

"They will Always find me"

- North African boys on the move and their use of social media

by Maria von Bredow, June 2019.

"There is an outstretched arm from there to here - they will always find me." (Moroccan boy A, 16 years old)

The boy who gave this short paper (and a report published in 2018¹) its title was forced to work for a criminal network in France. He was at first both seduced and deceived by the promise of smart clothes, money and the allure of an attractive new lifestyle before being forced to sell drugs for a criminal network. His chance of escape shrank the more he became involved in the network's criminal activities. He is still convinced that the network will eventually be able to find him, even though he found some temporary support and protection in Sweden.

North African boys have been seen on the streets of Northern Europe since 2011. With a mobile phone in their hands they move around searching for a way to send some money home and accomplish the European dream. They're a highly stigmatized and vulnerable group, being both victims of various forms of exploitation and perpetrators of crime such as pick-pocketing and drug-dealing. As one 16-year old boy stated in an interview: *"Why does everybody hate Moroccans? Why don't I get any help?"* (Moroccan boy B, 16 years old)

Starting their journey in Morocco at an age of between 9 and 14, the boys follow the social media updates from others already travelling ahead. The updates illustrate a lifestyle far from reality, a kind of "America letters"² that show money, mobile phones, nice cars and other symbols of material success.

Upon arrival in Europe they run away from overcrowded and somehow defective social protection centres³ and starts their journey northward. After being promised money, nice clothes and drugs for their own use, they often start working for the south- and central European criminal networks as errand boys, gradually being drawn into more serious crime. It is not easy for the children to escape this situation. If they leave the area because they no longer want to be part of the criminal lifestyle, they are found and enticed back. If the boys can't be located the threats continue by telephone and social media.

"If you run away they'll find you again, they call and try to get you to come back by offering money and nice clothes. If you still don't want to [go back], the threats start, once, twice, three times ... it gets worse, so you go back, even though you don't want to." (Moroccan boy C, 16 years old)

Children that nobody is looking for are especially vulnerable to adults who wish to exploit them for various purposes, whether they are in Barcelona, Paris, Hamburg or Stockholm. All of them carry a phone, making it possible to contact NGOs and to maintain contact with their families and peer-groups. However, the phones also make them easier to find by those wishing to make money out of their vulnerability.

"Apart from selling I was also forced to make and test drugs, to make sure they worked when they were sold." (Moroccan boy C, 16 years old)

¹ Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm Rapport 2018:3 "De kan alltid hitta mig" Studie om människohandel och utsatta barngruppers livsvillkor. Maria von Bredow (County Administrative Board of Stockholm Report 2018:3, "They will always find me")

² In reference to the letters Swedish migrants to America in early 20th century sent to their relatives back in Sweden exaggerating how nice it was in America and how well they were doing over there, while the reality was quite the opposite.

³ UNICEF España (2019) *Los derechos de niños y niñas migrantes no acompañados en la frontera sur española*

In interviews conducted since 2016 I have followed the routes made by approximately 25 Moroccan boys between the ages of 11 and 19 years old⁴. All the interviewees have spent time in Sweden, some of them for several years, others for just a couple of weeks, before they move on again in search of the elusive European dream.

At the seminar organised by the Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology I highlighted the vulnerability of these North African boys⁵, outlining how they move around Europe in the shadow of European child protection systems, being both victims and perpetrators of crime, and seldomly supported in finding their way into a sustainable situation. The findings show that social media sometimes helps them to find support and shelter, whilst simultaneously making them a target for adults wanting to exploit them. It's also worth mentioning, that the use of social media is just one of the subjects studied as regard to this group of North African boys on the move.

The interviews were semi-structured using large physical maps of Morocco and Europe where the boys could narrate their own journey and explain what happened in each place. Asking questions about how they travelled and showing interest in their situation gave place to a numerous of narratives about abuse, school dropout, families waiting for money, drugs, crime and exploitation. But certainly, there are also stories about friendship, love, responsibility and a wish for a normal life. The photo below shows such an interview situation.

