

## ASVARW

# Addressing Sexual Violence against Refugee Women

### Why a project to fight sexual violence against refugee women

Sexual violence against refugee and asylum-seeker women is a dramatic phenomenon across Europe and the Mediterranean countries. Several international agencies and Institutions – like UN, UNHCR, Council of Europe, and European Parliament – have pointed out the urgency to promote specific policy measures addressed to these groups, as sexual related risks make women more vulnerable.

We assume gender violence against women as a specific type of violence that includes physical, psychological and sexual abuses directed to a person, just because of her gender. It is related to the sexist and discriminatory cultures toward women, and – in most cases – it reflects the unequal power and different roles that societies and prevailing cultures entrust to women and men due to their sex at birth.

Sexual violence against refugees and asylum-seeker women has different forms, from sexual abuse to forced prostitution and sexual exploitation, human trafficking and violence within close relationships, as couples. It arises because of several factors, such as sexual exchanges to obtain transfers; unsafe traveling conditions; uncertain conditions at the entrance ports in foreign countries; poor living conditions and forced sex or rape in transit and reception centres; uncertain legal status in the host countries; criminal organisations managing illegal transfers, trafficking and prostitution.

Gender violence against refugee and asylum-seeker women often goes unnoticed, unaddressed or untreated. On the one hand, victims tend to not denounce and declare violence, due to the uncertainty of their conditions, the fear of retaliation or other reasons. On the other hand, public officials, humanitarian agents and social workers in the reception systems are not specifically trained to deal with sexual gender based violence, and they lack the instruments for violence prevention, recognition and protection. As the UNHCR and the European Commission have pointed out, the current systems of reception risk becoming incubators of violence.

### What the project intends to do

Through training programs and pilot actions, the ASVARW project aims at raising awareness and building capacity of the professional staff working in the reception of the refugee and asylum seeker women at the local levels, with different roles and competences. It focuses on those who have the closest contacts with women and who are trained to deal with sexual gender-based violence.

The skills gained by the professionals have a direct influence on women themselves, when – and if – they are willing to be helped in overcoming violent relationships, sexual threats and abuses. The project aims at empowering the victims of violence, coherently with the approach, which relies on women themselves to overcome violence and its consequences on life, self-esteem and health.



Initiatives at community levels aim at raising awareness among professionals, agencies and NGOs who are active in contrasting violence or deal with migrant, refugees and asylum seekers, but are not directly engaged in reception activities.

In specific, the project foresees four actions.

1. Training modules for key professionals who are the first contacts for the victims of violence. A training-needs assessment will precede each training set, to properly target each group of participants. Each training programme consists of modules on specific topics for different groups: social workers, psychologists and legal counsellors at reception and assistance centres; medical staff; police staff.
2. Pilot action “Multi-disciplinary teams within the reception and assistance centres” (in Italy and UK)  
This action aims at testing a multi-disciplinary approach, by setting-up teams that bring together different expertise and competencies and deal with RAS women victims of sexual violence and exploitation by working jointly on the identification, recognition and treatment of violence
3. Pilot action “Community Antennas” (in Italy)  
Refugee and asylum seeker women who have succeeded in overcoming violence are involved in the fight against sexual violence, on a voluntary basis and after a short training.
4. Awareness raising at the community level.  
The networking action targets those professionals and service providers who are not directly in contact with RAS women but are actively involved – at the institutional and community levels - in the fields of contrasting violence against women and managing migrants’ inflows.

## The partnership

- ✓ **Cattaneo Institute Research Foundation**, Bologna, Italy
- ✓ **MondoDonna**, Bologna, Italy
- ✓ **Centre for Gender and Violence Research**, School of Policy Studies, Bristol, UK
- ✓ **Antigona Research Group**, Universidade Autonoma de Barcelona, Spain
- ✓ **Symbiosis**, Thessaloniki, Greece