Save the Children
Italia ONLUS

MIGRANT MINORS: TRAVELLING THROUGH THE NET

Risks and opportunities stemming from the Internet as voiced by foreign adolescents arriving in Italy on their own

On the occasion known as **Safer Internet Day,** the day devoted to promoting a positive and informed use of digital technologies which was held this year on the **9th of February**, Save the Children Italia chose to gather, for the first time, testimonies given by unaccompanied immigrant minors who have reached Italy on their use of digital technologies during each phase of their journey, from when they first conceived the idea of leaving up until their current stay in Italy.

This consultation involved the participation of 165 minors aged 15 to 17 who had been provided with accommodation in various types of refugee and asylum seekers shelters[1] within the country. In terms of the participants' nationalities, the countries of origins most represented were Egypt (54), The Gambia (20), Guinea (18), Nigeria (17), Mali (11) and Senegal (10).[2]

The methodology followed was made up by a brief game involving introductions and talking to the participants about the aims of the activities, explaining why their involvement and contributions were important; an analysis of the keywords in relation to the contents of the contained in the various language versions of the questionnaire; administering the questionnaire/survey and the ensuing discussion to elaborate further on relevant incentives and contributions; and, finally, a closing moment through a game using greetings in the different languages spoken.

By presenting the results of this consultation, this document aims to serve as a tool in reminding all of Europe, during this particularly critical period for immigration policies, that the responsibilities of guaranteeing safe and informed internet access must also include these minors, in the same way as European adolescents, taking into consideration their specific needs.

Unaccompanied foreign minors: to whom are we referring?

Unaccompanied foreign minors are boys and girls travelling without a parent or legal guardian, who arrive in Italy alone and, precisely because of their particular situation, are more vulnerable and at risk of having their rights violated, running a serious risk of becoming victims of trafficking and exploitation. Over 12,000 unaccompanied foreign minors arrived in Italy in 2015 and 645 arrived in the just the month of January 2016.

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[1] The structures involved comprise:
- Two centres for first assistance and reception (Cpsa) at Lampedusa and Pozzallo;
- Three first assistance structures for unaccompanied foreign minors in Trapani, Caltanissetta and Catania provinces;
- Three CivicoZero centres: "CivicoZero" is the name Save the Children gave to the low-threshold, non-residential day centres that have opened in Rome, Milan and Turin to provide support, orientation and protection to immigrant minors and those who have just come of age who are facing social marginalisation and are at a greater risk of exploitation and abuse.

[2] Other participants came from Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Ghana, Afghanistan, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Albania.

Unaccompanied foreign minors and digital technologies

Internet access prior to departure

Data on internet access before departure vary greatly depending on the children's country of origin. The highest percentage rate was observed among Egyptian boys, whereas among youngsters from sub-Saharan countries there were scarce or no possibilities at all of accessing the Internet.

> S., a 17-year-old Afghan boy, confirmed that in Afghanistan *"internet doesn't exist, at least not where I come from"* and he only started using it in Italy. *"At the Centre, I saw an Afghan boy who had Facebook and Viber. I came to Civico Zero and asked one of the boys what Facebook was and he helped me open an account. Now I also have Viber and can talk with my family with it."*

When the Internet encourages you to leave

For the most part, the stories told – either by telephone or word of mouth – by relatives and friends have arrived earlier, are what influenced many in their decision to leave. In the case of those who had internet access in their home countries, the Internet sometimes contributed to reinforcing the idea of leaving, at times even in a decisive way.

Seeing beautiful photos of life in Italy posted by friends and acquaintances of a similar age or of the same nationality, representations that may be real or constructed but for them hold the promise of a dream come true, foster the desire to leave, with expectations that, in number of cases, later clashed with what turned out to be quite different reality.

> M., a 17-year-old Egyptian boy, *"I decided to come to Italy because I had seen photos of some friends on Facebook, they were beautiful... when they were still in Egypt their faces looked tired while in those photos they looked good, rested and smiling. (…) I had decided to leave and, to convince my father to pay for my trip, I'd show him my friend's photos, but my father told me not to trust the Internet. Since I had left school, I was continuously pestering my parents to get them to pay for my journey. My mother was backed me up in my decision to leave to avoid the daily family conflicts. My poor father was forced to get into debt at the bank and mortgage our house in order to pay for my trip towards Italy. When I arrived in Sicily I phoned my friend at the number in Italy I had found on his Facebook page. I asked if I could stay with him in Milan. My friend then started to tell me about his problems and advised me to stay at the reception centre until I got an immigrant visa. I've only just realised now how the Web is filled with lies. My poor Dad was right!"*
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> For one of the other boys the photos he had seen had been *"only a part of the choice made"* because he also had relatives who had come over and *"were able to find success and this was what made me decide to leave"*.
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> O., a 16-year-old Nigerian boy, decided to flee Nigeria after a conflict broke out between two ethnic groups in the region where he lived with his mother, due to issues relating to territorial disputes in the area. After losing his mother because of the conflict, O. Was forced to go into hiding for a few weeks, spending the night in the homes of different family friends who took him in. This difficult situation pushed him, as did also advice from some friends who had contacted him on Facebook, to embark on his journey towards Europe: *"Get away from there as soon as possible! Do what we've done… we will help you, don't worry!"*

