

Children in Limbo

Youth Transitions Among
Asylum Seekers in Malta



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An African immigrant's feet dangle through the
window bars at the Safi detention centre in Safi,
Malta (July 17, 2012)



Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international non-governmental organisation, with a mission to accompany, serve and defend refugees and forcibly displaced people. In Malta, JRS provides a number of services including information, legal assistance and psychosocial support and advocates for improved treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Malta.

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aditus foundation is an independent, non-governmental organisation with a mission to monitor, report and act on access to fundamental human rights in Malta. Together with its advocacy activities, aditus also offers legal information and assistance to migrants and asylum seekers in Malta.

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Executive Summary

For more than twenty years unaccompanied minors have been crossing the Mediterranean in search of refuge and the hope of finding a better life in Europe. These are children who have left their family, their homes, and everything they know behind. They have escaped war zones, crossed deserts, witnessed death and brutality, are likely to have experienced exploitation and abuse, and crossed the Mediterranean Sea. They arrived in Malta alone.

Over the past two decades the Government of Malta has been subjected to ongoing criticism for the way the state has failed to fulfil its human rights obligations and the duty of care owed to all migrants and refugees, especially to children and young people. The ongoing detention of children and young people, the degrading conditions within the centres, the lack of care and absence of clear protection policies and protocols are the source of condemnation and concern.

In light of this criticism, this research was developed in order to give a voice to the unheard. We wanted to facilitate a deeper understanding of how unaccompanied minors in Malta navigate their transitions to adulthood, whilst also navigating the asylum process, detention and immigration apparatus, reception system and the broader Maltese context.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that children and young people have the right to express their views freely. This research reflects a commitment to facilitate their participation in all matters that affect them, and to give voice. It is hoped that this research will inform, and contribute to efforts to strengthen a human rights-based asylum process and reception facilities for unaccompanied minors who seek refuge in Malta.

The research seeks to address two key questions:

- How do young refugees in Malta perceive, experience and navigate their transition to adulthood and independence (including socioeconomic and legal pathways)?
- How, if at all, does law, policies and service provision shape their aspirations, needs, and experiences within this process?

In order to meet the aims of this research, a qualitative approach was adopted. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 6 young people who arrived in Malta as unaccompanied minors, and who have since turned 18 years of age. It should be noted that the youth who participated in this study represent relative success stories. Only a small minority of unaccompanied minors who arrive in Malta are able to access the formal education system, fewer still are provided with shelter beyond the age of 18. Based on our own observations working in the field, we note that many unaccompanied minors who arrive in Malta by boat are missing. The young people who participated in this study actively chose to stay, in spite of institutional neglect. Data was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Five superordinate themes were constructed from data analysis. These were “Living in the contradictions”, “Precarity”, “Forced to be Fugitive”, “Being their own Cartographer”, and “Navigational Tools: a Compass, a Lighthouse, a Star”. The themes do not represent a chronological order and are linked to each other, entwined. The participants did however describe a temporal-spatial pattern that we illustrate as a metaphorical framework to understand and situate their experiences: hell, purgatory and limbo.

The findings of this research make painfully evident that after 20 years of receiving unaccompanied minors, and eight years on from a commitment to end child detention, young people who seek refuge in Malta continue to be violated. It is our hope that the voices of these young people be heard and understood as a clear indictment of Malta's present reception system and the State's failure to meet its international human rights obligations, including, but not limited to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Government of Malta has not only failed in its obligation to protect the rights of children and young people seeking asylum, but as participants describe, has itself actually been a source of terror, violence and abuse.

Our participants were very clear: one is not saved if one is violated. It is not enough to be retrieved from the sea, such a notion is in itself an assault on the dignity of the individual. These young people are more than flesh. They embody a narrative of being and becoming. They come with hopes and plans for their future. Paradoxically, our participants recounted how their ‘rescue’ from the sea was followed by imprisonment. Their encounter with the Maltese immigration system is one marked by abuse and neglect. Upon release from detention, they are cast out. The findings of this research highlight the subjective experience of ‘being free, but not free’. At a time when life decisions come to the fore, these young people recount how they are held captive by the temporal constraints of a system that does not ‘see’ them, nor care. Waiting is weaponized. They are forced to put their lives and plans on hold, time is suspended whilst the future they each hope for, is fugitive. Their narratives and their daily lives are marked by systemic exclusion.

“Children’s wellbeing requires that society is equipped with the necessary resources to ensure that no child is left behind. In view of this, the recognition of the value of social inclusion and respect for diversity forms an integral part of this Policy. In line with this vision, this Policy uphold that rights should be enjoyed by all children, irrelevant of gender, race, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, socio-economic and cultural or ethnic background. Such a universal approach enhances equity and social inclusion prospects, and encourages inclusive and cohesive communities”

NATIONAL CHILDREN’S POLICY, P. 15

The young people explained how they navigate the risk of homelessness, unemployment, illegalization and marginalisation alone. Despite the efforts of some individuals working within the system, in the absence of care and access to basic human rights, they are forced to be self-sufficient, navigating precarity alone in uncharted territory. Their message is very clear, they want to be their own ‘cartographer’ - to have the freedom to take control over their journey, and they also need someone to guide them, and ultimately, to care.

The report concludes with six very simple recommendations that respond to the findings of this research, prioritising the participants’ needs and best interests. Their implementation, however, requires a determined commitment to shift from treating unaccompanied minors as a border security concern, to prioritising the security of every child and young person, the rights of the child, and the rights of all ages in and of themselves. The transition to legal adulthood should be accompanied by reaffirming and honouring personhood.

To be very clear, these recommendations are firmly located within the values and commitments already established and promised by the Maltese State. Nothing more, nothing less. As such, they are accompanied by a simple appeal to the Government: to do what it promised to do.

The following recommendations then, seek to position the State, first and foremost, as the guardian of human rights, and the rights of the child:

Care. It is time to see and recognize every unaccompanied minor and to see everyone for the unique individual that they are, and to provide a level of love and care that responds to their individual and particular needs.

Respect. In simple terms, we must treat them with the respect and dignity that they deserve. This necessitates that children are included in decision-making processes on their own lives, in a way that is accessible, meaningful, and which allows children to be heard.

Protect. There is an urgent need to prioritise the security, safety and rights of every child, young person and the rights of all ages in and of themselves. It is also critical to commit to ensuring that the transition to legal adulthood is experienced within a process that reaffirms and honours the value of each individual person.

Guidance. Provide every young person with individualised support within a relationship that extends beyond the boundaries of an institution. A single individual can be a trusted source of light when the young person cannot see for the dark, be it a youth worker, a social worker, a mentor, someone reliable to accompany and offer support so that they may map out and navigate their own future, be it in education, employment, relationships or other paths.

Wellbeing. Every child and young person needs opportunities to have fun, to make friends, to relax and to feel that they belong. Provide unaccompanied minors with the protection and material resources necessary for them to access education whilst also living in affordable and safe housing. Time and resources are needed to ensure that policy, service provision and the broader environment is working towards improving and enhancing the life of every unaccompanied minor living in Malta.

Hope. Young people need opportunities to feel included, to develop a sense of belonging, to establish relationships and friendships, and to participate in the day-to-day life of Maltese society. A home should offer hope, and the opportunity for every young person to plan for their future.

contents

Table of contents

Executive Summary	3		
Table of Contents	6		
Foreword	8		
1. Context and Brief Literature Review	10		
1.1 Introduction	10		
1.2 Research Aims	10		
1.3 Recent developments in the Maltese Context	10		
1.4 Conceptualising Youth	11		
1.5 Youth transitions	12		
2. Research Methodology	13		
2.1 Research Approach	13		
2.2 Participants	13		
2.3 Ethical Issues	13		
2.4 Data Collection and Analysis	14		
2.5 Limitations	15		
3. Key Findings	15		
3.1 Participants	16		
3.2 The Themes	18		
3.3 Living in the contradictions	25		
3.3.1 Intercepted yet Discarded	25		
3.3.2 Negotiating ones' becoming	27		
3.3.3 "Like Freedom but not freedom": finding hope and dreams in limbo	27		
3.4 Precarity	28		
3.4.1 "Hell on earth": Physical Danger	29		
3.4.2 "Kind of war everyday": Abuse and neglect by Institutions	29		
3.4.3 Lack of Control	31		
3.4.4 Lack of information and guidance	31		
3.4.5 Disembedded	32		
3.4.6 Effects and Affects of Precarity	33		
3.4.7 Lost Time	34		
3.5 Forced to be fugitive	35		
3.5.1 Fugitive routes	35		
3.5.2 Forced to be fugitive: legally human and personhood	36		
3.5.3 Paradox of the fugitive (S)tate	37		
3.5.4 Resistance to the fugitive	37		
3.5.5 Fugitive existence	38		
3.5.6 Fugitive past	40		
3.5.7 Fugitive future	41		
3.6 Being their own cartographer	43		
3.6.1 Navigating risk	43		
3.6.2 A journey without navigational tools	44		
3.6.3 Navigating the terrain, alone	45		
3.7 Navigational tools: a compass, a lighthouse, a star	47		
3.7.1 Being rescued	47		
3.7.2 Source of hope and strength	47		
3.7.3 Source of care	48		
4. Conclusions and Recommendations	49		
References	51		
<i>Appendix A – Information Sheet and Consent Form</i>	<i>54</i>		
<i>Appendix B – Interview Guide</i>	<i>58</i>		

Foreword

In the years since June 2018, when arrivals to Malta through the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR) – the irregular migration sea-route from Libya – increased, just under 8,000 (7,964) asylum seekers arrived in Malta. Of these, according to UNHCR, some 23-25% claimed to be children travelling alone (Fact Sheets 2019, 2020, 2021).

While it is clear that not all who claimed to be children were actually recognised as such by the state, the fate of those who were was, and is, a major concern.

Until their claim to minor age is determined, children are locked up for weeks or months in terrible conditions. All too often, they are detained with adults, without any provision for their care, protection or support. Even after their release from detention, many are accommodated in reception centres for adults, with limited support.

This research was born out of a need to look beyond the legal obstacles to protection, to understand how asylum seeking children arriving in Malta alone experience their transitions to adulthood, whilst also navigating the asylum process, the detention and immigration system, the reception system, and life in Malta. It draws on the experience of six young adults, who arrived in Malta as children.

It is part of a legal and advocacy project called Access to Protection, implemented by JRS Malta and aditus foundation between April 2020 and May 2022, and funded by the Fondation Assistance Internationale (FAI), which sought to address the challenges asylum seekers face when seeking to access protection. Both JRS and aditus have long been concerned about the situation of asylum seeking children arriving in Malta alone, and both have sought to address the gaps in care, protection and support through service provision and advocacy. Today, we work with unaccompanied children in detention, where both organisations provide free legal assistance, and once they are released from detention, in open centres and in the community, providing legal assistance, basic integration support and support to access education.

Article 12 of the UN CRC obliges Malta, as a signatory to this international Convention, to “assure to the child...the right to express [...] views freely in all matters affecting the child”, as well as to give them “the opportunity to be heard”. The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes participation as a core principle, asserting that children and young people have the right to express their views freely. This research reflects a commitment to facilitate their participation in all matters that affect them, and to listen to their voice.

Within this study, we have sought to share the participants' childhood experiences as they were told to us, without doctoring, correcting or editing, as we firmly believe in the importance of meaningful child participation, and the need to faithfully convey their narratives, as well as their understanding and perceptions of the procedures and systems that shaped their lives. Their narratives are at once heart-

breaking and hopeful, pointing not just to where and how the system failed them, but also to those who provided comfort and guidance, and made them feel that they were not alone, among them social workers and care-givers.

It is hoped that the findings and recommendations presented in this research will contribute to policy development, service delivery, and ultimately, the enhanced wellbeing of unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in Malta.

aditus foundation & JRS Malta
2022

1. Context and Brief Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

For more than two decades children and young people have been travelling alone across the Mediterranean Sea in search of protection. Over the past twenty years the Maltese state has been subjected to ongoing criticism for the way the State has failed to fulfil its international human rights obligations and duty of care owed to all migrants, especially children and young people. UN bodies, international human rights bodies and NGOs have been consistent in their condemnation, highlighting the ongoing detention of children and unaccompanied minors, the degrading conditions in which they are held, lack of care, and the absence of clear protection policies and protocols for looking after vulnerable migrants as deeply concerning (see for example CoE CPT, 2005; Human Rights Watch, 2012; CoE CPT, 2021).

Despite these concerns, there is a noticeable dearth of research in Malta that has engaged the participation of young people who sought asylum in Malta as unaccompanied minors (noticeable exceptions include Pace et al., 2009; Spiteri, 2014; Otto, 2020).

Children who experience forced migration are simultaneously navigating their journey to adulthood. These transitions to adulthood are understood as a metaphor to capture the individuals' process of change, within a particular, and dynamic social and legal context. The rationale for this particular research was born out of a recognized need, on the part of practitioners, to understand how unaccompanied minors experience and navigate their transitions to adulthood, whilst also experiencing the legal processes and reception system in Malta. The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes participation as a core principle, asserting that children and young people have the right to express their views freely. This research reflects a commitment to facilitate their participation in all matters that affect them, and to give voice. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations presented in this research will contribute to policy development, service delivery, and ultimately, the enhanced wellbeing of unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in Malta.

“To promote the wellbeing, ‘best interests’ and empowerment of all children through the protection of their rights and freedoms, the provision of high quality services, and children’s active participation across all sectors of society to enhance their present and future prospects,”

MISSION STATEMENT, NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 8

“The ultimate aim is a society which respects and values every child, and which works towards the realisation of the full potential and wellbeing of all children,”

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 7

1.2 Research Aims

In an effort to inform and strengthen the asylum process and reception facilities for unaccompanied minors who seek asylum in Malta, this research explores and responds to the following two questions:

- How do young refugees in Malta perceive, experience and navigate their transition to adulthood and independence (including socioeconomic and legal pathways)?
- How, if at all, does law, policies and service provision shape their aspirations, needs, and experiences within this process?

