

Interpreter mediated social work in Galicia: an approach through the MELINCO Project

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the analysis of the communication difficulties detected in the interaction between social intervention professionals, on the one hand, and migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who do not speak the official languages of Galicia, on the other. This analysis is based on qualitative data obtained within a research project for development cooperation (MELINCO). Social workers have been studying this problem right from the beginning and there are many research papers focused on the difficulties and challenges that arise due to communication shortfalls with individuals, families and communities. The results highlight the difficulties experienced and even the impossibility of using social work tools, instruments, and principles during intervention. Despite the multiple strategies used by social workers during NGDO mediation before the different administrations, the absence of qualified interpreters in social services leads to violation of the civic and social rights of such users.

Key words: social work, interpreting, migration, communication, linguistic and cultural barriers.

[es] Trabajo social mediado por intérpretes en Galicia: una aproximación desde el Proyecto MELINCO

Resumen. Este trabajo se centra en el análisis de las dificultades de comunicación en la relación entre profesionales de la intervención social y las personas migrantes, refugiadas o solicitantes de asilo que no dominan las lenguas oficiales de Galicia. Se basa en los resultados de un proyecto de investigación en el área de la cooperación al desarrollo (Proyecto MELINCO), a través del análisis de datos cualitativos obtenidos en un grupo de discusión. Desde sus inicios, el trabajo social ha tenido en cuenta este fenómeno, existiendo múltiples trabajos centrados en las dificultades y desafíos que supone la comunicación deficiente a la hora de desarrollar la intervención con individuos, familias o comunidades. Los resultados que se presentan ponen de manifiesto las dificultades, cuando no la imposibilidad, de realizar una intervención de calidad con las herramientas, instrumentos y principios del trabajo social. A pesar de las múltiples estrategias desplegadas por los/as profesionales de la intervención social en la atención mediada por ONGD (Organizaciones no gubernamentales para el desarrollo) ante las diversas administraciones, la ausencia de profesionales de la interpretación en servicios sociales conlleva la conculcación de derechos cívicos y sociales de las personas usuarias.

Palabras clave: trabajo social, interpretación, migración, comunicación, barreras lingüísticas y culturales.

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1. Introduction

Galicia was known for centuries as a land of emigrants, both nationally and internationally, until it became a land of reception for migrants towards the end of the 1990s (Lamela et al., 2005), a trend seen even today. The first specific migrant intervention programs initiated by the Galician regional government (*Xunta de Galicia*) date to the year 2000 and these were implemented through municipalities or third sector organisations. A part of these third sector interventions are carried out by NGOs (Non-Governmental Development Cooperation Organisations), which in the Galician case exhibit unique characteristics that differ from other regions in Spain, these being:

- i). NGOs carry out activities in more than one territorial area and most of their branches are located in Madrid and Barcelona (at the Galician level actions are concentrated in the seven main cities, but with a clear interest in networking and action at local level);
- ii). The organisational structure is made up of hired staff, experts, volunteers and members, most of whom are females;
- iii). More than 60% have the legal status of associations, which are followed by foundations, and their scope of work covers humanitarian and emergency aid, development cooperation, education and awareness raising (García and Pereira, 2011). These organisations are registered in an official register created by the *Galician Cooperation Agency*⁵.

NGOs provide social care in Galicia in very sensitive contexts due to the extreme vulnerability situation of the beneficiaries of such public services (unaccompanied minors, gender violence and sex trafficking victims, migrants, asylum, or international protection seekers, etc.). The way assistance is provided is particularly relevant for neutralising or improving potential problematic, difficult and threatening situations (Morales and Vieitez, 2004).

The objective of the “Linguistic Mediation⁶ for Development Cooperation (MELINCO)⁷” project carried out from 2019-20, was to detect the linguistic and cultural barriers that prevail between NGO staff in Galicia and the migrants with whom they work, as well as to identify the training needs of the agents involved.

The project team was comprised of research staff from different fields: translation and interpretation, sociology, anthropology and pedagogy⁸. After finishing the exploratory study on the opinion of Galician NGOs regarding their work through translators and interpreters and perception of the latter about their work with NGOs, the following actions were carried out to provide support and correct the needs detected:

- (i). Design and implementation of training on quality linguistic communication through interpreters for NGOs;
- (ii). Creation of a good practices guide for interpreter-mediated communication in the third sector; and
- (iii). Provision of culturally adapted translations so that NGOs can facilitate target users with easy access to relevant information.

