

trapped in Europe dignity denied

women's  worldwide



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1 ■ arrival at Piraeus: escaping war, but greeted with inhumanity



introduction

Over the course of the last year, over a million people have entered Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq, fleeing conflicts, violence and instability, and seeking protection. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1,015,078 people have entered Europe via the Mediterranean, mainly through Turkey and Greece. European countries and the EU are failing badly in their efforts to manage the challenges presented by this wave of migration, violating the very human rights norms that they created and which lie at the core of European values.

At Women's Link Worldwide, we have been working for years to document human rights abuses against migrant women and children and to litigate cases to ensure that their rights are upheld, while raising the awareness of states and social actors of gender perspectives and the specific human rights violations suffered by women and children as they seek a better life, safety and dignity.

In an effort to obtain first-hand information on the circumstances of migrant women and children entering Europe, we carried out a fact-finding mission to Greece and Turkey from April 23 to May 1, 2016, and a follow-up mission to Piraeus, Greece, from May 29 to June 6, in order to gather testimonials from women migrants living there. Both missions confirmed the systematic human rights violations and the dire conditions suffered by refugee populations, particularly women and children.

This report is the result of the second mission. It tells the stories of twelve women who fled the bombings and violence in Syria only to end up trapped in Piraeus, deprived of their most basic rights. Many of them told us that they would rather have been killed by a bomb in Syria than die little by little in this filthy place.

Piraeus: trapped and deprived of their rights

Piraeus is Greece's largest seaport and one of the ten busiest commercial ports in Europe, averaging 24,000 ships per year.

There are currently 1,300 migrants from several countries living in a converted parking lot in Piraeus. This number has increased dramatically since the closure of the Balkan route (which led to the eviction of refugees from Idomeni in late May) and since the entry into force of the May 20, 2016 European Union-Turkey agreement, which calls for the expulsion to Turkey of all refugees arriving in Greece after March 20.

The mass arrival of refugees to the Greek islands (particularly Kos and Lesbos) from the Turkish coast forced the Greek authorities to move thousands of people to the mainland quickly, without proper planning. Many of these people ended up in Piraeus, a "transit city," where they have no choice but to wait as they take shelter in plastic tents that only serve to make the blistering heat of the early summer even more unbearable. It was here, in these tents, that we interviewed the Syrian refugee women whose stories are part of our investigation.

Far from the minds of the thousands of tourists who, with summer fast approaching, flock to enjoy the beaches of these stunning islands in the Aegean Sea, the refugee women try to find a way to make it through each day in the terrible conditions that have been forced upon them.

Upon their arrival to the port, the refugees were first housed in an industrial warehouse in the port of Piraeus. Hundreds of families took refuge in this place, which also provided a space for NGOs to distribute food and clothing. But after a few months they were thrown out of the warehouse and sent to the parking lot, separated by nationality.

The women we worked with for this project are currently living in tents set up under a bridge, hidden away in an isolated part of town where they were sent before the kickoff of the tourist season at Orthodox Easter. There is shade, but no toilets or drinking water nearby. The only toilets are in the area where the Afghans and Iraqis are living, which is not a safe place for Syrian women. They try to go unnoticed by the men when they go for water or to the bathroom, and they never do it alone.



The women have four showers they can use. The water is cold, and there is a six-minute limit. A British NGO tries to hand out soap and shampoo in individual-use bottles, but there are so many people that they usually run out before noon. There is a row of about fifteen portable toilets that are used by both men and women and are only cleaned two or three times a week. Because the conditions are so insanitary, some of the Syrian women prefer not to use them at all, despite the risk of being attacked while looking for other places in the port to go to the bathroom.

The only food available is distributed three times a day by the army, but there is no fixed meal schedule, so the refugees never know when they will eat. There is also very little variety in the diet, usually consisting of pasta for lunch, potatoes for dinner, and an occasional orange. The Afghans and Iraqis are served first, and only then may the Syrians eat.

Several NGOs make occasional visits to the port to monitor the situation of the refugees and migrants living there. A doctor sometimes comes along on these brief visits, but even they can't guarantee that the women will have access to the medicines they need or that they will be able to go to hospital if they get ill.

Because of the lack of a shared protocol and coordination among the NGOs working in Piraeus, these haven't been able to take any measures to address the serious, daily violations of rights that occur in the camps or to prevent the increasing violence—including sexual violence—that has been reported by both the organizations and the women we interviewed for this project.

We found that in Piraeus—as is also the case in other parts of Greece where refugees are in transit—access to asylum application procedures is restricted and dysfunctional. An asylum application must be made via Skype and using contact details that are printed on an information sheet which is only available in Greek. Calls must be made at a set time and day of the week, depending on the applicant's native language. The refugee women we spoke with explained that it is practically impossible to exercise their right to an asylum application through this system.

The waiting and the uncertainty about their future has taken a physical toll on many of these women. They are tormented by doubt, wondering if it was a mistake to leave Syria with their children, in order to escape the horrors of war, only to live in this nightmarish, inhuman place, where they are unable to feed them or provide them the most basic care. Their desperation is extreme, but they never give up. With steely nerves, they find the strength to keep caring for and finding joy in their families, while at the same time expressing their profound disillusionment with the treatment and lack of protection they have received in Europe.

the women

The testimonials we were able to gather were not chosen by any particular method. Once we found where the women were staying in the port of Piraeus, it was up to them whether or not to participate in individual interviews.

Although at times they may have formed temporary families to help each other out during transit, these women are essentially traveling on their own, and they are intensely distrustful of strangers. The initial fearfulness and defensiveness of the women in the group we spoke with underlined the extreme vulnerability of their circumstances. For this reason, to avoid heightening that sensation of vulnerability, we have changed the names of the women we interviewed to protect their identities.

Because the women must protect whatever little space they have carved out for their daily routine as they await their opportunity to continue on their way, and since they are extremely cautious about exposing themselves to outside scrutiny, it took time for us to initiate conversations with them. We first had to let them watch us work, until they became convinced that we were there to document, denounce, raise awareness of, and fight impunity for the human rights violations being committed against refugee women.

Finally, two women, Somod and Anin, allowed us to visit the group, to spend time with them, observe and understand their daily routine, and ask questions. The overwhelming sentiment of all the women in the group is clear: the living conditions here are miserable. They would rather have been blown up by a bomb in Syria than continue living in these conditions in Piraeus.

We ended up working with twelve Syrian women aged sixteen to fifty. Three of them were pregnant, and one was very young. Two of the women had husbands living in Germany, where they hoped to join them in order to reunite the family.



This is a tight-knit group of women. They first met in Mytilene, on the island of Lesbos, and then were transferred from camp to camp, along with their families, until they got to Piraeus.