Finally, some had said how they had been struck in particular by the Italian landscapes featured in the photos sent by their friends:

> A., a 17-year-old Egyptian boy, "*I saw the Duomo*", e S., an 18-year-old Egyptian, "*I saw the Colosseum in Rome*".
>
> H., a sixteen-year-old Bangladeshi, said: "*I saw the photos some friends had taken in front of the Colosseum on the Internet; the Colosseum was really beautiful and they seemed happy. And so that's how I chose Italy*".

(Dis)connected during the journey

Most of the young people consulted were unable to access the Internet during their journey. The telephone (mobile or landline) is the means most frequently used to both organise a journey as well as to contact and reassure relatives at home. Those who had mobile phones kept them well hidden in any case, fearful that they would be stolen. A mobile was often the only link with someone left behind, to hear his or her voice or look at photographs of the faces of loved ones, shot before leaving, but it was also needed to remain in contact with the trip's organisers.

> *"We were never able to connect to the Internet and it was already quite an achievement to even sometimes manage to call our family to let them know we were alright..."*
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> *"I was able to go online at an internet café and I tried to find the shortest route out of the country I was in."*
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> *"I had one (mobile) that couldn't take photos or shoot videos; I had brought it with me from Nigeria. I needed it to be in touch with my family left at home; whenever I could I'd call them to reassure them. I was never able to go online and, once I had arrived in Libya, I found I no longer had my mobile: I'm not sure whether I lost it or if it was stolen."* He was only able to get in touch with his family again after arriving in Italy.
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> *A., 16 years old, Egyptian, "I had my mobile but it was dead throughout the entire journey."*
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> *S., 16 years old, Egyptian, "I took a lot of photos before I left while I was in Egypt with my family and friend and even during the trip, with my friends, before taking the boat; I then put them on a memory card so that I could look at them again after arriving in Italy... unfortunately I lost the card at sea during the crossing from Alexandria."*
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> *S., 18 years old, Egyptian, "we had to keep our mobile phones off because otherwise the police would be able to locate us, they told us on the boat to keep them switched off."*
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> *H., 16 years old, Egyptian, "at a certain point, during the journey, I got myself into difficulties. I had gotten lost and I asked some people to help me out to figure out where I was and they let me use the Internet."*
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> *A., 17 years old, Egyptian, "my friends and I used the Internet to organise our departure. We were a group and all left together."*
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> *F., 17 years old, Bangladeshi, told us that once he had reached Hungary he had used Google Maps to find out precisely where he was and the right direction to take.*
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> *An Egyptian youth (aged 17), who came to Italy via the Western Balkans route, said that the human traffickers wanted him to use Facebook to communicate with them once he reached Italy, so he could then send the remainder of the money he owed for the journey.*

A journey far too difficult to photograph and to recall

Most of the boys said they had not taken photos or shot videos during their journeys, mainly because of a lack of mobiles with those features or because there was not much worth photographing or remembering.

There are nonetheless some exceptions. As in the case of B., a 16-year-old Afghani boy who used his Smartphone to document each phase – including some of the most difficult and painful ones – of his journey from Afghanistan to Italy, managing to even shoot the views of the asphalt that lies beneath the TIR (International Road Transport) system while hanging on to the vehicle from below, between the wheels, to leave the port of Ancona behind him.[3] There were also other cases in which a Smartphone became an important tool in documenting the vicissitudes and abuses encountered during these journeys.

A., 16 years old, Gambian, "I didn't even have a mobile, how could I have possibly managed to take any photos or make videos?! And in any case there wasn't any of it that I would have wanted to commit to memory".

H., 17 years old, Pakistani, "at a certain point during my trip I shot a video and posted it on Facebook. That way my family and friends could see where I was at that I was well".

A., 15 years old, Egyptian, "during the trip there was a person who accompanied us in a van from Rashid to Alexandria, and when we arrived to took some photos with him with my mobile to keep as a souvenir".

S., 18 years old, Egyptian, "there wasn't anything to photograph. We were all crowded against each other on a boat: how could we have taken any photos? What we went through during this journey we will never forget for as long as we live…even if we lived to be 100 years old".

B., (17 years old) took some photos during his journey across the Western Balkans route which took about a month, but he later lost them because his mobile broke once he was in Italy: "I'm sorry about it, they were great photos… I took them because of all the different countries I travelled across".

