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# Hoping for Help: The Organizational Response to Street Children in Tangier

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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## **Hoping for Help: The Organizational Response to Street Children in Tangier**

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Although the exact number is impossible to obtain, there are an estimated 30,000 street children living in Morocco. There are many different profiles of street children, but they are categorized mainly as children *in* the street and children *of* the street. Children in the street leave home due to poverty and precarious family situations but still return home from time to time if not every night. Children of the street have no homes to go to; they live, sleep and struggle to survive on the streets. In the city of Tangier where this study takes place, most of the children that are living in the street are doing so in hopes of making the stretch into Europe. Regardless of the profile, the reality that faces these children in the streets is still the same: terrible daily circumstances and a bleak, unknown future. In this paper I will explore the different types of organizational responses to the problem of street children in Tangier, including a boarding school, a religious convent, and three different associations. My methodology includes interviews with directors and volunteers from the different associations, participant observation, personal reflections and volunteer work for two of the organizations. Each institution works with various profiles of street children in its own unique way, and my purpose is to examine the approaches with which they alleviate certain issues, the philosophies behind their methods and the separate problems they all face in attempting to reintegrate the children back into Moroccan society. Through their stories, I will analyze the obstacles impeding these organizations from the potential of giving street children a chance at a positive future, and assess both the temporary and permanent solutions they have found in order to overcome the problem. I conclude that organizational social action alone is not sufficient to alleviate the problem, and that government intervention in Tangier is not only lacking but desperately needed in order to find a solution to the problem of children in street situations.

Key words: Social Work, Sociology, Philosophy of Education

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## **Introduction**

It is difficult to deny that Morocco has indeed come a long way on its journey for the acquirement of basic rights for all of its inhabitants. There is still one population, however, that continues to elude protection despite the ubiquitous awareness of their existence. It is estimated that there are anywhere between 10,000 and 30,000 children living in the streets of Morocco today. They are driven there by socioeconomic factors and situations that are often linked with poverty, such as domestic violence, single parent households or difficulty in school. “Most families of street-connected children have experienced persistent discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion within societies where inequalities are high and/or growing.” (“Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Children Working and/or Living on the Street,” 2011, p.9) There are several different

profiles of these children in street situations, including those at risk of being on the streets due to precarious family situations, those spending the majority of their time on the streets but still having family residences to go home to from time to time, and those that have been essentially abandoned, spending the entirety of their time living on the street. In the city of Tangier where this study takes place, a large majority of those living and sleeping on the street are a result of migrating to the city in the hopes of making it across to Europe. “They make the trip by hiding under trucks or buses on ferries from Tangier, or in over-loaded “pateras” – small, precarious speed boats run by professional smugglers.” (Vidal, p.14) The migration process for these boys usually begins months before when they leave their homes in rural areas to move to Tangier, but for many, the trip to Europe becomes too difficult and they end up having to make street life their place and way of living. Whatever the case may be, these children are all subject to substance abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, and violence. While recent Government reforms and laws have been passed with the purpose of helping them, it is the associations that are the ones that really take on the complicated task of social reinsertion for these children. In this paper I will explore the organizational response to street children in Tangier by writing about my experiences both interviewing and volunteering for the following organizations: *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*, *Casa Familiar Nazareth*, *Association Darna*, *Misioneras de Caridad (Las Hermanas de Calcuta)* and *Association Al Khaima*. Every organization had its own unique background, distinct methods of assisting the children and along with differing philosophies of education, worked with different profiles of street children. Through my interviews I discovered that the problems that inevitably accompany trying to reintegrate these children are internal just as much as they are external. I explore the limitations faced by the organizations, and assess whether the solutions they provide are indeed feasible, preventative, long-term or temporary, along with

which profiles of street children are receiving the most help. Lastly, based on my findings I will attempt to answer the question of whether the social action of these organizations is enough to help the children in the streets of Tangier, or whether Government interference is ultimately what is needed to make an actual difference.

## **Methodology**

My original intent for this paper was to write an academic analysis on the reintegration of street children through textual research and factual statistics. I chose to go to Tangier because I am fluent in Spanish, which is the predominant second language in the city. The only organization I had planned to work with, being that it was the only one that had been recommended to me, was *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*. After my first interview, however, and the subsequent conflicting interviews that followed I realized that there is an alternate reality behind the statistics that only fieldwork can uncover. With each interview I conducted, I was told about another organization, each one with its own story and its own hardships. I ended up visiting five organizations and interviewing employees, volunteers and spending time with some of the children. As a result, I opted to write this paper through the stories presented by these interviews, viewing the problem from the perspectives of the organizations themselves, through the lens of their joys and their frustrations. These are the people that devote their entire being to this cause, and it has become more than just a job for them. Those are the feelings I wished to portray, because they are the ones that speak louder than numbers on a page. I also reflected on my experience volunteering for one of these organizations, putting me face to face with realities that no amount of textual research could have ever prepared me to confront. Of course, being an American student, I was always conscious of the fact that my positionality as the researcher could have impacted the answers I received during

the interviews, and I tried to view my results within the scope of this obstacle. Another obstacle was the difficulty in finding these organizations, whom did not have a website or physical address, but were suggested to me by word of mouth. To add to this, there was also an issue with the availability and willingness of employees to speak to me. For almost all of the organizations, I was asked to come back multiple times for an interview. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, so I did not use a translator. The names of the directors have been changed or the last names excluded. All of the names of the previous volunteers for *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* have been left anonymous at their request.

### ***Ningun Niño Sin Techo***

The first organization I visited in Tangier was called *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*. It is considered a boarding house for former street children and is run by a Spanish woman whose name has been changed to preserve her anonymity. It is worth mentioning that it was my first stop for several reasons, the first being that it was the only organization I knew about in Tangier that worked with street children. It was recommended to me due to a previous student's work there, and any Google search on the topic in Tangier pointed primarily to this organization. I will first discuss my interview with Maria Jimenez, the director, and the overall philosophy behind *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* which, on paper, is a wonderful and effective solution to the problem of street children.