They are strong, brave women, with their heads held high, and sadness and dignity in their eyes. Most of them are very thin from going hungry to make sure their children have something to eat. They became emotional when they told of the pain of fleeing Syria and the humiliations they have been subjected to in both Turkey and Europe.

Somod is fifty years old and became a widow at thirty-five. She has five sons and a daughter. She used to live in Aleppo, Syria. She is traveling with four of her children, two pregnant daughters-in-law, and two grandchildren. She speaks softly and deliberately, with a profound, earnest gaze. She feels responsible for her whole family.

Aicha is twenty-four years old and married. She has four daughters and is three months pregnant. Originally from Al-Raqqah, Syria, she is full of energy and always smiling. She looks us in the eye as she arranges her headscarf and fusses with her hair. Her feet are covered in cuts and scars, but she never complains about the pain—only about how dirty they are.

Amal is married and has a son who will soon turn two. Six months pregnant, she is one of Somod's daughters-in-law. She too comes from Aleppo. When Amal cries, she turns her face away as if it made her angry to cry. And she is angry. She is angry with Europe and Greece. Only nineteen years old, she talks about her life as if it were already over.

Anin is thirty-six. She is married to a Syrian man living in Germany with two of their children. She has three daughters and three sons. She is tall and robust. She is a strong woman and very sure of herself, but she has a gentle, tender side. She suffers from asthma as a result of the living conditions in Piraeus. She is originally from Aleppo.

Zahraa is short and slight. She is thirty-five years old and alone with her children because her husband stayed behind in Algeria. She has two daughters and three sons. She too comes from Aleppo. Her pale skin is badly sunburnt, and she cannot conceal the sadness in her deep green eyes. She suffers from migraines, anemia and osteoporosis. She does her best to go unnoticed and can usually be found sitting quietly in a corner.

Hasisa is thirty, but she looks much older. Her skin is creased and sunburnt. After a while, you notice her young hands and eyes. Her husband is in Germany. She has three children. She keeps quiet, preferring to go unnoticed.

The emotional depth of the stories these women told made nearly everyone cry while they spoke of their plight. The heavy burden of emotions they have been forced to carry for months, even years, and the sudden rare opportunity to speak about their situation made this investigation extremely intense for everyone, but we knew we could not leave without hearing their voices.

2 ■ their voices



One day runs into another. It's hard to keep hoping that things will change. The only thing to do is keep surviving, day after day. After escaping the bombs and withstanding the trials of the road, we made it here. We are the "lucky few," the ones who made it to the European coasts, the ones who survived. But this lack of humanity, these terrible conditions—this isn't what we expected to find here. We dreamed of a new life.

It's dawn. The first summer sunbeams warm the ground, and the camp begins to come to life. The children cast a dejected gaze at their oppressive surroundings. One more day without enough to eat, one more day of trying to contact the asylum office so they can get us out of this hellhole. We'll keep trying, knowing it's no use, but never giving up. There are too many children counting on us. We have to keep trying for their sake.

We form a group so we can go together to the shared bathrooms over by the Afghans' tents and fill our pots at the water fountain. We keep our heads down and try not to attract any attention. It's not easy to go to the bathroom and wash up in peace here. Nothing is easy here.

Over the months of traveling together, we have formed a new family made up of desperate people with one common goal: survival.

Somod wants us to gather in her tent and relax and talk for a while about how we are doing, what we are going through, or whatever pops into our minds. Maybe we can ease our minds for a bit. **Anin** agrees.

Maybe by sharing our problems and making decisions as a group we can make it through another day. We are all too aware that we have virtually no power to insist on being treated like human beings here. But if we at least talk to each other and say out loud the things that each of us tells herself over and over, maybe we'll feel a little more alive and find the strength to keep going.

Just like every other day, the Greek army has distributed pasta, potatoes and a few oranges. Some of us have been here for more than forty days, and we can't stand the food anymore. The scarcity of food means that we don't have anything that even resembles a balanced diet. We are beginning to feel like livestock being fed whatever scraps are left lying around. We eat the oranges to try to get a little energy back and leave everything else on the plate.



inside the tent



It's getting hotter and hotter outside. Inside the tent, the stench of sweat is intense. This tent was made for a hike in the mountains, not for living in for months in the scorching heat.

"Do you remember when we got to Piraeus?" asks **Somod**. "We were told that there would be a caravan and two NGOs registering the new refugees so they could report to the authorities and start processing our asylum applications, but when we got here they didn't let us in. They said the port was closing in a few days. We came in anyway. The men jumped the fence and lifted it so the women could crawl under. The police arrested some of the men, but when they realized we weren't going anywhere, they gave us a tent and some blankets. That was forty days ago," concludes Somod, as the rest of us sit and think about what we would like to share about our experiences.

twelve women

We have decided to join the group and talk openly about our experiences in order to find a little peace and clarity after all the misery. We know that we are all going through similar circumstances. We know that fate gave up on us a long time ago. We take our places in the circle. Somod has made tea, and she invites us to fill the plastic cups we have brought from our tents. We try to keep the children busy so we can have a quiet moment together. The little ones stay by their mothers' sides, but we do our best to talk without too many distractions.

The worst part of living in the port of Piraeus is the constant fear we all feel. We may be physically weak, but the shell we have had to develop over the months, or in some cases years, of fleeing from the horrors of our country, has made us strong, able to go on, able to keep fighting until the end.

"Whenever my cell phone rings, I'm afraid to answer. I see a number from Syria and I think it's more bad news, so I pick up and ask, 'What's happened? Who died?'" says **Anin**. She always has her phone with her, either in her hand or in her pocket, because it is her only means of contact with those who have gone on ahead and those who remained behind.

fear of rape

"I don't sleep at night. I sit in a chair outside, watching the tents where my sons and daughters-in-law sleep, making sure nobody goes in and hurts them. This is not a safe place. The Afghans, who are on the other side of the port highway, get drunk and come into our area to look for trouble. They go into the women's tents. I'm responsible for my whole family," says **Somod** in her even tone.

"They took us to a camp where the Afghans and Syrians were fighting. A man told us not to get off the bus because an Afghan man had raped two Syrian girls, six and nine years old. He raped one of them when she was going to the bathroom. We refused to get off, and the police left us there for two days without anything to eat. They finally agreed to take us to a different camp. For the next three days, we went from camp to camp. The police would stop the bus in places where there was food to buy, but we didn't have any money, and we couldn't even go to the bathroom because it cost two euros to get in. We didn't eat for five days," recalls Somod. She has felt vulnerable and in danger ever since she left home with her family.

"I've been wearing this long-sleeved dress for weeks. It smothers me and I wish I could take it off to cool down for a while, but I'm afraid someone will come into my tent. When my husband leaves to charge the cell phone, I'm terrified that a man will force his way in," says **Aicha**.



