Integrating Middle East and North Africa Unaccompanied Minors Refugees and Asylum Seekers through Mentoring: Exploring EU-based research to inform future applications in Portugal

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Abstract : Adolescents often migrate unaccompanied by a caregiver facing particular risk this process. Recently, Portugal hosted the fourth highest number of Middle East and North Africa unaccompanied minors (UM) among EU countries. Thus, it´s relevant to explore peer reviewed refugee integration interventions among EU state members to inform the development of future Portuguese-based programs. This review aimed to analyse mentoring as a relevant integration tool for UM refugees arriving to Portugal. Mentoring was identified as a low-cost strategy with low to moderate positive results for youth at risk of developing psychological, social, and behavioural problems. Mentoring is starting to gain momentum within the EU countries receiving more refugee citizens from the EU relocation program. This review has a potential to inform social education technicians and the staff involved in the Portuguese refugee relocation program and encourage the discussion about the creation of Portuguese-based mentoring programs for the target group studied.

Keywords: migration; mentoring; unaccompanied minors; refugee; asylum seeker; integration

Introduction

People flee their home countries for different reasons. Migrants often move voluntarily to seek a better quality of life through work, education, or to explore new cultures and life journeys. However, asylum seekers and refugees leave their homes and countries due to conflict and violence, crises and emergencies, persecution and human rights violations, poverty, lack of basic services, food insecurity or disasters, and effects of climate change (IFRC, 2021, IFRC, 2022).

Migration can be voluntary or involuntary, but most of the time a combination of choices and contraints are involved (ICRC, 2015). The *International Committee of the Red Cross* (ICRC) [1] adopted

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[1] The *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)* is an impartial, neutral, and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance.

a broad perspective on migration and identified migrants as "*all people who leave or flee their home to seek safety or better prospects abroad, and who may be in distress and need of protection or humanitarian assistance*". Refugees and asylum seekers are included in this description and have specific protection under international law (UNICEF, 2017, EU, 2022). Refugees are people escaping from armed conflicts or persecution (EU, 2022). This statute is granted in the host country considering a well-supported fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, politics, or membership of a particular member group (EU, 2022). Asylum seekers are people who have not yet been recognised as refugees. They apply for international protection for which a definitive decision has not been reached (CVP, 2019). The recognition as asylum seeker is dependent on the national authorities' decisions (UNICEF, 2017, EU, 2022). In this process, children and adolescents unaccompanied by a caregiver face particular risks, including being exposed frequently to discrimination, marginalization, institutionalization, and social exclusion (WHO, 2018).