Our interview took place inside the boarding house itself, inside a spacious living room decorated with pictures of the King. There were also individual portraits of different boys inside a glass cabinet, but the silence that reverberated from the walls did not match what I would have thought would be a cacophony of sounds coming from young boys living under the same roof. Maria and I seemed to be the only ones in the building.

We began with how the organization got started. After being inspired by a documentary about street children in Colombia, Maria saw the same problem in Tangier and decided to take an initiative to do something about it. She did field research for two years, going back and forth between Tangier and Spain. She wasn't satisfied with the small temporary solutions that she was coming up with, however. "Unless you find a way to help the children long term, today's food is only going to be tomorrow's hunger."

(Jimenez, Personal Communication, 11/18/2014) That was how the initiative to start *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* began in 2000. The objective was to create a home environment for the children to grow up in, where they would have access to a bed, food, structure, education, and a small makeshift family. With enough support and funding, the organization was finally established in 2005. The process of bringing the children to the home was very difficult at first. They had to send out specially trained personnel with a strong background in child psychology to seek out children on the streets and offer them the organization's services. The twelve boys living in the home today, however, have not come directly from the streets. They were all at some point living in precarious situations in which either the parents came and asked for the home to shelter their child, they were assigned to live there by a tribunal, or in some cases, a few even came in on their own account. Although it was not explicitly stated by Maria, I came to the conclusion that this had a lot to do with the complexities of trying to reintegrate children of the street into a world of rules and structure after years without any. But this didn't mean that the children at her organization didn't arrive without their fair share of problems either. "They come here lacking a basic education. We have to teach them how to eat, have personal hygiene and speak properly. Just like any child

who is scolded by an adult, they will look at you with disdain when you try to discipline them. In these instances, however, it is made so much harder by the fact that their parents have never tried to educate them. They are very vulgar when they arrive, and the biggest challenge is to change the way they express themselves and teach them manners. Of course it also depends on individual personalities, not all of them are like this.” (Jimenez, personal communication, 11/18/2014) The ages of the children living in the home range from eight to eighteen years old. Maria explained that it is best to admit the children when they’re young, before they’ve reached their teenage years. Once they’ve reached the age of around fifteen or sixteen and they’ve been spending most of their time on the street, it becomes extremely difficult to break the self-destructive cycles that they inevitably fall victims to, such as glue sniffing or gang involvement. The boys go through a radical metamorphosis in her home, Maria proudly told me, arriving with savage-like behavior and leaving as civilized members of society. One of the requirements is that they attend school, and once they turn eighteen they can either continue their studies or are put through some kind of vocational training so that they can begin working and return to their families. The importance of family in the reintegration of the children was very important, and as long as it wasn’t harmful to the child, reuniting them with their families in the end was always preferred. The main philosophy behind the organization revolved around the care and personal treatment of the children during the process of reintegration. Any form of violent or stringent education is hardly ever effective, because it only ends up in the child wanting to go back to the freedom he enjoyed on the streets. “You have to have patience, gain their trust, and show them that there are caring people out there without ulterior motives. You

also have to help them while they are still children, because it's going to be too late as they get older and inevitably become violent, angry adults." (Jimenez, , personal communication, 11/18/2014)

Maria then showed me around the house, a simple, two-story compound with the living rooms and kitchen downstairs, and the dormitory where the boys sleep upstairs. There was a bulletin board in their room with the name of each boy and their school schedules. I counted twenty beds in the room, but only twelve names on the board. When I asked Maria about this, she explained that she couldn't take in any more boys for lack of funding. The organization had been receiving support from the Spanish government until the country underwent a financial crisis in 2008, meaning the first funds to be cut were those for social welfare programs. As far as the Moroccan government is concerned, she said they are completely indifferent towards not only hers, but all human rights organizations in general. She filed for help under law 1405 but has been waiting four years for an inspector to come to the organization. Without the funds and relying only on donations, she has been forced to let go of all her educators and staff members, leaving only herself and the cook at the NGO. She sadly pointed out the extra bed in which she slept in the same room as the boys, saying she could no longer go back home due to lack of personnel available to watch over the kids. It was not surprising, then, that when asked about a solution towards the problem of street children, the answer was aimed toward government intervention. "The government needs to create an effective plan. One that exists in action, not only on paper. They need to realize that if something is not done about these children while they're young, there will be absolutely nothing they can do when they are adults. There needs to be

more centers like these, and they need to be well funded. Centers that offer close knit families, personalized care, and the nurturing and treatment that a child's soul needs to be filled with. Otherwise, how will you fill that void?" (Jimenez, personal communication, 11/18/2014)

### **The Controversy behind *Ningun Niño Sin Techo***

The feeling that surged through me after leaving this organization was one of absolute awe and admiration for Maria and the work that she does for these children. Until that point it had been a rare occasion to meet someone who dedicated not only so much of themselves but also 100% of their daily life to solely improve and make a difference in the lives of children who might otherwise never have been given a chance. I felt anger at the lack of funding and resources available to help her cause, and wholeheartedly believed that organizations such as hers were a very viable and humanitarian solution to aid in reintegrating street children back into society. It provided an answer that revolved around treating these children as what they are, children, and not as a statistic. Unfortunately, blinded by my veneration, I overlooked for a moment that both my positionality as the interviewer and the occasional inherent deceptiveness of a conversation were two factors that made an interview nothing more than a story with no conclusive facts to back it. Having never witnessed this organization's process of reintegrating these children with my own eyes, was it possible to ever really know if what I was being told was how it was actually happening?