A., 18 years old, took some photos because "I wanted to be able to remind myself of a journey I will never make again".

Connected in Italy

The most of the boys consulted have a Smartphone at their disposal and connect to the Internet using Wi-Fi or through facilities that are housing them or ones they frequent, even if not all of them (such as the *hotspots*) permit internet use. Almost all the boys have Facebook profiles.

The Web plays a fundamental role for the unaccompanied youths arriving in our country: it enables them to keep in touch with their families and friends, to meet new people, to take their minds off things (thereby also serving as a means easing the built-up pressure caused by the extremely difficult experiences they have been through), to plan the next steps in their journeys' different phases – whether in the continuation of their travels or in the process of integration in the country (i.e. in looking for work or to learn the language).

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3 The images shot were used in the making of the short film "La polvere di Kabul"/ *"Dust of Kabul"* (It. 2012, 13') by Morteza Khalegi.

M., 17 years old, claimed that the Internet became useful after he had arrived in Italy: "I didn't have internet before, but then in Italy I started using it and I was able to talk with friends who were in other towns to get an idea of where to go and how to get things done".

M., 17 years old, Egyptian, "I use the Internet above all to communicate with my family, then to take photos to post on the Web and then lastly to talk with friends who live in Milan to work out when and where to meet up".

H., 17 years old, Pakistani, "I downloaded an app to assist me in learning. It's useful to translate and also to call the family and friends".

F., 17 years old, Bangladeshi, "I only watch the cricket and sometimes call friends".

M., 16 years old, Egyptian, "I watch football, play Farmville on Facebook and watch all the latest Egyptian films".

M, 17 years old, "If I'm without internet for a week it becomes a problem. If my family sees that I'm online they know I'm alright".

A, 18 years old, "Internet helps you to send photos to your family to show them how you're doing. It's also useful because your family can help you find work in Italy".

S, 17 years old, Afghani, only uses the Internet on his mobile. "It's difficult on a computer." And he uses Viber to talk with his family. "I don't have many friends here, so that's why I like Facebook, to keep in closer touch with my friends who are all in different places, and to meet new people. I add new people I don't know; on Facebook I have friends who are Albanian, Afghani...I met an English girl today".

For M., 17 years old, it's useful for meeting girls and playing billiards. As for chats he says: "I play with my friend who is next to me... I have no need for chat rooms!"

H., 16 years old: "The Internet is important because you can watch the news and study".

A 17-year-old Egyptian: "I have recently been transferred to this facility and I don't yet have a mobile of my own but, thanks to these computers that all of us can use, I too have opened a Facebook account, so I can talk with my friends and stay in touch with my relatives, aside from having some fun in my free time. I also use the Internet to translate certain words in Italian and communicate with the facility's operators when there isn't an Arabic-speaking mediator around, that way I need something I go to Google and translate everything, and then I note it down on a piece of paper and take it to the operators."

Three girls (one aged 16 and two 17) Nigerian: "We set up profiles on both Facebook and Instagram to be able to talk our friends and meet new ones besides posting our photos and looking at those of others. And then we also have WhatsAapp which we use to send each other songs or voice messages among our friends."

Some stated that many, even among themselves, go online to look at adult websites; if on the one hand they seem pleased with themselves, on the other they bring this type of use within the category of those considered problematic.

Let's not fall into the Web: what are the risks?

Of the boys interviewed 19.4% said they had had bad experiences while online, mainly in relation to viruses and attempts by strangers to approach them.

> *A., 15 years old, Egyptian, "One day, when I was already in Italy, a girl on Facebook told me she wanted a 10 euro top-up on her mobile and I said that if she gave me a good reason I'd do it… then she sent me an awful photo… basically, it was a sexy photo, so then I understood why she wanted the top-up".*
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> *H., 17 years old, Egyptian, told how a friend of his set up a false profile with the photo of a beautiful girl and he then accepted a friend request; but then this person started telling him personal things about himself, such as where he lived. So, after a short time, he realised he was being duped.*
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> *Instead others spoke about having talked with girls on Facebook and then discovered they were actually adult men, probably homosexuals, who created false profiles to approach and meet young boys. They specified that this happened in both Italy and in Egypt.*
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> *M., an Egyptian aged 18, "Something awful happened to me. I was talking to a girl to get to know her and then I found out that she was a gay man".*

Another problem that emerges is use of the Internet to make fun of and disparage one's own peers:

> *A., 17 years old, "I know someone who took a photo of a guy with a lot of hair, Photoshopped it so that he looked like he had no hair and started making fun of it".*
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> *B., 17 years old, "It happened once that I couldn't access my Facebook page anymore. There are people who steal passwords".*
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> *S., 17 years old, Afghani, "There have been people who bothered me and I immediately blocked them".*

Some also said that they thought there were fake Facebook profiles created by their fellow countrymen where false or only partially true information is given about their lives in Europe, to encourage boys like them to make contact to find out more.

