administrative figure.

5.3.3 Protecting the transition to adulthood.

The transition to adulthood constitutes a critical vulnerability requiring dedicated policy attention. Recommendations include: (a) restoring full application of the prosieguo amministrativo until age 21 as provided by the Zampa Law, with active monitoring to ensure that extensions are not systemically limited to one year in practice; (b) developing flexible documentation support mechanisms within reception center budgets to assist minors in obtaining civil documentation required for education and employment pathways; (c) creating graduated transition processes that incrementally build autonomy while maintaining welfare support; and (d) developing dedicated housing support for care leavers, drawing on models developed in other European contexts (Stein & Munro, 2008; Stein, 2012).

5.3.4 Improving territorial equity and regional monitoring.

The territorial disparities documented in this study call for a national monitoring framework that disaggregates welfare access outcomes by region and systemically disseminates good practices. The Italian authority for children and adolescents (AGIA) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies should develop regular, publicly available assessment of regional performance on key indicators: integration pathway access rates, guardian appointment times, voluntary exit rates, and psychosocial service availability. Inter-regional learning exchanges – including structured visits, shared training, and co-developed operational protocols – should be institutionalized as mechanisms for territorial equalization. The contrast between Sicily and Lombardy, documented in this study, provides a concrete starting point for such exchanges.

5.3.5 Strengthening professional preparation and institutional support.

Social work education in Italy must evolve to reflect the growing complexity of migratory realities. Universities offering social work degrees should integrate modules on international migration law, intercultural competence, trauma-informed practice, and UAM-specific protection needs into undergraduate and postgraduate curricula. The CNOAS and regional professional orders should develop continuing professional development requirements for practitioners working with migrant and refugee populations. Institutional investment in supervision, peer support, and burnout prevention for frontline professionals – not as optional additions but as essential components of a functioning child protection system – is critically needed. This aligns with Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023) argument that sustainable social work practice with migrants requires sustained institutional support structures as well as individual professional competence.

5.3.6 Addressing gender-specific protection gaps.

The systemic invisibility of female UAMs demands dedicated policy attention. Gender-disaggregated identification and referral protocols should be developed and institutionalized at both first and second reception levels, with specific attention to the identification of trafficking, gender-based violence, and exploitation. Specialized psychosocial services for female UAMs – including female cultural mediators, gender-sensitive health services, and dedicated safe spaces – should be integrated into the standard SAI service package. The emerging trend of Peruvian female UAMs arriving in Italy should be monitored closely to understand protection profiles and develop appropriate responses before it becomes a larger-scale challenge.

5.3.7 Recommendations for frontline professionals and social work practice

a. The ecomap for assessment and mobilization tool

One of the most consistently documented findings is that format institutional support – the social worker, the guardian, the mediator – is frequently absent, delayed or unstable. In this context, drawing on participatory social work theory (Folgheraiter, 2007), the social worker's role must extend beyond the implementation of bureaucratic procedures to the active identification and mobilization of the informal support networks that already exist around each minor. The ecomap – a participatory, visual mapping tool developed with the social work tradition – is particularly well-suited to this purpose.

In the context of Italian first reception centers – where 16 minutes per week of mediation renders systemic support effectively symbolic – the ecomap tools enables the social worker to do three things that the formal system often cannot: (1) listen to the minors own perception of their relationships and needs, placing them at the center of the intervention rather than as a passive recipient of services; (2) identify informal support resources that official system do not register and that would otherwise remain invisible; and (3) compensate for the inevitable gaps in institutional provision by mapping and activating the broader community of support already present in the minor's ecosystem.

b. interdisciplinary team communication protocols

Participants also described the rotating schedules of interdisciplinary team members as a major obstacle to the continuity of relational knowledge about individual minors. a practical recommendation is the development of brief structured handovers protocols, which are updated at each professional contact and made accessible to all team members, including the guardian. Such protocols ensure that knowledge about the minor's current situation, mood, concerns, and pending processes does not disappear when staff members shift ends or when a new social worker is assigned. The implementation of digital case management systems – trials of which are already underway in some Italian regions (Sanfelici & Silvana, 2021) – should be actively supported and expanded, with investment in training social workers to use these systems as tools that facilitate, rather than burden, their relational practice.

c. peer mentoring and testimonial approaches

several participants identified a practice with significant micro-level potential: the involvement of former UAMs - young adults who have successfully navigated the Italian protection system and are now instable situations – as peer mentor for newly arrived minors. this approach grounded in participatory social work theory (Folgheraiter, 2007) and in the relational social work tradition, addresses a critical limitation of the current system: the absence of a credible model of what successful integration looks like. Peer mentors who share the same cultural background, who have faced the same bureaucratic processes, and who can speak from direct experience have a distinctive credibility that institutional professionals cannot replicate. Their presence in reception centers – even informally – can significantly reduce the power of negative peer narratives that currently encourage system dropout and irregular departure.

d. advocacy within the system: social worker as rights navigator

Finally, the findings consistently demonstrate that the quality of a minor's outcome depends critically on whether they have access to professional who understands the full range of legal options available and is willing to advocate actively for their use – even when the institutional incentive is to take the path of least resistance. This study confirms what Gómez-Ciriano et al. (2023) describes as the rights-based approach in social work with migrants: the social workers role includes not only case management but active rights navigation and advocacy. In the context of the PA application process documented in Theme 4, this means that social workers should be equipped with the legal knowledge to independently assess a minor's eligibility for the PA, the institutional support to raise this assessment even when it requires additional workload, and the professional culture that frames advocacy as a core professional obligation rather than an exceptional act.

5.4 Recommendations for future research

This study opens several important directions for future investigation. First, longitudinal research following cohorts of UAMs from arrival through the transition to adulthood would enable systemic interact analysis of how migration status, regional location, and professional support interact to produce the perspectives of UAMs themselves – who are conspicuously absent as direct research subjects from this and much of existing literature – would substantially enrich the empirical base and align with the participatory social work tradition (Folgheraiter, 2003; Gómez-Ciriano et al., 2023).

Second, comparative European research examining how UAMs with equivalent status profiles experience welfare access in different national systems would enable assessment of Italy's specific legal and institutional contribution – including the Zampa Law and SAI model – to integration outcomes and would facilitate the identification and dissemination of good practices at the European level.

Third, further research on female UAMs and on younger children (under 14) – whose age profile diverges substantially from the predominant male 16 – 17 group . is urgently needed to fill significant empirical and policy gaps. Finally, research specifically examining the ethical dimensions of professional practice in UAM protection – including the discretionary decisions made by social workers and guardians and the structural conditions shaping them – would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of street-level bureaucracy in child protection contexts.

5.5 Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The qualitative sample consists exclusively of adult professionals and does not include UAMs own perspectives. Future

research should prioritize participatory approaches that foreground minor's voices. The quantitative component relies on official administrative data subject to known limitations: sub-registration in the SIM database, definitional inconsistencies across reporting sources, and temporal publication lags. Eurostat asylum data were available only for 2023-2024 at the time of analysis. The study's geographical focus on Italy must limits the generalizability of findings to other national contexts. Furthermore, the rapid pace of policy change during the study period means that some described institutional conditions may have continued to evolve after the time of writing.

5.6 Final Reflections

Italy's efforts to protect unaccompanied minors represent a genuine and significant achievement in European child protection policy. The Zampa Law remains, in its design, one of the most comprehensive and rights-centered legal frameworks for this population on the continent – a model worthy of serious attention in European policy development. Yet the gap between formal provision and lived reality – between the universal principles inscribed in law and the differential, uneven, and often precarious experiences of UAMs navigating the system – remains a critical challenge that neither goodwill nor legal architecture alone can resolve.

As this study demonstrates, effective child protection for unaccompanied minors requires not only a robust legal framework but a welfare system architecture that is adequately resourced, territorially equalized, professionally supported, and relational in its mode of delivery. It requires professionals trained, supported, and empowered to exercise genuine advocacy for the children they serve, rather than constrained to administrative processing under structural scarcity. And it requires political will – at the national and European levels – to treat migration as the shared responsibility it is, rather than a burden to be managed by states of first arrival alone.

Unaccompanied minors who arrive in Italy after journeys marked by violence, loss, and extraordinary resilience deserve a welfare system that sees them, first and foremost, as children – with rights, needs, and futures – rather than as administrative categories to be processes. The task of social work, at its best, is to insist on this humanizing perspective even within the most constrained institutional contexts. This study is offered, in that spirit, as a contribution to understanding and improving conditions under which that task is carried out.

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Annex

1. Methodology diagrams

Figure 5: Research methodology flowchart.

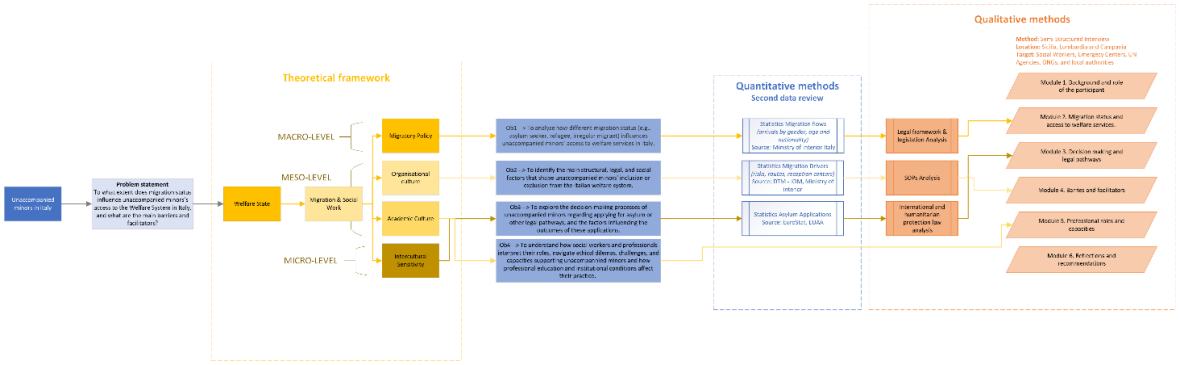


Table 2: Variables and data sources

Objective	Source	Type	Variable	URL
Ob1: To identify how different migration status influences UAM' access to welfare services	Ministry of labor and social policy	Government	Entry flows of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) in Italy	https://analytics.lavoro.gov.it/t/PublicSIM/views/HomePageeng_16944451741640/HomePage-SIM?%3Aembed=y&%3Aiid=3&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y https://portaleservizi.dlci.interno.it/
	Ministry of interior	Government	Migrant landing and reception	https://www.interno.gov.it/it/stampa-e-comunicazione/dati-e-statistiche/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-dei-migranti-tutti-i-dati
Ob2: To identify the main structural, legal, and social factors that shape UAM's inclusion or exclusion from the italian welfare system	Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) IOM	UN Agency	Migration drivers, risks, routes	https://dtm.iom.int/content/europe-migration-arrivals-dashboard
	SAI	Government	Reception and Integration System (SAI) capacity shelter by region	chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/14.pdf
	Ministry of labor	Government	UAM Report	https://www.lavoro.gov.it/documenti-e-norme/studi-e-statistiche/sintesi-inglese-del-rapporto-semestrale-approfondimento-dicembre-2024
	UNICEF	UN Agency	UASC	https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiNTMwYzQwMDgtZDAxNi00MzVjLWEyNDYtMGI0NmMxNWMzYzE2IiwidCI6Ijc3NDEwMTk1LTE0ZTEtNGZiOC05MDRiLWFiMTg5MjAyMzY2NyIsImMiOjh9
	AGIA	Government	Guardians	https://tutelavolontaria.garanteinfanzia.org/dashboard/
Ob3. To explore the decision-making process of UAM regarding applying for asylum or other legal pathways, and the factors influencing the outcomes of these applications	EUROSTAT	EU commission	1. Decisions granting temporary protection to unaccompanied minors by citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data (migr_asyumtpfa) 2. Asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors by citizenship, age and sex - annual data (migr_asyunaa)	https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/data/database