The World Health Organization outlined the unaccompanied minor refugees' and asylum seekers' risk factors for health problems and poor well-being during the different phases of migration (fig.1). Accordingly, we ought to recognize the urgency to find ways to support these two groups in each of the identified phases. During the integration process in the host country, the support from central and local authorities, non-governmental institutions, and the general population is key to preventing and mitigating further health and social complications and avoiding cultural/social conflicts in refugees' life or the daily operation of local communities. Specific intervention strategies are needed to both, support the integration of refugees and asylum seekers as well as to promote the education and information about the country's inhabitants towards the demystification of certain recurrent preconceptions of embodied danger, violence, and trauma (Varvin, 2017, Eide et al., 2018, Vervliet et al., 2014) towards the acknowledgment of the importance of including this migrant population for a peaceful and sustainable future of the society in which are being integrated.
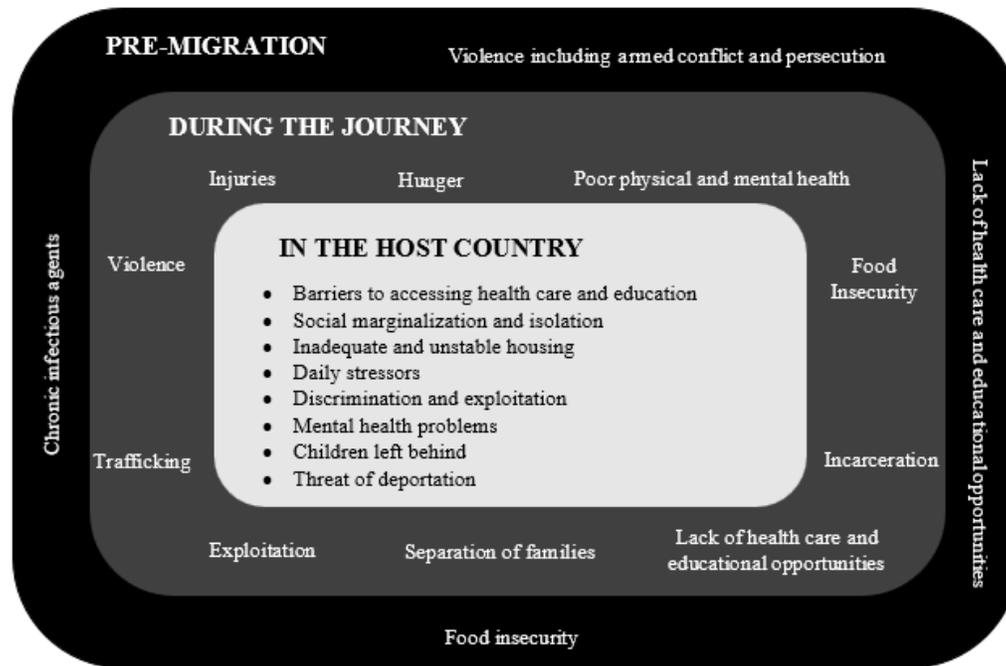
Figure 1. Health and poor well-being risk factor for migrants. Adapted from WHO (2018).

Peer mentoring has been a strategy implemented in a few EU countries for the integration of refugees and asylum seekers (Thommessen et al., 2015, Atkinson, 2018, Rodriguez and Dobler, 2021, Jaschke et al., 2022). Youth mentoring programs in particular have been identified as a low-cost strategy for youth at risk of developing a range of psychological, social, and behavioural problems (Raposa et al., 2019, Burton et al., 2021).

Motivated by the experiences of a Portuguese Red Cross team working with Afghan asylum seekers, this narrative review aimed to explore mentoring as a relevant integration tool for non-governmental national teams working with refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Portugal under the international protection law.

Hosting the Middle East and North Africa Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Portugal

The *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC)* is the largest humanitarian movement in the world, present in more than 192 countries and 14 million volunteers committed to the National Red Cross and Red Crescent principles and mission (IFRC, 2022). Strengthening the social inclusion of vulnerable people and groups to meet the humanitarian needs of migrants and host communities is a central work carried out by National Red Cross Societies (Le Noach and Atger, 2018, IFRC, 2017). The Portuguese Red Cross is one of the *International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent* (IFCR) national societies working in the integration of the Middle East and North Africa refugees and asylum seekers through the European Union (EU) relocation program (CVP, 2022, CVP, 2019).

The Portuguese Red Cross (PRC) strives to prevent and alleviate human suffering in Portugal and the world. Its´ mission is

to provide humanitarian and social assistance, especially to the most vulnerable by preventing and repairing suffering and contributing to the safeguard of life, health, and human dignity [Article 5, Decree-Law No. 281/2007, August 7th]. The PRC approaches several action areas such as psych-social support, professional training, and education, first aid and emergencies, health interventions, and integration programs. The refugees' reception and integration support are one of the actual central intervention areas of the institution in Portugal (CVP, 2022) as well as in other Red Cross National Societies across the European Union (Le Noach and Atger, 2018).

