



# Project overview

## Addressing Sexual Violence Against Refugee Women

### BACKGROUND

**Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against refugee and asylum-seeker (RAS) women is a growing and complex phenomenon.**

There are no reliable statistics on the scale of SGBV amongst RAS populations, but several international agencies and institutions – like the UN, UNHCR, Council of Europe, and the European Parliament – have pointed out the urgent need for specific policy measures to address the issue, as the risks of sexual violence make women more vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, and health issues.

We define sexual violence against women as specific types of violence and abuse, including physical, psychological and sexual abuse directed at women, because of their biological sex, and gender inequalities. It is a global phenomenon that takes different forms in different contexts, but always reflects the unequal power and different roles that states, societies and cultures entrust to women and men due to their sex at birth.

Sexual and gender-based violence against RAS women can include: sexual abuse in relationships; forced prostitution and sexual exploitation; survival sex; human trafficking and violence; and female genital mutilation.

It arises because of several factors, such as sexual exchanges to obtain transfers; unsafe travelling conditions; uncertain conditions at the entrance ports in foreign countries; poor living conditions and forced sex or rape in transit and reception centres; uncertain legal status in the host countries; or criminal organisations managing illegal transfers, trafficking, and prostitution.

**Sexual and gender-based violence against refugee and asylum-seeker women often goes unnoticed, unspoken, unaddressed and untreated.**

On the one hand, victims tend to not disclose violence due to the uncertainty of their conditions, the fear of retaliation, or other reasons. On the other hand, public officials, humanitarian agents and social workers and other professionals who encounter or support women after they arrive in the UK are often not specifically trained to deal with sexual gender-based violence, and can lack the instruments for violence prevention, recognition, and protection.

### Project aim

The aim of this EU-based project is intervention, training and capacity-building across four partner countries – the UK, Italy, Spain and Greece – on recognising, tackling, reducing and preventing SGBV amongst RAS women.

## KEY ACTIVITIES

The key activity of the project is to develop and deliver training modules in each partner country to front-line professionals working with RAS women.

In the UK, based on an extensive needs assessment, we have designed training that can be modularised around four themes:

- 1. Legal and institutional issues**, including national and international laws around sexual violence/trafficking etc; and national and international laws around asylum.
- 2. Social, cultural and anthropological issues**, including migrants' countries of origin; why people become refugees; RAS women's journeys; experiences of gender-based violence; and specific issues for female migrants.
- 3. Managing individual conversations with RAS women**, including how to ask about sexual violence and how to respond to/ manage disclosures of violence.
- 4. How to direct identified victims to the appropriate services**, including what services are appropriate and available, and how to make referrals.

In 2017-18 we delivered this training package four times, training over 60 front-line professionals across health, housing, domestic and sexual violence services, refugee agencies, legal advisers, police and psychotherapists to better identify and respond to RAS women.

In 2018, the UK members of the partnership are piloting an expert multi-disciplinary team to respond to RAS women victims of sexual violence and exploitation by working jointly on the identification, recognition and treatment of violence.

There are also initiatives at a community level aimed at raising awareness among professionals, agencies and NGOs working on gender based violence and/or RAS women.

### The partnership

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

## Key findings

The project has confirmed the urgent need for more training and preventative work on sexual and gender-based violence amongst refugee and asylum-seeking communities across Europe. The UK context means that, unlike some other European countries, refugees and asylum seekers are not housed in reception centres, where they might be able to access professional legal and psychological support at the point of entry. Instead, they are dispersed, and refugee and asylum-seeking communities have to find support for themselves on a much more ad-hoc manner. This further complicates matters for women who may have experienced sexual and gender-based violence.

We found that women migrants, particularly at the point of entry, tend to remain silent about the abuse they may have experienced in their country of origin or during transit, and focus on their immediate physical needs (health, housing, food, education for children).

Professionals therefore need to be aware of their complex needs, be trained on how to ask, and focus on helping women access the right support.

There is also an urgent need for multi-agency networking and collaboration across statutory and voluntary agencies to effectively tackle RAS women's experiences of SGBV. This will prevent further gender-based violence amongst this vulnerable group in the UK, and help RAS women deal with the abuse they have already suffered.

### Contact

**Dr Geetanjali Gangoli** [g.gangoli@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:g.gangoli@bristol.ac.uk)  
**Dr Lis Bates** [lis.bates@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:lis.bates@bristol.ac.uk)  
**Professor Marianne Hester** [marianne.hester@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:marianne.hester@bristol.ac.uk)

Please visit [bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/projects/current/addressing-sexual-violence-against-refugee-women](http://bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/projects/current/addressing-sexual-violence-against-refugee-women) for more information.



### Addressing Sexual Violence Against Refugee Women

This project is funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union. JUST/2015/RDAP/AG/VICT/9328