> *"I know lots of people pay a great deal of money to leave… There's surely someone who wants to rob them."*
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> *"It's normal that if you see other boys' profiles with beautiful photos and looking happy that you would want the same. If they create a fake profile to convince you to contact them for advice, maybe I'd even fall for it. Even if I don't know, it's not something easy to pass judgment on."*
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> *"Before leaving one of my friends told me: be very careful because there are dangerous people on Facebook."*
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> *"I've ended up communicating with people who had fake profiles. They asked me to post and share some photos in exchange for money. They would say: if you post these photos or invite your friends to post them we'll give you lots of money. At first I believed it and I did it, but then when I discovered that it was all false I didn't do it anymore, and then I let all my friends know that the photos were fake and not to post them. I also blocked the contacts I had. I was really sorry to have gotten my friends involved, in fact, I apologised to all of them and was always very careful after that about whatever I read or the propositions I received."*
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> *Three girls from Nigeria said they had found fake profiles on Facebook and had made friends with people who turned out not to be who they thought they were. "We've often been contacted on Facebook by persons who placed photos of people we knew but then turned out not to be them. When we realised they were fake profiles, we immediately de-friended them and we are now more careful when it comes to the friend requests we receive and before accepting one we make sure they are the person they claim to be."*

It's a matter of Rights!

It is fundamentally important to supply migrant and refugee boys and girls with the knowledge needed to utilise the Web in a positive and informed way. Internet access and an education in the safe use of the Web should be guaranteed in every reception facility, with facility operators receiving adequate training so that they can carry out this guiding role and help direct even those who have never gone online.

…But responsibility as well: *Play your part!*

17 years old, Egyptian, "I use social networks to contact my friends in Egypt, I post my photos and those of my friends here in Italy on Facebook, where I write that I am very well and have a lot of fun, and so they envy me and they start to wish that they too could come here. It's fun for me to show that I am doing well and am living in a beautiful country, even though, if truth must be told, this is a very small town. My dream is to go and live in a big city one day".

It is customary on social networks to post only what represents the positive side of things or one's self. Even someone who has just arrived in our (or in another) country often puts in motion the dynamics this kind of communication, addressed mainly at who has stayed in their country of origin. A part or all of reality is hidden, actions that unfortunately become irresponsible with regard to who allows himself to be taken in by this distorted reality, pushing that person to undertake a journey that can be extraordinarily dangerous.

Play your part is the slogan that steers the initiatives that revolve around this year's Safer Internet Day. In this sense, empowering boys and girls in our country through an increased sense of responsibility is fundamental, with the aim of ensuring a truthful and transparent communication with those in their countries of origin that allows for the identification of all the elements needed to carry out choices that are truly informed.

Concluding remarks

For unaccompanied foreign youth digital technologies, and in particular the Internet, represent an important source of opportunities, as they enable them to satisfy their emotional, social and integration needs.

The research, in any event, shows how the most vulnerable subjects are those who are often the most exposed to risks associated with an uninformed use of the Web. From this point of view, unaccompanied foreign minors are particularly vulnerable subjects, as they are alone, without the support generally provided by the presence of adults as reference points and often without a network of friends or relations in the country. These adolescents often have unrealistic expectations which they want to meet (and not just in economic terms), a scarce or non-existent knowledge of the language and are lacking significantly in an understanding and competence in digital technology that could guide them in their internet use. Furthermore, it's important to avoid the risks they run by using the Internet and social networks particularly as a "means of substitution", which leads them to become isolated with respect to relations with their peers in the country of arrival, remaining exclusively in contact with their relationship networks in the country of origin, thereby also hindering their ability to learn the language and, more generally, slowing down the integration process.

The consultation shows how the risk of grooming (for example, through requests for photographic materials in exchange for money) and/or exploitation is particularly high among these adolescents.

It is therefore necessary and urgent that a strategy be defined for unaccompanied foreign minors, at European and national levels, aimed at promoting access to digital technologies and their safe and informed use. To this end, we must:

1. Guarantee that in each reception/shelter facility there is the possibility to access the Internet, in a protected environment and with adequate monitoring of usage.

2. Train operators working in reception facilities in educational courses to follow with the youths to help foster a safe and informed use of the Internet and of social networks in particular.

3. Promote informational and awareness-raising actions, even in the various countries of origin languages, to alert unaccompanied foreign minors about the risks they run online, such as contacts with unknown persons, fake contents, etc.

4. Reinforce listening channels for, and gathering reports filed by, migrant minors on risks posed by sexual grooming or exploitation they encounter on the Internet, as well as law enforcement with regard to online exploitation phenomena, including through greater collaboration between police forces in the different countries.

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