As chance would have it, while researching and visiting another organization I met a young lady named Layla who had volunteered at *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* from

March to June of 2013. Having discussed the reason behind my study in Tangier, I asked if I could interview her about her time at the organization as I felt that having the perspective of a volunteer would be a good accompaniment to the interview of the director. Afterwards, she gave me the contact information of two more previous volunteers whom I sought out and interviewed as well. I found that while each volunteer had had different experiences and opinions during their stay, they all pointed to the same conclusion: there was something wrong with the organizational management of *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*. My objective is not to defame the purpose of the organization or to libel Maria's name. Rather, I feel that this research is important in stressing yet another factor making the reintegration of street children so tedious: the difficulties of running an organization and the mismanagement of resources when doing so. I will now discuss their interviews collectively, and as promised, I have changed the volunteers' names or left them anonymous.

Contrary to what I was led to believe, Maria Jimenez was not the sole founder of *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*. It was actually a partnership with a man named Abdelwahed Mezroudi. They created the project together, and for the first four to five years, it was one of the best centers in Tangier for the rehabilitation of street children. It had educators, psychologists and social workers, all the adequate and necessary staff to accomplish the task. It was also funded by *Agencia Española de Recuperación al Desarrollo*, a Spanish agency that approves and finances projects for minors presented by NGO's (aacid). Unfortunately, as time went on there were too many conflicting ideas for how to run the program between the founders and eventually, Mr. Mezroudi left. According to the volunteer that was present during this transitional period, everything

began going downhill from there. One by one the staff began to leave, either following Mezroudi or being let go by Maria because of differing opinions. The greatest discrepancy came when the Spanish Agency cut off the funding for the organization due to 80,000 Euros that were never justified or accounted for. "It was never due to the Spanish economic crisis. The money just wasn't used how it was supposed to be so the Agency demanded it back. After that it was complete chaos, and the organization now relies solely on donations and money raised from Galas and events that Maria is always trying to frantically throw together." (Anonymous, personal communication, 11/25/2014)

At the point when the first volunteer I spoke with was there in March 2013, there were only two volunteers and two educators left. "There was hardly any structure in the home. The kids weren't in the habit of doing their homework every day and they were always yelling and rough-housing with each other. Rather than trying to instill discipline, Maria would shrug and tell me, 'they're just bad kids.'" (Layla, personal communication, 11/23/2014) Because Maria was often away or busy organizing Galas to raise funds, as a volunteer Layla shadowed one of the two educators in the house. He was very aggressive towards the boys, and not in an effectively disciplining manner but rather in the way someone would treat a criminal. Layla would make deals with the boys, telling them that if they sat down with her and did their homework, she would play games with them after. They were always willing to go along with it, but on several occasions when the educator was around, he would hit the boys on the back of the head for getting distracted or even for not reading fast enough. There were several instances of this sort of violent discipline, which was supposedly against the philosophy of the organization in the first place. When Layla brought it up to Maria, her response

was along the lines of telling her that she was too sweet to deal with these kinds of kids but that she would talk to the educator about what he was doing. When I asked if she ever talked to him or if there were any repercussions or institutional changes, the answer was simply a rhetorical, "What do you think?"

As stated earlier, the purpose of including this part of my research was not to defame or slander a person but to measure the institutional effectiveness of their organization through the perspectives of people who had spent time volunteering for them. My third interviewee had similar stories as the first two but made a very good point when I asked him about the effectiveness of the organization as a whole. "In theory, an organization like *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* is a viable solution for that certain profile of kids; those in danger of being on the street due to precarious family situations. She falsely advertises that they are all former street children because it attracts more donors, but the reality is that it is much more difficult to place actual children of the street in these kinds of homes. The other problem is that as soon as they turn 18 they are not allowed to live there anymore, and a lot of these kids have left the organization without having learned any autonomous behavior. They simply go back to the life they were living before *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*. This organization can only work if you have an objective, and only if you are more concerned for the well-being of the children than for the recognition of what you do for them." (Anonymous, personal communication, 11/26/2014)

Just as I mentioned that my positionality as the interviewer definitely affected my interview with Maria, the same could have very well happened with my interviews with the volunteers. Their experiences and opinions were all subjective to the periods of time

in which they volunteered and their own personal relationship with Maria. As a last step, in order to ameliorate the two sides not only for this research but for my own peace of mind, I asked Maria if I could volunteer for her and spend some time with the kids. Although reluctant to let someone with no background in child psychology or experience with street children volunteer, she agreed to let me spend an afternoon with them on one of their days off from school.

The house is comprised of twelve boys, five of them thirteen years old and younger, and the rest upwards of sixteen. Accompanied by one of the eighteen year olds, we took the five youngest boys to play soccer one afternoon. I don't know what I was expecting, but I was surprised by how amiable and delightfully friendly the kids were towards me. While the younger ones played at the park with other boys from the neighborhood, I sat down with the oldest boy and watched them while we talked. It was by no means a formal interview or anything of the sort; I wasn't scribbling anything down on a notepad and he wasn't answering any questions. We simply had a conversation about our lives, and between that and watching the childrens' interactions with him and with each other, I was able to come to terms with the mixed perspectives I had received about the organization as a whole. All of the kids had different stories: this one's mother had passed away and his father was incapable of caring for him as she had, that one's parents had gotten divorced and amidst the drama encompassing the situation a judge had court ordered the child to stay in the organization. None of the children had ever actually lived on the street, as one of the volunteers had indeed told me, but it was very clear that they were better off here living in this organization than if they had remained in their homes. My companion had been having trouble in school, leaving his house in