“Ever since I left Aleppo, I try to go unnoticed. If anyone insults me or talks to me, I act like I didn’t hear. Traveling alone with my four children, without anyone to protect me, I have to find a way to keep moving without attracting any attention. I’m a woman without a man, and that’s dangerous here,” explains **Zahraa**, who is also most afraid of the refugees from other countries. “The Afghan men hang around near my tent. At night, I’m afraid to fall asleep because they might come in without my realizing it.”

“I’m always thinking that something bad is going to happen. There is no security in the camp. I’m very afraid because the tents are so flimsy that anyone could force their way in. I’ve seen where some of the tents have been cut open. And the Afghans on the other side of the camp get drunk and fight near our tents. One time I told them to go away, and one of them cut my tent with a knife,” recalls **Hasisa**.

protecting the children

One of the toughest things about our time in Piraeus is trying to find a way to protect our children. Most of us left Syria to seek a future for our children, but now the children cannot see a doctor when they get sick, and some of them suffer chronic symptoms that could be cured with the most basic care.

"A few days ago, a doctor who was giving me a checkup to see how my pregnancy was coming along told me that the baby was dead, but he didn't tell me what to do. But later, when I got sick from eating the spoiled chicken they gave us in the camp, I went to the hospital. There they gave me an ultrasound and they told me everything was fine," recounts **Aicha**, both relieved and worried.

"What can I give my children now? I don't have anything. That's what worries me the most," confides a desperate **Amal**. "We are living in a jail here. I haven't even been able to get a checkup to see if my baby is okay. I don't care about myself anymore. My life is over. But I do care about what happens to my little boy. He's barely a year and a half old. And I worry about what will happen to the baby I have on the way. I know I'm going to give birth in this tent, but in what conditions?"

"My children are all sick. The little one has a rash on his genitals, and when I took him to the camp doctor, he told me to wash him, but there is no hot water here. I can't take care of him in these conditions. I told the doctor he has asthma too, but he didn't say anything. Another of my boys won't talk and he's been wetting himself ever since we left Syria," adds **Zahraa**.

"There are no doctors here. I'm doing all right, although my periods have been very irregular since I started traveling. One of my children, though, has a problem with his eyes. He's cross-eyed, and he's losing his vision. He can only see out of one eye now. I need to get him an operation. All three of my children have the flu and a high fever. I give them the medicine I have, but they are not getting any better because of the conditions we are living in," explains **Hasisa**, speaking softly as her two-year-old daughter clings to her legs and cries. She tries to soothe the little girl, who is sick and has a fever. She never loses her patience, even though her daughter keeps crying the whole time she is trying to talk.



what about education?



"I'm very worried about my children not going to school. We left Turkey because they wouldn't let me register them for school, and now we are stuck here, and they still can't go to school. Look at my children in Germany," continues **Anin** with tears in her eyes, showing us a photograph. "They are going to school now. These are the same children who had to pick through the trash to help us survive in Turkey."

"I left Syria for my children. If it had been just me, I wouldn't have cared if they killed me, but the children deserve to live. I still have hope that one day they will have a better life than I had. I never got to go to school, but I want my children to have that opportunity," adds **Hasisa**.



finding a new family

Somod is traveling with nine members of her immediate family: four sons, two pregnant daughters-in-law and two grandchildren. "At one of the camps we stayed in, the only choice they gave us was to break up the extended family we had created over months on the road. Some of the young people agreed to leave so that the families could stay together. Then they took us to a camp where there were huge snakes with teeth as big as my index finger. The people who were already there showed us photos and videos and told us about a boy who was bitten by a snake and had to have his leg amputated. We decided not to get off the bus and we asked the police to give us something to eat because we had hardly eaten in five days. They brought us a boiled whole chicken that hadn't been cleaned, with the entrails still in it. Some of us ate, but others couldn't. Those who did got sick and started vomiting right away. My daughter-in-law, who was more than eight months pregnant, ate some and lost consciousness for over an hour."

"My husband and our two eldest children left Turkey for Germany, and since I couldn't keep up the rent payments I decided to leave for Greece with the rest of the children," explains **Anin**, who describes how her family has grown much bigger because it now includes all of us who traveled from Lesbos to the mainland with her and then were transferred to Piraeus. They helped her to



make it in one piece. We all protect each other, and we have forged bonds that are as strong as the blood ties we have with our families because of the trauma we are going through together.

“As a woman traveling alone, I have no choice but to follow the group so I can have some measure of protection and take care of my children. I will go wherever the group goes. Sometimes they don’t even tell me what’s going on or what we are going to do. They know I’ll follow them whether or not I know where they are going. All I hope for is that one day my children will be okay and get treatment for their sicknesses so I can see them healthy again. That’s my main concern,” explains **Zahraa**.

“I can’t make any decisions on my own anymore. I have to wait and see what the group decides. And I can’t leave them behind, because the people who have traveled this far have gone through the same pain and have the same hopes as me. I see myself reflected in their eyes. I’m alone, but the group keeps me going. I identify with them, and I know that if something happened to me or my children, the others wouldn’t leave us behind,” says **Hasisa**.

Europe: worse than the bombs in Syria and the smugglers in Turkey

"We lost everything when we left Syria to escape from the war. We sold our little stone house. Daesh took over our city and made the women cover up completely, even their eyes. They say they are following Islam, but that's not Islam," affirms **Somod**. "I'm not a human being here. I may have suffered institutional violence and labor discrimination in Turkey, but I'd rather be there than here in Greece in these conditions. There's no way out here. We can't even work to feed our children."

"In Mytilene, they dropped us off in a camp where we waited in line for five hours to get blankets. We didn't have anywhere to go, so we slept outside for three days. As far as Europe is concerned, we are not human beings," says **Aicha**. "My daughters have



asthma because there is no hot water here. A few days ago, they gave us a spoiled chicken that smelled really bad. My daughter and I ended up in the hospital. We didn't want to leave because there was hot water there."

"Turkey was hard because we had to work nonstop, but Greece is even worse. Before we left home we thought that in Europe, the birthplace of democracy, there would be some protection. I feel tricked. I'm totally disillusioned. I believed the messages about how there was democracy in Europe, but I know now it was all lies. They don't treat us like human beings, but like insects," explains **Amal**, trembling with anger against the Greek and European leadership. "I love my country. Even the hell that Aleppo has become would be better than living in Piraeus. The food they give us is killing us slowly. I'd rather be blown up by a bomb and get it over with. I only want to die once," she continues, repeating that her life is over and she doesn't want anything for herself anymore. But she can't stop worrying about her children.