2. Law and Documentation analysis

Table 3: Legal framework Analysis

Decree	Amendmend	Description	URL
Law 47/2017		"Provisions on the protection of foreign unaccompanied minors"	http://bit.ly/2sYgFd8
	Art 19 LD25/1988	1-bis. In no case may rejection be ordered at the border of unaccompanied foreign minors.	
	Art 31 LD25/1988	Where pursuant to this consolidated text it is necessary the expulsion of a foreign minor be ordered provision is adopted, provided however that the the measure itself does not entail a risk of serious harm for the minor at the request of the police commissioner, by the Court for minors. The Juvenile Court decides promptly and in any case no later than thirty days.».	
	Art 33 LD25/1988	1. Minors who do not have an entry visa issued pursuant to Article 32 of this Law and which are not accompanied by at least one parent or relatives within the fourth degree the provisions of Article 19, paragraph 1-bis, of the text apply single pursuant to Legislative Decree no. 286 of 25 July 1998	
	Art 19 LD142/2015	Implementation of the Directive 2013/32/EU: establishing common procedures for the purposes of recognition and revocation of protection international status.	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg
	Art 4 LD 142/2015	Unaccompanied minors who are victims of trafficking - Implementation of Directive 2011/36/EU, relating to the prevention and repression of trafficking of human beings and the protection of victims, which replaces framework decission 2002/629/JHA	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg
	Art 19 LD 142/2015	Regarding family investigations and adding the coordination between the Ministry of interior, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg
	Art 2 Law 4/1983	Foster care in family-type communities	
	Art 33 LD25/1988	Assited and voluntary repatrition	
	Art 19 LD142/2015	Paragraph 5, communication between juvenile court and guardianship	
	Art 19 LD142/2015	Parragraph 2, inclusion of unaccompanied minors within the framework of the Protection System for Asylum seekers and refugees.	
	Art 19 LD142/2015	Parragraph 3, provisino of assistance through municipality reception centers and possibility of transfers between municipality taking into account the best interest of the minor.	
	Art 32 LD25/1998	Mentioned that the lack of response from the juvenile court does not represent the rejection or refusal of the extension of the temporary residence permit for minors.	
	Art 34 LD25/1998	Addition of unaccompanied minors in the access to the National Health Service.	
	Art 21 LD25/1998	Inclusion of unaccompanied minors in the provision of health and education care.	
	Art 18 LD142/2015	Provision of services for unaccompanied minors: emotional and psychosocial support, legal counseling, cultural mediator	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg
	Art 76 PD30/2002	Information of posibility of the assignation and provision of free legal aid for unaccompanied minors.	
	Art 13 Law11/2003	Establishment of a special programme of assistance for victims of the crimes provided for in the articles 600 and 601 of the Criminal Code	
	Art 13LD28/2008	Implementation of Directive 2005/85/EC laying down minimum standards for procedures applied in the Member States members for the purposes of recognition and revocation of the refugee status	
Law 130/2020	**Law 173/2020**	Inclusion of unaccompanied minors in the protection reception system for refugee and asylum seekers.	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/10/21/20G00154/sg
Law 251/2007		Implementation of Directive 2004/83/EC on minimum standards for the qualification and status of third-country nationals or stateless persons as refugees or as persons who otherwise need international protection and the content of the protection granted.	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2008/01/04/007G0259/sg
Law 286/1998		Consolidated text of provisions concerning immigration regulations and rules on the status of foreigners.	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1998/08/18/098G0348/sg
Law 394/1999		Regulation containing provisions for the implementation of the consolidated text of the provisions concerning immigration regulations and rules on the status of foreigners, pursuant to Article 1, paragraph 6, of Legislative Decree No. 286 of 25 July 1998.	https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1999/11/03/099G0265/sg
Dublin III		REGULATION (EU) No 604/2013 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 26 June 2013 establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third-country national or a stateless person (recast) - Family Reunification	chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:180:0031:0059:en:PDF
EU 2022/382	**EU 2025/1460**	Temporary protection for Ukranians in Italy	chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202501460
LD 201/2025		Extention of the temporary protection for Ukranians in Italy	https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:decreto.legge:2025;201
Reception and Integration System - Laws			
Law 190/2014		Art 1 (181 - 182), transfer of responsibilities to Ministry of Interior	
LD 133/2023	**LD 176/2023**	Allowing the stay of unaccompanied minors in adult reception facilities	
LD 142/2015		Establishment of government first reception centers	

Source: Authors ownership through reviewing of laws, decrees and SOPs about protection system for assisting unaccompanied minors in Italy

Table 4: Type of reception centers for refugees and migrants in Italy

RECEPTION CATEGORY	TYPE	DETAILS
FIRST RECEPTION CENTERS	Government reception facilities	LD 142/2015 Funds: Asylum, Migration Fund and integration (AMIF) Max stay: 45 days Activated by: Ministry of Interior
	CAS Minors or temporary accommodation for UASC	LD 142/2015 For those ≥14 years old

		Max capacity: 50 places/center Activated by: Prefecture
	First reception facilities	LD 142/2015 Activated by: Municipalities or regions
	First reception facilities for minors/adults	LD 176/2023 For those ≥16 years old Max stay: 90 days possible extension of plus max 60 days.
	Other temporary structures (hotels, or other types)	LD 563/1995 Activated by: Municipalities
SECOND LEVEL ACCOMMODATION	SAI system	Funds: National Fund for Asylum Policies and Services
	Government reception facilities intended as secondary level facilities	Funds: AMIF
	Municipal reception facilities	Activated by regional or municipal level. Funds: contribution to the Municipalities from the National Fund for the reception of UAMs.

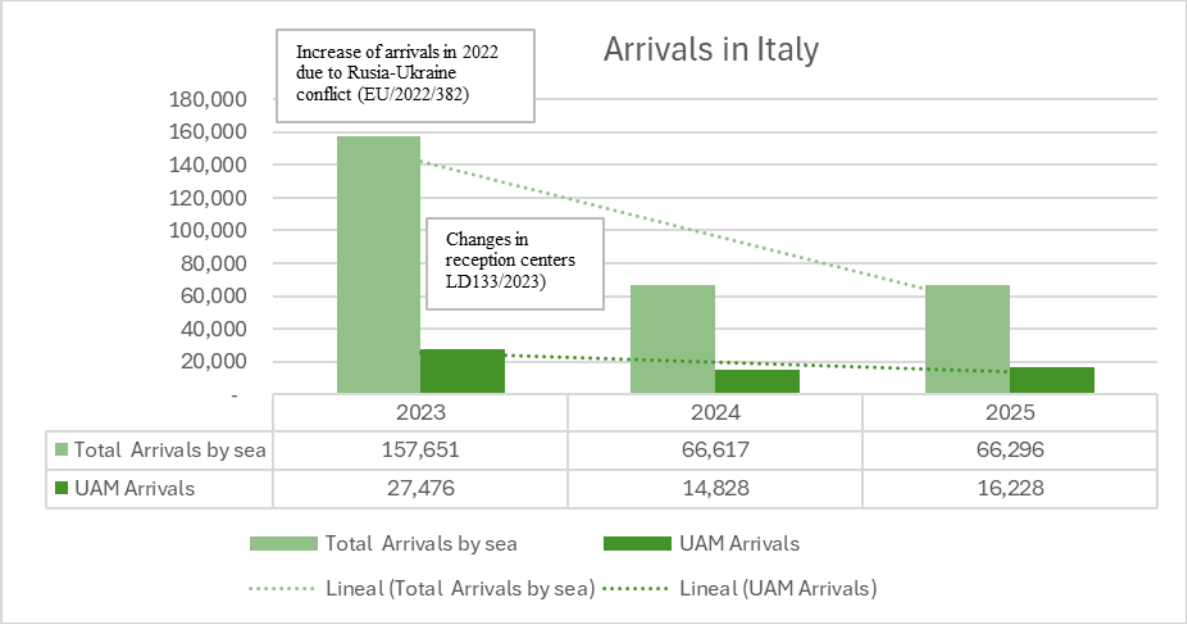
Note: This information could differ through time, this was the recent information by March 2026

Table 5: Reception centers, hours per professional

Staff	41 up to 50 places Individual housing units	41 up to 50 places in collective centers
Daytime worker	1 worker 14 hours a day	1 worker 12h a day
Night-time worker	Available 1 worker 8 hours a day	1 worker 8h a day
Director	10h a week	8h a week
Doctor	Available 4h a day for 7 days	Available 4h a day for 7 days.
Social operator	32 h a week	26 h a week
Linguistic mediation	24h a week	14h a week.

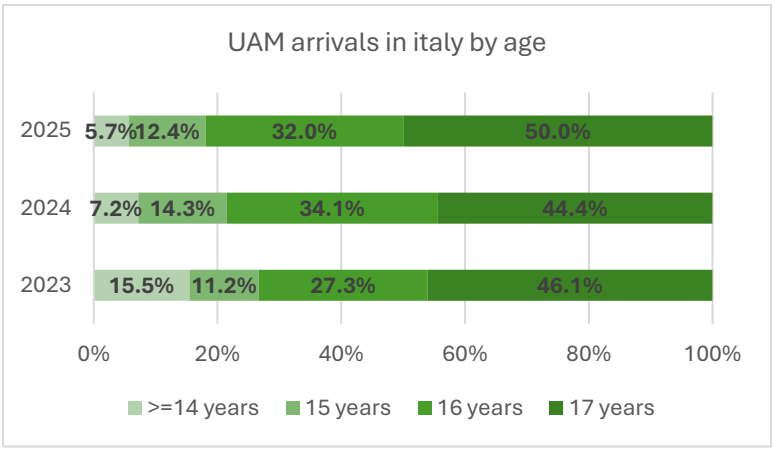
3. Quantitative Analysis

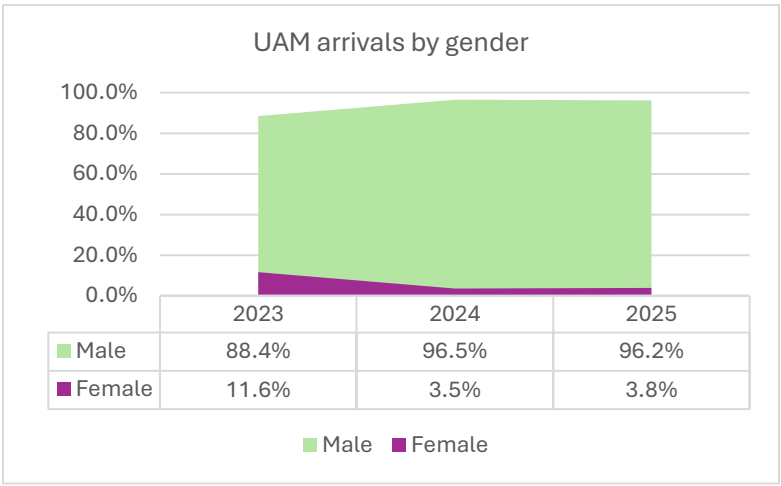
Figure 6: Arrivals in Italy per year.



Source: Own elaboration with data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies

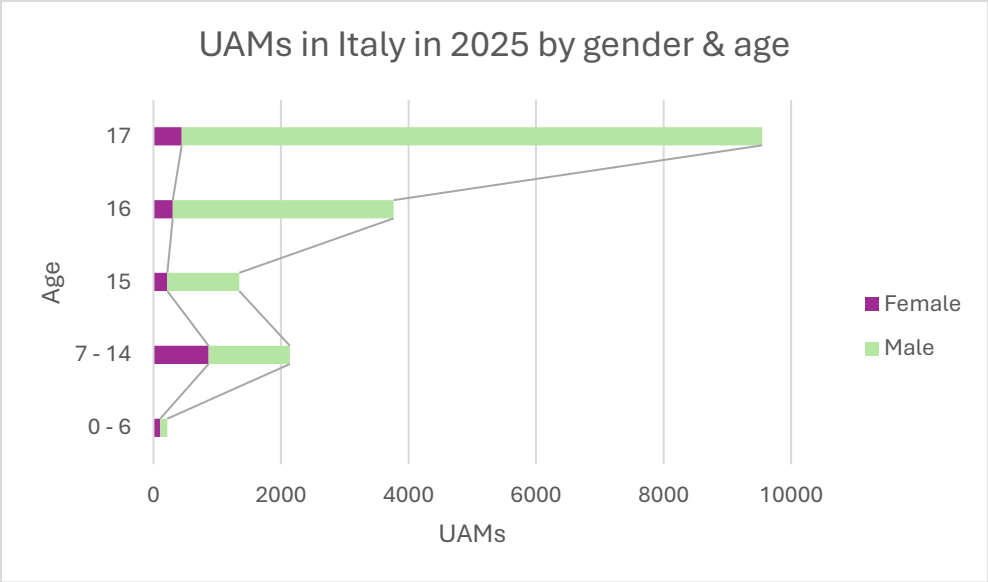
Figure 7: UAM arrivals by age and gender[i]





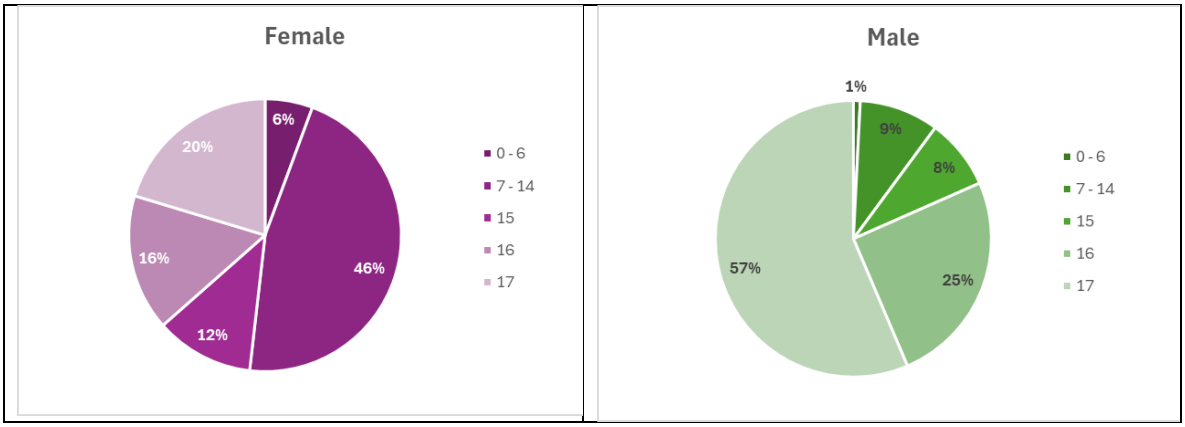
Source: Own elaboration with data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies

Figure 8: UAMs in Italy by dec 2025.