1.3 Recent developments in the Maltese Context

In 2014, then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat pledged to end child detention in Malta (Malta Today, 2014). This was followed up by a series of discussions between IOM, UNHCR and the then President of Malta, H. E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, forming a technical mission, and the publication of a final report that sought to 'bring concerns in relation to the wellbeing of separated and unaccompanied children at the forefront of the National Agenda' (IOM & UNHCR, 2014).

Malta, as a European Member State, is bound by international and European treaties to protect, respect and promote the rights of the child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizes the fact that children are individuals with human rights, and also require additional protection from the State in order to ensure that their right to survival, development and well-being is assured. At a time when the world is looking at children's rights in different contexts, such as in relation to the digital age (Farrugia, 2019; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2021), some children are not yet able to enjoy the basic rights stated in the UNCRC.

In this regard, Article 19 of the UNCRC states that all children have a right to be protected from 'all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child'. In addition, it states that it is the State's responsibility to ensure 'appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures' in order to safeguard children from all forms of maltreatment" (see Government of Malta, 2020).

In July 2021 the new Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act came into force, replacing earlier legislation on the protection of children in need of care and support, including unaccompanied minors and/or separated children. The process of child protection now falls under the responsibility of the Juvenile Court. The Act establishes the position of the Director (Protection of Minors) within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, who is responsible for protecting minors at risk. In relation to unaccompanied minors, children will now be participating throughout the asylum process and shall have their interests represented by a Legal Guardian and a Children's Advocate.

¹Article 1, Chapter 1 of European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights

The law also introduces mandatory reporting, whereby all persons, in particular professionals in contact with minors, are obliged by law to report knowledge or suspicions of child maltreatment.

1.4 Conceptualising Youth

The meaning and experience of youth is in constant flux, mediated by evolving temporal and spatial factors. As a social construction, youth is a relatively contemporary concept that is generally used to demarcate a period of time between childhood and adulthood. For the purpose of this research, and drawing on the work of White, Wyn, & Robards (2017), youth is understood as an embodied and situated process, as a social process of 'becoming', such that the meaning of age and how it is experienced is a result of the interaction between biological processes and the social, physical, political and economic environment (p. 34).

This conceptualisation works on the premise that the everyday lives, experiences and agency of young people within a given time and space are shaped by the environment and broader societal structures, rather than pre-determined by intrinsic universal, or Western, physiological characteristics and transformations. Second, it also understands that knowledge about youth is shaped by social and political processes that, we would argue, necessarily calls for critical interrogation (see also Lesko & Talburt, 2012). Youth as a social process also challenges the idea that youth is simply a phase of development edging towards adulthood, as if the latter marks some kind of ultimate destination, legally and institutionally defined as at the age of 18. This raises an important political point that calls for the recognition of the rights of all children and young people, regardless of their age, in and of themselves. As noted elsewhere, such issues come to the fore in understanding the realities of unaccompanied minors, since the transition to legal adulthood often coincides with a loss of rights: a transition to 'illegality' (see also Gonzales, 2016; Allsopp & Chase, 2017; Pisani, 2018).

1.5 Youth transitions

For the purpose of this research, we are using the term 'transition' as a metaphor to represent the young persons' journey from childhood to adulthood (White, Wyn & Robards, 2017). Our understanding of transitions includes institutional markers (for example education and employment) and the broader social and material relationships that shape and situate young peoples' lives.

In approaching this research, we looked to adopt a conceptual approach that recognizes, respects and works with complexity in order to understand the subjective experiences of young refugees as they navigate their lives in Malta. This approach understands how individual transitions are entangled within, impacted and framed by an evolving Maltese society, and different and intersecting vectors of power, including, but not limited to the legal, institutional, social, economic and political structures (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2013).

“This Policy considers children as individuals as well as members of a family and a society. This entails taking into account the whole child, including his/her immediate and wider environment and giving consideration to the full range of his/her needs, including material/financial, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, social and cultural needs.”

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 7

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Approach

A qualitative approach was adopted as the researchers felt that this approach would do justice to the participants' experiences and allow them the possibility to reflect on their experiences and convey that meaning to the researchers. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was applied in this research as it focuses specifically on significant experiences in the participants' lives and invites them to express how they themselves make sense of these experiences. IPA considers “the person as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and assumes a chain of connection between people's talk and their thinking and emotional state” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.54). It involves a double hermeneutic process: the participants' sense-making of their own experiences is followed by a process whereby the researchers make sense of the way in which participants understand their world. Through the latter, the researchers are also engaged critically with the participants' sensemaking to look beyond what participants say (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

2.2 Participants

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 6 young people who arrived in Malta as minors and subsequently transitioned to legal adulthood. The interviews focused on their experiences once they arrived in Malta. Their arrival dates span between 2004 and 2019. All participants had to be over the age of 18 and had to have applied for asylum in Malta, and were existing clients of JRS.

This study adopted a purposive sampling approach. In this sampling strategy, individuals who fit the criteria established for participation in the research are invited to participate in the research. The criteria for participation was young people who arrived in Malta as unaccompanied minors, had applied for asylum in Malta, had established a degree of stability for themselves, and were now over the age of 18. The Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), who commissioned and funded this study, approached potential participants, one by one, on the basis of this criteria. The recruitment process was an opt-in process, and only those interested in participating were put in contact with the primary investigator or the research assistant directly.

2.3 Ethical Issues

The participants may be considered vulnerable by virtue of their experiences as forced migrants and asylum seekers. Intersections of age (young adults), race and ethnicity, and legal status may also contribute to this vulnerability. An opt-in recruitment process was adopted. Thus, emphasis was placed on informed consent. Prior to agreeing to participate in the study, the participants were given all the information about the study in a recruitment letter and consent form which were also read to them in a language they could understand. Prior to the interview commencing, the interviewer went through the

information again, providing the opportunity for the participants to ask any questions and reconfirm their intent to participate. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time with no penalty (see information sheet and consent form APPENDIX A). The interview questions were focused on their experiences after their arrival in Malta and not on their journey or their reasons for leaving their country of origin. Acknowledging this vulnerability, participants were also provided with a list of services providing therapeutic support.

Given the nature of the research, part of the information collected related to the participants' ethnicity and nationality. Such information was treated with strict confidentiality and was not stored in an identifiable way. Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonym to conceal their identity and any identifying information was altered or omitted.

The research agenda and the ethical considerations and procedures were submitted to the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee (UREC) for approval. The application 8234_31032021 was approved in August 2021.

Apart from the ethical considerations outlined above, the following factors were also considered to ensure that the best interests of the research participants were always upheld throughout the research process:

- The researchers were aware of their position of power and privilege in relation to the participants, and how these could impact the research process. Participants were not always able to speak Maltese or English fluently and they did not have an academic background. Throughout the research process, the researchers ensured that participants understood the scope of the research and that the researchers had no authority in impacting any pending decisions regarding their asylum process. It was also made clear that their responses would have no bearing at all on their ability to continue accessing services from JRS where needed. Moreover cultural mediators and interpreters were also engaged where the participants could not communicate fluently in Maltese or English to ensure that the participants' voices could be indeed heard and understood.
- In the spirit of reciprocity, the participants were given the opportunity to maintain contact with the researchers. This enabled the possibility of follow-ups and in specific cases referrals to relevant service providers through which further support could be provided to the participants.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were carried out between October and December 2021 at a time and place which were convenient for the participants, whilst also taking into consideration any measures that were in place at the time due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviews took around 60 to 90 minutes. Prior to the interview, participants were reminded of the aims of the study and ethical issues involved, and they were then asked to sign the consent form in a language they could understand. The interviews were conducted in English or Maltese by the primary investigator or the research assistant, and in some cases, both researchers were present for the interview. When participants could not speak English or Maltese fluently, a cultural mediator was also present during the interview to act as an interpreter. At the beginning of the interview, the participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves so that the researchers could refer to them by that name, both during the interview and when reporting the research, in order to maintain anonymity. During the interview participants were asked to relate their experiences upon arriving in Malta to the researchers. They were asked general questions about their experiences while also creating a timeline of their journey from arrival until the day of the interview. Participants were also asked specific questions about significant transitions within their experiences. These included education, employment and their lifestyle, among others. The interview guide is included as Appendix B.

Each interview was transcribed soon after the interview in preparation for the analysis. As per IPA procedure, the researchers engaged in a case-by-case analysis of each individual transcript to establish "an interpretative relationship with the transcript" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 66). Each transcript was analysed in depth before moving on to another transcript. A transcript was re-read several times to prepare an initial free textual analysis. Later, passages of interest and significance to the research questions were annotated. Through this process, the researchers continued to engage with the participants' worldview and engage in their interpretation of it. An initial group of themes were identified and those segments

from the interview that support these themes were noted. This procedure was then followed for each transcript to identify the recurring themes and also new and different issues. The previous transcripts were then reviewed in light of the latter to identify if and how these themes were also present. The researchers' knowledge of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) and the applicability of this method to various theoretical frameworks enabled also the process of identifying the patterns and themes in the participants' experiences.

2.5 Limitations

While we ensured our utmost for this research to portray the experiences of unaccompanied minors, we are aware that it is not free of limitations.

One interview was conducted in Maltese, five were conducted in English. Of these, three were not speaking in their native language and a further two interviews were conducted with the assistance of a translator. We are sure that in most of these cases, certain nuances, details and expressions will have been lost. While the scope of qualitative research is not to generalise, it would have been ideal to have a few other individuals taking part in the research. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to include further participants in the study, and only those who accepted to participate in the data collection time frame were included. It is not by some bizarre fluke that the vast majority of unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in Europe are young men; forced migration is a gendered process. That said, having more females participate in the study would have provided some nuanced insights on the particular experiences of female unaccompanied minors.

We are also aware that the experiences of the research participants reflect the experiences of those participants who stayed in Malta, who were JRS clients and who were also employed. Without detracting anything from the importance of putting forward these participants' voices, we are aware that this also poses another limitation. The research does not encapsulate the experiences of any unaccompanied minors who felt they had no other option but to flee Malta and didn't return, those who are living in further precarity because they are unemployed, those who are in contact with other services or those who are not in contact with any support services whatsoever.



Two young migrant men walk along the road in Hal Far (Photo: JRS Malta)

3. Key Findings

3.1 Participants

Six individuals participated in this research. Of these, five identify as male, one as female, and all arrived declaring themselves as minors. Three of the participants were acknowledged as minors, three were not. At the time of data collection, four of the participants were asylum seekers, one had been granted Subsidiary Protection and one has Special Residence Authorisation.

The following are brief descriptions of each participant. The descriptions leave out identifying details such as gender, country of origin, how long they have been in Malta, past and present living arrangements and other such information to maintain the participants' anonymity.

Participant 1 was 16 years old when they arrived in Malta. They were placed in detention for almost two months and moved from one detention centre to another. Participant 1 claimed they were told to state they were 18 in order to secure their release from detention and were subsequently transferred to an open centre. In an effort to find stability and access to education, they left Malta more than once but were always sent back. In these countries they were able to study the native language and further their education. They compare the support and care received from these countries upon arrival to what they did not receive in Malta. They are currently living in a house for young persons and are studying. They are already employed within their area of studies and hope to pursue a related career. They feel that despite having protection, Malta offers them no security, and they hope to find a way to leave Malta upon finishing their studies.

Participant 2 arrived in Malta as a 16-year-old. They were placed in detention with other minors and adults alike for two and a half months where they had to endure several fights and moments of conflicts. It was there that they also had the age assessment interview. They were then transferred to another centre where they were given an element of liberty. Following recognition as an unaccompanied minor they were transferred to a house for young persons. The care they received here was much better, although they expected more support in terms of education. In the absence of support and with no employment prospects they planned to move to another country. Still a minor, they had to leave the residence for minors in order to be employed. They applied for asylum at the age of 18, and their application is still pending. They have plans to follow a specific trade, but these plans are on hold because they cannot afford to work and study.

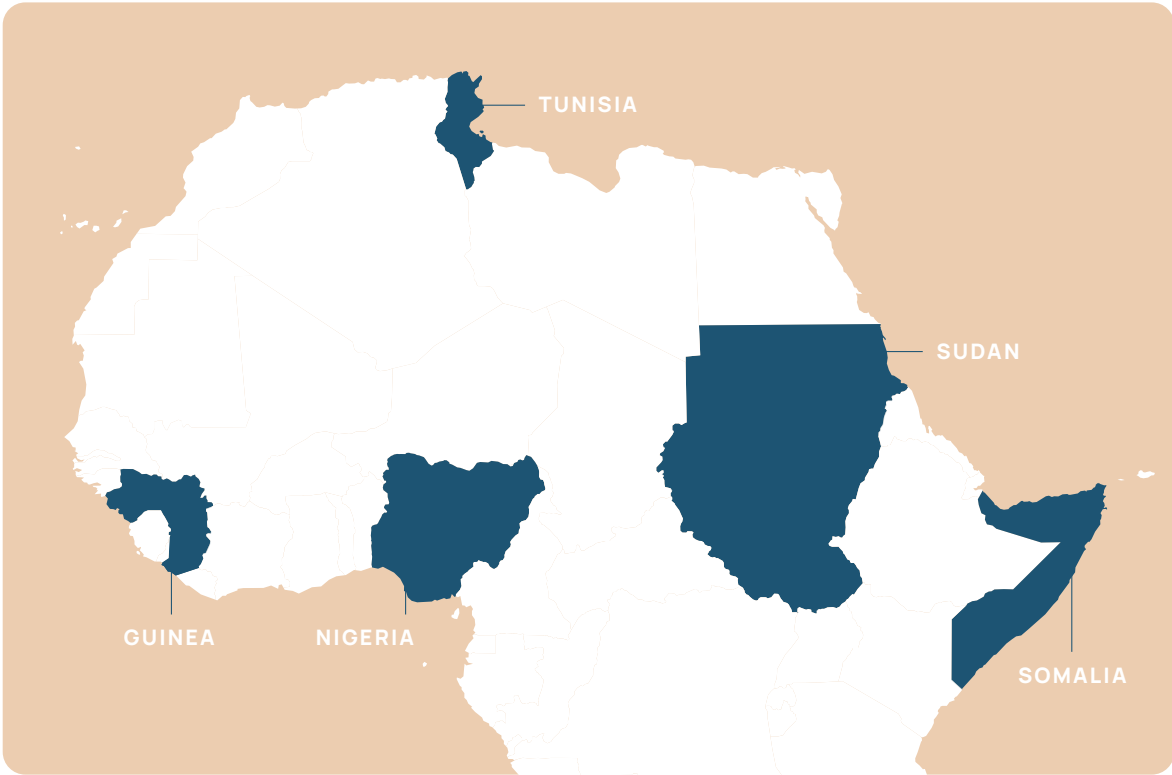
Participant 3 was 16 when they arrived in Malta. They were initially sent to detention for 40 days and then moved to another detention centre where they were held for 9 months. They describe being exposed to ongoing violence throughout these 9 months. They were then released and transferred to Hal Far open centre minors' section. They were not recognised as a minor, and they appealed the decision but in the process of awaiting a decision they aged out. Their application for asylum is still pending. They are currently living on their own and working.