This article presents and discusses the experience of NGO social workers, by analysing the difficulties experienced when working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers that do not speak the official languages of Galicia. Please note that the ability to communicate in a language, especially in complex administrative, legal, medical, etc. situations, is not limited to just being understood (Del-Pozo-Triviño et al., 2022). Therefore, full communication between both parties (professional and assisted person) should be guaranteed. The use of working languages that migrants apparently understand but which neither party is fluent in, may put such assisted persons at serious risk and lead to violation of their basic rights, this being acute in cases of illegal immigrants and those applying for refugee or asylum status, with the obvious inherent ethical implications for the social intervention agents involved.

⁵ <https://cooperacion.xunta.gal/es/entidades-inscritas-en-la-seccion-ongd>

⁶ Linguistic mediation is understood as the transfer of information from a source to a target language, in written (translation) or spoken (interpretation) form, in order to facilitate full communication between the parties. This concept differs from intercultural mediation, which does not have to be interlinguistic, where the aim is to improve relationships and promote integration between people or groups from different cultures.

⁷ <https://melinco.webs.uvigo.es/>

⁸ The Universities of Vigo (project coordinator), A Coruña, Alicante, Granada, Jaime I (Castellón) and Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (Portugal) participated in the project.

The results indicate that the absence of professional interpretation services makes it impossible to provide quality intervention based on social work principles, thus leading to the violation of civic and social rights of those assisted.

2. Migration, interpretation and social work

The analysis of communication problems between social workers and migrants who do not understand the language(s) of the society in which they live is not new in social work and dates back to the beginning of the discipline. Lacomba (2021) states that there is a historical two-fold relationship between migration and social work: on the one hand, as an object of intervention; and on the other, as a driving force for the development of the discipline.

Interpreters have been used in the United States of America right from the beginning of the social work discipline as something normal. Specific references to early 20th century intervention and communication with migrants in this country can be found in numerous studies of the Chicago School.

Immigration is not just a subject of intervention for Social Work, but historically has been a force that has contributed to shaping it, and has aroused the interest and dedication of key figures in the history of the discipline such as Jane Addams, Mary Richmond, Octavia Hill and the Grace and Edith Abbott sisters. (Lacomba, 2021, p. 408, translated by authors)

Mary Richmond, in her classic *Social Diagnosis*, dedicated a chapter to migrant families, and highlighted the “double difficulty” (2005, p. 182) in the process of rapprochement and establishment of bond between social worker and user when they do not speak the same language. Besides detecting several problems, such as the use of minors to interpret, which is present even today in professional practice, she warned about the picturesque use of certain “interpreters” proposed by the person assisted, who had a speech prepared for each interview situation. Richmond advocated language learning as a solution to avoid use of interpreters or, if using them, to control their communicative interaction and prevent them from becoming protagonists that overshadow the role of the social work agent (2005, p. 185).

Decades later, Baker (1981), in a classic paper in this field, defined the ideal interpreter as one who should have knowledge about social work. He also established a set of recommendations or criteria for adjusting interpretation to social work, by proposing specific training on its objectives and methods, and thus have a ready pool of qualified social intervention interpreters in case needed.

The author states that through this mediation social workers can learn about other cultures and obtain fluid responses from “someone who can act as an advocate for the client population” (Baker, 1981, p. 397). This somewhat “well-intentioned” view contrasts with that of others who alert to the possible not-so-positive conscious or unconscious interferences by interpreters (since the implications of their intervention are likely to be unknown).

Later on, in her “Interviewing through an interpreter”, Freed (1988, p. 316) emphasised the need to establish a team relationship with the interpreter in any intervention, something that had already been pointed out by Baker (1981). He also proposed that the interpreter have the ability to not only replicate words, but also other communicative aspects of the interviewer, such as intonations, expressions, and gestures, thus expanding the communicative field beyond spoken language.

Based on his work with refugees from Southeast Asia, Owan (1985) highlighted the role of the interpreter, who, rather than translate words, should act as a “cultural consultant”, and thus help bridge the cultural differences between social worker and user.

Westlake and Jones (2016) studied the quality of interpreter-mediated relationship in social work and suggested that focus be placed on the social worker rather than on the interpreter. Among other observations, they highlight that the quality of the relationship or link established between a social worker and user is usually affected right from the beginning, by a barrier, which makes the relationship a greater challenge than usual.