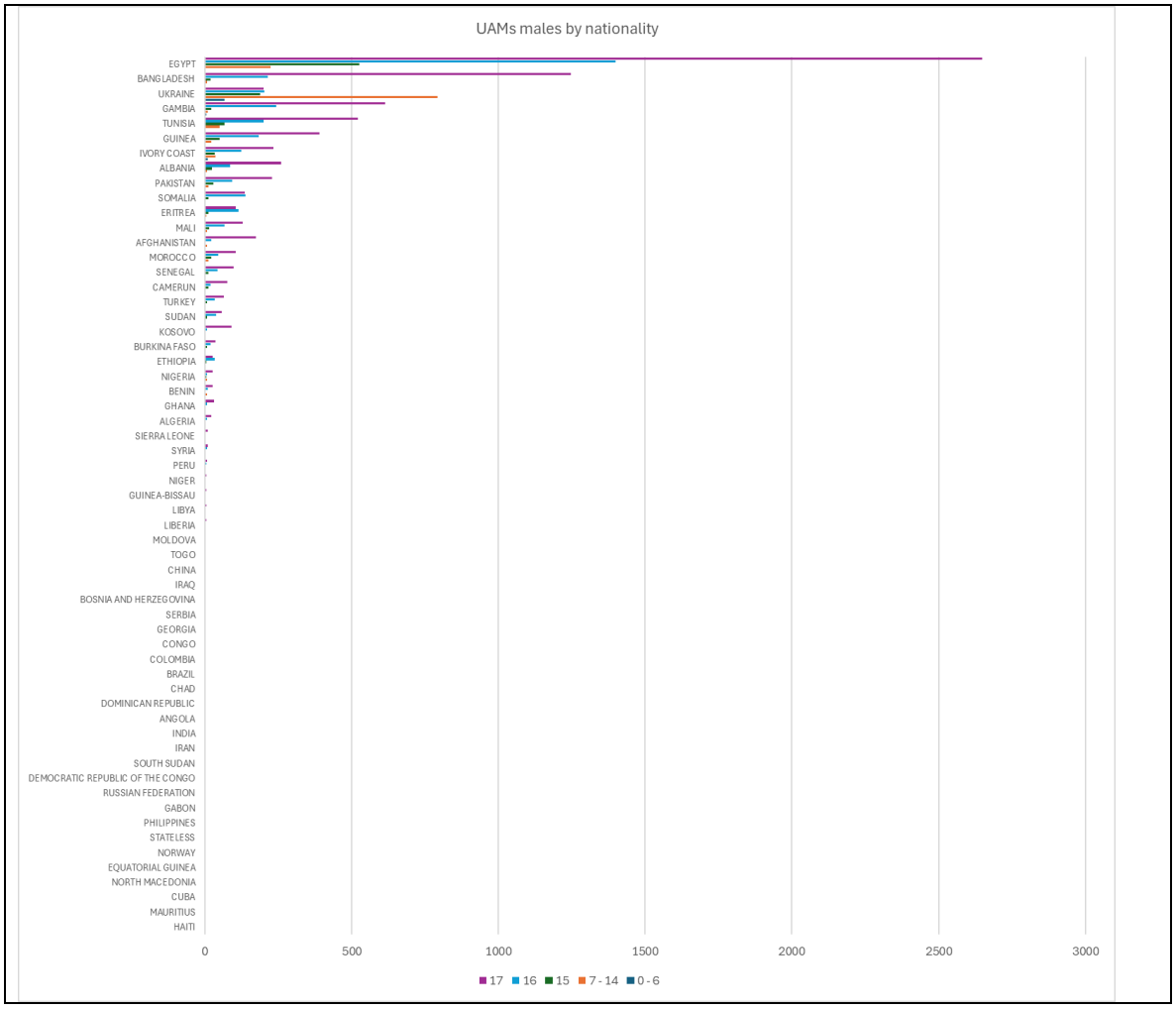
Source: Own elaboration with data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies

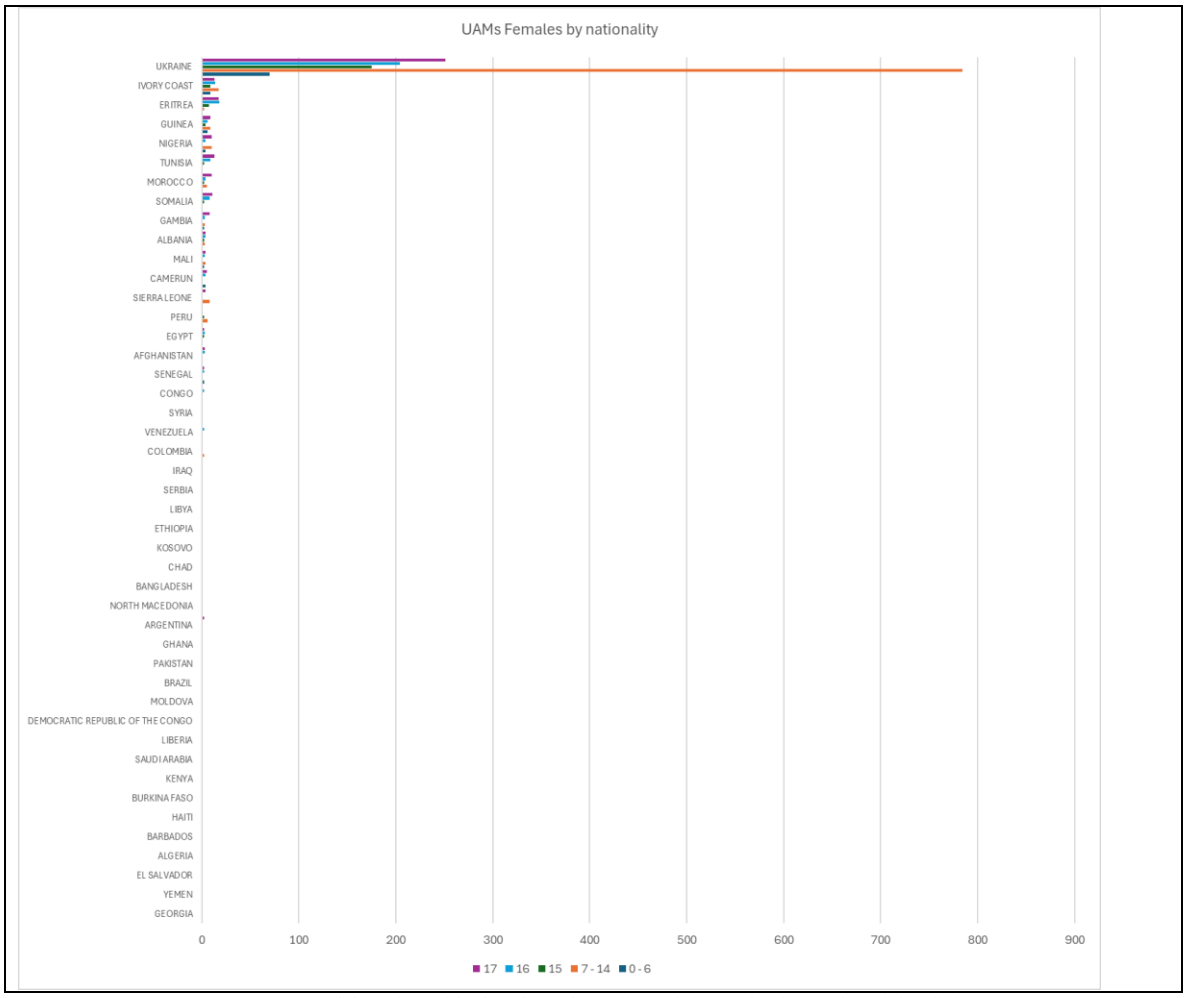
Figure 9: Comparison by age between gender of UAMs in Italy by Dec 2025



Source: Own elaboration with data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies

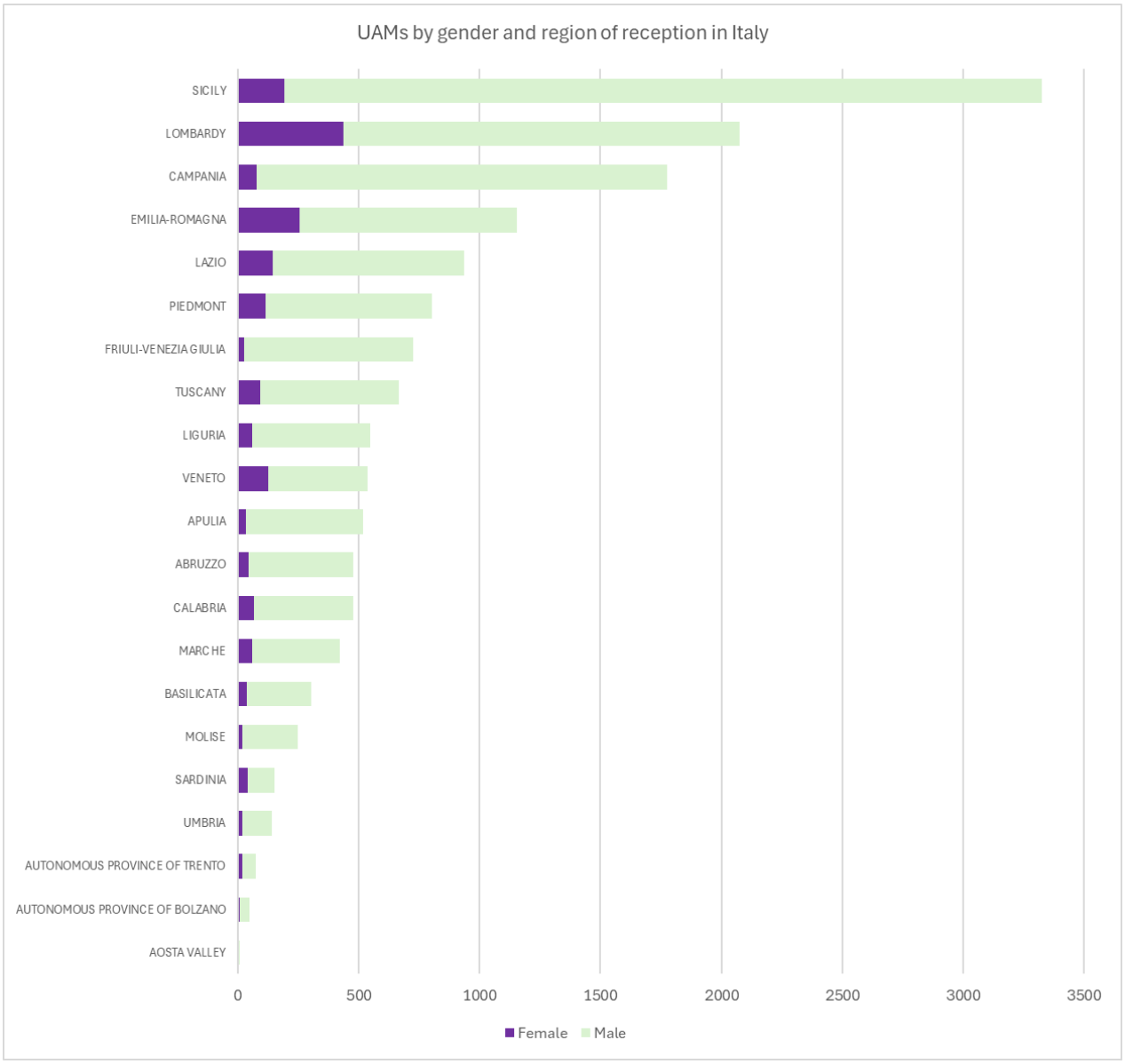
Figure 10: UAMs comparison by gender and nationality.