"They gave us a nice welcome in Mytilene. The Red Cross gave us blankets, food and tea. We waited there for three days, resting up and enjoying a little privacy at last. Then we continued to a camp on some land that was owned by a man who sold cars. That's where a lot of us met. There were rumors that 150 kilometers away there was a place where they were registering refugees, but I needed 500 euros to get my family there," recounts **Anin**, sitting by the tent entrance so she can open the flap and let the breeze in now and then. She too has asthma, and since she got to Piraeus her health has taken a turn for the worse.

"As our raft inched forward, I couldn't think or feel anything. I stared at the water and wondered, 'Sea, who will you take away today? Me? My children? All of us?' I awaited death. I could think of nothing else. And now I know that a death at sea would have been better than what we are going through now in Greece, in Europe," adds **Hasisa**.

Turkey: smugglers, violence, helplessness and exploitation

“When we reached the Turkish border, the police attacked us to keep us from entering. They hurt me,” says **Somod** with tears in her eyes, showing us the scar on her knee. “The police beat everyone: men, women, boys and girls. They opened fire on us. My son was shot in the earlobe. They burnt all our belongings, even a blanket I begged them to let me keep because it had great sentimental value for me. But they burnt it anyway.” Somod takes a quick breath and goes on. “We entered Turkey and tried to rent a room, but it was too expensive, about 500 Turkish liras [156 euros]. We couldn’t afford it, so we bought a tent and paid rent on a piece of land to set it up. The women worked from five in the morning to eight at night growing onions. We were paid twenty Turkish liras per day, barely enough to buy bread, oil and potatoes. We stayed there nine months, until we



heard that Angela Merkel was opening the German borders and taking in all the refugees. My late husband's brother and another family member sent us some money, 6,000 euros all told, and we made it to Mytilene, on Lesbos."

"We joined my husband in Izmir and set out together for Greece. During the first boat trip there were about 100 people on board. The boat was stopped by the police, who made us return to the coast because we were starting to sink. On the next attempt, there were fifty-nine of us on board. The smuggler told us he didn't care if we drowned. I was terrified. I remember that my lips were dry and pale during the whole crossing. We paid 1,500 euros," says **Aicha**.

"We paid 800 dollars [720 euros] to get the whole family into Turkey in a van. It was a twelve-hour drive. Some friends of ours rented us a place to sell gum and candy for 150 euros a month plus 100 for electricity and water so we could survive. We all went to work. My husband moved rocks with a crane, I repaired shoes, and the two eldest boys sold things they found in the garbage. They never let my children go to school during the nine months we were there. I got pregnant there, and my youngest daughter was born. I couldn't go to the clinic because I couldn't get permission, but a Syrian doctor who charged us half price helped me with my pregnancy. When my due date came, he said I needed a cesarean, and he couldn't do it for me. It cost 500 euros at a private clinic. A friend of mine finally lent me her *kimlik* [Turkish identification papers] and I pretended to be her and went to the hospital to get my cesarean. My daughter was fine when she was born, but when I went back to the hospital for my first checkup the doctor realized that the papers weren't mine, and he told me he was going to call the police. I explained that it was a simple mix-up, that I had accidentally grabbed my sister's papers. He let me go home, and I never went back to the hospital," recalls an anxious **Anin**. She falls silent for a moment, then adds, "'Go away' was what the Turks said to us all the time. They treated us like animals. It made me so sad because I never wanted to leave Syria, but I had no choice. I ended up in Turkey because there was no other option. They made it clear to me that we Syrians were worthless, that they could do whatever they wanted to us."

on the road

"We tried to flee to Lebanon, but we couldn't get in, so we went back home. We finally decided to set out for Turkey. We paid 2,500 dollars [2,253 euros] to transport the whole family," says **Somod**. "There were sixty-three people on our little plastic boat. We were met by an NGO that treated us very well, and then they called the police so they could take us to a camp where they sold cars. It was a car lot. We ate well, and there was hot water. We stayed there until the owner lost the property. Then we were transferred from camp to camp because we couldn't afford the taxi to go to the place where they could register us as refugees. It would cost 300 euros per person to travel the 150 kilometers."

"When we reached the Turkish border, we stood in line, and when we were about to get in they pushed us back. I was holding my baby girl in my arms and the other girls by the hand. I was desperate to get in, and right then I remembered a cousin of mine who was blown up by a bomb along with her children, and I thought, 'I wish it had happened to me,'" **Aicha** tells us, unable to stop the tears, but with her head held high. She takes a deep breath and goes on. "My husband, my children, my husband's other wife, who is like a sister to me, and I all fled together. I miss my country so much! We will return to Syria as soon as we can. We had two choices: flee or become savages. We decided to flee. One of the most difficult moments of our trip was when we separated from my brothers. They decided to head for a part of Syria that was controlled by the regime so Daesh wouldn't recruit them, while we made for the border. I stared at the truck they got into as it got smaller and smaller in the distance, and all I could do was wonder if I would ever see them again."

"The first night we tried to make the crossing in a boat there was a problem and it didn't work. The smuggler said he wasn't going to pay for lodging for everyone, so he called the police to have us arrested and put in jail. The next day, the smuggler came and got us out of jail to make another attempt. While we were at sea, we ran into the police. We were all praying that it was the Greeks, not the Turks. It was the Greeks, and they told us that the raft was losing air and we would sink at any moment," says **Anin**, recounting tense moments of the crossing that she will never be able to forget.



22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29

"My stomach closed up a long time ago. All I can do is drink tea and smoke cigarettes. When we left Syria three months ago, we had to pay a million Syrian pounds [4,100 euros]. We were driven toward the border in a car, but then we had to walk for eight hours. The journey was very hard, and when we got there the Turkish police told us the border was closed. They did let us in, though. I think they took pity on me because I was alone with four children," says **Zahraa**. "There were about 100 of us on the raft. I felt like I was being crushed, and I could see my children under the bags and suitcases. People were sitting on top of me. I had room to move my hands, but my head was pinned. If I could have moved, I would have grabbed my children and leapt into the sea, because it was better to die than to keep living that nightmare. I lost all hope of reaching shore alive. I was sure I was going to die. I didn't realize it when we arrived. One of the children had to tell me. I thought I was dead. I couldn't believe it when I felt the sand under my feet, and it took me a while to regain my composure," continues Zahraa, who has had migraines, anemia and osteoporosis ever since.

