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Vulnerabilities and the Italian Protection System:

An ethnographic exploration of the perspectives of protection seekers

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The photo for the cover image was taken Martina Millefiorini (research assistant) during fieldwork in July 2021. The picture shows the entrance of the administrative office of a reception project for protection seekers based in Latina (Italy), hosting single individuals and monoparental families.

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Vulnerabilities and the Italian Protection System:

An ethnographic exploration of the perspectives of protection seekers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following research is part of the Horizon2020 project "Vulnerabilities under the Global Protection Regime. How does the law assess, address, shape, and produce the vulnerabilities of protection seekers?" (VULNER, GA 870845) and focuses on the Italian context.

The first report (Vulnerabilities in the asylum and protection system in Italy), based on the research conducted in 2020, focused on the documentation and analysis of the existing legal and bureaucratic mechanisms in place, to identify and assess the vulnerabilities among "protection seekers", meaning all migrants seeking protection, regardless of the legal status they have eventually achieved.[1]

In this first report, we compared the ways in which Italian legislation and case-law approach vulnerabilities and how it arranges legal and bureaucratic instruments for recognition and protection, with the direct experience of legal experts and of those who, at different levels, make decisions on which situations of vulnerability can find effective legal recognition. On the one hand, our qualitative research deepened our understanding of the vulnerability assessment processes, as well as of the perspective of those who intervene in situations of vulnerability (decision makers, international organizations, legal actors, etc). On the other, the report highlights the effects of the transposition of these measures into concrete practices, both in terms of the most virtuous applications implemented in various territorial contexts and the disconnect between "law on paper" and "law in practice."

In this second report, based on ethnographic research conducted in 2021, the focus shifts to the direct experiences of protection seekers and of those who work in close contact with them. Throughout the research, **we investigated what opinion protection seekers as well as people working in reception and support services had about the protection system in Italy, both in terms of procedures and identification, protection, reception, and support measures provided for people in vulnerable situations.** The inclusion of an operational and "bottom-up" point of view made it possible to check, validate and integrate what emerged in the previous report.

The fieldwork took place between April 2021 and February 2022. We conducted 64 in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations in several reception and support centers for migrant people, as well as multiple informal conversations with at least 200 people - including protection seekers and social workers. The work was carried out in two Italian regions (Veneto and Lazio) and it shed light on series of issues that cut across the two contexts – and thus are of national relevance – as much as on issues that were distinct to the local context.

The research shows how it is essential to consider the complex issue of vulnerabilities related to migration experiences through qualitative research methods that go beyond quantitative data. The ethnographic approach chosen within the framework of this research made evident the importance of investigating the issue of vulnerabilities through a methodology capable of bringing out the heterogeneity of situations, the social transformations taking place and the intertwining of several factors (personal, social, ge-

1 In line with the conceptual framework that guides the VULNER project, the category 'protection seekers' is conceived to also include migrants seeking protection but who do not necessarily fit the definition and requirements for applying for international protection. In the Italian context, we focus on migrants who are asylum seekers or having alternative types of protection (for instance related to human trafficking, gender-based violence, age, social inclusion, etc.), as well as on actual undocumented migrants whose applications on these grounds have been rejected.

ographic, situational). The qualitative approach shed light, from the perspective of those involved, on the impact of broader issues – such as the functioning of the protection system at the European and national level or the functioning of local services and administrations – on individual experiences.

The research brings to light how situations of vulnerability may be understood differently by people seeking protection than by social workers and other legal and institutional actors, as well as how these situations may be pre-existing or become evident only at a specific moment in the migration journey.

The report devotes particular attention to how multiple situations of vulnerability are deeply connected to subjective conditions, migration trajectories, living conditions, and protection seekers' agency. The research also shows how various situations of vulnerability can take on different meanings and forms depending on whether they are related to the country of origin, to the journey, to the arrival in Italy, to a long stay in the destination context, or to additional problems caused by having moved to other European countries.

One section of the report investigates how the reforms introduced in Italy between 2017 and 2020 on immigration law addressed protection seekers' experiences of vulnerability, but also contributed in fostering them. Ethnography made it possible to highlight the daily life experiences of people who live or have lived in highly precarious situations, or who experienced forms of control or institutional abandonment.

The report highlights a number of critical issues that need to be addressed in the future. Indeed, the research results made evident how changes in regulations and their effects on procedures and reception services have had a profound impact on territories, services and protection seekers themselves.

The research documented how regulatory actions have often had a vulnerabilizing effect on protection seekers, while they do not seem to have facilitated the identification, recognition and protection of many situations of vulnerability described by migrants interviewed. **The picture that emerges from our work is that several vulnerabilities deemed particularly serious find formal but not necessarily concrete and material recognition, while others tend to be ignored or at least underestimated. This has a negative spillover effect both in the lives of migrant people and on the work of local services and administrations.** Furthermore, we found out that, in recent years, several critical issues that already existed in the system worsened, while the inability to intervene adequately in favor of full recognition and protection of situations of fragility increased. **In our view, it is therefore necessary to intervene at the institutional level and enhance the point of view of protection seekers and social workers, including those working in the non-profit sector.**

Sintesi della ricerca

La seguente ricerca si colloca nell'ambito del progetto di ricerca Horizon2020 "Le vulnerabilità nel regime di protezione internazionale. Come il diritto valuta, si occupa, dà forma e produce le vulnerabilità delle persone richiedenti protezione?" (VULNER, GA 870845) relativamente al contesto italiano.

Il primo report (Vulnerabilities in the asylum and protection system in Italy), basato sulla ricerca condotta nel 2020, si concentrava sulla documentazione e sull'analisi dei sistemi burocratici e giuridici esistenti per identificare e valutare le vulnerabilità delle "persone richiedenti protezione", espressione attraverso la quale ci riferiamo a tutte persone che richiedono protezione, senza considerare dirimente l'esito della loro richiesta (protezione o rigetto).[1]

L'analisi di come la normativa concepisce le vulnerabilità e come predispone strumenti di riconoscimento e di tutela è stata messa a confronto con l'esperienza concreta di esperti/e del diritto e di coloro che, a vari livelli, prendono decisioni nel merito di quali situazioni di vulnerabilità possano trovare un effettivo riconoscimento giuridico. Da un lato, la nostra ricerca qualitativa ha permesso di evidenziare il processo di implementazione delle procedure e l'esperienza concreta di chi interviene direttamente in questo ambito (organi decisori, organizzazioni internazionali, legali ecc.). Dall'altro, il report evidenzia gli effetti della trasposizione di queste misure in prassi concrete, tanto per quanto riguarda le applicazioni più virtuose messe in atto in vari contesti territoriali, quanto lo scollamento tra "law on paper" e "law in practice".

In questo secondo report, basato sulla ricerca etnografica condotta nel 2021, il focus è sull'ambito sociale e, in particolare, sulle esperienze dirette delle persone richiedenti protezione e di chi vi lavora a stretto contatto. **Nella ricerca ci siamo interrogati/e su quale fosse l'opinione che le persone richiedenti protezione e chi lavora nei servizi di accoglienza e di supporto avessero circa il sistema di protezione in Italia, sia per quel che riguarda le procedure previste, sia per quanto concerne le misure di individuazione, di protezione, di accoglienza e di supporto previste per persone che vivono in situazioni di vulnerabilità.** L'inclusione di un punto di vista operativo e "dal basso" ha permesso di verificare e completare quanto emerso nel precedente report.

La ricerca è stata condotta tra aprile 2021 e febbraio 2022, periodo durante il quale sono state condotte 64 interviste in profondità, osservazioni etnografiche in numerosi centri di accoglienza e supporto per persone richiedenti protezione, nonché molteplici conversazioni informali con almeno 200 persone tra richiedenti protezione e persone che lavorano nel settore sociale. Il lavoro è stato svolto in due regioni italiane (Veneto e Lazio) facendo emergere fenomeni trasversali ai due contesti, e quindi di rilevanza nazionale, tanto quanto questioni aventi una salienza prettamente locale.

La ricerca mostra quanto sia indispensabile considerare il complesso tema delle vulnerabilità connesse alle esperienze migratorie attraverso metodi di ricerca qualitativa che vadano oltre il mero dato quantitativo. L'impostazione etnografica data alla ricerca ha permesso di far emergere come la questione delle vulnerabilità vada indagata attraverso una metodologia capace di far emergere l'eterogeneità delle situazioni, le trasformazioni sociali in atto e l'intreccio di molti fattori (personali, sociali, geografici, situaziona-

1 In linea con la cornice concettuale elaborata per il progetto VULNER, questa categoria è concepita anche per includere persone migranti che chiedono protezione, ma che non necessariamente rientrano nella definizione e nei pre-requisiti fissati per fare richiesta di protezione internazionale. Nel contesto nazionale italiano, ci concentriamo su persone migranti che sono richiedenti protezione internazionale o che hanno altre forme di protezione (per esempio connesse al traffico di esseri umani, alla violenza di genere, all'età, all'inclusione sociale, ecc.), così come anche su migranti senza documenti le cui richieste di protezione non sono state accettate.

li). L'approccio qualitativo ha consentito di gettar luce, dal punto di vista dei soggetti coinvolti, sull'impatto di questioni di più ampia portata - quali il funzionamento del sistema di protezione a livello europeo e nazionale, e il funzionamento dei servizi e delle amministrazioni locali - sulle loro esperienze individuali.

La ricerca fa emergere come varie situazioni di vulnerabilità possano essere intese in modo diverso dalle persone richiedenti protezione rispetto al personale a cui si rapportano (sia quello operante a livello istituzionale e burocratico, sia quello coinvolto nell'intervento sociale), nonché come esse possano essere pre-esistenti o manifestarsi soltanto ad un determinato momento del percorso migratorio.

Il report dedica particolare attenzione a quanto le molteplici situazioni di vulnerabilità siano profondamente connesse a condizioni soggettive, alle traiettorie migratorie, alle condizioni di vita e alla possibilità di agire. Parallelamente, la ricerca mostra come le varie situazioni di vulnerabilità possano assumere significati e forme diverse a seconda che siano collegate al Paese di provenienza, al viaggio, all'arrivo in Italia, ad una lunga permanenza nel contesto di destinazione o ad ulteriori problemi causati dall'essersi trasferiti in altri Paesi europei.

Una parte del report mostra come le riforme introdotte in Italia tra il 2017 e il 2020 in materia di diritto dell'immigrazione e di tutela siano state dirette alle esperienze di vulnerabilità delle persone richiedenti protezione, contribuendo in certi casi anche a incrementarle. L'etnografia ha permesso di mettere in evidenza le esperienze di vita quotidiana di persone che vivono o hanno vissuto in situazioni di grande precarietà o che sono state vi forme di controllo o di abbandono istituzionale.

Il report mette in evidenza una serie di aspetti critici rispetto ai quali occorrerebbe intervenire in futuro. Emerge in modo piuttosto significativo come i cambiamenti normativi e quelli che hanno toccato le procedure e l'accoglienza hanno avuto un profondo impatto sui territori, sui servizi e sulle persone richiedenti protezione.