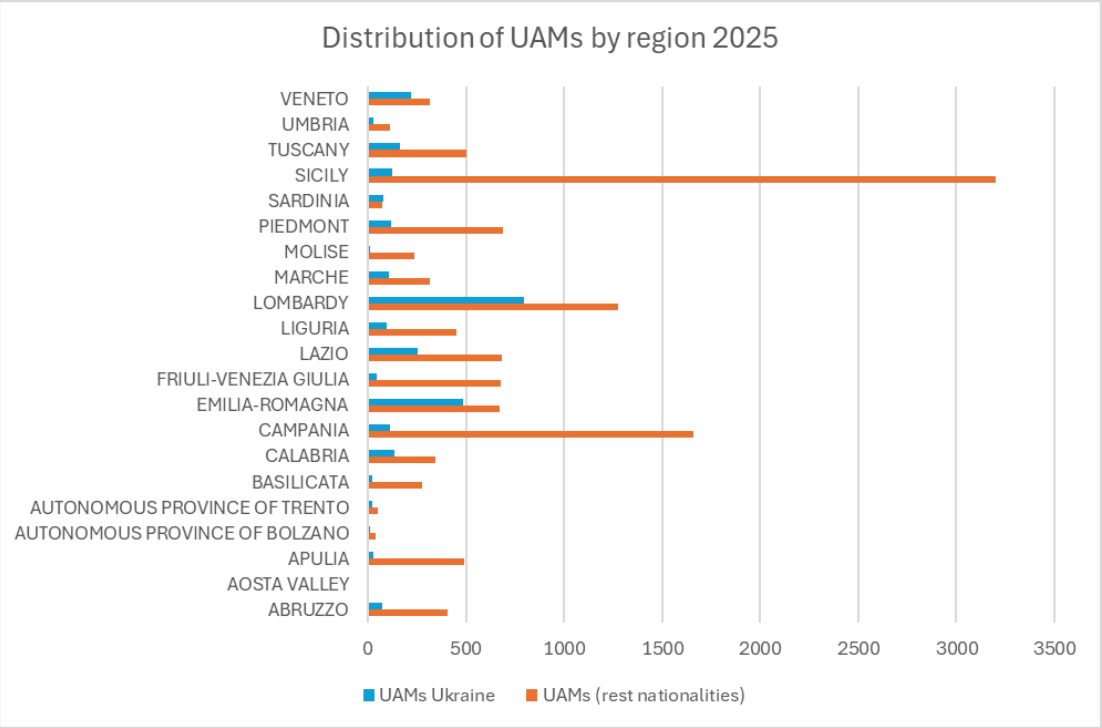
Source: Own elaboration with data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies

Figure 11: UAMs by region of reception in Italy.

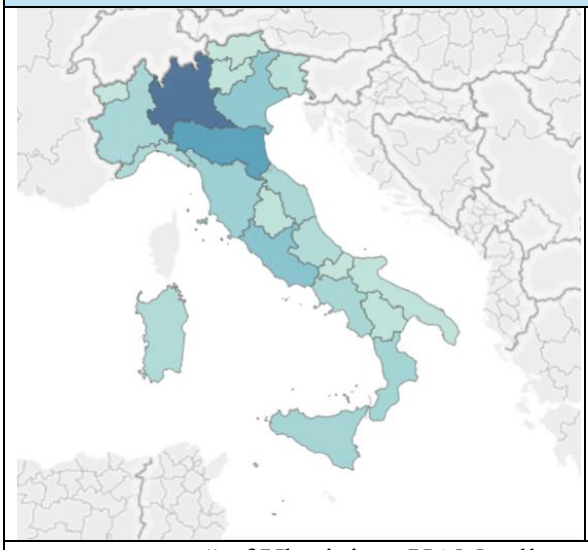


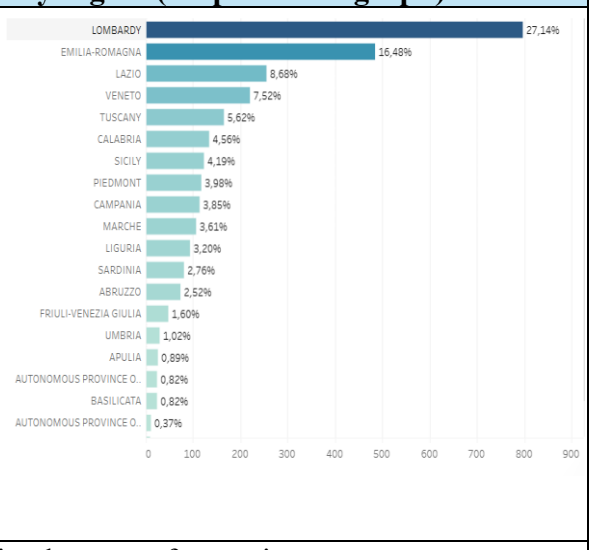
Source: Own elaboration with data from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies

Table 6: Analysis of UAMs by nationality and type of reception center and region



Distribution of Ukrainians UAMs by region (Map and bar graph)

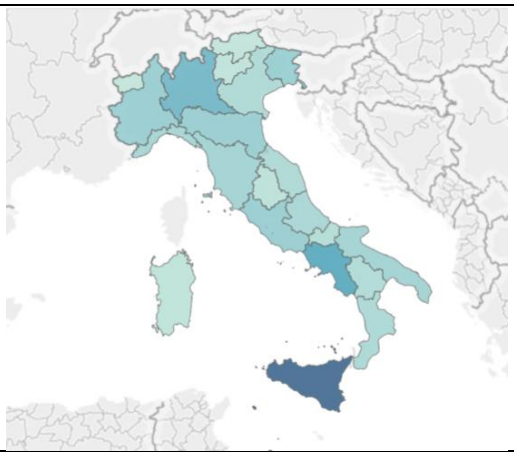


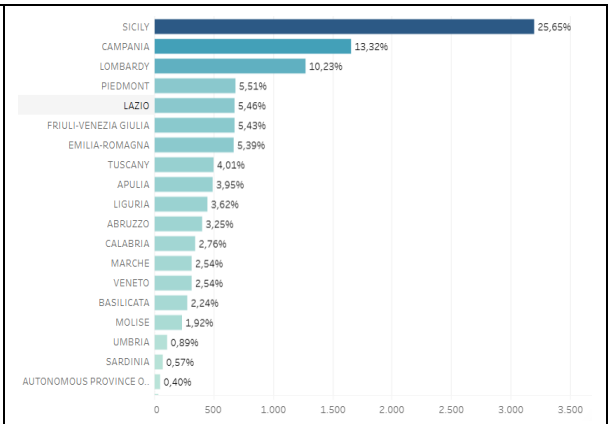


# of Ukrainians UAMs allocating by type of reception center

type of reception center	Number	%
Reception in private home	2841	95.90%
First reception facilities	8	0.30%
Second reception facilities	114	3.80%
Total	2963	100%

Distribution of UAMs rest nationalities by region (Map and bar graph)



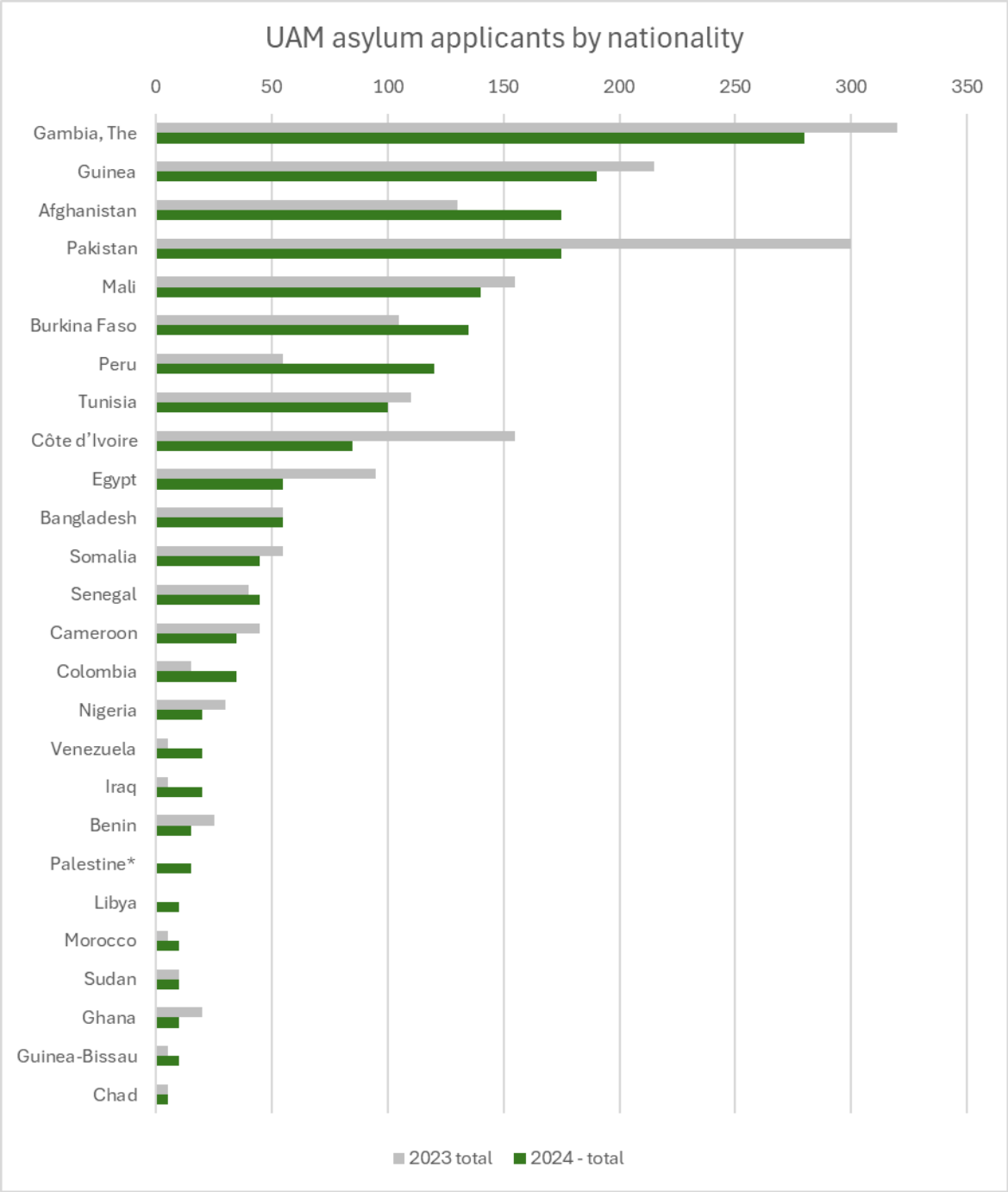


Accommodation by reception center type for all UAMs nationalities

type of reception center	%
Reception in private home	18.70%
First reception facilities	65.00%
Second reception facilities	16.30%
Total	100%

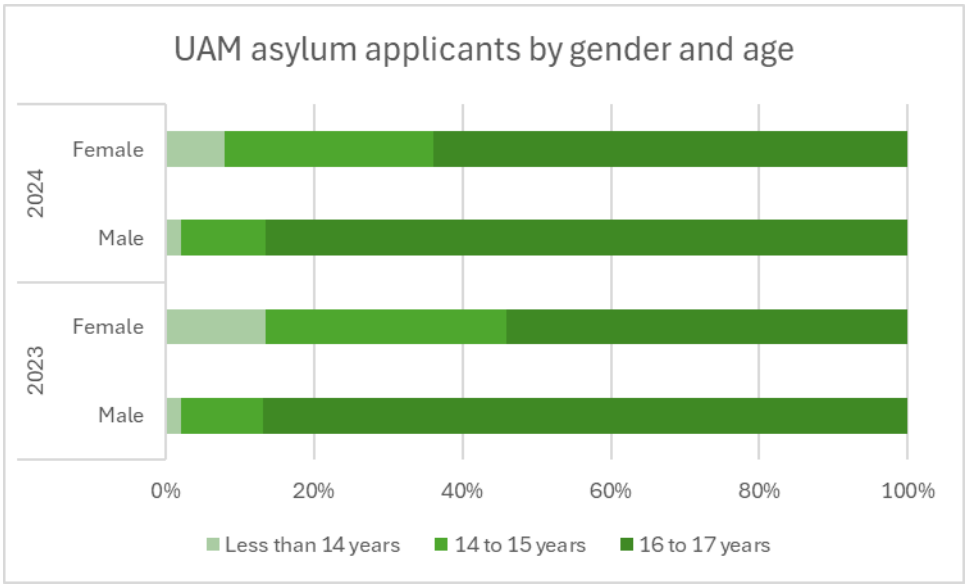
Source: Maps and bar graphs made in the PowerBi from the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, tables made from the data reported in the annual deep report of the same entity.

Figure 12: UAM Asylum applicants by nationality.



