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leaving
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safe

The reception
methodology of D.i.Re
anti-violence centres
Notes and suggestions
about working with
migrant, asylum-seeking
and refugee women





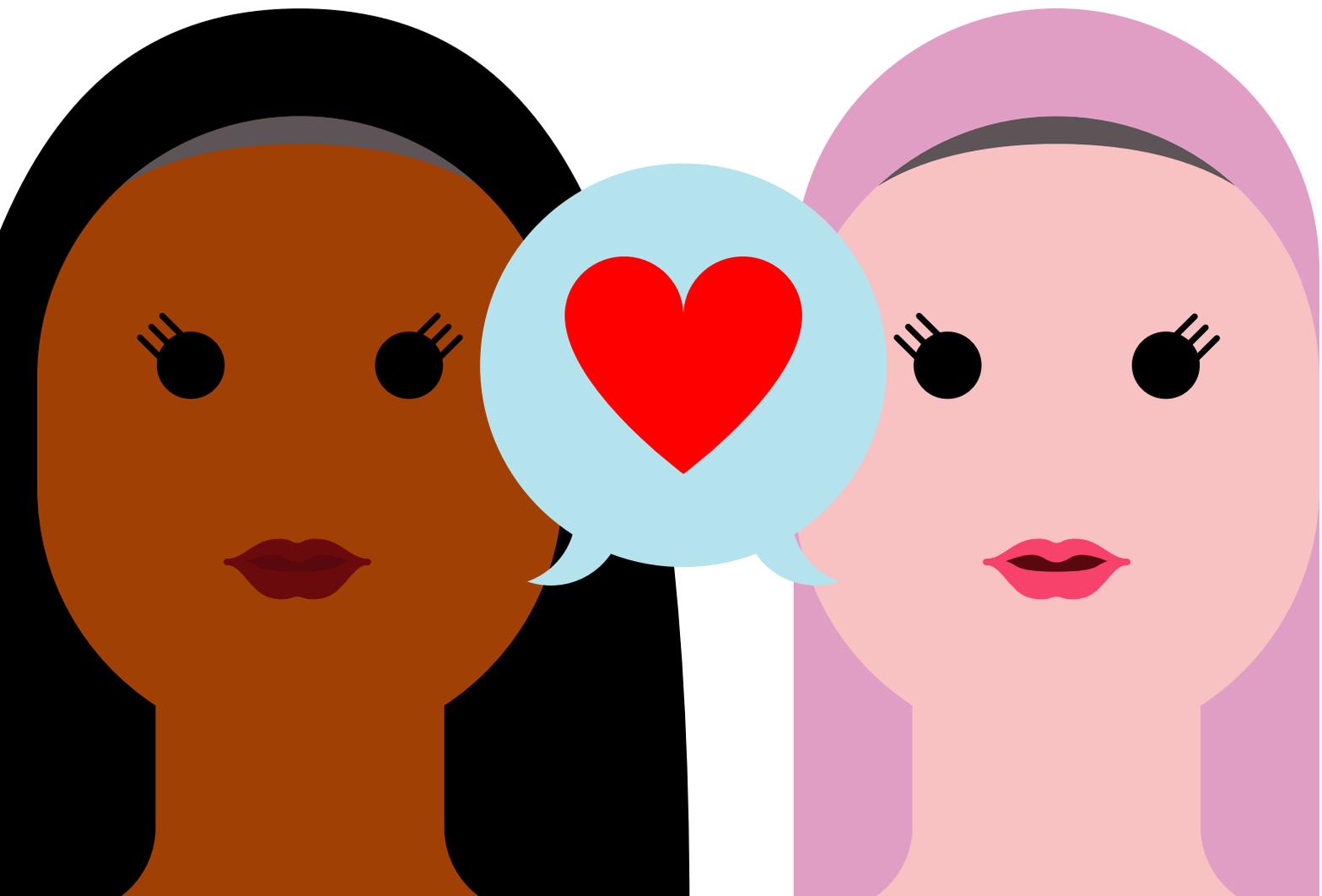
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Notes and suggestions about working with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women



Colophon

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Colour key

- 01. Needs
- 02. Truth
- 03. Fear
- 04. Trust
- 05. Before
- 06. The space
- 07. The team
- 08. After
- A. Asylum legislation
- B. Admission form
- C. Stereotypes and stigma
- D. The interview: the thoughts behind the words
- Bibliography

Acronyms

ANCI	Associazione nazionale dei Comuni italiani (National association of Italian municipalities)
ASL	Azienda sanitaria locale (Local health authorities)
CARA	Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers
CAS	Emergency Reception Centre
CE	European Commission
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CNDA	Commissione nazionale per il diritto all'asilo (National Court of Asylum)
CPR	Return Detention Centre
CRI	Italian Red Cross
D.i.Re	Donne in rete contro la violenza (Network of women against violence)
ETNA	Etnopsicologia Analitica Analytical Ethnopsychology
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
GREVIO	Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
MEDU	Medici per i diritti umani (Doctors for human rights)
SIPROIMI	Protection System for Refugees and Unaccompanied Children Migrants
SPRAR	Protection System for Asylum and Refuge Seekers
TUI	Testo Unico sull'immigrazione (Consolidated Immigration Act)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



Introduction

It is estimated that 90% of asylum-seeking and refugee women in Italy have experienced some form of violence: in their country of origin, in transit, on our territory.

They are women and girls who have escaped abuse and violence in their country of origin, thinking that emigrating was their only chance to build a life for themselves.

These women were kidnapped, sold, and subjected to torture, deprivation, rape, including gang rape; they were kept segregated without light or food, forced into prostitution or enslaved for months before they were able to find the money to continue their journey.

Sometimes they continue being abused in Italy and it is difficult for them to acknowledge their right to live a life free from male violence.

These are women who simply wish to “move on”, “live their life”, who are trying to forget what they have been through, but instead are forced to dig in the past, to recount their story in order to be able obtain international protection. This text is the result of the collaboration of operators and cultural mediators from different anti-violence centres involved in the *Leaving violence. Living safe* project coordinated by D.i.Re - Donne in rete contro la violenza (Network of women against violence) in partnership with UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

The publication is intended to be a common starting point and a tool for the D.i.Re network's anti-violence centres, which are increasingly hosting asylum-seeking and refugee women who have survived violence.

The contributing authors attempt to highlight the possible points of view of both the operators and the asylum-seeking and refugee women, highlighting potential critical issues and difficulties in the relationship between them and emphasizing the role of the cultural mediator, an essential professional figure in this process.

This analysis does not claim to be universal and exhaustive, but it is based on the observations, reflections and findings of all the operators, cultural mediators and experts who have been involved in the project as a whole, participating in workshops, training courses, local network meetings and, above all, hosting and supporting migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women who have survived violence.

In the different units, the women's thoughts are presented in the third person plural – as they - and not in the first person plural – as we -, because what is recorded is not the result of interviews, but of a process of reflection and an analysis of the women's experiences by the operators.

While writing this text - fuelled by constant exchanges of ideas within the working group, with the UNHCR representatives and experts who have participated in the various activities - the authors focused on the fact that although the background and tribulations of asylum-seeking and refugee women are quite specific, they should not be labelled and differentiated from the other women normally hosted in anti-violence centres. On the contrary, such specificities should inspire and stimulate anti-violence centres to effectively adapt their reception methodology to support them not only as asylum seekers and refugees, but especially as women.

In the **first four units** - respectively **about Needs, Truth, Fear and Confidence** - an attempt was made to deconstruct these concepts from the point of view of asylum-seeking and refugee women as well as operators and cultural mediators involved in helping the women leave violence.

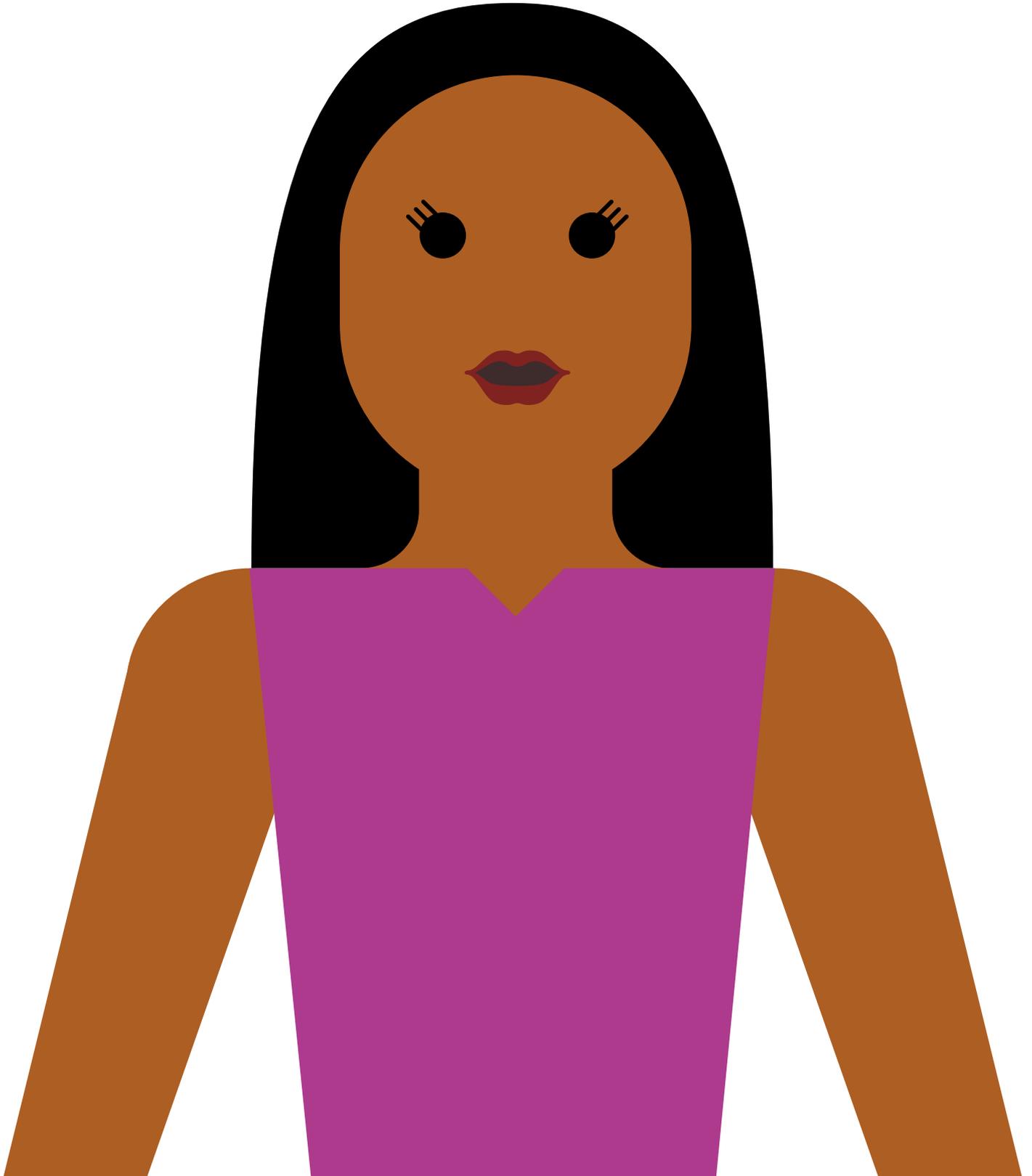
In the following **four units** - **Before, The Space, The Team, After** - we tried to set the focus on the key elements of the work done with asylum-seeking and refugee women based on the methodology of the D.i.Re anti-violence centres.

It is a feminist methodology, focused on the relationship between women, with the support of cultural mediators and the recent collaboration with institutions and partners, such as the Territorial Commission for International Protection and the reception system for asylum seekers and refugees.

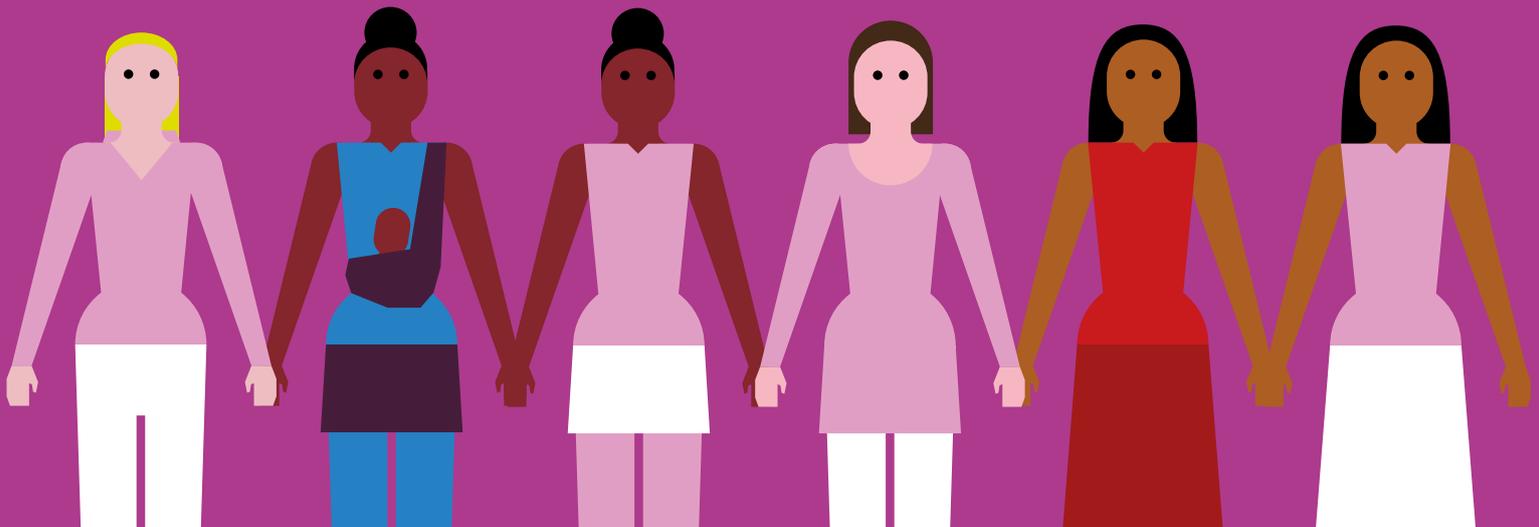
A section of additional information completes the publication, offering: an overview of the provisions on international protection and the reception system; a model admission form for anti-violence centres adapted for asylum-seeking and refugee women; a list of the most common stereotypes that, sometimes unconsciously, affect relations with asylum-seeking and refugee women; and a depiction of the thoughts that could be hidden behind the words that are spoken during an interview.

At the end of the volume there are some blank pages, for operators and cultural mediators to take notes, write reflections and criticisms.

We therefore invite you to consider this as a *work in progress*, one more step in the process undertaken by the D.i.Re network to guarantee citizenship, freedom and rights to all women.



01. Needs



- The needs of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women
- The needs of operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres
- Meeting the needs by developing a shared perception of violence
- Obtaining “the papers”
- From need to autonomy

01. Needs

Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women rarely approach an anti-violence centre on their own, prompted by a need/desire to ask for support. They are usually “referred” to the anti-violence centre by operators of the reception facilities, the Territorial Commissions, the health service. This is due to the structure of the reception system, which is increasingly perceived as an emergency service that is there to meet only basic needs, within a framework of dehumanising standardised procedures, where the specific features of individual experiences tend to be ignored, not to mention the possibility of making one’s own decisions.

For the operators, “hosting” a woman means helping them to overcome traumas and start a new life free from violence. But this may not really be among the priorities of migrant asylum-seeking and refugee women. If they are asylum seekers, then the absolute priority is to legalise their position. And then find means of subsistence, “start to live”. Initially, almost all of them seem to want to forget their experience of violence. Besides, for many of them, male violence against women is “normal”: being a woman also means to endure violence because it is something that is simply part of a woman’s life.

These factors, and many others, make it necessary to reexamine the nature of the interview so as to develop, above all, a shared principle of “desire/need” on which to base the support process together with the anti-violence centre.

Need, noun (from Old English *neodian* (verb), *neod*, *ned* (noun), of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *nood* and German *Not* ‘danger’):

1. Generally speaking, it indicates a lack of something. It is usually accompanied by a specification (need air, light, money), but can also be used singularly, meaning necessity; or particularly poverty, shortage, lack of money.

More specifically, in economics and sociology, needs are defined as painful sensations deriving from existing or expected dissatisfaction, accompanied by the awareness of appropriate means to reduce, remove or avoid such suffering, and the desire to obtain them; in psychology, social needs are intended as those that are solicited by the social environment, encouraging interpersonal emotional relationships of different nature and duration.

Most commonly, it indicates:

- a) the need to obtain what is lacking in order to achieve a given objective, or what is considered useful for the attainment of a state of material or moral well-being;
- b) the opportunity for an action to be carried out;
- c) the subjective sensation and the state of discomfort caused by the urgency to carry out a certain action, and at the same time the impulse to act. As a verb, its meaning corresponds to desire, to want. More concretely, it indicates that which is necessary.

[translated from: [Treccani.it/vocabolario/bisogno](https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/bisogno)]

The needs of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women



A distinction must be made between asylum-seeking women and girls and refugee women and girls with respect to a fundamental need: the “papers”. Asylum-seeking women have an urgent need to obtain a permanent residence permit, valid for more than the 6 months provided with the residence permit for asylum applications. Holding a residence permit is the first step to overcome the institutional violence that otherwise makes them feel “transparent”, non-existent. Women who already have a form of protection have momentarily fulfilled this need, at least on a formal level.

Asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls need to be listened to, they need to be able to express their **fear**, doubts, uncertainties that may or may not be related to their experience of violence. It could be a matter of being able to talk about something that, in the context of shelter facilities, is considered insignificant or even not taken into account at all, making them feel like “numbers” and not people. Women need to feel respected, to recover their self-esteem, their culture. They need to start planning their own lives.

They need a **space** where they can feel thoroughly supported. They need transparency, in other words, they need to know exactly what the anti-violence centre is and what it does.

A broad view of violence emerges from the experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee women. There are women with children born of rape, who have been victims of child and forced marriages or female genital mutilation, victims of torture and women who have suffered hunger and thirst. Women who have experienced and witnessed violence. These women need support. They need a lot of understanding. They need constructive understanding, not pity. >

The needs of operators, cultural mediators and staff of the anti-violence centres



In order to be able to guide and inform migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women about their rights and how to address their needs, **the team** of the anti-violence centres, and especially the operators and mediators, need to be informed about their legal status, the type of residence permit they may hold, and the rights/duties associated with each situation.

The operators need to first create a relationship with the cultural mediator who is there to “support” the operator to help her better understand requests that are not necessarily directly linked to the experience of violence. The operators need to discuss and determine the right way to approach the issue: first with the mediator and then with **the team** as a whole. They also need support and supervision focused on their specific duties within the team.

First of all, the operators need to communicate a clear image of what an anti-violence centre is. They must be aware that the centre could be mistaken for or initially considered as any other “office” where migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women have been asked to tell their story.

The team, operators and mediators need to feel confident in hosting women who bear the trauma of multiple, repeated and migration-specific violence. It is important to learn to detect the specificities of this community of women, overcoming possible prejudices and stereotypes that could surface unconsciously. The operators need to be receptive to cultural diversities in order to identify the shared points that unite all women, getting as much information as possible on the geo-political and historical conditions of the countries of origin and on the context of gender relations that may have pushed/forced women to migrate. >



In some cases, important fragilities emerge: women with physical and mental disabilities, with severe post-traumatic stress symptoms that could require psychiatric treatment; or women who are pregnant as a result of rape, or victims of sexual exploitation who are forced to get abortions.

Women and girls need to give and receive **trust** and thus recover their self-esteem. Women and girls need to be respected, not to be treated as incapable, as perpetual juveniles. They have the right and need to have clear access to all the information that concerns them.

Women have a fundamental need to take up residency in Italy, otherwise they have no access to various rights, including shelters. This problem not only concerns migrant asylum-seeking women who are no longer entitled to obtain residency since the 2019 Security Decree, but also all migrant women and girls with a residence permit when they leave the reception facilities (CAS – Emergency Reception Centre, SPRAR - Protection System for Asylum and Refugee Seekers/SIPROIMI - Protection System for Refugees and Unaccompanied Children Migrants), as they often cannot find accommodation that allows them to establish residency (sublet room, hospitality from friends or compatriots, informal occupations and so on).

In most cases migrant asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls have another basic need: housing. The length of their stay in reception centres varies according to their condition. Currently, asylum-seeking women cannot be hosted in SPRAR/SIPROIMI unless they are beneficiaries of International Protection, so their stay in reception facilities depends on the individual centre and usually does not exceed one year.

In order reach independence, women need to find a job. However, this practical need does not often correspond to their “intimate” migration project, which might be getting married and raising a family, or even simply “earning money to send home”, with only a vague idea of the kind of work they would like to do. The conditions imposed by the employment market may not be sustainable for them.



The team of the anti-violence centre may not have sufficient internal resources to deal with the significant vulnerabilities that can be manifested by women who have undergone multiple forms of violence and torture, and may therefore need to solicit the regional networks and the SPRAR/SIPROIMI system to find alternatives, such as ethno-psychological or ethno- psychiatric assistance, which is currently unfortunately only available in some cities.

The operators and mediators need to be aware of the inherent inequality of power involved in the relationship, and to reconsider their role to promote mutual acquaintance while being careful not to recreate a domineering relationship.

The anti-violence centre needs to make sure that the woman requesting protection and access to the shelter has a residence permit. It is the only way to ensure that social services provide the care and cover the eventual expenses. This requires **the team** to interact extensively with the network of services in order to overcome the problem caused by the introduction in 2019 of the Security Decree which prevents asylum seekers from obtaining residence permits.

The operators are used to finding accommodation for resident women who were victims of violence and who, for instance, leave the shelter when they are ready to live a life free from violence. However, finding housing for asylum-seeking and refugee women presents additional complications - difficulty in accessing lists for social housing, rental costs, and not least the apprehension of many landlords to rent a house to ‘non-white’ people, worse if ‘single women’. For this reason, the centre’s **team** needs to approach a variety of stakeholders in the regional context.

The anti-violence centre teams should include an operator in charge of job placement. When negotiating with the local businesses, they must consider all the potential factors that characterise the attitude of migrant asylum-seeking and refugee women towards work and economic independence.

Meeting the needs by developing a shared perception of violence



Developing the need

Hosting migrant and asylum-seeking women means initiating a dialogue aimed at laying the groundwork for the “will/need” to deal with the experienced violence and the consequent suffering. It means offering them support to help them give a meaning to an experience - the process undergone in the anti-violence centre - that involves reconnecting with **fear** while generating new strength, a strength that allows them to bear the weight of their past while facing obstacles and seizing the opportunities that life offers in Italy.

Knowing one's rights

It is necessary to make migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women aware of their rights, including their fundamental human rights as women in Italy. At the same time, it is also necessary to explain the duties involved in becoming part of the community of citizens as a result of being granted international protection and obtaining a residence permit.

Acknowledging the violence in one's personal experience

This represents a first step to allow migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women to approach their personal experience with a new attitude and eventually acknowledge the fact that it is violence: it is something that can happen to all women, anywhere, in any social context. This is not an inescapable destiny that they must accept and endure as women, but a situation that offers - in Italy - the possibility to obtain support and justice, as well as international protection.

Deconstructing stereotypes

It is necessary to deconstruct the **stereotypes** that migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women may have with respect to Western women, considered “emancipated” and “completely free”. Gender discrimination exists in any context, including in Europe, despite the progress made in terms of formally recognised rights. However, we must pay attention to the stereotypes that Westerners have internalised concerning the backgrounds of many asylum-seeking and refugee women, particularly towards women from Africa, too often considered as a single country, rather than an underdeveloped continent divided into very different nations, devastated by war, conflicts, famine, poverty, hunger, disease.

