

“I would tell any girls back home, don’t come to Europe”: Becky, 16

Thousands of unaccompanied child migrants are arriving in Europe each year — tricked by false promises of a better life. Instead, many find themselves trafficked into prostitution and slavery. Christina Lamb reports



PHOTOGRAPH BY QUINTINA VALERO

The Sunday Times, February 12 2017, 12:01am

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The wooden fishing boat, jam-packed with stick-figure people screaming and praying, was sinking fast. It was late October and the trawler's engine had failed en route from Libya to Italy. Freezing waves smashed over the bow and into the hold, where 70 children — 50 of them unaccompanied — were crammed among 300 refugees and migrants. Darkness was falling and hopes fading when the Save the Children ship finally got to them.

As the rescue vessel docked at Trapani, in northern Sicily, the children trooped off, unsteady on dry land, to be met by Red Cross workers who put pink Crocs on the girls and blue Crocs on the boys, then handed each of them a bag with a sandwich and a bottle of water.

“I try to imagine myself at their age in this situation: so cold, so rough, so dark,” says Gabriele Casini, a Save the Children spokesman on the rescue boat. “And then what a terrible situation they must be running away from to do this. No child should ever have to go through this with parents, let alone on their own.”

An astonishing 91% of all children arriving in Italy on boats last year were unaccompanied. And they came in their thousands. At least 25,800 unaccompanied children arrived by sea in 2016 — more than double the number that came the previous year. The migrants are getting younger, too. While most unaccompanied children are aged 15-17 on average, last year saw many who were as young as 9, 10 or 11. Youngest of all was Favour, a Nigerian baby who was nine months old when she landed alone last May, after her parents had drowned on the way. She was not the only one to be orphaned en route. Last year was the deadliest on record: more than 5,000 migrants drowned crossing the Mediterranean.

In November, Ahmad, 6, and Nasreen, 9, from Mali, were on a dinghy that was so crowded it half-deflated and filled with water. Their mother slipped to the bottom and drowned. After they were rescued, Ahmad kept trying to get into the clinic where his mother's body was taken.



Guardian angel: Princess (right) and Glory, one of the refugees she has helped in Italy
QUINTINA VALERO

Most of the children, however, came alone. They come — or are sent by their parents — in search of a better future and safety, just as people in Europe did during the Second World War.

Many of them end up lost in migration. Of the 25,800 children registered, about half have gone missing.

“If you go to Rome, Milan, Turin — Italian cities where there are lots of migrants — you see the adults in the piazzas and streets but you don’t see children,” says Franco Frattini, former foreign minister of Italy. “Where are they? They disappear.”

Last year, Europol, the European Police Office, warned that 10,000 children who entered Europe in 2015 had disappeared. But Delphine Moralis, the secretary general of Missing Children Europe, says they believe the numbers are far higher. She points out that the Italian authorities say 28 child migrants go missing every day, and in Germany 9,000 have vanished. What happens to them? And why are so many children arriving alone in Europe?

THE GIRLS



Hope at last: Becky and friends window shopping in Turin
QUINTINA VALERO

Promised jobs as shop assistants, hairdressers — even singers — young women, some as young as 13, are forced into prostitution.

On a rainy December night, a stumpy Italian man in a sou’wester hat leads 15 Nigerian girls through the streets of Turin to see the Christmas lights. They sing carols in harmonious voices, laugh and joke and press their noses in wonder at the window of a Gucci store, where fabulously expensive handbags are displayed like works of art.

Among the voices rises one a little less certain, yet almost angelic in its purity. Glory, 17, arrived four months ago and has just joined a church choir. When asked what she thinks of Italy, she replies: “It’s like, wow!”

For all their exuberance, there is something closed off in their eyes. Every one of these girls thought they were coming to Italy to start an exciting new life as “shop assistants” or “hairdressers”, jobs “in fashion” or even as “a singer”, and send money to their grateful families back home. Instead, they had been trafficked as prostitutes or sex slaves.