Voluntary migrants from Angola, Brazil, and Ukraine represent the largest groups of foreign citizens living in Portugal (Oliveira, 2021). Regarding the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, Portugal was one of the EU member states answering affirmatively to the call for their relocation from the Mediterranean coast (e.g. Italy and Greece) where the system has been overloaded since 2015 (CVP, 2022, FRA, 2022, CVP, 2019). This intervention is framed in the workgroup for the European Agenda on Migration (order no.10041 A/2015), coordinated at a national level by the Immigration and Borders Service, and the Refugee Relocation and Resettlement Programs (CVP, 2022). Middle East citizens make for a minor percentage of migrants arriving in Portugal despite the growing numbers after 2016 and the presence of Syrian and Iraqi citizens in the top rank of nationalities arriving in Portugal under the international protection law as refugees or asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2022b). Of the 2405 Refugees arriving in Portugal in 2020, 1014 were from the Middle East and North Africa regions (UNHCR, 2022b). Hence, the support for refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan has increased in Portugal since 2016 (UNHCR, 2022b) and PRC has been one of the NGOs hosting a major number of refugees and asylum seekers, intervening in the operationalization of the refugee integration efforts alongside governmental administrative bodies and other non-governmental institutions (CVP, 2019).

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Afghans constitute one of the largest refugee populations worldwide. Globally, Afghanistan's political and social crises generated an estimate of 3.4 million refugees and displaced citizens, most of them children, adolescents and women. Reasons for abandoning their country was violence, fear, deprivation, the constant threat to the human rights of women and girls, and the economic and health system collapse (UNHCR, 2022a). Despite their growing number in Portugal, Afghans are still a minority within the migrant population which can constitute an additional challenge for the integration process. In 2021, Portugal has received more than two hundred Afghan asylum seekers, most of them unaccompanied minors and women, fleeing Afghanistan under the international protection law after the Taliban occupation of Kabul and rise to power.

Portugal is hosting the fourth-highest number of unaccompanied minors among the EU Member States after France, Germany, and Finland, and despite all the commitment and affirmation of its priority, the central Portuguese government, local authorities and non-government institutions are facing challenges

regarding this highly complex integration progress (European Commission, , 2021). Concerning the inclusion process, children and adolescents must be a priority for humanitarian institutions and the Portuguese central and local authorities, since it is known that minors recurrently migrate on their own because their chances of success are considered greater than those of older family members (UNICEF, 2017).

The term '*unaccompanied minors* 'refers to persons under 18 years of age who are separated from their families during the process of moving to the host country and who seek asylum. Adolescents comprise the majority of citizens arriving in foreign countries with this statute (Randell and Osman, 2021). Unaccompanied refugee minors are especially affected by conflicts, natural disasters, poverty, and threats to human rights since they are often exposed to continued violence in their home country and accumulative stress (Keles et al., 2016, Lustig et al., 2004) during a sensitive period of their mental and physical development (Huemer et al., 2009). Some can be victims of human trafficking and other forms of violence during the journey (UNICEF, 2017), and once in a new country, they also face specific stressors and challenges in the resettlement process (Keles et al., 2016). Coming to a new country without parental presence and support, while already carrying a social and health burden, can be stressful and disturbing (Löbel, 2020). This can explain the immediate and subsequent prevalence of mental health problems such as anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression (Mohwinkel et al., 2018, Mitra and Hodes, 2019), substance abuse, and conduct and eating disorders (Pumariega et al., 2005) identified in this group. Additionally, uncertainty of their immediate and long-term future (Thommessen et al., 2015) and the often stressful living conditions in the host country, including frequent housing relocations, limited access to education, social isolation and discrimination from peers and a sense of unprotection can contribute to poor levels of health and wellbeing in unaccompanied refugee minors (WHO, 2018).

Notwithstanding the diverse instruments available on a legal, policy, and funding level in the EU, the operationalization of several intervention programs Europe-wide have revealed an inefficiency of such programs. This is related to the full implementation of the first and guiding basic principle of inclusion - which defines it as a "two-way process" (FRA, 2017). The conditions and procedures to provide international protection to citizens arriving in Portuguese territory are established in Portuguese law no 26/2014 in respect of the European Union 2011/95/EU directive and the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that having a right under European or national law is not sufficient, it ought to be effective in practice (Le Noach and Atger, 2018) and this is the actual challenge.

