

Training Needs and Preferences of Social Workers Providing Services to Migrant Children

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Abstract. A recent wave of migration has brought a lot of children to the EU. Children in migration face a stronger risk of becoming victims of violence, physical or sexual abuse, and trafficking. Social workers in the receiving countries are usually the ones who most often provide services to them. The study, using focus group methodology and aiming to identify the needs of social workers for training and their training preferences in this context, was carried out in 2018, in 7 EU countries.

The results have shown that the main issue is the absence of specific, systemic training aimed at improving the knowledge and skills needed for work with migrants. The public or governmental institutions did not have an interest in providing such kinds of training, they were organized on an ad-hoc basis by NGOs mainly. Lack of knowledge about legal systems, the difference between the theory and practice, and the lack of practical experience working with migrant minors were named by participants as the main gaps that need improvement.

Keywords: migrant children; social workers; training.

Socialinių darbuotojų, kurie teikia paslaugas migrantų vaikams, poreikis ir preferencijos mokymams

Santrauka. Su pastarąja migracijos banga į Europos Sąjungą atvyko daug vaikų. Vaikai migrantai patiria didesnę smurto, fizinio ar seksualinio išnaudojimo, prekybos žmonėmis riziką. Dažniausiai priimančiose šalyse būtent socialiniai darbuotojai teikia paslaugas šiems vaikams. 2018 m., naudojant fokus grupių metodiką, 7 ES šalyse buvo atliktas tyrimas, kurio tikslas – identifikuoti socialinių darbuotojų mokymų poreikius ir preferencijas šiame kontekste.

Rezultatai atskleidė, kad pagrindinė problema yra tokių specifinių sisteminių mokymų, skirtų tobulinti socialinių darbuotojų, dirbančių su migrantais, žinias ir įgūdžius, trūkumas. Viešojo sektoriaus bei valstybinės institucijos nebuvo suinteresuotos tokius mokymus organizuoti, juos šiuo atveju rengė NVO. Identifikuoti pagrindiniai trūkumai, susiję su mokymų turiniu, – tai žinių apie teises sistemas stoka, skirtumas tarp teorinio mokymo ir praktikos bei patirties dirbant su nepilnamečiais migrantais trūkumas.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: vaikai migrantai, socialiniai darbuotojai, mokymai.

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Introduction

Context of the research. The recent (starting in 2014) wave of migration to Europe has brought new different challenges for the European Union (EU) countries. One area of such challenges was the lack of professionals providing services to migrants and especially children, and also the needs of practicing professionals to acquire or improve their knowledge and competencies to properly respond to migrants' needs. Different organizations in 7 EU countries: Lithuania, Hungary, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, and Cyprus, that had identified such needs thought their direct work and service delivery to migrants, had formed a partnership and implemented project financed by the European Commission: "Introducing gamification in vocational education and training for professionals and social workers in the field of migrant children protection and support" (GVETS) (project No. 2017-1-HU01-KA202-035927). The project aimed to create a tool to fill in this training needs gap that would be based on the needs of social work practitioners. Even though the situation of migration in the participating countries was quite different, lack of opportunities for training and improving competencies of social workers working with migrant children was initially identified as acute in all 7 countries. Casual collection of countries participating in the research and the project can be named as its' limitation but neither the less the need for new training opportunities for social workers was very relevant in all the participating countries.

The aim of this article is to present the results of an international study on identifying training needs and preferences of social workers working with migrant children in the context of the most recent migration crisis and its challenges upon social work.

Statistical data on migrant children in the EU. According to UNICEF estimates, 5.4 million migrant children were living in Europe in 2016 (Garin et al., 2016). According to figures from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 32 039 migrant children arrived in Greece, Italy, Spain, and Bulgaria in 2017 alone. Almost half of them (46%) of them were unaccompanied or separated children, while the remaining (54%) were accompanied by their parents or other caregivers (Protection of children in migration, 2019).