Participant 4 arrived in Malta as a 16 year old. They fled war in their country in search of opportunities for education. They did not plan to reach Malta, and what they found was completely unexpected and they were very angry about the process they faced. They were placed in detention at the IRC for around 4 months, and they were not recognized as a minor. They appealed this decision. They were then told to sign that they were over 18 in order to be moved to a home for young people. Exasperated by what they felt to be an injustice, this is what they did. They have applied for asylum, and the application is still pending. Currently they live in a house for young people, and they are studying. They have plans to choose a profession that would help people in their country of origin.

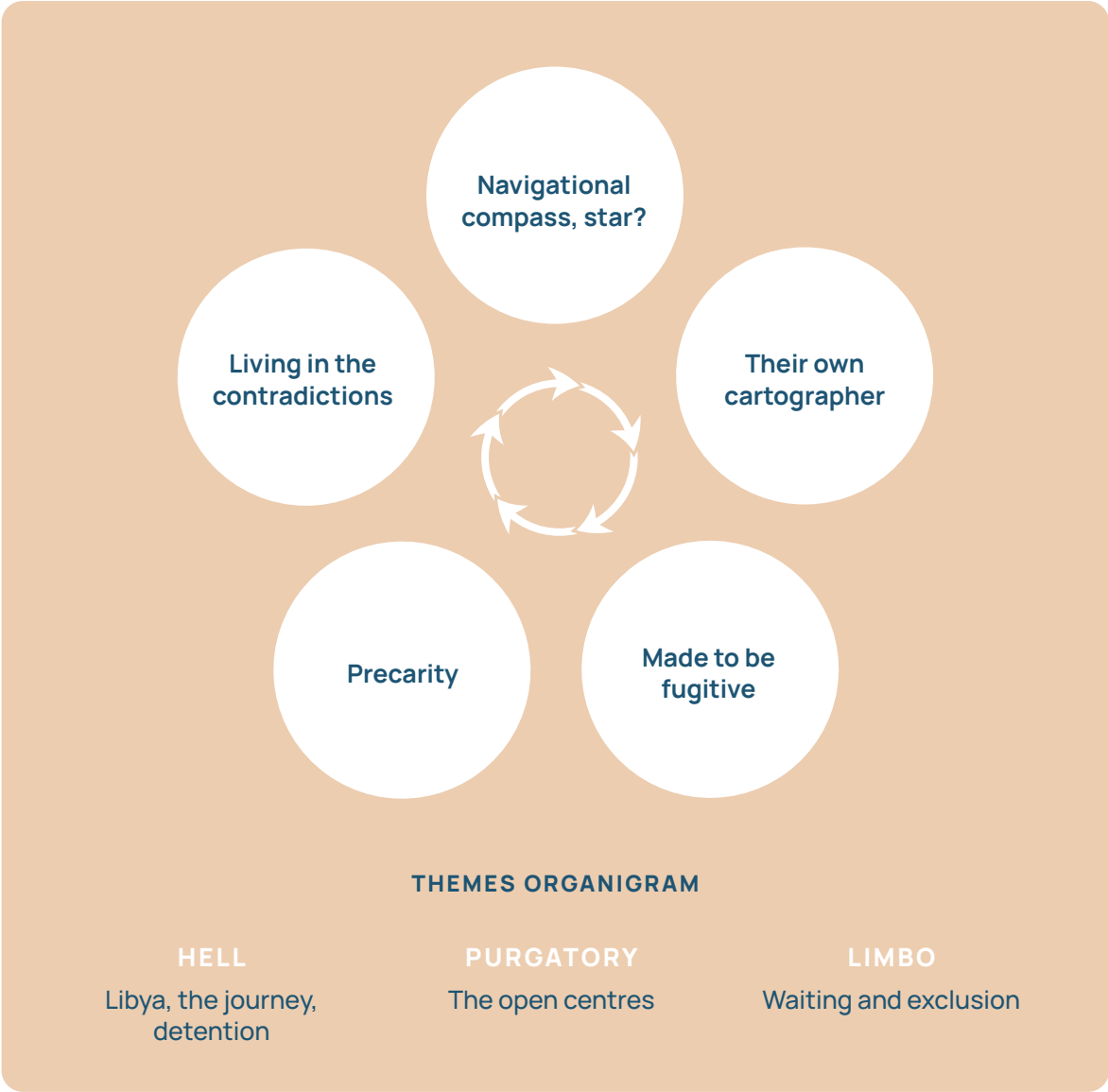
Participant 5 arrived in Malta when they were 16 years old. They left their country to join their family in another European country. They emphasised that they were not planning on coming to Malta but their boat was intercepted and then they were brought to Malta. Upon arrival, they were put in detention for 3 months and following that they were sent to an open centre for another 2 months which they still considered as a place of detention. They were then moved to a house for young persons, where their anger and disgust at being in detention somewhat dissipated, as they experienced more care. They had to leave this house when they turned 18. They are currently employed and live with their partner. They still plan to meet their family, and move to the country where they are, but at the moment they feel angry at being stuck in Malta without a way forward. They have considered the option to flee, but they argue that they are not an "illegal person" and thus keep choosing to stay in Malta and wait, despite the uncertainty.

Participant 6 arrived in Malta as a 15 year old. In search of better opportunities, they left their country with the promise of getting an education. They were placed in detention for 6 months, where they had to endure several moments of difficulty, including health issues because of stress. They were eventually recognised as a minor and they were placed under a care order and moved to a residence for minors. Concerned about their lack of opportunities and protection in Malta, they spent time moving and working in other European countries until they decided to come back to Malta. Having experienced several situations of exploitation, they managed to start studying. They currently have SRA status and they are now employed. They continue to study while working, and have plans to further their studies in their field. Despite an ongoing sense of insecurity, they consider Malta as their home and intend to remain in Malta and work here when they finish their studies.

The map below portrays the participants' countries of origin: Guinea, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia.



The sections that follow present five themes identified through the use of Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis and Thematic Analysis. The themes do not represent a chronological order and they are all intertwined. However, the participants did describe a temporal-spatial pattern that we have tried to illustrate in the following framework, which we hope will be useful in understanding and situating their experiences.



Many of the participants described the horrors of the journey to Malta, in particular during their time in Libya and crossing the Mediterranean Sea. When they arrived in Malta they thought they had left such terror behind. This was not to be the case. Each of the participants described their arrival in Malta, specifically in detention, as a particularly traumatic time, where they could not escape violence, and where they never felt safe. One participant specifically referred to detention as “hell”. The time spent in the open centres - specifically in Hal Far - while not as violent, was still experienced as punishing. We are describing this period as 'purgatory'; the centres offered no support or structure, and those that were placed in Hal Far described ongoing suffering. The transition to life outside was described as a protracted sense of waiting. Whilst their material conditions had improved slightly, the participants describe living in a state of 'limbo', their decisions and transitions on hold as they await the outcome of their asylum claim. Paradoxically, even those who have been granted some form of protection remain outside the gates of metaphorical heaven, as the sense of insecurity and liminality persists.

The following table presents the main themes lifted from analysing the participants' experiences together with the sub-themes that compose the main themes.

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
Living in the contradictions	Intercepted yet discarded	Paradox Picked up Dehumanised Feelings of ambivalence Vitality - more than a body
	Negotiating one's becoming	Stalled Made 18 Security over identity
	"Like freedom but not freedom" - Finding hope and dreams in limbo	Self-worth Waiting Agency Purpose Reframing
Precarity	"Hell on earth": Physical danger	Horrible conditions in detention Violence among detainees Theft Drug abuse Minors placed with adults Malnutrition Shock and trauma
	"Kind of war everyday": Danger posed by institutions	Violent and abusive officials Threats Lack of protection Feeling abandoned Lack of care
	Lack of control	No way out Struggling Fearful
	Lack of information and guidance	No information No explanation
	Disembedded	Disengaged Constantly on the move No links with family Lack of trust

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
	Effects and affects of precarity	Anger Injustice Self-preservation
	Lost Time	Nothing to do in detention Navigating the unknown Lengthy asylum process Stolen youth
Forced to be Fugitive	Fugitive Routes	Escaping Hiding Trying their luck
	Forced to be fugitive: Legally human and personhood	Lack of documents Not seen
	Paradox of the fugitive (S) tate	Abdication of responsibility Stolen freedom Stolen hopes
	Resistance to the fugitive	A bold decision to stay Claiming legality
	Fugitive existence	Suspended lives Put on hold Being alone Education plans derailed
	Fugitive past	Nothing to return to Letting go of the past Reframing the past
	Fugitive future	Uncertain future Documents do not provide certainty
	Fugitive transitions	Disrupted hopes Mourning lost time Choosing stability over wishes Transitions and biographical solutions are on hold
Being their own cartographer	Navigating risk	Wishes and desires Feeling somewhat prepared Fearless Caution Risk-benefit analysis Seeking biographical solutions Lack of safety

Theme	Sub-themes	Codes
	A journey without navigational tools	Being lost The phone as a tool Unfamiliar context No “map”
	Navigating the terrain, alone	Feeling alone No one to trust The need for support and guidance Treading water Stuck
Navigational tools: a compass, a lighthouse, a star	Being rescued	Individuals within the system A source of trust Guidance
	Source of hope and strength	A contrast to darkness Links to family
	Source(s) of care	Good people Love Help

The following sections present the themes and their explanation together with the participants' own words to present to the reader the participants' poignant voices about their experiences as unaccompanied minors in Malta.

3.3 Living in the contradictions

In the first theme we attempt to capture the young people's subjective experience of living in several paradoxes, such as being told that they were 'rescued' but feeling neither “saved”, nor acknowledged. Whilst their bodies were retrieved from the sea, they feel discarded and dehumanised.

Their lives in Malta are experienced as a protracted sense of waiting and living in the unknown. They have no control over their time in detention, the age assessment process and the asylum process, they have to wait for a decision...and wait. They feel stuck and somewhat helpless, and yet, they also demonstrate how they are actively struggling with, and transforming this experience into something positive, expressing a will to “live” and to hope.

As they try to make sense of how they are perceived and treated by institutions (and the relationships therein), they are both actively resisting whilst reluctantly conforming, complying to the demands of the legal process. This generates a sense of ambivalence that threads throughout their experiences in Malta. Such subjective experiences of these contradictions are complex, multi-faceted and not mutually exclusive: they coexist and surface at different times, with different intensities.

3.3.1 INTERCEPTED YET DISCARDED

Malta was never part of their plan. None of the participants were planning on coming to Malta and they speak of how they were 'intercepted' along their journey. Mario says:

L-ewwelnett li ahna ma dhalniex Malta b'hekk u hekk...huma haduna mill-bahar u gabulna Malta. Dik l-ewwel haġa, ahna ma dhalniex Malta, huma hadulna mill-bahar². (Mario)

It is this reality that adds to their sense of disbelief, or incredulity. Once picked up from the sea, they are brought to Malta as 'illegal immigrants', and feel they are considered as such from then onwards. There is no recognition of them as children, as human beings, or as bearers of rights. The following excerpt from Yohannes' interview portrays his confusion and anger with the apparent paradox of being 'saved' as a refugee fleeing war, only to be sent to prison. He feels rejected and violated:

Because they bring you from the sea, they are going to take you to certain place, and then from certain place, it turns to prison. So what is our case here? ...For me, I didn't know Malta before. I knew Malta when we arrived Mediterranean. Because they say, "We take you to Malta, and Malta refuse. We took you to Italy, Italy refuse." Until we see the Pope speak because they record things and then they come to play for us. They show us, people go outside, because of us, we are inside the sea. People are complaining, "Why you are leaving these people inside the boat?"³ Then when they come to this country, they say "No, we don't need this people. Maybe they are criminal." (Yohannes)

Family ties are important for someone like Mario who left his country to join his family. It is very frustrating to have been stopped in his tracks, with no control over his journey:

R: Jien kont sejra għall-familja, li qeghdin kollha [country⁴]. Kollha. Jien hrabt minn pajjizi biex inkun mal-familja. Daqshekk. U s'issa ma nistax nara l-familja. Dik il-haġa li tahraqni.

I: Jiġifieri s'issa m'għandekx il-possibiltà li tmur...

R: Ma nistax

I: Ma tistax għax għadek mingħajr il-karti?

R: Eżatt⁵ (Mario)

To conclude this section, we present Mohamed's words when we asked him to give suggestions about how the system for unaccompanied minors could be improved. He describes his experiences in detention with adults, being exposed to violence, and the long wait for some form of protection as an 'injustice', and feels that since arriving in Malta his rights as a child have been discarded. Mohamed asks that minors be protected in Malta by virtue of their being children, regardless of their asylum claim:

M: To help the minors to get their rights, like in the right way.

I2: And what would that help look like?

²First of all that we did not come to Malta in such a way... they pick us up from the sea and brought us to Malta. That's the first thing, that we did not come to Malta, they picked us up from the sea.

³Yohannes was rescued by a Search and Rescue NGO. Whilst on the vessel they were shown footage of the Pope and also protestors calling for the ports to be open for safe disembarkation.

⁴Name of country removed to maintain participant's anonymity.

⁵R: I was going to my family, who are all in [country]. All of them. I fled my country to be with my family. That's it. And now I cannot see my family. That's what frustrates me.

I: You mean so far you don't have the possibility to go...

R: I cannot.

I: You cannot because you have no documents.

R: Exactly.