Humanitarian assistance is crucial for the survival of displaced and refugee citizens, not only by providing shelter, nutrition, healthcare and water/sanitation, but also for the protection of their human rights by providing education and information as the basis for active participation in the development of modern multicultural societies. If well-planed, mentoring can be identified as a relevant

strategy for national institutions to promote the social inclusion and well-being of refugees or asylum seekers in the pursuit of their free and active participation in society (EURITA, 2019, Atkinson, 2018, Jaschke et al., 2022), particularly for unaccompanied children and adolescents (Mentor, 2009, Thommessen et al., 2015).

What is Mentoring? What are the Program Organization Alternatives?

Different definitions, understandings and methodologies of "mentoring" have been disseminated as the concept expands in modern times and within several contexts of intervention (Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021, Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014). Hence, a conceptual confusion of mentoring and other developmental relationship concepts such as coaching, tutoring, induction, and socialization (Dominguez and Kochan, 2020, Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021) caused uncertainty and inconsistency in its operationalization mainly within the empirically based research (Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021) and hinders the progress of unified efforts of knowledge development on mentoring (Janssen et al., 2016).

Mentoring can function as both, an intervention and a prevention strategy (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014) for different proposes depending on the target group and developmental aims. Traditionally, mentoring is characterized by a strong, caring and supportive relationship between an older or more experienced individual and a younger or less experienced (Rhodes et al., 2006) sharing a learning experience over time (Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021). Nevertheless, mentoring can also include peer-to-peer mentoring (e.g., similar age, status and experience) and group mentoring including multiple mentors and mentees (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014, Mullen and Klimaitis, 2021). Performing a literature review of contemporary mentoring tenets, types and applications, Mullen and Klimaitis (2021) extracted nine mentoring alternatives (table 1) from educational mentoring literature.

Table 1. Classification of mentoring alternatives/types. Adapted from Mullen and Klimaitis (2021).

Mentoring type	Key associated dimension	Definition
Formal mentoring	Planned programmatic interactions.	Planned, structured, and intentional - targets gaps and resolves problems in programs and organizations.
Informal mentoring	Spontaneous/natural mentor - mentee interactions.	Occurs in a natural relationship between two people where one gains insight, knowledge, wisdom, friendship, and support from the other.
Diverse mentoring	Relationally mixed demographics and interests.	Mentors and mentees differ in gender, ethnicity, and other demographical characteristics.
Electronic mentoring	Interaction at a distance via technology.	It mediates learning and communication remotely, admitting a cultural shift with technology rapidly changing how people interact.
Collaborative mentoring	Transformative relational development.	Is a dynamic partnership built upon reciprocity, despite differences in knowledge and expertise, status and rank.
Group mentoring	Shared agendas grounded indifferences.	Mentoring program in which a mentor (or small number of mentors) works with multiple individuals within a group setting (Kupersmidt et al., 2020).
Peer mentoring	Peer-based, empowering helping relationship.	A peer-to-peer relationship is built on the assumption that same-generation peers are influential in youth social and cultural development (Burton et al., 2021).
Multilevel mentoring	Mentoring across organizational levels.	Programs can be intentionally programmatic and aligned with institutional mission and policies.
Cultural mentoring	Diverse cultures united in mutual goals.	It nurtures diverse relationships and Cross-cultural relationships within diverse environments.

" Formal" and" informal"/"natural" mentoring are the more common and well-known types of mentoring programs. Formal mentoring implies a more structured process regarding aims, training, recruitment of mentors and the duration of the intervention. As for informal mentoring, it is mainly characterized by the absence of well-defined intervention aims. In a natural mentoring setting, mentors are not recruited and their intervention in the process is managed by the development of informal mentoring relationships. As reported by Van Dam et al. (2018), these are generally beneficial regardless of risk-status in young people-centered mentoring programs.