The positive aspects of the culture of origin

To ensure that asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls don't feel they need to start from square one, “having to learn everything”, “having to copy everything”, in order to be truly “emancipated” and fit into the new context, it is important to “redeem”, recognize and value the positive aspects found in their cultures of origin, and lacking in Western cultures.

Overcoming prejudice

Hosting means overcoming prejudices and acknowledging the fact that in other cultures there are different ways of relating to one's own body, of experiencing pregnancy, motherhood, education and interaction with one's children. It is important not to judge and to take the opportunity to challenge our own beliefs and habits.



How an anti-violence centre works

The other basic step to adopt when we start a dialogue with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women is to illustrate what a D.i.Re network anti-violence centre is and how it works: describing **the space** and the role of the people who work in it, underlining the commitment to confidentiality, the opportunity to tell one's own story and to be heard and believed, and the importance of the relationship between women in which every decision is taken together, in which women's wishes and freedom of choice are respected.

Do not create expectations and illusions

At the same time, it is important not to create expectations and illusions with respect to the immediate and complete satisfaction of all their needs: explain which needs can be satisfied and which cannot and, if possible, estimate the time that may be needed, accompany them to the various offices and local services involved, warn them of any eventual changes and always provide an explanation if something that was agreed upon together cannot be carried out as planned.

Make the best use of the possibilities offered by the reception system

Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women need to be thoroughly informed about "what they are up against" if they don't make the best use of the increasingly scarce possibilities offered by the SPRAR-SIPROIMI structures and reception facilities.

Cultural mediation is essential

Cultural mediation is essential especially in the first phase of hospitality, even more so than in subsequent talks when mutual **trust** has already been established: it is not only a question of giving a literal translation to overcome possible language barriers, but of finding metaphors, examples and cultural references to help migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women undertake the journey that is gradually taking shape with the assistance of **the team** of the anti-violence centre and the regional network in which it operates.

Mutual acquaintance

It is very important that cultural mediators and operators spend some time getting to know each other **before** meeting an asylum-seeking and refugee woman, especially if they have never had the opportunity to work together.

The mediator working in the team

The cultural mediator should become a permanent member of **the team** and participate in weekly meetings – team meetings – and supervisions, because her contribution is essential in the joint effort to establish mutual **trust**, to understand the needs of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women and to find the most appropriate solutions.



Obtaining “the documents”

The primary need

Anti-violence centres that host migrant and asylum-seeking women are most likely to have to deal with the primary need to obtain “papers”, i.e. a residence permit. Migrant asylum-seeking women live in **fear** that their application for asylum may be rejected, although very often they don't have a clear understanding of how the procedure that should provide them with documents works.

Being referred to the centre by the Territorial Commission

Asylum-seeking women may have been referred to the anti-violence centre by the Territorial Commission after an initial hearing, especially if the interview revealed a particular vulnerability, possibly linked to trafficking. In such cases, the hearing is suspended by the Commission in order to give the woman more time to process the experience and to be able to provide evidence to confirm her legitimate **fear** of serious risk should she be forced to return to her country of origin, as required by the 1951 Geneva Convention (see **Bibliography**).

Being referred to the centre by operators of the reception facilities

An asylum-seeking woman can be referred to the anti-violence centre by the operators of a CAS if she is still waiting for a hearing at the Territorial Commission or awaiting a decision on her appeal against an eventual refusal. This may occur because the operators of the facility detect the need for professional support to deal with the trauma resulting from the violence suffered during the migration, or because they may have noticed a situation of contingent violence (violence within the couple, harassment, abuse or sexual violence, including by male residents of the structure).

The hearing

The interview itself (hearing) by the Territorial Commission can often be a source of great uncertainty and **fear**. The anti-violence centres can offer support by preparing a report retracing the woman's history for the first hearing or as part of an appeal procedure against an eventual refusal. This report is not binding but it is a valuable document to assist the work of the Commissioner conducting the interview. The work that the operators and mediators can do in preparing the woman for the hearing, anticipating how the interview will proceed so that her **truth** can be heard, and eventually accompanying her, is extremely important.

The pressure of time

Helping women to meet these needs transforms the timeframe in which a process of leaving violence usually unfolds. Respecting the time needed to process one's experience of violence, which is one of the keys to the methodology of D.i.Re centres, often clashes with the deadlines imposed by the asylum procedure. The operators and mediators must be aware of the difficulties generated by this delicate equilibrium.

Mutual trust

In order to be able to efficiently tackle the need to “get the papers”, it is essential to start developing mutual **trust** from the very first interview with the operators and cultural mediators.



From need to autonomy

The concept of autonomy

The concept of autonomy, what it effectively represents - the possibility of supporting oneself with a job, paying the rent and/or utilities of the house one lives in and freely deciding how to spend the money one earns - and the value attached to it as part of a process of leaving violence - especially domestic violence - is not usually part of the expectations and desires of asylum-seeking and refugee women.

Being a woman: marriage and children

In fact, one must bear in mind that a large number of them were born and raised in contexts where you are “real women”, “proper women”, only if you are married and have children: the ideal scenario for them could be to marry a man rich enough so that they wouldn’t have to work. Their idea of the standard of living in the Western world, in Europe, gives them the illusion of being able to make their dream come true once they arrive.

Being a woman: informal work

Many asylum-seeking and refugee women come from countries where the - more or less regulated - informal labour market, complements the official labour market; the street and market sales of self-produced goods (agricultural products, cooked food) and other products is a common activity for women; the tax system, pensions and safety at work are not as developed as in the West and are in any case limited to the formal labour market.

The labour market

These differences can make it difficult to understand the way the rigid labour market works in Italy, and cause frustration with respect to the job, the salary and the obligations attached to it.

Involving the cultural mediator

Cultural mediation can also be helpful for the operators of the anti-violence centres who deal more specifically with this aspect of leaving violence - looking for opportunities for vocational training, internships and job placement, as well as finding accommodation, etc.. - in order to overcome possible misunderstandings and adjust unsuccessful work integration projects.

Work beyond trafficking

Many asylum-seeking women were in the hands of human and sex traffickers, and are referred to the centres sometimes by counter-trafficking programs, sometimes by Territorial Commissions. “Working on the street” distorts the perception of potential earnings and makes normal working conditions seem much less “profitable” and difficult to understand.

Money “remittances”

The demands of the family in the country of origin could also weigh on the money needs of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women: they need to “send money home” - the so- called “remittances” of migrants - for their family’s subsistence and to repay the debts contracted for the journey to Europe.

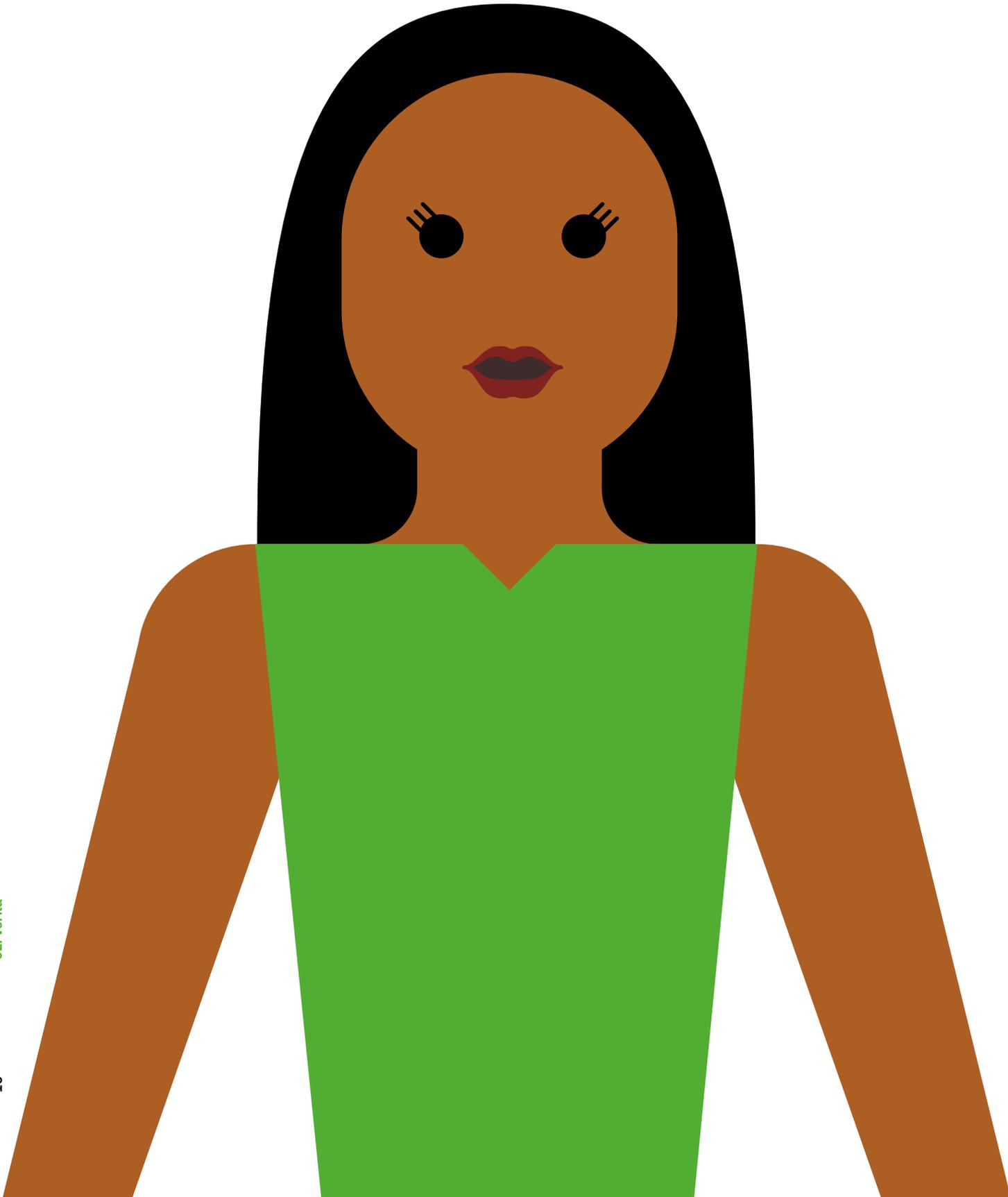
(Re)Establishing the approach to money

The approach to money, its value as a payment for work, how to handle it, how to balance expenses so as not to have to borrow money, to avoid pressure and constraints: these issues will have to be addressed in order to develop the ability to autonomously meet one’s individual needs.

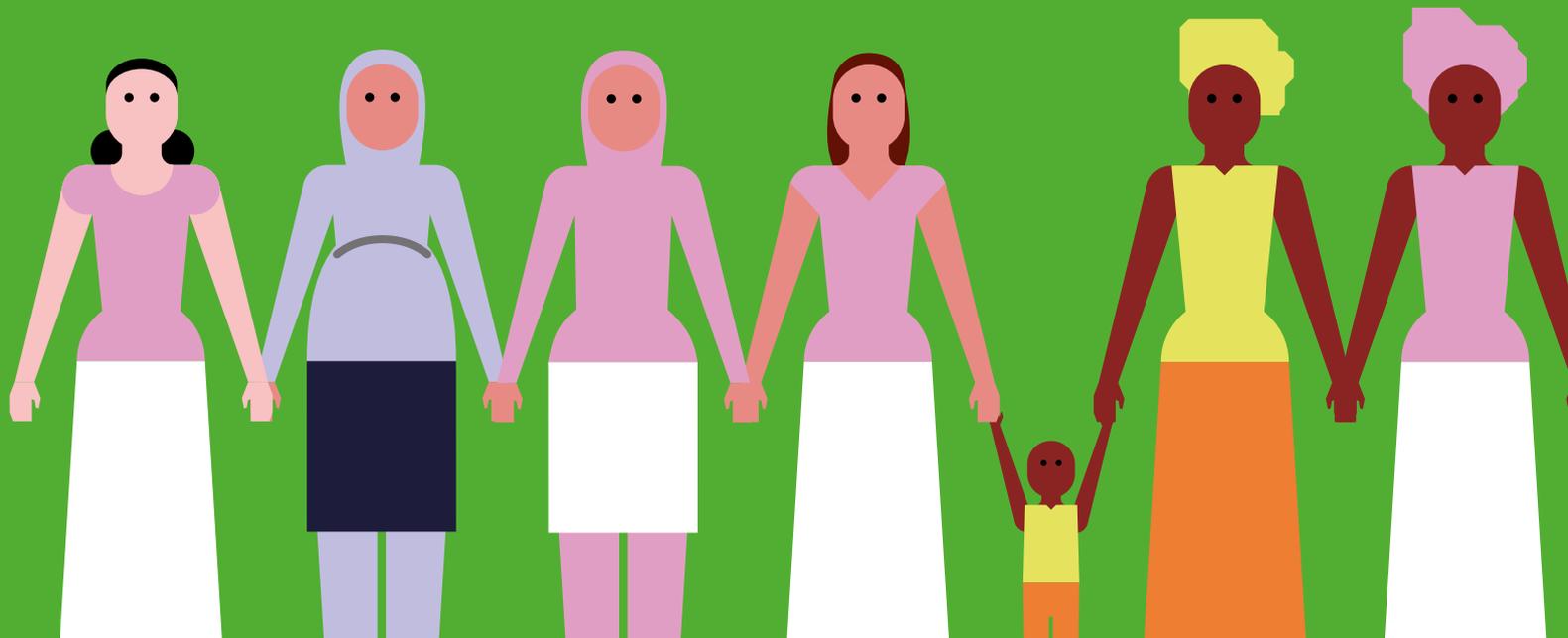
Find a rented accommodation

After the Second World War, the rental listings specified “We don’t rent to Southerners” when tens of thousands of Abruzzians, Apulians, Sicilians, Calabrians, Sardinians, Molisians and Campanians moved to the big cities in the North - especially Milan and Turin - to look for work.

The updated version of that statement could read “We don’t rent to Africans” or “We don’t rent to blacks”. This is a political-cultural difficulty that operators who assist migrant, asylum- seeking and refugee women in the search for accommodation increasingly have to deal with. These situations require patience, negotiation skills and adjustment to conditions that are more “informal” (subletting, hospitality, temporary accommodation in church facilities, etc.) than those usually available for Italian women.



02. Truth



- The truth for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women
- The truth for operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres
- Building together the asylum-seeking woman's truth

02. Truth

Does the issue of truth influence the work that takes place within an anti-violence centre or not? Does the search for truth in the narratives of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women affect our work?

We cannot ignore it, whether it is dealing with the outside world or within the support relationships between women. This is why the anti-violence centres have decided to take a clear stand: to respect what is being told, without investigating or judging the authenticity of the narrative.

The listening **space** of the anti-violence centre is a judgement-free space, the woman can change her story and her interpretation of the events along the way, confronting each emotional and painful aspect as she becomes aware of the extent of the violence she has endured. With their 30 years experience, the teams have learned to recognise the effects of violence on women such as inconsistencies in the narrative and the difficulty in respecting the chronology of the facts.

One of the essential points of the methodology of anti-violence centres is to believe what the woman describes, because it is only by believing her that a process of unveiling violence can be initiated.

In ancient Greek “unveiling” is the term used for “truth”: not absolute objectivity, but a dynamic and endless act, as the philosopher Heidegger wrote (see **Bibliography**).

And it is this evolving truth that is revealed during the process of leaving violence, when the woman, together with the operators and mediators, begins to free herself from the superstructures and stereotypes that have conditioned her life.

Thus, the anti-violence centre becomes **the space** where the truth becomes manifest.

truth, noun (from Old English *tríewþ*, *tréowþ*, *trýwþ*, Middle English *trewþe*, cognate to Old High German *triuwida*, Old Norse *tryggð*):

1. Nature of what is true, conformity or consistency with given principles or an objective reality.

2. What is true (as opposed to falsehood, lie, error).

In particular:

a. With regard to certain facts: knowing, ignoring, seeking, discovering, ascertaining the truth; saying, revealing, keeping silent, hiding the truth (i.e. the real nature of something); denying the truth;

altering, distorting, deforming the truth; admitting, recognising the truth;

b. Assertion or knowledge responding to a superior and ideal concept of truth.

c. That which is true in an absolute sense.

[translated from: [Treccani.it/vocabolario/verità](https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/verità)]

The truth for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women



I BELIEVE YOU

It is difficult and painful for all women who suffer violence to bear the burden of truth.

Asylum-seeking women often know that in order to be granted international protection, their story must be deemed credible by the Territorial Commission. This is why they also tell the operators and mediators of the anti-violence centre what they intend to say in the Commission to “test” the effectiveness and credibility of the story. Sometimes they ask: “Is my story OK?”.

NEGATION

*“I don’t want to talk about it anymore...”
“It can’t be true!”*

Often migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women no longer want to talk about the violence they have suffered, or they omit information about sensitive aspects of their intimate lives -sexual orientation, rape, especially gang rape. They simply want to “move on”.

The moment they manage to talk about the violence, they show resistance, strength, resilience in facing the tremendous extent of the abuse.

CONTRADICTIONS

“From signs of lying to symptom of trauma”.

When they tell the story of the migratory journey there are often elements of contradiction or inconsistency that can be a consequence of trauma, **fear**, but also the result of what the traffickers have forced them to say upon arrival in Italy.

The truth for operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres



The operators and mediators need to know that the element of “credibility” is the most important evaluation factor adopted by the Territorial Commission for the recognition of international protection. The anti-violence centres are conceived as a transitional **space** for women survivors of violence where they can process their experiences while living in a state of uncertainty caused by the contradictions of their own story and the emotional impact of the violence they have been subjected to. This attitude also proves to be extremely valuable in supporting a story that is considered convincing in order to obtain protection even if it doesn’t correspond to the woman’s experience. The developing relationship will allow the truth to emerge.

Often the violence suffered by migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women is so appalling, diversified and repeated over such a long period of time that it seems unbelievable that they were able to endure such pain and survive.

Consequently, inadequately trained operators and mediators could develop an attitude of denial, distrust and doubt, and, if overlooked, this could influence the quality of listening.

The contradictions in the narrative are often interpreted - in institutional contexts - as evidence of non truthfulness and therefore non credibility. For example, this could happen during the hearing with the Territorial Commission for asylum-seeking women.

On the other hand, the operators and mediators accept contradictions and discordant attitudes because they know that these can be a symptom of the traumatic impact of violence.



LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MEDIATION

An essential tool to truly “listen”.

Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women often need the help of a linguistic and cultural mediator in order to express their **needs**.

This can generate the **fear** that their story will be distorted through the “translation” made by the cultural mediator.

Building a relationship of **trust** is the first step towards the creation of a **space** in which the woman's truth can be truly acknowledged, even when the operator hears it filtered through the interpretation of the cultural mediator.

THE PROCEDURAL TRUTH

Not feeling like victims, but really appearing to be victims

Most of the migrant asylum-seeking women who nevertheless managed to survive and arrive in Europe are encouraged by the positive outcome of the journey, and consider the past as something to be left behind for good. However, as part of the procedure for obtaining international protection, they **need** to talk about the violence from which they fled and the violence they may have experienced along the journey, which means that they have to relive the trauma of their abuse in order to prove that they would be at risk if they returned to their country of origin.

The anti-violence centre helps migrant asylum-seeking woman in dealing with the Territorial Commission, and more generally with the priority goal of “getting papers”. On one hand, the operators need to help make the women's position as victims believable, while **the team's** work is focused on bringing out their innate strength and resources, their resilience, their ability to take charge of their lives and leave their experience of violence behind.

Building together the asylum-seeking woman's truth



Referral

In most cases, asylum-seeking women turn to anti-violence centres when sent by third parties; they rarely intentionally turn to them on their own will. Often, the Territorial Commissions or the operators of the reception facilities encourage women to turn to the anti-violence centres. The motivation that convinces women to do so is the possibility of obtaining a residence permit, or getting assistance with practical questions such as looking for a job or dealing with bureaucratic procedures, or the possibility of being helped in dealing with internal dynamics in the reception facilities.

Desire

However, **after** an initial phase of mutual acquaintance and the establishment of a trusting relationship – while introducing the opportunities offered by **the space** of the anti-violence centre - the woman may develop the desire to inhabit this new space, to relate her story and to regain the awareness of the violence she has suffered.

The repeated story

In general, when asylum-seeking and refugee women come to the anti-violence centre, they have been through numerous experiences of repeating their story to authorities and institutions - Police Headquarters, Territorial Commissions, legal practitioners in reception facilities, lawyers(s), judges, etc. - over and over again.

Violence and residence permit

Filling in the C3 form upon arrival/landing, writing the statement before going to the Commission hearing, the Commission hearing that could be repeated several times, the appeals filed with the lawyer, the court hearing: these are all contexts in which their story has to be told again and again. Not only that: the story must obviously be credible and coherent in order to make sure that the authorities evaluate positively the asylum application and grant the residence permit, to avoid the failure of their migration project and to finally be able to live with dignity in the country of destination.

“Functional” truth

In these contexts, the extent of the violence suffered is not considered in itself, but is purely functional to highlight the risks that the asylum-seeking woman may face if she returns to her country of origin, a necessary condition for obtaining international protection. At the end of the story, the woman remains alone.

Name and acknowledge violence

Awareness of all this is necessary for operators and cultural mediators to introduce **the space** of the anti-violence centre as something radically different. A space in which the endured violence can find a voice regardless of the rest, a space in which other women can hear the violence being named and come to acknowledge it.

If the operators keep this in mind, the truth will naturally find its way in the narration, while establishing a trusting relationship between women, oriented towards acknowledging the pain and traumas that could possibly affect every woman.



From “functional” truth to personal truth

The passage from “functional” truth to “personal” truth will take place naturally, when stories that are not coherent or not very credible will find a receptive **space** in which to process the pain, a space in which listening is not oriented towards the reconstruction of “truth” as an end in itself or to prove something to someone.