"In February, some people from where we lived decided to leave. My husband had already fled Syria. It was very painful for me to bid farewell to the people from my community who stayed behind. I watched my house get smaller and smaller in the distance. It was all we had. I asked my neighbors to have someone move in and take care of it until we could return. It was very painful to leave. If it had been just me, not the children, I would have stayed behind and let them kill me, but I decided to leave for the children. They deserve to live," explains **Hasisa**. "We headed for the Turkish border in a big car, and at one point the driver told us that we had to go on alone. We walked for more than six hours. It was a terrifying trip, because we thought that at any minute we would be caught by the combatants from one side or the other. We were afraid they would kill us all. We got to the border, and after several tries they let us in. The police took pity on the group we were traveling with. All we had was a small suitcase with clothing for the little ones. My mother was traveling with us too, helping with the children. The crossing to the Greek isles was horrible. People kept getting on. There was less and less room, and I ended up losing my daughter in the crowd. I could hear her cries from between people's feet, but I couldn't find her. One of Somod's sons crawled around looking for her until he found her and brought her back. It was awful. When we finally reached the coast and got out of the boat, we couldn't stop crying. Everyone was crying—men, women, and children. I don't know if we were crying from sadness, from hope or because we hadn't died," continues **Hasisa**, still crying.



leaving Syria

"I left Syria two years ago, but I left my soul back home. Syria is the love of my life," says **Aicha**, full of energy as always, enjoying the chance to weigh in. Her broad, easy smile contrasts with the fatigue etched on the rest of our faces. "My city was taken over by Daesh. Bombs were exploding all the time. Daesh made the women cover up from head to toe. My mother has asthma, and one time she lifted the part of the veil that covered her face to take a breath, and she was arrested and taken to jail. My husband was arrested too, for smoking a cigarette. Our family was always poor, but when the war came, we didn't have anything to eat or anything to give our daughters. We decided to flee. My husband left first for Turkey, before I followed him with the girls and an uncle of mine. We paid 50,000 Syrian pounds [208 euros]."

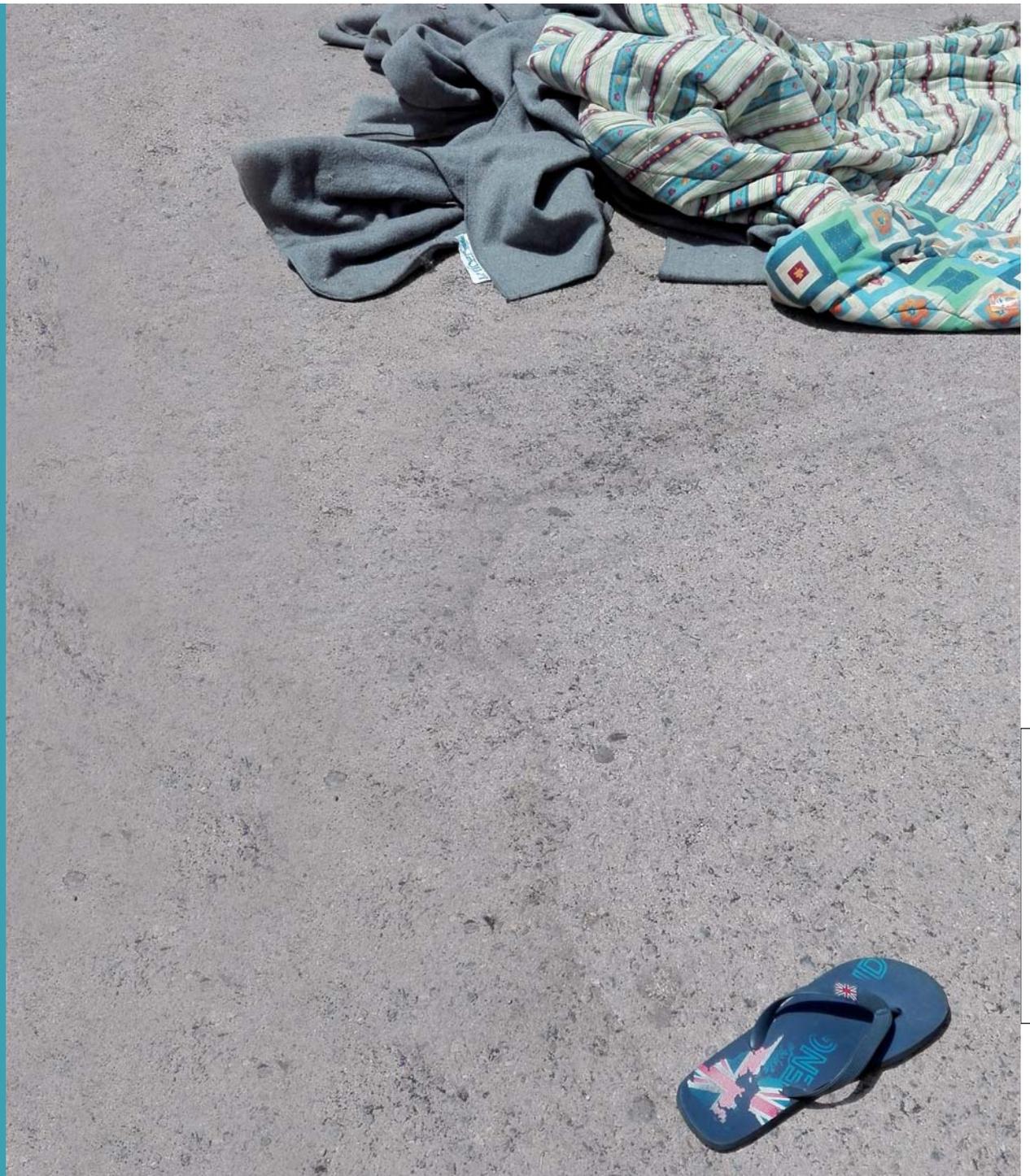
"The worst part was seeing my mother leave. She left with my two brothers for Jordan. I know she has had another daughter who is now two years old, and I still haven't seen her. It really hurt to see my brothers go. I raised the younger one, and a little while ago, I saw a picture of my older brother on Facebook and I could hardly recognize him, he's so thin and he's aged so much. The suffering has taken a toll on him," explains **Amal**.



“We used to say goodbye to each other every night because we never knew if we would survive to the next day,” adds **Anin**. “Before the war, we had a great life. I feel like we were living in paradise when I think of what we have been through since. I decided to leave when we had nothing left to eat, not even bread. First we sold the car, then the house, and finally our land to pay for the trip. We were paid very little, much less than what it was worth. It was very hard for us. I would sleep with my sandals under my pillow in case we had to flee the bombs at night. I think that at one point early in the war the regime ran out of weapons, but then Russia and Iran gave them more and they started the bombings. Things got much worse. The bombings were constant. We had to take cover under a bridge every five minutes. One night, the bombs came and we ran away. In the confusion, my daughter stayed behind in the house. When I realized she was still there, I rushed back in horror to get her, with bombs exploding everywhere. When we ran out of food completely, we boiled lime blossoms and drank the tea. One of my daughters got sick from not eating. Her skin was dry for a long time. And then there were the forced recruitments. I lost two nephews because the Bashar al-Assad regime and Daesh both wanted to recruit them, and when they refused to join either side they were murdered. I also remember the time they recognized a cousin of mine who was hit by a bomb by a tattoo on his arm. That was the only part of him left intact,” Anin tells us as the rest of us nod in understanding and encourage her to continue.