Last year, for the first time, Nigerians were the largest group arriving in Italy by sea, making up 37,500 of the 180,000 total, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Of these, more than 11,000 were women — an almost eightfold increase on 2014 — and 3,000 were unaccompanied children.

Save the Children estimates that more than 90% of Nigerian girls and women coming into Italy are victims of trafficking for prostitution. Not only are the numbers going up but the girls are getting younger; some are as young as 13.

The man leading the girls through the rainy streets of Turin is Alberto Massimo, 45, a former chemist who used to frequent prostitutes on the edge of Turin with his friends. Eighteen years ago, his life changed when he met one called Princess Inyang Okokon.

“I liked her, so after we had sex I asked her for a walk in the park the next day,” he says. “She told me she couldn’t unless I paid. I laughed and said this wasn’t for sex, but she explained her madam didn’t let her out of the house unless she came back with money. I realised she was a kind of slave.”

Princess was 24 and had been working at a restaurant in Nigeria’s Edo state in 1999 when a smartly dressed woman came to buy cakes for her hotel. “She told me I was a good cook and could have a good life in Europe as a chef and make lots of money,” she says.

The woman invited Princess and her fiancé to spend Christmas at her hotel and told her she would arrange everything, and that Princess could pay her back once she earned money. The bill would be \$45,000.

I was raped by five boys in the desert, imprisoned, and beaten with a hose

“I didn’t know what that was, as our currency, naira, was always in thousands,” says Princess. “I was so happy that this smart woman wanted to help me, and my family were also happy. I left behind my fiancé and three children, and thought I would soon be sending back money.”

The woman arranged her flight to Heathrow along with two other girls and instructed them to claim asylum by saying they were from Sierra Leone, which was in the midst of civil war. After five days they were sent from London to Turin, where Princess was taken to a madam who clad her in scanty clothes and sent her and other girls out to the streets. She was so scared she spent the first night hiding behind a rubbish bin, crying.

“I had no idea that in Italy there were women who buy girls like a commodity,” she says. “We had to pay rent and if we made a mistake, like getting pregnant, we had to pay another \$5,000, so kept getting into more and more debt. When I complained, the madam said, ‘Once you pay off your debt, I will teach you to buy girls and you can make lots of money like me.’ ”

The problem was not just working the streets. “The madam beat me so violently with her high-heel shoes that, once, they broke my skull and I had to be taken to hospital and stitched,” she says. “I vowed to myself I would get my revenge. But I couldn’t escape because I didn’t speak the language and didn’t know anyone.”



Refugees including Rejoice (centre right) and (far right) receive training at an Italian restaurant
QUINTINA VALERO

Fortunately, after six months on the streets, she met Alberto, who spoke English and was “a man of God’s heart”. He and his friends raised some money so Princess wouldn’t have to work, while they decided what to do. He found a priest to help her, but she told the priest: “I don’t want to escape, I want to fight them and stop the same thing happening to other girls.” The priest gave her an office in a town called Asti, where Alberto lived, and training in how to talk to the girls. Once everything was ready she escaped with four other girls.

Messages started arriving from the traffickers that they would kill her. (Before leaving Nigeria, Princess had been made to drink animal blood in a voodoo ceremony and swear an oath that if she didn’t pay back the money, her family would be killed.)

Princess bravely took the madam to court, where she was convicted of exploiting prostitutes and jailed for four years. “When she was released she sent a message that she would kill me,” she says. “But if I worked the streets I would have died, so it’s better I am killed fighting the traffickers.”

In 2004 Princess and Alberto got married. They have since had a daughter together, and two of Princess’s children from Nigeria — now grown up — have moved to Italy. Their organisation, Progetto Integrazione Accoglienza Migranti (Piam), receives funding from the Italian government. It has four refuges in and around Asti and also places girls with families. The girls are provided with language courses, vocational training, such as in cookery, and legal assistance. Under Italian law, if a victim blows the whistle on his or her trafficker they get a five-year residence permit.

As Princess’s own story makes clear, the networks that bring Nigerian girls into Italy as prostitutes have existed for more than two decades. But in recent years things have changed. “In the past, girls were older, like me: mothers coming to Europe to help their kids back home, so they were more able to fight back,” explains Princess. “Now, almost half are children themselves — innocent souls whose mothers should be taking care of them, not vice versa. It’s shocking to see these tiny things on the roadside selling their bodies.”