La ricerca documenta come gli interventi normativi abbiano spesso avuto un effetto vulnerabilizzante sulle persone migranti. Questi stessi interventi non sembrano essere stati in grado di favorire l'individuazione, il riconoscimento e la tutela di numerose situazioni di vulnerabilità descritte dalle persone migranti intervistate. **Ne emerge un quadro per il quale una serie di vulnerabilità ritenute particolarmente gravi trovano un riconoscimento formale, ma non necessariamente concreto e materiale, mentre altre tendono ad essere ignorate o quantomeno sottovalutate. Ciò comporta una ricaduta negativa sia nella vita delle persone migranti, sia nel funzionamento di chi lavora nell'ambito dei servizi e delle amministrazioni locali**. Infine, abbiamo riscontrato come negli ultimi anni una serie di criticità già esistenti nel sistema siano aumentate ulteriormente, così come si è acuita l'impossibilità di intervenire adeguatamente in favore di un pieno riconoscimento e tutela delle situazioni di fragilità. **A nostro avviso, si rende quindi necessario un ulteriore intervento a livello istituzionale e una generale valorizzazione del punto di vista e delle competenze delle persone richiedenti protezione e di coloro che lavorano nell'ambito sociale.**

ABBREVIATIONS

AMIF Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

CAS Extraordinary Reception Centre (reception centre managed by NGOs and offering basic services to protection seekers)

COI Country of Origin Information

CPR Centre for Permanence before Repatriation (temporary detention centre for undocumented migrants)

C3 FORM Form that protection seekers fill in at the local police headquarter when they ask for asylum

EASO European Asylum Support Office (former name of EUAA)

EUAA European Union Agency for Asylum

FGM Female Genital Mutilation/Modification

GRETA Group of Experts on Actions against Trafficking in Human Beings

IDP Internally Dislaced Persons (protection seekers within their country)

IOM International Organization for Migration

MSF Doctors Without Borders

N.A.Ve former name of "Veneto Anti-Trafficking Network"

N.A.V.I.G.A.Re "Veneto Anti-Trafficking Network for the Intersections of Actions of Governance"

NGO Non Governmental Organization

PRAL Lazio Anti-Trafficking Plan

SAI System of Reception and Integration (reception centre managed by NGOs and local authorities, offering additional services to refugees and protection seekers)

SIPROIMI former name of SAI

SPRAR former name of SAI

UNHCR United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Italian Context

In the past decade, Italy has experienced profound change due to migration flows and related national policies on immigration. Two major Mediterranean events have played a role in this phenomenon: 1) the outbreak of conflicts in various North African countries (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya), which have affected both local populations and the migrants living in those countries for some time; and 2) European and national policies put in place as a result of these geo-political changes and those in other contexts (Syria) that affect European border states (Turkey/Greece). Drawing on a variety of methodologies and perspectives, studies have revealed the changing flows and diversification of nationalities and conditions of people who have arrived in Italy from the central Mediterranean or along the Balkan route.[1]

Data from Eurostat and the Italian Ministry of the Interior show that, from 2014 to 2017, there was a consistent increase in the number of migrants arriving to Italy by sea as asylum seekers (an average of about 150,000 over four consecutive years, ranging from about 170,000 in 2014 to about 120,000 in 2017), before a sharp decrease from 2018 to 2020.[2] However, the increase should be read in relation to a series of increasingly restrictive EU and national policies, which effectively reduced the importance of other schemes that allowed easier legal access to Europe for reasons other than so-called "international protection"[3] (such as for work). For this reason it is relevant to look at the floating number of arrivals in relation to national and EU rescrictive policies enacted during the last decade.

In the long term, there has been a trend toward the implementation of increasingly restrictive policies by European and national institutions, inspired by policies of *refoulement* and the intent to counter migratory flows that are considered 'irregular'[4]. In this case, there has been an emphasis on policies of border externalisation, militarisation, and the systematisation of mechanisms of detention and of the selection of people upon entry (hotspots, pioneered in Italy and Greece[5]) and exit (CPRs – Centres for Permanence before Repatriation –, which are centres operating as a detention facility but that have not been assimilated into the national detention system[6]). In addition to these actions, there have been collaborations at the EU level and by individual member states (such as Italy) with countries of origin and transit (e.g., Libya, Morocco, Turkey) to block or hinder the arrival of migrants. Emblematic in this regard is the so-called Italy-Libya Memorandum[7], ratified in February 2017 and later renewed, which effectively institutionalised the repressive actions of the Libyan coastal police and tolerated the existence of detention centres in that country (Reviglio, 2020).

1 For a broader discussion, see Ciabarri (2020), Campomori & Ambrosini (2020), Della Puppa & Sanò (2021a), Sòrgoni (2022).
2 Further information and data on arrivals and protection applicants can be found in Eurostat and Ministry of Interior websites at the following links: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/migration-asylum/asylum/database; http://www.libertaciviliimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero (Last consulted on the 27th of July 2022).
3 'International protection' is understood here in line with EU law, as referring to the refugee status and the subsidiary protection status, that is, to the protection status guaranteed to those fleeing persecutions and/or serious harms (Dir. 2011/95/EU, art. 2, a).
4 On the repressive character of migration policies, see Khosravi (2010); Fassin (2011), De Genova (2013), Pinelli (2018), Tazzioli (2018), Campesi (2018).
5 On this topic, see Pinelli (2017).
6 Further information on CPR can be found in Veglio (2020).
7 "Memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of development, combating illegal immigration, trafficking in human beings, smuggling and strengthening border security between the State of Libya and the Italian Republic". Link: https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Libia.pdf (Last consulted on the 27th July 2022).

Restrictive policies toward incoming irregular migrants also resulted in the defunding of sea rescue programs and the implementation of the Dublin Regulation, which aimed to criminalise so-called "secondary movements" and the phenomenon of "asylum shopping".[8] In general, more criminalising and restrictive policies at the European and national levels have made travel more dangerous and have worsened the conditions in which migrants arrive. This has resulted in an increase in the number of deaths in the Mediterranean due to rejections and, more generally, due to the restrictive policies just mentioned. In this context, the actions NGOs take to offer support along the Balkan route or to rescue migrants in the central Mediterranean have been crucial. However, the so-called "Security Decree bis" (Decree Law no. 56, June 2019) criminalised NGOs' action at sea, seeing them as agents that facilitated illegal immigration. Finally, further confirming the increasingly restrictive migration control policies even after the drastic decrease in flows (approximately 34,000 in 2020), there were the actions taken to counter the Sars-Cov-2 epidemic (henceforth, the Covid-19 pandemic). This included "quarantine ships", where newly arrived migrants were confined for varying lengths of time for supposed public health issues (Spada, 2021; Sanò & Firouzi Tabar, 2021), but which turned into further forms of fundamental human rights violations (FRA, 2021).

Those who managed to arrive in Italy and to apply for international protection[9] had to come to terms with a long-term emergency-based approach to the phenomenon, both in terms of procedures and reception.[10] In parallel, international organisations (such as the UNHCR, IOM, and EUAA) tried to take action on two fronts: monitoring access to the international protection procedure, and tracking the vulnerable situations of some individuals who may have "specific needs" as far as procedure and/or reception measures are concerned.

As documented in the report "Vulnerabilities in the asylum and protection system in Italy", published in 2021 by our research team as part of the H2020 project "Vulner: vulnerabilities under the global protection regime" (GA 870845) and focused on the legal framework for protection, so-called "humanitarian protection" (provided for in the Consolidated Text on Immigration 286/1998)[11] has served to identify a number of situations of vulnerability that cannot be framed within the scope of international protection. Its repeal in October 2018 – because of the "Security Decree" (Decree Law no. 113, October 2018) – had several consequences that this report will explain.

The subsequent government introduced towards the end of 2020 a "special protection" in response to the requests coming from various actors (magistrates, lawyers, NGOs, third-sector groups, civil society, etc.) within the so-called "Lamorgese Decree" (Decree Law no. 130, October 2020, implemented by law in December 2020). This protection seems to hold the potential to provide a regular status to people in vulnerable situations. In addition, several lawyers have stated that it could potentially "resolve" the situation of many migrants who formerly received humanitarian protection and who have integrated into Italy

8 On "secondary movements", see Zimmermann (2009), Belloni (2016), Fontanari (2018). On "asylum shopping, see Moore (2013).
9 In this study, we use the term 'protection seekers' to refer to people seeking protection, regardless of their final legal status obtained (protection or rejection). In line with the conceptual framework that guides the VULNER project, this category is conceived to also include migrants seeking protection, but who do not necessarily fit the definition and requirements for applying for international protection. This includes both undocumented migrants and people who achieved other typologies of protection other than international protection (for instance because their were minors or victims of trafficking and labor exploitation).
10 Formally, the right to seek international protection in Italy has been guaranteed by the transposition of European Directives, through the Qualifications Decree (Legislative Decree 251/2007), the Procedure Decree (Legislative Decree 25/2008) and the Reception Decree (Legislative Decree 142/2015).
11 For a description of humanitarian protection in the Italian legal system, see the following article: https://www.dirittoimmigrazionecittadinanza.it/archivio-saggi-commenti/saggi/fascicolo-n-1-2018-1/208-la-protezione-umanitaria-nel-sistema-giuridico-italiano (Last consulted on the 27th July 2022).

from a social work perspective, but who have not been able to renew their "humanitarian protection" status following its repeal and the temporary establishment of a typified form of residence permits (so-called "special cases"[12]) provided by the first "Security Decree" (Decree Law no. 113, October 2018).

In the face of this complex scenario, the present report highlights how support and reception has been re-organised toward newly arrived migrants in need of protection, and particularly toward those who are defined by the authorities as "the most vulnerable". The main objective is to document how procedures, support services and the reception system in Italy identify vulnerabilities, and the extent to which such approach indeed reflects protection seekers' experiences of their own vulnerabilities. If, in the 2021 report, we illustrated at the national level how Italian institutions consider, evaluate and manage the complex issue of vulnerabilities, **this report analyses this same issue from a micro-local perspective** through the experiences of protection seekers and of personnel working at the support and reception services present in the territories where they live. We decided to read the problem of vulnerability mainly in relation to the issue of reception and territorial services, as the 2021 report looked primarily at the function of the institutions in charge of screening and evaluating these issues. By looking at reception areas, we can draw broader conclusions on the topic of vulnerability, transcending the institutional reasoning that frames it mainly with respect to biographical factors and living conditions in the country of origin (Fabini et al, 2019; Sacchi & Sòrgoni, 2019; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a).

To this end, **we highlight a number of overaching issues that characterise the experience of migrants with regard to both the procedures of the Italian system and the reception measures. These questions concern the dimension of *temporality*[13], the *intersectionality*[14] of categories shaping the situation, and the *agency*[15] of protection seekers.**

The notion of *temporality* allows us to understand how much it affects processes of subjugation and subjectification[16] – that is, how certain procedures, reception measures, living conditions and paths of self-determination play a fundamental role in delineating the contours of what we might call "situations of vulnerability." Moreover, dimensions of temporality allow for an analysis of the dynamics of vulnerability to which migrants may be exposed throughout their lives and in their migration trajectories.

Similarly, an *intersectional* perspective allows us to explore additional facets of a issue that positions migrants in highly diverse ways depending on a range of subjective, relational, and contextual situations. Intersectionality as a framework has a long tradition that particularly emphasized the multidimensional charachter of all power relationships, a glance that for a long time remained overlooked (McCall, 2005).

Finally, a look at protection seekers' *agency* allows for a range of discourses, representations and actions situated within a broader framework. Looking at the agency of protection seekers allows them not only to emerge from being passive victims of processes in need of care and protection (Mai, 2018). On the contrary, it shows how these individuals can decide whether to conform to or resist a set of mechanisms and systems that tend to box them within predetermined binaries (regulations, pathways, bureaucratic

12 The list of "special cases" included short-term protection for victims of natural disaster, domestic violence or labor exploitation, people living with health problems and for those who demonstrated a remarkable civic engagement.
13 For an introduction to this concept, see Triandafyllidou (2017).
14 For an introduction to this concept, see Degnen & Tyler (2017).
15 For an introduction to this concept, see Griffiths et al. (2013).
16 The two concepts remind to Foucault's theorization on the restrictions imposed to subjects, but also their efforts to resist against them that contribute in shaping the very way in which their perceive themselves.

processes) or to limit their movements and placements. In their words, through their actions, narratives and representations, we see some of their most significant desires, personal resources, and points of reference. Not necessarily counternarratives and counteractions can be definied as "resistance" or examples of "resilience", because some situations of vulnerability cannot be always solved (Cole, 2016).

