Conference Paper
Albania: Reviewing the country of origin literature and addressing the gaps in research

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1. The main argument of this short conference paper is that the country guidance for Albania which is used in decision making on asylum claims for unaccompanied young people is not fit for purpose. Overall there is a lack of robust research data on unaccompanied Albanian minors. Reliable quantitative data is patchy. Likewise, in-depth qualitative research is scarce. Without sufficient research data to draw on, country guidance can be seen as problematic, as it is not adequately informed by the lived experiences of the young people.

2. In terms of general research on unaccompanied minors within the European Union and internationally, there is a small but growing body of literature (for example, Bloch et al 2010; Chase 2010; Chase 2013; UNHCR/UNICEF 2014; Allsopp, Chase and Mitchell 2015; Cemlyn and Nye 2012; House of Lords 2016; Allsopp and Chase 2017; Humphris and Sigona 2017; Menjivar and Perreira 2017). Research indicates that migrant children are vulnerable to exploitation, violence and trauma at all stages of the migration process – prior to migrating, in transit and on arrival (Bloch et al 2010; Chase 2010; Chase 2013; Menjivar and Perreira 2017).

3. For unaccompanied children arriving in the UK, the state has a legal duty to protect their rights, and to work in their best interests to find 'durable solutions' in childhood and the transition to adulthood (Allsopp, Chase and Mitchell 2017). However, research highlights that instead, the needs of unaccompanied children are often made secondary to national concerns about immigration (Cemlyn and Nye 2012; House of Lords 2016; Allsopp and Chase 2017; Menjivar and Perreira 2017). Child migrants are thus treated first and foremost as migrants and only secondly as children. The House of Lords inquiry by the European Committee in 2016 into unaccompanied children in the European Union notes, for example, that in terms of the provision for and protection of unaccompanied minors, there is 'a huge gap between theory and practice' (House of Lords 2016: 14).

4. Research points to a general culture of suspicion and disbelief (Cemlyn and Nye 2012; House of Lords 2016; Allsopp and Chase 2017; Humphris and Sigona 2017; Menjivar and Perreira 2017). The image of how a child migrant should be is often centred on a child much younger than the actuality of most child migrants. The majority of child migrants are teens and male and do not fit the cultural image of the 'deserving' child migrant. The literature points to how compassion is often displaced by suspicion and fear – fear of crime, threats to national security, and population imbalance (Cemlyn and Nye 2012; House of Lords 2016; Allsopp and Chase 2017; Humphris and Sigona 2017; Menjivar and Perreira 2017). Unaccompanied children thereby come to be seen as 'dangerous children, when in fact they are children in danger' (House of Lords 2016: 22).

5. In terms of the particular experiences of Albanian children who arrive in the UK unaccompanied, there is very little specific research (notable exceptions include Orgocka 2010; Lenja et al 2015;; Vathi and Zajmi 2017; Cena et al 2018; Hynes and Dew 2018). What we do know from government data is that children and young people from Albania form the third largest group of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in the UK (*Walking the Tightrope* 2017). Nonetheless, their chances of

gaining refugee status are incredibly low (Refugee Council 2015). We know also that around 90% of unaccompanied children and young people arriving in the UK are male (Madill 2018; https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-april-to-june-2016/asylum#data-tables).

6. Additionally we are aware from practitioners working in the field, and from the testimonies of the young people themselves, that this group of children and young people include many who have been impacted by blood feuds, by domestic violence, by labour or sexual exploitation, by trafficking, or by persecution based on their sexuality, gender or ethnicity (Madill 2018; *Walking the Tightrope* 2017).

7. However, if we look to the country guidance on Albania there is little specific attention to the particular circumstances of children, unaccompanied or otherwise. While there are separate reports on sexual orientation and gender identity, on ethnic minority groups, on blood feuds, and on female victims of trafficking, there is no separate guidance report on children.