Now, instead of flights to Europe, they are sent across land to Libya, a nightmare journey during which they are treated like animals and raped repeatedly. By the time they arrive, many are pregnant, physically damaged or HIV positive, and deeply traumatised. “I shed tears each time I hear their stories,” says Princess.

She and Alberto have rescued more than 240 girls, which they know is but a drop in the ocean: an estimated half of the 40,000 prostitutes in Italy are Nigerian. I meet some of the recently rescued girls at a refuge in the village of Monale in the foothills of the Alps. Eight Nigerian girls and a toddler share a flat above a nursery. Dance music is blaring out, the TV in the kitchen is showing music videos, a selection of hair extensions is laid on the table, and girls are lounging on the sofa tapping into their phones, Snapchatting or WhatsApping with people back home.

The newest inhabitant, Becky, 16, moved in a month ago. She is sparkily bright, curled up on a bed with cropped hair, black T-shirt and red shorts as she tells me her story.

Like most of the girls, she comes from Edo state in Nigeria and had to drop out of school at 14 because her family couldn’t afford the fees. Her parents had died when she was young, so she was brought up by an “auntie” for whom she kept the house. “Things were very difficult,” she tells me. “One day, a friend of my auntie raped me, but she didn’t believe me. Then one of her daughters came back from Europe and told me if I went there I could go to school, there were lots of job opportunities and I could live my dreams. I couldn’t see any other option.”



Rescued: Osas in a refuge in Asti. Her father was poisoned
QUINTINA VALERO

The first shock was the journey. She and three other girls were packed into a bone-shaking truck with about 40 people to cross 3,000 miles of desert through Niger and Libya. Many fall off and die en route. But that wasn't all. "At night, most drivers pull into one spot and call for girls to be brought," says Becky. "If you say no, they kill you. No one is going to do anything."

That wasn't the end of the nightmare. Arriving in Libya, she was kept in a "collection house" for a month, where she was raped again. This was raided and the girls were taken to a filthy detention centre where they were held for two months and raped again.

"I was pregnant when I got out and they gave me drugs for an abortion," she says. By then, she wanted out. "My dream of Europe wasn't worth this. I told the woman there I want to go back but she said she had already paid for my crossing."

Becky was loaded onto a rubber dinghy so crammed with people that some Gambians on board threw three girls into the water. "There was a pregnant woman so scared she went into labour and died." After a night and a day at sea they were rescued and taken to a camp in the Sicilian town of Syracuse. Becky had been given a number to ring on arrival. "They told me to say I was 20 so I could leave and go to Palermo."

This is typical, says Francesca Bocchino, head of child protection for Save the Children in Italy. "You get one boat where all the Nigerian girls say they are 20, another where they all say 21 — obviously they have been told what to say. So these tiny girls are put in an adult reception centre where they shower, get dry clothes then leave. It's clear there is an organisation behind it. They reach Italy and disappear because they know there is a person waiting for them. We lose track of them within a couple of hours."

She points out the total number of unaccompanied minors coming into Italy is even higher because Nigerian girls claim to be adults. "I think estimates are low, also disappearances are underestimated."

Becky was taken to a house where there were two other girls. "On the second day, the madam told me to get dressed and follow her to the streets. I said, 'This isn't what I was told.' She said, 'You have to do this to pay back the €35,000 you owe.' The other girls got €200-€300 a night if they were lucky. I didn't earn any money."

Eventually she met a Nigerian man and asked him to help her get back to the camp in Syracuse. There she told them her real age — 15. "The madam kept calling me and I was scared out of my life. Even when I changed my Sim [card] she called me and said, 'I am watching you.'"

Only when she was transferred to Asti did Becky feel safe. She has started Italian lessons and was excited to see her first snow. "I just want to live like a normal human being," she says.

She shows me a WhatsApp message on her phone from a friend back home who had been forced to leave school for financial reasons and envies Becky. "Don't pray to be like me," Becky messages back. "I would tell any girls back home, don't come to Europe."