the morning and coming back at night having spent all day with his friends skipping class. His mother had sought out the organization as a desperate means of giving him a structured lifestyle since she was a single mom and worked all day. He had never really been at risk of being homeless, but his life was definitely not headed in a good direction. He remembered a time when they housed actual children of the street, but he said that aside from the greater psychological burden of reintegrating those children it was also more expensive, due to the medicines required and the special educators needed for them. Without the funds, there was hardly enough for the kids already present. But he wasn't complaining. He knew the money was short but he said he was grateful for a roof over his head and a hot meal every night, and said they made do with what they had. These boys, whom he gestured at with a sweeping motion of his hand, they were his family and he could not have imagined his life without them. Being the oldest in the house and without the funds to pay for a staff, he often helped chaperone the younger boys just as he did on the day I went with them. He felt that it gave his life purpose, looking after his brothers as he called them, and helping Maria get their lives on track just as she had done for him. Towards the end of the game one of the boy's stomach began hurting from running too much, and it was time to go home. The walk back was long, but the way they all kept checking on him and being a shoulder for him to lean on was absolutely endearing. They spoke Darija to each other, but would courteously speak in Spanish to involve me in their playful conversations. At one point, a strange man approached us saying something I couldn't understand. One of the little ones grabbed my arm and pulled me to the middle of the group, to where I wouldn't be on the outermost edge, and then continued the conversation he was having with us. It was a

small act of kindness but I was utterly taken aback by his instinct to protect me just as if I were one of his brothers. They were playful, they were mischievous, and they were scolded from time to time by the oldest one for running into the street or jokingly shouting, "Taxi!" to make them pull over as they ran away. As I observed this behavior I realized that anyone walking by would not think twice about the fact that all they were seeing was a family, a group of brothers walking home. And indeed, that's what these boys had become. When we returned, the boy who had been injured rushed to Maria to tell her what was wrong, and she apologetically turned to me and said we would have to cut my visit short so she could take care of him. I thanked her, received goodbye hugs and kisses from the kids, and walked home with a heavy heart but a resolved mindset about the situation.

Regardless of whose version held the most truth about the happenings at *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*, the facts remain the same: limited resources allow only twelve boys out of the possible twenty to live in the house, they do not come from the streets but from difficult situations at home, the organization is struggling to find funds and also currently has no staff. But beneath all of that, what I realized that day was that there were still twelve boys, twelve precious lives that were better off living in this home than if they had continued living in their situations and ended up who knows where. They have become a family, a support system to one another and although children living in the streets find this amongst themselves as well, the different environments impact the different goals and relationships they have with each other. The love that the boys at *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* have for each other goes beyond a bond that is formed out of the need for survival, but rather stems from coexistence and the genuine desire to protect each other

and see each other do well. Despite any failures in the managerial department and controversial behavior from the educators, that is truly where the success behind the philosophy of this organization lies. It has a long way to go to, but it offered something that no other organization I visited came even close to giving the children: a home.

### **Casa Familiar Nazareth**

While the premise of a boarding school where children lived and became reintegrated turned out to be complicated and the stories a bit controversial, I was directed to a couple of other organizations that functioned under the same philosophy of helping those at risk of ending up on the streets, only without the children actually living at the associations. The first was *Casa Familiar Nazareth*, an organization founded sixty years ago by a Franciscan Monk in order to help people in dependent situations in the cities of Tangier and Ceuta. It currently consists of four projects: assistance for persons with severe disabilities, a nursing clinic for basic healthcare in the Tangier medina, pastoral visits to the civil penitentiary prison and the integration of minors in difficult situations, or Al Basma. *Casa Nazareth* launched Al Basma, meaning “the smile”, as a response to the growing phenomenon of unaccompanied minors in the streets in 2007. It covers a variety of basic needs for minors (food, shower, sanitary assistance and laundry service) as well as an intervention through mediation with their families and educational institutions. (Caza Nazareth)

I interviewed Sufian, the social educator for the Integration of Minors Al Basma project. He works with twenty-five children from the ages of eleven to eighteen. The one requirement is that they have to either be in school or some kind of vocational training. The kids come a few times a week, during which mornings and afternoons are

dedicated to school work and then a break is awarded in between for relaxing or playing. Sufian chats with them before every summer and they plan a week-long summer camp together, the only time out of the year where they kids will actually live together. I asked about the criteria for choosing which kids get to come to the organization, since the space was limited at twenty-five. He explained that whenever a space becomes available due to the boys becoming older than eighteen or finding work, he makes visits to the local schools and has a discussion with the teachers about which student has been falling behind or missing school entirely. Most of the time it coincides that the parents of the minors suggested by these teachers are either divorced, single mothers, or they have been adopted. Sufian will then speak with the families and decide if the program *Al Basma* is right for them. On some occasions, the nurse from the organization's clinic will also send in boys who come in for treatment depending on the situation. For him, the most difficult part about educating the boys is the period of time when they reach adolescence. At fourteen and fifteen years old, the boys begin questioning everything they're told to do and why they're there. "It's not that they're bad kids," he chuckled, "didn't we all go through that rebellious teenage phase?" He showed me the room where some of the boys were doing their homework. They had new desks, a computer, and an open classroom with bright lighting. There were school schedules on a bulletin board next to pictures of them at what I assumed was them at a previous summer camp. "They go through a drastic change from when they first arrive to when they leave. I love them as if they were my own kids, but am grateful to be able to send them home to their families every night." (Sufian, personal communication, 12/01/2014)

This statement spurred on the question about those kids that didn't have a family to go

to, the children *of* the street. He said that it was simply more feasible to prevent kids from ending up on the street than integrating children who are already living there.

“When the kids who come here see someone genuinely interested in them, they want to try harder at school and show the better side of them, and also show that side to their families. It’s easier to get results that way.” He told me about a congregation of Catholic sisters that worked directly with street children, and also about Association Darna, an organization that to his understanding also offered them refuge.