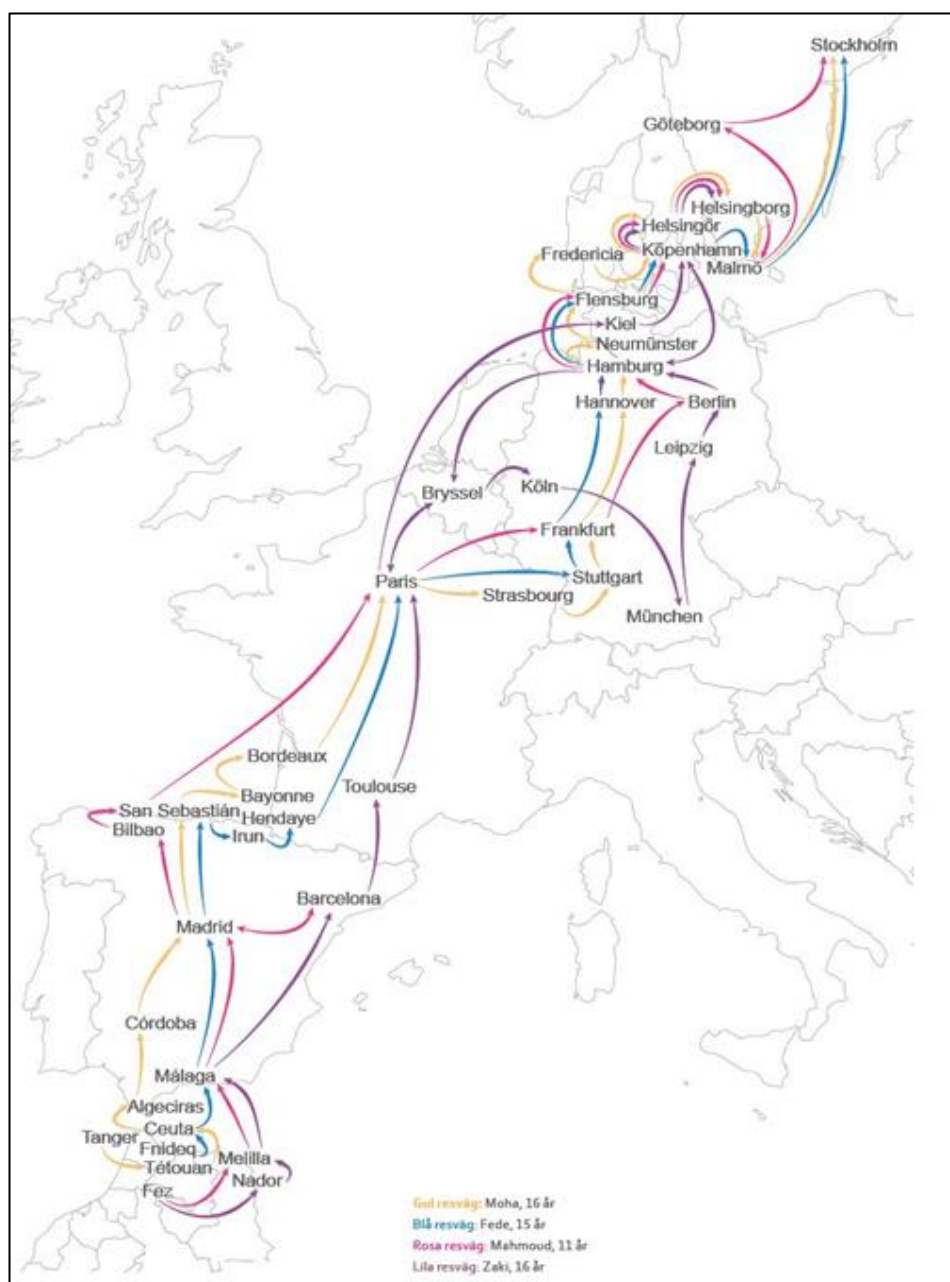


Illustrating their journeys, it becomes visible how far the children can travel without proper documentation and it also highlight the lack of coordination between Europe's child protection systems and how well organised criminal networks are. Concurrently, the maps give the children a sense of success, they managed through Europe.

⁴ The interviews were conducted by me, Maria von Bredow, Child Rights Expert. During 2017/19 working as a senior analyst at the Swedish National Coordination against Human Trafficking, formerly at the County Administrative Board of Stockholm (Länsstyrelsen Stockholm) and currently at the Swedish Gender Equality Agency (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten). E-mail: mvonbredow@gmail.com

⁵ Only boys are interviewed in this study (although not very common, there are for sure even girls from Morocco moving around Europe, and their situation could be the focus of future studies)

The following map illustrates the journeys made by four boys interviewed 2017 and 2018 in Sweden.⁶



⁶ Länsstyrelsen i Stockholm Rapport 2018:3 "De kan alltid hitta mig" Studie om människohandel och utsatta barngruppers livsvillkor. Maria von Bredow (County Administrative Board of Stockholm Report 2018:3, "They will always find me")