In the room next door, Jennifer, 18, tosses her mass of curls and preens herself in a mirror as if she hasn't a care in the world. Stunningly attractive, she, like Becky, also came to Italy at 15. "I left school at 11 because my mum couldn't pay," she says. "My father had disappeared and I used to help my mum carry water on her head and sell cans to drivers on the roadside to feed my four brothers and sisters. Then my mum married another man and he gave me the idea of coming

to Europe. I was desperate to make my family happy, especially my mum. The man introduced me to a woman who said, 'Europe is a free life, you can do anything.' She paid for everything. I was so happy. But when I got here it was a different thing."

Like Becky, Jennifer's journey through Niger and Libya on a truck was extremely harrowing. "I was raped by five boys in the middle of the desert then taken to a house in Tripoli where the men were all trying to have my body. Then, after some months, I was taken to a camp where around 100 people were waiting for a boat, but that was raided by police so I was taken to prison, kept for six months and beaten every day with a hosepipe." She takes off her shoes and shows me scars on her legs.

Jennifer was freed, then captured again and beaten even more. "Each time I thought things couldn't get worse, they did." Finally, she was put on a boat packed with 500 people. Crossing the rough seas made them physically sick until they were rescued and taken to Sicily, then Milan.

"I told them I was 24, as that's what I had been told to say," she says. "In fact I was 16. I called the number I had been given and was taken to a madam's house. Every night around six I went to the street. She said if you don't work, you don't eat. "Some days, I earned €100 or €200 but then had to pay her rent, bills and clothes, so kept owing more and more money on top of the €45,000 euros she charged for the journey. It would have taken me years to repay and I was scared on the streets."

She was also scared to leave. Like all the girls, she had been subjected to a voodoo ceremony before leaving Nigeria, drinking animal blood, eating a raw chicken liver and made to swear that she would repay her debt or die.

"I was worried if I broke the deal something would happen to my mum," she says. "In the end I couldn't take any more."



Jennifer, a former victim of sex traffickers
QUINTINA VALERO

After seven months on the streets, she managed to escape and get back to a camp. She was transferred to camps in Perugia and then Milan before she was sent to the refuge. “Here I am so happy,” she says. “I feel safe with Princess and Alberto and am hoping to get a job.”

She was right to be worried about her family. After she escaped, the trafficker sent someone to beat her mum. Another girl in the refuge, Rejoice, tells me that last February thugs turned up at her mother's home to beat her and the little daughter she had left behind, breaking her arm, then in July they went back and burnt the place down. On the sofa lies Osas, unspeaking. I later find out her father was poisoned.

"We've all cried a lot, there have been a lot of tears, a lot of pain," says Jennifer.

"Many of the girls are psychologically damaged and don't sleep," says Princess.

One day, we are in her car driving to a refuge when she gets a call about a girl who has been placed with a family and is threatening suicide because she is pregnant after being raped in Libya. "What will I tell the child?" the girl pleads.

Princess also gets threatening phone calls. Trafficking is big business involving criminal gangs such as Black Axe, a Nigerian group working with the Sicilian mafia with a gruesome reputation for disfiguring those who cross it. Last November, 17 alleged members were arrested in raids in Palermo.

Apart from talking to the girls on the streets, trying to persuade them to leave their madam, Princess also goes to Sicily to reception centres to try to rescue the girls before the pimps get them. But according to Save the Children, traffickers or madams often have informers inside the centres.

"I've been saying for the last year the migrant crisis is turning into a crisis around exploitation," says Kevin Hyland, the UK's first anti-slavery commissioner. "If you look at the numbers, we haven't got a migrant crisis, we have a human-trafficking crisis."

A recent report by IOM, which interviewed 1,400 migrants in Italy last summer, found that 75% had been trafficked or exploited; 6% said they knew of people who had been approached during their journeys by someone offering cash in exchange for organs or body parts; many talked of being forced to give blood.