### **Association Darna**

It wasn’t the first time I had heard about Association Darna. It had been mentioned to me as one of the first organizations in Morocco that worked with street children, along with Bayti in Casablanca. The trek to reach it was no easy feat. I was told which general neighborhood it would be in but of course, it had no physical address or discernible sign with which to distinguish it. I ended up having to ask a local boy to show me the way, for a tip of course, and finally found the building. Consequently, I arrived too late in the afternoon and was told to come back the next day. The next day when I came back, the person Sufian had told me to ask for wasn’t there, and the next day when she was, she said I needed to speak with the director, who wouldn’t be there until the next week. I relentlessly returned each time because I was so excited to finally speak to someone who worked for an organization that actually sheltered children who lived in the street. When at last I was able to speak to the director, my enthusiasm was abruptly cut short.

We were not able to sit down and engage in a formal interview. Aside from the fact that she was extremely busy and spoke only a small amount of Spanish, she

informed me that there was an entire procedure (beginning with me emailing the organization's headquarters) that was required for me to take a tour of the building and interview staff. I did, however, explain my purpose for being there, and to my dismay, I was told that *Association Darna* was no longer a refuge for street children. The blue house now functions as a school for professional apprenticeship, cultural entertainment and scholarly help and tutoring. Like *Casa Nazareth*, they work with children in difficult home situations and help keep them on track in school, or place them in some kind of vocational training so that they can find work. The house teaches a variety of different skills: carpentry, butchery, culinary, ceramics, iron-works, music, technology information, literacy, and multiple other scholarly matters. Today, the center teaches more than one hundred children from all areas of Tangier. (Association Darna) Near the blue courtyard where we were standing, there were kids playing soccer and somewhere beyond them I heard the sounds of a woodworking class. Through the open windows of the building upstairs I could see that there was some kind of language class in session. From my brief and limited overview, the association definitely seemed to be well-funded and successfully carrying out the tasks that she told me about. Before being ushered out, however, I managed to ask about the street kids and why they could no longer find refuge there. From what I understood, *Association Darna* was opened as a harbor and rehabilitation center for children living in the streets until Law 14-05 was passed in 2006 dealing with the conditions of opening and managing social protection refuges. Afterwards, the association made the transition into helping children in vulnerable situations, and has now even expanded into teaching centers for women and young girls. It was an organization that seemed to do fantastic work with this certain profile of

at-risk minors, but it also served to deepen the interminably growing question: What was being done about the children with no families, those living and dying in the streets of Tangier?

### **Misioneras de la Caridad– “Las Calcutas”**

There seemed to be no apparent answer to that question. After *Association Darna* turned out to be another organization intended for the prevention of minors ending up on the street rather than helping those already living there, my final hopes rested with the Catholic congregation Sufian had told me about. *Misioneras de la Caridad*, or Missionaries of Charity, is a religious congregation founded by Mother Teresa of Calcuta in 1950 in the Indian city of Calcuta. Since then, and around the city of Tangier, the sisters are known mostly as “Las Calcutas”. Their mission statement is simple: to help the most poor among the poor. In Tangier, the house of Las Calcutas was established in 1989 and is also known as “Dar Salam”, located in the old *Iglesia de la Purísima* in the heart of the Medina. The church is no longer used for religious services but rather as the location for the sisters to carry out the different projects for the congregation. Six days out of the week, its doors are opened as a harbor for single mothers, who in a Muslim society, face extreme criticism and are often left to fend for their own without any type of help or resources from public institutions. The sisters shelter the women during their pregnancy, and after, offer a daycare service for the child while the mother tries to find work. On Wednesdays, however, the church became a harbor for children of the street, and that was exactly what I had been looking for. For once, the location of the organization was not difficult to find. The difficult part was

establishing contact with the sisters, as they did not have a webpage or public phone number available for me to find out if I could volunteer for them. Luckily enough, during my interview with the director of *Asociacion Al-Khaima* (an organization I will subsequently discuss), I found out that he had a good long-standing friendship with the sisters of Calcuta. As a side project, one of the interns for his association also volunteered for Las Calcutas every week, and one phone call later I was all set to volunteer the next day.

I showed up at the *Iglesia de la Purísima* at two in the afternoon, half an hour before the work would start. The door to the Church was located on the left hand side of an upward path within the medina, and on the right of it there was a wrought-iron gated area in which children were already lined up waiting to go inside. Some of them hung their hands over the horizontal railing and leaned their heads against their forearms as they curiously followed me with their eyes. The purpose of the line outside was so that one of the volunteers could search them one by one and take away their sniffing glue. It was the one requirement that the sisters had for the children to be allowed into the church: to hand over any drugs in their possession.

Once inside, I found myself in a large hall decorated with balloons, explained to me by one of the sisters as the waiting room for the kids to play in while they were seen. Past another set of doors in a walled-off section there were other volunteers and even some of the single mothers who found refuge there on the other days of the week working quickly to get all of the stations set up. There was an area with six showers and a large hampers where the kids could undress and place their dirty clothes before they washed up. There was the station where I would be working, a long bench where boxes

of donated clothes from Spain were being unpacked and sorted according to size. A medical station was set up right in front, with two chairs and a cart filled with anything from gauze, bandages, nail clippers, hair combs and disinfectant sprays. Lastly, in the kitchen there were simple meals being prepared which would ultimately be served on a long dinner table where the boys would make their final stop.