8. The Albania country guidance from 2016 on Female Victims of Trafficking cited research from UNICEF which does make mention of children:

> "5.3.1 A UNICEF report dated July 2015 stated:
> Child trafficking victims face:
> • Sexual exploitation.
> • Forced labour, including forced begging.
> • Forced marriage.
> • Being forced to commit illicit activities.
> "Trafficked and exploited children in Albania are mostly subject to forced labour, including begging, and sex trafficking. They can be trafficked to large cities, tourist sites, and border points and ports within the country, or trafficked to other countries. The recruiter and the trafficker may be an individual, a small informal group, or a larger organisation. Whilst it is often parents who exploit children for begging and other forced labour other adults, too, may exploit children living and/or working in street situations. Children who have been exposed to violence and abuse at home, or who live in otherwise dysfunctional families (eg. those with alcoholic parents), are at special risk of trafficking by neighbours, relatives, or strangers abusing their vulnerable situation."
> "5.3.2 UNICEF noted:
> 'There are reports of parents and other family members arranging the marriage of girls for trafficking, or forcing their children to beg […]'"
> (Home Office (2016) *Country Information and Guidance. Albania: Female victims of trafficking*)

9. What is striking here is that when the child is specifically gendered in the country guidance, the child is usually gendered female. So the discussion above talks about girls being trafficked via arranged marriages but there is no separate mention of the particular forms of exploitation and trafficking that boys might be vulnerable to. Yet we know that most unaccompanied minors from Albania in the UK are male, and we know from international research that child migration generally occurs within the

context of exploitation, violence and trauma. As researchers note: '[r]eports from the United Nations, Amnesty International and Human Rights organisations have identified a range of human rights violations as precipitating children's migratory flows' (Menjivar and Perreira 2017: 8). Yet there is a shortage of research on the experiences of unaccompanied children from Albania to help us better understand their particular migratory histories and how these are intersected by gender.

10. In 2016 of the 229 unaccompanied children from Albania who received an initial decision on their asylum claim only two were granted refugee status (Madill 2018). There is however little research on what happens to Albanian young people when their claims for asylum are refused.

    There is, however, emerging evidence that Albanian boys and young men are vulnerable to exploitation by criminal gangs, to becoming victims of modern slavery through labour exploitation on building sites or in car washes, for example. We know that some facing repatriation disappear, sometimes while they are still in care, yet more research is still needed to build a fuller, evidence-based picture (Simon et al 2016).

11. But what about those who are forcibly returned to Albania? Again there is very little research on what happens next. Recent research by Vathi and Zajma (2017) notes a disjuncture between what appears to be in place policy-wise in Albania in terms of services and provisions, and what is actually happening in practice for returning children and young people. This research concludes that protocols that are in place for children and young people 'are not always implemented' (31) and notes that '[r]esearch findings show that the procedure and service provision for them is not always adequate and well-coordinated on the ground' (50).

    We are increasingly aware that women who have been trafficked and returned may be vulnerable to re-trafficking (Tahiraj 2017); yet there is scant knowledge of what happens to young men on their return to Albania and their particular risks to exploitation and trafficking. Across the board research is lacking but there is a particular gap in understanding the causes of trafficking of males, and their specific support needs.

12. To sum up, it is clear from reviewing the literature on unaccompanied minors from Albania in the UK that there are significant gaps in research and that we simply do not have robust and sufficient data on a number of key areas needed to inform decisions on asylum claims.

    For example, more information and a better understanding of the contexts in which Albanian children migrate to the UK is needed; more information on blood feuds is needed; more knowledge is needed about how domestic violence and family conflict shape children's migratory patterns is needed; and more research is needed on the ways child migration from Albania is underpinned by, and interwoven with, trafficking.

    Additionally more data is needed on what happens to young people who have their claims to asylum refused, in order to understand the potential risks they face in relation to exploitation, violence and trauma. What are their risks, for example, of becoming victims of modern slavery?

    And throughout we need a gendered lens that not only highlights the particular traumas and violence that girls and young women face, but also highlights the particular violences inflicted on boys and young men.

    Dr Rachel Alsop
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