Trauma

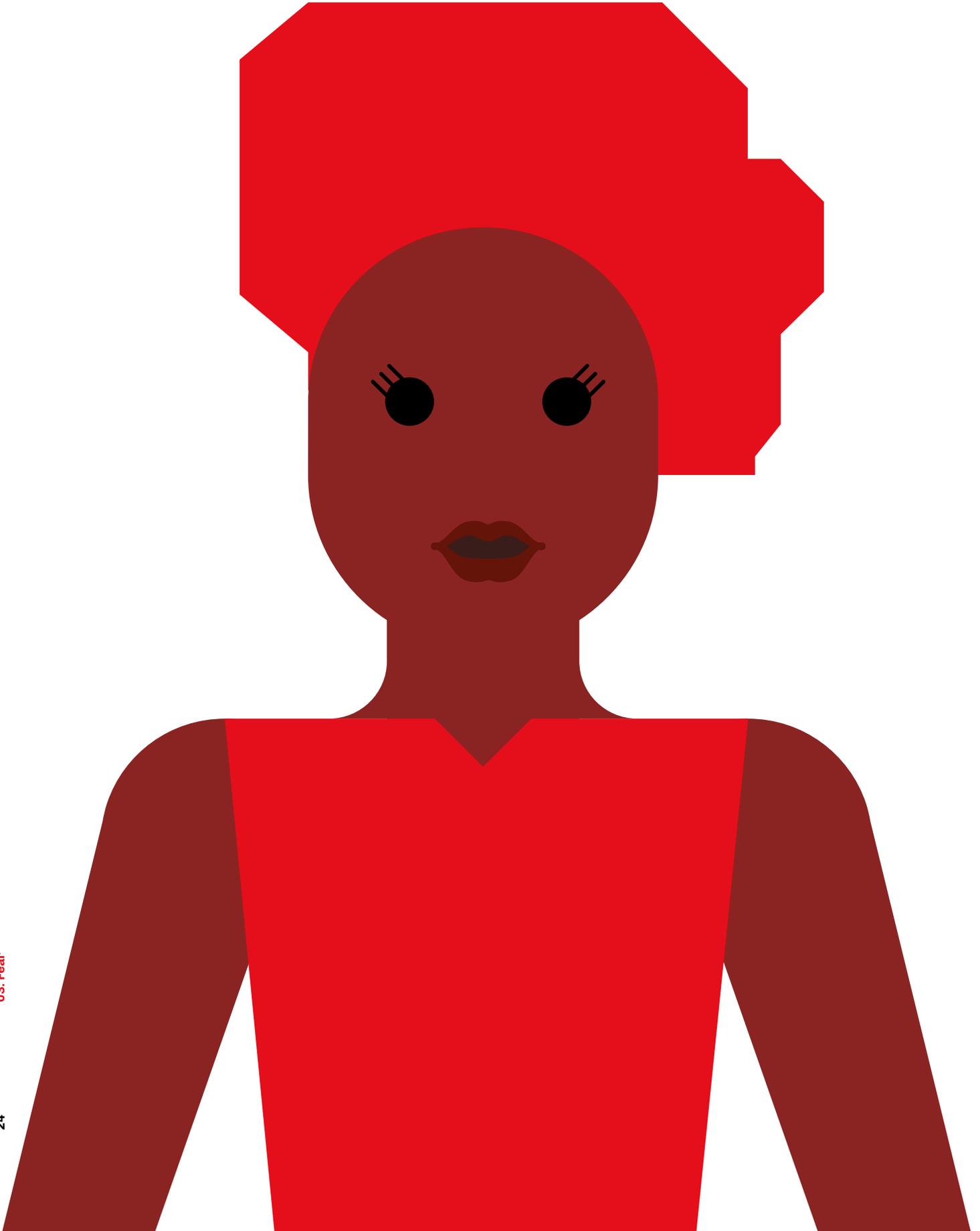
We know that in cases of exposure to recurrent trauma, the ability to sustain a coherent and credible narrative is deeply compromised. In the case of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women this aspect is magnified by the fact that their cultural and communicative codes are significantly different from those of the listener. The lack of reciprocal knowledge of the different codes, understanding and interpretation can become an obstacle between the woman and the operators. Consequently, the role of the cultural mediator is decisive. It is intended as a “bridge between two worlds”, providing both parties with a translation, not only linguistic, that will facilitate mutual understanding.

Co-constructing a coherent and credible narrative

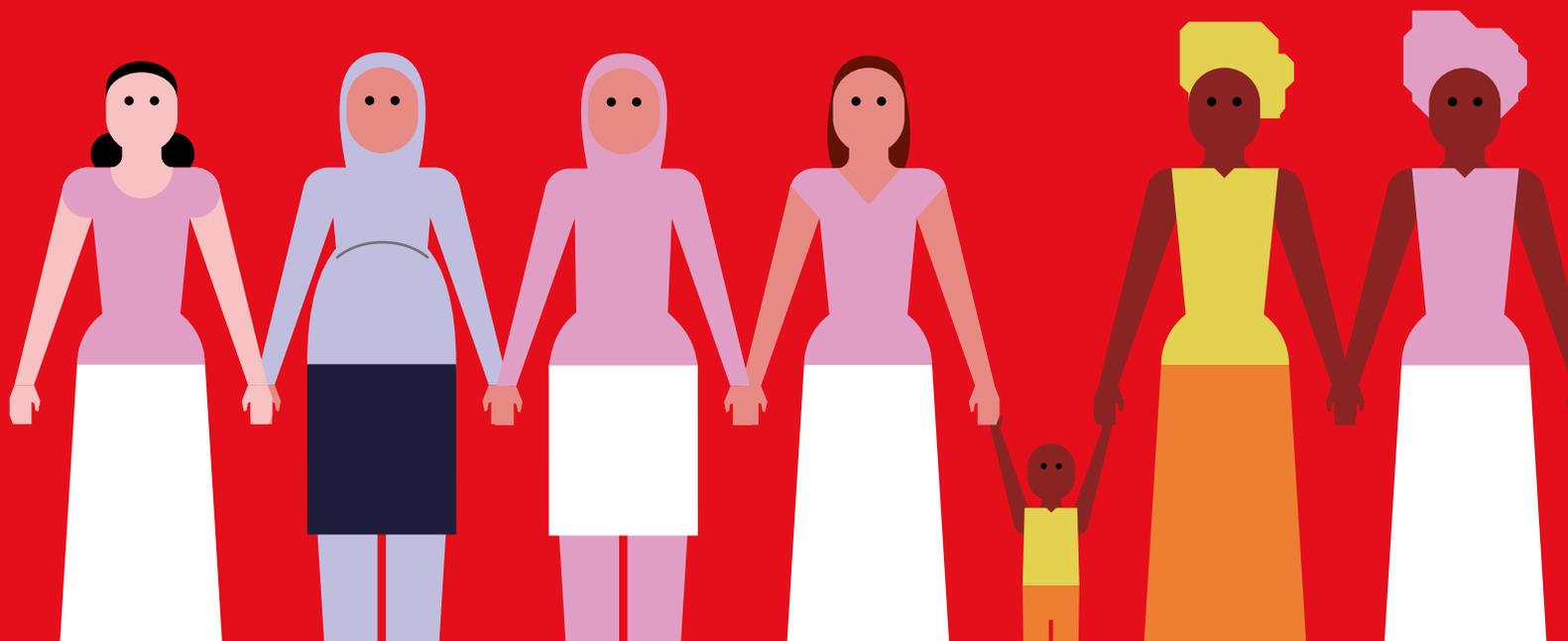
If the right conditions are provided to host the woman and her story regardless of her ability to appear “true” or to demonstrate the truthfulness of her stories, the second step will be to co-construct the coherent and plausible narrative required to meet the criteria of “credibility”, “consistency” and “reliability” established by the Territorial Commission in the procedure for the recognition of international protection.

Freedom of choice

This is not a goal of the operators of the anti-violence centre, but the woman’s free choice to decide, once hosted, supported and believed, whether to disclose her truth to the outside world (to the Territorial Commission). If this does not happen, the anti-violence centre will have been, in any case, the place where the woman was able to express her truth because she was believed and cared for.



03. Fear



— Fear for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women

— Fear for operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres

— Overcoming fears together

03. Fear

Fear is an innate emotion, one of the so-called primary or universal emotions. Its main function is to make our response more efficient in situations where our survival is at stake and which we perceive as dangerous or painful. Such a reaction is triggered without necessarily involving cognitive and conscious processes. It is therefore very powerful and can even condition our behaviour in an automatic and unconscious way.

Violence is an experience that generates fear in the woman who suffers it and can produce, in the operator, a phenomenon of emotional mirroring that needs to be acknowledged and processed. When meeting migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women who have survived violence, specific fears may surface. It is important to be aware of these fears so as to prevent them from affecting the relationship.

fear, noun (from Old English *fær* 'calamity, danger', *færan* 'frighten', also 'revere', of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *gevaar* and German *Gefahr* 'danger'): Emotional state consisting in a sense of insecurity, bewilderment and anxiety in the face of real or imaginary danger or in the face of what is or is believed to be harmful; it takes on the guise of a strong and sudden disturbance, more or less intense according to people and circumstances, when the danger arises unexpectedly, takes one by surprise or appears imminent.

[translated from: [Treccani.it/vocabolario/paura](https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/paura)]

Fear for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women who have suffered violence



Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women can feel fear caused by being involved with another woman/other women who is/are not familiar with their language, their habits, their values, and belong to a cultural context very different from their own. The question that arises is “if you don’t understand me, how can you help me? In a certain way, the staff of the centre represents an “authority”, even if this is not clearly defined, therefore the woman’s fears linked to the contact with the authorities of her country of origin or along the migratory path could be projected onto the operator.

Like many women who have survived violence, asylum-seeking and refugee women are afraid of not being believed or of being forced to talk about experiences that they prefer to keep to themselves.

Those who have been involved in the asylum application process can turn to the anti-violence centre after numerous encounters/interviews, in different contexts always connected to the authorities; their history has been repeatedly questioned, analysed and challenged by these authorities who are perceived as having the power to determine their fate. Throughout these interviews, asylum-seeking women who are in Italy without identification/papers, are afraid of being deported, arrested/detained, and therefore of not being able to live the life they wish for themselves and their children, of not achieving the goal that has driven so many women to come to Italy/Europe. For those who arrive from an African country after crossing the Mediterranean, there is also the tremendous “fear of being sent back to Libya”.

The fear of “diversity” can be a latent factor within the woman-operator relationship, that surfaces in somatic sensations evoked by the odours of the Other, or the different linguistic and non-verbal communication codes.

Fear for operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres



The operators may think: “If I don’t understand you, how can I help you?” These concerns can trigger a sense of helplessness and fear concerning the responsibilities involved in her role, fear that the woman might be underestimating the risk she is running.

The fear of the operator is basically fear of failing her task: not being able to “detect” the woman’s **needs**, or to find the right tools to interpret her experience of violence and therefore to help develop her personal process to leave violence.

The operator may feel fear because she can’t provide (all) the answers to the **needs** of a migrant asylum-seeking or refugee woman, especially if they are related to specific issues such as residence permit or employment.

The operator may feel a sense of fear when she finds herself speaking to a woman who doesn’t have a clear understanding of the context in which she finds herself; she may associate it with those she has already been through, and may not realise how the anti-violence centre differs from other places in which she has been asked to tell her story. This situation can lead to a sense of dismay in the operator if she is not provided with the necessary tools: knowledge of the bureaucratic process and of the reception system for asylum applications, possibility of legal advice on migration issues, availability of specific services of the network, specific risk detection, etc..

The operator may fear, even if not consciously, a woman who is “different” in many ways, an Other whose cultural heritage and therefore communicative codes are difficult to understand.



The woman may be disoriented and therefore intimidated because she is not familiar with the Other's position as an operator, in that specific cultural context.

Asylum-seeking and refugee women can feel fear when faced with a "white" and "bourgeois" Western woman, who is perceived as a member of the institutions in a position of power.

This also reflects the asymmetry of a relationship that can be conditioned by fear of judgement.

Besides the fear that can be reactivated by the violence of the past, the migration journey may have exposed women to other traumatic experiences: the separation from the family of origin, abandonment or, in the hard journeys such as those from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Mediterranean passing through Libya, witnessing the violent death of their loved ones, travelling companions and children, the suffering of others and the constant violence.

The asylum-seeking woman who survived violence, has the great fear of not being able to obtain a residence permit, and therefore of seeing her life project shattered despite all the sacrifices and sufferings she had to endure in order to arrive in Italy/Europe. This fear is often what generates the need to resort to lies or omissions.

Women may omit some important elements of their lives for fear of being judged by the operator who may not be familiar with the hierarchical and violent cultural practices in her country of origin. The female genital mutilations, for example, are seen with horror in the West and are considered violence, but to one who has been subjected to the mutilation, it can be perceived as a fundamental part of her identity as a woman.



The operator of the anti-violence centre is aware of the fact that - even if she intends to treat the woman as an equal - the situation remains asymmetrical and the relationship with the Other is conditioned by her role as an operator and by judgements that could unintentionally affect it.

Operators who are in contact with asylum-seeking women may feel fear when confronted with women who not only have been subjected to multiple forms of violence, but also have experienced traumatic experiences linked to leaving their families, to abandonment, or - for those who cross the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean - to the witnessed violence and bereavement typical of this migratory route.

When hosted women make decisions that may seem "wrong" or hazardous, operators may worry that they have not been able to guide the woman properly and that they have not been able to establish trusting relationships that would allow them to speak the **truth**.

This fear may arise, for example, when women tell a story that we perceive as not being their personal experience because they continue to be conditioned by what has been imposed on them by traffickers or exploiters (in the case of women victims of trafficking). Or when they lie about their age, claiming for example that they are 20 years old, but when asked: "When did you first get your period?" they reply: "Last year".

The operator, the whole team, the cultural mediator, the legal advisor or the psychologist may find it very difficult to listen to repeated episodes of violence rooted in the culture of the country of origin of the woman who turns to the centre. Defensive mechanisms may be triggered by the enormity of such stories, with the result that the woman isn't believed or her story is considered instrumental: "She says this in order to obtain a residence permit or receive benefits".



The fear of judgment, of a negative judgment, can strongly influence the account of the violence experienced. It may happen, for example, that a Nigerian woman victim of trafficking who has been repeatedly raped does not tell this story to the operator for fear of being judged a prostitute (*ashawo*) because she takes the blame for the rapes. Since their arrival in Italy, asylum-seeking and refugee women may have endured sexist or racist abuse or discrimination - if they are black, they may well have been approached on the street with sexual requests and treated as prostitutes. These experiences may increase their fear of being judged.

Not being able to interpret the codes of non-verbal communication can be very intimidating. For example, in many cultures, out of respect, people do not look in the eyes of those who represent the Authority, and so the operator and the mediator can be surprised when women do not look in their eyes of when they talk to them.

Nigerian women victims of trafficking who have concluded an agreement with the traffickers through a ritual – *the juju* – also fear the terrible consequences that breaking the silence imposed by this oath can have on their family of origin. The fear triggered by the juju becomes an instrument of blackmail, manipulation and subjugation, and is quite prevalent because many of them are still being actively exploited when they come to the anti-violence centre.



Refraining from judging is one of the key factors in the reception methodology, but it is a practice that is difficult to conceive outside of the support relationship established in anti-violence centres. Developing one's own idea of the people we deal with is a spontaneous, natural process that can be conditioned by **stereotypes** that we have assimilated.

Women may have a negative prejudice towards the operator, which may affect the relationship, prompting them to omit details of their own experiences or to distort the facts according to what they imagine they are expected to say. Eventual omissions or distortions in the story are part of the women's **truth** and should be accepted as such.

Not being able to decipher the codes of non-verbal communication can be very alarming. In **team** meetings with the mediator, an operator who has not had the opportunity to familiarise with certain codes of non-verbal communication, may feel intimidated by a woman who does not look her in the eye, interpreting this as a lack of respect. Even when the operator knows that not looking into the eyes belongs to a specific cultural communication code, she encounters difficulties because she experiences it as an unbalanced relationship, as a sign of distrust and distance.

Accepting and transforming this fear is a delicate task, a constant process that evolves as the relationship of **trust** is built with an operator and a cultural mediator and strengthened by the prospect of concrete life alternatives. An ethno-psychological approach, where available, can help to place the process in a perspective that takes this emotional impact into account and at the same time supports the woman as she retrieves her freedom without repudiating her personal experience.

Overcoming fears together



Trust	The issue of fear is closely linked to trust . Fear, in fact, can be caused by a lack of mutual trust.
Describing the anti-violence centre	It is necessary to clearly explain who we are, where they are and how the anti-violence centre operates because, unlike women who generally turn to the centres, migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women might not be familiar with them and this can generate fear and mistrust. Operators should be aware that they will meet women who are deeply troubled not only by the traumatic experience of the violence they have suffered, but also by the intimidating contexts in which they have had to tell their personal stories and describe the violence they have suffered without receiving any response.
Understanding the procedure for international protection	Having knowledge of the “bureaucratic” steps that asylum-seeking and refugee women have to overcome is crucial for the operators of the Centres in order to get an idea of the painful experiences they have gone through, being practically “forced” to describe the violence as part of their story (see Additional Information A).
Understanding the reception system	Likewise, understanding the functioning of the reception system, the professional figures involved and the entire network in which the anti-violence centre operates can facilitate mutual knowledge and understanding and reduce the level of fear that can exist in the relationship (see Additional Information A).
Diversity	In an anti-violence centre, a sense of fear can be felt in the development of a relationship with the migrant woman and her diversity. To overcome it we need to relate to it, confront it and overcome it. In this process the mediator is of crucial importance, because she acts as a bridge between diversities.
The cultural mediator: freedom to explain	It is necessary to rely on the cultural mediator, leaving her the freedom to explain the essence of the operator’s message not only by translating literally, but by using practical examples that clearly illustrate the concepts, or other tools that can be helpful for the interpretation.
The cultural mediator: “white” woman	Sometimes even the mediator, especially if she comes from Sub-Saharan Africa and therefore “black”, can be seen by the asylum-seeking woman as being poles apart, precisely because of her position in Western society: “Now you are one of them, you became “white”, so I don’t trust you”.
The cultural mediator: too “close”	At times cultural mediators from the same country are seen with suspicion by women precisely because they are too “close”, especially by those who come from countries where society is structured in clans or tribes. In this case, tribal or clan membership has a greater weight than the solidarity between women, which is the basis of the support relationship established in the anti-violence centres. Women think: “She knows where I come from, she is from the same tribe as me, she probably knows my family: better not to tell her things that are too personal and that could put me in danger”. Or they think that the mediator might tell their family things that they prefer them not to know. If possible, it is advisable to check the availability of a cultural mediator who speaks the same language, but comes from a different region/ city in order to create the necessary “distance” for them to feel confident.



The time it takes

In order to overcome the fears linked to roles and “diversity”, it is necessary to dedicate the time it takes to establish a relationship which, even if not perfectly symmetrical, is sufficiently safe to allow women to explore their negative side.

Time imposed by others

It takes time for the relationship to be established, but one must be aware that the schedule is sometimes imposed by the institutional context and particularly, in the case of asylum-seeking women, by the appointment for the hearing in the Commission or by the eventual time needed for an appeal against a possible refusal.

Relying on the methodology of anti-violence centres

In order to overcome the fears described earlier, when working with migrant asylum-seeking and refugee women, it is important to adopt the principles of the methodology of anti-violence centres:
Operators never provide predetermined solutions, but try to build, together with the woman, some opportunities that consider the social, economic, and cultural context. This approach increases the effectiveness of the intervention, because it makes women protagonists who decide for themselves.

For the process to be successful, the operator needs to keep an open, non-judgemental attitude and practice active listening in order to increase the woman’s trust and awareness that she is not alone. Understanding this helps the woman think of possible ways to leave violence behind.

During the whole process, the operator always remains one step behind the woman, does not make decisions for her, does not push her to take actions she is not ready to take, and does not take any decision without her consent.

[From violence to empowerment, Coordinamento Centri Antiviolenza Emilia Romagna, 2014].

Respecting wills and choices

Even if the woman tells a story that may not seem to reflect her real experience, the operators and the whole **team** must always respect her will and her choices, and accept her story without judging it, including the choice to tell a story that differs from her experience because it seems more appropriate to obtain asylum or to omit parts of her story. It is important to be supportive without ever trying to stand in for her. This includes respecting her choice not to reveal to the Territorial Commission events that she shared with the anti-violence centre team.

Truth as a possibility

Some details of the stories may seem so unbelievable that they seem impossible, untrue. In such cases, it is necessary to rely on the mediator and be willing to question our ability to be “non-judgemental”. That doesn’t mean not to question or not to doubt, but always keep in mind the perspective of what could be true.

Exploring truth as a possibility with the cultural mediator

When we suspect that the woman is not telling us the **truth**, we need to question ourselves and, with the help of the mediator, seek answers to any doubts that may arise. The doubts may concern the facts that are being reported - for example, it may seem implausible that in Nigeria the bodies of the dead can be kept at home for a long time before being buried, until they have the money to pay for the funeral - or the way they are told.



Emotional pitch

The emotional pitch of the story could be quite different from the usual descriptions of violence. Certain episodes – which we see as “obvious” expressions of violence – can be considered as “minor”, everyday events not worth mentioning. They can therefore be perceived and described as absolutely “normal”, not worthy of particular attention or dramatisation. Or, vice versa, they may be expressed in dramatic terms and difficult to hold back.

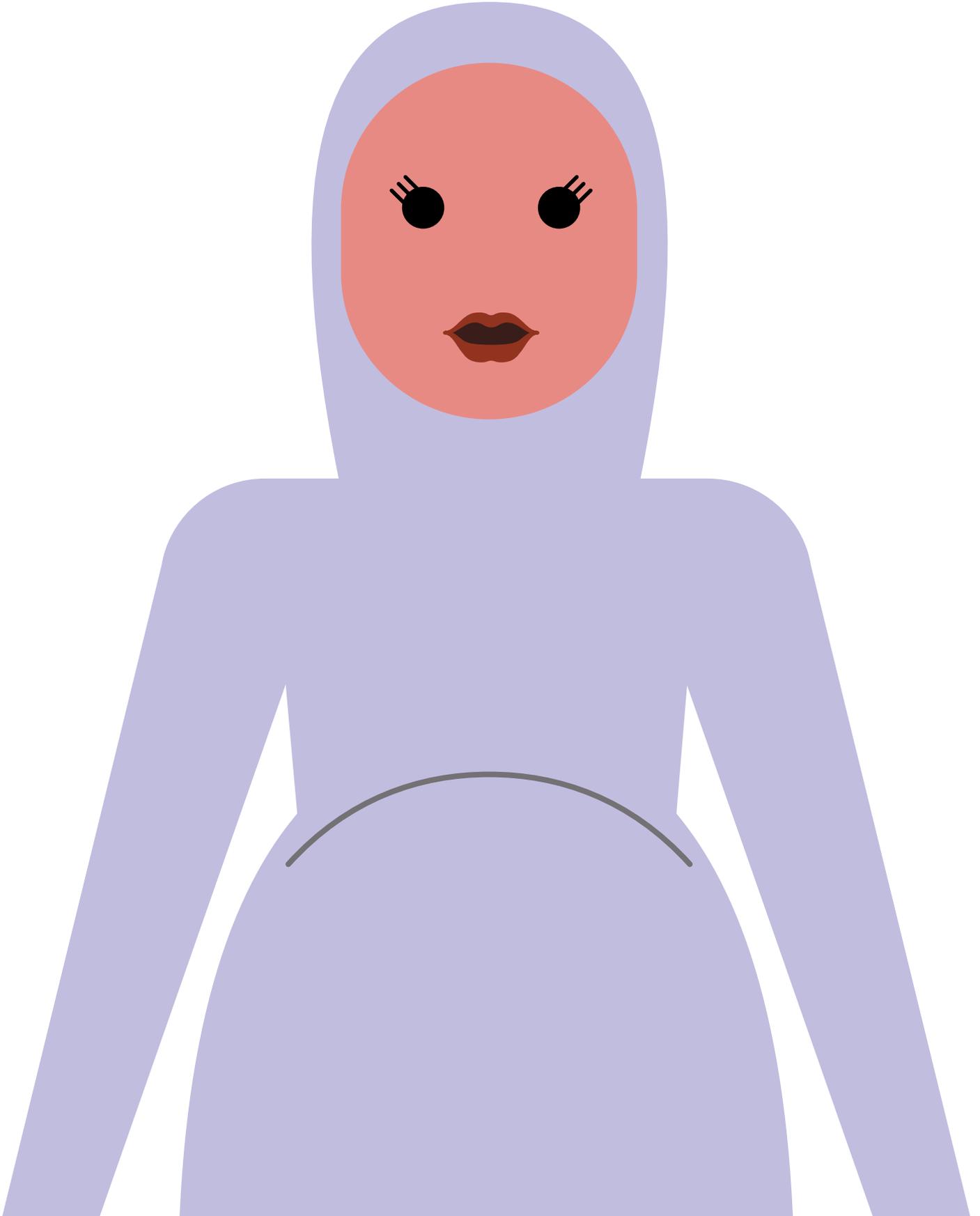
In these cases, cultural mediation can be very useful to help unveil and overcome mutual mistrust and differences.