They confronted the difficulties present in the communicative process by addressing issues such as empathy, using active listening techniques or using shorter sentence flow than usual, thus significantly limiting use of social worker reflections, which in other contexts would serve to encourage the person interviewed to follow the conversation, and lead to disappearance of barriers in some cases. This study concludes that the above hinders one of the social worker’s abilities, namely, that of generating in-depth conversation, leading to superficial conversations and difficulty in addressing open issues.

This same study, carried out within the social work context with children and families, highlighted some notable challenges in interpreter-mediated practice, among which are: detecting and clarifying communication misunderstandings (which may invalidate an interview); overcoming resistance to seeking clarification; overcoming the propensity to use more close-ended questions and making fewer reflections, which lead to superficial interviews (Westlake and Jones, 2016). According to the researchers, all these communication problems greatly hamper professional practice, endangering the very service received by non-native speakers.

3. Methodology

A mixed methodology, involving the application of two different techniques, i.e., two surveys and two focus groups, was used after first defining the two target groups of this study: Galician NGOs' staff, and translators and interpreters who provide external services in these organisations. Each technique addresses the need for collecting different types of information. In the case of the survey, the objective was to collect comprehensive and systematic data on the professional practices of NGOs and interpreters. In the case of the focus groups, the objective was to collect the evaluations and perceptions related to the experiences and insights of the work activity of each professional group. A comparative report of the results was prepared to highlight the coincidences and evaluations on the same issues during practice of the different professional roles (Del-Pozo-Trivino et al., 2020).

This paper presents the results of the qualitative contributions from the NGOs' staff focus group that we believe are noteworthy to understand the status quo of social workers' interpreter-mediated communication with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

Focus group dynamics was selected from among the different qualitative techniques due to its technical capacity for seeking the so-called conversational ideology (Callejo, 2001), which consists of accessing the structural dimension of the group's awareness of its own reality through its social and discursive practice. The NGO staff focus group meeting held on 08 November 2019 lasted 1h:13min:04s, had 9 participants (6 females and 3 males) with the following characteristics: Spanish nationality; no foreign language competence; NGO employees (with academic training in social work, psychology and political sciences); scope of action in social and health intervention; working in assistance programs for applicants and beneficiaries of international protection (refugee/asylum), human trafficking and gender violence. Participants were recruited from the NGOs official register created by the Galician Cooperation Agency cited above. Those with greater availability and geographical proximity were given priority due to the difficulty of meeting at the same place and time.

Prior to the meeting, participants were given a thematic script on which the discussion would be pivoted, to create a synergistic effect and facilitate exchange of opinions and assessments. The content included: i) presentation of entities/agents and cases (cases dealt with: casuistry); ii) communication demands: situations and resources used (situations, resolutions, documents used and evaluations); iii) difficulties and assessment of the work performed by interpreters and translators: type of difficulties, positive highlights and needs detected; iv) proposals for improvement and expectations: contributions and future prospects.

The informed consent sought from participants contained a commitment to anonymise the resulting transcription of the group (in terms of names, places, etc.) as well as to provide feedback on the result.

4. Discussion of the melinco project results

This section first contextualizes the professional practice of interpreter-mediated social intervention in Galician NGOs and then analyses the information collected by grouping it into three thematic sections. The first one focuses on the so-called "poor communication" and its negative consequences on intervention. The second subsequently addresses the impossibility of the social worker to centralise case intervention (especially in terms of referrals and coordination with other services and institutions). The third presents the proposals of the focus group participants to reduce or solve the problems detected.

Spanish Basic Law 5/2015 obliges the state to provide translation and interpretation services (hereinafter T&I) in court and police contexts in Spain and Galicia. In the court context, such service provision is the competence of the Xunta de Galicia, which until 2010 directly hired interpreters from a list of professionals, for actions related to the field of justice. The service was subsequently outsourced to companies on a competitive tender basis. Del-Pozo-Trivino and Fernandes (2018) state that there are no legal requirements to perform T&I work in this area, despite the fact that *Directive 2010/64/EU* establishes the obligation to provide quality T&I services. In the police context, such provision is state competence, and services are similarly outsourced through competitive tender. Consequently, T&I services provided in these fields are precarious and lack professionalism, besides being subject to unstable market laws (corroborated by interpreter focus group participants).