“Because of the war, we had nothing to eat. And we lived in an area where the Kurds, Daesh, and the regime were all fighting. We were stuck in the middle,” says **Zahraa**. “My husband was called into combat by both the regime and Daesh, and he had to flee to Algeria. At the time, the borders were open, and we thought he would be able to come back home. But then they closed the borders, and I was stuck in Aleppo with the children.”

“I lived with my husband in a small, humble house, but we were living in peace. We worked the land, as I had always done with my sisters, ever since I was just a little girl. We were poor, but we got by. But when war broke out between the regime, Daesh, Russia and the Free Syrian Army we no longer had anything to eat. They all attack the civilian population. That’s why I had to flee my country,” explains **Hasisa**. “Daesh was very strict with the women. Whenever we went outside, we had to cover up completely. If you showed any skin at all, even a finger, they would take you to jail and whip you in the plaza so everyone could see. There were big women, foreign women, who wore uniforms, so you could only see their eyes. They watched us and turned us in.”



living a slow death: is there any hope?

"I don't ask for much: a clean place to live, decent food and hot water. At night I go to the sea and cry and await an answer that never comes. I will return to Syria as soon as I can," vows **Aicha**.

"If all we Syrians put our tears together, they would drown the sea itself. It would be washed away in the tears we have cried. What we went through in Aleppo before we left can only be compared to hell. I want to see my mother again, have her by my side once again," says **Amal** between tears, not of grief, but of rage.

"I'm all alone. I feel so alone. I feel like a bird whose wings are clipped. I don't know what to do or where to go. My mind won't stop. I can't sleep or eat. I don't know what to do or where to go, and sometimes I can't understand what people tell me because I can't pay attention. I feel totally lost and I'm more afraid every day," admits a shaken **Zahraa**.

reality: woman, mother, refugee

Somod always looks us in the eye when she speaks. “If I fall, the whole family falls,” she states categorically, making no effort to wipe her tears. She thinks of her two pregnant daughters-in-law, knowing that one of them is due to give birth any day now in this filthy place. She hasn’t decided yet whether to call the ambulance. “They always say they are coming, but they never do.”

“Our life was so beautiful before,” says **Aicha** again and again. “I want a clean house and decent food again. My daughters are sick from living in this dirty place with all the bacteria and germs. My husband fell ill too, because back in Syria he had an ulcer, and he should have had an operation, but then everything changed.”

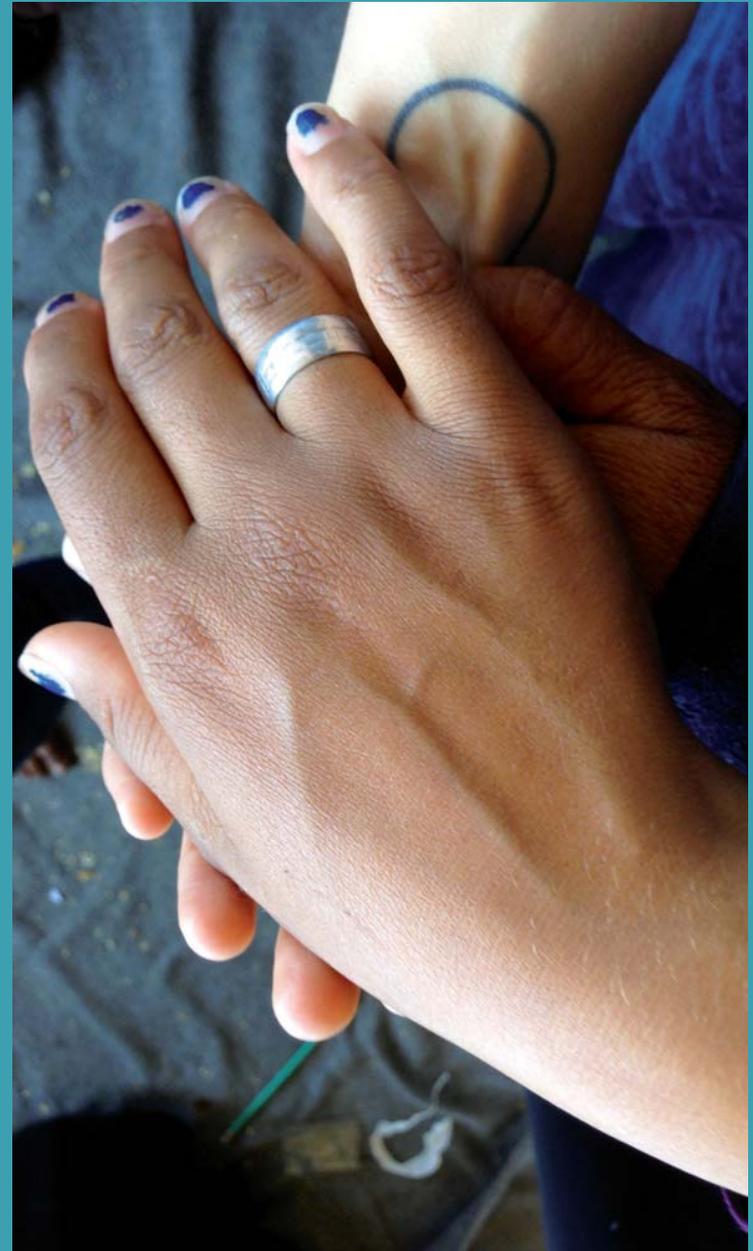
“I dream at night about waking up, making breakfast for my son, giving him his backpack and seeing him off to school. What will become of these children if they don’t go to school?” wonders **Amal**.

“I left Syria for my children. If it had been just me, I wouldn’t have cared if they killed me, but the children deserve to live. I still have hope that one day they will have a better life than I have had,” concludes **Hasisa**.

making it through another day

We feel a little better after sharing our pain and being heard and understood. We are ready to make our way back to our own tents, some of us carrying our small children.

But before we leave the tent where we have shared our suffering, worries and hopes, we clasp hands with each other, breathe deeply, look each other in the eye with our heads held high and, with the certainty that we will find the strength to go on, we file out one by one from the tiny space where we have been able to just be ourselves again for a little while.



3 ■ women refugees in the EU: violated rights



methodology

The information we obtained through this investigation and on which our conclusions and recommendations are based comes directly from our interviews with women refugees. We traveled to the port of Piraeus on a fact-finding mission, accompanied by an interpreter and cultural mediator who facilitated the conversations between the Syrian women and Women's Link Worldwide.