“The State is thus responsible for promoting and safeguarding children's health and safety, both of which warrant that the child has a safe place to live, ideally within a family home with biological parents and kin, or with adoptive or foster families; providing the child with adequate alternative care when his/her parents or guardians fail to do so ”

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 32-33

M: To have a good place where to live, to be in a room and to give them more money. ...a paper, documentation to protect us, not only police paper. Give us help to get our paper, our documents. And also our education.

I2: So what difference does the paper make, the document?

MR [interpreter]: So it's like the issue because the minors when they turn 18, they become treated like adults, they would do the asylum application and later they would decide to accept them or not... why not...like, because they came as minors, they would automatically giving protection or like...and would be able to see their families or whatever...

I: So you're still waiting for the protection. Is it something you worry about?

M: yes, why they don't accept minors automatically, why after you need to wait and then wait more, like two years?

I: And what does this waiting do for you?

M: Worry.. just like I don't have anything to do for them so just wait (Mohamed)

3.3.2 NEGOTIATING ONES' BECOMING

The participants also described how their subjective sense of becoming is a process of resistance and negotiation, shaped by the material, social and legal context they find themselves in. This is also a creative process marked by tensions and precarity.

Both McLovin and Yohannes discuss their frustration at being given a date of birth in January, thus assigned an age that is not their own. In the following passage Yohannes describes the cost of freedom from detention, and also freedom to control his own subjective sense of self; his body is ascribed an identity which simultaneously discards the individual, and the narrative, that embodies the flesh. Yohannes is also forced to accept a trade-off. He chooses his freedom from detention, and in return, must relinquish his basic human rights as a minor:

Actually it's not my original date. They change it, they give me this age. They say "If you don't accept this age, you're not going to get the paper. So, either you accept this or you go back to Marsa to the detention centre" Yes. I said, "But you cannot change my age" and they say, "You come here in this country, forget your age, what is matter is paper" and I say "okay" (Yohannes)

McLovin in a non-believer, but his documents state he holds Muslim religious beliefs. He tells us that he started to question his faith before leaving his country, but didn't feel safe talking about it in his asylum interview. Choosing to prioritise his security over his identity, he pretends to be Muslim, aware of how his sense of self as process is also an ongoing negotiation, shaped by his material, social and legal circumstances and sense of in/security:

R: Yeah. And then also I want to change my beliefs on my documents. It says Muslim but I'm not.

I: Why does it say Muslim? What happened there?

R: I thought it was safer to say it because I thought it will sound...because within the [country] community if they found out you're not Muslim, it's not safe I think I get used to it. Like pretending to be a Muslim (McLovin)

3.3.3 "LIKE FREEDOM BUT NOT FREEDOM": FINDING HOPE AND DREAMS IN LIMBO

This sense of feeling discarded by the system, does not come with a sense of liberation from its control. Osman captures this experience in a simple, and yet poignant way. Rather than feeling free from restraint, he feels stuck in a state of limbo, whether it be in detention, or surviving without documents, and also living in the unknown:

Like freedom but not freedom...if you don't have document in Malta, you don't have freedom. (Osman)

Freedom from detention then, is not a freedom that can be practised or enjoyed, rather it is experienced as a new form of constraint or unfreedom. Demonstrating the multifaceted experience of freedom, the participants also spoke about the need for care and protection, the need to trust and be trusted, and the need for information (see following themes). And yet, in the midst of this exile, of feeling discarded, the participants also demonstrate resilience, a dogged determination to make the best of their situation, find a sense of purpose and hope.

Despite Mario saying he feels so stuck, he also expresses how he currently finds purpose in work to be able to support his girlfriend while he waits for the outcome of his application:

L-esperjenza naraha sabiha taf meta? Meta jkolli ghal xiex nahdem. Jigifieri jekk...kieku mhux l-gharusa pereżempju, ma nkun qed nahdem ghalxej, x'ha noqghod nahdem hawn? Jekk jien irrid immur mal-familja? ⁶ (Mario)

Juliet also finds purpose in her work, because it gives her not only joy, but also hope and a way to look towards her future:

The difference is it makes me feel useful. When I'm at home, I feel useless, doing nothing, just lying down on the bed doing nothing I feel useless. So when I'm working, making changes to people's lives... it gives me joy. It gives me, there is still more hope for you, there is still more to climb up. (Juliet)

Yohannes expresses his wish to be a doctor to be able to help out and "fix" the problem with malaria:

Yes, so I said I want to be a doctor because malaria should not kill somebody. It become reason why my mum died. Then I said no, not my father, not my family is going to die because of this disease. Because of that, I want to be a doctor, to fix that. My family is not going to lose somebody else like this. Not only them, people who die because of diseases. (Yohannes)

At times it is the experience of having survived that gives them this will to live. They feel there is a bigger purpose to their lives. Another turning point is when they start acknowledging their rights and refuse to be considered "illegal" (see below). This is why they choose to stay instead of running away. Despite going through several hardships, they also reframe their experience and focus on the good as a way of coping. Indeed, the participants provided many examples of how hope, vitality and agency surface, giving them the courage to persevere. Juliet's dream to study is what keeps her going, her will to live:

Yes because it has always been...it's a dream...a dream, they say it never dies. If the dreamer dies, so the dream dies. Dream is always there. (Juliet)

3.4 Precarity

Through the second theme, we want to portray how the participants referred to their own experiences and day-to-day lives. The term precarity refers to the young people's experience of insecurity, born out of physical danger, exposure to drugs and violence, feeling abandoned and uncared for. Precarity is also experienced in the unknown, an inability to control their circumstances. They are located in Malta, yet disembedded both temporally and spatially, they feel little sense of security and believe they can trust no-one but themselves.

3.4.1 "HELL ON EARTH": PHYSICAL DANGER

The participants all describe feeling shocked at the conditions they were forced to endure, and the way they were treated when they were brought to Malta. The initial sense of relief at having escaped Libya and the journey across the Mediterranean, was soon replaced with confusion, fear and an element of anger with how they were treated upon arrival. It is interesting to note that whilst not all of the participants made specific reference to their rights, they each made it very clear that they felt violated.

Mhux ovja li diffiċli, tkun persuna sejra għal hajja ahjar, iġhaddi minn affarijiet li qatt ma kien rahom f'hajtu⁷. (Mario)

In the previous excerpt, Mario refers to what was happening in detention. Despite the dangers he faced in his journey across the sea, he still considered detention as the worst experience of his life, particularly because he was expecting to find a better life upon arrival. He continued to explain how he was placed with adults in detention, wherein violence and theft were the order of the day:

Dejjem bil-ġlieda. Wara xahar u jumejn, xi haga hekk, konna...ghax kellna naqra flus u hekk, konna nixtru biex inpejpu u hekk, u kien hemm ohrajn, immigranti, halli ma nsemmihomx. Ma kellhomx flus biex jixtru u hekk. U tipo dawk li riedu jisirqu l-flus. Imbagħad kien hemm il-ġlied hux...ma nafx jekk smajt biha⁸. (Mario)

Other participants had similar experiences. Adults and minors were placed together and this often exposed minors to ongoing dangers. Juliet recalls how shocked and traumatised she was to arrive and find herself in detention without understanding "how come everyone is locked away in prison?". She could hardly communicate with anyone, had no information and even struggled with basic nutrition up to the point of becoming ill:

That was part of it and it was really hard, actually. I got stomach ulcers from there because I wasn't eating. The food was not what I was used to. Sometimes the food was cold before they bring it. Sometimes they bring the food and just leave it outside. It wasn't easy. I was in the hospital, then outside, then in the hospital, then outside...it was always like that. (Juliet)

McLovin also recalls how he was introduced to marijuana at the open centre, and how this soon became part of what he described as a "crazy life":

I was smoking marijuana for about 6 months because there was nothing else to do there....when they put us [in the open centre]...they gave us mattress and stuff for your bed, and then the guys were on the bed rolling joints, and they were like, "You want?" I didn't know what it was, it was my first time. I slept for like 8 hours that night. (McLovin)

⁷ Obviously it is difficult, a person going to find a better life and going through things he's never seen in his life.

⁸ Always with some fight. After a month and a couple of days, something like that, we were... because we had some money and so, we used to buy to smoke, and there were others, immigrants, let me not mention who they are. They didn't have money to buy and so. And kind of, they wanted to steal money. And fights broke out then... I don't know if you've heard about it.

⁶ Do you know when I see the experiences as beautiful? When I have something to work for. I mean if... for example, if it weren't for my girlfriend for example, I would be working for nothing, why would I be working here? If I want to go to my family?

“The Child Protection (Alternative Care) Act, 2017, (Part 1 of the Child Protection, Title I, Sub-Title II of Child Protection, article 8[6]) defines “significant harm” as including “abuse, neglect, ill treatment, exploitation, abandonment, exposure, and trafficking of any of the persons mentioned in subtitle VIII BIS of Title VIII of Book First of the Criminal Code ”

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 13

We conclude this section with Osman's account of life in detention:

People inside [detention] were very angry and like, fighting all the time, and screaming “freedom” and doing protests inside. One time, it was a very big thing and the police came and they started beating everyone....I will never forget that day. In detention I saw hell on earth. I was crying and people were bleeding.

3.4.2 “KIND OF WAR EVERYDAY”: ABUSE AND NEGLECT BY INSTITUTIONS

Apart from having to face the horrific conditions in detention, participants recall their interactions with security guards and officials. Such relationships are described as often being violent and abusive, and one of mistrust. Osman describes detention as being “kind of war everyday” particularly because “if something happens to you and you tell to the officers, they will not do anything”. This was also the experience of other participants. In some cases they chose not to inform the security when something happened to avoid the risk of being seen as “too close” to the security, that would then create issues for them within the detention camp with other detainees (see also ‘navigating risk’ below).

In the following excerpt, Yohannes relates interactions with security guards from detention. He recalls how migrants were complaining about the conditions they were living in and were threatened with being returned to Libya if they did not keep quiet.

We told him that this is not right. We told him, “You don’t have to tell us that. Libya is not our country, we’re not going to go back.” He’s telling us, “Keep quiet. If you don’t want to go back, keep quiet.” It keeps repeating every time, complaining [about] the room or about food or milk or anything because the migrants who are inside, they are always complain, complain, complain. He was keeping people quiet, saying, “Don’t complain, here you don’t have [the] right to say anything. You have to spend your time until you go out. How long, we don’t know. We don’t have to come close to you and you don’t come close to us. What they tell us to give you, we give you.” Our connection only with security. (Yohannes)

It is the border regimes, and national security mechanisms that foreground the participants' contact with Maltese institutions. Together, they represent and prioritise control, abdicating responsibility for care and human rights obligations. In the following passage Juliet's pain is tangible, she expresses how the absence of protection exposed her to further dangers. She invites us to imagine her as a child, alone in detention, and expresses how much she needed to be seen, to be heard and to be protected:

At that age, there must be something. Can you imagine someone that age, standing alone with no one else? Something is chasing. If you go deeper, you can see the truth from them. Kids, at that age, might be afraid to speak. If it's someone you can trust, you can be able to open up for the person and they'll protect you. (Juliet)

This lack of care that was described in detention and in Hal Far was contrasted by the participants' experiences of being cared for when they were then moved from the open centre to a residence for minors.

“Children needing alternative care are to be informed about their rights and choices and involved as much as possible in the decision-making process in a way children can understand. In addition, children should be supported in the process of transition so as to guarantee their stability, safety and general wellbeing ”

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 48

Being cared for also brought with it a sense of safety as expressed by Mohamed:

[interpreter]: [when I moved there]...it was like I felt no fear, it was like feel safe. Completely different...they were taking care of them, it was different to before, they cared about them. (Mohamed)

3.4.3 LACK OF CONTROL

Participants also expressed their precarious situation by explaining the little to no control they have on their own lives, not just when they were in detention or in the open centre, but also in their current situation living in the community.

Some participants were informed that they would have to spend some time in detention, but they had assumed that this would be limited to days. They were not prepared for the time, nor the conditions therein, and had received no information regarding the process or what was to happen next. All of this contributed to a feeling of no control over their lives or immediate surroundings, further contributing to a sense of precarity. Osman was informed that he would be released with a group of older minors, but this never happened. In the following excerpt this lack of control is entwined with the other aspects of precarity being discussed, the sense of abandonment, the abuse by institutions and lack of information are vividly evident:

[interpreter]: So when they arrived, they took their details, the first thing their name. Then when they were taken to detention, the police came and said that the ones that were 14 or younger were supposed to leave and they would come back another day to release the ones who were minors but like 16 and over. But they never came. (Osman)

In the following passage Juliet describes how she struggled with her own emotions within the detention context, how aggression is embodied and directly related to - intertwined with - her immediate environment. How can she regain control over her own emotions, and how she acts on these emotions, within a context where she has no control at all?:

I: So you felt like you had no way out in that situation?

J: Yes.

I: And in that moment, what helped you cope?

J: It was hard. I used to be really aggressive. Because of those trauma that was already on my mind, I used to be very, very aggressive. Situation that looks like this, I take it bigger, like oh my god, so scary, let me die. It was like those aspects can solve what I'm going through, like the anger in me for what I have passed through, was too much (Juliet)

3.4.4 LACK OF INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

Coupled with feeling uncared for and without any control over their immediate environment, participants also stressed how a lack of information also contributed to this feeling of not being in control. For example, even when Juliet was placed under a care order and transferred from the open centre, no one explained anything to her:

No, just tell me “You are free, you’re going to be with care order”, that’s all. I don’t know anything. (Juliet)

Mario struggled significantly in dealing with lack of information. He describes how he was moved from one centre to another, completely in the dark as to what was happening to him or where he was going:

R: Ma konna nafu xejn.

I: Jigifieri just ġew u haḍukom?

R: Mill-Marsa haḍuna

I: Mill-Marsa kienu haḍuk [residential home for minors]. Min kien ġie għalikom?

R: Security

I: Qalulkom xi haġa fuq x’s se jigri? Meta kienu joħduk, pereżempju, mill-Marsa haḍukom Safi, minn Safi għall-Marsa...kien hemm xi hadd jispegalkom x’s se jigri?