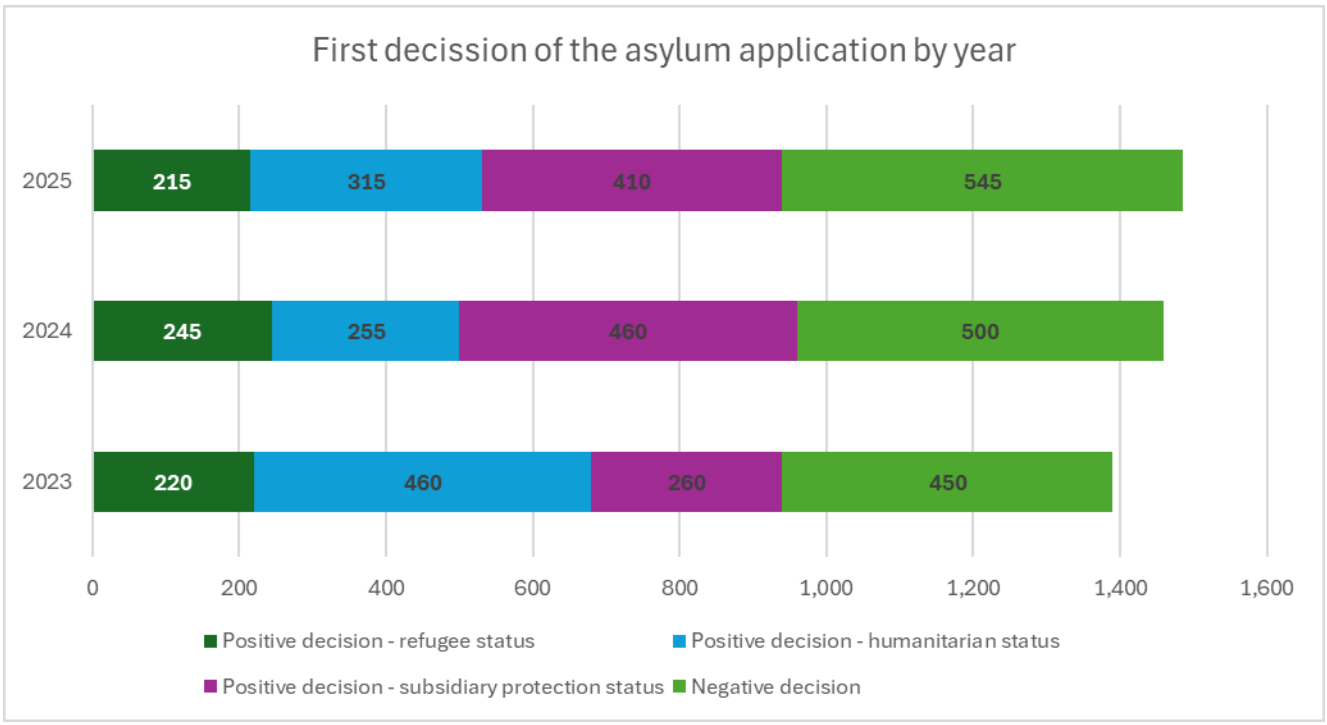
Source: Authors' elaboration with data from (EuroStat, 2026)

Figure 13: UAM asylum applicants by gender and age.



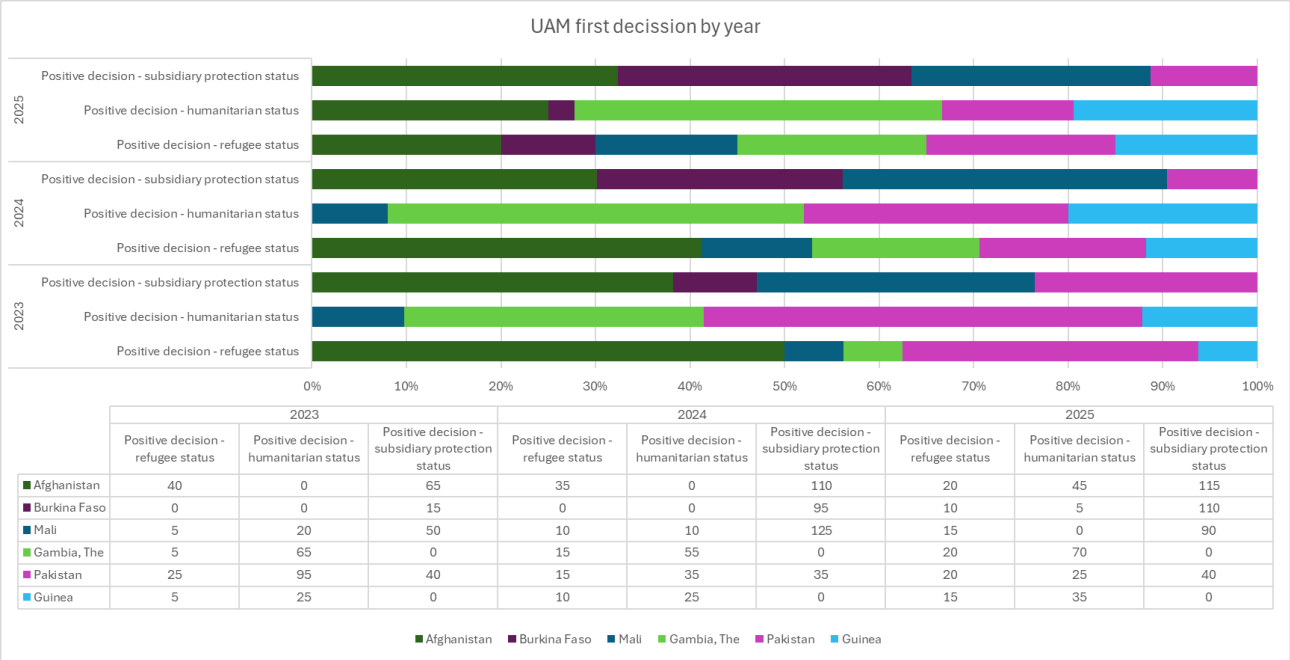
Source: Authors' elaboration with data from (EuroStat, 2026)

Figure 14: First Decision of asylum applications by year.



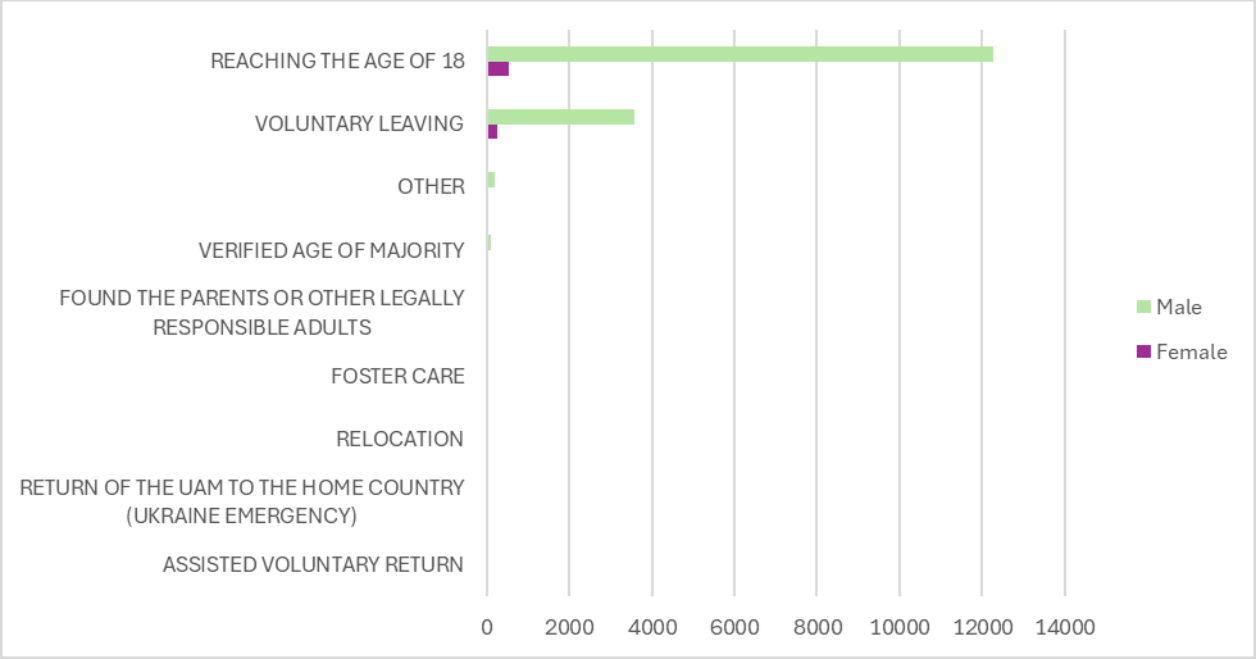
Source: Authors' elaboration with data from (EuroStat, 2026)

Figure 15: UAM positive first decision by year.



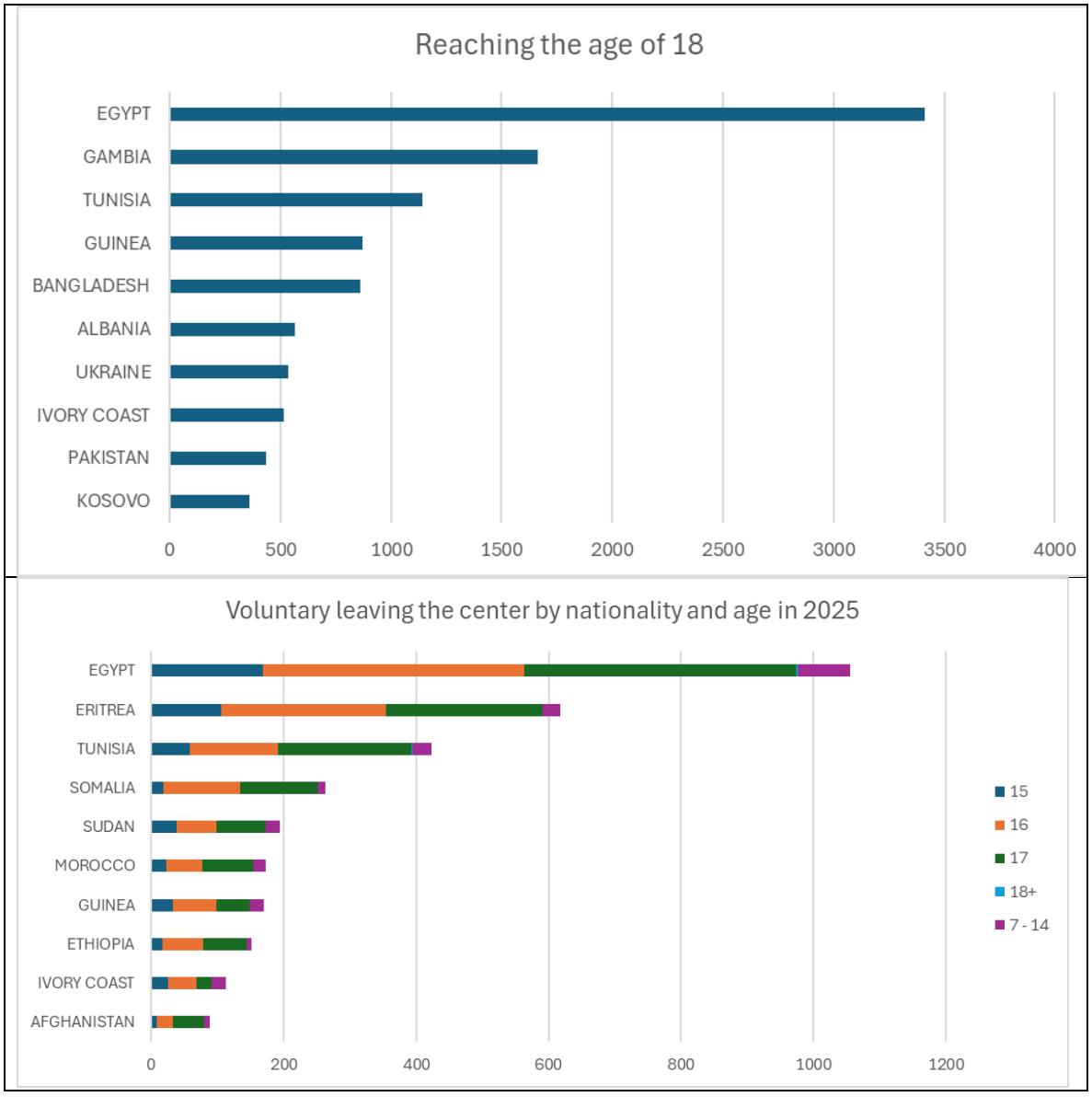
	2023			2024			2025		
	Positive decision - refugee status	Positive decision - humanitarian status	Positive decision - subsidiary protection status	Positive decision - refugee status	Positive decision - humanitarian status	Positive decision - subsidiary protection status	Positive decision - refugee status	Positive decision - humanitarian status	Positive decision - subsidiary protection status
Afghanistan	40	0	65	35	0	110	20	45	115
Burkina Faso	0	0	15	0	0	95	10	5	110
Mali	5	20	50	10	10	125	15	0	90
Gambia, The	5	65	0	15	55	0	20	70	0
Pakistan	25	95	40	15	35	35	20	25	40
Guinea	5	25	0	10	25	0	15	35	0

