



What happens to teenage migrants in Sicily?

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"The most difficult part was crossing the desert. Three days and three nights, you walk and walk and you look around and it is only desert," recalls Musa*, 18, from Gambia. He survived the Sahara crossing only to endure forced labour and violence in Libya.

He finally reached safety in Italy on a smuggler's boat nearly a year ago but is still living in a temporary or "first" reception centre for unaccompanied minors in Priolo, Sicily waiting for his asylum claim to be processed. His room-mate at the centre is Amadou* who was 17 when he left his home country of Mali. He was rescued from a sinking boat in the Mediterranean and brought to Italy five months ago.

"There is nothing to do at the centre. We spend the day on the internet and sometimes we play football. I'm trying to learn some Italian online because we don't have classes here," said Musa.

Musa and Amadou should have been transferred to longer-term accommodation for unaccompanied minors known as "comunità de alloggio" within two months of their arrival. At one of these shelters, they would have had access to Italian classes and education.

But Italy received nearly 12,000 unaccompanied children in 2015 and another 7,009 crossed the Mediterranean from North Africa in the first five months of this year, more than double last year's number during the same period.

According to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), almost nine out of 10 refugee and migrant children arriving in Italy this year were travelling alone and Italy's capacity to host them is now under severe strain.

"A quiet tragedy"

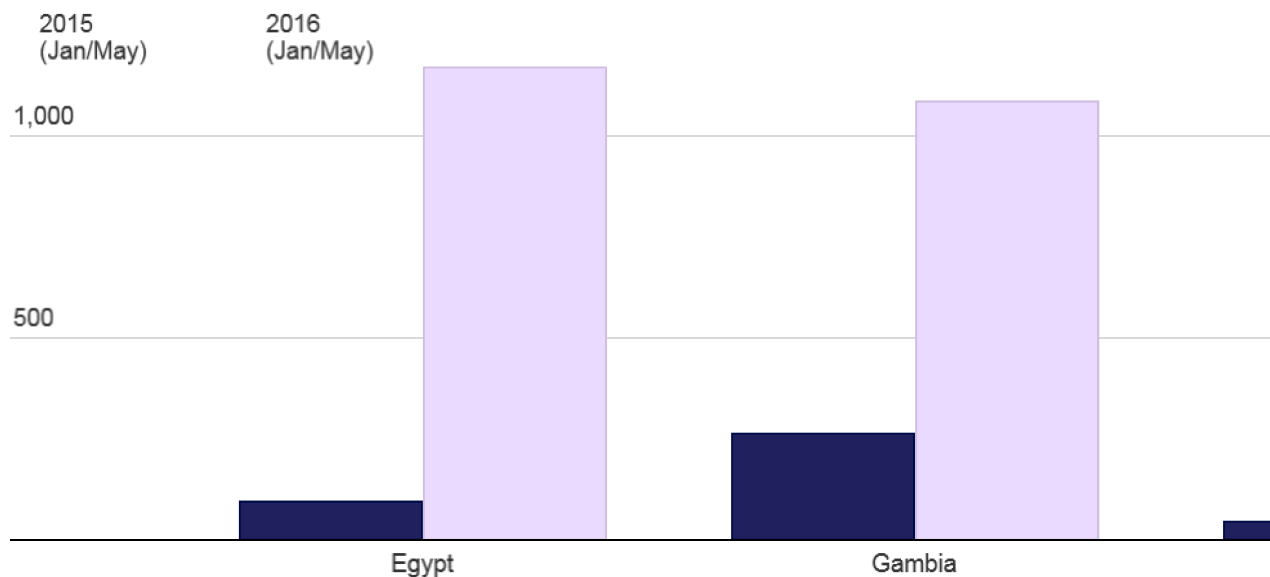
"While all eyes have been focusing on Greece and the Balkans, a quiet tragedy has been unfolding in the Central Mediterranean," said Sarah Crowe, a spokesperson with UNICEF, which earlier this month published a report "[Danger Every Step of the Way](#)" warning of the risks of abuse, exploitation and death that unaccompanied children face as they travel between North Africa and Italy.