"The surge of people has made a perfect marketplace for these criminals and the international community has just stood by and watched," says Hyland. "We know there are collecting houses in Libya with thousands of women and girls, and there are people transporting girls at the rate of thousands a month and earning an absolute fortune, and no one brings them to book. If they were using the same routes to bring in heroin or cocaine, the international community would be down on them like a ton of bricks."

Some of the girls end up in the UK. "We know there are links between Nigeria and the UK," says Hyland. "There are madams in Manchester, Birmingham or London who will make a call and say, 'I need some girls.'"

British police recently managed to smash one network, capturing a 38-year-old madam in Edo in a joint operation with Nigerian law enforcement. She was sentenced in August to 22 years for bringing Nigerian girls into Heathrow.

The extreme lengths to which girls are going for a new life become clear on the tiny island of Lampedusa, a little bit of Italy that has become the door to Europe for many migrants as it is closer to Africa than the European mainland. The gynaecologist Helena Rodriguez has spent six years working at the island's clinic, from where she has watched the crisis unfold.

“So many girls have been through here,” she sighs. The morning we meet, she is examining two recently arrived young girls from Nigeria whom she fears are destined for the streets. One, Christabel, had a miscarriage en route, and says she left Edo state because her family had given her as an “attendant” to a traditional ruler, a lifetime of servitude, then someone offered to help her cross the “big river” to Europe.

“They don’t even realise it’s a sea,” says Rodriguez. “This is typical — they all say, ‘We don’t know how we got here.’ Immigration police understand something has happened. Sometimes girls cry, say they have been raped. Others, you can see it in their eyes. Some are very thin and say they were kept in jail for months like animals.”

Aside from Nigerians, many of the girls she sees are from Eritrea — 3,714 Eritrean children came into Italy last year, the largest number of unaccompanied children from any country. They fled dictatorship to avoid forced conscription into an army that many never leave.

Rodriguez tells me a horrendous story. “Many of the teenage girls have had injections to induce menopause. They know they are very likely to be raped en route so take Depo-Provera injections in Ethiopia to not get pregnant not realising the long-term effects,” she explains. “It’s terrible. It has a very high dose of progesterone — it stops their periods but is like early menopause, and causes many dangerous physical changes, such as infertility, and psychological problems such as depression. We are seeing it a lot.”

Yet she says she understands their desperation. “I am a refugee too,” she says. Born in Cuba, she married a Yemeni paediatrician with whom she had two children. Then they moved to Yemen where she was made to wear hijab and her husband took another wife and child. “It took me 15 years to escape,” she says. Finally, 10 years ago she and her children fled to Italy. “For me the biggest thing was my daughter, who was then nine. When we got to Italy she played in the park and sang, ‘I am free, I am free.’ That was the most beautiful thing for me.”



Refugees rescued by a Save the Children ship arrive in SicilyQUINTINA VALERO

THE BOYS

Forced labour and organ harvesting are among the horrific abuses that await boys and young men who pay traffickers to get them to Europe from Eritrea, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia — and now Egypt.

Deep in mafia country in southern Sicily, Salemi prides itself on being the first capital of united Italy — a title it held for just a day in 1860 when Giuseppe Garibaldi proclaimed himself ruler there. Over the centuries it has been through invasions of Romans, Vandals, Goths and Arabs who gave it its name, which means peace.

Over the last year that peace has been tested as the small town has experienced a new influx — hundreds of migrants from Africa and the Middle East. Among them, dressed in ripped jeans and a T-shirt with his hair in a topknot, is Dahi, 15, who has all the insouciance of a typical teenage boy.

He is part of a new phenomenon on the migrant trail. Nigerian girls are not the only reason for the surge in unaccompanied children coming into Europe. Last year also saw a 10-fold increase in the influx of Egyptian boys, who leave in search of a better life. While the focus on migrant smuggling has been on Libya, a parallel market has quietly grown in Egypt, even though the trip is far longer. Originally it was used by Syrians, then Sudanese and Somalians, but these days many young Egyptians themselves are making the trip.

“There is very little work in Egypt especially for young people and people can’t get enough food,” explains Dahi who made the journey from his village a year ago.