According to Eurostat (as of 26.11.2019), there were 647 165 asylum applicants in EU 28 member states in 2018, out of which 30.55% were children (197 725, age less than 18). In 2017 numbers were higher: accordingly 712 235 and 213 970 (30.04%) out of them were children. Data of asylum applicants in all countries that participated in the research are presented in Table 1. It can be seen from the data that Italy and Greece are the countries that are receiving the greatest number of asylum applications from all the countries participating in the research, with Lithuania receiving the least amount of applications.

In 2018, 19 700 asylum seekers applying for international protection in EU member states were considered to be unaccompanied minors. This was down by more than one third compared with the number of applicants in 2017 (31 400). In 2018, at the EU level, unaccompanied minors accounted for 10% of all asylum applicants aged less than 18 (Eurostat as of 26.11.2019).

Table 1. The number of all asylum applicants and children of age less than 18 in the EU 2017-2018. As of 26.11.2019. Source: Eurostat.

	All	Children (less than 18)	All	Children (less than 18)
Country/year	2017	2017	2018	2018
European Union 28 countries	712235	213970	647165	197725
Greece	58650	19785	66965	21770
Spain	36605	8460	54050	11270
Italy	128850	15510	59950	10185
Cyprus	4600	690	7765	1090
Lithuania	545	185	405	130
Hungary	3390	1595	670	360
Portugal	1750	560	1285	300

Legal protection of migrant children. Migrant children are more vulnerable than adults. They face a higher risk of becoming victims of violence, physical or sexual abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. Many also go missing or are separated from their families during the migration journey. All children in need of international protection have a right to care and protection under international law. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) adopted by the United Nations in 1989 is the main legal regulatory instrument. It follows, therefore, that all actions, legislative and otherwise, have to follow the instructions and guidelines laid down by the Convention and that is embedded in the national legal frameworks.

The European Union has specified its policies for child protection in the “EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child” that was adopted by the European Commission in February 2011. It recalls that the standards and principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child must continue to guide EU policies and actions that have an impact on the rights of the child. Under general principles, the EU Agenda underlines that the EU’s commitment to the rights of the child requires a coherent approach across all relevant EU actions using the Treaties, the Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000) and the UNCRC as a common basis for all EU actions relevant to children. Furthermore, the “child rights perspective” must be taken into account in all EU measures affecting children (Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000, p. 29).

Challenges faced by migrant children. Research shows that migrant children face many challenges: segregation and adaptation problems at schools (Devine, 2009; Reynolds, 2008), disrupted family structure (Parreñas, 2005; White, 2017), cut off relationships with friends (Reynolds, 2007; Haikkola, 2011), poorer results at schools (OECD, 2012 a and b), higher risk of depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health problems (Chan et al., 2009) and many others. Sime and Fox (2015) have also identified barriers, that migrant children face concerning accessing services in receiving countries: limited financial resources and lower social class position; lack of information regarding services; language barriers and unclear rules; cultural barriers and others.

Challenges to social workers and the social work profession in the migration context. Social workers, regardless of their setting (that can be mainstream statutory or voluntary) are usually one of the main professionals that provide services to migrant children and their families. Children and their families have a huge diversity and myriad of needs, so it is essential that social workers understand the legal, political, as well as psychological and social issues surrounding their immigration (Chang-Muy and Congress, 2008). It can be generalized that social workers providing services to migrant children have to provide services in all or any of the areas: appropriate accommodation, access to education, medical care, legal representation, recreation and counseling, mental health services (Roth and Grace, 2015; Evans et al., 2018; Reynolds and Bacon, 2018), and other. Also, migrant children and their families have to deal with multiple systems during their integration process and social workers have a vital role here in ensuring that all stakeholders are “at the table” when seeking effective services and successful integration. Immigration issues are complicated and cross-systems and cross-disciplinary collaborations are necessary in order to solve them (Finno-Velasquez and Dettlaff, 2018). All that requires extensive knowledge and competencies from social workers. Finno-Velasquez and Dettlaff (2018) argue that professionals providing services to migrant children and their families lack expertise about their unique needs that result from their migration and acculturation experiences and there is a need for its development. Other researchers also state, that “the scale and complexity of contemporary migration have demanded far-reaching change from within the profession: highlighting issues in interventions, in the training of social workers and in the types of research they undertake” (Williams and Graham, 2014, p. i5).