Social workers and other social intervention agents have multiple interactions and relationships with the police and court agents, especially when accompanying users to these institutions to lodge complaints, provide testimony, depositions, documentation procedures, asylum interviews, etc.

Unlike in the court and police fields, T&I services in the health, education or social fields are not covered by regulation. In fact, one of the initial consensuses among the focus group participants was the lack of T&I services in third sector actions, wherein the linguistic rights of users are not guaranteed (Jiménez-Ivars and León-Pinilla, 2018).

Social workers in the third sector experience two different situations, depending on whether they work for organisations that belong to the state reception system for international protection applicants (which provides

T&I, formally with funds), or to organisations that do not belong to this system, which mostly serve illegal immigrants.

In the former case, organisations integrated within the system usually establish priorities for use of T&I services, because although formally existent, this service is not guaranteed on a 24-hour basis, since it is economically unviable. Hence, interpretation is prioritised for accompaniments rather than for bureaucratic issues, as well as for more important interviews (asylum) and some medical consultations.

In the latter case, the absence of T&I services in social work organisations makes it difficult or impossible for social workers to practice their profession normally. They are unable to resolve the T&I needs that arise during intervention and find themselves in “a so called family intermediation stage, which fully deteriorates communication” (FG-7)⁹ and leads to impotence. Specialised interpretation services are sought only in very complex cases due to lack of economic resources.

In the absence of T&I services, NGDO users are usually accompanied by one or more non-professionals that can “interpret” and facilitate communication. Social workers participating in this study identified four situations of this type where all experience communicative or ethical problems. In the first situation, friends or acquaintances of users act as interpreters, who, despite their good intentions, can bias the information. In the second situation, unknown persons of the same nationality act as interpreters, to whom users must confide intimate aspects of their life. In this particular case, the parties do not always understand each other correctly, due to the existence of different mother tongues and variants in the same country or cultural area. In the third situation, children interpret for their mothers before service providers, something that Richmond (2005) already warned at the time, due to the huge responsibility placed on the children, who are confronted with situations they should never experience (details of their parents’ lives, taking sides, self-interests, etc.). In the fourth situation, men (husbands, fathers) interpret for their wives/daughters, which implies a strong patriarchal bias. In some of these cases, social workers decide not to use interpreters due to suspicion of gender-based violence or human trafficking. In cases with unaccompanied users, interpretation is done by other agents, volunteers, the organisation’s beneficiaries, and persons related to it.

Daily activities are carried out using several precarious communication solutions, often-using creativity, non-verbal communication, drawings, pictograms, or on-line translations. These strategies have inherent communication problems and are thus unable to provide satisfactory communication.

4.1. Social work in poor communication contexts

The “Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles and the Professional Integrity of Social Work”¹⁰ state that social workers have a responsibility to promote human rights and social justice in relation to society and the people they work with. This, among other things, means combating discrimination, respecting diversity, challenging unfair policies and practices, as well as working to facilitate access to equitable resources.

In the specific case of care provision to migrants, one must take into account their legal or administrative status, since it determines many aspects of their lives. On the one hand, there are legal immigrants who suffer from limitation of certain rights with respect to the rest of the population; and on the other hand, there are thousands forced into illegal immigration who are in a worse situation when compared to any other group since they suffer from a total absence of rights. This implies huge difficulties for carrying out any type of intervention for access to rights, not just social rights, but also civic ones. Therefore, research participants are aware that their action should address the non-recognition of migrants’ rights in Spain, who are systematically treated as second-class citizens by the State through the so-called Aliens Act (*Basic Law 4/2000*), which denies them rights. The State legislates “in a centrifugal manner” (FG-3), by (intentionally and with impunity) expelling people from the system, and compelling agents towards resistance and defiance of laws in the performance of their duties: “With migrants, what is clear to me is that we should become anti-establishment, I mean that this is a dissenting fight; against resources, against rights, against the establishment” (FG-4).

Communication is the main intervention tool in social work and is a basic instrument that links agents and users, from which social diagnosis information about the case is obtained. Worth highlighting among its principles is its commitment to human rights, and from this approach, the agents advocate defence of users, which aims at guaranteeing the rights of those in social exclusion situations.

The focus group results highlight that poor communication has serious consequences on social work, since it does not permit use of standard intervention tools and methods, thereby preventing in-depth interviews, something essential for constructing case reports.