The reasons behind the increase are not yet clear.

Unlike the Eastern Mediterranean route between Turkey and Greece, few families use the highly risky route through North Africa. Seventy percent of the approximately 28,000 arrivals to Italy between January and June were adult men, but there were also 7,567 children, 92 percent of whom traveled alone.

Data from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) shows that the top nationalities for unaccompanied children arriving in Italy are Egypt, Gambia, Guinea and Ivory Coast.

Top four nationalities of unaccompanied children arriving in Italy



Source: IOM



Simona Moscarelli, a legal expert with IOM in Italy, observed that a spike in arrivals from Egypt this year is mostly made up of minors. Economic and political instability in Egypt, as well as family pressure on minors to help out financially may be among the push factors. A readmission agreement between Italy and Egypt allows for the return of migrants who don't qualify for asylum. However, according to Italian law, children can't be returned.

To understand the increase in minors coming from West Africa, "much greater research is needed into what is really going on, what is triggering this. We know that in the case of the Agadez route that it has been used for decades," said Crowe of UNICEF.

Agadez, in Niger, is a smuggling hub for migrants coming from West Africa, and heading for Europe via Libya. According to the UNICEF report, unaccompanied children using this route often use a "pay as you go" system to reimburse their smugglers which makes them particularly vulnerable to forced work. Italian social workers report that both boys and girls are sexually exploited and forced into prostitution while in Libya, and that some of the girls arrive in Italy pregnant.

Children stuck at "hotspots"

For those who finally make it to Italy, their hardships are far from over.

"Italy is doing so much to save lives at sea, but the problem really begins when children get to dry land," said Judith Sunderland from Human Rights Watch (HRW), who visited migrant reception centers in Sicily in June.

Under pressure from the EU, Italy established four ["hotspots"](#) late last year where newly arrived migrants and refugees go through initial registration, screening and fingerprinting. They are supposed to be kept in these initial reception centres, where facilities are basic, for no more than 72 hours before being transferred to others better-equipped for longer stays.

But the longer-term shelters for unaccompanied children in Sicily are all full and as a result, children are spending weeks or even months at the hotspots, sharing sleeping areas and facilities with adults, in violation of Italian law. A system to distribute them elsewhere in Italy is not yet legally established, unlike adult asylum seekers.

A recent [report](#) by HRW from the Pozzallo hotspot in Sicily found that children as young as 12 were being kept for as long as a month in the overcrowded short-term reception centre. Unlike the adults, they are not allowed to leave the centre during the day. Several Eritrean girls HRW interviewed reported being constantly harassed by adult men and having little access to the psychological and medical care.

A request by IRIN to visit the Pozzallo centre was denied by the Italian authorities, but Amadou, who spent 10 days at the Pozzallo reception centre before being transferred to the medium-term facility in Priolo, confirmed: "There were a lot of kids sleeping in the same room as adults and families. I just wanted to leave there as soon as possible."

Still unprepared

The vast majority of unaccompanied minors arriving in Italy are teenage boys. Currently, over a third remain in Sicily, distributed between dozens of small shelters while a small minority are [fostered](#) and live with local volunteers.

"For sure, we have a problem of overcrowding at the reception centres for minors," said Stefania Congia from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies who is responsible for unaccompanied minors. "The government is trying to receive everybody... but the numbers are not very predictable. There's no way of knowing if next week the wind will be good and 10,000 will arrive or 100."

Although it is hard to forecast exact numbers, boat crossings from North Africa have consistently peaked during the summer in recent years. Vincenzo Di Mauro, director of Educandato Regina Elena, a reception centre for unaccompanied migrant children in Catania, said Italy has little excuse for being unprepared. "If this is the sixth summer we spend in an emergency situation, there is something not working right," he told IRIN. His centre hosts 68 children, nearly double its official capacity. Meeting the costs of hosting so many children is a struggle, especially as funding from the Ministry of the Interior to pay staff salaries has been delayed for the past 18 months.

In an effort to address the situation, the Italian government plans to create almost 1,000 new reception places for unaccompanied minors with resources from the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund ([AMIF](#)).

*Not their real names

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