



# CHALLENGES AND NEEDS OF DISPLACED WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NORTHERN FRANCE

## I. INTRODUCTION

Women and girls have been present in makeshift settlements along the northern French coastline since the early 2000's. Some travel alone, whilst others travel with children and/or partners. The vast majority of the population of these makeshift camps has always been young single men, meaning that women as a minority remain less visible and face particular challenges. Like most displaced people in this area, women and families here attempt to reach the UK for different reasons. These include family and community links including joining husbands or other family members in the UK, pre-existing language skills and sometimes as a perceived last resort after having had asylum claims refused in other European countries and/or finding difficulties accessing asylum due to the Dublin system. Women and girls in the area are faced with high risk of exploitation, abuse and untreated health concerns. Their safety and security are constantly compromised and there is a huge gap for state and non-state actors to fill if the rights of women and girls are to be upheld, in line with European standards and obligations.



## II. AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN GRANDE-SYNTHE

Since the dismantlement of the Calais 'Jungle' camp in 2016 and dispersal of camp residents, there has been a larger number of women in Grande-Synthe (commonly referred to as Dunkirk). In mid-September 2019, there were an estimated 220 individuals within families in Grande-Synthe, including 50 women.

These women usually travel in family units. They tend to be Kurdish from Iraq or Iran, although there are also small numbers of Persian-speaking Iranians, Arabic-speaking Iraqi women, and Kuwaiti women without citizenship (so-called Kuwaiti 'Bidoon'). Over the last year, roughly from September 2018 to September 2019, the Refugee Women's Center supported an estimated 300 women, including 25 women travelling alone. This represented a slight increase in the number of women travelling alone, most of whom were from Iran.

Women in family units are likely to have left their countries of origin due to political repression and instability, religious persecution, economic hardship or so-called 'honour'-based violence and abuse. In particular those travelling alone most often report having fled domestic or 'honour'-based violence, persecution as a result of their sexual orientation or having been separated from their husbands during their migration journey.

### III. AN OVERVIEW OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN CALAIS

Over the last year an estimated 35 women have passed through Calais. The majority populations are Iranian and travelling in family units, or Eritrean or Ethiopian and have travelled alone from their country of origin, often fleeing indefinite military conscription, political persecution and 'honour'-based violence including female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C). In previous years there were very few families living in Calais, but this has changed in the last year with an increase in the number of Iranian families as well as some single mothers arriving with children from West Africa.

Most of the women travelling from African countries arrive through Libya to Italy. In 2017, there were more women in Calais (around 50) but these numbers tend to fluctuate. At the moment, it appears as though many of these women have moved on to Brussels or other locations in the surrounding area, where they may find better provision of citizen shelter for undocumented people. While people report having less access to food (one meal a day), and brutal police violence, having a stable place to sleep each night appears to be the biggest pull factor for those living in displacement, alongside effective access to medical care and legal information.

### IV. KEY CHALLENGES FACING DISPLACED WOMEN AND GIRLS IN NORTHERN FRANCE

#### ACCESS TO SHELTER

- Camps and makeshift settlements around both Calais and Grande-Synthe are evicted up to every 48 hours, with few long-term and suitable alternatives offered. Between 8 August 2018 and 1 June 2019 738 forced evictions took place in Calais alone. This maintains people in a constant state of insecurity and instability. Women in particular suffer from the lack of stable shelter, which forces them into unsanitary and undignified outdoor living conditions and puts them at greater risk of exploitation.
- In Grande-Synthe, during evictions the state generally proposes accommodation in Reception and administrative situation examination centres (CAES centres) around the region, but spaces are constantly insufficient. When people are offered this solution, they are rarely given information on where they will be taken or the permitted length of stay, may be housed in isolated centres far from transport links and with poor provision of food, healthcare and sanitation. Whilst conditions in these centres vary significantly there is often an insufficient number of social workers in the centres, at times one social worker to 200-300 displaced people. This leads to many people returning to makeshift settlements across the coastline.
- Emergency shelter under the 115 service is not unconditional, and these services claim to have no places for families or single women.

