

## Supporting Unaccompanied Minors in Transition to Adulthood: The Turkish Case

Turkey has been hosting a significant number of refugees since 2011 because of the civil war in Syria; %5 of the population in Turkey are refugees. %91 of refugee population in Turkey are Syrians, %4 Afghans, %4 Iraqis and %1 Iranians. The overall rate of refugees from Somalia and other countries is less than %1 (UNHCR, 2018, 31.03). By November 2019 the total number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is 3.684.835; and %46 of this population are children (1.730.596); %15 are youngsters (555.061) aged 18-24. While up to date statistics are announced on the web site of the Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, it is not possible to reach the current statistics of unaccompanied or separated minors the same way.

Some of the unaccompanied minors see Turkey as a passage to third country, it is the target country for rest. Therefore, some of them continue their lives unregistered, and the rest claim to be taken under protection by their own will or they are identified by the police and taken under protection. According to Law on Foreigners and International Protection (2015), article 66/5 and Children Support Centers Directive depending upon this law; the unaccompanied minors are taken under protection at Children Support Centers. As of 2019, there are Children Support Centers for unaccompanied minors in Agri, Konya, Yozgat, Tekirdag, Diyarbakir, Erzurum, Gaziantep, Bilecik, Erzincan, İstanbul and Van. CODEM (Children Support Center) which is located in Beylikduzu, İstanbul is the first admission institution and conducts transfers to the other cities.

The number of unaccompanied minors in Turkey who are under protection is held by the city directorates of Immigration Office, however it is not possible to reach these statistics directly. The number of unregistered unaccompanied minors is not known (Karataş et. all, 2014). The lack of statistics about the unaccompanied immigrant

children in Turkey and in the World makes it difficult to understand the aspects of the problem.

UNICEF states that the number of refugee and immigrant children who took to the roads on their own all alone has raised five times since 2010 in “Five-fold increase in number of refugee and migrant children traveling alone since 2010” report. (2017, akt: Düzel & Alış, 2018).

According to Immigration and Cohesion Report prepared by Refugee Rights Commission, which has been established as a sub-commission under Human Rights Commission at Turkish Grand National Assembly in 2018, the number of unaccompanied minors at Children Support Centers is 288. While the Syrian children who are apart from their parents generally stay together with their relatives or acquaintances in the cities; the other unaccompanied refugees are taken under protection and sent to Children Support Centers. The unaccompanied refugees who avoid registration and hope to migrate to other countries are under the risk of illegal human trafficking or the worst versions of child labour. According to Turkish Law the unaccompanied minors are the children who must be taken under protection.

Unaccompanied minor is described as “the child who is not under efficient care of a person responsible, without accompaniment of an adult who is responsible by law or general customs and entered to Turkey or became unaccompanied after entering Turkey” in Law no 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection. Identifying the unaccompanied minors and taking them under protection is the responsibility of Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management and Ministry of Family, Social Services and Labour. The children who are taken under protection at Children Support Centers as part of Children Protection Law no 5395, are given access to fundamental rights such as shelter, health, education and psycho-social support; these children can

benefit from preventive and protective precautions. Directive of Unaccompanied Minors and Directive of Children Support Center are the directives and instructions that regulate the services in this field. Besides, Turkey is a party to many international conventions about minding the rights of unaccompanied minors. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children and its additional protocols, United Nations Geneva Convention, the Council of Europe Convention on Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Human Trafficking, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) are some of these conventions that Turkey is a party.

Even though Turkey has accepted the international standards for unaccompanied minors and made progress in legal and institutional context; the current incompetence of the institutional capacities, late admission and approval, difficulties about determining the age, access to education and difficulties about attendance, family union issue and uncertainty about the processes about the unaccompanied minors in transition to adulthood are considered about important development areas. (Association of Solidarity with Refugees, 2014; HYD, 2010; TOHAV, 2014; Yöney, 2015).

Since long term admissions and evaluation processes may cause secondary trauma, increasing the institutional capacity and generating effective procedures are among highly urgent and important needs. Even though the unaccompanied minors who are taken under protection are provided appointed guardians by law, there are deficiencies about appointing guardian. Moreover, the extensity of child labour is risky for unaccompanied minors.

The unaccompanied minors who turn age 18 at Children Support Centers are sent to satellite cities in order to find a job and earn their livings. The protection may continue for a short while when they turn 18, in case of some special conditions such as the

unaccompanied minor gets into university. Collaboration among the institutions in the field and rising coordination, diversifying education and skills activities for unaccompanied minors and studies to convert the prejudices in the society are among important needs in the field. (KOREV, 2017).

An important education program for unaccompanied minors who are under protection is ANKA education's sub-program developed by Psychologist Kultegin Ogel and it is offered to both corporate staff and unaccompanied minors. The program has been developed drug abuse oriented and implemented for the last 10 years. On one side it supports the unaccompanied minors while staying at the institution, on the other side it also includes the information needed for counselling and guidance after leaving the institution. The education program includes home accidents, rules of good manners, simple recipes, simple repairs, cleaning and nutrition, and it is supported by videos without using a language. The education program is applied by social service staff with small group work. Besides, there are educations about child rights and case management implemented by UNHCR and UNICEF for social service staff and NGO staff. Care precautions for the unaccompanied minors, who are included in the protection system, are removed when they turn 18 and the unaccompanied minors become more disadvantaged. When the protection order for Turkish citizen children raised, the law no 3413 which is about work placement do not cover unaccompanied minors. The Social Services Law no 2828 mainly do not cover unaccompanied minors. Because of that vocational education before 18 years of age and work placement after 18 become very important for unaccompanied minors in Turkey. On the other hand the need to develop the capacity about vocational education, and low awareness of the youth about vocational education create difficulties to reach vocational education (Atasü Topçuoğlu, 2013). In 2019 Ministry of Education and ILO started a collaborative work named as "Opportunity for Life Project", and they started educations for 14-29 aged immigrant groups via Vocational Education Centers. During the education the

participants have been supported by pocket money and travel allowance, and their participation in the work life has been targeted (ILO, 2019).

In order to support the unaccompanied minors in transition to adulthood in Turkey, it is advised to put forward seeking children's best interest during the processes of registration and protection, prioritizing the rights to reach education, increasing the capacity and awareness about vocational education, providing psycho-social support continuously and effectively, reducing the protection mechanisms gradually only after they turn 18 depending on them to earn their socio-economic independence.

To put these actions into practice, open and transparent immigration policy, various accessible transition strategies for all children, creating options of legal and safe work, empowering the access to education including vocational education, increasing the capacity of vocational education, increasing coordination and collaboration among institutions, increasing the capacity and competences of both NGOs and public institutions are needed (Kraus et. Al., 2018).