We started out by exploring the port area and establishing contacts with the Athens-based organizations working with refugees, as well as with men and women who were awaiting their chance to travel to northern Europe. After this initial exploratory phase, we began working with the women to build a relationship of trust with them, so we could get the information we needed in order to denounce the perilous conditions that forced them to flee Syria, the poor treatment they received in Turkey, and the deplorable situation they are experiencing in Greece.

Over the course of the investigation, we determined that in order to accurately describe the circumstances leading to their presence in Piraeus, we needed to learn the women's stories in detail and analyze the effects of the violence in Syria and the hardships they have faced during the migration process as women traveling with children without their husbands.

We focused on the situation of women, because the fact that they are women exposes them to different risks and difficulties than those faced by men during their escape from Syria, transit through Turkey and arrival in Europe. Referring to "woman, refugee and mother" as an indivisible whole is key to understating the situation they face. These three conditions have specific impacts and consequences that are completely different from those of a "man, refugee and father." Any attempt to create a realistic portrait, protect their rights or denounce their situation must take into account this set of conditions, shared by all the women who participated in the project.



In order to create the opportunity for the women to participate effectively, we first had to create an appropriate space and to obtain the level of trust necessary for them to express themselves openly, without coercion or restriction, and speak of their situation, thoughts, hopes, and fears.

The methodology we used to gather information was based on the “life history” method used in qualitative research. By listening to their stories, with whatever details and personal experiences each woman chose to share, we were able to reconstruct the causes behind their current situation of vulnerability, as well as the processes that have led to the violations of rights they are subjected to.

Creating a relationship of trust was essential to the success of this method, based particularly on individual, voluntary conversations with women who were interested in talking about their situation. We also conducted group sessions with the women and observed the routine in the camp over the course of the investigation.

We started with an inductive, open, flexible, cyclical, adaptive research model, which evolved over the course of the project as we obtained more information. In order to achieve effective, frank communication with the study group, we decided to start by establishing contact with the children.

Once we had identified the women we wished to speak with, we gave their children coloring books and crayons. This helped us gain access to the group in an unobtrusive, natural manner. In this way we not only won the trust of the children, but the women began to speak with us as well, and a relationship of trust began to grow.

We carried out six individual interviews with Syrian women living in Piraeus. In the report, the individual interviews appear as one conversation with the whole group (see Section 2: Their Voices). This allowed for a more coherent narrative, since we asked them all the same questions. We also conducted several group conversations in order to strengthen our relationship of trust. Up to twelve Syrian women, aged sixteen to fifty, participated in the group conversations.

To supplement the information we received from the women, we also interviewed three civil society organizations assisting refugees throughout Greece: Doctors of the World Greece, Praxis, and Greek Forum of Refugees.

conclusions

There are currently thousands of women and children fleeing war, seeking refuge and trying to survive in EU territory under extremely dire conditions, with no one to help them and no access to safety or a life with dignity. They do not have access to sufficient food, and the food they do have access to is not nutritionally balanced. Basic services such as drinking water, electricity, health care, education and a safe, sheltered place to sleep are not available to them. They lack the financial resources they need to survive and cannot secure paid work. Their freedom of movement is restricted as “illegal immigrants,” and their access to international protection is all but nonexistent. The European Union is responsible for this large-scale violation of human rights committed against men, women and children. However, we must note that there are special obligations in place for the protection of women, particularly pregnant women, and children.

The decisions adopted by the European Union to date, far from guaranteeing respect for human dignity and promoting solidarity in the face of humanitarian catastrophes, such as war, have been above all opportunist measures based on a conceptualization of the crisis as a migrant crisis. This characterization serves to justify the summary detention and removal of persons entering EU territory without due process. In the few cases in which access to asylum proceedings has been granted, the process has been rushed and lacking in guarantees.

Due to policies adopted by the EU severely curtailing access to asylum proceedings, thousands of women and children already within EU territory are losing hope. In many cases, the only way to get an appointment with the asylum office is via a Skype number that is only available one hour per week for thousands of people.



38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45

This is a humanitarian refugee crisis that persists despite a European legal framework that prohibits it. Any agreements entered into by the EU should be required to include an analysis of their human rights impact. This analysis will allow the EU to ensure that its actions do not undermine the core values of European society: democracy, peace, equality and non-discrimination, and respect for human dignity and fundamental rights.

Many times throughout history, millions of people have had to flee their homelands to save their lives. Since 2015, millions of people have overcome multiple obstacles to reach Europe in order to escape the war, armed conflict, violence, political instability, and total breakdown of state protection that plague countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.

Reaching the European Union represents an opportunity for these persons to save their lives, and not merely in the sense of continuing to survive. EU law is based on the constitutional traditions of the states that make up the European Union and the development of the European and universal human rights systems. The common feature of all these sources of law is that they place the human person, not the "citizen" or the "European," at the center of the legal and political system. The decision to place the human being at the center is what defines us as a society and a civilization. It is what gives the European Union its character and sense, and its origins lie in lessons learned through Europe's experience with war, devastation and suffering. They lie in the ideal that every human being has the right to seek and achieve a decent life as well as in the basic principle of solidarity upon which we have constructed the rights of refuge and asylum.

Human rights must be upheld within EU territory. They are not a luxury we may do without "in times of crisis." They are our very structure, and failing to uphold them creates institutional responsibilities that can and must be denounced.

Human beings clamor at the gates of the EU, crying out for help and fleeing horror. These gates open and close in accordance with a legal system that guarantees respect for the human condition, equality and non-discrimination, and that rejects arbitrariness and irresponsibility. The European legal system may not be manipulated or ignored, for it was created to preserve peace and democracy. To allow Europe's institutions and leadership to violate it by slowly killing thousands of women and children who we know to be our responsibility and who are under our jurisdiction is not only a gross violation of human rights; it strikes at the foundations of our very system. The table below outlines the fundamental rights held by refugees arriving to Greece which are presently being violated.

WHAT RIGHTS HELD BY REFUGEES ARRIVING IN EUROPE ARE BEING VIOLATED?

ACCESS TO THE RIGHT OF ASYLUM, RIGHT TO INFORMATION AND RIGHT TO LEGAL REPRESENTATION		RIGHT TO LIVE FREE FROM VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION	
INTERNATIONAL NORMS	REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS	INTERNATIONAL NORMS	REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS
<p>1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Article 1A)</p> <p>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 14)</p> <p>Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 22)</p>	<p>Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Article 60)</p> <p>Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 18)</p> <p>Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception¹ (Article 5)</p> <p>Directive 2013/32/EU on common procedures² (Articles 6, 12–19, and 20–22)</p> <p>¹ Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection.</p> <p>² Directive 2013/32/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 on common procedures for granting and withdrawing international protection.</p>	<p>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 1)</p> <p>Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (Articles 1–6)</p> <p>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 2)</p> <p>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 3, 24, and 26)</p> <p>International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 2.2)</p> <p>1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Article 3)</p> <p>Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 2)</p>	<p>Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Articles 1 and 4)</p> <p>European Convention on Human Rights (Articles 3 and 14, and Protocol 12)</p> <p>Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 21)</p>

WHAT RIGHTS HELD BY REFUGEES ARRIVING IN EUROPE ARE BEING VIOLATED?