The report for the Territorial Commission

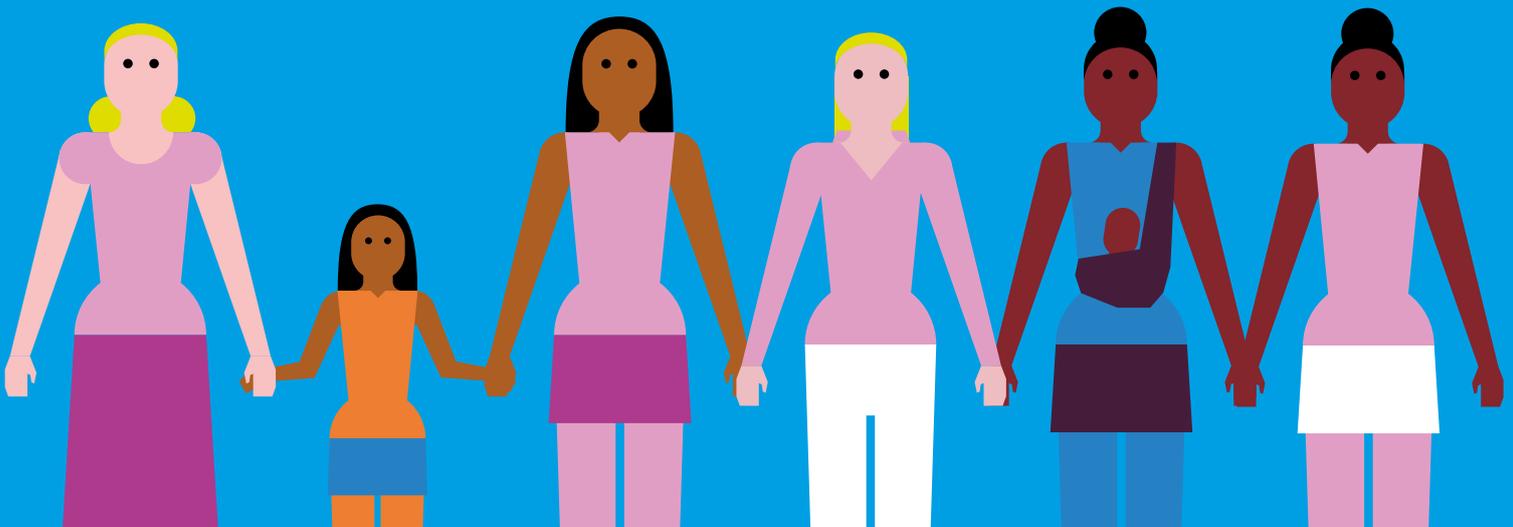
In the relationship with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, when we say that the operator always remains one step behind the woman, this also implies:

- When the woman has been referred to the anti-violence centre for further consideration of her history of violence in the context of her application for international protection, it is important not to decide for her what to write in the documentation, especially in the report addressed to the Territorial Commission. This is particularly important because what we think is the most suitable choice does not always turn out to be so. As operators of an anti-violence centre, we may not have the necessary skills to evaluate whether or not the inclusion of certain elements can help to obtain international protection, or actually block the recognition of the refugee status or other forms of protection. In some cases, the Territorial Commission’s assessment may be negative, precisely as a result of the successful process achieved at the anti-violence centre.

 - The woman must be actively involved in every step of the documentation process – approval, proof-reading, variations – and she must sign the report for full acknowledgement.
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04. Trust



— Trust for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women

— Trust for operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres

— Building trust together

04. Trust

For the operator of anti-violence centres, trust plays an important role in the relationship with women and between women. When working with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, it is important to present **the space** dedicated to interviews as an opportunity, as something very different from the other situations she has come across with operators and experts since her arrival in Italy (CAS, SPRAR/SIPROIMI, police, etc.). New relationships will start to develop and help overcome the isolation caused by suspicion **after** the woman regains her self-confidence and starts to trust the operators and the others.

trust, noun (from Middle English *truste* (“trust, protection”), from Old Norse *traust* (“confidence, help, protection”): an attitude, towards others or towards oneself, resulting from a positive evaluation of facts, circumstances, relationships, whereby one confides in the possibilities of others or of one's own, usually generating a feeling of security and peace of mind.

[translated from: [Treccani.it/vocabolario/fiducia](https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/fiducia)]

Trust for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women



The trust that migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women have placed in the various people they depended on in order to leave their country and reach Europe was betrayed many times: starting in their home country, throughout the journey and upon arrival.

The languages they speak are generally unknown in Italy. They do not speak or hardly speak Italian.

Their body language is different/unclear.

They think that the operators are all “white women” who “don’t understand how things work back home”.

It is an unfamiliar place, the people who work there are new to them, but act just like many others they have met before who (probably) proved to be of no help and to whom they ‘have already told their story’.

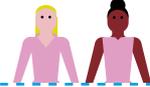
They don’t know what an anti-violence centre is, how it works, what makes it different from other venues where they have been interviewed **before**. They can’t imagine how the operators can help them and why they want to hear their story again - the departure, the journey, the violence - forcing them to repeat it all over one more time.

They don’t see the operators as “equal” women but as civil servants, as authorities who have the power to provide them with residence permits. They don’t understand our code of behaviour, they suspect some hidden purpose behind overly confidential attitudes.

They feel that the operators aren’t part of their reality, don’t share their system of values, but that they think they know how they should lead their lives and handle relationships, and above all that they have the power to control their destiny.

Their priority is to obtain ‘the papers’, i.e. the residence permit. Everything else is secondary.

Trust for operators, cultural mediators and staff of anti-violence centres



The stories of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls may seem “unlikely”, too similar to one another.

We can’t communicate in Italian. We are afraid of making mistakes, of not being understood, of being misinterpreted.

Their body language is different/unclear.

They are often black or non-white women, who ‘don’t understand how things work over here’.

They come from different countries, we don’t know anything about their exact geographical location, their culture, their history. Sometimes we don’t even know which is the capital city or what language they speak.

For the operators, the anti-violence centre is an ‘obvious’, clear and self-explanatory term. There is no need to provide specific explanations for women who were born in Italy or who have been living in the country for a long time, because in most cases they have come to the centre spontaneously.

Operators may sense an ‘invisible’ distance and try to bridge it by treating women with inappropriate confidence, without considering that elsewhere – for example in Africa – people are very formal and the etiquette involves a series of progressive, gradual questions/answers – which may seem a waste of time – **before** getting to the matter of the meeting.

Operators also live in a patriarchal culture as do women victims of violence who approach the centres. This awareness should help mitigate the power issue in the relationship.

Their priority is to obtain “the papers”, i.e. the residence permit. But as operators in an anti-violence centre, this **need** is perceived as being “above and beyond” their area of competence.



In most cases, they were 'referred'/accompanied to the anti-violence centre, they didn't choose to go there. Usually, no information is given to them about the centre, probably simply described as 'a place where they can help you'.

They feel/imagine/believe that the "awful things" that they have been through will be considered to be their own fault, that they will be blamed for everything.

Those who helped them emigrate explained to them that they would get "the papers", the residence permit, only if they spoke about a few specific things. They often "bought" the story they would have to tell. Even if it is not what really happened to them.

They seem indifferent as they describe the experience of violence, as if it had 'happened to someone else', trying to maintain a dignified, strong attitude, with long silences and without being overtaken by emotion.

The violence they have suffered is such that they cannot describe it.

Their narrative is a "stream of facts" that are not necessarily in chronological order, but are presented by degrees of emotion. The endless repetition of the story is a draining experience.

The operators' insistent questions irritate them. The women are eager to break away from their painful experiences, because in any case they cannot change them and they perceive them as "God's will". They just want to start a new life.

They often agree to come to the anti-violence centre because they think that the operators can help them obtain 'the papers', the residence permit, and make sure that they will not be repatriated. This is their main concern, along with the pocket money and medicines, and finding a job.



In most cases, they were 'referred'/accompanied to the anti-violence centre, yet the methodology of the anti-violence centre is essentially based on the woman's personal and conscious decision to go to the anti-violence centre.

They seem passive/submissive, unable to acknowledge the violence: it is unthinkable to have been through what they say they have experienced without trying/doing "everything" to break free.

The operators are familiar with the so-called "photocopy stories", the "stories bought" from traffickers, stories that are identical or very similar, told by migrant asylum-seeking women in an attempt to conform to the standard conditions required to obtain international protection.

It can be hard to understand that they don't want to let off steam, to cry, to let go when they see the operators' willingness to listen. In contrast to what we are used to seeing, they 'resist' voicing their pain, and their long silences could be seen as omissions, as horrible experiences that they would rather not talk about, but that 'definitely' happened.

It is difficult to imagine other ways of approaching and perceiving pain, so it may appear that they are "pretending" not to suffer.

It is necessary for them to describe the violence so that we can understand how to help them.

The operators try to "understand" how, when, where, with who... etc., in order to reconfigure the logical order of the story. To do this, they press them with questions, establish connections between events, eventually deduce/discover facts that the women did not necessarily want to talk about.

Their reluctance irritates us. We are afraid that if we don't get them to "acknowledge the violence" and come to terms with it, it will eventually have a negative impact and condition their lives.

We feel manipulated, because we sense that they came to the anti-violence centre because they believe that the operators can help them obtain "papers", and we realise that without a residence permit they risk repatriation. But we would like to respect the timing and the process that women normally go through in the centre. We can try to help with the residence permit but the duration of the process does not depend on us. We are also unable to provide employment.



They don't want to give the names of those who helped them during the journey, even if they were betrayed and sold to traffickers, or the name of their abusive partners, especially when they are living in the same shelter. They refuse to press charges. They are ashamed and they often don't mention that they were forced to work as prostitutes because they assume that the operators will judge them.

Many of them have a history of violence in their home country, where they were subjected to female genital mutilation, forced child marriage, abuse, harassment and rape. But they are not always aware that these are forms of violence and it is very difficult for them to talk about it.

They know where they come from and what they left behind, but they do not know exactly what to expect in their new life. Sometimes the trauma undermines their abilities and reduces their self-esteem.

Certain forms of violence against women and girls are considered as 'normal' in some cultures/ contexts in the countries of origin: women are taught that the husband/partner, parents, elderly women and men of the family should always be respected, even if they abuse you.
If you are a woman, they decide for you.

Asylum-seeking women involved in trafficking are often exploited by other women. This can lead to their not being able to imagine a different kind of relationship between women.

They **fear** that the family of origin and the local community will judge them badly or ostracise them if they talk about the violence they have endured and maybe still endure, and this fear conditions their decisions.

Nigerian women who are victims of sexual trafficking have often been forced to take an oath through a ritual, the *juju*, which – if broken – could create serious consequences for the family that remained in the country of origin as well as for themselves. But in many cases, when they tried to explain it to the people who heard their story, the *juju* was trivialized, treated as superstition; they were encouraged not to believe in it or were considered 'naive'. This can make it difficult for women to address this particular aspect of their story, because they are afraid that even the operators won't take them seriously.



The operators try to accurately reconstruct the facts, including the names of the traffickers, of the people who sold them, forced them into prostitution, or of the partners who abuse them, because this information is needed in case they decide to press charges or if the centre has to submit a report to the Territorial Commission.

Violence suffered in the country of origin, in families and communities, may be the key for migrant asylum-seeking women to obtain the status.
This is why the operators try to help expose these experiences and are somewhat frustrated by the women's reluctance.

It may be hard to believe that migrant women could have embarked on such a journey without having the slightest idea of what they were going to do later, once they arrived, to support themselves.

Operators may find it difficult to understand that in certain cases violence, especially domestic or family violence, is considered "normal".
They have often witnessed male violence against women in the family, so it is quite difficult to convince them that it is not normal. They seem submissive, unable to acknowledge the violence they have been subjected to, unaware of their rights.

This 'female version' of violence against women is a complex element to deal with because it questions the 'relationship between women' at the base of the support methodology of anti-violence centres.

It is difficult to imagine why their families far away, or communities that developed in Italy, made up of people who apparently have no connection with these women, can have such a crucial influence on their choices.

In the case of Nigerian women victims of trafficking, the operators must also deal with the question of traditional beliefs and rituals, and with the **fear** of adverse consequences if the oaths are broken, as in the case of the *juju*, a ritual to which girls and women have often been subjected before leaving to dissuade them from escaping or rebelling. In the secular context of anti-violence centres, where the methodology is based on the principle of "believing" the hosted women, this 'spiritual' dimension needs to be accepted, even though it may be difficult to understand how something that may seem like superstition to us could have such an impact on them.

Building trust together



The role of the cultural mediator

The task of the linguistic and cultural mediator is crucial in helping the operator understand the meaning of trust in the different cultural contexts of origin. This concerns not only the theoretical aspects, but also the practical daily issues that are essential elements through which trust can be developed. The linguistic and cultural mediator is important as an example of relationships between women from different cultures (the operator and the mediator) that, in time, can have a positive impact on the attitude of the hosted women towards **the team** of the anti-violence centre.

Gradualness

A gradual approach to the involvement of the asylum-seeking woman in the process of co- construction of her personal project to leave violence will enable us to establish an increasingly genuine contact, focused on respect for the Other, on seeing her culture and the differences she bears as assets and not as an obstacles. The perception of being regarded as a “woman” rather than as a “migrant, asylum-seeking or refugee woman, victim of violence” and seeing the possibility of her **needs** being fulfilled will help to strengthen and add trust to her relationship with the operator.

The time variable

The time variable becomes very important in the process of establishing a relationship based on trust. If, at first, responding to the emergency seems to be the only possible option, it is nonetheless clear that, with time, we will gradually understand many facets of the relationship, and discover hidden issues that appeared incomprehensible and obscure at first. The time dedicated to deep listening, focused not only on the circumstantial aspects of explicit requests, and addressing each other’s vulnerabilities will prompt a beneficial exchange with the Other.

Non-judgmental attitude

We are not there to judge or to evaluate. This premise is even more significant in establishing a bond of trust with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women. They have their own cultural values and practices, which can be radically different from ours, for instance in terms of the mother-child relationship, the use of medicines or the concept of time. Another example is the practice of juju, the ritual oath that trafficked women and girls from Nigeria, many of them asylum seekers, are subjected to, which is viewed by some as superstition or black magic, while anthropologists acknowledge its authenticity and its religious significance. The operator needs to be conscious of her own feelings, in order to be able to deal with them in the context of her relationship with the woman, rather than concealing or ignoring them and risking to instil her own prejudices into the relationship.

It is not a question of excluding the personal and cultural values of the operator, but rather of encouraging awareness and consideration of these beliefs, even when they appear to be in contrast with those of the woman, in order to engage in a process of co-construction.



Not asking to be trusted

We don't ask them to trust us, but offer them to take the opportunity to build a different relationship, making it clear that we don't represent the authorities (law enforcement or police, courts, social services), and nothing will be imposed upon them, they will be free to choose.

Being women

We introduce ourselves to the woman by telling her that we are all women even if we come from different countries, and that anti-violence centres are there to help women regardless of the type of violence they have experienced.

Trust as an option

The operator must think, feel and offer trust as a potential element in the relationship. She must not take for granted that a relationship of trust will be established, because this could generate expectations and consequently affect the future of the relationship.

The dynamics that unfold between the operator, the mediator and the woman could lead to disappointments and failures.

Expectations and illusions

The approach must not be "redeeming" or overly benevolent; it must not be aimed at simply satisfying any form of request or generating illusions in an attempt to reassure the woman. Asylum-seeking women who have survived violence, can have many different types of requests linked to specific **needs**: a residence permit, a job, money, potentially dangerous situations for family members in the country of origin, etc. The operator should provide honest answers about whether or not the anti-violence centre can address these needs/requests, without making false promises, and should try to stimulate the woman's proactive behaviour.

The boundaries of the relationship

During the first interview, it is important to clearly define the limits of what we can do as an anti-violence centre and what doesn't depend on us, in order to provide a stable and trustful base for the next meetings and for the development of the whole process, and to avoid creating expectations that cannot be met. This involves informing the woman that we can provide her with support but that some of her requests may ultimately depend on other parties – in particular the Territorial Commission for the asylum application, the Police Headquarters for the issuing of the Art. 18 residence permit, but also lawyers, operators of CAS and other reception facilities, any social or health services involved, and so on – and that therefore it could happen that, in spite of the commitment of the operators and experts of the anti-violence centre, the outcome may not necessarily be as desired/expected.

The report for the Territorial Commission

Our role, as operators of the anti-violence centre, can also include providing support in dealing with institutions. A typical example of this is the compilation of a report for the Territorial Commission, which is often requested of anti-violence centres when they assist asylum-seeking women. The woman should be involved in every step when drafting the report:

- obtain the woman's consent to be contacted by the anti-violence centre upon request of the Territorial Commission;
- inform the woman from the very first meeting that the Territorial Commission will request (or may request) a report on the development of her situation;
- adjust the content of the report if requested by the woman;
- allow the woman to personally sign the declarations, and thus make sure that she has understood, approved and endorsed the content of the report.

05. Before



- Getting in touch with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women
- Introducing the anti-violence centre
- Being referred to vs. choosing to contact the anti-violence centre
- Before the interview: the relationship between operator and cultural mediator
- The first personal interview
- Gender-based violence experienced before arriving in Italy
- Trafficking before the asylum application process

05. Before

It is essential start by informing asylum-seeking and refugee women about the existence and objectives of anti-violence centres so that they can decide to seek counsel there. Operators of women's shelters often overlook or do not consider anti-violence centres as part of the territorial services that offer support to asylum-seeking and refugee women who have survived violence.

Getting in touch with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women

While asylum-seeking women are generally hosted in special facilities (see **Additional Information A**), things are very different for women who have been granted international protection. The reception system continues to take care of them for a certain period of time, providing housing and other services, until it is time for them to be independent and support themselves. A wide range of community organisations, religious structures, Evangelical parishes and churches, groups of compatriots, volunteering activities, formal and informal communities and networks, often with the support of local authorities, try to facilitate this process of 'integration', although very often people remain confined in contexts of marginalisation and exclusion.

It is very difficult for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women to discover the existence of anti-violence centres on their own, especially since their knowledge of the Italian language might still be limited.

It is therefore essential to establish connections with those who are involved with them in various ways, such as the operators of the organisations that administer the emergency reception centres (CAS) and SPRAR/SIPROIMI facilities, since these are the places where most newly-arrived asylum seekers and refugees are hosted.

However, contacting those who are no longer part of the reception system is much more complicated. Cultural mediators can be valuable "antennas" to monitor the territory, because they know and often spend time in the same community centres, markets, places of worship, and can identify the representatives of the various communities, establish an initial contact, overcome eventual mistrust, and stimulate word of mouth.

The following is a brief overview on how introduce the anti-violence centre to asylum-seeking and refugee women who are still supported by the

reception system, based on the experience of D.i.Re anti-violence centres that were involved in the *Leaving violence, living safe* project.

Introducing the anti-violence centre

In order to publicise the Anti-Violence Centres among migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, the first thing to do is to locate the structures - CAS, SPRAR/SIPROIMI – that are based in the area where the women are hosted.

Once the mapping has been completed, it is important to contact the coordinators of the reception facilities and schedule a first encounter. This is also an opportunity to propose and organise a meeting with the operators of the CAS and SPRAR (now SIPROIMI) in the area in order to inform the entire staff about the anti-violence centre and its methodology.

These meetings are essential to build trusting relationships between the two professional teams - at the anti-violence centre and at the reception facility - to then plan and organise meetings with small groups of women hosted in the reception facilities.

At this stage, cooperation between the operator and the cultural mediator(s) is essential.

During the encounters with small groups of women and girls we first introduce ourselves - the operator and the mediator - providing information about who we are, where we come from, how old we are, whether or not we have children, the choices we have made in life that led us to work in an anti-violence centre, and so on, to help them identify us as persons.

We then describe the centre as a group of women working together with other women to defend women's rights, and explain that this is why we are there to meet them.

We ask the women to introduce themselves, suggesting that they include elements to help us get to know them better: who they are, where they come from, how old they are, whether or not they have children, if their children are here with them or if they remained at home.

Once the presentations are made, we can give more details about the activities of the centre without mentioning violence. Instead, we begin with the fact that we are all women, we come from different backgrounds, countries, cultures, social classes, etc., and therefore we can say that all of us, as women, experience in different ways the same discrimination, the same ill-treatment and abuse by men and the patriarchal society.

Eventually, we can inform them that the centre also deals with violence, pointing out that there are different types of gender-based violence, that it is a situation that affects women all over the world. We try to get feedback, encouraging them to ask questions and to express their views.

In the end, the distinctive aspects of the work of an anti-violence centre should always be clearly explained: the confidentiality of the interview, non-judgmental listening, respect for self-determination, and finally the fact that women are supported and guided in their choices, and that all decisions are made in a spirit of collaboration.

We can then leave informative materials about the anti-violence centre, tell them about the toll-free number 1522 and explain that we are there to help them.

It is important to note that:

- in some structures it will be possible to organise only one meeting with the hosted women, although it would be preferable to meet again with the same group of women to get to know each other better and encourage dialogue;
- the hosted women and girls might not feel comfortable sharing their experiences in front of the other women in the structure who attend the meeting: sharing can be made easier by arranging more meetings to progressively build a climate of mutual **trust**;
- in some cases, the presence of the the hosting facility staff during the meetings could inhibit the interaction with the anti-violence centre operator and mediator, as it could raise doubts about the privacy of the interviews;
- if the mediator and the operator notice this problem, then it would be advisable to ask the hosting facility staff not to participate in subsequent meetings;
- the mediator is the professional figure who most easily captures the women's attention and inspires **trust**, especially if she comes from the same geographical and cultural context: sometimes, at the end of the meeting, one or more women may turn to her to confidentially ask for help. This is an opportunity to encourage them to arrange an individual meeting with the operators of the anti-violence centre.

Being referred to vs. choosing to contact the anti-violence centre

It is unlikely that a migrant, asylum-seeking or refugee woman will spontaneously decide to contact the anti-violence centre. However, sometimes, after a meeting with women in a reception facility, some of them ask for an appointment at the centre. In most cases, the woman or girl is referred to the anti-violence centre by a CAS or SPRAR operator. A first interview is sometimes requested on account of a past or recent violent episode, and/or violence that risks being repeated.

In other cases, after a memorandum agreement has been made, the Territorial Commission may decide to refer the woman to the anti-violence centre. This occurs especially when, during the interview with the asylum-seeking woman, elements emerge that could refer to a past or recent experience of violence, or to trafficking; if no clear evidence of such experience has been identified, the Commission suspends the hearing to give the woman extra time to reflect. If there is a suspicion of trafficking, the referral can also be made by the local anti-trafficking centres who collaborate with the anti-violence centres.

It may and often does happen that women who have asked for an interview at the anti-violence centre do not show up. In order to avoid this, we can go to the facilities where they are hosted for the first interview. In such cases we need to make sure that there is a suitable **space** available to ensure that the interview is conducted in a warm and confidential manner.

Before the interview: the relationship between operator and cultural mediator

A collaboration based on confidence and **trust** between the operator and the cultural mediator is the key to establish a positive connection between the hosted woman and **the space** of the anti-violence centre.

The permanent inclusion of cultural mediators within **the teams** of anti-violence centres is relatively new and gradually gaining ground. However, every anti-violence centre occasionally needs to work with “on-call” cultural mediators, who in these cases only work for a specific interview.

In both cases, it is essential that the operator and the mediator have a moment to get to know each other before the interview in order to agree on a shared working method. This is necessary in order to avoid that the mediator's behaviour makes the operator feel:

- “excluded” from the conversation if it goes on with a one-to-one exchange between the mediator and the hosted woman;
- that something is being left out when a very long statement is translated into a very brief sentence;
- that essential details are added or removed, altering the meaning of a sentence, if what the operator said is translated into a much longer or shorter sentence.

The overview below summarises some key elements of the relationship.