Professional training of social workers in the migration context also faces some challenges. Social workers in the EU often (with some exceptions) require university training since the Bologna Reform. However, the exact activities, training requirements and settings for delivering services vary significantly across Europe (Hussein, 2011). Studies on social work in Europe suggest that in general, the roles of social workers and other professionals working in social services for migrants revolve around assessment, multi-agency working and liaising with other professionals, reducing and managing social risks for individuals and families, and case management (Moriarty et al., 2015). In different European countries services for migrant children and their families are delivered by social workers that according to their acquired training could be classified into at least two categories: 1) professional workers who have accredited qualifications in areas such as social work or comparable formal programmes; 2) less-qualified workers who provide personal assistance and care in different settings for which they may have undertaken vocational training, short training courses or only on-the-job training (Montero et al., 2017). For example, in Lithuania, the position of a social worker’s assistant can be undertaken after only 40 hours of training. So the competencies of these different categories of social work professionals can be very different and can mean a wider variety of training needs. This aspect was important while planning the research of training needs and preferences of practicing social workers that formed a basis for the training tool prepared later in the GVETS project.

Globalization and migration as its attribute, their influence on social work and its training programs in academia, are widely discussed for many years now (Healey, 2014). The Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (IASSW and IFSW, 2004; Sewpaul and Jones, 2004) and the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IFSW, IASSW, ICSW, 2012; Jones and Truell, 2012) stipulate the need of social work education to prepare students for work in a new global environment (Jönsson and Flem, 2018). But still, according to some academics, social science courses about foreign cultures in the social work study programs do not convey the necessary skills for social workers, they largely (almost exclusively) are based on the side of laws, institutions, and explicit regulation (Kornbeck, 2001).

Even though the topic of relations between migration and social work is being analyzed from a variety of different perspectives in academic literature, it seems that the needs for improvement of knowledge and qualifications of social workers who are already working with migrants have not been studied yet. The authors of this paper were not able to detect the published results of a similar kind of research.

In this context, the *aim of this research* was to identify the needs of practicing social workers for building knowledge and competencies in order to work with migrant children and their families and to determine their training preferences.

Data, methods, and study design

Data for this research was collected during: (A) 7 focused discussion groups (in 7 participating member states) of social workers working with migrant children in different organizations (NGOs, schools, municipalities, state child protection agencies) and (B) 7 focused discussion groups (in 7 participating member states) of representatives of stakeholders, working in the social workers' education and training field (teachers at colleges, universities, VET institutions representatives, representatives from NGOs providing trainings for professionals working with migrants).

Table 2. **Participants of focus groups:**

Country	No of participants	
	Group A	Group B
Italy	8	5
Hungary	4	5
Spain	5	7
Greece	10	7
Lithuania	5	5
Cyprus	6	6
Portugal	7	6
All together	45	41

Informants were selected purposively; focus groups were conducted from January through March 2018. The organization implementing GVETS project in each country was

responsible for organizing focus groups, transcribing data, coding it according to the research protocol, and preparing a detailed report file of the generalizations and conclusions. All the reports then were summarized into one data set and analyzed further.

Data of the focus groups were analyzed using standard procedures of qualitative content analysis (Ritchie et al., 2010). Conceptual analysis was carried out: a concept was chosen for examination and the analysis involved the examination of selected concepts in the data. The text was coded into manageable content categories by a process of selective reduction. Results were analyzed by drawing generalizations and conclusions where possible.