RIGHT TO LIFE		PROHIBITION OF SLAVERY	
INTERNATIONAL NORMS	REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS	INTERNATIONAL NORMS	REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS
<p>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 3)</p> <p>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 6)</p> <p>Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 6)</p>	<p>European Convention on Human Rights (Article 2)</p> <p>Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 2)</p>	<p>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 4)</p> <p>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 8)</p>	<p>European Convention on Human Rights (Article 4)</p> <p>Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 5)</p>
PROHIBITION OF TORTURE AND CRUEL, INHUMAN OR DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT		RIGHT TO DIGNITY AND PERSONAL INTEGRITY	
INTERNATIONAL NORMS	REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS	INTERNATIONAL NORMS	REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS
<p>Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 5)</p> <p>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 7)</p> <p>Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (Article 2)</p>	<p>European Convention on Human Rights (Article 3)</p> <p>Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 4)</p>	<p>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 10)</p>	<p>European Convention on Human Rights (Article 8)</p> <p>Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Articles 1 and 3)</p>

WHAT RIGHTS HELD BY REFUGEES ARRIVING IN EUROPE ARE BEING VIOLATED?

RIGHT TO PRIVATE AND FAMILY LIFE

RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING: FOOD AND HOUSING

INTERNATIONAL NORMS

REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 12)

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Articles 17 and 23.1)

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 10)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 16)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 8 and 16)

European Convention on Human Rights (Article 8)

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 7)

Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception (Article 12)

INTERNATIONAL NORMS

REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25)

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 11)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 23.1)

Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception (Article 17.2)

RIGHT TO HEALTH, INCLUDING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

INTERNATIONAL NORMS

REGIONAL/COMMUNITY NORMS

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 12)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 12)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 23.4 and 24)

Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception (Article 19)

WHAT RIGHTS HELD BY REFUGEES ARRIVING IN EUROPE ARE BEING VIOLATED?

RIGHT TO EDUCATION

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

**INTERNATIONAL
NORMS**

**REGIONAL/COMMUNITY
NORMS**

**INTERNATIONAL
NORMS**

**REGIONAL/COMMUNITY
NORMS**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 26)

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Article 13)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Article 10)

Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 23.3 and 28)

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 14)

Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception (Article 14)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 13)

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 10)

European Convention on Human Rights (Article 5)

Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception (Article 7)

BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD

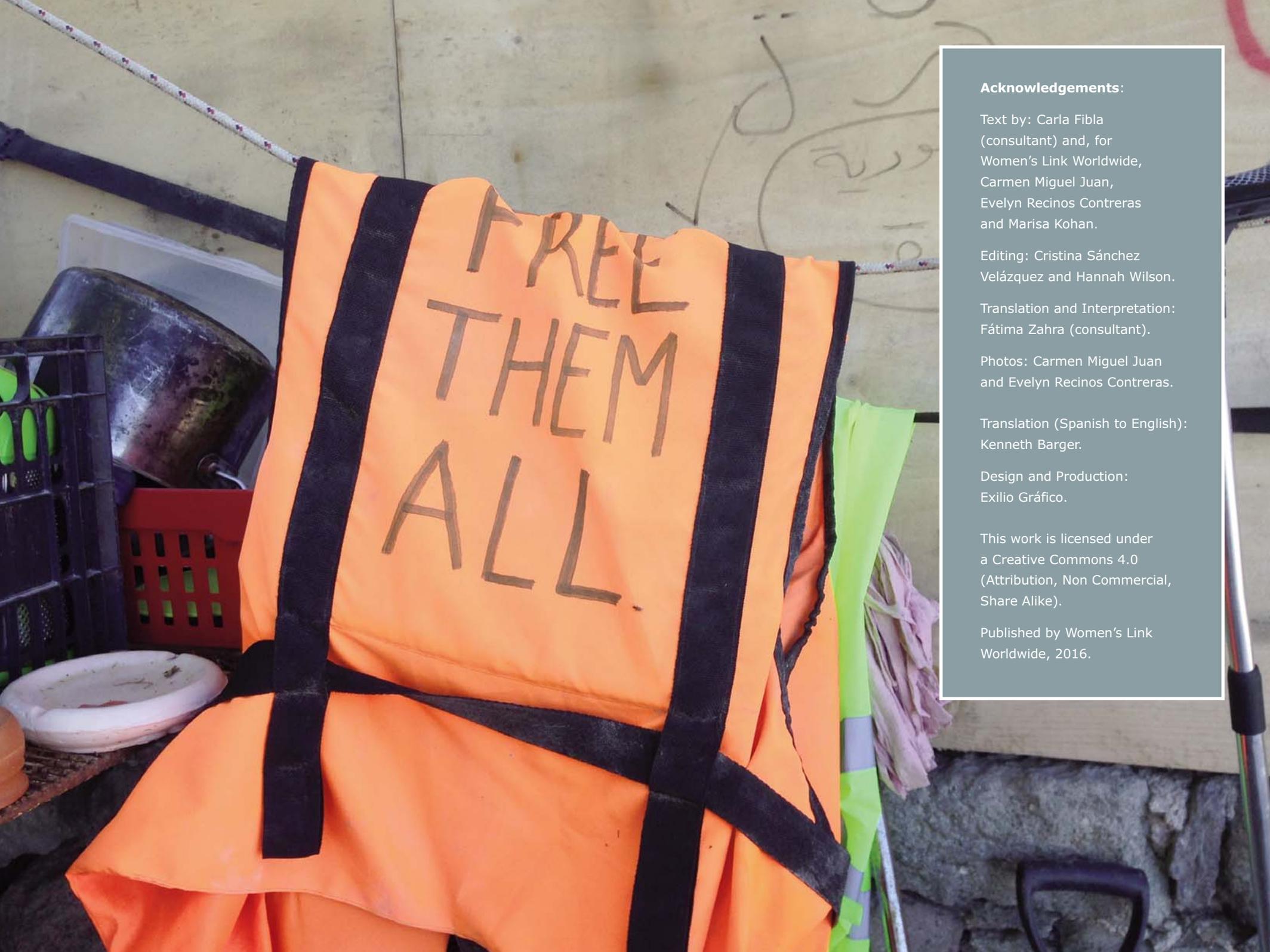
**INTERNATIONAL
NORMS**

**REGIONAL/COMMUNITY
NORMS**

Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 3)

Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Article 24)

Directive 2013/33/EU, standards for reception (Article 23)



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