R: Le⁹(Mario)

3.4.5 DISEMBEDDED

Although participants are physically located in Malta, there is often a sense of disengagement with the local context. The term ‘disembedded’ is being used to refer to both a temporal and spatial experience. It is being used to describe a sense of separation from the local context, with little or no relationships with key institutions (and where these relationships exist, they are marked by suspicion or are superficial). Their relationship with Malta is experienced as transient (see also the following theme). The local context provides little by means of security, or guidance, instead precarity prevails. Such support is generally sought outside of Malta, through connections with family or friends abroad, but even this is limited. Time is also experienced as suspended, transient and passing by.

Being in Malta is characterised by being constantly on the move. Participants often explained how they had to move back and forth between detention centres, and then to an open centre, for some, or for a short time, a residential setting. Eventually they moved out - or aged out - and found a temporary place to stay, often with some friends, until they eventually rented a place of their own. Some also relocated to other countries but had to come back to Malta. This has also to be considered in light of their displacement from home, and their fragmented journeys through transit countries to reach the coast of Libya. The constant displacement is evident from McLovin’s words:

⁹ R: We knew nothing
I: You mean they just came and took you?
R: They took us from Marsa.
I: From Marsa they took you to [residential home for minors]. Who had picked you up?
R: Security
I: Did they tell you anything about what was going to happen? When they took you for example, from Marsa they took you to Safi, from Safi to Marsa... was there anyone explaining what was going to happen?
R: No

Then I had to move out from my friend’s place. I moved in with a German friend in Msida. He left also my friend to Germany and I had like last day...it was like on a weekend and I had to leave the house on Monday. I was like, “Where should I go?” and [they] said, “Oh you can come tomorrow here.” (McLovin)

Mohamed describes a similar process, he also relied on friends (who are themselves in a similarly precarious situation) as stepping stones towards greater independence:

I moved from [residence for unaccompanied minors] to Hamrun, a house where I had a friend there, he’s renting there. So I stayed about like 20 days, like not paying the rent in the beginning, 2 weeks later I found this job and then I started paying the rent. I stayed there until June and then he moved to Tarxien (Mohamed)

They are also displaced and disembedded from their own familiar context. When Mario’s brother travelled to Malta to visit him in detention, he was initially denied access and later on only allowed to see him for an hour:

Stenna, mela, bejn l-ewwel ta’ Settembru u Ottubru, kien ġie għaliġa hiġa minn [country]. Kien daħal id-detention, kważi siegħa għamilt miegħu. Ma hallewnix narah fil-bidu imma mbagħad hallewh. Ried joħodni għax ma jistax ikun, xahrejn ma jafu biġa, xejn¹⁰. (Mario)

This physical displacement is coupled with an underlying disembeddedness despite being in possession of documents. Both participants with protection are aware of the fluidity of their situation, and that they could be impacted by any changes in the country’s situation, despite one of them fervently affirming:

As I am now, I am here in Malta. If there is war today, do you think I will go to my country and fight? I will stay here. Here I stay, here I will fight. I will fight like the Maltese (Juliet)

This was an issue that was mentioned by a number of participants. The sense of feeling disembedded coincides with a wish to belong, their relationship to Malta also contributing to, and being an expression of, living in the contradictions (see above). Indeed, as we see in the following section, the memories of abuse and feeling violated continue to fold into the present, affecting their relationships with Maltese institutions and the people they meet.

“Some categories of children and adolescents who have been identified as being at greater disadvantage include: Children living in institutions [and] asylum seekers. ”

“Whereas universal services cater for children across different situations and contexts, targeted services provide specialised focus on those children who may require additional support and individualised outreach, since their life circumstances place them at an increased risk of disadvantage. ”

NATIONAL CHILDREN’S POLICY, P. 23-24

¹⁰ Wait, so, between the first of September and October, my brother had come for me from [country]. He had come into detention, I spent at most an hour with him. They didn’t allow me to see him at first, and then they let him. He wanted to take me with him, because it was not on, two months not hearing anything about me, anything.

3.4.6 EFFECTS AND AFFECTS OF PRECARITY

The ongoing sense of precarity had a significant impact on the participants and they had very negative feelings towards how they were treated as minors, expressing anger at the injustice they have had to face during their time in detention and also upon their release.

Mario, who speaks Maltese fluently, wanted to express the injustice he felt upon being placed in detention for three months. He did not know the right word in Maltese so he paused the interview to look up the word on his phone to make sure he was using the right word to express this:

R: Sorry, ha nidhol Google Translator ghax hemm kelma bl-Ingliż, insejtha [shows phone]

I: Inġustizzja

R: Dik li ma rridx jien.

I: U hassejt li dawk it-tliet xhur kienu inġustizzja?

R: Eżatt¹¹ (Mario)

The affects of trauma are experienced in the present (see also 'fugitive past' below). Juliet continues to carry the weight of past experiences as she navigates her future, and she acknowledges her tendency to overreact as a measure of self-preservation:

Then the problem was, the trauma that I had from my childhood were going with me. So I lose patience so easily. So I don't take anything like, when somebody tried to...how I'm going to say? Like when I realised somebody tried to take advantage of me I overreacted. I stopped sometimes, so many other job, before I start to work with people with disability, which finally changed my situation and my life. (Juliet)

3.4.7 LOST TIME

In describing the participants' situation of precarity, we have made significant references to the participants' feeling of lost time. We feel that this needs to be further emphasised. Lost time has different layers. Participants lose time when they are assigned an age that is not theirs (see above). This time lost, or rather stolen, is a time that they can never retrieve, and a time that is crucial to their developmental process and the experience of transitioning to young adulthood. A 16 year old who is "made 18" cannot build up gradually to adulthood. They are thrown into adulthood without the proper tools and support to navigate this process.

Time is also lost physically when they are in detention and open centres with nothing to occupy themselves with. Substance abuse might offer a temporary escape, a way to while away the time, but nonetheless, time passes very slowly and as Mario says "a day feels like a month". Abandoned by the system, denied adequate information, guidance and support, and not engaged in any activities (such as learning the native language) that might support inclusion - all of this contributes to lost time. When they are released from detention, when they leave the open centre, or try their luck in another country, time is lost as they attempt to navigate the unknown (see below). Every time they start from scratch.

Time is also lost when participants are held limbo through the asylum process, waiting for others to take a decision that will, to a significant degree, determine their fate. Mario's words are a clear portrayal of how these teenagers feel they have been robbed of the age where other young people are experiencing what it means to be a young person:

¹¹ R: Sorry, let me use Google Translator as there is a word in English, I forgot it [shows phone]

I: Injustice.

R: That's what I don't want.

I: And you felt that those three months were an injustice?

R: Exactly.

R: Ma nahsibx li jien, meta nkun xih, ma nahsibx li ha terga' tkun 16 li tista' tgawdi mbaghad. Daż-żmien mhux ha jerga' jigi.

I: Jiġifieri thoss li tlift biċċa minn haġtek

R: Eżatt¹² (Mario)

The participants all describe, in different ways, how the physical and psychological precarity described above intersects with the temporal insecurity of waiting. In the following sections we present how this temporal experience is intertwined with legal and social processes, affecting how they imagine and navigate their unfolding futures.

3.5 Forced to be fugitive

'Forced to be fugitive' is a term that we have used to depict co-existing and interdependent states that participants described during their conversations with us. The term 'fugitive' then, is being used in different - but symbiotic - ways, as a state, or existence, outside of the law, or even forced to be on the run, and also as an ephemeral state, such as a fugitive light, that is difficult to capture, imagined, perhaps seen, but out of reach.

3.5.1 FUGITIVE ROUTES

Whilst they were not asked to recount their experiences prior to arriving in Malta, a number of participants described how they were forced to become fugitive as they travelled through Africa. Mclovin describes how he (sometimes unsuccessfully) navigated these dangers, including his attempts to evade the authorities, who also represented a threat:

It was difficult when I was in Ethiopia and Sudan. I was travelling and sleeping on the street, and getting arrested and getting out of the prison (Mclovin)

Libya is described as a particularly dangerous context that provided nothing in the way of protection or security. In the following extract Johannes describes how they must depend on themselves and also go into hiding in order to avoid harm:

What we find in Libya, everything there we do from our power. To get safe, you have to hide yourself (Yohannes)

It is interesting to note that the majority of our participants have taken an active decision to remain in Malta and 'wait out' the asylum process (see below). Mclovin and Juliet both took the decision to leave Malta in search of protection and tangible opportunities elsewhere in the European Union. Whilst they did not describe conditions such as those faced in Africa, it is clear that these fugitive routes were a source of physical and emotional precarity, marked by physical dangers and neglect, hope, risk, uncertainty and disappointment. Both Juliet and Mclovin pursued these journeys alone, trying their luck in more than one member state as minors; both eventually returned to Malta, in the case of Mclovin, this was against his wishes.

In the following excerpt, Juliet describes how she finds herself alone in a hotel in Italy. When the management realize that she is a minor and travelling alone, their key concern appears to be self-preservation and avoiding any trouble with the law, and so Juliet is moved on:

¹² R: I don't think that I, when I grow old, I don't think that you will be 16 again that you can enjoy then.

This time will never come back.

I: So you feel you lost a part of your life.

R: Exactly.



📷 African Migrants pray outside the Initial Reception Centre in Marsa (Photo: Kristóf Hölvényi)

Yes I went to Italy and I was stranded in a hotel with minor documents with me. Some people in that hotel, when they see it, “You are minor, what are you doing here? You shouldn’t be here alone. You have to leave, you’ll get us in trouble.”... There was another lady who I met here...I called her and she told me, “I am in Spain, if you want come to Spain.” Then I go to Spain and when I was in Spain, although is not legal but it’s a fact...” (Juliet)

3.5.2 FORCED TO BE FUGITIVE: LEGALLY HUMAN AND PERSONHOOD

The participants all described how the lack of documentation affects their lives in Malta. Even in the most mundane of activities, they are forced to defend or demonstrate their very presence in Malta in what is described as an exacerbating day-to-day ritual. In order to attend the interview, Osman had to travel from Gozo to Malta. In the following passage he expresses his frustration with this regular ordeal:

Not having the ID doesn’t help because at the end of the day, everyone will be like, “Okay but where is ID? Can I have your document?” for everything... Even today, I took the ferry to come, and they were asking me, “Where is your Gozo ID so you can take the fast ferry?” So yes, I come and go but what do you want, on a ferry they ask me too? Like “Where is your Gozo residence?” (Osman)

The lack of legal identity makes for an almost ghost-like experience, stripped of legal recognition and personhood, these young people are positioned as ‘outlaws’, neither acknowledged nor seen. Both Yohannes and Osman spoke of their love for sports; Yohannes trains with a basketball team, whilst Osman is eager to pursue his love for football. Both of the young men have found support from local teams. They are allowed to train, and have also made friends at different clubs:

I play in [mentions different localities] I played in different teams, in like 5...but then it’s what I was telling you, for getting the contract I couldn’t so I was just like training and playing sometimes but not officially (Osman)

...I’m not registered but I’m joining them in training because I don’t have ID. Without ID, you can’t do anything...If you don’t have paper, you are nothing (Yohannes)

Both of these passages demonstrate how recognition and inclusion depends on legal recognition, in the absence of identity documents they are forced to be fugitive players, a nonentity, denied the opportunity to belong to a team.

3.5.3 PARADOX OF THE FUGITIVE (S)TATE

The participants expressed how they believed the Maltese state had abdicated in its responsibility to protect them; the institutions responsible for their care (including legal guardianship for those recognized as minors) were also fugitive in as much as they were operating outside of the law, and were essentially nowhere to be seen. The following dialogue with the interviewer illustrates Mario’s resentment and hurt:

M: Ha nghidlek jien, tini pajjiż fl-Unjoni Ewropea, sewwa? Li jidhol tifel żagħżugh il-habs, m’ghandux għalfejn. Suppost iż-żgħażaġh fl-open centre, sa fejn naf jien. Jistennew ftit imbagħad jagħtuhom il-karta. Mhux jagħmel tliet xhur detention magħluq bejn erba’ hitan.

I: Ghamilt tliet xhur mela Safi?

M: Eżatt...Ma wegibtnix. Ghedtlek, tini pajjiż fl-Unjoni Ewropeja li jzomm tifel ta’ 16-il sena ġo ħabs, nghidlu jien? ...Issa għidli, inti qieghda hemm ġew bejn erba’ hitan, x’inhu d-dritt tiegħek? Qas biss taf għalfejn dhalt hemm ġeww. Għidli għala¹³(Mario)

In the following passage, Yohannes reflects on his sense of injustice at being sent to ‘prison’: How come you get somebody, about 4 months, just putting them inside, take his freedom? And escaping from his country because he’s not safe there and then he’s trusting this country in Europe. (Yohannes) Juliet also reflects on the apparent absurdity of her hopes of accessing education as she faced the prospect of being placed in a prison:

It was horrible. The first time I arrived, I thought I was in a prison. I never had any idea what it was, that there was the camp...what I thought was that when I arrived I would end up in a school, start studying, something like that. That’s what I was thinking (Juliet)

3.5.4 RESISTANCE TO THE FUGITIVE

Despite the precarious nature of their daily experiences in Malta, the participants also described a decisive commitment to remain in Malta and resist the fugitive existence. As such, remaining in Malta is understood as an active choice, a rebellion, a decision to wait out the asylum process and demand a place to belong. Osman describes how he reads the situation within the European Union, and understands that every choice will involve risk. As such, he tells us, he is ‘very patient’:

I see my friends that left, it was not so amazing because they don’t have the documents; they are in the same situation as me. So I know, even if before I was like “Ah but they’re doing better”, at the end of the day everyone is in the same situation in a different place....so for now, what I want to do is stay here, I don’t want to go anywhere else - as in, to France, Spain, to whatever - because I managed to find a good job and I’m making good money. So I want to stay here and then, if I get the document, I will go back [and look for my parents]. I’m fine as I am right now, I just want the document...(Osman)

Mohamed also told us that he has “taken the decision to stay in Malta, and be patient” (rather than risk trying to reach his family in France). In the following dialogue, Mario demonstrates a certain tenacity in his decision to remain in Malta and wait out the process, that is also driven by the need to be recognized as legally human, within, and neither beneath or outside of the law:

R: Jien kieku f’mohħi li nahrab minn Malta, kont ilu li hrabt għax shabi kollha harbu. Jien ma rridx nahrab.