Mentoring programs are widely accepted as positive for the youth of all backgrounds and abilities (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014). Median-small to moderate positive effects were identified through youth high-quality and enduring mentoring programs, including improvement of social relationships, academic achievement and school engagement, reducing problem behaviour, improving psychological and physical well-being, supporting a more positive vision of the future for mentees (DuBois et al., 2011, Rhodes and DuBois, 2006, Rhodes et al., 2006). Nevertheless, several questions remain about the extent to which mentoring interventions can effectively affect youth development. Different moderators have been considered in the assessment of the effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth and are related to the program design and implementation, characteristics of mentors, mentees and their relationship (DuBois et al., 2002, Raposa et al., 2019).

A recent meta-analysis of youth mentoring programs' study outcomes (Raposa et al., 2019) estimated the effect sizes of the youth mentoring programs' impact for 70 studies (n=25286 youth mentees; 12 years old on average). Larger effects were observed for programs with a higher percentage of male youth. Mentoring also had a large impact in samples that had a higher percentage of male mentors. Yet, in their analysis, Raposa et al. (2019) point out that further research is needed to fully understand how mentor and youth gender might influence outcomes, especially since the result can be strongly related to program methodology or study features. Effectiveness of mentoring did not vary for mentee race/ethnicity or age consubstantially and this analysis contradicts previous research publications stating that older youth have fewer enduring mentoring relationships (c.f. Kupersmid et al., 2017). Another finding consistent with other studies is that volunteer mentors with specific training in helping professions achieve better results indicating the necessity of recruiting mentors with experience in helping professions and allowing less experienced mentors to take the adequate training prior program implementation.

Despite most mentoring programs for youth seeking to create caring relationships between young people (mentees) and more experienced non-parental adults (mentors) (van Dam et al., 2021, Burton et al., 2021), peer mentoring programs contemplating the role of youth mentors to promote positive outcomes for younger peers is increasing (Burton et al., 2021). Peer mentoring explores the well-known fact that adolescents seek independence from older adults during this period of life (c.f. Miller-Johnshon & Constanzo, 2004) as part of their self-emancipation and self-identity development. This allows to assume that advice from adults is less likely to be assimilated while the guidance of an older or relevant peer can influence the young mentee, for example, through vicarious experience and verbal persuasion (c.f. Bandura, 1977). A present Portuguese Red Cross mission focusing on the emergency resettlement of 132 young unaccompanied Afghan asylum seekers in Portugal, empirically showed a mutually influencial relationship between young and older peers for both, positive and negative behaviour.

van Dam et al. (2021) and Burton et al. (2021) meta-analysis studies revealed small to medium effect sizes (g=0.30; g=0.45) of peer mentoring programs and the authors identified several program characteristics to moderate program effectiveness. Thus, peer mentoring programs with moderate to high levels of adult supervision and operating in the community or outside of the school day setting tend to have larger positive effects (Burton et al., 2021). Additionally, van Dam et al. (2021) reported that more effective programs include measurement instruments other than questionnaires (e.g. school records, observations, interviews, government reports) and consider school, teachers, peers and government records as informants besides the youth mentee.

Mentoring as a Key strategy for Social Cohesion and Integration of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Mentoring is being recognized as a positive and low-cost strategy that non-governmental institutions supporting refugee resettlement and integration can apply towards the facilitation of

acculturation, social integration, and school success (Oberoi, 2016, Jaschke et al., 2022). If we acknowledge that refugee's integration in the host country is highly influenced by the way they experience contextual and social connectedness and if they achieve suitable socio-economic conditions, stable living environments and opportunities to learn the language (Varvin, 2017, Vervliet et al., 2014) then we believe that a valid argument for the implementation of mentoring programs fostering the integration support of refugees and asylum seekers in Portugal is established.