These agents often deal with very complex cases in which not only language, but also the lack of confidence, seriously affects intervention. Issues that would be easy to resolve become difficult due to lack of communication, further aggravated by the fear derived from the immigrant’s illegal situation. The result is

⁹ The numerical code (1 to 9) refers, henceforth, to each of the participants in the focus group (FG).

¹⁰ Approved in 2018 by the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work, in Dublin.

often an improvised intervention either due to ignorance of case context or delayed processes, which leads to persistence of problems over time, and, in certain cases, a loss of rights. Issues with strict deadlines among others range from reproductive rights, in the case of voluntary interruptions of pregnancy, to those related to abode and residence, in the case of administrative deadlines for aliens' documentation.

Illustrative of the above is the case of a young Senegalese who, after four or five years visiting social services, and insisting time and again of having "many problems" (without providing details), one day appeared with a deportation order received years ago, that had long expired. The young man did not understand the message in the document and was still in hiding, afraid of being deported: "You think of all these years that the man tossed about sleepless brooding about the problem, when it was just a case of translating a piece of paper" (FG-2).

On the other hand, bad communication also hinders defence of users' rights, either because of social worker ignorance or information bias. Such lack of communication affects the most vulnerable persons who, in the end, are unable to avail of social resources. The consequence of bad communication is ultimately the reception of a deportation order, or alternatively, that of illegal residence.

An example of the above is the recent arrival of 20+ year old Moroccan youngsters to Pontevedra, probably ex-unaccompanied minors, to whom the State restricts attention after they reach legal age. According to social workers, "these minors often do not engage in conversation... but just say yes to everything" (FG-7). They also explained that "someone" suggested that one of them go to the police, only to leave the police station with a deportation order.

Poor communication leads to the impossibility of thousands of immigrants and/or refugees accessing social rights in the different areas. The agents are aware that:

Bad communication implies not having access to rights, such as for example, the right to health services, the right to education, and others that we know hamper migrants' ability to live and inhabit the place he/she is in. (FG-3)

Communication problems cause helplessness among agents because they cannot address migrant users' needs adequately due to lack of knowledge of their condition and background. All of the above, as well as other types of systemic precariousness (not contemplated in this study) that affects agents when providing social services leads to immense day to day frustration that sometimes translates into the desire "to give up" (GD-8).

There is consensus that the reason behind such lack of essential T&I in social services is more of a global, structural, dismantling problem resulting from a lack of funds, even in the health and education sectors. The important impact of the pandemic on some initiatives cut short in this specific area was also discussed.

On the other hand, bureaucratization of social intervention has made the current situation of migrants even more precarious than that at the end of the 1990s, when this field of social intervention was born in Galicia, when there was a lot of interaction between agents, who sought ways to solving newly arising problems related to the migrant population.

Many situations today are still more precarious than at the end of the 1990s or in 2000, because everything in the field of migration was actually being born at the time. There was a lot of interconnection, everything that was done had repercussions, and agents were fully aware of that. We were able to devise ways to solve situations, including housing. This is no longer possible, everything, all things, each thing is objectified, everything is bureaucratized, everything, absolutely everything. (FG-7)

If we compare the current situation with the one at the beginning of the 21st century, when substantial numbers of migrants arrived to Galician territory, we find that two decades later, and as opined by the participating focus group agents, there is now a huge bureaucratization of care provision to this group. This prevents the creation of problem-solving strategies by persons carrying out the intervention, and gives the feeling that everything is so "tied up, that it is impossible to act" (FG-4). Problems and complaints have increased in recent years due to obstacles placed on the registration of illegal residents, which had always been the way to access rights such as health and education.

This means migrant groups we work with find it harder to access anything at all, are unable to register after a year, or get a housing rental contract [...], and are unable to even talk to the social workers of the city council: things we thought were possible "Ah, the legislative framework, the law regulating the rules of local administration has changed and now we do not know... whether we can or not perform residence registration?" "It's worse. (FG-7)

4.2. Impossibility of coordinating comprehensive intervention

Social services usually function as a first step to access the health, education, or other systems, through referrals and articulations between entities and services. Communication problems mean that, if the intervention

does not work at ground level, it cannot reach subsequent levels, and this has a special impact in cases of mental health.