¹³M: Let me tell you, pick a country in the European Union, right? That a young boy is put in prison, there’s no need. Young people should be in the open centre as far as I know. They wait for a while, and then they give them their papers. Not having to spend three months in detention closed within four walls.

I: So you spent three months in Safi?

M: Exactly...You didn’t answer me. I told you, tell me which country in the European Union keeps a 16-year-old boy in prison, I say? ... Now tell me, you are in there within four walls, what are your rights? You don’t even know why you are in there. Tell me why.

I: Ghaliex?

R: [Mario is writing something on his phone and shows the interviewer]

I: Hekk hu

R: Daqshekk

I: “I am a legal person”, indeed. Hekk hu. Vera, vera. So ghalhekk ma hrabtx...¹⁴ (Mario)

3.5.5 FUGITIVE EXISTENCE

The fugitive existence is being used to depict how the participants' encounter with the reception system affects them. Couched within the public narrative framing them as 'illegal immigrants' and rendering their lives in Malta as fugitive, the fugitive existence refers to both 'not being seen' in the sense that their individual needs and subjective experiences are neither understood nor acknowledged. It is also being used to describe how this encounter affected their experience of time in the present, as put on hold: lives suspended or hijacked by the logic of a legal or institutional temporal mechanism.

Both Mclovin and Yohannes expressed a sense of despair at not being recognized as minors. Yohanes started to raise his voice when describing how he was not believed, expressing and embodying a real sense of personal violation at being assigned an age that was not his, wherein his body is assessed, and his personal narrative is ignored. “They tell me, ‘You are tall and our results say you are not underage... No, you are not 16, you are 18’.” (Yohannes). In the following dialogue Mclovin describes how he felt both cheated and abandoned by the system, and the absence of someone to protect and guide him through the process left him with no alternative other than to accept his designated age and the consequences of this decision:

Mc: So they released me, as I told, they tricked me like on the paper. Like they didn’t tell me what they meant, so after I signed they told me that I agreed I was 18. Then I had to prepare for my interview. I passed and I got subsidiary and I was released.

I: Okay, and so you went from detention into the open centre. When you say you were tricked, how do you feel about that? Or how did you feel then?

Mc: Yeah, I mean, I was kind of felt like there was no one to help me, so I had to agree whatever they were doing (Mclovin)

In a similar trail of affect, Juliet describes how the absence of someone to recognize and witness her reality and the dangers that she had to confront alone, led to many years of what other participants also described as 'lost time':

And about the life, you can see how many years I wasted for nothing. Going to Italy, going to Spain, because there, there were no...if there were a guide that were close to me, I can open up, “Look, I am afraid, he is chasing me, I am running away because of this...” (Juliet)

This sense of lost time emerges throughout the narratives, and with it, another contradiction, a sense of urgency and the need to be doing more. The young people attempt to fill time with constant geographic

¹⁴ R: If I had put my mind to escape from Malta, I would have done it a while ago, as my friends have all escaped. I don't want to escape.
I: Why?
R: [Mario is writing something on his phone and shows the interviewer]
I: That's right.
R: That's it.
I: “I am a legal person”, indeed. That's right. True, true. So that's why you didn't escape...

movement (the journey to Malta, within Malta and attempts to carve out a route elsewhere in Europe), and this restlessness coalesces with lost time (see also above).

In different ways the participants describe their own subjective experience of how their own biographical projects, which include just having fun (“ċerti affarijiet irrid ingawdi bhal xi hadd li ghandu 16-il sena”¹⁵ Mario) are essentially put on hold, appropriated by the temporal workings of the legal processes and institutional settings (including detention, the age assessment process and the asylum process). For all of the participants, this was experienced as time suspended - they are forced to inhabit the unknown, and to wait. The fugitive present is experienced as a life in limbo, time – and the opportunities to act in their own time – is ephemeral and out of their control. Mario remained waiting in detention for two months after 'passing' the age assessment process, and when asked how this made him feel, he replied:

Hażina! Dik li ma taf xej, hażina. Ma jghidulek xej, qatt ma tkun taf x'inhu ġej ghalik. Forsi jien marridx ngħaddi dak iż-żmien u mmut. Nista’ ta’, nagħmel habel, immut u daqshekk. ... Ghax nippreferi mewt milli ngħaddi minn dak iż-żmien.¹⁶ (Mario)

Waiting is imposed, and comes to embody their day-to-day structure, subjective experiences, and transitions (see below). Osman was denied the opportunity to work whilst he waited for the outcome of the age assessment process, and his own biographical project was placed on hold. The process itself took over two years, by which time he had turned 18 – effectively, and paradoxically, denied both protection as a minor, the transition to employment associated with youth, and the legal rights attained by becoming an adult. Throughout the interview Mohamed repeatedly spoke about his wish to continue his education. In the following excerpt, he describes how the staff at the residential setting for minors (of whom he speaks fondly) asked him about his hopes for the future, but were apparently unable to provide information or the material support to pursue these plans:

I wanted to go to school, to learn something, because they [staff at the residential home for minors] were asking me, “What do you want to do?” but it was all like on paper, just they would give them us our per diem and we just go hang out, go eat and sleep, that’s it... I wanted to learn like being a barber or hairdresser but they were just promising me “one day, one day” but it never happened. (Mohamed)

In the absence of structured activities or employment, Mohammed's day to day life is experienced as mundane, a temporal existence marked by boredom and repetition, whilst his hopes to study remained fugitive.

“*This Policy document maintains that children need to be provided with the best possible conditions and opportunities to enjoy a safe, stimulating and happy childhood, and to grow, flourish, and be enabled to reach their full potential.*”

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 14

¹⁵ “Certain things I want to enjoy, just like someone who is 16 years of age”
¹⁶ Bad! Not knowing anything, it's bad. They do not tell you anything, you never know what's in store for you. Maybe I don't want to go through that time and I die. I could, I would take a rope, I would die and that's it... As I would prefer to die than to go through that time.

3.5.6 FUGITIVE PAST

The participants describe a fugitive past in different ways. In the following excerpt Mohamed was speaking about his experience in detention. The decision to remain in detention, despite the fear he was experiencing at that time, was based on the conviction that he had nothing to return to, as such, he would still be on the run,

[I asked to be sent back to Tunisia]... I was scared, but then changed my mind... because I didn't have anything in Tunisia to go back, so he even if I would go back, I would try to leave again. (Mohamed)

Whilst describing traumatic experiences prior to leaving their homes, and throughout their journey, a number of participants also expressed an intent to forget - or let go of - the past and focus on the present, and the future. In this sense, the past is fugitive as it fades away:

I've started to forget the things that happened in the past, now I'm like, "My life yesterday is not as it is today." I'm forgetting the things that happened in Hal Far, in detention...even when I was in the open centre, when I had nothing to do (Osman)

Mclovín also describes his attempts to narrate his past as an 'adventure' in order to protect his own sense of wellbeing,

I almost like forget mentally whatever happened [in Libya]...I don't like to see it as a negative because then it will have an impact on my mental...so I see it as like adventure, you know? (Mclovín)

3.5.7 FUGITIVE FUTURE

When asked to speak about their hopes for the future, every participant responded with an element of trepidation, every hope was framed with uncertainty, the precarity that weaves through their narratives of the past and the present reaching out and marking their future. For the majority, who were still waiting for the outcome of their asylum process (a process that had already put their lives on hold for years), their future in Malta is bound to their present and their past, insecure, difficult to grasp, fugitive in the imagination, and also as a temporal experience. Mario, for example, describes how his life has been put on hold since arriving in Malta almost 2 and a half years prior, still awaiting the outcomes of his request for asylum, each day is experienced as agonizingly slow,

... Stenna biex kont hawn...il-ġurnata b'xahar għamilha...halli tifhima. Meta tgħaddi ġurnata qisek għaddej xahar¹⁷ (Mario)

Interestingly, even those who have been granted protection also expressed a real sense of insecurity, their legal protection – that was granted by the fugitive state – providing little in the way of reassurance within the broader political context. When asked about his plans for the future, Mclovín framed his response in relation to policy changes to the Special Residence Authorisation¹⁸, indicating that he can't stick to a plan because he can't place trust in the institutions, or by implication, his future:

Mc: I think they change like every six months or...

I: In what ways?

Mc: I don't know how to explain it...maybe with like what's happening with Malta in the news...

¹⁷... Wait, for me to be here...a day counts as a month...so you understand this. When a day passes, it's like a month has gone by.

¹⁸In November 2020 the GoM announced changes to the Special Residence Authorisation (SRA), a policy introduced in 2018 in place of the Temporary Humanitarian Protection – New (THPN). Maltese NGOs have since condemned these revisions that included restrictions to family-oriented measures and other measures that they argued would lead to further social exclusion and poverty (Times of Malta, 2020)

I: In what sense? With the asylum seekers and with the SRA?

Mc: Yeah, I think so.

I: You have subsidiary protection so how does that affect you?

Mc: I feel like we get the 3-year document and I feel like maybe one day when you go to renew they will say, like, "Okay we're not going to renew it."

Juliet expresses these same fears, despite being granted protection in Malta she told us "I think the Government have the right to change it". She also describes the stress involved in renewing her documents, a process that is also marked by insecurity:

And apart from that one, this document, since the last time I renew it, you know how long it is now? I haven't even get my working permit, it's going to expire on the 28th of this month and the ID card is still not out. So I'm still waiting, sometimes you will have the working permit runs out and I don't know how they want people to use that to work (Juliet).

3.5.8 FUGITIVE TRANSITIONS

The participants all expressed an interest in continuing their education, and securing reliable employment (of note is that only Juliet expressed a hope in one day having children of her own). What is clear by now, is that the biographical projects of each of the participants is very much in flux, their subjective experience of time shaped by their encounter with border practices such as detention, and broader institutional processes including age assessment and the asylum process. Whilst each of the participants expressed an interest in continuing their education (and two of them were in education thanks to the individualised support provided by residential homes), they also described how this transition was framed within, and dependent upon securing legal status. Juliet describes how her hopes of accessing education were disrupted by the legal process. At the time her wishes were dismissed, and she was advised that studying would not be an option made available to her beyond the age of 18 (presumably due to her precarious legal status and, linked to this, her very limited material resources) and that as such, exercising her right to an education would be a 'waste' of time:

One thing I missed was I wanted to study. I was telling them [social workers and care workers] I wanted to study, I want to go to school. They tell me, "You cannot, you are not allowed because you are immigrant. When you are 18, they will stop you, you will not study anymore, it's time wasted." It was difficult so at that age...till now, I still miss that age that I didn't study (Juliet)

Juliet looks back on this decision, taken on her behalf, as a missed opportunity and time lost. Since then she has managed to attend courses through her work, and whilst she still looks forward to continuing her education in the future, she mourns the loss of this opportunity within her own desired temporal biographical project.

Mario also expressed a wish to continue with his education in the future, but that in the absence of any form of material support, such a choice would involve too much risk:

Qaluli imma ma tajtx każ. Kont tajjeb hafna l-iskola imma...kif ha nfhemek? Kont nibqa' l-iskola u ma nahdimx imma kif ha tlahhaq bejn l-iskola u x-xoghol? Jekk int wahdek f'dil-biċċa xoghol? Trid thallas, eżempju, kiri u tmur l-iskola...¹⁹(Mario)

¹⁹ They told me, but I didn't bother. I used to do well in school but... how shall I explain to you? I would have stayed in school, and not work, but how can you manage to juggle school and work? If you are alone in this thing? You have to pay, for example, rent, and you have to go to school...

The fugitive present feeds into a fugitive future that is unclear, time is suspended, and as such, transitions are also put on hold. For most of our participants, their hopes for the future, and plans for their route ahead, are dependant on the outcome of their asylum process. Mario feels that all his plans for the future are out of his control, he cannot live his own life:

Għax jien ma nistax ngħix hajti. Ma nistax insiefer, ma nistax inżewweġ, ma nista’ nagħmel xejn²⁰. (Mario)

For Yohannes, protection and a ‘document’ would mean he “can visit Europe...learn more...gain more experience” whilst for Mohamed, his future employment depends on the ‘document’:

M: I need the document for a job, because without this document I cannot work legally, or have a contract...

I: So you think having protection will make your life better? To have the document, the protection, you have better work opportunities?

R: Yes. (Mohamed)

“Adolescent children shall be fully informed of the possible adverse effects that certain actions may have on their health, their learning ability, expenses and their general overall development. Students should also be made fully aware of the importance of completing school, since the need for education grows in proportion to the increasing need for an advanced, skilled and flexible workforce. Thus, realising and maximising one’s potential, be it in the academic or vocational field, is crucial to student motivation, attendance and achievement. Education plays a determining role in the psychosocial and academic development of the child and his/her eventual prospects in the labour market. Thus, adolescent children who are neither in education, nor in employment or training (NEETs) reflect a great loss of human potential and are at higher risk of multiple forms of deprivation ”

NATIONAL CHILDREN’S POLICY, P. 78

²⁰ As I cannot live my life. I cannot travel, I cannot get married, I cannot do anything.

3.6 Being their own cartographer

This theme refers to how the young people want to be their own cartographer. The participants all shared a desire to take control of their own journey, to plot their own map and to live their lives. As noted above, in the absence of secure pathways, protection and guidance from key institutions, they also understand that seeking their own biographical solutions involve risk and uncertainty within uncharted territory. Their choices are limited and they are denied the navigational tools to map their journey. Our participants had at some point all taken the decision to wait out the asylum process and remain in Malta, but it is a choice that comes with consequences that are not of their making or favour. Whilst their day to day lives are filled with work, and to a certain degree, hobbies, they are forced to put their decisions and transitions on hold for years, whilst the future still remains fugitive. In essence they are always active, as if treading water, but never moving in a direction. Mario describes himself as a ship that has been shackled by an anchor that represents the ‘system’:

Dik l-ankra, ngħidu l-problemi, u l-vapur jien. Dik qed iżzommni. Tajtek eżempju jiġifieri...M’għandix għalfejn ngħid problemi, Malta, daqshekk...Malta hux. In-nies m’għandhomx x’jaqsmu. Is-sistema.²¹ (Mario)



²¹ That anchor, let's say the problems, and I am the ship. That's what's holding me. I gave you an example I mean... I don't need to say problems, Malta, that's it... it's Malta you see. The people don't have anything to do with it. The system.