Focus groups were conducted according to two sets of questions – one set developed for social workers, another set for stakeholders of the training field. The research methodology was the same for all participating countries. Questions for social workers were aimed at finding out the problems that migrant children face in each country; competences that social workers need when working with migrant children; their learning experience and knowledge about possibilities to improve their qualifications in this field; attitude and willingness to use information and communication technologies (ICT) in the learning process.

Questions for stakeholders were aimed at finding out the opportunities that organizations that they are representing are providing to social workers to increase their knowledge and improve competencies needed for work with migrant children; the methods used to identify the demand for such trainings and their contents; how much the ICT are used while providing trainings and if it is beneficial or not in their experience.

Ethics: participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, including the right to withdraw their consent at any time. Consent was given voluntarily and confirmed by signing an informed consent form. The personal information of all participants has been removed when transcribing recorded interviews; to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each respondent was assigned an identification code. The language of participants was not corrected.

Results of the research

Needs of migrant children. Participants of the focus groups A shared their views about the main needs of migrant children. A common issue in Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Greece identified by the research participants was that migrants often lack legal documents (e.g., a social security number). This is one of the biggest issues concerning children as it leads to situations where children do not have access to school, hospitals, etc.

Another theme that was identified and was prevalent in all participating countries where the research was conducted, one of the biggest problems faced by migrant children, is the absence of lessons of the national language in the accepting country. In most cases, such specific lessons are provided to adults only, while kindergartens and schools are left to teach the children by themselves. The participating social workers have told that, to the best of their knowledge, there are no specific programs in schools to integrate migrant children at any stage of the educational system. The respondents have also said that for pre-school age children, such a situation is not as difficult, but for school-age children, it leads to high levels

of distress, as they often feel not accepted by the community of the school and tend to skip classes or lack motivation to study.

Participants have also emphasized one problem that is faced not only by the children but also by their parents: lack of information on the national cultural norms of the accepting country. Without knowing the cultural norms, parents are not able to help their children deal with integration issues and sometimes even obstruct it. Professionals state that more attention should be paid to introduce migrants to the country they are staying in.

As a separate aspect, the need for better reception services for unaccompanied minors and psychosocial support to all migrant children was also emphasized.

Competencies used to help children and competencies that need to be improved by social workers. As participants from the focus groups A reflected on what competencies they are using while working with migrant children. Such competencies and abilities as empathy and close, humane treatment, were first mentioned in the sense of not “judging” the actions of the children and/or their parents, but trying to understand why they do what they do (in other words, to ask the question “is there a cultural or social reason behind their actions?”). On the other hand, the participants admitted that it is difficult for them to find a balance between practicing empathy and avoiding the emotional burnout they risk themselves. There is a lack of balancing support and control – it is not always clear for how long they should be supporting and understanding and when to start delivering requirements and controlling their fulfilment.

Other competencies and skills used while working with migrants were listed as the most important:

- Insight to acknowledge about the child’s needs;
- Cooperation with these children and other professionals;
- Communication skills;
- Competence and confidence in their work;
- Provision of support to these children and among colleagues.

Participants have also mentioned knowledge of the legislation as a very important aspect and the need to improve it.

Most of the competences and knowledge aspects listed below are the ones that, according to social workers, should be considered as standard requirements for all professionals working with migrant children but were also identified as needing further improvement:

- A deeper knowledge of cultural differences;
- Having first-hand experience with migrants (or programs that simulate that);
- Knowledge of best practices of local integration;
- Drawing upon similarities, connections between the professionals and the migrants to ensure empathy;
- Flexibility, readiness.

In the context of the research, it was important to know the attitudes of the social workers regarding improving their qualifications and participation in trainings aimed at that despite the practical experience that they might already have. Informants have stated that trainings are a very important part of improving the qualification of specialists working with migrants

in general, because even after working with migrant children for years, trainings provide new perspectives. They deepen knowledge of the highly relevant legal structure and help to develop a better understanding of sociocultural characteristics. Furthermore, trainings give possibilities to raise professional self-awareness, provide an opportunity to step back and see one's role as a helper from a distance.