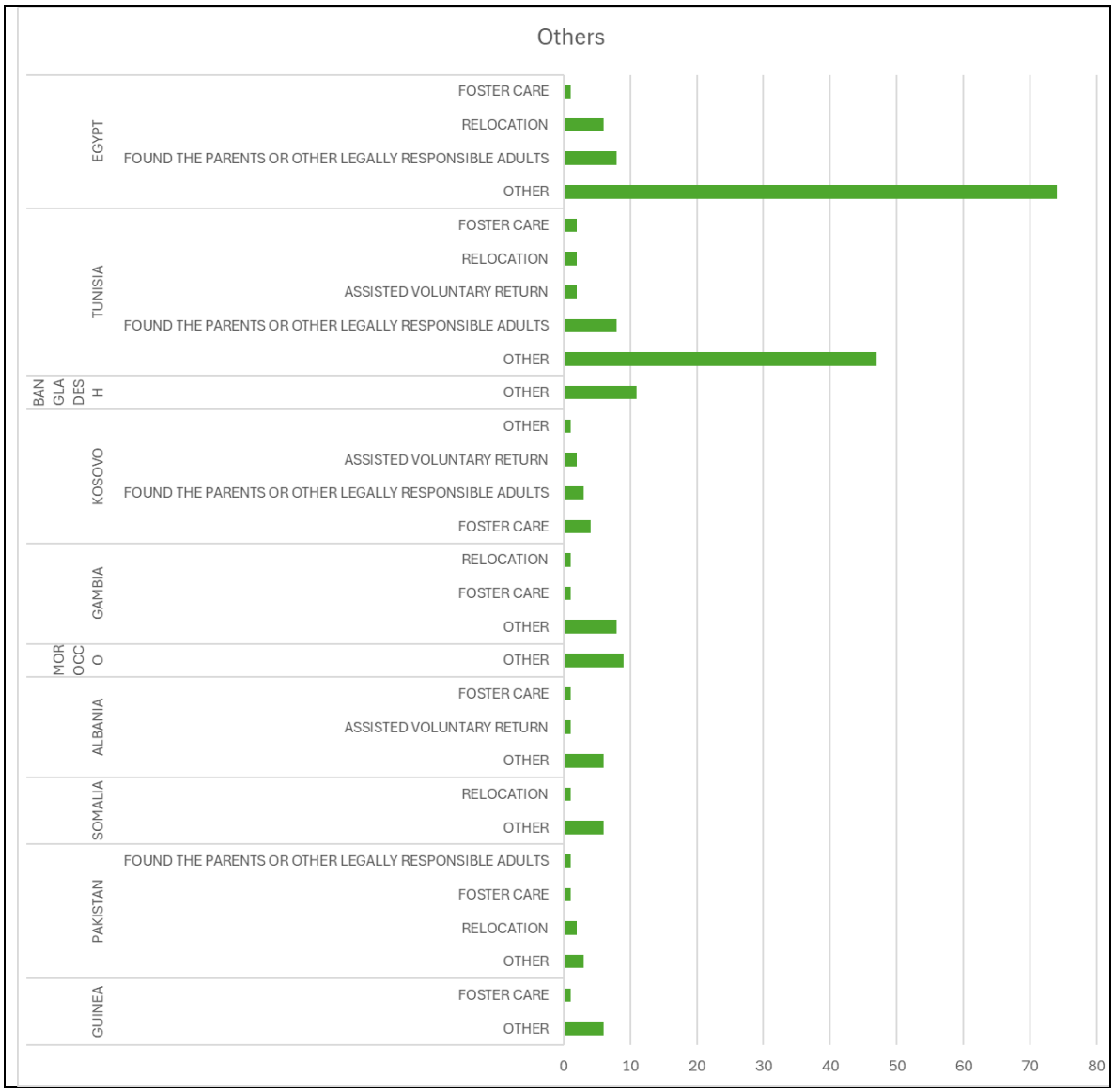
Figure 16: Leaving the reception center by reason and gender 2025.



Source: Author elaboration with data reported and published by SIM of unaccompanied minors leaving the reception centers during 2025. (SIM, 2025)

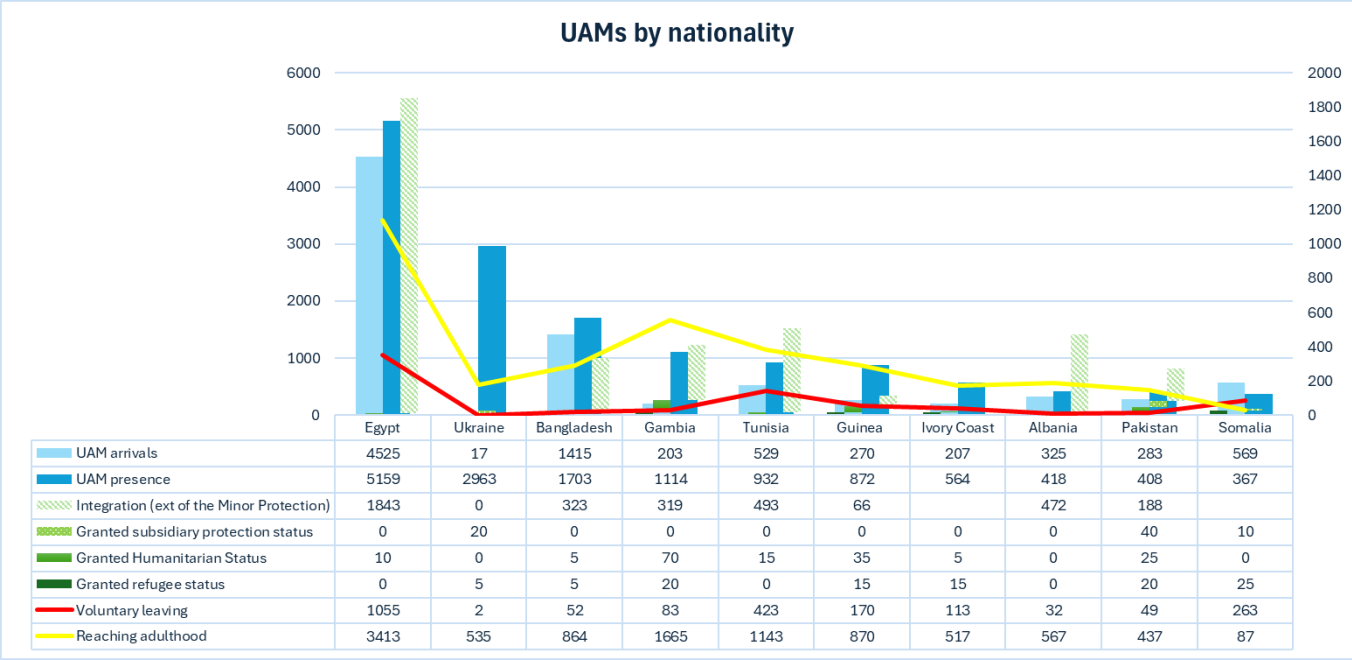
Table 7: Top 10 countries by reason of leaving the reception center during 2025.





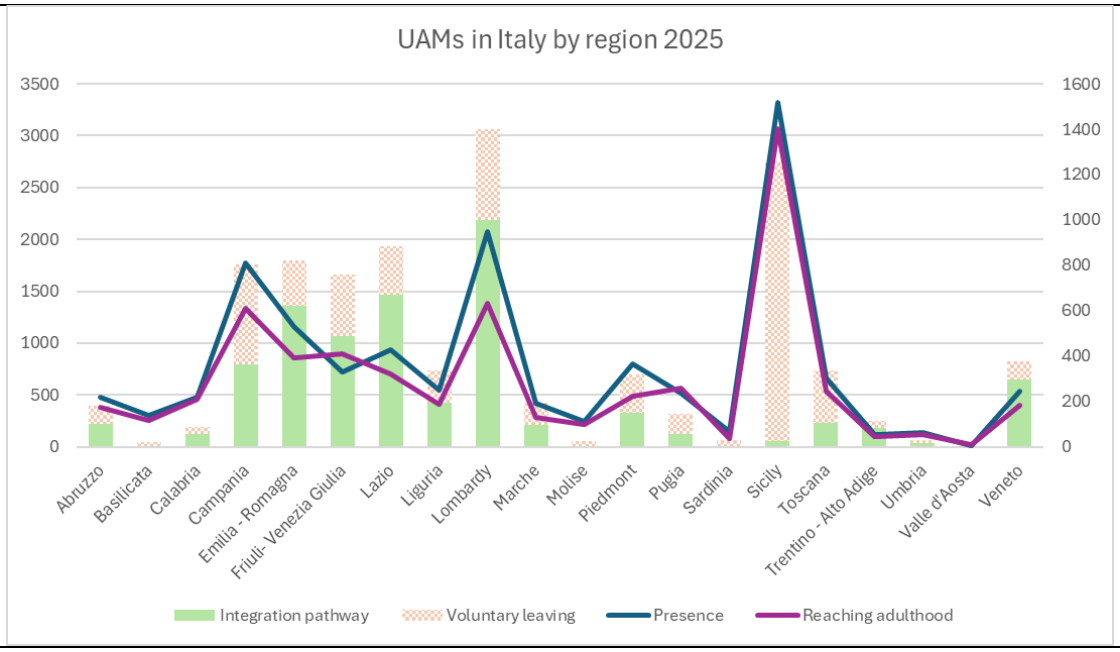
Source: Author elaboration with data reported and published by SIM of unaccompanied minors leaving the reception centers during 2025. (SIM, 2025)

Figure 17: Analysis by nationality.



	Egypt	Ukraine	Bangladesh	Gambia	Tunisia	Guinea	Ivory Coast	Albania	Pakistan	Somalia
UAM arrivals	4525	17	1415	203	529	270	207	325	283	569
UAM presence	5159	2963	1703	1114	932	872	564	418	408	367
Integration (ext of the Minor Protection)	1843	0	323	319	493	66		472	188	
Granted subsidiary protection status	0	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	40	10
Granted Humanitarian Status	10	0	5	70	15	35	5	0	25	0
Granted refugee status	0	5	5	20	0	15	15	0	20	25
Voluntary leaving	1055	2	52	83	423	170	113	32	49	263
Reaching adulthood	3413	535	864	1665	1143	870	517	567	437	87

Figure 18: Analysis of UAMs presence by region 2025.



Regional distribution SAI centers for MSNA 2025

Region	POSTI MSNA		
	Active	Occupy	Vacant
Abruzzo	154	149	5
Basilicata	258	252	6
Calabria	313	311	2
Campania	687	687	

Emilia - Romagna	587	587	
Friuli- Venezia Giulia			
Lazio	117	117	
Liguria	231	229	2
Lombardy	704	703	1
Marche	191	186	5
Molise	126	126	
Piedmont	201	198	3
Puglia	599	585	14
Sardinia	22	22	
Sicily	1979	1957	22
Toscana	321	321	
Trentino - Alto Adige	17	17	
Umbria	62	61	1
Valle d'Aosta			
Veneto	77	77	

Source: Author ownership using data from (SIM, 2025)