Operator



She introduces herself to the cultural mediator, provides information about her professional background. If the cultural mediator is 'on call' and there for the first time, she also gives information about the anti-violence centre.

She explains the key elements of the D.i.Re anti-violence centres' methodology and how she intends to conduct the interview: the set of questions, her expectations concerning the mediator's work, the sensitive expressions or specific concepts she might mention that may not have an equivalent in the language into which the translation is made, the type of questions that will be asked ('direct', 'open').

She specifies whether she wants to be given explanations about gestures or other elements in the woman's non-verbal language directly during the interview, or if she prefers to wait until after the meeting. She gives possible indications on how to deal with the most emotional moments, for example bursts of tears.

Cultural mediator



She introduces herself to the operator and provides information about her professional background, the contexts in which she normally practises mediation, and eventual situations in which she has already worked with women victims of violence.

She explains how she usually conducts the interview: the need to use traditional greetings, what elements she thinks need to be added in order to clearly convey particular concepts that may not have a counterpart in the woman's language of origin, any advice regarding physical contact - it should be the woman who seeks it - and eye contact, which can be considered a lack of respect.

She explains that there can be elements of non-verbal communication that sometimes leave “unspoken” matters that are understandable only among people coming from the same socio-cultural context, and adds that she will later report what - in her opinion - the woman meant with a particular gesture, or look, silence, facial expression, or tone of voice.



She asks the cultural mediator to explain to the woman that - as a team - there are no “secrets” between the mediator and the operator. It must be clear that everything the woman says will be shared with the operator, even if not necessarily at once, especially if the woman starts by saying “I’m only telling you, don’t tell her”, to talk about something more intimate or embarrassing.

She agrees with the operator to share the whole content of the conversation, and explains to the woman that she and the operator work as a team, so there can be no “secrets” between them. She listens to confidences that start with “I’m only telling you, don’t tell her”, and will wait until the end of the interview to share them. The goal is to create a climate of **trust**. For this reason, it is important that the cultural mediator clearly explains that she will report to the operator what was said in the moments when she was alone with the woman, making sure that she agrees.

The operator and the cultural mediator establish verbal/non-verbal signs of understanding between them to handle possible “critical” moments of the interview. For instance, the operator can propose or the mediator can ask the operator to go and get a glass of water when one or the other understands that it is better for the mediator and the hosted woman to discuss things alone (without the presence of the operator) for a few minutes.

At the end of each interview it is good to allow a moment of exchange during which the operator can confirm with the mediator the correct interpretation of all the passages, in particular those that may have generated a feeling of disorientation, especially when the body language revealed a strong emotional reaction.

The operator and the cultural mediator make sure that at the end of the interview there is enough time for them to discuss, to verify the accuracy of the interpretation of what the woman said/expressed, including possible emotions or implicit messages expressed in non-verbal language. In this context, the mediator has the possibility to provide the operator with cultural interpretations of the different moments of the interview, especially those with a more intense emotional charge, in order to avoid misinterpretations that might arise due to the operator’s cultural background.

The first personal interview



Generating comfort

The operator and the cultural mediator are together when they greet the woman in the anti-violence centre, or in a reserved room of the reception facility where she stays. They both try to create a friendly situation, for example by letting the mediator greet the woman in a way that is typical of her culture, asking her to choose where she wants to sit if it is possible.

Acknowledging

The interview starts warmly with presentations, asking the woman how she is, how she feels. The woman must feel that we accept her as a woman with her own values and skills. From the first meeting, we must have a non-judgmental attitude and help the woman regain her strength. We must guarantee support, make her feel safe from threats, and help her address her **fears**.

Accepting diversity

The assessment of risk is not the same for each individual woman. We have to be prepared to deal with different ways of speaking and acting, different attitudes that were developed in other situations. In short, we have to deconstruct our professional position and be open to women who are different from us.



The 'right' questions

During the first interview, the anti-violence centres usually propose a series of questions aimed at determining the situation of violence and the woman's history. It is also important to evaluate the risks she faces in terms of possible ongoing violence, in order to start defining the individual process of leaving violence and achieving autonomy. The operators and mediators must be able to evaluate each case, and according to how the interview is proceeding, decide which questions to ask and how to ask them, being careful to always ask 'open' questions, that is, questions that do not require a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer.

Privacy

At the beginning of each interview, operators and mediators will always mention that the interview is confidential, that the woman has the right to privacy and to remain anonymous, even if - in the case of women and girls referred by other structures - her name is already known to several people. Above all, everything that the woman will share in this **space** will remain confidential, and no details will be revealed to the operators of the reception facilities or to the operators of the anti-trafficking desk or to anyone else, except for information that may be useful to better deal with situations involving these facilities, exclusively with her previous agreement. This is essential to establish a **trust**-based relationship.

Violence and international protection

The anti-violence centre is a context that facilitates the resurfacing of violence. This is necessary, when working with asylum-seeking women, in order to prepare the hearing before the Territorial Commission, and the eventual report issued by the anti-violence centre. The woman will always have the possibility to choose which elements of her story she wants to reveal to the Commission, but the impact of violence on her life and the risks she runs if she returns to her country of origin must be clearly identified, in consideration of the criteria for obtaining international protection.

Truth and coherence

According to the 1951 Geneva Convention (see **Bibliography**), an application for asylum should be approved if there is a well-founded **fear** that, when returning to her country of origin, a woman or girl may run the risk of being exposed to further violence and/or discrimination, endangering her life or exposing her to inhuman and degrading forms of abuse. This condition must be evidenced by the asylum seeker during the hearing with the Territorial Commission, which will ascertain, whenever possible, the **truth** and coherence of her story.

Victim vs. force

This means that with respect to the Territorial Commission, and more generally to the main objective of "obtaining papers", namely a residence permit, the anti-violence centre assisting a woman asylum seeker finds itself having to help her to give credibility to her position as a victim, while usually the task of the anti-violence centre **team** is aimed at bringing out her strength, her resilience, her ability to assume control of her own life, her autonomy.

If violence doesn't surface

During this first interview the violence might not come to light. In this case, the operators and mediators will immediately schedule an appointment for the next interview in order to continue the process. It is important to reassure the woman that she is not alone and that she can count on the support of the anti-violence centre **team** and the network of collaborators, without however creating illusions about immediate solutions to all her problems.



Gender-based violence experienced before arriving in Italy

Many migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls who reach Italy have suffered some form of gender-based violence in their country of origin, where discrimination against women, their subordinate role in the family, forced marriages to much older and often unknown men, denied education for the mere fact of being female, are widespread conditions based on the idea that a woman's only possible destiny is to be a wife and mother.

There is an increasing presence of very young women, often from rural areas, among Nigerian women and girls, who are currently by far the largest group of asylum seekers. They usually have low levels of schooling or at best have been trained for menial jobs.

Some of them report episodes of violence by men, including partners and family members. Many of them grew up in contexts where their husbands - their fathers - regularly beat their wives, where domestic violence is not punished, where women who try to report it are dissuaded by the police, and where women are told that they have to obey their husbands and endure the violence: that such violence is "normal".

Women and girls from various Sub-Saharan African countries and Egypt may also have been subjected to traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, or been forced to marry their dead husband's brother when widowed (levirate marriage).

Most of the journeys to the West from sub-Saharan Africa are now made via Libya, where human trafficking has become a source of income for armed gangs and militias in a country that is totally destabilised. As confirmed by numerous reports by United Nations organisations, non-governmental organisations and the press (see **Bibliography**), the time spent in Libya almost always involves an atrocious series of violent acts: kidnapping, torture, imprisonment in appalling conditions, enslavement, forced labour, forced prostitution, repeated and gang rapes. Violence not only endured but also witnessed.

Like many other women, they are unfamiliar with contraception, do not perceive it as an option to which they are entitled, and are very poorly informed about the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

For many young girls, particularly from Nigeria, the journey to the West also includes sex trafficking. Their dream of freedom, of a better life, of earning a living, is shattered by forced prostitution, often

involving threats, violence and drug abuse.

Homosexuality is still strongly discriminated against, in some cases it is even illegal.

Many dream of having a man by their side to protect them, instead of becoming self-sufficient.

Trafficking before the asylum application process

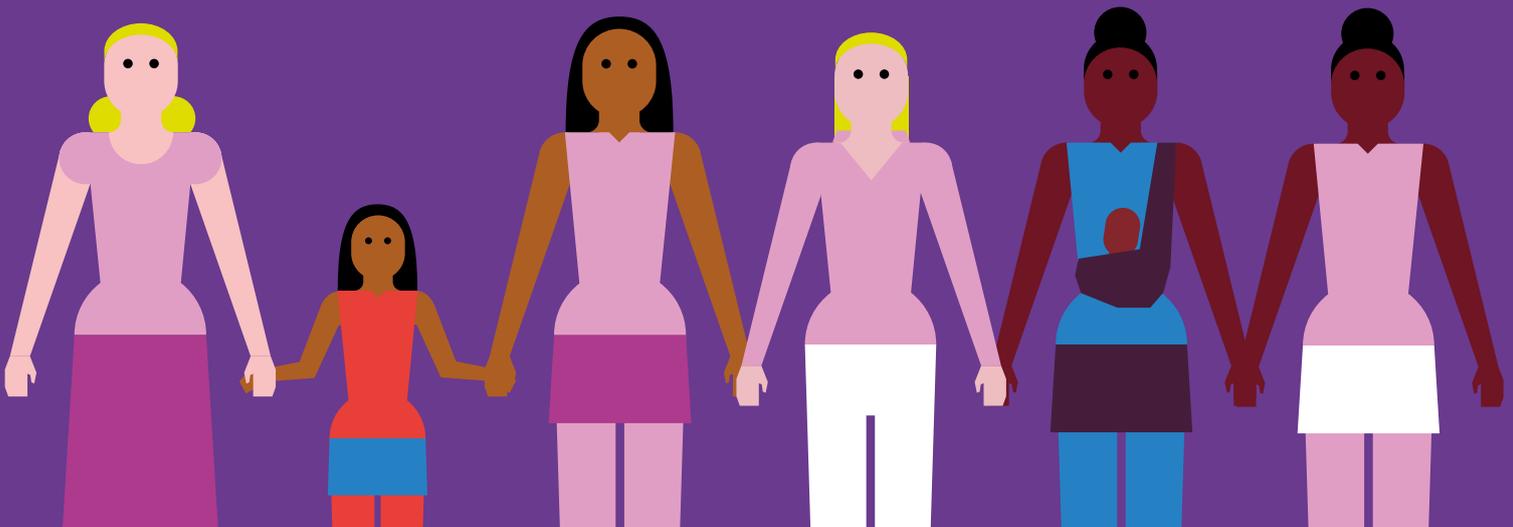
Many migrant asylum-seeking women are also victims of sex trafficking, or other forms of exploitation (forced begging, forced labour).

Trafficking is one aspect of gender-based violence, one side of the huge multifaceted problem of violence against women.

One very significant detail about trafficking, however, is that those who are usually responsible for the trafficking, the so-called 'madams', are women, women who buy and sell other women; some of them have previously experienced that same violence to which they now subject the women and girls under their control. In these cases, we can say that it is the women themselves who perpetrate violence against other women: but even if they do have a lot of power, it is a man who usually stands at the top of the criminal pyramid.

The experience of a warped relationship between women, where **trust** is betrayed and where control and power are associated with threats and violence, begins in the country of origin, even before embarking on the journey. This also contributes to the difficulty – for migrant, asylum-seeking or refugee women who have also been victims of trafficking – to be able to conceive a warm and supportive relationship between women, at the heart of the methodology of the D.i.Re. anti-violence centres.

06. The space



— What happens in the space of the anti-violence centre

— The space for relationships with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women

— A safe space

— Space-time

— The interview space

— Building relationships with the outside spaces

— A space to identify violence

— A space in progress

06. The space

The **space** is the setting, the location, the time - the **before** and **after** - and the how!

Anti-violence centres are places where women are offered support built on relationships with other women to help them leave violence. The first anti-violence centres in Italy were established in the early 80s as a result of the feminist movement's efforts to develop a method to prevent gender-based violence against women. Violence against women is considered an expression of patriarchal culture and of men's exercise of power over women; it serves the purpose of maintaining the dominant position of one sex over the other.

The anti-violence centres associated with the national association D.i.Re - Women in the Network against Violence address the issue of male violence against women from the perspective of gender difference.

Anti-violence centres are places of exchange, study and development of political thinking. Over the last 30 years, they have elaborated a shared methodology to respond to women who want to leave intra- and extra-familial violence with their children and regain their freedom.

The anti-violence centre is a place that women can approach anonymously and free of charge.

What happens in the space of the anti-violence centre

When a woman goes to an anti-violence centre to ask for support, the first person she comes in contact with is the reception operator. The reception operator is a professional figure who provides information about the support that can be offered to address the woman's **needs** after an initial analysis of the request and risk assessment - usually during the first phone call. During this first contact an appointment is arranged for a proper interview that will provide the baseline for a process of support to leave violence.

The approach involves placing the woman at the centre of the relationship to support her in making decisions that will enable her to make changes in her life as she chooses.

The operator's task is never to interfere with the woman, never to assume a judgmental position, never to try to control, but to play a dynamic role in the relationship that is being built. Following the interview with the woman, an active process is

established, in which her personal reflections, the concrete decisions to be taken, the involvement of the other professionals in **the team**, the internal and external resources, all contribute to bring about short, medium and long term changes.

The space for relationships with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women

Due to the presence in Italy of an increasing number of asylum-seeking and refugee women, new **needs** have emerged over the years, prompting a reflection on the methodology of the anti-violence centres. Considering the above information regarding the methodology of reception, in recent years the anti-violence centres of the D.i.Re network gained experience and began to examine the distinctions in methodology that are specifically inherent to the reception and support of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women survivors of gender-based violence.

The process of hosting and helping asylum-seeking and refugee women survivors of gender-based violence to leave violence behind involves, above all, the inclusion of a new professional figure: the cultural mediator. The cultural mediator had not necessarily been taken in consideration before but now plays a fundamental role in the relationship with the woman.

The whole process of leaving violence is developed together with the cultural mediator in every phase. The relationship between the operator and the cultural mediator is a necessary tool to overcome the language barrier, but also serves as a bridge in dealing with the migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee woman and her particular cultural identity. The relationship involves several women, each one with specific characteristics.

The cultural mediator adds a multi-cultural perspective to **the team**: the space of the anti-violence centre is transformed into a space for reflection that involves all the women working in the centre, their role within the team and the development of projects to overcome violence. The anti-violence centre also becomes a space where mediators can continue their training and professional growth, by sharing their experiences, the methodology and language typical of this context with the other women who work there - operators, experts, volunteers. The operators also have the opportunity to become familiar with the professional requirements of mediation work, its timing and procedures, which often do not coincide

with the timing and procedures adopted by the operators. Above all, the space of the anti-violence centre as a whole can gradually become a place where the reception of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women is no longer the specific task of a few dedicated workers, but of the whole team.

Finally, the staff of the anti-violence centre must have an understanding of the world, of the countries of origin of the hosted women, of their cultural and socio-political background, including the context of gender relations, the organisation of the family and the role of women in the household, the traditions and religions; this will help the operators understand the life experiences of the hosted women, the way they describe them, their **needs** and priorities. In short, it means studying (see **Bibliography**)!

A safe space

The space of the anti-violence centre is a protected environment for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women offering them a new form of assistance, based on relationships between women, enabling them to find and identify themselves as the protagonists of their own history and life.

Welcoming her “at the door” and inviting her in, offering the woman the possibility to choose where to sit during the interview without obliging her to sit “in front of a desk” - if the space of the anti-violence centre offers alternatives, such as a small living room, a room with armchairs, or placing 3 chairs in a circle - and leaving time for the “traditional” greetings in her language with the mediator, without asking them for a “literal” translation: these are simple details that will help lay the foundations for a more balanced relationship regardless of the hierarchy.

Space-time

The process of leaving violence in the anti-violence centre does not follow a set timeline, because it is established step by step through the relationship between the operators and the hosted women, a fundamental aspect of the methodology of the D.i.Re Centres.

In every process of support, time is a silent partner with a crucial role:

- it is never enough when so many important decisions have to be taken in a short time;
- it is extremely slow, especially when seeking justice or waiting for the results of an application for international protection;
- it is an invaluable resource when it comes to taking care of oneself.

The task of the reception operator is to manage to work within these different timeframes, while respecting the woman’s rhythm. For asylum-seeking women, time is often long, slow and silent.

A long time goes by before the Territorial Commission hears them and before they receive a response in relation to their asylum application, a period in which their whole life seems suspended, at the mercy of a decision-making authority that could completely change their whole life plan. During this period, they have plenty of time to build a future for themselves, but without any certainty that such a future will be possible.

It is essential for anti-violence centres to consider the urgency of migrant asylum-seeking women to define their legal status, and to provide a listening space for this specific **need**. Knowledge of the procedures for obtaining refugee status or other forms of protection that are available under recent laws is crucial; lawyers who are able to provide specialised legal support should be involved and help with the practical aspects of preparing for a hearing before the Territorial Commission or supporting an appeal against the rejection of an asylum application.

The interview space

The space of the first interview with the migrant, asylum-seeking or refugee woman is methodologically different because of the way the meeting is arranged.

Generally, women directly contact the anti-violence centre and the phone call for help is considered as the first basic step that confirms the motivation needed to start the whole process of leaving violence.

Asylum-seeking and refugee women, however, are usually referred to the anti-violence centre by other people: operators of the accommodation facilities where they are hosted, healthcare workers, police, or by the Territorial Commission, especially when agreement protocols have been established with the anti-violence centre.

Therefore, the space of the first interview, which coincides with the space of the phone call, is very different because these women are offered help that they didn’t ask for, that they might feel forced to accept, without having an idea of what kind of help it is. Sometimes they arrive with a piece of paper on which someone, perhaps a doctor or an operator from another institution, has simply written the telephone number of the centre and the words “For help”.

Hence, it is necessary to first describe the space of the anti-violence centre. The operators and mediators introduce themselves to the woman, try to make her feel comfortable both physically and emotionally, provide detailed information about the

premises: a listening space which is offered as an opportunity, that she can fill as she wishes, that can be created together with the operators, a space that differs significantly with respect to the other facilities or offices where she had interviews before.

The first meeting involves:

- **risk detection and assessment:** considering how individual situations may vary and monitoring the risk;
- **empowerment:** offering the opportunity to experience self-determination and helping the woman recover her strength and centrality right from the start;
- **outlining an individual project to leave violence:** establishing medium and long-term objectives together with the woman and supporting her in taking important decisions about her life.

The process of leaving violence involves a series of meetings, there is no fixed number: this allows the woman to deal with the various aspects of her story as she chooses, in an order that isn't necessarily chronological - the violence suffered in the country of origin, in transit, in the country of arrival - depending on the development of her relationship with the operator and cultural mediator, her personal evolution, a random event that might have triggered flashbacks of a previous experience. Telling her story becomes an opportunity to hear it, to be heard and to feel that others believe her when she describes experiences often related to violence that took place over a period of several years. It is also an opportunity for her to decide to alter her position within the violent relationship.

One of the typical effects of gender-based violence is the difficulty to respect the chronology of events related to serious and repeated traumatic experiences, or the likelihood that several apparently contradictory versions of the same violent experience might be provided. These discrepancies are common to many women who have experienced violence and the operators have learned to deal with them. This is why the position of the operator and the mediator is not to investigate the accuracy of the information, but to assemble the pieces of a puzzle that are not always clearly and smoothly displayed.

This factor is not an obstacle and does not need to be assessed in order to develop the process of leaving violence, because the relationship between women, which is the essential key of the methodology of D.i.Re. centres, is a way to stand by the woman with all of her contradictions.

Building relationships with the outside spaces

Anti-violence centres are connected with different local institutions that deal with violence against women: health services, social services, police, courts, shelters and community groups, etc. In the case of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, these include the Territorial Commission (for asylum-seeking women), the Prefecture, the reception centres (CAS) and SPRAR/SIPROIMI structures, nonprofit and religious associations that deal with migrants such as Arci, Medu, Caritas, as well as the local associations of compatriots.

Establishing connections with these structures is at the base of what needs to be done to create mechanisms of "referral", such as shared procedures, in order to facilitate the access of asylum-seeking and refugee women to anti-violence centres; including the option of informing them about the services offered by D.i.Re centres directly in the facilities where they are hosted.

A space to identify violence

Identifying and naming violence is another fundamental element of the reception methodology, the first step for the operators to begin to raise the awareness that is needed to initiate a process of leaving violence.

However, migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women are not always able to name the violence, at least not immediately, especially if their priority is to obtain "papers" and to emerge from the condition of invisibility that keeps them from imagining any kind of future. The experience of anti-violence centres that have supported migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women in recent years confirms that the violence that emerges is just the tip of the iceberg of the violence that they bear.

These women may have suffered violence in their country of origin, undergone genital mutilation, been subjected to child and forced marriages, been denied education, subjected to child labour, forced to undergo religious rituals and ceremonies against their will, or harassed because they are lesbians or considered witches. They were often betrayed, convinced to leave only to fall prey to traffickers and sexual exploiters.

Sometimes the women just whisper the word 'Libya' to suggest what they have endured during their journey. In fact, the majority of women who have transited through Libya are known to have been kidnapped, sold and imprisoned in actual

concentration camps, with no electricity, insufficient food or water; they were raped, gang-raped, tortured and they witnessed the torture and killing of their fellow travellers. They were reduced to slavery, forced to work or to have sex, they got pregnant and were forced to abort.

Once in Italy, they may have been subjected to further violence: as victims of trafficking or driven into prostitution or other forms of illegal labour, blackmailed/threatened with the death of their family of origin, or subjected to violence by their partners or other men in the same reception facilities.

Despite this multi-traumatic experience, migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women often explicitly state that they have no intention of dealing with past violence, even though the impact of abuse on their lives is made obvious throughout the interviews, providing the operators and mediators with keys to make the violence emerge. In every case, **the team** will support the operators and mediators to determine the best way to deal with these resistances, assessing the evolution of the process while respecting the woman's position at all times.

On the other hand, it is necessary to remember that gender-based violence is among the conditions that can facilitate the access to international protection. In the case of asylum-seeking women, the emergence of violence becomes an essential element to be included in the narration of their experience at the hearing with the Territorial Commission, and a necessary step to reach the primary objective of obtaining "papers". This has to be clearly explained especially to migrant asylum-seeking women who ask for support to "get their papers".

A space in progress

These notes don't cover the full range of opportunities offered by the anti-violence centre, a space in continuous evolution dedicated to relationships between women in which migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women can feel free to choose, imagine and define their project for a new life in Italy or in any other country in the world.

07. The team



- Who is on the team of the anti-violence centre?
- The cultural mediator in the anti-violence centre team
- Working in a network: the team² (understood as “team squared”)
- The specific concerns of the network for the protection of migrant, asylum-seeker and refugee women
- Taking care of the team: protection from burn-out and secondary trauma

07. The team

The heart of the anti-violence centre is its team of operators and experts, workers and volunteers. The methodology of the anti-violence centres is based on team work with the different professional figures involved in the centre and on the awareness that each team member collects a part of the woman's story and filters it through her personal perspective. It is only through shared vision that we are able to reconstruct the puzzle and to properly represent the woman's story.

When migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women leave violence, the different territorial services, including the reception facilities (CAS, SPRAR, SIPROIMINI, secondary level reception centres) must be actively involved. In fact, the support system is complex and follows predefined and rigid institutional procedures, and is carried out by a multidisciplinary and multi-agency team, with specific competencies, roles and organisational procedures, a team beyond the team.