1.2 Structure of the research report

After explaining the methodology of the research (chapter 2) and the organization of reception measures in Italy provided for people in vulnerable situations (chapter 3), the central sections of the report (4, 5, 6) address the main issues that emerged during the ethnographic research and during the interviews. Each individual chapter looks at the issue of vulnerability at various levels, attempting to bring into dialogue micro-local issues, individual life experiences and more general issues. Specifically, chapter 4 addresses the issue of vulnerabilities related to subjective conditions of the person (age, gender, health conditions, etc.), factors related to the context of origin, and travel. Chapter 5 addresses the issue of vulnerabilities in relation to everyday interactions and procedures encountered by migrants in situations of vulnerability who are seeking protection. Finally, chapter 6 explores vulnerabilities related to gaps or (in)direct responsibilities of the protection system at local, national, and supra-national levels. This last section considers how local situations have a link to how national and EU policies and institutions conceive, assess, and take care of the protection demands of people considered "particularly vulnerable".

Reference to these cross-cutting issues will allow a more adequate understanding of the limitations of the notion of vulnerability in comparison to an approach focused on single issues, single vulnerabilities, or single territories. The aim is to highlight the extent to which – at the local level as well as at the national and EU levels – there is a need to look at the processes of vulnerability and the multiple factors that also call into play the less visible aspects as well as the transnational and relational implications of the migration phenomenon. In other words, the issue of vulnerability encompasses at the same time various facets involving both biographical factors, intersectional inequalities and contextual determinants.

II. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Methodological approach

The research for this report aims to understand the experiences of people seeking international protection or benefitting from other forms of protection who find themselves or have found themselves in vulnerable situations in the Italian context. During the research, we have also considered protection seekers who have had paths not necessarily connected to the international protection procedure, such as victims of trafficking and severe labour exploitation (protected by paths connected to the "art.18," provided for by the Consolidated Act on Immigration – Legislative Decree 286/1998). In both cases, the aim was to understand how some situations of vulnerability can be linked to personal conditions and/or to the living contexts and migration trajectories of these people.

This report is based on ethnographic research, including interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations. In carrying out the fieldwork, our main reference have been scholars dealing with ethnography of institutional settings and, more precisely, related to asylum (Fassin, 2013; Chatty, 2014; Olivier de Sardan, 2015; Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2019; Gill & Good, 2019). The purpose is to offer a "bottom-up" qualitative perspective with respect to the functioning of the national vulnerability protection system in Italy, investigating the discrepancies existing between official procedures/meaures and concrete actions in migration issues.

The research was conducted in two Italian regional contexts of strong interest for the phenomenon of migration and reception policies such as Veneto and Lazio. Importantly, while Lazio is the region where various central institutions and humanitarian organizations active on the issue of migration and vulnerability are based, the latter is a region that neighbors the northeastern border and has been characterized by a restrictive policy approach to the issue of reception.

The field research in Veneto was conducted by Dany Carnassale in the provinces of Venice, Padua, Treviso and – solely with respect to the issue of trafficking – Verona. Field research in Lazio was conducted by Martina Millefiorini in the provinces of Rome and Latina. Dany Carnassale also carried out two short research periods in Rome in July and December 2021, corresponding to the initial and final moments of the research in Lazio, during which he worked closely with his colleague. Specifically, in the Lazio context he mainly conducted ethnographic observations and interviews with staff of support services for migrants in vulnerable situations. We mainly attended activities and meetings organized in reception centres (like Italian classes, private consultancies for administrative issues or job/housing orientations), and help desks for protection seekers (informative points, legal support for undocumented or homeless protection seekers – including those applying for a place in a reception centre – and other services concering basic needs). Apart the in-depht interviews, during the fieldwork we had the chance to talk with more than 200 perople (considering both protection seekers and personnel working in reception centres and other services), These encounters provided many information and insights that facilitated our understanding of the complex topic of vulnerability in relation to migratory paths and requests of protection.[17]

17 For the list of reception centres and services in which we carried out the fieldwork, see Appendix 1.

In most cases, interviews were often thought of as the concluding moment of a period of ethnographic observation, so that migrants could develop more confidence and have ample time to ask questions about the project (later deciding whether to participate with an interview or facilitating access to other potential participants). The ethnographic approach allowed the comparison of data that emerged from interviews with issues that came from observations or informal conversations that took place during activities involving or targeting migrants. The combination of different data sources and perspectives on the issue of vulnerability allowed us to give account both of particular and underepresented situations and of those that are more recurrent. Such a look made it possible to document processes of vulnerabilization and the capacity of various social actors (migrants, experts, social workers) to cope with them.

It is useful to emphasize the inductive dimension of the research, which led to the inclusion of some research contexts and research questions that were not initially envisaged (Olivier de Sardan, 2015). Similarly, the comparison with people who have experienced reception procedures or measures in other Italian regions or European (and non-European) countries has allowed us to broaden the scope of our analysis to include other macro issues that are relevant to the understanding of the policies envisaged at the national and supranational levels with respect to migrants seeking protection for situations of vulnerability of various kinds. It was thanks to an active listening to protection seekers' voices that we were able to include some aspects that we did not initially took into account (Chatty, 2014).

2.2 Fieldwork preparation

After the preparation of the research tools (February – March 2021), there was a first **exploratory phase of the work (April – May 2021).** After mapping the different realities connected to the reception of migrants in Veneto and Lazio, we analysed data regarding the presence of persons seeking protection in the two regional territories. It was essential, in order to gain access to such data, to interact with prefectures, local authorities and experts who knew the organization of reception and services offered in these territories. The comparison between the available quantitative data and the mapping allowed us to identify the places and contexts for research that were most in line with the project's objectives.

Next, the research team selected contexts that allowed for an in-depth examination of how regulatory changes in recent years have impacted the ways and possibilities of taking care of situations of particular vulnerability, but also which may have produced vulnerabilization. In identifying the research contexts, consideration was given to the need to witness the plurality of forms taken by support services for migrants, as well as the forms of reception arranged. For this reason, reception centres with rather different characteristics were identified. The underlying hypothesis was that the type of reception facility, its geographical location (city or province) and its size (small, medium, large) could illustrate the daily challenges in the path of social inclusion and contact with the services present in the territories[18].

In addition to the two major forms of reception (CAS, "extraordinary reception centres", and SAI, "system of reception and integration"), which account for almost all of the available reception places in Italy, we have also taken into account forms of reception that are less relevant from a numerical point of view, but

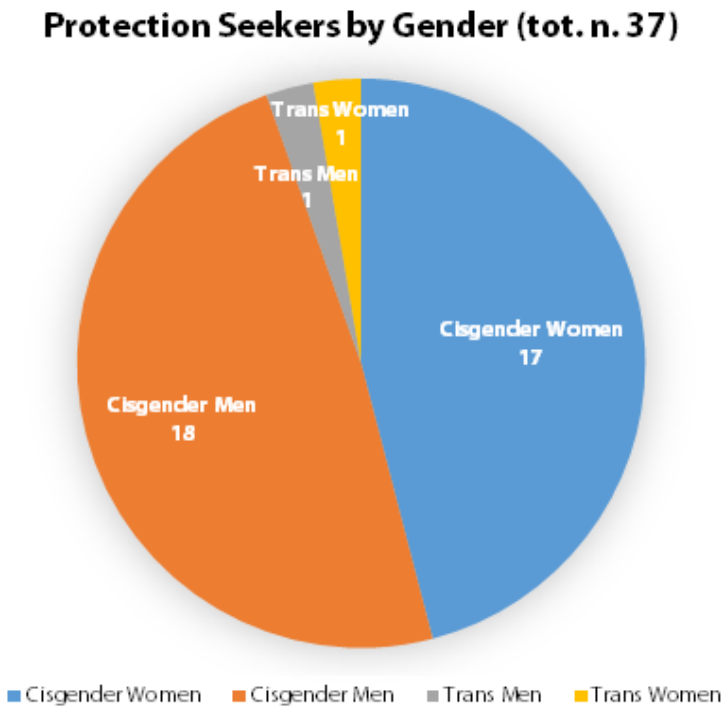
18 For a list of the centres and services that hosted the research or had some of its members participate, see the Appendix section.

no less significant. This is the case of the "humanitarian corridors"[19], the "Refugees Welcome" projects[20] and some small social private projects (municipal dormitories, "third reception"), sometimes linked to AMIF projects (Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund), financed through government funds[21].

The necessary authorizations were also obtained to access research locations that are generally closed to the outside public (e.g., protection seekers' shelters and territorial services that cater to migrants). Such authorizations were also useful considering that many institutional and non-institutional interlocutors had particularly restrictive regulations in place related to the evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic (in some cases there were also protracted forms of "home office" for their employees).

Once the centres and services for ethnographic observation were selected, we started to select persons for the interviews, both among protection seekers and people working in care and support settings. In both cases, efforts were made to include a plurality of perspectives and experiences to witness various facets of the complex issue of vulnerabilities.

In the phase June-December 2021, the actual field research was carried out: it included ethnographic observations in the selected contexts, in-depth interviews with 37 migrants (protection seekers, refugees, holders of other forms of protection, or undocumented) and 27 people usually working in support or reception services[22]. The involvement of professionals working in social services was important to offer another perspective to the observations made and testimonies provided by the interviewed migrants. The involvement of these pratictionners was very useful to shed lights on protection seekers' vulnerabilities, to which they are being confronted on an everyday basis. Their experiences were useful also to reflect on the limitations of the current legal and bureaucratic practices in addressing them, that we documented in our first research report. In this regard, as mentioned above, beyond the in-depth interviews conducted, ethnography and its informal engagements with a larger number of migrants, intake and support service workers added further perspectives, experi-

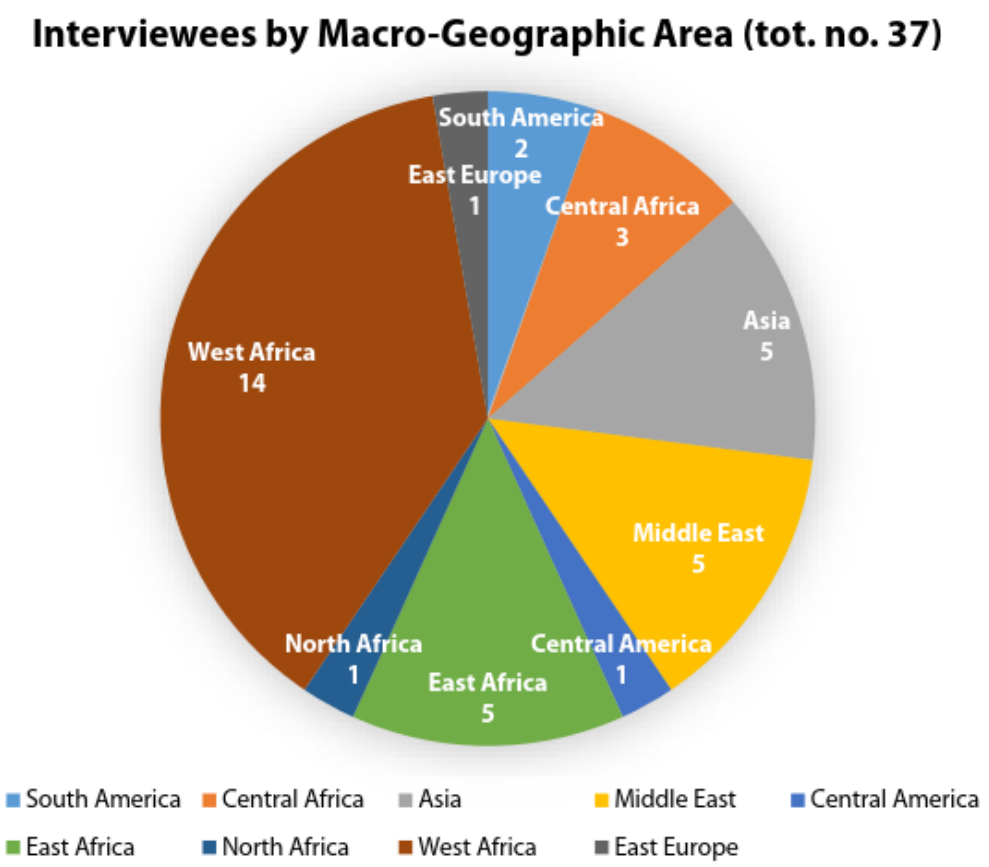


19 "Humanitarian corridors" are alternative and safe resettlement programs for refugees and protection seekers. For further information, see the following link: https://www.humanitariancorridor.org/en/humanitarian-corridors/ (Last consulted on 27 July 2022).
20 "Refugees Welcome" is a voluntary-based NGO proposing domestic reception for protection seekers and refugees. For further information, see the following link: https://refugees-welcome.it/ (Last consulted on 27 July 2022).
21 For further information about AMIF projects, see the following link: https://www.interno.gov.it/it/temi/immigrazione-e-asilo/fondi-europei/fondo-asilo-migrazione-e-integrazione-fami (Last consulted on 27 July 2022)
22 A couple of interviews, initially planned in December 2021, have been rescheduled under requests of participants in January and February 2022 despite the fieldwork was officially finished.

ences and critical views on what was emeging during our interviews. Therefore, the analysis that follows in the next sections is to be considered based both on data from interviews and on data regarding the ethnographic dimension of the research in a broader sense.