Mentors with adequate training and cultural competence may influence the quality of mentoring relationships (Oberoi, 2016). The presence of a mentor can help refugees and asylum seekers to *set expectations* by giving orientation for what to expect from others (including governmental and non-governmental support associations) and what their responsibility is in the resettlement process and adjustment to a new reality, **encourage self-efficacy** by supporting refugees to obtain necessary information to allow for autonomy regarding their health care, housing, employment, social services benefits or schooling and **support the mentee if there is need of an additional help** mainly regarding situation related to mental health problems (EURITA, 2019).

The studies assessing EU-based mentoring programs for refugees and asylum seekers are scarce. These programs are now gaining momentum in countries such as Sweden (Hosseini and Punzi, 2021) and Germany (Jaschke et al., 2022) and seem to be mainly focused on the support of unaccompanied minors (UM).

Exploring the experiences of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking minors from Afghanistan, Thommessen et al. (2015) found that having a mentor ("good man" – a mentor provided by the Sweden State) was a protective factor for these minors that highlight influence of personal characteristics and the guidance by their mentors and the consequent impact on their life (e.g. "…the friendliness and kindness or humanity she provided."; "get the advice and guidance needed to actually learn for the sake of learning"; "It is important to have one person to talk to, and to have someone to guide you."; "being introduced to this society, so for instance, learning how to deal with practical things"; "Someone to show them the way, and provide support and guidance - like a mentor").

Portuguese Red Cross technicians working with the last emergency resettlement group of young Afghans in Portugal also identified this necessity. Some youngest, mainly the most emotionally vulnerable, naturally "choose" a technician or facilitator with whom they share some details of their daily routine, share their anxieties, get information about the way the new national systems work, ask questions about the way of life and their educational or working opportunities in the hosting country or ask for advice about the choices and decisions about their future.

From the perspective of the Portuguese Red Cross technicians, the challenge is to support the emotional and physical health as well as advise the young unaccompanied asylum seekers without getting too attached or personally involved. This is particularly difficult, because of recurring emotionally highly loaded situations. A strong personal involvement, despite its best intent, can impede

the next phase of integration in the host country in which emotional and functional autonomy of the migrant citizen is crucial.

A more recent study (Hosseini and Punzi, 2021) found that unaccompanied Afghan minors refugees in Sweden felt that having Swedish friends and a meaningful and mutual relationship with teachers, social workers and laypersons was an important support in understanding the language and social codes and gave them a sense of connectedness with the hosting society. Another curious finding of Hosseini and Punzi (2021) is that UM desire to be involved in voluntary work as a "way of giving back" and wish their experiences could be helpful to other UM refugees arriving in Sweden in the future. This offers a possibility for the development of a future same-culture peer-mentoring project within this geographic area.

Conclusion

Mentoring has now gained momentum within the EU countries receiving more refugee citizens due to the EU relocation program. By learning from other EU examples, we believe that formal mentoring programs implemented by non-governmental institutions can be a possible and promising strategy to support the recent Middle East and North African migration wave in Portugal. As reported in this paper, refugees from these regions are a minority in Portugal within the migrant population despite their fast-growing numbers. This means that same-cultural peer mentoring probably cannot be an immediate strategy to support the newest Middle East and North African citizens arriving in Portugal, since the ones belonging to the first group are probably still dealing with different integration challenges in their lives (e.g., finding a decent job, housing, pursue education) and still needing additional support themselves.

Working with young people is always challenging as they experience different sensitive developmental periods where several physical, psychological, social and cognitive changes occur intensely. In this sense, working with unaccompanied minor refugees and asylum seekers requires additional challenges because of their often-fragile situation as reported previously. It involves a great deal of empathy, kindness, and care, but also acceptance, perseverance, a sense of mission and adequate training from the part of mentoring program coordinators and mentors. Thus, anticipating the possible reception of the next groups of Middle East and North African citizens, we believe it to be important to consider the implementation of a training program for potential mentors and program coordinators involved in the reception of these citizens by non-governmental organizations such as the Portuguese Red Cross. Also, promoting community partnerships with universities, research centers and other organizations could be important to generate knowledge of the specific integration barriers and support strategies through research and support of the development of evidence-based mentoring and other integration programs.

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