The process of leaving violence for asylum-seeking or refugee women is a complex legal, social and health issue, due to an inadequate and intricate reception system. The system as it is today presents: insufficient accommodation capacity, unclear definition of procedures and multiple obstacles in the access to the service network. In this complex situation, it is clear that the operators and cultural mediators need to work together within the team framework, a team², or team squared, in order to provide each woman with valid responses by means of one integrated procedure of social inclusion.

Who is on the team of the anti-violence centre?

- **Anti-violence centre operators:** if possible, trained not only in gender-based violence but also in the reception of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, with legal knowledge and basic familiarity with migration processes.
- **Operators** specialised in orientation, education and professional training, housing and social integration.
- **Operators** responsible for safe houses and semi-autonomous houses (when provided by the anti-violence centre).
- **Operators** in charge of health care.
- **Operators** with specific tasks related to the administration and management of financial support on behalf of the hosted women.
- **Educators** who take care of children hosted with their mothers.
- **Linguistic and cultural mediators:** who assist asylum-seeking and refugee women not only with language problems, but as facilitators in establishing contacts, in guidance and counselling sessions, with public services, health and social assistance, and in interviews within the anti-violence centre.
- **Lawyers:** in addition to civil and criminal lawyers dealing with the different aspects of gender-based violence, lawyers with expertise in immigration and asylum laws are needed to support the asylum-seeking woman throughout the bureaucratic process, ranging from the first legal notice about her rights and duties to the preparation for the interview with the Territorial Commission, up to the hearing itself and the eventual appeal.
- **Psychologists:** experienced in the treatment of trauma and, if possible, with some knowledge of ethno-psychology.

Moreover, the team of the anti-violence centre must interact with:

- **Operators specialized in the actual reception of migrants**, who deal with the primary **needs** and offer support related to the citizenship procedures for asylum-seeking or refugee women: these professionals work within the reception facilities (CAS, SPRAR, SIPROIMI).

This list is not complete: other specialists may need to be involved, depending on the individual process of leaving violence.

The cultural mediator in the anti-violence centre team

Special attention should be paid to the figure of the cultural mediator, that has played a major role in the listening process in many anti-violence centres. The issue of cultural diversity is in fact much broader and more complex than the language barrier alone. When listening to a migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee woman, the first concern is not understanding the language, but building a trusting relationship by making the woman feel welcomed and not judged.

The work of the cultural mediator is crucial because she acts as a bridge between the two cultures, facilitating and promoting dialogue and exchange between two distinct realities. This is why mediators and operators should agree on how to conduct the interviews **before** starting the collaboration.

Consequently, the role of the cultural mediator is no longer only that of an intermediary between two parties, but also becomes an integral part of the hosting and listening process. In fact, it has become clear that the operator should possess linguistic and cultural competences, and therefore that women from different countries should be permanently assigned as operators within the teams of anti-violence centres.

Mediators and operators, or possibly the mediator-operator, who assist an asylum-seeking or refugee woman should have basic knowledge of immigration and asylum laws (see **Bibliography**) in order to support and assist her with bureaucratic procedures and facilitate her social integration.

There are culturally embedded practices, such as polygamy, child or forced marriages, female genital mutilation, abortion, pregnancy, childbirth and childcare, or certain healthcare practices, that migrant women, including cultural mediators, might approve in contrast with what is accepted, expected and allowed in the Italian context. It is therefore necessary to find a balance between the respect and acceptance of cultural diversity and the observance of women's rights under Italian law while promoting women's autonomy and freedom of choice, at the base of the work of anti-violence centres.

Working in a network: the team² (understood as “team squared”)

According to the guidelines for intervention and networking between municipal social services and anti-violence centres written by D.i.Re in collaboration with ANCI (2014, see **Bibliography**), the team of an anti-violence centre operates within “a vast ‘integrated network’ of public and private organisations that involves the following institutional and private sectors:

A) the public institutional sector:

Region, Province and Municipality, Local Health Authority, Local Education Office, equal opportunities advisor, social services, immigrant centres and employment offices;

B) the private welfare sector, including the network of anti-violence centres, shelters that also host minors, and centres for abusers;

C) organisations working locally and listed in the regional registers of voluntary work or of associations for social advancement, non-profit organisations (Onlus) as well as experienced social cooperatives whose objective is to prevent and fight violence and to support the victims of violence.”

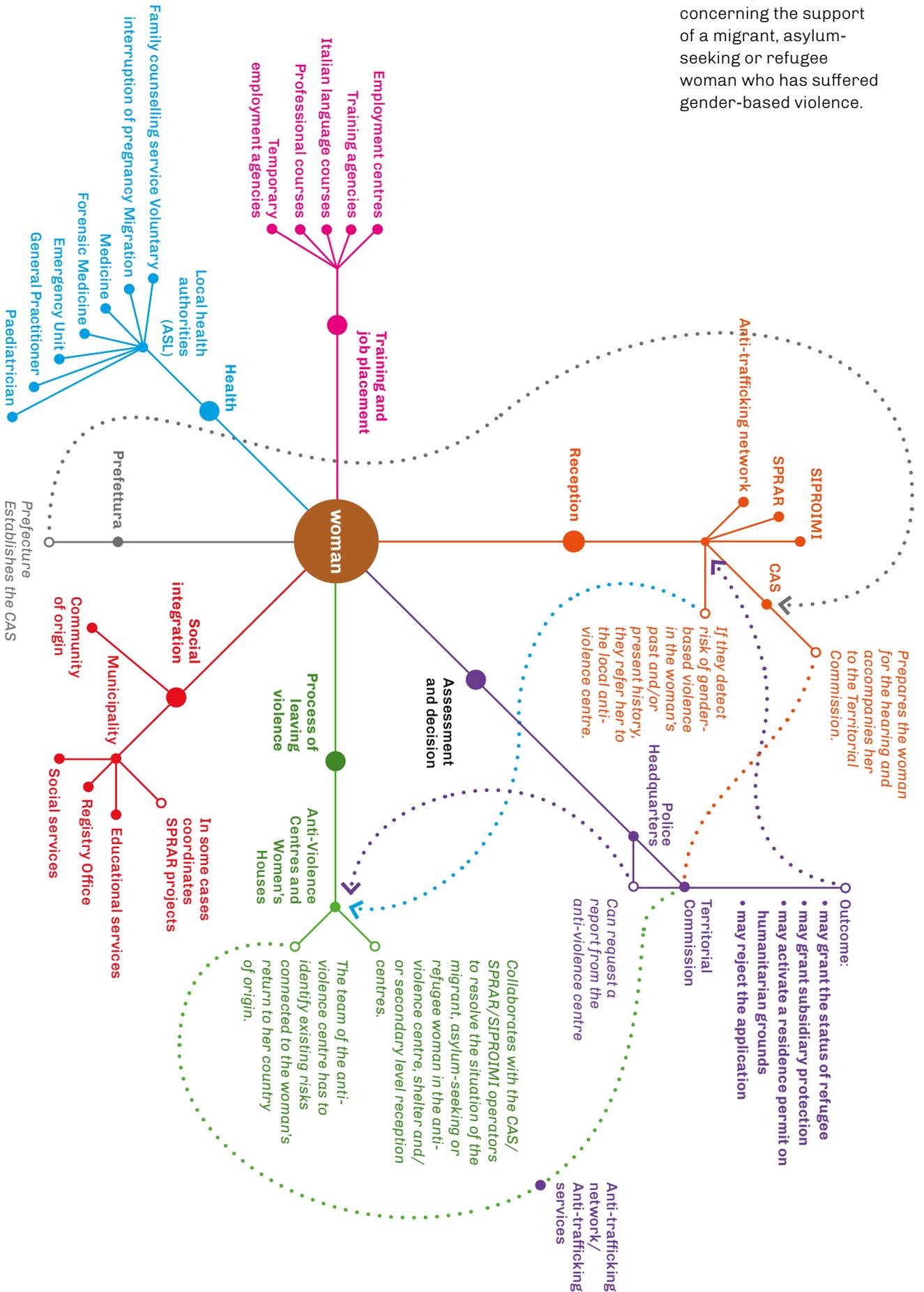
When we host a migrant asylum-seeking woman, a further level of complexity arises, as we need to interact with institutions that are not normally part of the anti-violence network, such as: Territorial Commission, CAS (Emergency Reception Centres), SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) transformed into SIPROIMI (Protection System for Refugees and Unaccompanied Children Migrants) since the 2019 Security Decree, Police Headquarters, Prefectures and Embassies.

We must also consider the local communities of origin that migrant women often refer to.

Therefore, highly qualified professional skills together with an open dialogue with the local community are required in order for the reception process to function properly.

The specific concerns of the network for the protection of migrant, asylum-seeker and refugee women

Here is an example of a network diagram indicating specific issues concerning the support of a migrant, asylum-seeking or refugee woman who has suffered gender-based violence.



CAS – Emergency reception centres

Created as a response to the shortage of beds in the standard reception facilities, they have now become the “standard” mode of reception. They are designated by the Prefectures on the basis of agreements with different types of organisations (cooperatives, associations, hotels, etc.) and are subject to public service contract policies. The stay in the CAS should be strictly limited to the time it takes to transfer the applicant to a secondary level reception centre.

SPRAR – Protection System for Asylum and Refuge Seekers, now SIPROIMI – Protection System for Refugees and Unaccompanied Children Migrants

It was the secondary reception system set up by the Ministry of the Interior’s Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration, administered by ANCI (the National Association of Italian Municipalities), and involved projects launched by single municipalities or consortia of municipalities located within the same territory.

With the 2019 Security Decree, the SPRAR was replaced by the SIPROIMI, Protection System for Refugees and Unaccompanied Children Migrants. The SPRAR system stop being operative when the last projects that were launched by individual local authorities or networks of municipalities before this law came into force come to an end.

In the past, people who had formally applied for asylum and had no means of subsistence could be accommodated in SPRAR projects. With the changes introduced, the former SPRAR facilities exclusively host those who have already obtained international protection and unaccompanied foreign minors, and are no longer accessible to asylum seekers. Only those accommodated at SIPROIMI centres benefit from specific active measures aimed at the integration and social inclusion of foreigners on Italian territory (for more details check the following link <http://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/en/areetematiche/Pages/THE-RIGHT-TO-BE-RECEIVED.aspx>).

The so-called “active integration measures” include, in addition to food and accommodation:

- linguistic and cultural mediation
- Italian language courses
- training and professional programmes
- orientation and legal assistance to promote integration.

Territorial Commission for the Recognition of International Protection

This is the authority responsible for granting international protection. Following the candidate’s hearing, the application for international protection is examined. The authority’s task is to verify that the conditions for obtaining international protection are met, according to the provisions of the 1951 Geneva Convention, art.1 a (2):

The term “refugee” applies to any person who has a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.

A migrant woman can apply for international protection if:

- she has suffered some form of gender-based violence in her country of origin: sexual violence, domestic violence, forced marriages, punishment for transgressing moral norms (stoning, corporal punishment, imprisonment), harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation or levirate, persecution based on sexual orientation and LGBTQIA+ gender identity, and sex trafficking;
- and she has reason to fear that, by returning to her country, she risks being persecuted again, that her life may be in danger because she escaped,
- and that the local authorities would not be in a position to provide adequate protection.

For a more detailed description see the **Bibliography** and specifically: UNHCR: Guidelines on International Protection No. 1: Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (HCR/GIP/02/01).

The risk of persecution can be either directly attributed to the State or related authorities - such as political organisations, political parties, people who control a territory - or to private individuals or social groups - such as the family, the local community - if it can be proven that the State is unwilling or unable to offer adequate protection, as for instance in the case of child and forced marriages, still imposed on girls and young women

by their families even in situations where the minimum age for marriage is set by law.

Four members compose the Territorial Commission:

- District official (President)
- International protection and human rights expert (UNHCR)
- Administrative official with instructional duties (Ministry of Interior)
- Administrative official with instructional duties (Ministry of Interior)

The Territorial Commission may request a report from the anti-violence centre indicating possible risks related to gender-based violence, should the woman return to her country of origin.

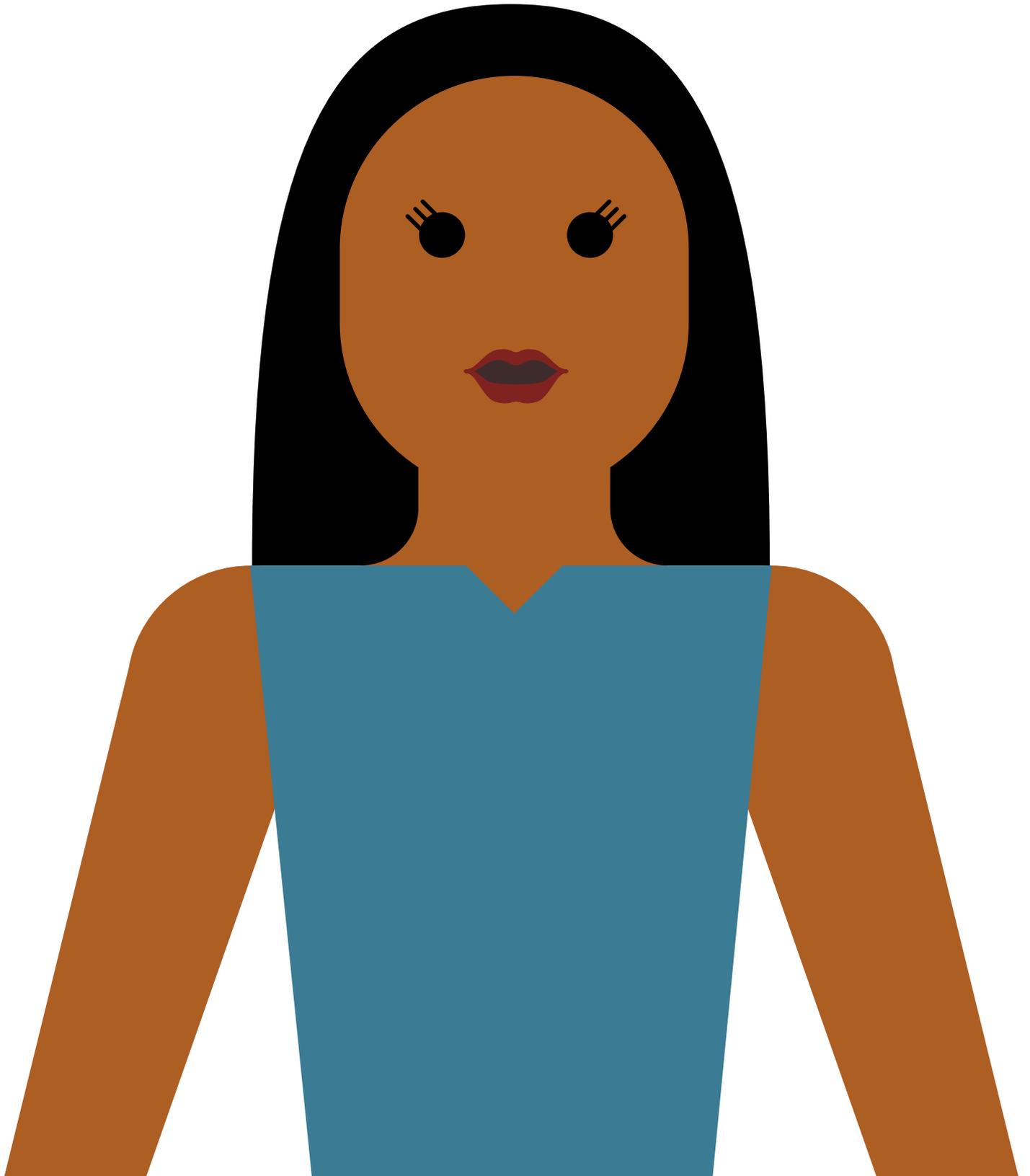
The Territorial Commission decides by decree whether to grant refugee status or subsidiary protection, or to reject the application, on the basis of the evidence gathered during the hearing.

Taking care of the team: protection from burn-out and secondary trauma

In the work practices of anti-violence centres, great attention is paid to the care of the team in order to reduce the effects of stress, burnout or secondary trauma that may occur due to repeated listening exposure to experiences of violence. This is especially relevant when working with abused women, and even more so when dealing with complex situations involving migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women.

In the guidelines drawn up by D.i.Re in collaboration with ANCI (see **Bibliography**) the need to provide “continuous updates and periodic monitoring aimed at protecting the operators and the whole team of the anti-violence centre from the risk of burnout and secondary trauma” was specified (p. 62); this recommendation is also partly included in art. 3 paragraph 4 of the State-Regions Agreement of November 27, 2014.

Monitoring has always been an integral part of the methodology of anti-violence centres, even in times when it was not taken into consideration in other private social work structures. Continuous updating and monitoring have become essential tools. Keeping updated is a way to reinforce the team’s knowledge and skills in interpreting the multiple aspects of violence connected to migratory journeys, which, by definition, are constantly modified; monitoring offers a platform for dealing with emotional, relational and/or organisational issues.



08. After



- How to deal with the (re)emersion of a trauma
- The development of autonomy: school, home, employment
- The role/importance of the community
- Looking towards the future

How to deal with the (re)emersion of a trauma

During the reception process, if a good relationship of **trust** is established between the woman, the operator and the cultural mediator, it is quite likely that some symptomatic traces of past traumas will surface.

The sense of security that the woman experiences once she feels protected from violence and connected to the women who listen to her and support her, causes memories of the violence to resurface. And as memories emerge, so does the determination to give them meaning and seek answers.

This is a very delicate phase of the process which, in the case of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, presupposes an awareness on the part of the operators who should step back and set aside their culture of origin and the precepts by which they usually interpret reality, including trauma, illness and psychological pain.

It has been scientifically proven that traumatic experiences produce neurobiological wounds that can have long-term effects on the health and life of women who survived violence.

The seriousness of the trauma depends on the type of trauma, the age at which it occurred and its duration over time. It may also vary according to whether or not some form of support was received in the immediate aftermath. Symptoms may manifest themselves in very different ways and may intensify over time, especially in the absence of treatment.

Cultural factors have a significant impact on the effects of a trauma, precisely because it is “a rupture in the everyday experience and memory, an event that cannot be depicted in our mind, because by nature our mind needs to codify facts within the universe of human understanding”, as the psychoanalyst Massimo Ammaniti wrote (see **Bibliography**).

The way we interpret reality and attach meanings to events varies from culture to culture and deeply depends on the contexts in which we were born and raised. Hence, the concept of trauma or illness and the way it manifests itself in the body and mind also varies from one cultural context to another, as well as, for example, “therapy”, “treatment”, the concept of “taking care” and the people involved.

In the case of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women who are victims of violence, suffering and pain can unfold in unexpected ways, especially if they are the expression and consequence of severe violence and abuse.

The operators and psychologists of the anti-violence centre may not have the expertise to address the re-emergence of trauma in ethno-

psychological terms. However, they must be aware of the fact that symptoms take forms that are profoundly different from those they normally encounter. These symptoms can be affected by **fear**, by **truth**, and by the **needs** that arise in the relationship with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women.

In this process, the role of the mediator is extremely important because she facilitates the interpretation of traumatic expressions by offering keys to understand the cultural and psychological reactions that may be manifested.

Such awareness will allow them to respond to the woman’s emotional distress and to consider sending her to specialised institutions that can provide therapeutic assistance to help her process the trauma, without underestimating it or classifying it in terms of ‘mental illness’ or ‘madness’ (see box below).



Here are some centres that can provide professional assistance, advice and training including in the ethno-psychological context:

— MEDU – Psyché

Clinical Centre for Transcultural Mental Health, Rome,
+39 06 8419556 e +39 3275727801,
psyche@mediciperidirittiumani.org
<http://mediciperidirittiumani.org/medu-psyche-centro-di-cura-e-documentazione-controla-tortura-a-roma/>

— Centro Studi Sagara

Usigliano di Lari (PI),
+39 349 4504186,
info@centrosagara.it

— Centro Frantz Fanon

Psychotherapy, counselling and psycho-social support service for migrants, refugees and victims of torture, Turin
+39 011 4546552

— ETNA – Etnopsicologia analitica

Counselling service, individual, family and group psychotherapy, Rome
+39 340 4202345 or +39 320 2662274
<http://www.etnopsicologiaanalitica.com/>



In order for our approach to be efficient, we must also acknowledge those 'magical' or 'religious' and 'spiritual' aspects that the woman may not feel free to mention, or may only do so in part, in hints and in whispers, out of **fear** of being judged or not believed. It is essential to assume and not reject these cultural values that don't belong to us and that we don't understand because they are different from the Western concept of psychological disorders and suffering. This will enable us to establish the **trust** and cooperation necessary to develop a process of self-determination.

Once again, the bridging role of the cultural mediator proves to be essential, because it makes it possible to understand the connection that exists, for many migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, between the spiritual dimension, embodied by the members of her family and community, and the present material dimension, and how the former can condition the latter in ways unknown to us.

In this context, the words of Sobonfu Somé, quoted in an article by Laura Bazzini (see **Bibliography**), are eloquent. Somé, a Burkinabe woman from the Dagara ethnic group and an influential voice of African spirituality, was given by the elders of her community the task of transmitting the values of her people's spirituality and rituals to the West, and wrote: "In Africa, when we want to perform a healing ritual, we start by analysing relationships, because they are the basis for understanding how healthy we really are".

The development of autonomy: school, home, employment

In the anti-violence centre, the asylum-seeking and refugee woman is supported and guided in the decisions to be made to leave violence and develop a new life project that begins with herself, her **needs**, her freedom of choice about her future in Italy.

We work with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women on two different levels: one of words, such as the narration of their own story to help them gain awareness of what they have experienced, and a level of action to offer them an immediate response to meet their practical **needs**.

It is essential for migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women to be able to communicate in Italian in order to become autonomous. Attending an Italian language course, if they have not already done so, is the first step towards empowerment and the freedom of seeking to build a life adapted to their expectations in their host country.

The anti-violence centre now also offers an employment guidance service, as part of all the programmes aimed at the autonomy of the women who attend the centres, so that they can gradually gain independence. The counselling allows the woman to focus on herself and to bring out her potential and skills in the employment areas that interest her most. This process helps her to consider herself as an autonomous woman, no longer dependent on a man for financial support.

The migrant women who have been hosted in anti-violence centres in recent years have specific skills that they had developed in their countries of origin. Guidance in job hunting can help them bring their skills and expertise to light. Using this or other aspirations as a starting point, the woman gradually becomes the central figure of her own life.

The process of empowerment involves self-perception and autonomy, key elements of the reception procedure.

The process of self-determination allows each woman to determine and make use of the most effective individual and contextual resources to reach her objectives in life, with the support and monitoring provided by the reception procedure.

The role/importance of the community

Members of the community from the country of origin play a crucial role in the success or failure of the process of leaving violence: they can either support it or block it.

In order to better understand this apparent contradiction, it is necessary to analyse their involvement in the support they offer to migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women.

First of all, it is useful to mention the positive contribution of communities, as they provide asylum-seeking and refugee women with concrete social support, in the framework of the categories defined by James S. House (see **Bibliography**).

But it would be inaccurate to assume that social networks are always supportive. A community may well have undesirable effects on the individual members, for instance a strong and close-knit community will provide a high degree of social support, but at the same time it could be intolerant and require its members to observe the established social rules and cultural values.