2.3 Interviews and profiles of participants

In total, 64 in-depth interviews were carried out with protection seekers, experts and workers of reception and support services. Dany Carnassale conducted a total of 36 interviews (of which 17 with migrants) in Veneto and Lazio, while Martina Millefiorini conducted 22 interviews (20 with migrants) in Lazio; Letizia Palumbo carried out 6 interviews with operators/experts in the area of trafficking and exploitation.[23] In defining the target for the interviews, we set ourselves the goal of reaching a balanced number of women and men, involving people of different ages and heterogeneous geographical backgrounds, as well as with diverse migratory situations and experiences.



In fact, as far as migrants are concerned, the field research allowed us to engage with people from very different backgrounds in both Veneto and Lazio. **A good number of interview participants came predominantly from Sub- Saharan African countries (particularly West and East Africa) and Asia (particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh).** A numerically smaller number, on the other hand, come from countries in North Africa, the Middle East, Central America, and South America. The diversity of provenances also translates into a **diversity of travel types**, ranging from arrival by air (mainly people from the Americas and some people who arrived via humanitarian corridors from the Middle East or others who made stopovers in non-EU countries) to crossing from the Central Mediterranean (primarily by people from Sub- Saharan Africa, but also some people from Bangladesh), and including also the walking route (mainly by people from Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan).[24] In addition, it is important to clarify that our re-

23 A limited number of interviews were co-interviewed and attributed to those who played a major role during the interview and/or in its organization or management.
24 For further details on protection seekers and refugees who participated with an interview in this research project, see Appendix 2.

search participants are very heterogenous from the point of view of their legal status at the moment of the interview: they include current applicants in the asylum procedure; undocumented migrants who were about to start their application or whose application was finally rejected; and finally people that had recently received a positive response giving them refugee status or other forms of protection foreseen by the Italian law. Involving people at different stages and with different experiences of the protection system gave us the opportunity to compare different profiles in terms of time of arrival, outcomes of the procedure, type of accomodation and other support services they had been offered, etc.

Regarding people working in support or shelter services, we tried to involve a balanced number of people in both regions. Specifically, **12 interviews were conducted with social workers and experts in Lazio and 11 in Veneto, with the remaining (4) being with practitionners and experts at national level**.25 Similarly, we sought to give voice to people who are experts on specific issues (e.g., human trafficking, and severe exploitation), as well as from diverse observation points (social workers in reception or territorial services, NGOs, support associations, local or national level experts). **Considering their roles or professional profiles**, **14 interviews were conducted with people working in NGOs, 7 with people working in reception centres for protection seekers, 4 with lawyers and 2 with other experts.26** This allowed various issues to be declined based on the experiences, knowledge, and expertise of interlocutors.

2.4 Ethical issues

It should be specified that all people's names mentioned in this report take into account the choice made by the participating persons through the informed consent forms that we have collected. Specifically, **all the names of the protection seekers are pseudonyms** chosen by them, while the other research participants have in many cases decided to waive privacy and have consented with respect to the possibility of having the name of the institution/service/centre in which they work appear.

The **involvement of both a male and a female researcher made it possible to reach out to protection seekers with different profiles**, taking into account the gendered dynamics that pervade the relationships established in the field. This also made it possible to address particularly sensitive topics (e.g., gender-based violence, sexual explotation, sexual orientation, etc.), toward which it may provoke a potential embarrassment or closure because of the interviewer's gender identity[27]. Care was also taken to address any fears related to the disclosure of a range of information deemed private and personal, providing reassurance about the handling of personal data and about the VULNER project's ethical protocol.[28]

25 For further details on experts and social workers who participated with an interview in this research project, see Appendix 2.
26 See Appendix 2.
27 To clarify this point we can report the example of women who experienced sexual violence and who could not be necessarily at ease in talking about this traumatic experience with a male researcher.
28 For further details see https://www.vulner.eu/106307/Ethics

III. THE LEGAL AND BUREAUCRATIC FRAMEWORK: VULNERABILITY IN PROCEDURES AND RECEPTION

3.1. The normative setting

The reception system for migrants in Italy has profoundly changed because of the regulatory modifications introduced – both at the procedural and reception level – between 2017 and 2020, which were documented in last year's report.[29] After an increase in arrivals by sea, there was a multiplication of reception management bodies during the period from 2014 to 2017. After the approval, in 2018, of the so-called "Nuovo capitolato" ("New specification") – a regulation that enshrines the new measures and costs provided for reception in CAS reception centres[30] – the **reception scenario in Veneto and Lazio, as well as in the rest of the whole country, went through a radical transformation**, with some territorial specificities. In the years 2014-2017, big reception centres hosting applicants for international protection started to appear in several local areas.[31]

Another reason for this governmental choice was the political unwillingness of many municipal authorities to host SPRAR/SIPROIMI (former names of SAI reception centers, that acquired the new name only from December 2020 with the Lamorgese Decree). **Such so-called "scattered reception centres" are organized around micro-housing, rather than big reception centres.** Following the closure of the biggest centres and the so-called "Nuovo capitolato" regulating the measures and costs of reception, some NGOs that operated reception centres have disappeared or decided to stop participating in calls for applications. On the contrary, in some cases other realities that had no experience in the sector – or that were moved by economic logics distant from those that should characterize this sector – came forward. In Lazio, specifically in Rome and Latina, the actual numbers of big reception centres have not yet reached the exorbitant figures of those in Veneto, but they still have been very present and continue to be quite widespread, usually in peripheral areas.

Changes described above also convey an idea of reception that follows a cost-benefit economic logic, according to which reception to protection seekers – being considered an expense item – is to be rationalized. This led to an increase in **inefficiencies and to the inability to make reception a preparatory moment for social inclusion of newly arrived protection seekers.** Specifically, services such as Italian

29 Briefly summarized, the reference is to the introduction of the so-called "Minniti-Orlando Decree" (Decree Law 13/2017, converted by Law 46/2017), which, among other things, repealed the appellate degree in the international protection procedure. There was a further regulatory change with the so-called "Security Decrees" (Decree Law 113/2018, implemented by Law 132/2018), which abolished "humanitarian protection" and introduced typified forms of protection called "special cases." From a procedural point of view, this decree introduced the so-called "accelerated procedure" for people from certain countries (so-called "safe" countries of origin) or who are in certain circumstances (e.g. undocumented when crossing the border). At the same time, the so-called "Security Decree" formally excluded for asylum seekers with pending procedures and to holders of "humanitarian protection" the possibility to access SAI reception centres (designed for people already holders of international protection). Finally, the so-called "Lamorgese Decree" (Decree Law 130/2020) re-introduced a form of protection alternative to international protection, called "special protection", and the possibility for protection seekers to get access to SAI reception centres. It is beyond the scope of this report to address in detail some of the issues just mentioned. Therefore, for more details about the measures provided by these regulations, please refer to the report of the first year of Vulner research: https://www.vulner.eu/78645/VULNER_WP4_Report1.pdf

30 For further details regarding reception costs, minimum services provided, and information regarding CAS reception centres, see the attachments available at: https://www.interno.gov.it/it/amministrazione-trasparente/bandi-gara-e-contratti/schema-capitolato-gara-appalto-fornitura-beni-e-servizi-relativo-alla-gestione-e-funzionamento-dei-centri-prima-accoglienza (Last consulted on 27 July 2022)

31 For the Veneto region, examples of such areas include the area called Prandina (in the town of Padova), the areas of Cona (a rural area of the outskirt of Venice) and of Bagnoli di Sopra (in a rural area of the outskirt of Padova), which housed many hundreds of people (up to 1.5000 each) in each facility (usually organized with big, shared tents).

courses, psychological and legal assistance were no longer funded in the CAS reception centres. The analysis of these data and scenario also led us to reflect on how these changes concerning reception had a strong impact on the lives of the people housed at the time, of those who passed through, as well as of those who are currently there.[32]

Beyond the general reception system that benefits those who applied for international protection, **the research also brought us into contact with the anti-trafficking entities running shelters for people who have suffered sexual and/or labour exploitation in Veneto and Lazio**. As far as Veneto is concerned, in the spring of 2021 the "N.A.Ve Project"[33] (Veneto Anti-Trafficking Network), of which the city of Venice had been the leader since the early 2000s, ended. Recently, the region took over that role in the new project called N.A.V.IG.A.Re[34] (Veneto Anti-Trafficking Network for the Intersections of Actions of Governance). Within the framework of this research, the main interlocutors on trafficking had a great deal of experience and a good degree of team and reception structuring, both regarding Veneto and Lazio. In addition to the usual measures aimed to identify and intercept people potentially involved in trafficking and serious labour and/or sexual exploitation, these entities are active with street units and, in a multi-agency collaboration, relate to other institutions such as police headquarters (*Questura*), Territotial Commissions for the Recognition of International Protection (henceforth Territorial Commissions), Civil Tribunals (henceforth Tribunals) and unions.[35] Regarding the support provided to people, they accompany them to the competent institutions for the bureaucratic-administrative part (police headquarters, Tribunals, and Territorial Commissions), as well as for meetings of other types (facilitation for health visits, activation of internships, relationship with social workers, etc.). In Lazio, there is a regional coordination project (PRAL project[36], Lazio Anti-Trafficking Project) that currently connects about 12 anti-trafficking entities, as well as several other specific projects focused on issues concerning sexual exploitation (Roxanne Project[37]) and labour exploitation.

3.2. Institutional setting

It is also important to outline how institutions understand the issue of vulnerability in relation to migration and application for protection, as it is understood at the decision-making and support level, based on what is formally provided for in the Italian protection system and from what is discussed more fully in the first report (Vulnerabilities in the asylum and protection system in Italy).

First of all, it is important to refer to the **action carried out by the major international organizations (UNHCR, IOM, EUAA)** with respect to the so- called "specific needs" brought by some migrants as opposed to those commonly present in the migrant population. The research carried out last year showed how much the action of these organizations has developed on various levels, and this influenced the

32 These considerations are in line with other research project concerning asylum reception conditions in Italy (Sacchi & Sòrgoni, 2019; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021). Further details about the implications of these reflections will be explored in chapters 4, 5 and 6.
33 Further information at the following website: http://www.progettonave.it/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)
34 Further information at the following website: https://www.regione.veneto.it/article-detail?articleId=12211467 (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)
35 Further information about these institutions are given in the following paragraph (3.2).
36 Further information at the following website: https://dev.dirittisociali.org/pral-progetto-antitratta-lazio/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)
37 Further information at the following website: https://www.comune.roma.it/web/it/scheda-servizi.page?contentId=INF38555 (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)

approach taken by various local actors (institutional, administrative, and social) regarding the screening, identification, assessment and support of what are considered "situations of vulnerability" (Busetta et al., 2021).