A bell rang from somewhere within the church and it was time to get to work. The doors opened up and the grand hall from the beginning was filled with the sound of boys' yelling and laughter, and the sound of a soccer ball bouncing off the walls echoed throughout the building. The volunteer who had been outside with them came in first, dumping a bag of little orange containers of *Cyclax* (the glue that they sniff) and the plastic bags that they use to inhale it into the garbage. The boys were then led into the back by groups of two, taken first to the showers. After showering, they were given a clean pair of underwear and were sent over to our station where they stood there shivering while we dug through the piles of clothes, gauging their sizes to find something that fit. Each boy got a pair of pants, a shirt, a sweater, and if there was one that fit, a jacket. They also got a new pair of socks and if their shoes were no longer usable and depending on availability of sizes, they got a wearable pair of shoes. Once dressed, they would sit in one of the chairs at the first aid station where a volunteer nurse would cure any injuries they may have sustained on the streets. Every single child had cuts and bruises here and there, some much worse than others. One of the boys lifted his pant leg to reveal a gash about six inches long and an inch wide on his calf. He gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles turned white while the nurse tended to it, but he did not cry out once. Another had a large burn on his thigh, but stayed silent

when they asked how he got it. Many of the boys also had minor wounds on their scalps, and when I asked about them, I was told that many of them become involved in gang fights where rocks are thrown at each other's heads or get pushed to the ground. If any of the injuries were severe enough, they would have been taken to the nearest hospital for treatment. There were also some grooming activities at this station. While the nurse cured their injuries, the boys were given a pair of nail clippers and a small bin so they could dispose of the clippings. When they finished, they would sit on the second chair where another volunteer would clean their ears and check their hair for lice. This was some of the boys' favorite part, not only because they enjoyed the way the comb felt running through their hair, but because they would have a nicely-combed hair do when he was through. One of them turned towards me with a big cheeky grin and pointed at his hair, lifting his eyebrows twice as if to say, "Isn't it nice?" They were then led by one of the sisters to the big table where they were served their meal, which was usually some kind of meat, a piece of bread and a fruit. All of the boys ate their food ravenously.

Two by two, rounds of boys continued to come in through the doors. With each shivering, malnourished boy that emerged from the showers, the amount of usable clothing grew smaller and smaller. As I dug through the piles of men's pants and sweaters, I found it harder to find clothes small enough to fit these boys who were no more than skin and bones standing in front of me. I would hand them some pants, they would hold them up to themselves, say "Kabir, kabir" (the Darija word for big) and hand them back. It was the same with jackets. As the climate got colder and rainier, the boys would ask for something warm and with a hood to cover themselves when it rained. The

problem was that all of the small jackets would get passed out immediately, and we were left with only a handful of jackets big enough for adult men. Feeling that what we gave them wouldn't be warm enough, some of the boys would point at the remaining small jackets asking for another but the sisters would tell them no. It wasn't an easy thing to do, they said, but they were so low on supplies that they couldn't afford to give each child more than one jacket. The shoes were another issue. Sneakers were the first to go, but boys still came bearing shoes that were clearly falling apart. Many of them had to be given slippers or flip flops, despite the impracticality of wearing them in the rain.

Another problem presented by the shoe situation was that sometimes the boys would leave their shoes outside, come in barefoot asking for new shoes, and then sell the ones they were given in order to buy more sniffing glue. As a matter of fact, it was like that with everything they were given. There was always the risk that they would sell anything provided to them in the house in order to buy more glue. That was why the meals had to be finished before they left and the small granola bars they were given as dessert had to be eaten on the spot. It was the same with the pills they were given for their toothaches. Lacking any actual toothbrushes to give out, they had to resort to giving the kids one pain killer each for fear that they may take too many at once or that they would sell the remainder in order to buy more glue. It seemed that the desire to momentarily escape their reality had become a fixation for these boys, most important above all else.

The main problem faced by Las Calcutas was that of extremely limited resources. Everything they had to work with came from donations, and all of them from

Spain. The reason for this was that despite their charitable mission, being a Catholic convent in an Islamic country meant that not many people supported the work they were doing there, especially offering shelter and refuge for single mothers. Even the donations they did receive from Spain were of limited help; as I had become painfully aware, the clothes were often unusable. The clothes thrown in the hampers by the children were washed and used again if they were in a descent state, but after having worn them all week long, the clothes were hardly ever in a reusable condition. The supplies were constantly dwindling, but the demand was always high. Every week, anywhere from thirty to fifty boys showed up at their doorstep. This didn't include those over eighteen years of age who also came hoping for help. The two weeks I volunteered there, an average of about fifteen boys lined up outside the door, but were not allowed in because the Church was used only for minors. The sisters brought them out a plate of food and any clothes that they might desperately need, but that was the extent of what they could do for them.

When all of the remaining clothes were packed away, the supplies back in storage and the last boy had eaten, I walked out with them as the sisters closed the doors. A couple of the boys hugged me goodbye before I watched them run off together, turn the corner and vanish into the medina streets. I knew that this would probably be the best meal they ate all week, and for sure the only shower. The wounds would need to be cleaned and gauzes would need to be changed but there would be no one to do it. I felt good about having been able to help out but I couldn't bring myself to feel like I had made any sort of a difference. The sisters assured me that the next week,

*if* the boys returned because some of them never did, that they would come back with a fresh tube of glue in their pocket.

### **Association Al Khaima**

The last organization I will write about targeted a different problem altogether, although it was also concerned with the work done by Las Calcutas. There is a specific profile of minors in the streets of Tangier due to the city's geographic location. Every year, thousands of people migrate to the northern cities of Morocco in hopes of making it across to Europe and starting a better life. With Tangier being one of the main gateways between Europe and North Africa, many find themselves having to stay there after unsuccessful attempts at migration into Europe. There are even more cases, however, of those who successfully make it to Spain and then are forced out of the country by the Spanish government. "These boys have frequently been met by rejection if not violence by Spanish authorities. Most are sent back immediately, never making it beyond the port in Spain. Those few who make it past the port must enter the Spanish child protection system in order to stay; once in Spain, some of them face institutional mistreatment under the Spanish child protection system." (demogr.mpg) While migration may not seem pertinent to the problem of street children at first, a vast amount of the youth deported from Spain end up on the streets of Tangier with nowhere to go. The next organization I interviewed did not work with street children directly, but they helped the Moroccan migrant youth and in doing so acted as a preventative operation to prevent many from ending up on the streets.