This issue was addressed in the ensuing debate among focus group participants, with the conclusion that social workers should function as comprehensive intervention articulators that respond to the needs detected in each case, by referrals to other services, and thus act as guarantors of intervention continuity through follow-up. Social services thus play an essential role in articulating and coordinating interventions in the several areas, besides ensuring their continuity in time.

The situation of Moroccan women who are gender-based violence victims illustrates this problem. They are sometimes accompanied to police stations and courts, where the legal obligation to provide T&I services is often not fulfilled. According to one research participant, the articulation through social services should guarantee comprehensive intervention and access to social rights over time. Despite Moroccans being a long-term residence group in Spain, comprehensive public care through the different public services is not being assured because social care provision is performed without interrelationship between the several administrations, with the consequent lack of guarantees to access services: “These women are not receiving an answer, there is no follow-up, this is not working... these persons have rights and they have to access their rights” (FG-7).

It is from this centralised intervention position that social workers relate to other State departments and services such as those linked to justice (courts and police stations), essential for making complaints and seeking protection against any type of violence or abuse.

In the specific case of police and judicial contexts, the widespread view is that protocols that contemplate the obligation to provide T&I services in police stations and courts are not being complied with. Institutions sometimes resort to NGDO staff, but this can invalidate the evidence due to lack of guarantees, with the consequent loss of rights.

Problems were reported in cases whenever asylum seekers or women victims of trafficking are accompanied by NGDO professionals to public services. In these services, some organizations have filed complaints with the Ministry of the Interior about the conditions under which police interviews are carried out in cases of asylum applications, especially related to the performance of interpreters who make value judgements either due to prejudices or lack of intercultural keys. Illustrative of this is the case of Georgian asylum-seeking families who refuse interpretation services due to previous negative experiences, relating to value judgements or coercion by interpreters, usually Russians, who vehemently deny the existence of conflicts, which is the basis of their asylum request.

On the other hand, communication difficulties make it impossible to inform users about their rights in Spain, which may differ from those in their country of origin.

This is very serious at court and police levels too, and especially now, with increasing international protection requests, when one can gauge that people do not understand what is being said, perhaps because whatever is considered a right here, does not exist in their country of origin. Therefore, they do not even contemplate or think that they may likely be a victim of violence because such behaviour is quite standard in their country of origin, and one needs to translate that too. (FG-3)

Another sensitive area with which social workers interact and articulate is health services. The need for T&I services in this field was unanimously agreed. There is some consensus that the health administration services ignore migrants and, in a certain way, “abuse” referral to NGDOs when such cases should be addressed by them.

Focus group participants highlighted cases of informed consents signed without understanding the content, as examples of non-compliance with law. This opens the door to the application of health practices that cannot be considered as implemented through informed consent, since signatories may possibly not agree to the content. In some cases, NGDOs file appeals through contentious-administrative, and if necessary, judicial proceedings, since Basic Law 3/2018, on the protection of personal data, provides that administrations not only keep a record of information, but also ensure that the person understands what he/she signs:

When we come across cases of signed consent for a surgical intervention that the person does not understand and, furthermore, is against all his/her cultural principles, the case is appealed through contentious-administrative or judicial proceedings, if necessary, because we feel that it is the only way migrants become aware of their rights. And this is because, although we can accompany them, they will be institutionalised at some point, which is when they will find something related to their situation in the welfare state they are in now. The point is that these are rights and there is a State obligation that users understand and be understood. (FG-3)

Beyond informed consents, there are a number of ethical problems related to Basic Law 3/2018, which place dilemmas on social workers when handling serious cases, in which they must weigh whether or not to transmit certain health related information to relatives.

Of special relevance in this field are problems that arise due to the lack of intercultural understanding, between health personnel and users. This transcends simple translation and can end with negative health consequences. For example, gender taboos that hinder communication for a diagnosis: There is the case of an Ara-

bic-speaking man, with testicle infection, whose infection was not reported to the doctor because the interpreter was a woman, the patient's younger sister who did not know how to translate the word testicle.

In cases related to mental health or the need for psychological therapy, there are many problems, both for diagnosing these needs (due to poor communication) and for getting adequate health care. This leads social workers to "fight every day" (FG-4) with health workers. Difficulties were reported in referring people with traumas typical of their migratory route or refugee status to psychological support services (Achotegui, 2009).