For example, the EASO (former name of EUAA) initiated in 2015 a collaboration at all levels of the procedure[38], which led to the implementation of the C3 form, i.e., the document that formalizes the asylum application and now includes a specific point in which to report any situations of vulnerability. EASO has had a temporary support role in the Territorial Commissions and Civil Tribunals, joining their staff in an administrative capacity and not in the decision-making phase. EASO's action focused mainly on preparing, updating and expanding COI (Country of Origin Information), with the aim of filling the knowledge gap on a heterogeneous set of instances concerning protection seekers' countries of origin.

During the same period, IOM and UNHCR developed a series of actions already in the hubs and hotspots where pre-identification and triage of newly arrived persons by sea takes place. In these contexts – not without great difficulties, contradictions, and compromises – action has been directed at how to facilitate the **identification of persons with "special needs" by virtue of their personal and subjective status, in accordance with national and international regulations**.[39] In principle, the main purpose of these actions is to prevent such individuals from being assigned to unsuitable reception centres and their procedure from being prioritized, as would be expected. Some situations of vulnerability are more visible and related to a very young or advanced age: a very serious health disability, illness, a pregnancy condition or the presence of new-borns. These situations have provided for a series of channels aimed at dealing with these conditions. However, those situations that are less obvious or not visible at all (e.g. issues related to torture, sexual violence, trafficking, etc.) risk being directed to contexts where protection seekers will not necessarily find support. In general, in this report we will show how "early identification" actions seem particularly difficult and contrast with other control devices and a number of policies that move in the opposite direction (e.g., the so-called "accelerated procedures" provided by the Security Decree and the cost-cutting of CAS reception[40]).

Also worth mentioning is the **role played by UNHCR within the Territorial Commissions** – until 2017 as components with an investigative function and later as supervisors/advisors and participants only in decisions[41] – in an attempt to legitimize a more attentive look at the recognition of situations of vulnerability, albeit reproducing a series of standardizing tools not always capable of capturing the complexity of the issues reported by migrants.

It is also useful to recall the action carried out by UNHCR and other NGOs in local areas through **training opportunities aimed at reception staff.** Here the goal has been to raise the bar *vis-à-vis* the issue of the "specific needs" of protection seekers, with the specific aim of addressing these issues based on their practical needs. However, such actions have been uneven, as it is impossible to organize them in a wide-

38 More information can be found at the following link: https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/20161214%20EASO%20OP%20Italy.pdf (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).
39 For additional information, see the report produced by ASGI (Association for Legal Studies on Immigration) and reported in the website of Asylum in Europe: https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/italy/reception-conditions/special-reception-needs-vulnerable-groups/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)
40 For further information, see paragraph 5.2.4 of the first Italian Vulner report: Vulnerability in the Asylum and Protection System in Italy
41 The recent re-organization of the Territorial Commissions saw the exit of UNHCR from the latter role in favor of human rights experts as of 2022.

spread and systematic way. So, there is a risk that such actions will have limited impact even in the face of the significant turnover affecting workers in the reception system the major organizational changes that have affected this sector in recent years.

Finally, mention should also be made of the **role played by the "Servizio Centrale"** ("Central Office") the institution that coordinates local SAI reception centres (co-managed at the local level by a municipal authority and an entity that materially organizes their management). This office periodically produces a report in which there is explicit mention of the issue related to specific needs of people experiencing situations identified as particularly vulnerable.[42]

42 Further information can be found in the website of Servizio Centrale. This is the report published in 2021 and showing data of SAI reception centres in Italy: https://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Rapporto-SIPROIMI_SAI_leggero.pdf (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

IV. VULNERABILITY AND PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

4.1 Vulnerability in countries of origin: the impact of life conditions in the home country

In this chapter, we discuss how some **situations of vulnerability can be traced back to the protection seekers' personal circumstances and biographical features**. To do so, we draw on the personal stories we collected in Lazio and the Veneto regions. Referring to a selection of the collected testimonies, we will see how a number of vulnerabilities can be traced back to the protection seekers' own **identities** (their age, gender, minority membership, presence of a chronic illness or disability), or to **contextual determinants of their country of origin** (poverty, exploitation, family arrangements) or those of **transit** (torture, violence, detention).[43] We show how recognising, assessing and taking charge of such situations of vulnerability require that **we look carefully at how personal circumstances change over time, how they become intertwined with other personal and relational factors, and how they may either worsen a person's living conditions or activate particular responses to lessen their effects.** As such, this section addresses the dimensions of temporality, the intersections of personal and contextual factors, and migrants' agency (Griffiths et al. 2013; Giudici, 2013; Fontanari, 2021; Pitzalis, 2022). Finally, **we show how we must frame certain circumstances in a relational rather than a merely individual perspective** (Della Puppa & Sano, 2021a; Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021).

The people who undertake migratory paths and then find themselves in Italy in search of protection have complex premises that vary according to their territories of origin, age, gender, the type of journey they are undertaking and other personal conditions (Bartolini et al., 2020). It is important to underscore the need to examine the issue of vulnerability in relation to this **heterogeneity** of personal and starting conditions, as it has major implications for how we understand the protection seekers' perspectives. Such subjective perceptions and considerations of situations of vulnerability are not necessarily reflected in the way institutions in countries of origin, transit or destination look at their subjectivities, paths and demands (Mai, 2018).

When speaking about their backgrounds, the migrants we interviewed mentioned some particularly difficult situations that stemmed from **poverty**. Sometimes, generic references to "poverty" are commonly used by asylum authorities to dismiss application for international protection, labelling those protection seekers as "economic migrants". However, "poverty" may be one of the several factors that can contribute in moving elsewhere is search of protection, because social determinants behind international migrations are mixed. Our research did not aim to identify the reasons why protection seekers fled, but to look at how they reported relevant information about former and current conditions of vulnerability. In this case, poverty has been one of the most reccurring issues that contribute to the decision or the necessity to leave the place in which our partcipants were living. A substantial number of respondents reported coming from fairly large and, in some cases, extended families. As far as socio-economics are concerned, most of the migrants whose experiences are included in the research report lived in situations of deep poverty that sometimes forced them to begin working as pre-adolescents to contribute to the family budget. In other cases, a difficult starting economic situation became worse due to the loss of primary

43 References to situations of vulnerability related more to the destination context and procedures for applying for international protection will be covered more in chapter 5.

family ties (parents, close relatives) because of their death, divorce/separation, or intra-family conflicts. In other cases, it was the severance of other relationships (e.g., with partners, friends, or employers) that suddenly worsened the socio-economic situations of the people we encountered during this research.

Some of those we interviewed highlighted how their condition of vulnerability originated or worsened due to unforeseeable situations, such as **parenthood**. *Karin*, a 24-year-old Nigerian woman in Lazio, traced her difficulties to when she had to interrupt her studies because of her pregnancy. She left her family, as they thought she was too young to become a mother. This led her to follow a partner who was unable to provide her stability, and she ultimately began her migration path to Italy at the age of 16, leaving her child in Nigeria. In other cases, it was the experience of being a son/daughter that made it necessary to come to terms with a difficult family situation. *Djibril*, a 25-year-old Malian man, recounted how his father's sudden disappearance – while his mother was pregnant – made it imperative that he started working as a porter at the age of 13. This enabled him to financially help his mother, who had to support him, his younger brother and the new-born twins.

The issue of parenting emerged in other forms in two other stories, recounted respectively by *Maryan*, from Gambia, and *Nour*, from Syria, both 36 years old at the time of the interview. *Maryan* described being strongly subordinated to family decisions since the age of 12, when she had to undergo FGM.[44] Retrospectively, she spoke of it as a "family tradition" that could lead to isolation and social and verbal stigmatisation for girls who did not endure it. This trauma, which marked her childhood and adolescence, came back in another form even after her arrival in Italy, as an eventual repatriation would mean that her daughter could also be subjected to it. Going back to *Maryan*'s time in Gambia, she recounted how she struggled to escape an arranged marriage, eventually deciding to marry a boy toward whom her parents had not expressed a favourable opinion. A further element of vulnerability emerged in her life when she gave birth to her daughter, who unfortunately had serious respiratory issues. This led her to seek help and possible solutions to improve her child's health condition. Finally, she managed to find support from a hospital and later obtained a visa to Italy to access better medical care. *Maryan*'s story helps us reflect on the theme of vulnerability in a relational sense, connecting a personal situation to a relational one (the presence of a sick child).

Nour's story also reflects a situation of relational vulnerability, specifically in relation to the health of her eldest son. Nour grew up in a rather large family and had 10 siblings. Her eldest son, who was 14 years old at the time of the interview, was born with a disability and needed a wheelchair. Initially, *Nour* and her husband *Abdul* (also interviewed) managed to secure care for their son, but the outbreak of war in Syria complicated the situation. In the following years, *Nour* – who had given birth to another child – found herself facing some very difficult periods due to the ongoing war and the temporary absence of her husband, who had moved to Lebanon in the attempt to provide economic support by working abroad. Unfortunately, the departure of the doctor who was following her son for medical treatment, and the inability to be guaranteed adequate care in the hospital, led to her decision to move to Lebanon as well. There, *Nour* and *Abdul*'s request for help did not find immediate and concrete responses from international organizations and NGOs in the area. However, MSF[45] subsequently opened a channel with the "humanitarian corridors" project managed locally by the Waldensian Church to relocate them to France or

44 FGM alternately means "female genital mutilation" or "female genital modification" depending on the type of practice in question. For a multidisciplinary study to the topic, see the following report: https://mapfgm.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Guia-Ingles.pdf (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).
45 Here referring to the NGO Medicines sans Frontiers https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

Italy. Following a procedure that lasted about a year, during which the family had a series of preparatory meetings for the relocation, they received the go-ahead to relocate to Italy as part of the "humanitarian corridors" managed by the Waldensians.[46]

Giorgia and *Alessandra*, two of the social workers involved in the relocation and reception projects for protection seekers arriving via humanitarian corridors in Veneto and Lazio, referred to a very specific issue. Indeed, situations such as those described – related to health issues or family situations – can be addressed through enhanced humanitarian corridors, preventing protection seekers from exposing themselves to the risks associated with dangerous journeys. At the same time, their narratives stressed that in the resettlement programs some aspects (size of the family and health issues) can be additional elements for being considered eligible for the "humanitarian corridors" from Lebanon.

The testimony of *Sara*, a 49-year-old Jordanian woman, showed how difficult relationships with in-laws could also lead to a desire to imagine a different path for oneself and, to a greater extent, for one's children. *Sara* worked in Jordan and in the Gulf countries as an engineer with her husband (also an engineer). However, her husband's family requested to withdraw her daughter – who they considered "of marrying age" – and her eldest son – who they wanted to work – from school. This caused her to break family ties, and she decided, at the age of 45, to move to Germany to allow her children to pursue their studies. Her agency here is clear; her account reflects the desires, personal ambitions and symbolic-material resources that protection seekers mobilise throughout their lives.