The eldest of three, he left school at 12 and worked painting houses with an uncle. “He had spent 12 years in France and was always talking to me about Europe,” he says. “We heard of one guy who had got to Italy and was sending back money, so I decided I would go and change my life.”

Dahi’s father was not happy. “He said, ‘You will risk your life in the sea,’ but I told him by the trust of God I will make it.”

“Everyone knows who to contact,” says Dahi. One agent linked him to another to arrange a passage. The price was €3,000 — more than his father earns in a year in his factory job. “My father made a contract to pay this back over two and half years,” he says.

Dahi and a friend, who was also making the journey, were given a phone number and told to go to Alexandria. From there they were taken to the mountains. “There, another group came who were armed and said I had to pay another 5,000 [Egyptian pounds — £200 sterling] or they would kill me. They took our money, our phones and everything.”

Because of Egypt’s tightly controlled state, people-smuggling is more under-the-radar than in Libya. The boys and 14 others were taken to sea in a launch from which they were transferred, offshore, to a much bigger wooden boat containing about 300 people.

“Some people do the journey in five days but it was the start of the cold season and waves were high, so our journey took 13 days,” says Dahi. “They gave us half a piece of bread each day and a cup of water so dirty we strained it through our T-shirts. The boat was unbalanced so the traffickers kept beating people with a cable to make them move from one side to another.”

“We thought we would die,” he adds, showing a scar on his left foot. “One man just kept shouting ‘my God!’ ”

Finally they saw the Italian coastguard and were rescued and taken to Sicily. “I told them I was 14. We heard that Egyptians over 18 would be sent back, so many fled.”

Child migrants are supposed to spend a maximum of 90 days in a reception centre before being transferred to a community, but the Italian authorities are overstretched, so they are often kept much longer. Dahi was in a reception centre for six months, during which time other boys left, moving to cities to try to earn money.

He now lives with 16 other African boys in a community house in Salemi. It’s a sunny place on a hill, with views across to the Norman castle and surrounding olive groves. There is a TV lounge upstairs, a homework room and an office where boys meet a social worker and a psychologist.

“When the boys are first off the boats, they don’t sleep, have nightmares,” explains Leonarda Ardagma, who runs the house. “The younger they are, the worse. You can tell they have been through terrible things.”

The boys go to the local school where each class has one specific teacher to help migrants. “I like it, they don’t beat us like teachers in Egypt,” says Dahi. “I want to learn Italian, then, when I am 18, get a job in construction and send back money to repay my father and help my siblings.”

The local population is not always friendly. Ardagma points out that Salemi is a small town with 8,000 people that has suddenly been landed with 400 adult migrants, plus children. “The population wasn’t prepared,” she says. “Nothing has happened but there is resentment.”

Dahi is much better off than those he came with who needed to find money quickly. Most Egyptian boys leave reception facilities within a few days to travel to cities in north or central Italy — especially Rome, Milan or Turin — where they try to earn money to send back or to move on to other European countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands or the UK.

Others are taken by the mafia as forced labour, picking oranges or vegetables in fields, earning just €1 a day and kept in containers, or working in markets in Milan and Rome. Some end up in the hands of paedophiles. There are even claims of boys being taken or killed for their organs.

“Egyptian boys are first in labour exploitation,” says Francesca Bocchino, the head of child protection. “It’s different from Nigerian girls, where they are trafficked from the start. The Egyptian boys have a dream, but when they get to Italy they see it’s not as they imagine. They end up in sex trafficking as that’s the only way they can get money to cross borders. They don’t want to tell their family about their bad experience because families have often sacrificed a lot to get them to Italy.”

The lost boys and girls

25,800 unaccompanied child migrants arrived in Italy alone last year. About half of them have gone missing



THE NUMBER OF UNACCOMPANIED CHILD MIGRANTS WHO ARRIVED IN ITALY IN 2016, BY COUNTRY (SOURCE: SAVE THE CHILDREN)

- Eritrea: 3,714
- Gambia: 3,119
- Nigeria: 2,932
- Egypt: 2,459
- Guinea: 2,225
- Ivory Coast: 1,613
- Somalia: 1,535
- Mali: 1,302

How Europe has failed them

Bureaucracy and broken promises are to blame for the thousands of children who have gone missing on the EU's watch



Migrants leave a refugee centre on Lampedusa to go to the beach ANDREW TESTA

It's a sad indictment of an affluent continent that for most children, whether fleeing war, persecution or poverty, Europe is not the end of their suffering.