The young participants had a tendency to frame, and make sense of their present within a broader temporal journey wherein their past is always present (even if they actively try to 'forget', see above) and affecting how they imagine and face the future. When speaking about the ongoing uncertainty they experience, we are reminded that nothing compares with the many dangers each of them faced in their journey to Malta, and so they feel prepared:

When you put that belief in reality and you just cover your face and you say, “Nothing gonna happen.” Even when we crossed the sea, I didn’t think it’s dangerous. I’m thinking like, the way I left...it was very challenging, to go up to the mountains, come down, and cross all these days by walk... You just walk, walk, when you get tired, you sit. People who crossing you, they tell you to run, you run. Two days for crossing the desert. That is the challenging. That is the hardest one. (Yohannes)

Mario told us that today he is 'fearless', and the scariest part of his journey is behind him:

M: Ghax il-biċċa tal-biża' għaddejtha

I: X'kienet il-biċċa tal-biża'?

M: Meta kont fuq id-dgħajsa²² (Mario)

This sense of fearlessness however, should not be confused with recklessness. Their journey demands a reflexive process wherein they navigate risk with the best of their knowledge and with the limited resources made available to them. For example, in the following passage, Mclovin describes how he skilfully navigated the asylum processes of another EU member state and Malta, moving between them in order to avoid homelessness:

I was going back and forth [between country and Malta]. So I stayed there I think for 6 months, then came back, stayed I think in Malta for 3 months, then I went back for 2 months and came back... Because I was in [country] because they gave me a decision and when you take an appeal you have to leave the camp. So I didn’t want to be homeless. (Mclovin)

Osman had to leave the residence for unaccompanied minors when he managed to secure a job in Gozo (since residential support is not provided in the sister island). Likewise, Mohamed was not unhappy living at the residence, but in order to find work he was forced to give up the security it provided:

It was difficult for me to find a job. To be able to work I had to leave [the residential home for minors] as I wasn’t allowed to do a job at night. My job is at night. (Mohamed)

Juliet also describes how securing employment provided the financial security to live alone, but that being alone came with its own risks:

I’ve been living on my own...I’ve moved some times, from one place to another. I changed apartment a lot. Once you have a job, you can be able to earn your living, so that wasn’t a big deal. The problem was, if I wasn’t intelligent enough, maybe I would end up as a junkie or some kind of drug addict out there because of the experience of not having a support.. (Juliet)

²²M: As I already went through the scary part.
I: What was the scary part?
M: When I was on the boat.

The confidence that the participants describe as they learn to navigate risks, sits alongside narratives of being lost. The following excerpts suggest that issues of temporality raised above – waiting, transitions and the biographical project - must also be understood within the Maltese context, wherein our participants are expected to navigate a space that is not their own, without tools and where the light is fugitive.

In describing one of the major differences between the detention centre and the open centre, many of the respondents referred to retrieving their phone. The phone transcended the borders of detention, and also of Malta, providing a link to family back home, and elsewhere. In the following passage, Johannes describes how he and others used the phone to understand the relocation process as they waited in detention. As such, it provided an important source of information, until it was taken from them:

When the country start taking people, we realised that most of us, our names were not there. We had also people in my journey, they are indicated so they tried to follow in internet, they found that the way to some countries and then when they ask the office, the office told them, “Where you get that information?” and when they showed them, they took their telephone. (Yohannes)

Despite expressing an interest in accessing education, Mohamed was not familiar with any of the educational institutes in Malta. He was left in the dark, oblivious to what the local context might be able to offer in terms of pursuing an education. The participants were not provided with a map (metaphorical or physical) with which they might move through and navigate the new terrain and the inherent risks along different paths. As such they had to navigate the space alone, and were also exposed to abuse:

I was lost because there were nobody to coach me. This is how they lived the life here, this is how things should be. So I was lost, so just continue lost for those 2 years, without nothing... the people you think will guide me were the people that take advantage of me. Everybody is happy to see a minor who is lost because... (Juliet)

The affects of navigating a journey without tools are experienced in different ways. The participants speak about wanting to take control over their own journey, but they do not want to take their journey alone. In the following excerpt Mario describes his wish for freedom, but not a freedom that is imbued with risk and dangers, leaving him isolated and bereft of protection. In order to 'live his life' he is asking for support:

Li ttihom liberta’...mhux inti tiddeċiedi fej ha jkomplu hajtu...[u] li taraw x’jixtiequ...per eżempju l-iskola, forsi jridu jkomplu l-iskola. Forsi jridu jghixu hajjithom bħal kulhadd, igawdu...Mhux għal kbar qed nghidlek, għaż-żgħar. Biex ikun jista’ jghix hajtu²³. (Mario)

In the following excerpt, Mohamed explains how he has had to navigate his expectations in Malta and, in the absence of his family to rely on, learn to rely on no one, and to trust no one but himself:

When I was in Tunisia, my expectation was that once you arrive to Europe, you find a job ready, but what I found was different because life was difficult for me here. I have learnt so much, to be independent, to rely on himself. I had to find a job and learn many things because I was alone and there was no one to help me, so I had to learn a lot like I was growing up differently... I have to trust myself, I have friends, but trust is different (Mohamed)

²³That you give them freedom... not that you decide where they get to continue their life [and] to see what they want... for example school, maybe they want to continue studying. Maybe they want to live their lives like everyone else, having some fun... I'm not saying for the adults, it's the young ones. So one can live their life.

This sense of 'being alone' needs to be understood within the broader political, social and legal context in Malta. Whilst the institutions responsible for the border apparatus (detention, open centres) and gatekeepers of rights (age assessment and asylum process) are at the foreground of the participants narratives, institutions such as the family are elsewhere, and other institutions that should provide a degree of protection, stability, care and direction (a road map if you will), and the resources to access basic rights and secure the best interest of the child (including, but not limited to the educational system, the welfare system, the legal guardian) are noticeably absent. Being alone then, should not be confused with becoming independent (which is what they pursue), but rather is expressed as isolation and becoming disembedded, atomised and discarded (see above). At this point, it is worth noting that those participants who had been recognized as minors were not familiar with the role, or the individual who was their legal guardian.

In the following passage Mclovin, who has been granted protection, suggests that the absence of guidance implies that no one really cares:

I think they should give them better guidelines because they will focus more on giving documents or not...but they get documents, they don't really do follow-up on them. They don't really care, you know? (Mclovin)

A lack of care is experienced in different ways. Like Mohamed, Yohannes' experiences with the institutions in Malta have taught him not to trust, since he believes no one cares. Yohannes left his home in Africa without informing his family - he was intent on pursuing his education in Europe - only informing them once he arrived in Libya. He described his decision with a smile on his face that indicated an awareness of the risks he had taken. This decision to go it alone is entangled with a need for guidance along the way. The kind of support Yohannes tells us he needs most is in an "older person" to look out for him, someone he can trust so as not to be led astray. In the absence of such support, Yohannes has also learnt to rely on himself for guidance:

There is no one going to say or ask you, tell you or give you advice. Why would they give advice? They doesn't know you, doesn't care about you... As I told you, sometimes when I sit by myself, I think about things, like, "That is bad, be careful." (Yohannes)

Juliet echoes this need for an older trusted person to provide guidance:

...not support with money, support with how you live the life, like "Not like this, you make it like this, this is good." Someone to lead me a little bit...Sometimes it might be motherly, sometimes it might be fatherly. Somebody a little bit older than you that can sincerely lead your way and tell you, "Okay, since you missed these classes, start this one, this will help you." (Juliet)

3.7 Navigational tools: a compass, a lighthouse, a star

In contrast to feeling abandoned, the participants did share moments and examples where they felt they were not alone. This was something that struck the researchers, perhaps not only because of what was

"Policy Objectives: Strengthen support to children as they go through the transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood, to safeguard physical, sexual and mental health development"

NATIONAL CHILDREN'S POLICY, P. 68

shared, but also how these stories were narrated: it was made clear to us that particular - perhaps special - individuals made a real difference to these young peoples' lives. We are describing these individuals as 'navigational tools'. This theme represents those few individuals who embodied a source of trust - that might be a compass to provide guidance and direction, a lighthouse to alert against dangers, or a star - providing warmth and light in what is otherwise a dark, precarious journey marked by uncertainty. Some of these individuals were in Malta, others were elsewhere. In contrast to those individuals within the system who the participants described as ignoring their needs, or even violating their sense of self, these individuals provided cartographic potential, embedding (albeit fleetingly) the young person as they try to make sense of what has happened, their present and also their journey ahead.

3.7.1 BEING RESCUED

In contrast to the sense of being 'intercepted yet discarded' that we illustrated above, in the following excerpt Juliet describes how different social workers have been the source of both neglect (particularly when she first arrived in Malta), but also of rescue:

Yes. They [social workers] were always the one that rescued me. Although they never asked or noticed when I entered here at that age. (Juliet)

She goes on to tell us of the dangers she faced in detention for more than six months (see above). Juliet had not presented as a minor, but over time one individual (a volunteer) had continued to keep an eye on her. She was able to both 'see' her and also the precarious situation Juliet was in:

That was when I saw that lady. She asked me why I was crying, what happened to you? I told her that somebody hurt me. She told me, "I asked you last time, you are very small, you look like a minor, you didn't want to say. Something is happening to you." (Juliet)

3.7.2 SOURCE OF HOPE AND STRENGTH

Mario's sister travelled to Malta and visited him whilst he was detained in Marsa. This visit is described as providing him with the hope to carry on living:

Tatni l-enerġija...fil-qalb imma, mhux fil-ġisem. Fil-qalb. L-enerġija li nista' nibqa' haj²⁴ (Mario)

Mario looks through his phone to show us a photo of when his sister visited him, 'Ara d-dmugh f'ghajnejha²⁵ he says, as evidence that he is loved. He also speaks of his fiancé and his family as the support he needs to drag the rope, the weight of his problems, 'li ttini s-sapport. Li tiflah miegħi l-ħabel'²⁶

3.7.3 SOURCE OF CARE

When we asked Mclovin about the services he had received since he arrived in Europe, he described how, upon arrival in Sweden, he was immediately assigned a guardian²⁷:

When I was in Sweden, when you're there as a minor, then give you something called "the good man" to look after you and stuff like that. She was a really good person. (Mclovin)

²⁴ She gave me energy...in my heart though, not in my body. In my heart. The energy that I can stay alive.

²⁵ Look at the tears in her eyes.

²⁶ That supports me. To carry the rope with me.

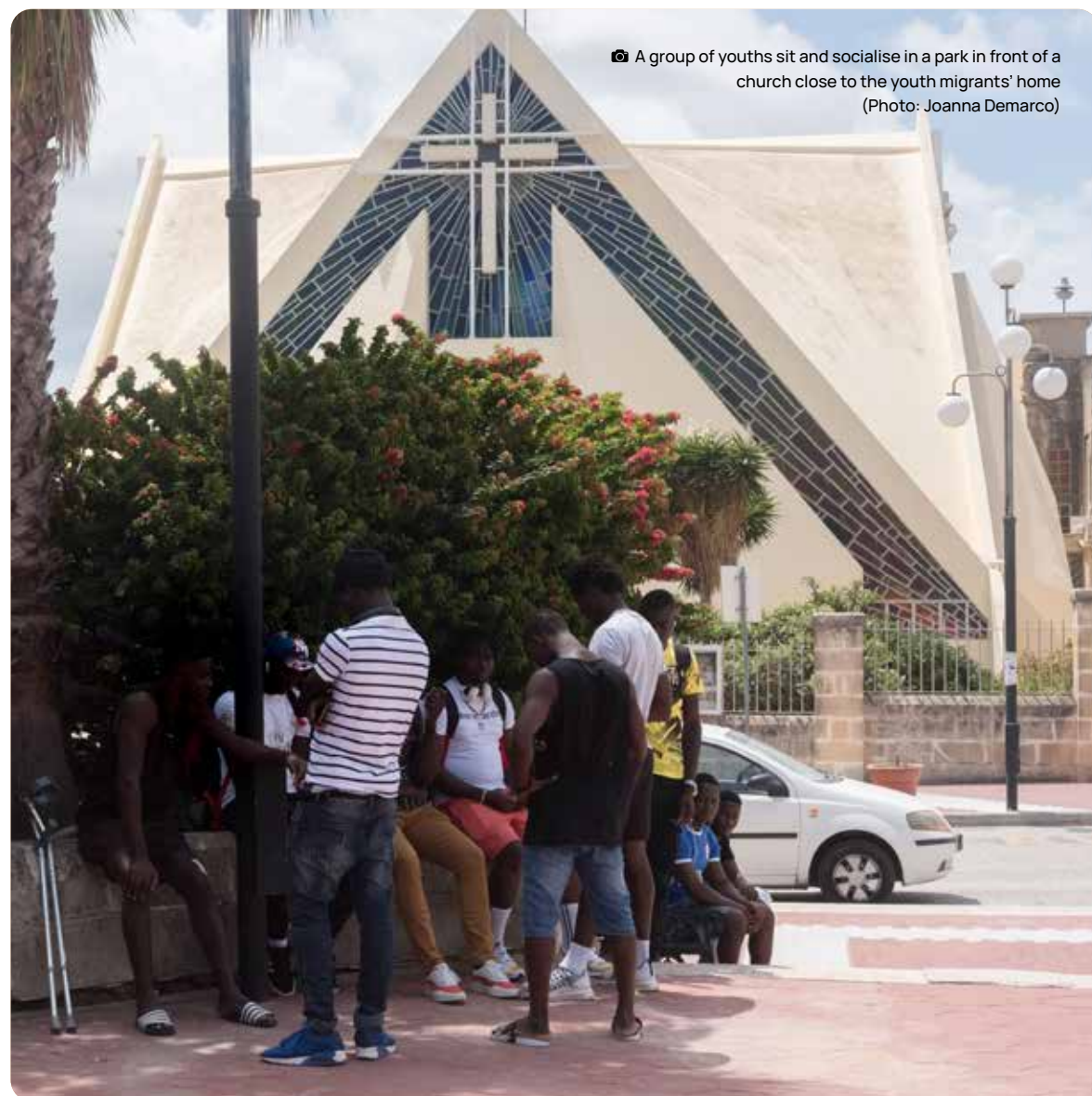
²⁷ In Sweden each unaccompanied minor (including Dublin cases) is assigned a guardian prior to age assessment. In the case that an age assessment leads to the person being considered an adult, the assignment ceases. (Swedish Refugee Law Centre, 2021)