The effects of the intertwine between povery and parenthood can be found in the testimony of a 31-year-old Venezuelan woman, *Gioia*. Although she came from a middle-class family, the socio-economic situation in Venezuela (the scarcity of food, the absence of basic goods, such as medicines, and the non-regularity of some basic services, such as electricity), and of her family (the loss of her husband's job while they had a baby girl) shaped her decision to move to Italy, where she already had a contact person (her mother-in-law). Her decision came in response to a situation that was gradually eroding their life chances. *Gioia* recounted the trauma she experienced in seeing a family rummage through a garbage bin in search of food, a scene she could not have imagined witnessing even a few years earlier. Moreover, her sense of responsibility and desire to "give a future" to her daughter (just 3 years old at the time) shaped her decision. In this case, the collective economic effort of her extended family enabled the household to move to Italy to attempt to improve their living conditions. Unfortunately, *Gioia* moved from the socio-economic precariousness of Venezuela to the socio-economic reality of Italy at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. This scenario completely reshaped her plan, forcing her to find alternative solutions, including working off the books as a cleaner to have a minimum economic income.

Other testimonies also voiced themes related to international events, including internal **conflicts and war**, as the main reason for choosing to leave home. *Hassan*, *Ibrahim*, and *Keleta* from the Horn of Africa and *Serge* from RDC (Democratic Republic of Congo), voiced this theme. However, others recounted situations of vulnerability, fragility and precariousness related to more personal issues or to relational choices. These testimonies show the **importance of looking at vulnerability in relation to both the individual and their social network, going beyond simplistic reasoning that leads to standardised and culturalized categorisations of contexts or backgrounds**, such as those that stereotype Nigerian women as prototypical victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation or migrant men as not subject to trafficking or exploitation (Mai, 2018; Pinelli, 2019; Semprebon et al. 2021). Indeed, our ethnographic work

46 For more details about the "humanitarian corridors" project, see the following report: https://www.humanitariancorridor.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/REPORT_ENG_WEB.pdf (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

revealed situations of vulnerability that were not necessarily related to particularly "visible" issues, such as age (too young or old) or body (disabilities or serious illnesses)[47], also discussed in the previous report (section 4.2).

The testimonies offered by *Moussa*, a 29-year-old Burkinabé man, and *Happy*, a 28-year-old from Cameroon, are examples of the importance of **'invisibile' features** in determing protection seekers' vulnerability. *Moussa* had almost no schooling, as the death of his father when he was only 7 years old led him, much like *Djibril*, mentioned earlier, to work as a shepherd from the age of 10 to 16. *Moussa* eventually decided to marry a girl who belonged to a Christian minority, and he had to convert to her **religion**, a decision that caused his village community to condemn him for the crime of apostasy. As a result, he faced problems in his community, to the point that his mother was killed as a form of intimidation, and *Moussa* was forced to flee, no longer safe in his own village.

In *Happy*'s case, his sexual experimentation as a teenager led him to realize that he had a preference for boys, which jeopardised his relationship with his family and community. He came from a rural background, where **homosexuality** was perceived as an intolerable and unjustifiable abomination. The danger to his own life and that of his partner led him to flee to other parts of Cameroon, well before he considered journeying to Europe. He lived for several years both in metropolitan settings (Douala, Yaoundé) and in more peripheral locations (small villages). In both contexts, however, he found himself in dangerous situations and in profound difficulty finding support and self-realisation. In these cases, the supra-individual and relational dimensions of the vulnerability process return, as the absence, sudden loss or impairment of primary social and family ties show how some people can plunge more deeply into precarity. *Happy*'s story shows the importance of seeing the issue of temporality in relation to the dimension of travel, the focus of the next section.

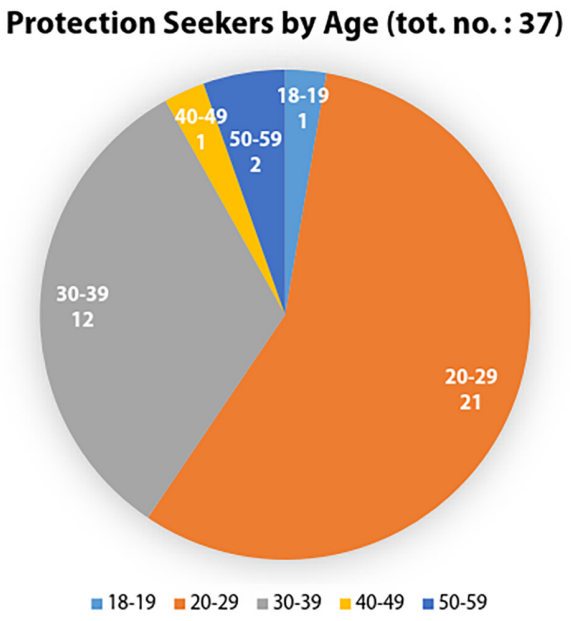
In this section, we highlighted that **former conditions and personal circumstances may have long-term effects in migratory trajectories of protection seekers**. Considering **socio-economic background and other social circumstances beyond the mere individual level** can facilitate also our understanding in all the challenges experienced by protection seekers on the move and after the arrival when they have to cope with the situations of vulnerability that they are experiencing.

4.2 Vulnerability on the move: the impact of travel

In general terms, the "poorest" people frequently lack the resources that are required for the expensive journey to Italy (Van Hear, 2004). For this reason, some people can experience debt bondage in case they are forced to flee from very complex situations. Reflections based on **class and socio-economic resources** reminds the importance of considering also these aspects when approaching the topic of migratory paths. Interviews with people from other geographical backgrounds than those described in the previous section (e.g., from the Americas, Eastern Europe) have shown how even **coming from more affluent social classes does not necessarily prevent them to sink into situations of isolation and precariousness. This can happen suddenly in the country of origin, as well as during the journey or after arrival in Italy**.

47 For a broader discussion on the role of the body in asylum procedures, see Fassin & d'Halluin (2005); Good (2007), Fassin & Rechtman (2009); Beneduce (2015); Gill & Good (2019), Perocco (2019) and Sòrgoni (2019).

For example *Serge*, a protection seeker from the Democratic Republic of Congo, former university student and from a relatively affluent family, recounted how the conditions of travel levelled down different conditions of departure. Indeed, he reported the importance of sharing food and water expenses during the journey to Libya, as well as very harsh periods during which he was homeless. The condition of homelessness and profound existential precariousness –not to mention the abuse and violence suffered during the journey – marked many of the people encountered during the research (Bartolini & Zakoska-Todorovska, 2020). **Most of the testimonies collected in Veneto and Lazio refer to situations of vulnerability created by the migratory journey and that were not always adequately considered either by the institutions in charge of assessing such instances, or by some of the people working in support services aimed at providing standardized basic services** (Perocco, 2019).



A sense of deep insecurity and uncertainty about their future led young men and women from Sub-Saharan Africa to embark on the journey, in several cases without informing or having the consent of their families. Their young **age** placed some boys and girls in vulnerable and violent situations, as they have been exposed to the actions of human traffickers encountered at several points in their journey. Some accounts of boys/girls, who undertook the journey as minors, give a very clear idea of how the issue of age is central in retrospectively reading several central problems (Bartolini & Zakoska-Todorovska, 2020). In the interviews, it emerges how, in the face of a series of unexpected events or long-lasting processes, protection seekers have enacted a strong sense of responsibility that goes beyond their own subjectivity and calls into question a series of family responsibilities. This led them to decide to embark on the journey to Europe (thus not necessarily Italy) to be able to improve their condition of departure. A journey about which they only at times had information, sometimes only partial or even distorted.

For example, while *Ibrahim* (Somalia) spoke of a kind of "secret school" in Ethiopia, in which she was able to access information useful for continuing the journey, *Victoria* and *Mencie* (both from Nigeria) referred to the false promises they had received with respect to what they would do in Italy. Otherwise others, like *Djibril* (Mali), thought Italy was a suburb of France, while other participants like *Alongir* (Bangladesh) more or less indirectly told of having been sold to Bangladesh and sent to work in Libya to pay off a family debt.

Araphan and *Djibril*, two young men both from West Africa (Ivory Coast and Mali, respectively), recount how the experience of traveling as **minors** has indelibly marked their lives and paths. An aspect of no small importance is related to the access to information and resources to put into play. Both reported that their own journey was rather improvised and that they encountered many more obstacles than people who left after their twenties and travelled with more information. On the one hand, this exposed them to various forms of exploitation and prevarication, from people they encountered on the journey. On the other, it led them to find support from people who tried to help them exactly because they were 15/16 years old at the time they were in Libya.

Like *Araphan* and *Djibril*, many people referred to violence and torture suffered on their journey to Libya, as well as to prolonged conditions of imprisonment and abuse, such as sexual and labour exploitation to pay for their freedom and follow-up travel (Perocco, 2019). Again, a close look at gender helps to show how much violence and hardships characterized the journey and the period spent in transit countries, affecting young and older women more deeply than men. Exploitation of the body in sexual and labour terms determines the paths of people in transit, in both cases with repeated violence, threats and forced confinement. During the interviews, we decided not to dwell too much on this period of their biographies, as the testimonies collected in recent years and documented by numerous NGOs and international organizations[48] seemed to us sufficient to contextualize the fragments of lives shared during our interviews.[49]

Joy, a 33-year-old Nigerian woman interviewed in Lazio, said that her four months journey from Nigeria to Italy, which took relatively less time than many others coming from the same country, was so hard that it felt like a 40-year journey. *Hamed*, a middle-aged engineer from Iran, on the other hand, summarized his travel experience as something that simply shattered him and changed him as a person. These narrative fragments are sufficient to explain even some of the evasive responses given particularly by women, who ended up in networks of trafficking, exploitation, and sexual violence on their journey (Mai, 2018). It is no coincidence, indeed, that most of the women and young men we encountered never spontaneously went into detail with respect to this period of their lives, as in almost all cases they would likely wish to erase or forget it. It is not surprising, therefore, that several people interviewed explicitly said that if they had known that the journey would be characterized by all this violence and precariousness, they would not have decided to undertake it.

The geographical context of the Balkan route has long been more underestimated than that of North Africa with respect to the risks and violence that characterize it.[50] Yet, even the testimonies we gathered from people from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, recount several acts of **violence** they endured before arriving in Greece, as well as the experience of multiple violent rejections that occurred in different Balkan countries, as in the accounts of many people encountered in first-level receptions, from Asia and the Middle East, as well as Morocco. For instance *Mohamed* (Pakistan), the oldest interviewee that we encountered during the fieldwork (58 years old at the time during the interview), said that he left his country of origin when he was almost 48 years old. He reported that duing his travel of 6/7 months from Pakistan to Greece he experienced several episodes of violence and dead people along the way are usually not respected, because survivors steal all their belonings and then they continue their travel. Other testimonies report vulnerable situations created by having witnessed the **death** of some of their loved ones or traveling companions, particularly on the Mediterranean crossing, like in the case of *Araphan* (Ivory Coast), or in Libya. Some former asylum seekers encountered in Veneto recounted how the living conditions in big reception centres led them to re-experience the **trauma** of Libya, as the context – although different – reactivated a series of memories and difficulties in sleeping. For instance, *Serge* (Republic Democratif of Congo) mentioned during the interview that after the disembarkation he was trans-

48 For more information on this topic, the following reports can be consulted: https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/no_way_out_migrants_and_refugees_trapped_in_libya_face_crimes_against_humanity_en.pdf; https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/eu0119_web2.pdf (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

49 A similar reflection comes from the experience of Mai (2018) and his interactions with people formerly involved in the sex industry.

50 For more information, see this report edited by ASGI: https://www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/The-Balkan-Route-Report-2020-by-Rivolti-ai-Balcani-italian-network.pdf (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

ferred into a big CAS centre in the middle of nowhere. In that place, he had serious problems in sleeping during the nights, because it was populated of hundreds of Libya's survivors like him. The noises he heard during the nights and the crowded put him in a situation of living again what he experienced in Libya.