#### ACCESS TO SANITATION SERVICES

- Makeshift settlements generally have little to no access to showers, toilets and clean running water.
- Where there is infrastructure, it is generally insufficient with regard to numbers, doors often do not have locks or are not clean making women feel particularly unsafe using them. When there are too few shower and toilet units, they tend to become monopolised by groups who charge others for their use.
- Childcare, especially for new-borns, remains difficult with limited access to clean water and facilities to wash in.

#### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

- Many women living rough experience violence from partners, whilst women travelling alone are a target for exploitation by smuggler networks.
- We regularly see single women who have partnered with single men and present themselves as a couple as a 'protection' measure for the woman, who feels at risk from smugglers or other men around them. Often these situations result in exploitation or violence.
- Women experiencing or at risk of domestic and/or gender-based violence have little recourse to state support. Even when women and girls have reported violence to the police, safe accommodation has not always been offered and the report has not triggered a full investigation into the incident.
- Women and girls travelling alone face greater risks of different forms of sexual violence, harassment and rape.

## TRAFFICKING

- Women travelling alone regularly disappear from camps. Organisation operating on the ground suspect that many are housed in private accommodation by smuggler networks for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced prostitution or sex work. Single women generally have less money and so are more likely to end up in situations of debt bondage. When these women have come to the attention of organisations such as the Refugee Women's Centre through alerts from the police or the hospitals, it is clear that there has been no meaningful follow up or safety measures put in place by the authorities.

## ACCESS TO APPROPRIATE MEDICAL CARE INCLUDING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

- Whilst there is a hospital service for undocumented people in both Calais and Dunkirk, the hours are limited and interpreters are not always present.
- Some hospitals in the region have attempted to deny access to free pregnancy termination for undocumented women.
- The lack of access to appropriate medical care, including sexual and reproductive health services, is particularly concerning in light of the high risk of sexual and gender-based violence that women face in the area.

## CHILDREN

- Despite President Macron's policy promise to focus on education for all children, there are still hundreds of children living in makeshift settlements who are not in school. Many have spent years without formal access to education, which has concerning impacts on their behaviour and psychological well-being.



## V. AVAILABLE SUPPORT SERVICES

Support for undocumented women and girls in northern France comes mainly from grassroots aid organisations. There is a striking absence of large INGOs, UN agencies and state services, leaving women and girls critically exposed to risks and susceptible to abuse, health risks and exploitation. As of October 2019, the key actors on the ground are:

- The **Refugee Women's Centre**, which provides individualised psycho-social, material and casework support to women, girls and families living rough in makeshift settlements and those in state accommodation centres in the region. This includes information about and access to shelter, accompaniment in legal procedures, and support to women experiencing domestic and gender-based violence.
- **Gynaecologists Without Borders**, which provides sexual and reproductive healthcare to women and girls in makeshift settlements, as well as a refuge for women exposed to violence. This refuge is scheduled to close in November 2019.
- **Secours Catholique**, which runs a day centre in Calais with a safe space for women and girls where associations collectively run weekly activity days for women.



## VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



### SHELTER

- Safe and continuous shelter should be made available in state accommodation centres in the Nord and Pas-de-Calais regions, irrespective of women and girls' immigration status.
- Evictions should not take place without alternative places in these centres being proposed.
- These centres should offer meaningful support to residents, including adequate food, healthcare, access to school for children, and full access to information about French asylum procedures.
- These centres should be staffed by a sufficient number of appropriately trained social workers.

### SANITATION

- Adequate sanitation, including sufficient water points, toilets and showers, should be installed in close proximity to all makeshift settlements. They should be clean, safe and secured with locks.

### LEGAL AND INFORMATION SERVICES

- Information about people's rights with regards to shelter and asylum should be made available in accessible languages and formats.
- Social workers with interpreters should run regular outreach activities in makeshift settlements to identify unaccompanied minors, respond to issues facing those in the settlements and provide information about state services available to displaced people.

### SAFETY AND SECURITY

- Women reporting violence should be offered immediate and unconditional safe accommodation. Their reports should be fully investigated.
- Trafficking identification and referral mechanisms should be put in place.

### ACCESS TO MEDICAL CARE INCLUDING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES

- Hospital service hours for undocumented women and girls ought to be expanded, with guaranteed interpreters available over phone or in person.
- Free pregnancy termination for undocumented women must be provided.
- The Minimum Initial Service Package must be made available, to provide minimum standards of sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls in the area, irrespective of immigration status.