In the following excerpt Osman describes his relationship with one particular social worker in the open centre in Hal Far. The narrative captures the importance of this individual in Osmans' life, a source of trusted advice and love:

‘when I found a job in Gozo I talked to [name] about it, and then I moved..... she was amazing and very important because she helped me to go to school. If you had like any problem, you knew that you could talk to her and she would come and help you fix it... Even when I was angry or when I was coming back home very angry, I would see [name] and she would make something and I would be very happy and would feel very good. I trust her. I’m glad and thankful that...’ (Osman)

Despite various attempts, once Osman left the open centre he was not allowed to maintain contact with the social worker. In many ways the following passage suggests a cruel paradox within the system. The social worker placed within the centre was a source of much needed care, guidance and warmth that Osman still needed, but this care was subsequently and painfully terminated with apparently little consideration for how this would affect his wellbeing:

I cannot go in the minor section anymore so once I tried but I couldn’t manage to get through to her...I tried to go to Hal Far to see her and when I showed the asylum seeker document, they said I couldn’t go in. I said, “Please can I see my mother [name]?” and they said, “No you cannot come in.” And I didn’t have her number so I couldn’t contact her. I was very angry...(Osman)



📷 A group of youths sit and socialise in a park in front of a church close to the youth migrants' home (Photo: Joanna Demarco)

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Malta has been receiving unaccompanied minors since the late 1990s. For the past twenty-five years, children and young people have been crossing the Mediterranean Sea, alone, in search of refuge. This is a well trodden route, a familiar and yet discarded narrative. They leave behind war, poverty, family and loved ones to find safety and an opportunity, to pursue an education, employment and dreams of a better life. Each individual journey traverses space and time, reaching into the future, and as the landscape changes and evolves, so does the child – the body, the person, the journey, the hopes and the fears are one. One cannot separate the child from the body, nor the journey from the child: their story is evolving, unfolding, becoming and unique.

To 'rescue' another individual implies that we recognize a shared humanity. To 'rescue', implies that we not only recognize our vulnerability as human beings, but also extend and endorse the embodied right to dignity, and to be protected from suffering and pain, at all times, in all spaces. As a society we also understand that our vulnerability is not shared. When children and young people are exposed to danger, they are particularly vulnerable, hence the special rights accorded to them under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Our participants were very clear: one is not saved if one is violated; rights become merely abstract when they are dissociated from the person retrieved from the sea – a child, a young person, is more than flesh. They embody an evolving narrative of becoming, they come with hopes and plans for their future. In 2013, then Prime Minister Joseph Muscat acknowledged this very principle when he stated that "Dignity does not mean saving people from death and caging them", and committed to ending child detention in Malta (Malta Today, 2014). The findings of this research highlight how, eight years on from this important declaration and commitment to do better, and after a quarter of a century of intercepting asylum seekers in the Mediterranean Sea under the premise of 'rescue', in Malta children continue to be detained – imprisoned – in horrific conditions, abandoned and exposed to violence. The State has not only failed in its obligation to protect the rights of children and young people seeking asylum, but has actually been a source of terror, contributing to the violation of their fundamental human rights.

Situated beneath the law, their bodies and their narratives are violated; situated beyond the law, their rights are denied. The findings of this research highlight the devastating effects of being imprisoned and exposed to violence and ongoing precarity. Upon release from detention, young people are cast out, they

“Dignity does not mean saving people from death and caging them”

(THEN) PRIME MINISTER JOSEPH MUSCAT (MALTA TODAY, 2014)

are 'free, but not free'. Their narrative, their daily experiences are marked by the temporal precarity of waiting. Whether it is a football match, or participation in Maltese society, they are forced to stand on the side lines, forced to be fugitive. The participants describe how their own life decisions are put on hold as they wait for others to take a decision on them. They navigate this process, living in the contradictions, a life in limbo. The young people explained how they carry the risk of homelessness, unemployment, illegalization and marginalisation alone. They are isolated, and in the absence of care and access to basic human rights, they are forced to be self-sufficient, navigating precarity alone, without a map. To be clear, our participants are prepared to continue their journey alone. They continue to learn how to negotiate risk, as they simultaneously negotiate their own sense of becoming. Resisting the life of a fugitive, they choose to remain in Malta as a way of taking control of their individual physical and subjective journey, they want to be their own cartographer. And at the same time, their message is very clear: "I need someone to care". The findings also provide important insights into how the presence of just one trusted individual can make a real difference to their sense of wellbeing, providing a source of guidance in the otherwise fugitive light, a compass in uncharted territory.

This report concludes with six very simple recommendations that are presented as basic principles. Each recommendation responds to the themes that we presented in the key findings and have been developed in such a way that prioritises the participants' needs and best interests, a cardinal principle in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The recommendations do not stand alone, but rather, must be understood as intrinsically linked to each other. To be very clear, these recommendations are firmly located within the values and commitments already established and promised by the Maltese State; Nothing more, nothing less. Their implementation however, will require a determined commitment to shift away from treating unaccompanied minors as a matter of border security, to prioritising human security, the rights of the child, and the rights of all ages in and of themselves. The transition to legal adulthood should be accompanied by reaffirming and honouring personhood. As such, the recommendations seek to position the State, first and foremost, as the guardian of human rights, and are accompanied by a simple appeal to the Government - to do what it promised to do.

“Guiding principles that underpin the National Children’s Policy:

Protection – to guarantee the safety of children by protecting them from significant harm;

Provision – to cover the special needs of children and their right to access quality services, including the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to leisure, play and cultural activities;

Participation – to ensure that children influence decision-making which affects their lives to bring about positive change ”

NATIONAL CHILDREN’S POLICY, P.13

“This policy highlights the uniqueness of each child and adopts a life course approach to child wellbeing. The vision of this policy is, that all children are to be loved, supported, and protected. ”

MICHAEL FALZON, MINISTER FOR THE FAMILY, CHILDREN’S RIGHTS AND SOCIAL SOLIDARITY;
MINISTER’S FOREWORD, NATIONAL CHILDREN’S POLICY, P.4

Care. It is time to see and recognize every unaccompanied minor and to see everyone for the unique individual that they are, and to provide a level of love and care that responds to their individual and particular needs.

Respect. In simple terms, we must treat them with the respect and dignity that they deserve. This necessitates that children are included in decision-making processes on their own lives, in a way that is accessible, meaningful, and which allows children to be heard.

Protect. There is an urgent need to prioritise the security, safety and rights of every child, young person and the rights of all ages in and of themselves. It is also critical to commit to ensuring that the transition to legal adulthood is experienced within a process that reaffirms and honours the value of each individual person.

Guidance. Provide every young person with individualised support within a relationship that extends beyond the boundaries of an institution. A single individual can be a trusted source of light when the young person cannot see for the dark, be it a youth worker, a social worker, a mentor, someone reliable to accompany and offer support so that they may map out and navigate their own future, be it in education, employment, relationships or other paths.

Wellbeing. Every child and young person needs opportunities to have fun, to make friends, to relax and to feel that they belong. Provide unaccompanied minors with the protection and material resources necessary for them to access education whilst also living in affordable and safe housing. Time and resources are needed to ensure that policy, service provision and the broader environment is working towards improving and enhancing the life of every unaccompanied minor living in Malta.

Hope. Young people need opportunities to feel included, to develop a sense of belonging, to establish relationships and friendships, and to participate in the day-to-day life of Maltese society. A home should offer hope, and the opportunity for every young person to plan for their future.

“Whilst placing the child at the centre of its attention, this policy considers investment in children as a precondition for the welfare and advancement of society ”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY, NATIONAL CHILDREN’S POLICY, P.6

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APPENDIX A

INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Maria Pisani, and I am Senior Lecturer with the Department of Youth & Community Studies, at the University of Malta. In collaboration with the Jesuit Refugee Service, Malta, we are conducting a piece of research that seeks to explore how young refugees in Malta perceive, experience and navigate their transition to adulthood and independence. I am the Principle Investigator for this research. I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be supporting our efforts to inform and strengthen the asylum process for unaccompanied minors who seek asylum in Malta. Your decision to participate (or not to participate) will have no bearing on your ability to access services provided by JRS. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting around 60 minutes. The interview will be held at a time and space convenient for you.

Audio recording will be used during the interview to allow for later data analysis.

In the event that the interview must be held online as a result of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, the interview will be held at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will be video recorded via the Zoom recording function and transcribed. Zoom makes use of end-to-end encryption as a key feature, meaning the interview and the video-recorded session will only be visible to the Principle Investigator and the Research Assistant.

Data collected will be treated confidentially. Participants will be given a pseudonym to conceal their identity and any identifying information will be altered or omitted.

Video recordings will be stored in an encrypted manner on a password-protected computer, as well as on the Zoom Cloud and personal data will be stored securely and separately from the pseudonymised data. The videorecorded session will be deleted from the Zoom Cloud and computer storage by not later than December 2021.

Your name and surname, or any other personally identifiable details, will not be used in the study. Data collected will be anonymised, and only the Principle Investigator and the Research Assistant will have access to your personal details.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be stored anonymously. If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you, and your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference. Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail on maria.pisani@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,

Maria Pisani
Principle Investigator
maria.pisani@um.edu.mt

APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Project title: "Young asylum seekers living in Malta: Exploring youth transitions"

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in this research study, and this consent form specifies the terms of my participation.

1. I have been given written and verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. I understand that my participation in this research will have no bearing on my ability to access services provided by JRS. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased for as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data will render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask me questions about my experiences as an unaccompanied minor within the Maltese asylum and reception system. I am aware that the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that the interview will be recorded and later transcribed verbatim. I understand that should the interview be conducted online, it will be video recorded by means of the Zoom video recording function, and audio will be transcribed verbatim. I am aware that Zoom makes use of end-to-end encryption as a key feature, meaning the interview and the video-recorded session will only be visible to the parties involved in said session.
5. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned.
6. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications, reports or presentations arising from this research.
7. I have been informed that the pseudonymised verbatim transcript will be stored securely and separately from the video-recording, which will be kept in an encrypted file on a password protected computer as well as on the Zoom Cloud in the case of a zoom interview. The video/ recording will be destroyed and deleted from Zoom Cloud and computer upon completion of the study, not later than December 2021.
8. I have understood that personal data will be stored securely and separately from the pseudonymised data. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cupboard. I have understood that the consent form will be stored securely and retained for a period of three years following this study, after which it will be destroyed.
9. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
10. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study.
11. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
12. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

13. I have been informed that only the Primary Investigator and Research assistant will have access to the identifiable data collected.

14. I have been informed that the study may be available at the University of Malta Library and is therefore accessible to students, staff and members of the public.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Dr Maria Pisani _____

Principle Investigator
(maria.pisani@um.edu.mt)

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Young asylum seekers living in Malta: Exploring youth transitions

Allocated name/code:

Nationality:

Legal status:

Age:

Date of arrival:

Residence (open centre/residential setting/private accommodation)

How old were you when you arrived in Malta?

Did you tell the authorities how old you were? (or give them another age? If so, why?)

KEY QUESTIONS:

- We are trying to understand young migrants' experiences of arrival and living in Malta. Can you share your story with me?
- I'm particularly interested to learn more about what you were hoping would happen once you reached Malta/Europe?
- Can you share your experiences with me? What actually happened once you arrived? Why did this happen?
- How did you manage to 'get through' this experience? How did you cope, what helped you?
- As you look forward, what do you see? What would you like to happen? What do you need?

Can we draw a timeline of what you went through since arriving in Malta, together? (arrival, IRC?, age assessment, care order, transition to centre? Other residence? Asylum process...)

POSSIBLE PROBES:

A. Initial Reception, asylum and age assessment

- Can you tell me about your experience upon arrival in Malta? (mode of arrival, reception conditions, time spent in IRC/other detention centre? and experience of same)
- Did anybody explain to you what rights you had as a minor, since you were under 18 years old upon arrival?
- Can you tell me about your asylum request?
- Can you tell me about the age determination process?
- How did you cope with this process (if at all)? What support did you find? Who provided this support? How did this support (or lack of) affect you?

B. Care Order

- Did anyone explain to you what a care order / legal guardian is?
- Is it something that you wanted/ would have wanted? Why/Why not?
- Were you placed under a care order? (if no, why not?)
- If yes, can you share this experience with me? What kind of support did you receive? Who provided this support?

- What kind of support did you need?
- If yes, do you know who your legal guardian was? Can you share your experiences within this relationship? (regular contact? How often? How did you make contact? By appointment?)
- Do you still have contact? (if yes, how often?)

C. Transition from IRC

- Can you describe what happened after you left IRC?
- What kind of support did you receive to help you in this transition? Who provided this support? (material, information, emotional, other?)
- What kind of support did you need?

D. Legal status/protection needs/ realities and expectations

- What protection/legal status/papers do you have?
- What difference has it made to your life?
- What were you expecting from this protection? Has it met your expectations? (if yes, how? If no, why not?)

E. Transition to Education?

- Were you given the option to go back to education when you arrived?
- Were you hoping to continue your education in Malta? What would you have wished to study?

F. Transition to Employment (and education?)

G. Transition to independent living (and what does this mean?)

H. Transition to [anything else participant may have mentioned, e.g. travel, return?, relationships, lifestyle choices/hobbies/sports]

I. Hope and aspirations

- What is your life like at the moment? Can you share your day to day experiences with me?
- How do you imagine your future? Over the next year? 5 years? What do you hope to be doing? Can you share some of your hopes with me? (family? Education? Travel? Work? Others?)
- Have any of your hopes changed since you arrived in Malta? Why/Why not?