In 2007, the Asociacion Al Khaima was established in Tangier as a result of cooperative work between several Spanish and Moroccan entities, as a response to the

vast amount of expulsions of young Moroccans from Spain. Their goals are to “promote citizen participation across the different sections of the associative world, create spaces for thought and training on the migratory processes, and promote the use of art and media as a meeting point and a source of knowledge (Al Khaima)”. I interviewed an employee of the Association, Mohammed, about the work that Al Khaima does and his thoughts on the problem of street children in Tangier. They are currently focusing their work on the efficient defense of children’s rights through the training of social actors and through the involvement in migration processes through a transnational standpoint. This is done through a method of intervention known as transnational social mediation, which is applied when working with Moroccan youth, their families, as well as the state institutions and associative people in charge of their protection. Basically all of the entities involved in a minor’s decision to migrate to Europe. There are several ways in which the organization works to defend the rights of immigrant minors in Spain. They involve the centers of protection in which the minors seek refuge, and intervene with the proper documentation should the Spanish government try to say they are not minors due to improper credentials. They also get in contact with the families of the boys and establish a way for them to connect. Mohammed showed me the room at the association where they would set up skype accounts for the mothers of the boys and allow them time to use their computer and speak with their sons. He felt that maintaining this familial bond was crucial for the mental well-being of those migrating to another country to help improve their family’s lives as well as their own.

There are those, however, that are forced to return from Spain due to problems finding work or deportation by the government. These boys come back with

psychological problems from the trauma of the experience and are burdened by the shame of having to go back to their families empty handed. A lot of the times the family doesn't want to take them back, and these are the boys that end up most at risk of living on the street. Asociacion Al Khaima includes a reintegration program for these minors, offering family therapy in order to reunite the familial unit and also attempting to find them work in Tangier with *Atento*, a Spanish company in Morocco. These measures prevent those whose families seek help from the association from ending up on the street, but there are so many more that come from other cities or have no concerned families in the first place that don't receive this kind of help.

“Because the distance between Tangier and Tarifa is only fourteen kilometers, the kids try to sneak on the trucks or hide in the merchandise on the crossing ferries. The same problem exists in Ceuta, hundreds of children looking for the opportunity to cross. They come to these cities with a purpose, and initially not doing drugs.” (Mohammed, personal communication, 11/25/2014) The situation is worrisome in Tangier, however, because there is no protection for the minors who never make it across. The problem is disregarded completely by authorities, who ignore the fact that delinquents and junkies take advantage of the children and use them to ask for money, sell Kleenex or profit from them in many other ways. Mohammed spoke passionately about this issue, saying, “The authorities don't lift a finger to try to stop this.” But the reality, he added, is that there are always going to be difficulties with authorities when it comes to human rights. It seems that it is up to organizations to take action, but at least in Tangier, there isn't a single entity that is actually *intervening* in the streets, only preventing. There was the *Unidad de Proteccion de Menores* established in 2010, but it

has no resources, no experience, and only does office work. “Even this organization does very little about those who are already on the streets. The extent to which we do is if a family comes and says their child has left the house and they don’t know where he is, we will try our best to locate him and have them reunited again. But that’s the catch: there has to be a family and they have to be concerned. Very few of those boys are fortunate enough to have that.” (Personal Interview, Mohammed, 11/25/2014)

It was then that Mohammed told me about Las Hermanas de Calcutta, and that he had an intern at his organization that volunteered there every week. His name was Mustafa, and after we volunteered for Las Calcuttas the next day he agreed to allow me to interview him about his work for Al Khaima and with the street kids of Tangier. He is a social educator who has worked with the type of profile of street kids that fall into the category of immigrant minors for several years now. “Like Mohammed said, they come from different cities with the purpose of trying to reach Spain, but the difficulties of accomplishing this feat leaves them homeless in the streets of Tangier. That is how the drug problem starts.” (Mustafa, personal communication, 11/26/2014) Every day that a child is out on the streets, his chances of starting to sniff glue increase exponentially. There are several reasons for this, and they are not recreational. For a boy that is new to the streets, the first reason is to avoid harassment from older boys who have been there for much longer, and who are more likely to take advantage of them knowing that they have recently arrived. The act of sniffing glue helps them to fit in. Aside from this, during the winter seasons it helps to alleviate the cold and stave off the hunger. The problem is that from continued use, despite the non-recreational reasons for starting, the habit creates an addiction and then the kids find that they can’t stop. It makes them

forget the original purpose of having come to Tangier in the first place, for migration, and they end up staying and scraping a living off the streets.

Mustafa was the volunteer from Las Calcuttas that collected the glue from the kids before they came into the church. He has built a trusting relationship with the boys over the years, and even when he runs into them on the street they know to hand it over. "They trust me enough to know I genuinely care about them and that it's for their own good. They wouldn't do the same for anyone else, though, especially not for authorities." (Mustafa, personal communication, 11/26/2014) For his work with Al Khaima, he creates weekly reports after he volunteers for Las Calcuttas so that they can attempt to keep track of the amount and condition of the street kids in Tangier. The reports include how many children were seen that day, what kind of injuries they had sustained that week, which ones didn't come, and which ones were new. This allowed him to do medical follow ups, see if the kids got better or worse and begin creating before and after profiles for them in the hopes that Al Khaima might one day be able to start a reintegration program for them too. Mustafa shook his head sadly when saying that that day seemed to remain far away. "It is the Government who really has all the means to fix this. We as organizations and volunteers are extremely limited in our resources, and nowadays simply having good will is not enough. Calcutta is great, but at the end of the day the kids still go back to the street and every week, a lot of them come back worse. They are clean for one day and then during the rest of the week when they become dirty again, they are extremely socially excluded and no one thinks twice to do anything for them. It's not the public, it's not the organizations; the solution is in the State." (Personal Interview, Mustafa, 11/26/2014)