As we show more in detail in the next sections, further evidence of **how travel can produce vulnerabilities is also related to the operation of the Dublin Regulation**, which led to repatriations from other EU countries to Italy – whereas Italy was intended as a country of transit and not of destination (Degli Uberti, 2021; Fontanari, 2018; 2021). Some of the protection seekers met during the research found themselves in sudden situations of vulnerability after losing contacts, employment opportunities and family/community support in the countries to which they had arrived.

4.3 Concluding reflections on vulnerability and personal circumstances

We saw how several people interviewed or met during the research spoke of **particularly difficult situations before embarking on their journey to Europe**. Some of these were related to personal circumstances, while others stemmed from contextual or supra-individual issues. The fact that they came from large families or in which some important figure (one or both parents, other relatives, or more generally community support) suddenly passed away underscores the **importance of activating an intersectional gaze that is attentive to the multidimensional processes and relationships in which subjects are involved** (McCall, 2005).

Unfortunately, the passage through routes notoriously characterized by violence, torture and imprisonment shows how **violence also has a gendered element**, as it falls differentially and indelibly on women and young people in particular (Pinelli, 2019). The walking routes of the Balkans or those of the desert take us into the territories of the unspoken, the said-in part or the said-implicit (Taliani, 2019). Several women preferred to gloss over any incidents of violence they experienced during the journey, both out of a sense of dignity and in order not to relive traumatic experiences for the umpteenth time.

Despite these difficulties, people encountered have shown that they bring a range of conscious choices into play. One of these is certainly the use of selective narratives with a multiple set of interlocutors: relatives, communities, people encountered on the journey, Italian institutions, and staff working in reception. From protection seekers' narratives it emerges that the **institutions in charge of collecting their applications for protection, or called upon to evaluate them, rarely avoid delving on deeply unpleasant episodes or assessing the weight of violence occurred during the journey and in transit countries** (formally not considered "relevant" for the purposes of obtaining "international protection"). Something similar can be said also on the side of people working in reception centres, especially for social workers just arrived in CAS reception centes. On the contrary, professionals working in SAI centres are usually more prepared and trained in dealing with these issues, even though not without contradictions (Pasian & Toffanin, 2018).

In other words, these institutions have not always chosen to avoid asking questions about such backgrounds, risking implementing forms of "secondary traumatization", which basically means to live once again – even unintentionally – a past trauma, but in an another context, lifetime, situation and interlocutor (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012; Beneduce, 2015; Taliani, 2019; Perocco, 2019; Sòrgoni, 2019). **Life histories and migration trajectories do not always fit within the contours, boundaries and definitions given by international and national regulations regarding people who could be**

beneficiaries of protection (Ticktin, 2014; Mai, 2018). Even **the conditions to obtain a residence permit on ground of "special cases", introduced into the Italian legislation in 2018 as a replacement for the so-called "humanitarian protection", have demonstrated all the limitations of case typification and the futility of extremely precarious permits.**[51] Similarly, the issues reported in this section highlight the supra-individual, relational and constantly changing dimension of personal circumstances related to situations of vulnerability. This aspect shows the extent to which the need for protection brought by such individuals does not necessarily fall within the cases envisaged by the Geneva Convention (1951) and does not easily meet the forms of protection and identification measures officially provided for by the normative interventions that have been introduced over the past few years. As a result**, discourses related to so-called "personal circumstances" invite reflection on the importance of juxtaposing subjective conditions and contextual factors not included in formal procedures or not enough documented in the contexts of origin and transit.** Sometimes, even the most recent and updated COI about specific geographic contexts or issues can lack of reliable information about the situation of persecutions or vulnerability that protection seekers experience in the countries of origin and on the move. For this reason, **taking seriously into account the voices of protection seekers can counterbalance a bureaucratic approach rooted only on what is considered "official" and "documented" more than what is effectively "experienced" and which corresponds more precisely to the complexity of social realities.** This issue of unrecognized vulnerabilities, as well as that of vulnerability situations amplified, or created because of the procedure and daily interactions with various actors, will be the subject of the next section.

51 A further limitation of these permits, in addition to their duration, was their non-convertibility into other types of residence permits, such as work permits.

V. VULNERABILITIES AND THE PROTECTION PROCEDURE

5.1 Vulnerabilities in the supporting procedures

This chapter puts the issue of vulnerability due to personal circumstances and contextual factors in relation to the protection procedures, assistance services and reception centres migrants encounter in their destination countries. **We trace how the diversity of geographic origins, age, and departure and reception situations come into play to shape how situations of vulnerability are conceived and addressed.** We provide examples of how the protection seekers concerned and the staff at institutions and support services might conceive of some situations of vulnerability differently. In other cases, we show how vulnerability may be evaluated according to different scales of priorities and with certain expectations in how it is managed and/or resolved. Migrants seeking protection develop relationships both with the staff working at the institutions involved in the procedures (particularly police headquarters, Territorial Commissions, and Tribunals), and with the services present in the territories (aimed specifically at migrants or at the entire population). They also develop relationships within reception centres, where they come to know the staff and others housed in the facilities or living in the territory. **In this section, we focus also on how protection procedures (both those related to asylum and alternative paths, like human traiifficking and gender-based violence) and reception measures can also directly or indirectly aggravate situations of vulnerability.**

The ability to compare diverse situations (due to differences in age, gender, origin, skin colour, class, linguistic proficiency, legal status, socioeconomic conditions) offers a better idea of how institutions conceptualise, assess, and address a range of vulnerability situations (Fassin & Kobelinsky, 2012). Conversely, the analysis in this section shows how certain procedures, services and support measures may also ignore, underestimate and disregard some instances of vulnerability (Degli Uberti, 2019; Taliani, 2019). This may be because they do not recognise these instances as such, or because the way the institution functions leads them to underestimate situations of vulnerability (Fassin, 2005; Sacchi & Sòrgoni, 2019; Pasian et al., 2020). Having met with protection seekers at different stages of these procedures (at the initial stage, in progress, concluded, reopened), we were able to collect different points of view from those who had concluded the Italian procedures and who could talk about them retrospectively, and from those who were in the process and had an idea *in itinere* of what they were experiencing, and who could compare their desires to the reality. These perspectives allow us to understand more fully both how certain relationships and actions proposed by the State can aggravate states of vulnerability, and how others can soothe and overcome such difficulties (Fabini et al, 2019; Costantini, 2021; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a; Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021).

5.2 The different timing of the procedures

By taking a careful look at the dimension of temporality (Griffiths et al, 2013), it is useful to point out how **migrants reached by our research arrived in different periods**: some more than 20 years ago, some almost 10 years ago, some between 2014 and 2018 – years of profound normative and organizational changes – and some in more recent times marked by the pandemic and new geo-political conflicts

(2019-2022).[52] Taking this initial data into account is crucial, as it means that in different periods and in different contexts these migrants experienced different regulations, procedures and forms of reception that are difficult to compare.[53]

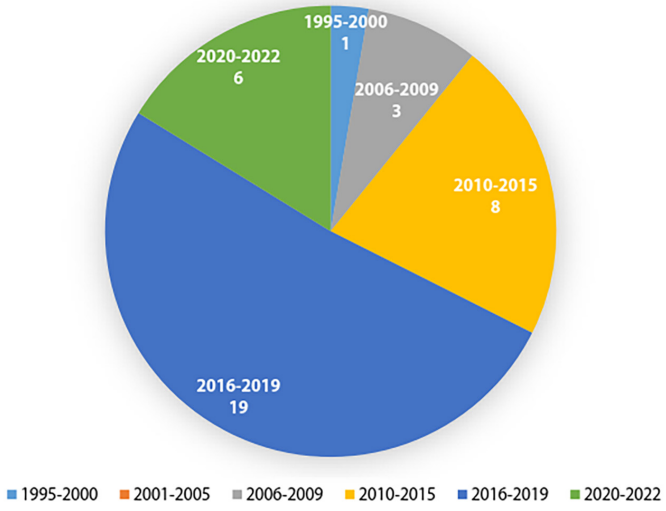
Yet, although most of the people we interviewed arrived in Italy between 2015 and 2020, some had only relatively recently completed the bureaucratic process to apply for regularization through various paths: asylum, alternative procedures created for minors and victims of human trafficking and severe exploitation, but also the amnesty proposed to undocumented migrants who were eligible to regularization because of the work sector in which they used to work (especially domestic work and agriculture).[54] We also met people who arrived in earlier years, on the heels of the so-called "North African Emergency" (2011-2014).[55] **The importance of comparing recent and less recent situations was useful in showing how needs for protection and regularization can be similar in some cases, but encounter profoundly different procedures and forms of reception a few years apart**. Similarly, **the involvement of some people who have been in Italy for several years made it possible to show how the emergence of vulnerability can manifest itself even some time after entering Italy**. Limiting ourselves to one example, *Ruggeria*, a 50-year-old Brazilian trans woman, arrived in Italy as early as the late 1990s, did not apply for international protection until 2019, that is, about 20 years after her arrival in Italy. This situation occurred because she was unaware of this possibility and, therefore, lived many years in Italy without documents and with the fear that Italian institutions might repatriate her if she expressed the need to regularize herself.

Among the people interviewed, some of them have the procedure still underway in the administrative or jurisdictional phase, or are awaiting the outcome of parallel proceedings such as the regularisation scheme for undocumented migrants connected to labour emersion initiated during the Covid-19 pandemic (connected to the so-called "Relaunch Decree").[56] In the Italian context, this extraordinary type of **regularization of undocumented migrants** who are in the territory is not new. On the contrary, it is a policy sistematically used to let "emerge" long-term situations of irregularity and potentially able to "solve" also situations of vulnerability. To a lesser extent, we had the chance to interview people who experienced other procedures and forms of reception in countries other than Italy (e.g., Germany, France, Sweden, and Norway), and who later returned to Italy voluntarily with open or already concluded procedures (Fontanari, 2021). Of particular interest among them are those, like *Sara* and *Karin*, who were subjected to Dublin Procedures after going to other countries. In other cases, Italy was the country of transit or where a second asylum application was submitted after negatively concluded procedures in other European countries, like in the case of *Hamed*.

52 Two recent examples can be the political change in Afghanistan in 2021, which provoked a relevant numbers of protection seekers and IDPs (Internal Displaced Persons), and the Ukraine's invasion (February 2022) that unfortunately could not be documented in this report for its effects (approximately 100.000 people from Ukraine arrived in Italy).
53 The latest change that has again affected the reception organization is related to the so-called "Lamorgese Decree." For more details regarding the main measures under this decree, see the following source: https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/italy/reception-conditions/short-overview-italian-reception- system/ (Last consulted onth 27th July 2022).
54 On this specific issue, the reference is to the Relauch Decree (Decree Law no. 34, May 2020).
55 The reference is to the increase in numbers of migrants passing to the Central Mediterranean route arriving in Italy, due to the political changes happened in North African countries, such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. For a broader discussion on this topic, see Ciabarri (2020) and Sòrgoni (2022).
56 The reference is to the Decree Law no. 34, May 2020. Limited space does not allow for an in-depth analysis of the implications of this measure. For more details: https://migrationpolicycentre.eu/the-plan-of-italy-for-regularisation-real-progress-for-migrants-rights/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

The involvement of protection seekers who encountered different procedures and support, or reception services with different timeframes, made it possible to explain their feelings that decisions are marked by arbitrariness and result in the heterogeneity of practices implemented in Italy at various levels and moments of the procedure (Fabini et al, 2019; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a). These aspects should be contextualized with respect to the fact that decision-making institutions (police headquarters, Territorial Commissions, and Tribunals) have assumed various compositions, functions, practices, orientations and sensitivities over time. Consequently, these issues should be analysed in relation to a regulatory framework that is perpetually changing and characterized by a restrictive and emergency-based management of the phenomenon (Campesi, 2018; Sanò & Firouzi Tabar, 2021). Indeed, prior to 2018, part of the institutional staff did not have *ad hoc* **training** regarding a series of issues related to vulnerability. In the minutes of the Territorial Commissions of the years between 2013 and 2017, it was possible to see very quick and cursory interviews, which also hinted at how there was a lack of sensitivity in delving into a series of issues that were only seemingly clear and simple (Veglio, 2017; Sòrgoni, 2019). This paved the way for a **very limited recognition of vulnerable situations and an underestimation of less visible ones, with frequent recourse to "humanitarian protection".** Most of the grievances related to the attitude of officials of Territorial Commissions come from protection seekers who had the hearing in those years, and to a lesser extent from those arrived since the end of 2018. This latter group reports that, beyond the outcome of the interview and of their application for protection, they still found the staff of Territorial Commissions kind and recounted to have had enough time to tell their story. As an example related to the same issue, *Happy*'s (Cameroonian) and *Muraad*'s (Syrian) hearing were based on the same type of request (the issue of sexual orientation) and were held in the Territorial Commission of the same city. However, the former reports that he felt uncomfortable facing the Territorial Commission and the translator, who had a deeply detached, hasty and disinterested attitude, while the latter praised the very professional attitude activated by both parties involved.