4.3. Needs and proposals for improvement

The results represent a devastating criticism of the conditions and situations in which social workers and other professionals carry out interventions with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers that do not speak the official languages of Galicia, whether mediated through interpreters or not.

Despite the negative aspects mentioned above, one of the possible notable solutions to poor communication processes, is intercultural mediation (Navaza, 2014), which has already been implemented by some of the participating organizations.

Although intercultural mediation is considered an ideal tool for communicating with persons that do not speak the NGOs' local language, we need to differentiate between the role of mediators and interpreters, especially in court or police settings, where mediation is not possible and the interpreter must limit to transmitting the message from one language to another without modifying it. Impartiality and integrity of message transfer guarantees mutual trust between the parties and is a fundamental ethical principle in the interpreting profession (Phelan et al., 2019).

The focus group meeting reported the following intercultural mediation experience in A Coruña, with Arabs and Senegalese.

In our intercultural mediation encounter with Arabs and Senegalese ... we, in health programs experienced a lot of trouble with certain groups, for example Senegalese. The incorporation of a Senegalese intercultural mediator with good command of the two registers, the two languages, the two cultures... ensured very, very high success in that program. (FG-8)

Intercultural mediation, despite its suitability, can be complicated due to the various versions of Arabic and other coexisting languages or dialects that hinder the work of mediators. Therefore, in order to address the great linguistic complexity present in migrant groups, we discussed intercultural mediation specific to their different origins.

One needs to speak at the dialectal level, because there is no such language as classical Arabic. Then there are the different dialects, for example, Arabic, Moroccan and Algerian, which are more or less similar, but the Syrian version differs. A Moroccan that is not fluent, for example, in Syrian, perhaps does not understand most of what is being said... hence, it is very complex. This is where we always defend the fostering of intercultural mediators of different origins. (FG-8)

In this context, and from the point of view of social workers and other agents, the absence of intercultural keys often has a greater weight than linguistic problems:

That is, translating, in the end, "is easy", right? This is not the problem. The problem is when you have to interpret. What we notice here is a lack of training in terms of multiculturalism. (FG-9)

There was a strong consensus on the need to incorporate a set of topics related to social work and those related to disciplines such as social education, when designing academic training curricula. Also considered essential was the need to not only introduce or reinforce contents related to intercultural and human rights approach, anthropology, and migration studies, but also include the gender perspective, paying special attention to legal issues related to migrants, which is a constantly changing area. The importance of the immigrant reception concept was highlighted, because it is the initial communication point from where the bond of trust with users is established, which eventually bears fruit.

Criticism was almost unanimous on the lack of hands-on field experience in university studies, which led to many professionals having to self-train after completing academic studies that are often disconnected from the reality of migrants.

One solution proposed for improving care of migrants who do not speak the local language is that the T&I mediated NGO services, normally provided through the State financed international protection system, be also available to social and health services.

That the public administrations provide T&I services to social entities working with these people. This would be the minimum requirement in any public sphere [...] that administrations provide them or that they be provided to us so that we can carry out our work, but financed by the administrations, not the NGOs. (FG-2)

The participants opined that the public administrations should guarantee T&I services and operations and not leave such State responsibility and obligation in the hands of NGOs (Naredo, 2015).

5. Conclusions

The MELINCO project results point to a high professional precariousness of translators and interpreters that mediate for Galician NGOs with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who do not speak the language of the host country. This situation is aggravated when communication is carried out without the minimum quality standards required to provide a comprehensive social service.

The lack of specialized T&I services leads to a serious cultural bias in communication, greater vulnerability, and violation of basic rights, whenever relatives, non-professional interpreters, minor sons and daughters or aggressors in situations of gender violence, engage as interpreters. The above is compounded by a poor understanding of the situation of target users by the agents providing such services, thus making it impossible to establish a bond of trust that would have otherwise facilitated elaboration of proper complex case diagnosis and defence of their rights. Lastly, the lack of a comprehensive approach anchored in social work, whose role is to articulate actions of the various services and administrations, leads to non-assurance of coordination and continuity of interventions.

The above hinders the work of social services due to poor coordination with other action and intervention areas (health, police, judicial, educational), and hence the problems derived from incomplete or inaccurate communication compound the challenge and possibilities of providing proper protection and justice. This project has provided information on the communicative reality in these contexts, in order to improve the practice, scope and cover of the services provided by NGOs in the field of migration and international protection.

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