Chart – The role of the community



Types of support	Positive effect	Negative effect
Emotional	The community offers participation, a sense of belonging and recognition: it can, for example, help people cope with the trauma of their past experiences.	The community is also a context where judgement, gossip and rumours spread, which can have a negative impact on women's self-esteem and self-determination.
Instrumental	The community offers concrete help in solving practical matters: providing clothes, beds, food from the homeland, care assistance, etc.	The concrete help offered by the community can generate bonds of dependency, debts and forms of retaliation.
Informative	The community offers advice and suggestions on how to get around in the new environment: access to local services, transportation, where to get essential goods.	Sometimes the information that is offered is, more or less intentionally, incorrect: for example, "If you get pregnant, you won't have any problems with the residence permit", although this is not necessarily true. Pregnancy can be a way for men, the children's fathers, to regularise their position through family reunification, once mother and child have obtained a form of international protection.
Appraisal	The community offers the possibility of social mirroring and self-appraisal which can strengthen the woman's self-esteem and foster her empowerment, for instance when she joins an anti-violence centre.	Social mirroring and community assessment can become an obstacle, for example when the woman is told: "Don't trust the anti-violence centre!" to prevent her from engaging in a process that would lead her to take her distance from the community and from its control.

One of the problematic aspects, in the case of migrant, asylum-seeking or refugee women who are victims of trafficking, is that often the exploiters and traffickers are members of the community, so the madams who exploit them might also be those who offer advice and support.

The same problematic gender relations and patriarchal power dynamics are sometimes replicated within communities, and this doesn't help the women's empowerment and escape from violence. Yet, this is precisely where influential and respected figures who can support the information and awareness-raising work of anti-violence centres can be found.

We must keep in mind that the team of the anti-violence centre and the other women who are hosted in the shelter can also constitute a supportive community.

It is clear that, since gender-based violence is a cultural problem, communities are also likely to be environments that perpetuate stereotypes and stigma, and can be obstacles to the empowerment of women who decide to challenge established gender roles.

Moreover, the sometimes exclusive involvement with the communities of origin provides great social support, but can also be a limitation, as it can interfere with the process of literacy and risks developing into a form of control.

Relationships within communities are also driven by a sense of loyalty, which is a powerful pillar of every human being's life. "As Catherine Ducommun-Nagy (2008) illustrates, the life of every individual is intricately woven with different loyalty bonds that may be perceived as chains or obstacles to individual freedom.

But at the same time everyone needs loyalty, because it is the basis of social ties and of a network of relations that is absolutely essential for us to exist. The problem arises when some of these bonds are invisible, and therefore intangible, or become mutually incompatible, resulting in conflicts between different affiliations. This is why only the relationships that are perceived by the hosted women as supportive can be considered as social assets" (see article by Giammarco Manfreda and Elisa Serafini, in **Bibliography**).

It is important to provide migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women with all the above-mentioned aspects of social support, while they continue to be integrated in their community without necessarily having to conform to it. The team of the anti-violence centre needs to work closely with and in the communities of origin, in order to promote awareness and cultural exchange as instruments of change.

Looking towards the future

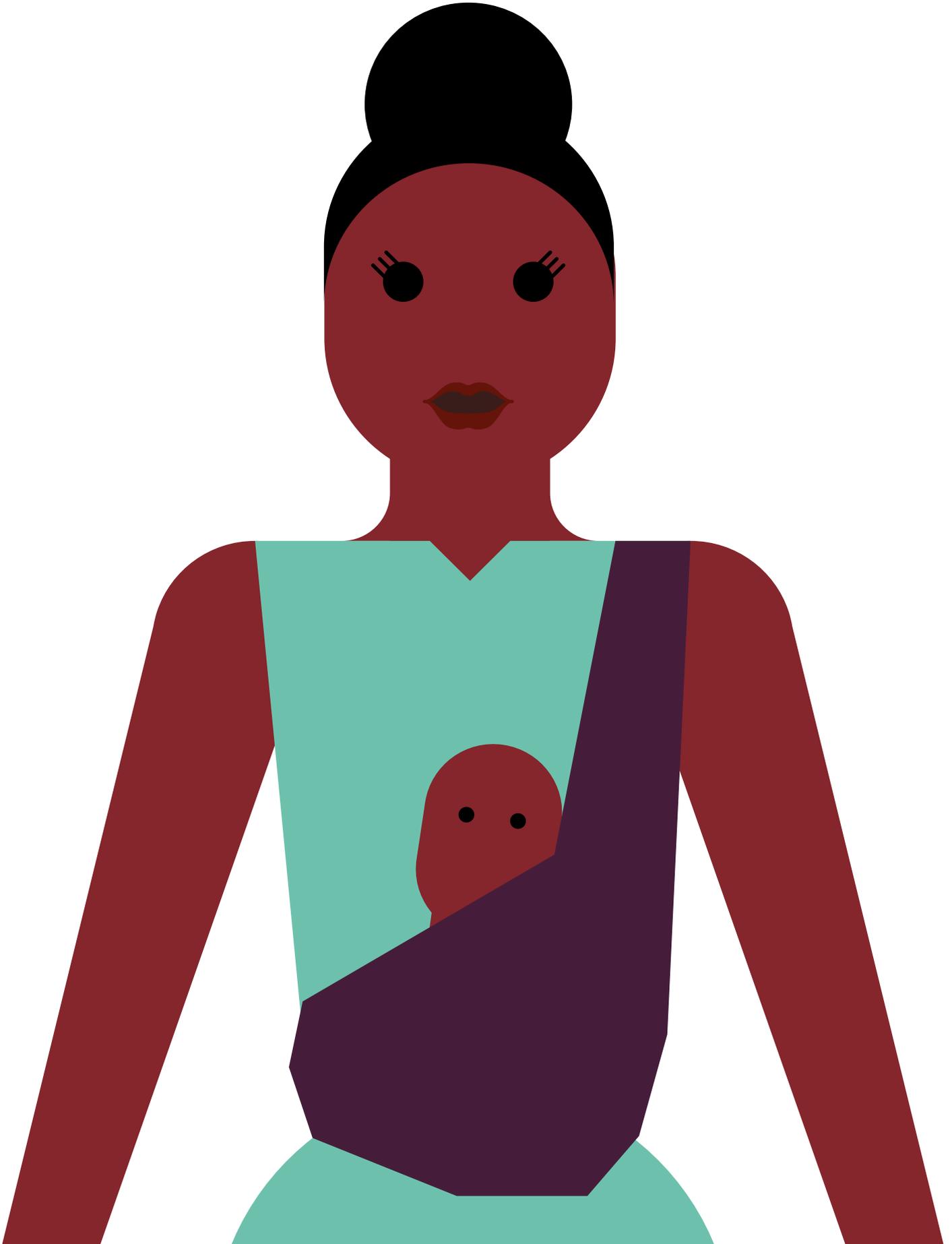
It will take time to better understand to what extent the work of the operators and cultural mediators of the anti-violence centres has contributed to transforming the lives of asylum-seeking and refugee women, helping them to build a new gender identity in which the heritage of their country of origin is interwoven with visions of themselves as women - free to stand and to make autonomous decisions for their own lives. These are the achievements that anti-violence centres treasure.

In time we will also gain a better understanding of the change brought about by migrant women asylum seekers and refugees in the work of anti-violence centres; this publication is a first acknowledgement of such change as well as a contribution to help facilitate their reception.

Additional
information A

Asylum legislation





Asylum legislation

In the Italian legal system, the essential starting point on the subject is **Article 10 of the Constitution**:

The Italian legal system conforms to the generally recognised principles of international law. The legal status of foreigners is regulated by law in conformity with international provisions and treaties. A foreigner who, in his home country, is denied the actual exercise of the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian constitution shall be entitled to the right of asylum under the conditions established by law. A foreigner may not be extradited for a political offence.

The Italian legislation on **international protection** is the result of several legislative measures, the alignment with the international legal system and the implementation of EU standards. These measures have not been adequately coordinated and therefore the system is complex and non-organic.

On the international level, Article 14 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that::

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

The 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (with the 1967 Additional Protocol) defines a **refugee** as a person who, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

Furthermore, Article 33 of the same Convention establishes the principle of **non refoulement**, providing that “no Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account

of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion”.

The **interdiction of rejection** (non refoulement) applies to all forms of forced relocation, including deportation, expulsion, extradition, informal relocation and denial of entry. This principle can only be waived if, for serious reasons, a refugee is considered a danger to the security of the country in which he or she resides or a threat to the community. This principle is an integral part of international human rights law and is a principle of international customary law. Article 19, paragraph 1 of the Consolidated Immigration Act establishes the cases in which the principle interdiction of rejection (non refoulement) applies.

For a **refugee status to be granted**, certain elements and conditions must be satisfied, such as:

- The fear of being persecuted in one’s country must be well-founded.
- The persecution must be motivated by the reasons stated in the Geneva Refugee Convention. Persecution includes acts of physical and mental violence, sexual and domestic violence, acts of gender or child abuse, female genital mutilation, child and/or forced marriage, levirate, war and mass rape, forced pregnancy, segregation, trafficking and exploitation, denial of education, crimes of honour and all forms of deprivation of liberty.
- The impossibility/unwillingness to avail oneself of the protection of the country of citizenship or habitual residence..
- Being present outside the country of nationality or habitual residence (the fear may also arise after expatriation).

The Istanbul **Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence** defines gender-based violence as a violation of human rights and states in Article 60 that:

The Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence defines gender-based violence as a violation of human rights and states in Article 60 that:

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that gender-based violence against women may be recognised as a form of persecution within the meaning of Article 1, A (2), of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and as a form of serious harm giving rise to complementary/subsidiary protection.

Parties shall ensure that a gender-sensitive interpretation is given to each of the Convention grounds and that where it is established that

the persecution feared is for one or more of these grounds, applicants shall be granted refugee status according to the applicable relevant instruments. Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to develop gender-sensitive reception procedures and support services for asylum-seekers as well as gender guidelines and gender-sensitive asylum procedures, including refugee status determination and application for international protection.

Between 2004 and 2008, the three legislative decrees adopting the **European Union Directives** on reception, recognition of international protection and the procedure for granting international protection were issued with great delay. These regulations are complementary to existing EU regulations. The following directives were subsequently adopted:

- Directive 2011/95/EU (Qualification Directive) by Legislative Decree No. 18/2014;
- Directive 2013/32/EU (Procedures Directive) and Directive 2013/33/EU (Reception Directive) by Legislative Decree No. 142/2015.
- The Decree Law No. 13 of February 17, 2017 (the so-called Minniti Decree) converted into Law no. 46 of April 13, 2017 and the conversion into Law no. 132/2018 of the so-called Salvini Decree or Security Decree have added new amendments that were further modified by the decree approved by the government on October 5, 2020.

The institution of **international protection** was introduced into the European legislation by Directive 2004/83/EC, implemented in Italy by Legislative Decree no. 251 of November 19, 2007, the so-called “Qualification Decree”. International protection includes refugee status and subsidiary protection.

Subsidiary protection is a form of protection that is complementary to conventional protection and can be granted when the applicant does not qualify for refugee status but is entitled to protection under international law.

Council Directive 2004/83/EC stipulates that:

A person eligible for subsidiary protection means a third country national or a stateless person who does not qualify as a refugee but in respect of whom substantial grounds have been shown for believing that the person concerned, if returned to his or her country of origin, or in the case of a stateless person, to his or her country of former habitual residence, would face a real risk of suffering serious harm and is unable, or, owing to such risk, unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country.

Legislative Decree No. 18 of February 21, 2014 implements Directive 2011/95/EU on standards for the qualification of third-country nationals or stateless persons as beneficiaries of international protection, for a uniform status for refugees and persons eligible for subsidiary protection, and for the content of the protection granted.

Humanitarian protection and the changes made with the coming into effect of Law 132/2018

Law no. 132/2018 has delisted the residence permit for humanitarian reasons which, as previously mentioned, was also issued in the event that, having examined the asylum seeker’s application and his/her position, the Commission decided not to approve the application for international protection, but nonetheless, recognising the evidence of serious humanitarian reasons, forwarded the documents to the Questore (local police authority) for the eventual issuance of a residence permit (as per Art. 5, par. 6 of the Consolidated Act on Immigration).

Consequently, a **residence permit for special protection** (extended by the decree of October 5, 2020) was introduced for cases where the foreigner cannot be expelled or rejected (Art. 32, par. 3 Legislative Decree n° 25/2008), implementing the principle of **non refoulement** (Art. 19, par. 1 and 1.1 of the Consolidated Act). This residence permit can be converted into a residence permit for family reasons and allows the holder to be employed.

Finally, **other types of so-called special residence permits** have been introduced for humanitarian needs: for medical treatment (Art. 19, par. 2, letter d-bis of the Consolidated Act), for social protection in case of victims of violence or severe exploitation (Art. 18 and 18 bis of the Consolidated Act), exceptional calamities (Art. 20.bis of the Consolidated Act), situations of exploitation of a foreign worker who has filed a complaint and cooperates with the prosecution (Art. 22, par. 2 of the Consolidated Act), and acts of particular civic value (Art. 42 bis of the Consolidated Act)

All of these new types of residence permits have a limited duration and only some of them can be converted into other types of residence permits (for work, study, family reunification) in accordance with the Consolidated Act.

The issue of residency for asylum seekers

Article 13 of Decree-Law No. 113/2018, converted into Law No. 132/2018, amending Article 4 of Legislative Decree No. 142/2015, had ruled that the residence permit issued in order to apply for international protection “does not provide entitlement for inscription in the population register”.

Therefore, asylum seekers could not be included in the population register and obtain an identity card. The residence permit for asylum application was considered an identification document. The Constitutional Court ruling no. 186/2020 declared that this article was illegitimate, and consequently revoked it.

Essentially, the right of registration for asylum seekers, which was effectively barred by the Salvini decrees, is now back in effect as a result of the Constitutional Court ruling.

However, access to local services was guaranteed in the place of habitual residence/ domicile (art. 5, par. 3, legislative decree no. 142/2015) declared at the time of application or at the reception centre.

In fact, asylum seekers should have access to all services and benefits provided in the area under the same conditions as the residents. Thus, they are entitled to services connected to education (nurseries, kindergartens), employment centres, training courses and any other kind of service. They are also entitled to essential services provided by private parties, such as opening a bank account.

Unfortunately, we have observed that in the various regions, the impossibility of being registered, partly due to the difficulty of obtaining a regular rental contract, has precluded many asylum seekers from getting access to the above mentioned services.

Reception

The reception system is structured in two different levels:

- the **primary reception** upon arrival in the country, which is often equivalent to disembarkation after rescue at sea, comprising hotspots and a series of primary reception facilities with various denominations;
- the **secondary reception**, based on the SIPROIMI, Protection System for Refugees and Unaccompanied Children Migrants - which became effective after the entry into force of the Security Decree (2019) and replaced SPRAR, Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees - and the CAS, Emergency Reception Centres, a combination of primary and secondary reception facilities.

Asylum seekers may be detained for a maximum of 30 days to determine/verify their identity or citizenship at hotspots, CARAs (Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers) and CDAs (Reception Centres), some of which are referred to as CPSAs (First Aid and Reception Centres).

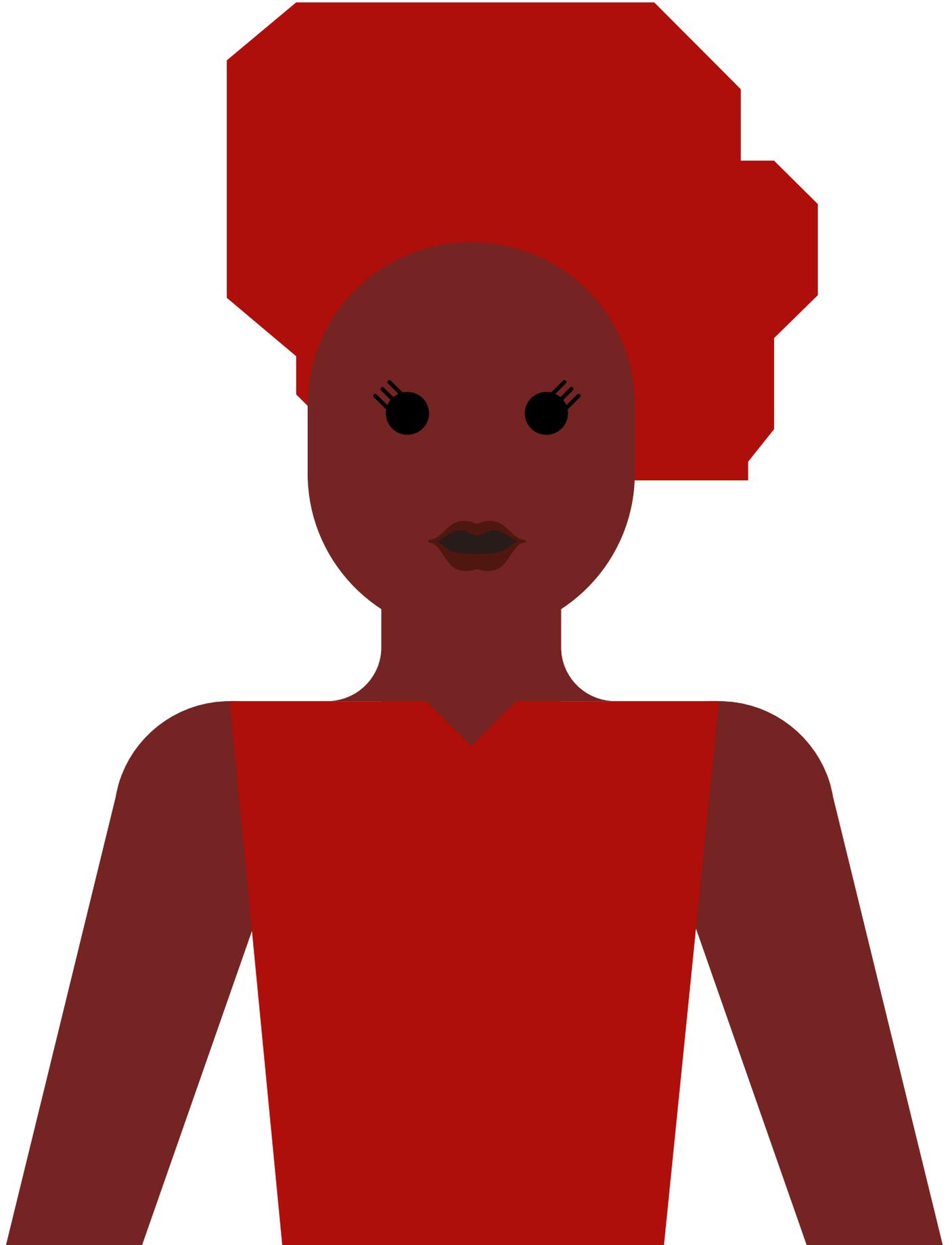
Detention may also be extended in the **CPR, Return Detention Centres** (for a maximum of 180 days), where those who did not apply for asylum upon arrival are brought. Minors can also stay with their parents if these are subject to detention. The CPRs are the former CIEs, Identification and Expulsion Centres, where irregular migrants, those without a residence permit who have received an expulsion order, are detained while awaiting repatriation, in accordance with agreements between Italy and their countries of origin.

Financial resources for the reception system have been reduced.

Reception in the CAS/CDA is reserved for asylum seekers without sufficient means of subsistence. The services provided in the centres have been reduced to the bare minimum.

In the SPRAR system, now called SIPROIMI, reception is reserved for beneficiaries of refugee and subsidiary protection status, unaccompanied minor migrants and holders of residence permits for medical care or other special cases, if they cannot be hosted in other structures.

For further information on reference documentation, consult the Bibliography



Additional
information B

Admission form



Admission form

Anti-Violence Centre _____

Profile information form n. _____ **date** _____

Operator: _____

Mediator: _____

Personal data

First name and surname _____ other _____

Given names/nicknames _____

Nationality _____ ethnic group _____

if holder of a residence permit _____

Age _____ born on _____ in _____

Address _____

Telephone number _____

Language spoken _____

Education

None Primary school certificate or equivalent Middle school certificate or equivalent

Professional qualification Diploma University degree Not known

Other _____

Obtained in Italy Obtained abroad Recognised in Italy

Knowledge of the Italian language

None Poor Good Excellent

Civil status

Single Married (traditional/official marriage)

Divorced Widow Not known

Legally separated (de facto - in the process of separation)

Other _____

If there is a partner (even if not legally recognised) please indicate where he/she is:

Italy (specify) _____

Abroad (specify) _____

Employment situation

- Student (please specify) _____
- Housewife
- Not employed _____
- Employed (specify) _____
- Occasional Work/Irregular Work (specify) _____ a _____
- Prostitution in the street/indoor (specify) _____

If so, the activity is:

- Voluntary Mostly
- Voluntary Coercive
- Coercive
- Mostly coercive
- Alternately voluntary and coercive
- Retired
- Other (for example, specify if seeking first employment) _____

Economic status and social support of the woman

- Is the woman in a reception centre? No Yes
specify which one _____
- Does the woman have economic problems? No Yes
specify sources of income _____
- Does the woman claim to have someone to help her in case of need? No Yes
specify who _____

Family members	Surname and first name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Residence (address)
Husband or partner					
Other cohabiting adults					

Children

Is the woman pregnant? No Yes

Does the woman have children? No Yes

How many in Italy? _____ How many in the country of origin? _____

Are the children acknowledged by the father? _____

Surname and first name	Gender	Date and place of birth	Age	Residence (address)

Were they ever abused? No Yes

Have they ever witnessed violence? Never Occasionally Often Always Does not answer

Woman's psychophysical condition

Does the woman report physical problems? No Yes

If so (specify) _____

Does the woman report psychological problems? No Yes

If so (specify) _____

The woman was referred by

- Voluntary access
- 1522
- 800290290 - Anti-trafficking toll-free number
- Local social counselling service _____
- Social services from the Municipality of _____
- Local Health District (ASL) (specify) _____
- Police (specify) _____
- Leaflets or other informative material (specify) _____
- Other anti-violence facility (specify) _____
- C.R.I. (Italian Red cross) _____
- Emergency Unit _____
- CAS/SPRAR/SIPROIMI (specify) _____
- Other (specify) _____

Did the woman apply for international protection or any other form of protection?

- Yes No (specify) _____

Did the woman already have a hearing with the Territorial Commission?

- Yes No (specify) _____

Does the woman have a residence permit/other documents?

- Yes No (specify) _____

The residence permit/card was issued for:

- Work/study Family reunification Health Refugee status
- Subsidiary protection Special protection
- Special reasons (Art. 18, 18 bis C., medical treatment or other)
- Residence permit for humanitarian reasons
- Other (specify) _____

Was the woman provided with adequate information about her rights upon entry into Italy?

- Yes No (specify) _____

Was the woman provided with clear and intelligible information about her rights in the reception centre?

- Yes No (specify) _____

Type of request

- Accommodation Looking for a house/apartment Listening Psychological counselling
- Legal counselling Child custody counselling
- Protection Legal advice for regularisation
- Occupational guidance Employment Voluntary interruption of pregnancy support Health information
- Other (specify) _____
-

Type of violence experienced by the woman

- Psychological Physical Sexual Stalking Institutional
- Exploitation of prostitution Forced marriage FGM
- Enslavement Economic
- Other (specify) _____
-

The violence was experienced

- In the country of origin In transit countries In Italy
-

Does the woman acknowledge the violence she suffered?

- Yes No

specify _____

Reported symptoms as a consequence of violence

The woman reports:

- Eating disorders Sexual problems Aggressiveness/self-harm Inability to work
- Total disability Partial disability Relational problems (addiction, isolation, violence)
- Work-related problems
- Physical problems (headache, gastrointestinal disorders, genital disorders, motor and/or muscular disorders)
- Fear Weeping Dizziness Helplessness/horror Sadness
- Lack of emotional response Flashback Hyper-alertness
- Anxiety/restlessness Difficulty with the sleep-wake pattern
-

Charges

Are there pending charges/lawsuits?

