

# > VIOLENCE AGAINST ASYLUM SEEKER AND REFUGEE WOMEN IN FRANCE

This study was conducted between November 2017 and March 2018, mainly within the Île-de-France region, and with occasional exchanges with reception centres for asylum seekers (CADAs) in the cities of Nantes, Rouen, Mayenne, Chatillon and Chambon-le-Château. We interviewed 35 professionals working in the field of asylum or prevention of violence against women, 5 women and 15 CADA professionals. Focus groups were also organised with 14 women residing at the centres.

This study has established a typology of the violence women residing in France may face, as well as the risk factors that can make them more vulnerable to violence and the factors that make it complicated to prevent and protect them from violence. This research has also shed light on good practices already in place upon which future measures can be based. Furthermore, it has helped identify the mechanisms that women themselves develop in order to maintain their autonomy, protect themselves and rebuild their lives in France. These mechanisms as

well as the needs they identified in the framework of this research can equally serve as the basis for reflecting on future measures to develop with regard to the prevention from and protection against violence.

The findings of this research reveal that asylum-seeker and refugee women remain exposed to a number of acts of violence once in France, such as insults and harassment combining racism and sexism; physical and sexual assaults due to sleeping on the streets; theft; sexual exploitation; "arranged" marriages or pregnancies to facilitate obtaining accommodation or a residence permit; survival sex (for food or a place to sleep); violence committed by spouses or partners; and discrimination or persecution due to sexual orientation.

The reception conditions, which are insufficient and sometimes precarious, expose asylum-seeker and refugee women to a large number of violent acts, such as those indicated by the Committee on the Elimination of



Discrimination against Women in 2016 and those in the findings of several recent studies<sup>1</sup>. Women on the streets or in makeshift camps in France have faced proposals to trade sexual relations for accommodation, or experienced sexual assaults. The professionals interviewed also reported knowledge of such incidents.

Precarious administrative and economic conditions, as well as difficulties linked to adapting to the host country (isolation, language difficulties, rejection and racism from the local population) are equally highlighted in the research as factors that can have a strong bearing on the exposure of asylum-seeker and refugee women to violence.

As regards difficulties pertaining to obtaining protection from violence through common law, two situations were singled out: fear of losing residence permits or international protection when the latter is attached to that of their spouse; and the belief that filing a complaint or reporting a violent incident may be detrimental to their asylum application. Complaints that are filed and often not acted upon, as well as a lack of clear information on the rights framework of women in France, fuel the victims' fears.

Moreover, the research found that there is little consideration for the specific needs of asylum seeker and refugee women in reception policies. Failure to account for gender-specific needs when designing reception centres can lead to women having to share some common areas, such as toilets or bathrooms. This may lead to new situations of violence, particularly sexual, as underscored by three women interviewed.

The research also highlighted the absence of systematic gender-based violence training for professionals, an issue which was also identified by the High Gender Equality Council<sup>2</sup>. The absence of training, coupled with the systematic lack of consideration of the issue, translates to an "invisibility" of the violence suffered by asylum-seeker and refugee women residing in France. In practice, only a few isolated practices such as the study conducted within the humanitarian centre at La Chapelle by the Primary Health Care (PHC) teams of the Samu Social of Paris, systematically document instances of violence suffered by women.

1 - Freedman, J. "Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women: a hidden aspect of the refugee crisis". *Reproductive Health Matters*, Elsevier, n° 24, pp.18 – 26.2016; et Pannetier, J. et al.. *Prevalence and circumstances of forced sex and post-migration HIV acquisition in sub-Saharan African migrant women in France: an analysis of the ANRS-PARCOURS retrospective population-based study*. 2017

2 - High Gender Equality Council, drafted by Bousquet, D.; Forest, M.; Bougeard, J.; Bourdin, M., *Situation of asylum-seeking women in France upon adopting the Act on the reform of the right to asylum*, 2017



Awareness-raising and information measures intended for asylum-seeker and refugee women regarding violence, their rights or resources and available practitioners are developed by very specific associations and collectives and are hardly ever made known or emulated by other practitioners who are involved with the management of resources intended for asylum seekers or refugees.

Protection measures designed to address cases of violence in the centres visited remain mostly ad hoc. This can lead to the establishment of techniques such as family mediation for cases of domestic violence; difficulties in terms of assessing abusive situations; and normalisation and reproduction of stereotypes linked to violence. This may also prevent professionals working in the centres visited to know and use resources available to inform and assist women victims of violence.

Lack of knowledge, among practitioners working specifically on violence against women, regarding the specific vulnerabilities and risk factors faced by asylum-seeker and refugee women, leads to violence prevention campaigns not being adapted to this group, or assistance services failing to account for their needs (such as interpretation).

In order to address these difficulties and the lack of consideration of their specific needs, asylum-seeking and refugee women, with the help of certain practitioners and professionals, have developed and set up informal support networks, aimed at preventing and providing appropriate support for violence cases.

Prevention, documentation, information and awareness-raising measures with regard to this issue were identified within the framework of the research. These measures are mainly applied by collectives or associations created to respond to the specific needs of and violence affecting migrant, asylum-seeker and refugee women such as the Adfem collective, Les Lesbiennes dépassent les frontières (Lesbians Without Borders), Rajfire, the Kali Association, SOS Africaines en danger (SOS Africans in Danger), Les Champs de Booz and Gams; or those that have integrated this issue in their work, such as Cimade, Libres Terres des femmes and Maison des femmes in Saint-Denis.

This study also highlighted the importance of building a social and community network to enable women find alternative housing or extra income and to protect them against social isolation, which can represent both risk factors and consequences of violence.



To this effect, initiatives that support the creation of women's groups or women's participation in the host community were identified as favouring the integration process in France, and of being capable of exposing potential situations of violence and protecting against risks linked to the lack of housing or economic resources.

Lastly, the women interviewed expressed their needs in connection with prevention of and protection against violence. They particularly saw a link between lack of accommodation, uncertainty and the possibility of being exposed to violence or having to trade sex for accommodation. One of their main requests regards creating a sufficient number of places to accommodate all people seeking asylum. As regards violence, women highlighted that they lack discussion forums and information related to their rights as well as access to practitioners who can help them in case of need. As such, the requests voiced are linked to the development of forums for discussion between women and obtaining tools or training and awareness-raising sessions to provide them with clear information concerning the laws that protect them against violence and available practitioners.

The findings of this study has led to several recommendations. Firstly, it is crucial to increase the information available on violence that asylum-seeker and refugee women are exposed to, as well as to enhance gender consideration in asylum policies, but also the consideration of such women's needs in terms of gender-based violence prevention policies.

The study also demonstrated the importance of increasing information and awareness of asylum-seeker and refugee women, as well as that of men, and to strengthen their implication in these processes.

Better consideration and support is also dependent on the training of asylum professionals and the establishment of tools for identification and action against violence.

The prevention of violence also implies adequate and secure accommodation for all asylum-seeker women.

Lastly, the study highlights a number of channels for improving the provision of support to victims, including: facilitating access to support structures and competent authorities, better medical care, as well as possibilities for efficient residence of female victims.