In search of liberty through self-determination: women in need of international protection and violence against women in the contemporary context of globalized migrations

Giulia D’Odorico

Trama di terre (Weave of Lands) is a feminist association set up in 1997 in Imola, in the province of Bologna (Italy), by a group of women from different backgrounds. Most of the founders and the members are of migrant origin. The main purpose of the association is to assert grassroots women’s rights while working for concrete political answers to the concerns of women, especially of those who usually remain on the sidelines of the mainstream because of their class, religion, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. The association provides a range of advice and support services to women, such as a cultural center, including a school of Italian language for foreign women, a women’s library, an anti-violence center, including two shelters, a housing service for women in need, and a reception project addressed to refugee and asylum seeking women.

The association currently hosts around 30 women, and every year hundreds of women come across Trama in order to find support and help. Furthermore, the association is member of a wide network of institutions, non-governmental organizations, and universities, such as the Euromed Feminist Initiative, aimed at researching women’s rights and developing gender-sensitive programs and policies at local, national, and European level. Since 2014, because of the increasing number of women who cross the Mediterranean and then apply for asylum in Italy, the association has been consistently engaged in developing

1. Trama di Terre, Imola BO, Italy; giuliadodorico@hotmail.com, info@tramaditerre.org


How to cite this chapter: D’Odorico, G. (2018). In search of liberty through self-determination: women in need of international protection and violence against women in the contemporary context of globalized migrations. In C. Padovani & F. Helm (Eds), Rethinking the transition process in Syria: constitution, participation and gender equality (pp. 173-177). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.21.767

© 2018 Giulia D’Odorico (CC BY)
and implementing gender-sensitive reception measures and tools in order to secure the specific needs of women and girls in refugee contexts. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statistics between January and June 2016, around 115,068 people arrived in Italy (almost the same in 2015: 116,149) (UNHCR, 2016). The number of women increased from 9% in January to 14% in August. The most represented nationalities are Nigeria (around 20%), Eritrea (13%), Sudan (7%), Gambia, Ivory Coast, Guinea (6%), and Somalia (5%). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2016 around 3,501 people lost their lives crossing the Mediterranean3. This number includes missing people. In particular, Trama di terre is concerned with improving the specific life conditions of women seeking international protection in Italy, taking as a starting point their own words and the life experiences they share with us during the hospitality. Currently, we host 30 women and two children. They come from Cameroun, Eritrea, Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia. The association financially sustains two of them, since they have been excluded from the official aid system: it provides them with immediate relief through housing, health and economic support, legal aid, and psychosocial care along with the asylum procedure.

In addition, the association advocates with politicians, health services, training centers, universities, etc., to improve aid efficiency at local, regional and national level, and to take their specific needs into account. All the activities are developed with the aim of designing and implementing long-term solutions for an adequate refugee protection system within a specific gender-sensitive and cross-cultural perspective. However, we recognize that in Italy the refugee system is still managed according to an emergency logic, as if the refugee fluxes were temporary – this is not the case as the data related to migration flows shows very clearly. Moreover, adequate and forward-looking international migration policies to face the refugee crisis are completely missing, as the recent UN summit showed, as well as the raising of walls across Europe. As of today, six walls have been built across European borders; and Europe has spent 1.7 billion on them.

3. http://migration.iom.int/europe/
In 2016, some international reports, such as those of Amnesty International (2016), the Women’s Refugee Commission (Cosgrave et al., 2016), and Save the Children (Coppola & Lo Iacono, 2016), described how the majority of women and girls seeking asylum in Europe experienced multiple forms of violence against women throughout their life-course, in their countries of origin, transit, and arrival. In Trama, we try to create a space where women may share their experiences of violence and find support. Most women tell us about the extremely gender discriminating context they were born and grew up in. Most of them did not have any access to formal education or sexual and reproductive services. Some were forced into early marriage – even several times – with older men, and this practice always includes marital rape and unwanted pregnancies. Some others were forced into military service, including different forms of exploitation, torture, and sexual harassment, such as in the case of Eritreans. Other women, like the Somali we meet, fled war contexts dominated by religious fundamentalist groups, where women suffered rape or extreme violence by official/unofficial armed groups. Many women are at risk while they are traveling to Europe, in particular in Libya, where they are at the mercy of traffickers, camp guardians, and official as well as unofficial armed groups. Most women reported being held in private houses and jails against their will, while others have been forced to work without remuneration or to prostitute themselves in the so-called ‘connection houses’. Some women have been allowed on board to cross the Mediterranean only by ‘accepting’ to be raped by the traffickers. Even in the transit and reception centers, they can face violence. They often do not have the opportunity to meet experienced and gender-trained personnel in reception centers. In addition, there are no sex-segregated facilities and female specific-shelters. Most of them declare that they feel at high risk of – or in some cases that they have experienced – sexual molestation or sexual coercion. Moreover, sexual and reproductive health care services are not always immediately accessible. This could prevent the transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infections or offer access to safe and legal abortion, especially if they suffered rape during the journey.

One of the main issues that is questioning our daily work with women is the trafficking and sexual exploitation of many women asylum seekers. Most of
them are of Nigerian origin. Between January and June 2016, around 3,529 women of Nigerian origin arrived in Sicily crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa. We can presume that most of them experienced trafficking or various forms of exploitation\(^4\). Later, in case sexual exploitation happens in Italy, women risk facing serious repercussions if they denounce their traffickers, who may have access to the existing special program for victims of trafficking (ex Art.18 Dlgs 286/98 ed ex Art.13 L. 228/2003). According to Save the Children (Coppola & Lo Iacono, 2016), in Italy, around 1,225 women and girls entered this program. Note that 80% of victims are of Nigerian origin.

Many others have access to reception measures within the asylum system. Trama is hosting six Nigerian women aged between 19 and 27. All of them have been trafficked and many have been forced into prostitution in Libya. They are still at risk of sexual exploitation in Italy and across Europe. This situation challenges our practices of reception, especially in terms of women’s safety and legal support. To conclude, contemporary migration flows challenge our daily work as well as the Italian refugee protection system, while encouraging us to develop adequate measures, tools, and long-term aid policies, with a specific focus on the situation of women and young girls and the different forms of violence they may suffer. We urge the asylum system to recognize women the right to claim asylum based on Violence-Against-Women (VAW), as well as to develop more policies to effectively protect the rights of women seeking asylum.

References


\(^4\) http://www.cittal.it/images/Position_Paper_NoTratta_DEF.pdf