Training needs of social workers. Participants of both focus groups A and B in Lithuania, Hungary, Greece, Cyprus, Portugal, and Spain have named some organizations in their countries providing training to specialists working with children, or in the field of migration, including universities, local community service providers, international organizations, and mainly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but they indicated that trainings aimed at specifically developing skills or competencies needed for work with migrant children, systematic or on ad-hoc basis, do not exist at all in any of these 6 countries. The participants of the focus groups A have also noted that many professionals that have contact with and provide services (legal, medical, educational, etc.) to migrants are not well-trained on the topic or lack knowledge to assist efficiently. They have concluded that specific intercultural and other trainings related to migration are more needed for those who do not meet migrants every day. Those who are working with them on an everyday basis already have substantial knowledge and skills from past work experiences.

It is important to mention that social workers (participants of focus groups A) might have volunteered, have been asylum seekers or migrants themselves, or they might have personal counters relevant to the topic – i.e., have a migrant spouse. But, at large, professionals that have contact with migrants do not have much knowledge, because in most cases there are no systematic trainings provided for specialists. This is especially true in work with asylum seekers and refugees. Trainings that do exist are irregular, provided on an ad-hoc basis and mainly carried out by NGOs.

Some participants of focus groups B in some cases (Lithuania, Hungary) said that their institutions that provide trainings for social workers do not feel the demand for such specific trainings – to improve competencies or skills needed for work with migrant children. However, if such need were declared, they would be willing to prepare and include them into their training curriculum.

The only researched country where the situation was different was Italy. The participants of focus groups A and B in Italy were aware of a few specific training courses regarding precisely migrant children. For example, public health service workers in Italy are taught on migration, especially on mental health issues related to that. Moreover, some NGOs (like Intersos, ASGI) provide constant, systemic non-formal education to “reception operators” (social workers managing integration process of migrants) on various topics: quality standards in reception, minor higher interests, intercultural skills, legal and psychosocial aspects, vulnerability, legal trainings on unaccompanied minors and asylum-seeking minors for lawyers and social workers.

Participants of focus groups A were asked to describe what training would be the most appealing to them. They stated that they do not feel the need to have separate training for this purpose. It was said that it would be enough to incorporate the specific needs of migrant chil-

dren into the existing training programs. The face-to-face training methodology was named as most preferable by research participants in every country; they also agreed that blended learning training would be another desirable option. A combination of face-to-face activities facilitated by a trained and experienced educator in the field of migrant children support, on-line learning materials, pre-recorded lectures, presentation of case studies, guided structured independent study time, and skills developed during the face-to-face experience were named as most important characteristics of such a training or training program.

Gaps in the existing training system. When participants of both groups A and B were asked about the gaps of existing training systems for social workers working in the field of migration, different aspects were mentioned in different countries. But still, some things were common for every country and that can be pointed out:

First, for professionals working with migrants, it is very important to deepen their knowledge about the legal environment of migration as well as counseling skills to help migrants and especially asylum seekers accept their legal conditions and restrictions of their freedoms. It was pointed out that all specialists working in the field should be aware of legislation and regulations so that they would be able to help migrants at any stage of their integration, even if sometimes it is considered to be quite basic information.

Moreover, there is a lack of general training for professionals about their and other professionals' roles and how to cooperate with each other in a more effective way. Better division of work and cooperation between professionals for the best interests of migrant children should be a priority. It was stated that it is very important for all relevant professionals and organizations to have common approaches concerning this particular field and to be open to cooperation between each other.

It should be taken into account that it is necessary to provide self-care training for professionals working in the field to avoid the emotional and/or professional burnout. The latter was named as a very common problem and it was suggested that demand for supervision is high.