- Yes No

specify _____

Was there ever an intervention by the police? No Yes

Was there: A complaint An admonition

Medical records

Are there any medical records? No Yes

specify _____

Author of the violence

- Spouse Cohabiting Partner Non-cohabiting partner / boyfriend
 Ex-spouse Ex-cohabiting partner Ex-non-cohabiting partner / boyfriend
 Trafficker Madame Guerrilla fighter Soldier Policeman Not identified
 Other relative (specify _____ or indicate if Father Mother Brother/Sister)
 Other (specify) _____

Has the woman experienced violence from more than one person? No Yes

Sex	Nationality	Education	Occupation	Reported violence

Does the woman claim to have been gang-raped? No Yes

Indicate the number of aggressors _____

In which country? _____

Additional information provided _____

Does the woman currently live with the aggressor? No Yes

Further remarks by the woman about the violence she experienced

Additional notes by the operator

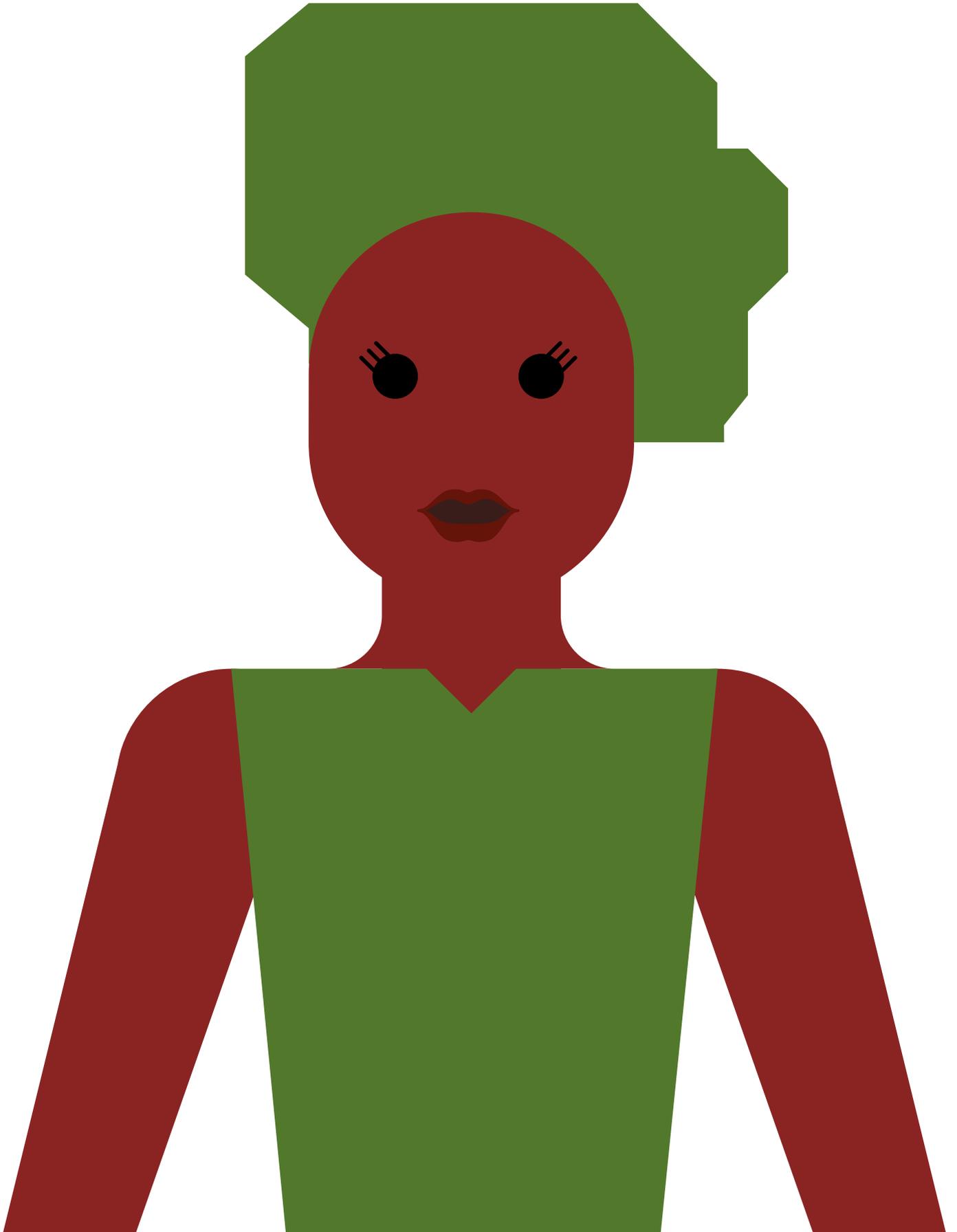
Basic needs assessment	Basic needs identified
Need for accommodation	
Special dietary requirements	
Medical check-up	
Medicines taken, if any	
Need to communicate with loved ones	
Other	

Risk Assessment	Risks identified
Current security problems	
Past security problems	
Individuals who can harm the woman or cause her problems	
Security problems involving family members, friends or acquaintances	
Dangerous situations for the alleged victim both in the country of destination and in the country of origin	
Other	

Additional
information C

Stereotypes and stigma





Stereotypes and stigma

A stereotype is a rigid approach by which people are indistinctly labelled as belonging to a certain category, grounding judgements on characteristics such as cultural background, personality or history, without any consideration for the differences between individuals.

Stereotypes refer to assessments or judgments that are often rough and inaccurate, not directly acquired but mediated and absorbed through the cultural and social context, and are therefore difficult to challenge because they are so widely shared.

In a way, stereotypes facilitate communication within certain communities, because they refer to shared concepts. Phenomena such as racism and sexism feed on stereotypes that tend to denigrate outsiders and women in order to establish the superiority of a specific male model.

The term denigrate itself – which, according to the Treccani dictionary, comes from the Latin *denigrare*, derivation of *niger* “black”; *propr.* “to blacken”, then figuratively: to try with malicious intention to tarnish the reputation of a person or to diminish the value of something, by speaking ill of it - refers to the introduction into the language we normally use of a concept, that of the black, of the negro, as a person endowed with negative features and a “lower” social position than whites, which is nothing but a stereotype. And when you denigrate a person, the stereotype becomes a stigma.

In the context of patriarchal societies, women are subject to a specific stereotyping, they are stigmatised precisely because they are women. This practice is aimed at reinforcing male domination in society, an attitude sometimes shared by women.

When we relate to migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, negative stereotypes about women and outsiders sometimes merge, in a two-way pattern: “they” are objects of stereotype on our part, although often unconsciously, and “we”, operators and mediators, are objects of stereotype on their part. Establishing a relationship of **trust** also means creating a **space** in which stereotypes can be overcome.

It is easier to identify stereotypes when we know them. Therefore, in this section you will find the ones most frequently encountered while working with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women in anti-violence centres. The list is indicative and incomplete...

stereotype *n.* [from the French *stéréotype*, comp. of *stéreo-* “stereo-” and “-type”].

a. Conventional model of attitude, speech and such: to reason by stereotypes. Specifically, in psychology, a preconceived, generalized, simplistic opinion, i.e. one that is not based on personal evaluation of individual events but that is mechanically repeated, about persons or events and situations (corresponds to the French cliché): to judge, to define by stereotypes; individual s., if pertaining to individuals, social s., if pertaining to social groups.

b. In linguistics, locution or expression that is fixed in a given form and thereby mechanically repeated and trivialised; cliché, catch-phrase: speaking in stereotypes, overusing stereotypes.

c. Expression, motto, proverbial saying or single word that reflects prejudices and negative opinions with reference to social, ethnic or professional groups.

[translated from Treccani.it/vocabolario/stereotipo]

stigma *n.* (from Latin *stigma* (-ātis)) “mark, spot, speck], *prop.* “puncture”, *gr.* *στίγμα -ατος*, derivation of *στίζω* “to prick, mark”] ...

b. In social psychology, the attribution of negative qualities to a person or group of persons, especially with regard to their social status and reputation: an individual, a group affected by psycho-physical, racial, ethnic, religious s.

[translated from Treccani.it/vocabolario/stigma]

Most common stereotypes concerning migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women

This – indicative and by no means complete – collection is the result of dialogues with migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, hosted in the anti-violence centres of the D.i.Re network, who were involved in the project and participated in workshops with operators and cultural mediators.

Migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women and girls

- They are poor.
 - They are not very educated, and often illiterate.
 - They are backwards, they are not aware of their rights.
 - They have no awareness of the violence they have suffered or are suffering.
In their countries there are no women's movements/ organisations, they don't fight for their emancipation and empowerment.
 - They depend on men and are submissive.
 - They are not good mothers.
 - They abandon their children in their countries of origin or the country they left from.
 - They don't take good enough care of them and leave them with strangers.
 - They come to Italy and have other children.
 - They tend to take their children born in Italy to Italian fathers and run away with them.
 - They are too laid-back, they want everything to be solved for them but often don't accept what is being proposed to them.
 - They don't have initiative.
 - They do not want to make efforts.
 - They are never satisfied.
 - They want "everything" "now".
 - They are demanding and impatient: they don't want to accept the fact that it takes time to find solutions/ answers.
 - They think that if men took care of their problems, everything would be solved more quickly: they immediately bypass the operators when they find a man within the network of services.
 - They are unreliable.
 - They say they will do things but they don't do them.
 - They want you to feel sorry for them, they try to look miserable in order to get papers and/or any other kind of support.
 - They often lie or don't tell the whole truth: you don't know and maybe you'll never know what really happened.
 - They think that the operator's job is not a "real" job.
 - They don't think the operators - especially the young ones - are competent.
-

Eastern European women

- They just want to settle down and have money.
- They are either prostitutes or caretakers.
- They look for an Italian husband and then bring their whole family.
- They know how to handle men, at the first sign of trouble... they open their legs and calm them down.
- They use abortion as a form of birth control.

Women from Central and South America

- They are prostitutes/easy to jump in bed with.
- They are cunning.
- They seduce old men and men in general.
- They don't want to work, they want to be kept.
- They are submissive (Andeans).
- They don't understand much.
- They are slow.
- Violence for them is part of love, they accept it without questioning, they put themselves and their children's safety at risk.

Nigerian women

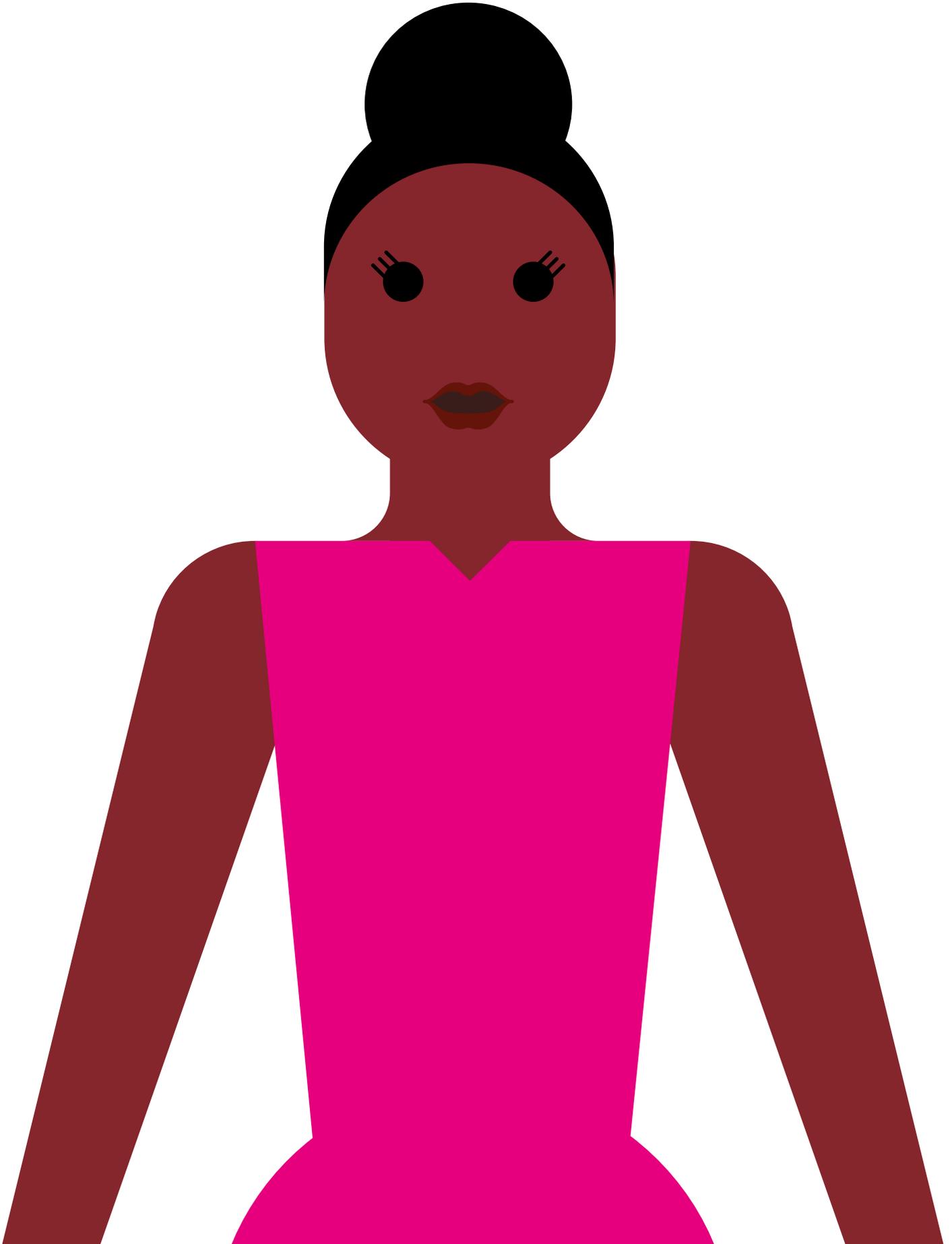
- All prostitutes.
- They are lazy.
- They don't have initiative.
- They don't want to make any effort to improve their situation.
- They are aggressive.
- They are ignorant.
- They are superstitious.
- They have a lot of children.
- They use abortion as a form of birth control.

Women in the Islamic Mediterranean and the Middle East

- They are submissive.
 - They are backwards.
 - They are dominated by their husbands.
 - They are oppressed: they wear the veil.
 - They are too laid back.
 - They are lazy.
-

Operators as seen by migrant, asylum seeker and refugee women

- They are white. In other words: they don't understand us, they don't understand our culture.
- What operators do is not a "real" job.
- She is not woman enough because she doesn't have/doesn't want to have children (concerning the operators that don't have children).
- A young operator can't be competent.
- The operators are "bourgeois" women, well dressed, clean and formal, who can't understand what I've experienced and will surely think badly of me.
- They are there to judge, to criticise, to tell us how we foreigners should behave.
- They think they know what is good for us even though they do not know us.
- They don't go to church (or other places of worship), they don't pray, they don't believe in God.
- They don't know what a family is, they don't respect or care for the elderly.
- When they listen to us, you can see in their eyes that they are judging us, that they already have an answer as we speak, and they never or hardly ever listen to the full sentence.
- They are always on a diet, they hardly eat, they don't appreciate the pleasures of life.
- They classify us by continental belonging, ignoring national differences: all Spanish-speaking, dark-skinned women are 'South American', all 'black' skinned women are 'African', all Slavic or Balkan women are 'Eastern', all Arabic-speaking women are 'Moroccan' or 'Muslim'.
- For them, all women with black skin are 'African'.
- They are obsessed with formalities, bureaucracy, they are not interested in the person standing in front of them.
- They are institutions, not women speaking with other women.



Additional
information D

**The interview:
the thoughts
behind the words**



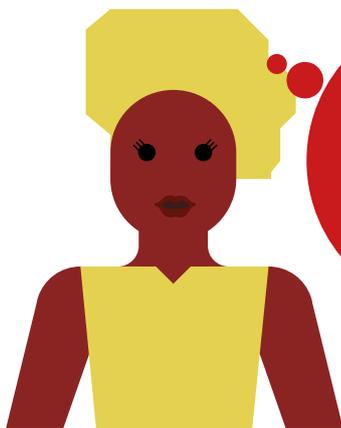
**The interview:
the thoughts
behind the words**

Thoughts “flow” behind the words that are exchanged during an interview, behind the questions and answers; they appear in facial expressions, looks and gestures and are generated by reluctance, suspicion and unacknowledged prejudices. These are thoughts that generate frustration, **fear**, lack of **trust**, weariness, disbelief, helplessness, discouragement.

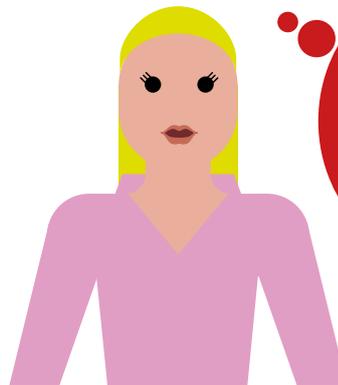
As operators, it is good to be conscious of this potential “subtext”: to be aware of one’s own body language in order not to generate misunderstandings and distrust in the hosted

woman. And be assisted by the cultural mediator when trying to interpret what seems to be hiding behind the other woman’s body language, in order to understand the unspoken thoughts that we can “perceive” and create a **space** for them to be expressed.

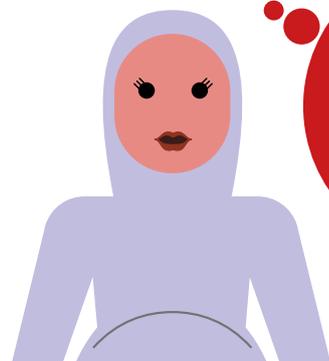
In these figures you will find some of the thoughts that - according to the experience of the operators and mediators who participated in the project - can most commonly be hidden behind words. Not only the words of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women, but also those of the operators and mediators.



“You think you know me, but you know nothing about me or the country I come from. You don’t understand what I say or what those words mean... how can you think you can help me?”



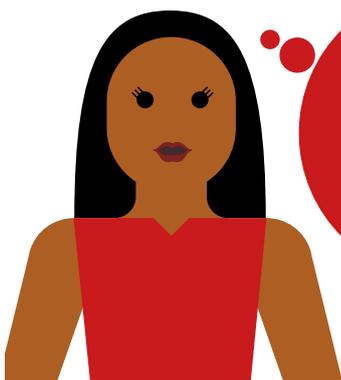
“If I don’t really understand her, if I am not sure I understand her needs, how can I help her? How can I communicate to her the danger that I believe she is in and support her without standing in for her?”



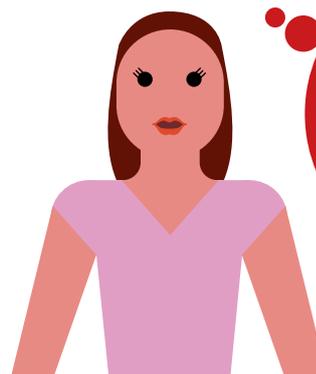
“I don’t want to tell you everything that I’ve been through, it hurts too much. You wouldn’t believe me anyway.”



“I can’t help you get a residence permit or find a job. Those are your needs. But I’m just an operator in an anti-violence centre...”



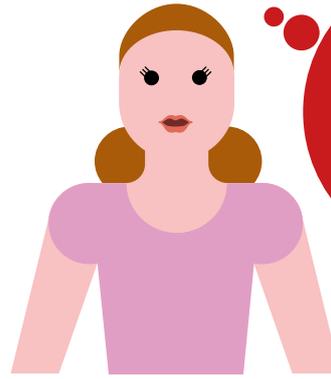
“I have to tell my story one more time... I have to be careful, it has to be the same as the one I told the Commission, otherwise they won’t help me get my residence permit and they will send me back to Libya”.



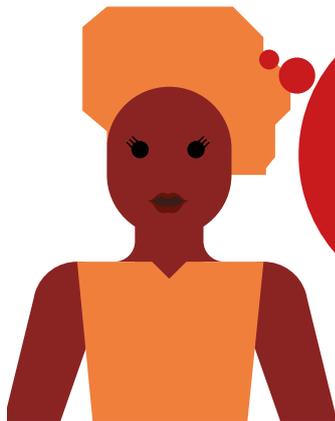
“I don’t think she understands where she is and what we can do together, she keeps asking me about the permit and the money she has to give back to the madam. But I can’t help her, I’m not a migration lawyer”.



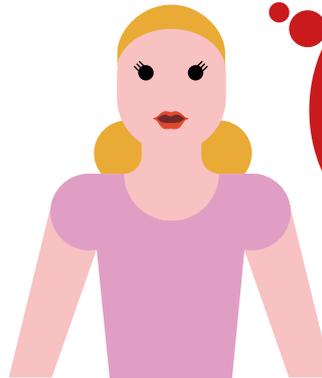
"It hurts too much to keep talking about my trip. I keep thinking about my daughter who's still in the hands of the madam and my cousin who died in the connection house..."



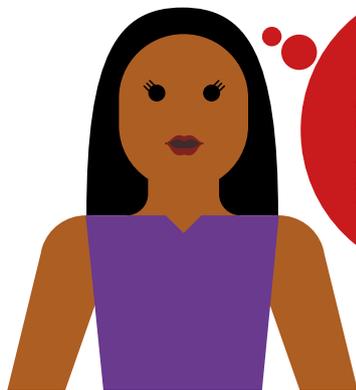
"What she's describing to me is real torture, maybe the anti-violence centre isn't the right place to talk about it..."



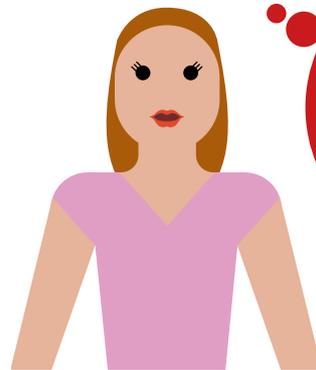
"I can't tell her the truth, I can't tell her how old I am, I wouldn't be able to work and pay the debt".



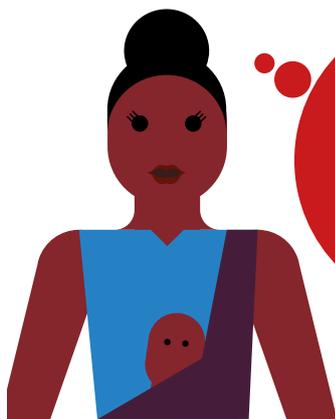
"Why isn't she telling me her real age? I couldn't get her to trust us, but this way I can't help her."



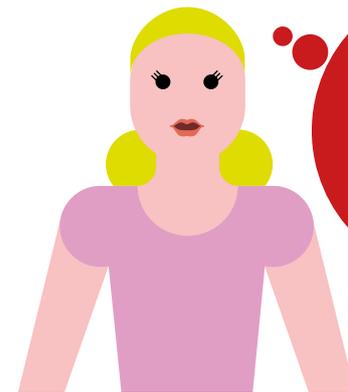
"If I tell her that the madam had me raped, she won't believe me. If I tell her that I am working on the street, she will report me to the police."



"There is no way she has survived everything she is describing. She is exaggerating to get her papers."



"She moves and looks at me in a strange way. Why is she asking me all these questions? What does she want from me?"



"Her eyes are shiny and she smells strange. Maybe she smokes joints?"

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Over the last few years, there has been a steady increase in the number of studies, researches, reports by international and national institutions and non-governmental organisations, journalistic investigations and essays on the condition of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, including on the specific situation of women and girls. This essential bibliography lists only some of the available resources, which seemed useful to further develop and complete the contents outlined in the Units and in the Additional Information concerning the support of migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women victims of violence. Some of the following texts are in Italian. We invite you not only to search for more information on the web, but also to explore the shelves of bookshops where you can now find a growing number of novels, collections of short stories and graphic novels that shed surprising light on the vast cultural diversity of the hosted migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee women in anti-violence centres.

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