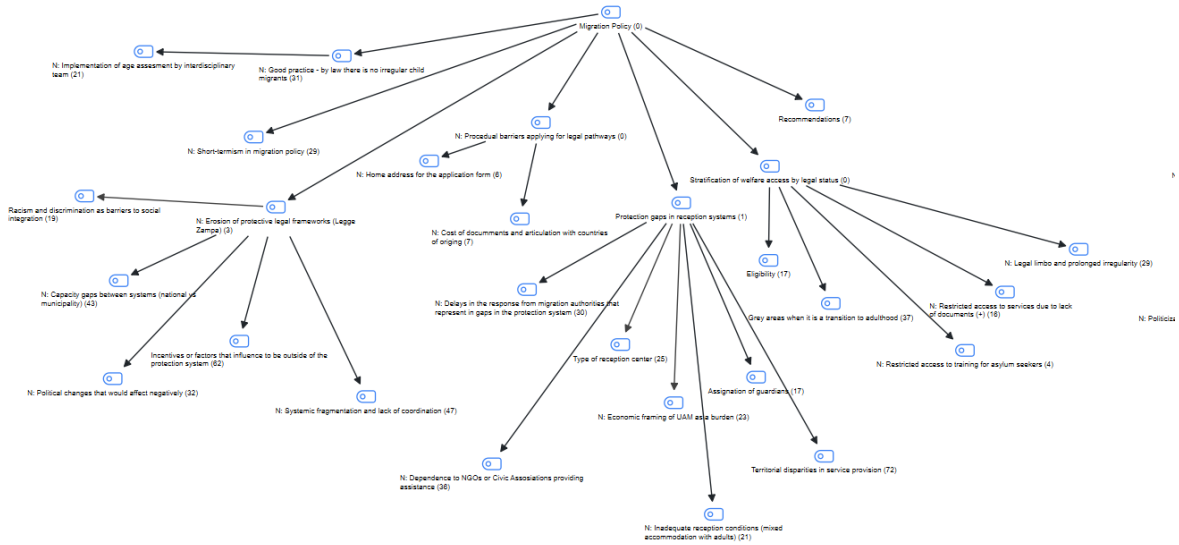
4. Qualitative Analysis

Table 8: Code system with frequencies

Code System			Memo	Frequency
Codes system				2209
Academic Culture				0
	Academic training relevance			30
	Continuing education and supervision			17
	Limits of professional training in practice			28
	N: Need / lack of trainning about cultural sensitivity			26
	N: Professional role		Ethical dilemmas and how the professionals could tackle them down	0
		N: Ethical dilemmas in rights protection		39
		N: Monitoring and accountability practices		26
		N: Politicization of social work practice		13
		N: Use of legal appeals to challenge institutions		12
	Recommendations			8
Intercultural Sensitivity			Influences how migrants and refugees settle in reception countries - integration and their relationship with the system	0
	Decission to apply for asylum or other legal pathways			0
		Impact of the outcomes of the application for legal pathways		19
		N: Eligibility criteria		53
		N: Limited options for legal pathways		28
		Related to age of arrival		26
		Related to migration project		63
		Related to nationality		49
	Importance of support		Improtance of the role to guarantee a integration in host communities or provision of welfare services	0
		From Social Workers		23
		From guardians		42
		From legal counsellors		22
		N: Cultural mediators		20
		N: From Psycologist		10
	N: Social withdrawal due to discrimination			23
	Perceived of fairness and transparency of the process			0
		Lack of knowledge		26
		Lack of support and guidance		35
		Long responses		32
		N: Dependence of individual actors for access to rights	Gatekeeping role of social workers and guardians	41
		N: Lack of accurate translators	That could represent in rejections or delays in mgration procedures and even more for those cases applying to asylum	8
		N: Lack of empathy and people centered approach		18
		N: Lack of trust in the state and their officials		17
	Recommendations			13
		N: Good practices about social cohesion and integration		24
Migration Policy			Norms that rule transit of people across borders --> their intentions to stay and relationship with host societies. Developing conceptual framework	0
	N: Erosion of protective legal frameworks (Legge Zampa)		Erosion and gaps regarding of the implementation of the law in the territories	3
		Incentives or factors that influence to be outside of the protection system	Italy as transit country could receive UAM that desire to continue their journey to other countries or parts in EU. Hence, entering the protection system could mean a restriction in their mobility against their migration goals	62
		N: Capacity gaps between systems (national vs municipality)		43
		N: Political changes that would affect negatively	Changes in zampa law that would have negative impactis in accessing services to UAM	32
		N: Systemic fragmentation and lack of coordination		47
		Racism and discrimination as barriers to social integration		19
	N: Good practice - by law there is no irregular child migrants		The participants confirm the knowledge of the law and the good italian practice protecting child migrants and providing them with the same rights as a national one	31
		N: Implementation of age assesment by interdisciplinary team		21
	N: Procedual barriers applying for legal pathways			0
		N: Cost of documments and articulation with countries of origing	Cost to issue passport, birth certificate or also bureocratic barriers such as delays in the response from countries of origin... even more when depend in family members for the domment	7
		N: Home address for the application form	Requirement of home address or long term rent contract	8
	N: Short-termism in migration policy		Lack of long or midterm solutions for UAM seeking for integration and resilience of this target group.	29
	Protection gaps in reception systems			1
		Assignation of guardians		17
		N: Delays in the response from migration authorities that represent in gaps in the protection system	The delays in the response from juvenile court represent in the reaching of adulthood from the minor and then a short window where the minor could have really access to the different services	30
		N: Dependence to NGOs or Civic Assosiations providing assistance	Specially those outside the protections ystem and in irregular or clandestine camps	36
		N: Economic framing of UAM as a burden	Institutional perceptio of UAM as a economic burden	23
		N: Inadequate reception conditions (mixed accommodation with		21
		Territorial disparities in service provision		72
		Type of reception center		25
	Recommendations			7
	Stratification of welfare access by legal status			0
		Eligibility		17
		Grey areas when it is a transition to adulthood		37
		N: Legal limbo and prolonged irregularity		29
		N: Restricted access to services due to lack of documents (+)	24/04/2026 04:17 p. m. - catal Fusionado con el código Migration Policy > Lack of documentation	16
		N: Restricted access to training for asylum seekers	Better services for minors .. or differences with services provided by asylum seekers	4
Organisational Culture (Barriers & facilitators)				0
	Advocacy and legal action in defense of minors' rights			39
		Gaps in transition to adulthood		29
	Fundings and resource constraints			0
		Funding limitations		40
		Infrastructure limitations		23
		Staff shortages		23
	Institutional Coordination			0
		Challenges		39
		Good practices		17
	Institutional conditions challenges			0
		Hierarchychallenges	As barriers due to bureocracy process, delays in responses from institutions or lack of their response or their willingness to cooperate	3
		High workload- Burnout		26
		Lack of supervision or accountability regarding the quality of the		8
		N: Lack of professionals to fill the vacancies		16
	Interprofessional coordination			24
	Recommendations			29
	Restrictions / Constrains in the availability and quality of the services			0
		Assignation of guardians		16
		Bureocratic complexity		54
		Educational and training courses		23
		Italian language courses		14
		Migration project		22
		N: Access to job opportunities / labor		44
		N: Information provision		17
		N: Lack of home address for the registration in the system		9
		N: Location of the reception center far from cities	That represent in more challenges in the integration in host communitites and found job opportunities	10
		N: Pshycological support	to help coping mechanisms, control of emotions, prevention of druqs abuse, and companion	12
		Reception centersdont have the proper services		34
	Role perception and responsibilities			0
		Guardians		60
		N: Cultural mediators		14
		N: Legal counselling / lawyer		9
		N: Psychocological support	Importance of psychologist as part of the interdisciplinary team to provide a holystic assistance to the UAM	5
		Social Workers		54
	Social discrimination or inclusion networks			0
		Cultural misunderstandings		17
		Discrimination		10
		Language barriers		12
		N: Lack of integration activities		34
	Legal uncertainty			0

Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 19: Theme 1 - Migration Policy code system & frequencies.



Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 20: Theme 1 - Subcode clouds.



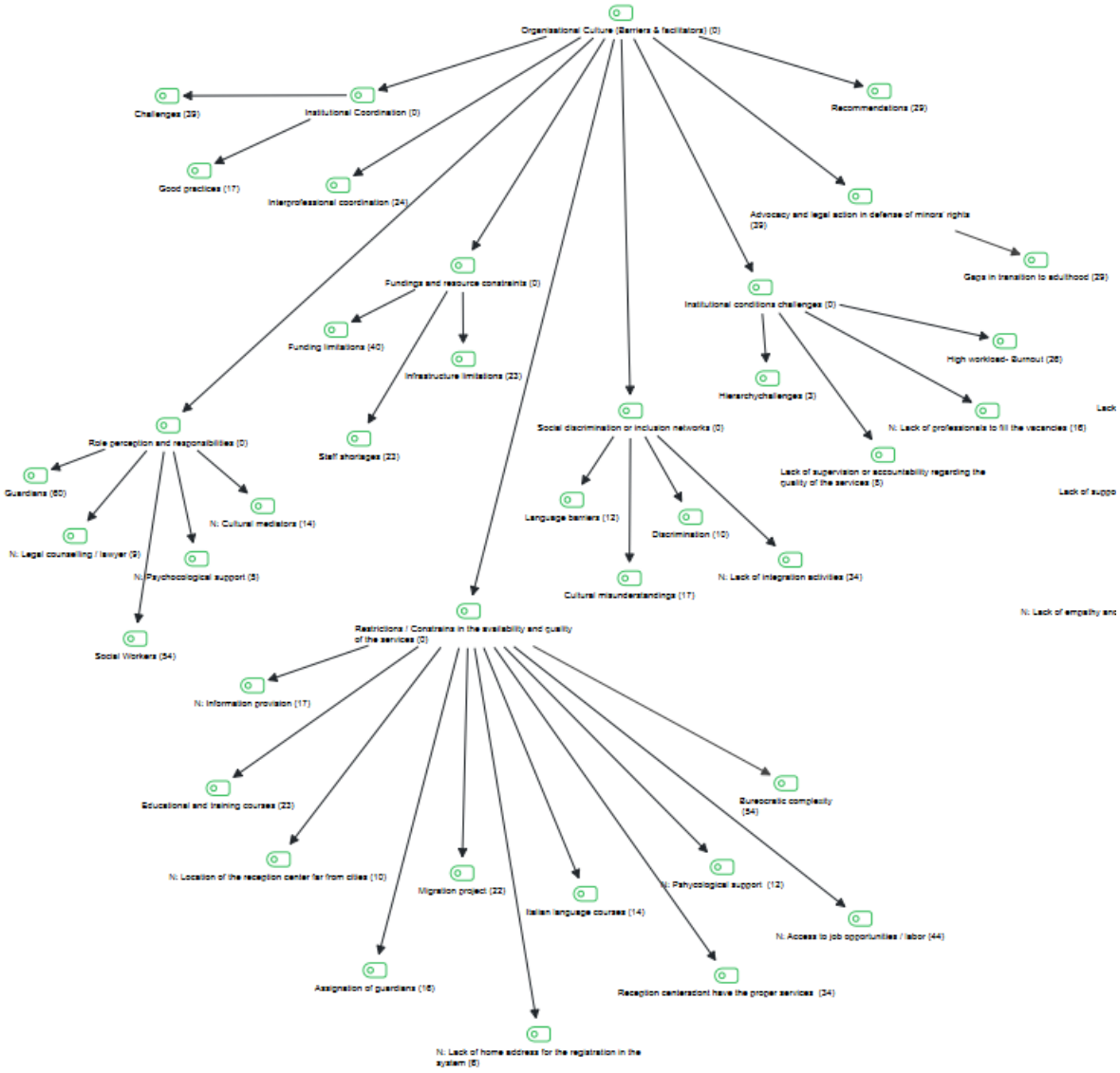
Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Table 9: Co-occurrence between systemic fragmentation with code system

Code System	N: Systemic fragmentation and lack of coordination
N: Erosion of protective legal frameworks (Legge Zampa) > N: Capacity gaps between systems (national vs municipality)	10
Institutional Coordination > Challenges	6
Protection gaps in reception systems > Territorial disparities in service provision	5
Restrictions / Constrains in the availability and quality of the services > Bureocratic complexity	5
Restrictions / Constrains in the availability and quality of the services > Reception centersdont have the proper services	3
Perceived of fairness and transparency of the process > N: Dependence of individual actors for access to rights	2
N: Erosion of protective legal frameworks (Legge Zampa) > N: Political changes that would affect negatively	2
N: Erosion of protective legal frameworks (Legge Zampa) > Racism and discrimination as barriers to social integration	2
Protection gaps in reception systems > Type of reception center	2
Advocacy and legal action in defense of minors' rights > Gaps in transition to adulthood	2
Fundings and resource constraints > Funding limitations	2
Academic Culture > Limits of professional training in practice	1
Decission to apply for asylum or other legal pathways > Related to nationality	1
Migration Policy > N: Erosion of protective legal frameworks (Legge Zampa)	1
N: Procedual barriers applying for legal pathways > N: Cost of documments and articulation with countries of origing	1
Migration Policy > Protection gaps in reception systems	1
Protection gaps in reception systems > Assignation of guardians	1
Protection gaps in reception systems > N: Delays in the response from migration authorities that represent in gaps in the protection system	1
Protection gaps in reception systems > N: Dependence to NGOs or Civic Assosiations providing assistance	1
Stratification of welfare access by legal status > N: Legal limbo and prolonged irregularity	1
Fundings and resource constraints > Infrastructure limitations	1
Institutional conditions challenges > Hierarchychallenges	1
Restrictions / Constrains in the availability and quality of the services > N: Pshycological support	1
Role perception and responsibilities > Social Workers	1

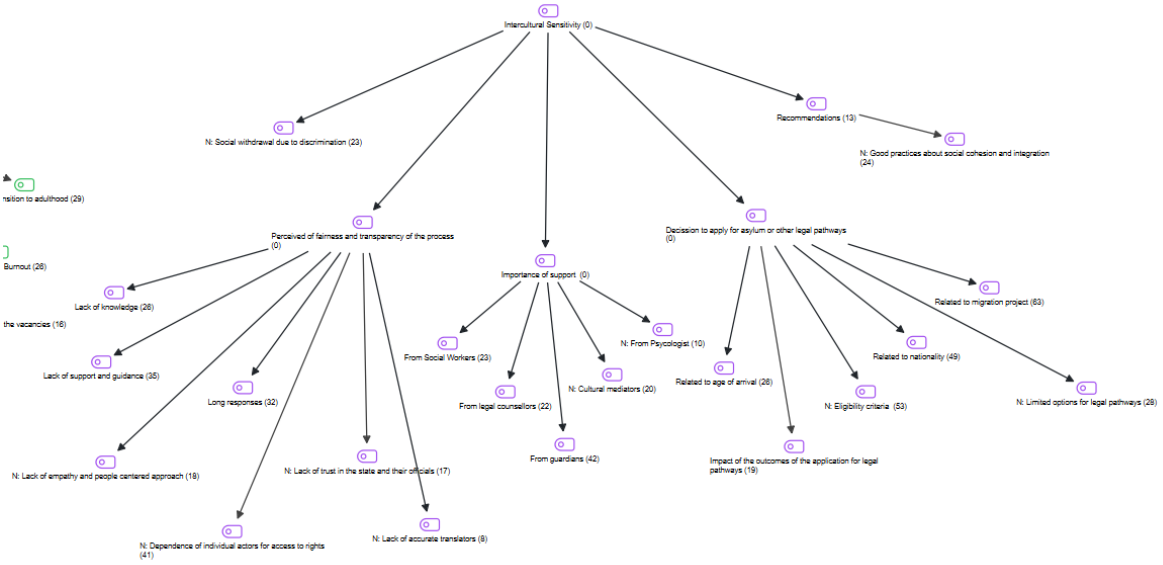
Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 21: Theme 2 - Organizational culture code system & frequencies.



Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 22: Theme 3: Intercultural Sensitivity



Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 23: Proportion of segments codified regarding importance of support from different professionals.

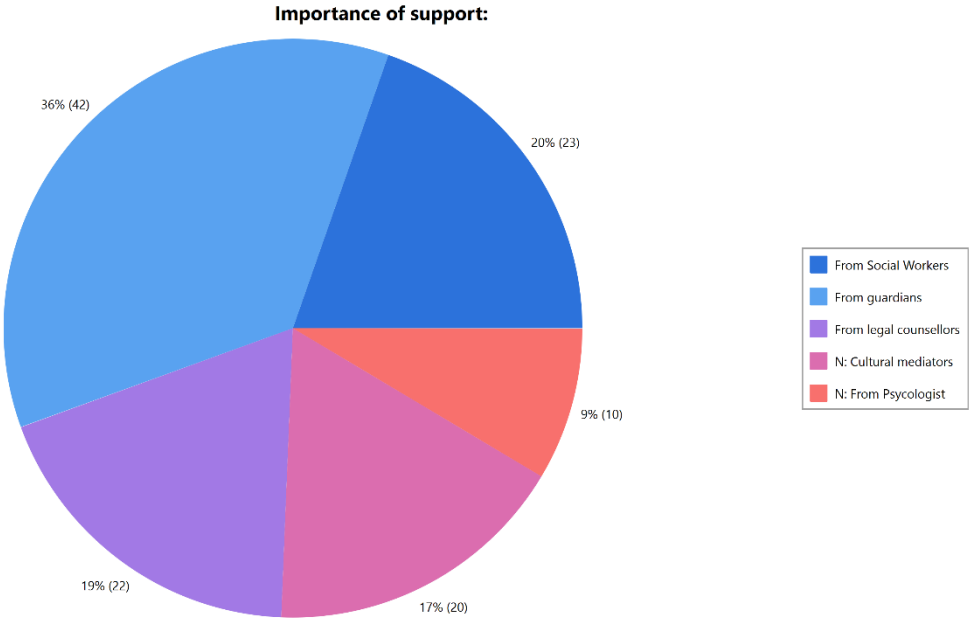
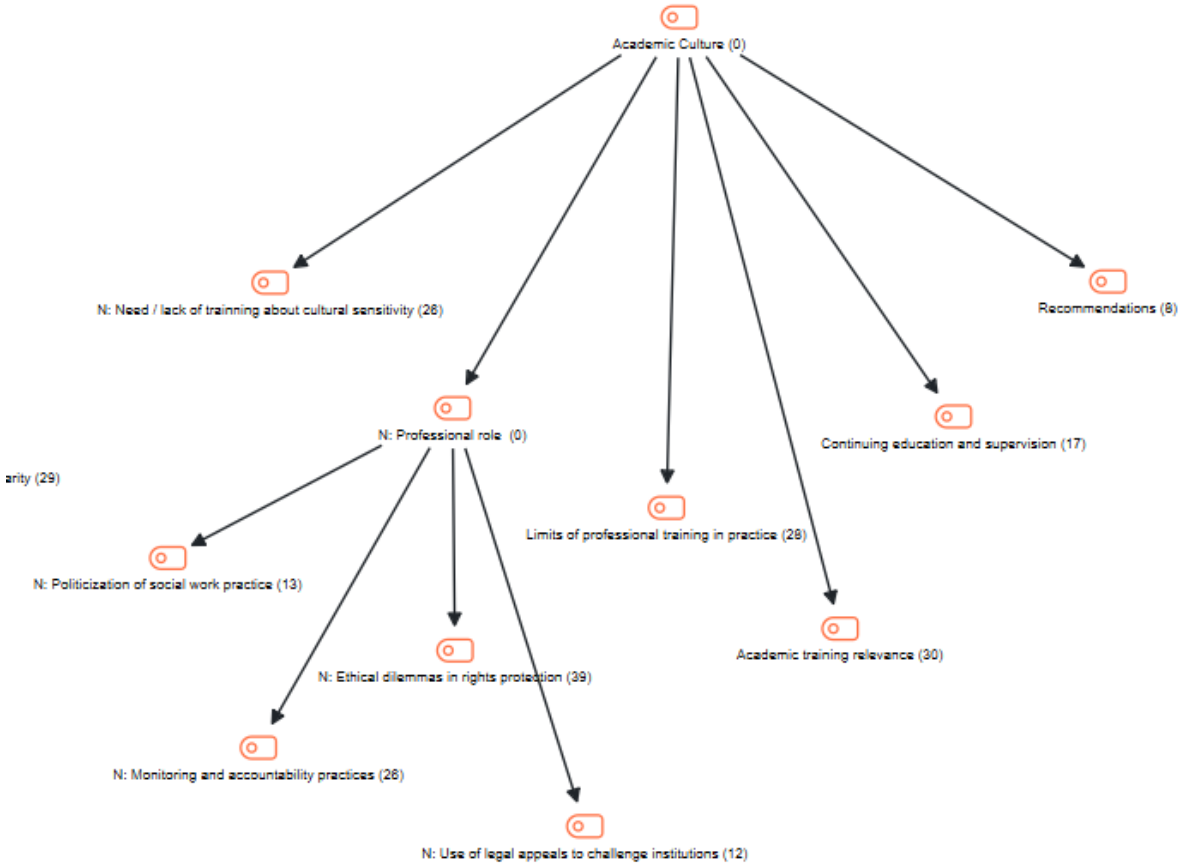
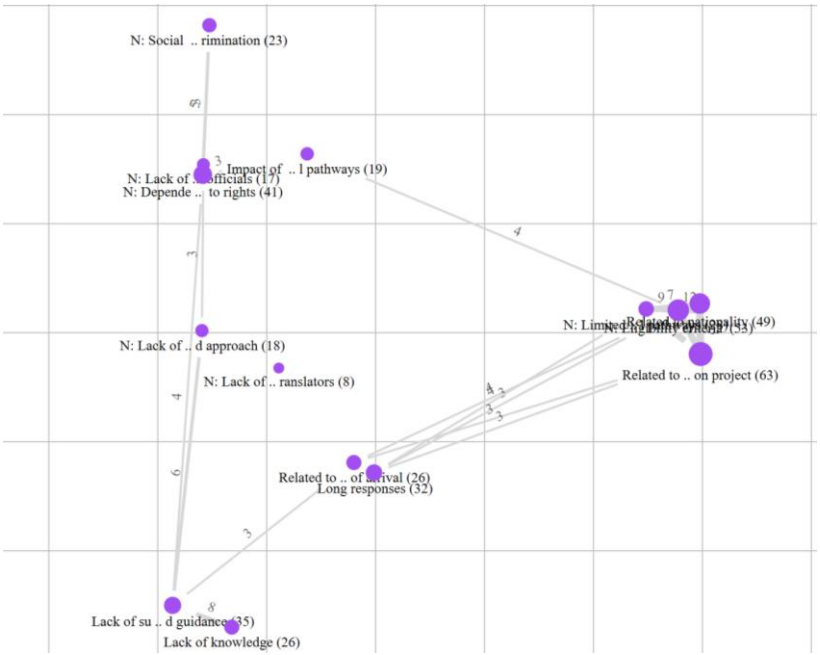


Figure 24: Theme 4 - Academic Culture code system & frequencies.



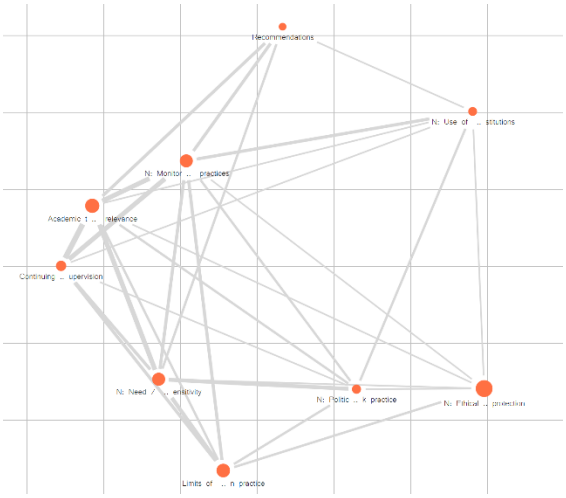
Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 25: Codes relationship and intersections within a segment during the semi-structure interviews.



Note: Author's elaboration through qualitative analysis of the semi structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 26:Intersecion of codes and subcodes within a segment - Academic Culture theme.



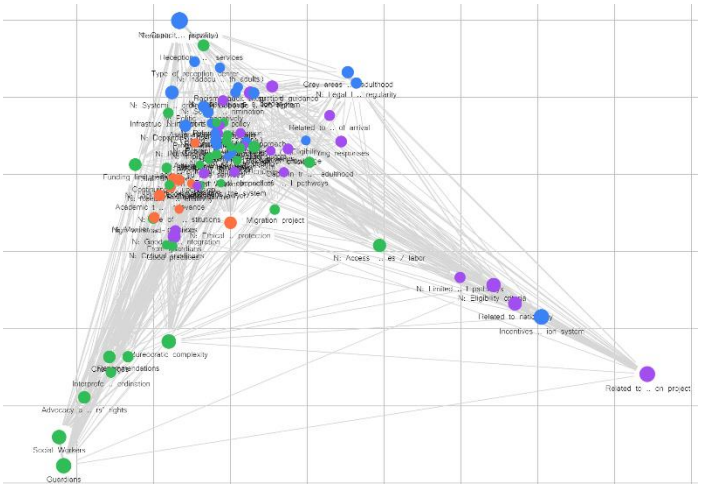
Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 27: Code frequencies cross all themes.



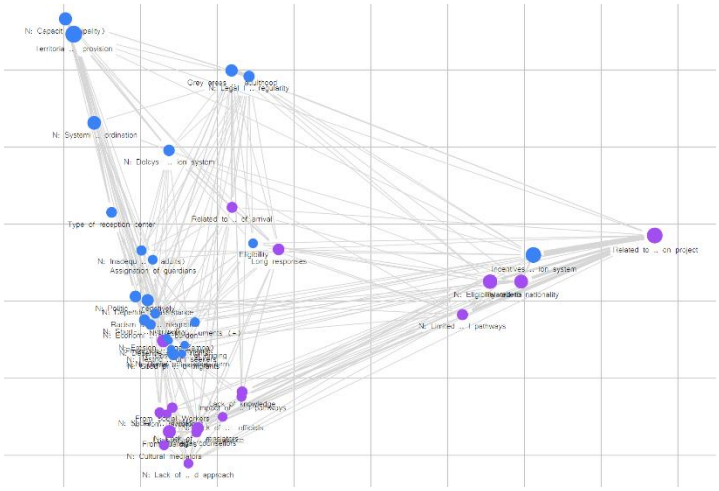
Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 28: Co-occurrence of subcodes within a segment.



Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

Figure 29:Intersection between Migration Policy and Intercultural Sensitivity themes.



Source: Autor's elaboration analysis of the semi-structured interviews using MaxQDA

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Non-plagiarism declaration

Submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master's Programme in Social Work with Child and Youth:

- Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College
- Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work
- Contains proper citation and references from my own prior scholarly work
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I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize and will result in a failing grade in the programme.

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Name (in block letters): CATALINA PINZON YAYA