Another important gap of the existing training systems for competencies needed for work with migrants in general and migrant children specifically that was named in all researched countries, was little involvement and support of governments in creating policies and environment suitable for such trainings. To ensure constant improvement of professional skills, non-mandatory training courses should be replaced with compulsory ones. Participants thought that there is a need to update the academic syllabus by adapting it to the new challenges. For instance, by taking into account the new migratory dynamics.

Finally, the difference between what social workers working with migrants learned in colleges/universities/training courses, and what they experienced when they got to the fieldwork, was considered as an important gap. The participants have suggested that there is a missing link between theory and practice.

Attitudes towards using information and communication technologies in the learning process. The participants of both groups A and B were asked about their experiences and attitudes towards using ICT in the learning process. There were no major opinion divisions in different countries, all participants have mentioned a few most important aspects.

Describing their experience of using ITC in their learning or teaching process most of the focus groups participants said that their experience was either poor or very short-term. Based on the information provided by the participants, it can be noted that it is crucial to understand the level of digital skills, and the level of access to ICT tools among the professionals, in order to define how such tools can benefit them most. It should not be forgotten that among social workers there might be also those who do not have basic computer literacy needed to use ICT in the learning process.

When asked about the possibilities of using ICT for the training of skills most said that they see it as a possibility only for the theoretical part of learning. In the participants' opinion, skills could not be improved by using only the ICT, it must be combined with human interaction. Another important aspect in trainings with methods involving ICT would be to develop the system of evaluation of knowledge gained by using online resources that should ensure the efficiency of such resources. Moreover, it is important to clearly identify the target group, the training contents, and the way to find a balance between content that is not too difficult but also not too easy.

In general, the attitudes towards using ICT for the training of social workers were rather reserved, but such a possibility was not disapproved for some specific, limited use.

Conclusions

1. A recent migration wave to the EU has shown that member states were not prepared to provide needed social services for such numbers of migrants. Migrant children, arriving unaccompanied or with their family members, make a significant part of this group and are more vulnerable than adults. The EU countries have struggled in providing services to migrant minors that would be securing the best interests of the child.
2. No specific, systemic training aimed at providing knowledge and skills to social workers needed for work with migrant children was identified in 6 out of 7 researched countries. Italy was identified as the only country that has some systemic training opportunities for professionals providing social services to migrant children.
3. Research results have shown that professionals in participating countries see the following main problems of migrant children in the receiving countries: the lack of legal documents possessed by migrants that obstruct access to public services; lack of information on national cultural norms; lack of quality in reception services for unaccompanied minors as well as psychosocial support to all children; and absence of national language trainings.
4. Even though social workers that have participated in the research thought that they had substantial professional knowledge and skills, relating to the mentioned child migrants' problems they have also identified the most central training needs for them. First of all, they stated the need for trainings to decrease the lack of knowledge of legal systems so that they could help migrants to access public services. Second, they felt the need to deepen the knowledge of intercultural differences and the need to have first-hand practical experience with adult and minor migrants (or programs that simulate that), which would

allow to fill in the gap between theory and practice and allow to find similarities, connections between the professionals and the migrants in order to ensure empathy, flexibility, and readiness. It can be presumed that increased competences on these topics would also allow influencing the quality of reception and psychosocial support services being delivered to migrant clients by social workers. Other important issues in terms of training were identified as the need for supervision to maintain the wellbeing of professionals themselves and opportunities to improve cooperation skills between different specialists, as it was seen as absent at the time of research.

5. The biggest issue that was identified during the research was that such trainings were not seen as relevant enough by the public, governmental responsible organizations; therefore, they were organized on an ad-hoc basis and mainly by NGOs. Such trainings were not obligatory in any country for those who were providing services to migrant children. Social workers felt the need for more systemic training.
6. Finally, it was stated that even though using ICT tools for trainings could be useful, it is always necessary to complement it with face-to-face interactions. Blended learning was seen as useful; however, the accessibility of ICT and basic computer literacy have to be considered carefully when planning such trainings for social workers.

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