## Conclusion

As far as the organizational responses to the problem of street children in Tangier, it is evident that there are certain profiles of children that are receiving a substantially greater amount of help than others. The most assistance is available for those at risk of being on the street or already spending time there because of precarious family situations and no structural enforcement in their lives. A family has but to seek out an organization such as *Casa Familiar Nazareth*, *Association Darna* or even *Ningun Niño Sin Techo* in order to find help in leading their child back to the right path and maintaining them there. These organizations have their different methods of accomplishing this (some more successfully than others), but clearly there is a catch: for a child to be placed there, someone has to be concerned about him first. Whether it is sought out by the child's own family, a suggestion by an educator or some type of court order by a judge, there has to be an initiative taken and a genuine concern for their future for the child to even have the possibility of receiving help from one of these organizations. It is the same case for *Association Al Khaima*, who offers help to the profile of immigrant minors at risk of ending up on the street, but only if it is sought out by the family of the minor in the first place. Some of them are fortunate enough to have this in their lives, and they are placed in an institution where help arrives during a crucial period of their development. For thousands, this is hardly ever the case. Not to mention the fact that these are private organizations, where the amount of funding and availability of resources not only determine, but severely inhibit the number of children that they have the capacity to take. The problem of inadequate funds was exemplified by my visit to *Ningun Niño Sin Techo*, where conflicting perspectives during interviews

shed light on the difficulties of running such an organization and the financial repercussions that were a consequence of the mismanagement of resources. Finding the adequate personnel and an effective leader to run an organization like that is clearly just as difficult as the task of reintegrating the children themselves. The overall point, however, is that in regards to the street children in Tangier, these four establishments function on the sole basis of small-scale, preventative work.

The only social action attempting to make a difference in the lives of children actually living in the streets comes from the religious congregation *Misioneras de la Caridad*. My experience volunteering there was heart-wrenching, eye-opening and indelibly etched into my memory. Despite having done research on the unfortunate circumstances in which these kids found themselves, it was the first time that the harsh realities of their daily lives left the context of a computer screen and stared at me with wide, hunger-stricken eyes. Regardless of whether they are in their situations because of migration or by simple accidents of birth, the work of the Sisters of Calcuta is the closest these kids ever come to anyone showing any kind of concern about their well-being. The problem is that it is nothing more than an extremely temporary assistance comprised of charitable volunteer work. Like the profound wounds that I watched the volunteers attempt to mend with basic supplies meant for shallower cuts, the work of Las Calcutas does the same - place a small bandage once a week over a vast problem that unless tended to every day, will only continue to fester. Their work is undoubtedly admirable and provides certain basic necessities that no human being, especially a child, should ever be without. But at the end of the day the children still go back to the

streets. There is absolutely no initiative, at least in the city of Tangier, which is currently working on a permanent solution to get them out.

When asked about what needed to be done in order to extinguish the problem of street children, every single organization and volunteer I spoke with pointed to Government intervention as the answer. Despite the amount of good will they possessed and donations they received, all organizations, whether preventative or charitable, were extremely limited in their scope. The Government alone has the means to provide a large-scale solution to the issue, but according to my interview with Mustafa, they choose to be blissfully ignorant of its severity. “Before any Royal visit comes to Tangier, unmarked, white police vans are dispersed throughout the city to pick up the street kids. They take them to the *Plaza de Toros*, an old bull-fighting stadium left over from the Spanish protectorate, and house them for two to three days until the King leaves. Afterwards they are released back into the streets. It’s not that the King isn’t conscious of the real problem, it’s more that by hiding it they believe it will take care of itself.” (Mustafa, personal communication, 11/26/2014) While this is one personal opinion, it is true that despite whatever laws have been passed in recent years regarding the protection of all children on paper, the reality is that very little is legally done for them. During his interview at *Al Khaima*, Mohammed painted a mental image of what he felt would be the best solution for the problem: multiple Government-mandated centers of protection for these children, specialized to fit the different profiles. These centers would offer them a place to sleep, drug rehabilitation, occupational trainings, and reintegration into the school system. The staff would consist of government-employed social workers, psychologists and educators, people like Mustafa

who can work with these children through the basis of a trusting relationship rather than aggressive disciplining. It would only work if the general public mentality, especially that of authorities, changed about street children. Rather than viewing them as criminals, or even allowing them to fade into the background because of the routinization of seeing children on the street, there would have to be a general concern for them, spurring on a standardized reaction to take them to these centers if a family cannot be located. That solution would be effective, it would be feasible, and it would be long-term. But for now, all of these “would be’s” remain only ideas in the mind of a frustrated social worker, who’s organization is limited to the scope of one specific profile and by the exasperation of the volunteers who all feel the same frustration as him. I limited my own research to examining the organizational response to street children in Tangier, but as a recommendation for future studies I would suggest analyzing the Government response (or lack thereof) and attempt to tackle the issue from the perspective of the law makers and those with the power to make a tangible difference. After seeing the limitations of organizations who try to do what they can but are only able to achieve small-scale, temporary or strictly preventative results, I am convinced that the answer really does lie in the hands of the Government to help the children that have no other possible chance at a future. Once they are off the streets, well-funded preventative work is definitely something organizations can continue to successfully do on their own. The Moroccan government needs to comprehend the fact that 30,000 children in the streets will become 30,000 violent, angry adults who will be socially excluded and incapable of contributing anything to the country. There needs to be a shift in focus to build social

infrastructure rather than such an emphasis on a material one. To be conscious of the fact that buildings will last, but the human spirit will not.

Nobody can help the circumstances into which they are born, just as nobody should feel superior or entitled to ignore the suffering of others just because they were born into more fortunate circumstances than them. One result of turning a blind eye to the horrors that face these children, because they are not our children or because we can only stand so much, is that we forget that their situation is entirely beyond their control. We forget that each individual who is subjected to a life of social exclusion is our fellow, our equal, and that we could have been in their shoes hoping for someone else's help. Once we all remember this simple truth, children living not only in the streets of Tangier but all over the world may yet have the same chance as we did to dream big, and strive for the future that they want.

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