“Europe is supposed to be a haven, but they end up even more damaged,” says Delphine Moralis, secretary-general at Missing Children Europe, an umbrella organisation for NGOs. “In one of the centres where I work in Belgium, 80% of the Afghan boys who arrive have been sexually exploited along the way and much of that has happened in Europe.”

As the main entry point last year, Italy currently houses 176,000 refugees and migrants. The system is overstretched and does not have capacity for all the adults, let alone all the children, many of whom fall into the hands of traffickers. Minors are supposed to be kept in the crowded hotspots where they first arrived for only two days before being transferred to a reception centre, but in Sicilian camps such as those at Trapani and Pozallo, children remain for three or four weeks with adults, where there have been reports of further sexual harassment.

Italy and Greece — Europe's other main entry points — have been unfairly burdened because other EU nations are falling way short of their 2015 commitment to relocate 160,000 refugees from camps in the two countries by September this year. So far, just over 8,000 have been relocated. Only 171 unaccompanied children have been moved from Greece (of which 100 had

been separated from their families on the journey) and just one from Italy. “Thousands of children have been left to rot or fall into the hands of traffickers,” says Moralis. “I can’t look these children in the eyes any more.”

The UK opted out of the scheme but agreed to take in unaccompanied children under the Dubs amendment, passed by parliament last spring after it was shamed into action by Lord Dubs, himself a child refugee of the Second World War. According to Unicef, of the 30,000 unaccompanied children arriving in Italy and Greece last year, the UK took in just eight for “family reunification”. But Dubs says none has come from Greece and Italy under his amendment, which he says is “very disappointing”. From the Calais Jungle, the UK has taken in 750 children — almost half of the unaccompanied children in the camp, and most of them for family reunification.

Overcrowding is not the only problem. Even where children have family to join elsewhere in Europe, the bureaucracy of family reunification is so slow that many end up leaving the system and falling into the hands of traffickers. Astonishingly, no one really knows how many disappear or where they go.

“When an unaccompanied migrant child goes missing, often it is not reported,” says Moralis. Even if a report is made, “there is a complete lack of procedures and this allows a large group of children to go missing and for us to have very little information what happens to them. “I find this totally unacceptable — this is a fixable problem.”

Research by Missing Children Europe suggests the numbers may be far more than the 10,000 claimed by Europol. “A new report in Sweden said more than 1,800 had gone missing,” says Moralis. “In Hungary and Slovenia, the EU Fundamental Rights agency reported 85%-95% go missing within a couple of days of arrival. Germany says it has more than 9,000 missing. I refuse to believe people would think this is OK.”

The former Italian foreign minister Franco Frattini points out that this is not a new problem. While serving as EU commissioner for justice from 2004 to 2008, he says they discovered three networks exploiting child migrants — one for trafficking of organs, one international paedophilia network and one for internet sexual abuse. In 2006 he got the EU to publish a Charter of Rights for Children, but 10 years on he believes “nothing has changed”.

“In fact the situation has worsened, but Europe has lost its way and does not see this as a priority,” he says. “Mafia and organised crime groups have penetrated the camps and when children disappear, no one denounces it. Children are being prostituted on our streets and killed for organs to sell on the black market to private hospitals.”

One glimmer of good news is the recent end of the dictatorship in the Gambia, which is one of the largest sources of child migrants. However, President Trump’s travel ban on people from seven majority-Muslim countries is already encouraging anti-migrant parties in Europe to call for similar blockades.

“The sad reality is these children represent a problem, so if they disappear, people don’t care,” says Frattini. “But the fact is, the status of a child is a vulnerable status — all children. You have to start [from that stand point] otherwise Europe is not Europe.”