Protection Seekers by Date of Arrival (tot. no. : 37)



Many protection seekers who participated through an interview have gone through particularly long or excessively fast procedures depending also on the period of arrival. For example, people who arrived between 2014 and 2015 encountered first convocation times of up to 1.5 or 2 years (due to undoubted unpreparedness on the part of the Ministry of Interior to handle large numbers of applications). Conversely, others that arrived in more recent years (after 2018) in some cases waited only a few months. Of course, it is worth pointing out that the timing of convocation does not follow a merely chronological criterion, as there are both faster and more prioritized procedures for individuals with "specific needs" (to borrow the terminology of international organizations and the humanitarian sphere), as well as territories that received a much higher number of applications than other places. Based on the data collected, **in the years between 2015 and 2018, it could happen that international protection applicants residing in Veneto had convocation times of about 1 year in the provinces of Padua and**

Venice, while more than 1.5 years in that of neighboring Treviso. Definitely a long wait, if compared with the convocation times provided in some very efficient Territorial Commissions in southern Italy (e.g. 8/9 months) in the same period.

This kind of situation led several protection seekers to ask for explanations as to why their acquaintances residing in other provinces or regions had waited much less time, or why people who arrived at the same time and resided in the same reception centre had very different convocation times. **The long wait is a *leitmotif* of many of the testimonies collected in Lazio and Veneto, which pose the question in very practical terms: a slow procedure causes to experience a state of protracted precariousness that prevents one from freeing oneself from the traumas that have characterized his/her past and journey, compresses or limits the possibility of acting and moving, and blocks the possibility of freely planning one's life**.

Indeed, several people who were left with a particularly difficult set of situations related to personal, family, and contextual circumstances were interviewed during the research. These people ended up with an international protection application procedure that lasted 6 or 7 years – if not even longer – as in the **case of people who went abroad after receiving denials and then returned, either voluntarily or because of a Dublin procedure, applying again for international protection in Italy.**

Conversely, **excessively short were the applications submitted by people intercepted at the border in irregular conditions, those who were detained in CPRs** (detention centres hosting undocumented migrants before procedures of deportation) **and those who came from so-called "safe" countries** (the list was introduced through a circular of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the fall of 2019, in continuity with other European countries that had previously decided to have it).[57] Although, from a formal standpoint, these "accelerated procedures" provide for very short timeframes for convening and deciding, the institutions responsible for receiving and evaluating these applications (police headquarters and Territorial Commissions) have usually struggled to comply with them. As required by the regulations, **institutions tended to consider as "ordinary" (in terms of timing) some applications for international protection, from which did not emerge what criteria these institutions qualified for inadmissibility or manifest groundlessness.** These situations happened to some women (mostly Nigerian) encountered in Lazio, detained for short or medium-long periods in the Ponte Galeria CPR (this is the case of *Karin*, *Silvia*, *Cristina*, *Glory*, *Anta* and *Mencie*). However, further diversifying the experiences of these women is also how they arrived in a CPR: the situation of those who lived in a reception centre and then slipped into situations of irregularity with their identity documents is different than that of those who arrived in Italy with a visa and ran into controls that caused detention in a CPR due to irregularities with their identity documents; in the latter case, a quick summons to the Territorial Commission meant arriving at that crucial moment with extremely limited preparation.

Based on the findings of the research, **it is not possible to say that the most "obvious" situations of vulnerability as related to age (young or mature) and body (due to a disability or some serious or congenital disease) necessarily were sustained with additional measures and then quickly assessed with a positive outcome.** As shown by the testimonies of reception workers, NGOs, and those working in first-level services, this cannot be said for the situation of protection seekers who have arrived just near to full age and have not always found recognition such as "humanitarian protection" (possible

57 As stated also in our first research report, the list included the following countries: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia-Erzegovina, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Morocco, Montenegro, Senegal, Serbia, Tunisia e Ukraine. Evolving situations in these countries demonstrate the limits of what can be considered as a "safe" country.

until 2018) or "special protection" (which only became part of the legislation in December 2020). As it also emerged from the research conducted last year, this situation emerged as particularly dramatic, especially with regard to the situation of people who had been granted humanitarian protection without adequate screening for additional conditions that could guarantee recognition of a greater form of protection, and who found themselves in the unfortunate historical conjuncture of renewing humanitarian protection when it no longer existed, that is, between the fall of 2018 and 2020.[58]

5.3 The timing of the reception

The issue of temporality also comes into play from another point of view, that is concerning reception (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021; Pitzalis, 2022). **The variability of the timing of procedures can be seen also in other forms, as for instance in support services and reception centres that experienced different levels of organization based on arrival flows, team available and various specifications that regulated their scope of action.** The centrality of the type and location of these centres emerged clearly during the ethnography and during the discussion with social workers of reception centres. Based on these two criteria (space and numerical capacity) it is possible to make some considerations with respect to the issue of vulnerability and that are in line with other research projects carried out in Italy (Fabini et al, 2019; Sacchi & Sòrgoni, 2019; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021b).

Having conducted ethnography in rural and urban settings in both regions, we understood what living in a SAI reception centre, as well as in a CAS located in an urban or suburban setting, implies. Similarly, provincial specificities carry their own weight. For example, while CAS reception centres in the city of Padua and province in recent years has favoured the so-called "diffuse" typology, not providing big reception centres of many hundreds of people (apart from the brief experience of the camp in the area called "Prandina"), the provinces of Venice and Padua have had for several years mega reception centres of more than 1,500 people each (Cona and Bagnoli di Sopra).

The interweaving of geographic factors and density of people housed allows us to make some reflections with respect to how much these factors affected the way in which we recognized, took charge of, and provided forms of support to those who manifested certain situations of vulnerability. During the years between 2018 and 2020 CAS centres and the services that could be provided underwent heavy cuts, and this is connected to the fact that professional figures of fundamental importance, such as linguistic-cultural mediators, as well as the possibility of conducting Italian language courses, the possibility of being able to talk about one's experiences to a psychologist or to a legal expert, and also the possibility of initiating job orientation paths have disappeared. Thus, **in recent years there has been a further divergence between the possibilities offered to migrants seeking protection hosted in SAI centres and those hosted in CAS centres, while until a few years before they could be organized in potentially comparable ways.** The approach to the issue of relationships, accompaniments towards the so-called "autonomy" and, more generally, to the possibilities of meeting, listening and support, diverged.

The impossibility of accessing – by people who are not holders of international protection, but with procedures still in progress or holding a humanitarian protection – the then SIPROIMI (now SAI) reception system is not of secondary importance. This resulted in a reception system with two sequential levels: a

58 For further information on this topic, see the first Report, pp. 78-83.

"basic" one (CAS) and a subsequent system in which additional services could be found (SIPROIMI/SAI). This made it impossible for newly arrived people to be able to access a range of rights and services essential for social inclusion and stuck people with protection in CAS centres even in the presence of obvious and overt situations of vulnerability.

A further consequence of the process described was a **massive increase in the SAI system of people in situations of vulnerability that are considered particularly serious (generally related to physical health conditions) and an underestimation of other situations of vulnerability that are considered milder or at any rate considered less of a priority**. With respect to this point, it is useful to point out that formally there are SAI facilities having specialized *teams* for handling complex vulnerability cases (e.g., people suffering from both physical and mental health problems), but the places available in such facilities are underestimated compared to the real needs. For instance, in our fieldwork in Lazio, we had the chance to meet the coordinator of a SAI having a staff specialized in the assistance of protection seekers having mental health problems. However, *Luciano*, this professional, bitterly mentioned that the spots available for this typology of people are only a few (around 5/6). A similar argument can be made toward another group, single-parent households, frequently encountered during the research, both in Veneto and Lazio. *Laura* and *Alessandra*, two interviewees in Veneto, stressed the increase of monoparental families in situations of vulnerability and the underestimated number of places available for them in SAI reception centres.

The ethnographic part carried out in the two regions showed that **the so-called "ordinary" CAS and SAI** (i.e., not those framed as "for people with specific needs" by Servizio Centrale) **are in any case populated by people in multiple situations of vulnerability, who in some cases remain "stuck" in such centres for a long time, aggravating or prolonging their discomfort and malaise**. When the Servizio Centrale – which oversees and coordinates the national management of local SAI – makes places available in SAI reception centres in the whole Italian territory, it may happen that they are in far-flung places. In such cases, refugees and protection seekers who have meanwhile lived 5/6 years in a particular region are not always available to move elsewhere. This happens not because of mere calculations of convenience, but simply because of the absence of a social fabric of reference. In expressing unwillingness, such people highlight the difficulties they would face in relocating to contexts in which they have no social network of reference. Aside from these critical issues, it emerged in the ethnography that the SAI reception centres visited during the research have a more than adequate staff-to-migrant ratio. **In SAI centres, refugees and protection seekers usually have at their disposal équipe composed of various professional backgrounds, and sometimes the manager can also activate the collaboration with an external member of the staff. This makes it possible for certain vulnerabilities to emerge and to be taken care of,** even when some deeply critical situations emerge as a result of a failure of a migration project (as in the case of some people returned to Italy following Dublin procedures and encountered in various SAI reception centres in the Veneto region).

When **requests for help related to some vulnerability emerge only at a later stage,** for example after a recognition of international protection and following a transfer from a CAS to a SAI, this is usually connected to the fact that past traumatic experiences taken into account were related to serious health or conspicuous ill-health issues, to the detriment of less "visible" issues (related to psychological or other hardships). Generally, a relationship can be drawn between the size of the CAS centre and the type of support provided (Fabini et al, 2019; Sacchi & Sòrgoni, 2019; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021). **Many participants (migrants and non-migrants) described big reception centres as places where the underestimation of vulnerabilities is systematic**. For instance, some people who spent years in such places said that they

did not receive assistance or even information about the procedure. Protections seekers, but also the staff working in small-sized SAI shelters, reported that claims related to health issues were preventively cured just giving paracetamole to guests (Firouzi Tabar, 2019). Last but not least, both social workers and protection seekers reported that the possibility to establish contact and give support in big CAS centres is almost impossible, because the number of guests is not proportionate in comparison to the staff working there. The long stay in such contexts for several years, following various denials up to the degree of the Court of Cassation, can lead a situation of vulnerability to be unanswered, amplified, or hindered by subsequent forms of intake (Degli Uberti, 2021; Costantini, 2021).

In certain cases, people who manifest discomfort, and who do not find resources internally to cope with them, may come to trigger conflicts with other migrants or with the reception staff, perceived as co-responsible for institutional neglect. A process of mutual disavowal is triggered in these cases, which may also lead some people working in the reception and services to read certain malaise, damage and violent actions through culturalist lenses ("it's typical of Nigerians / it's typical of Nigerian women" stated one of the social worker that we spoke with), perpetuating moralizing control dynamics in different forms (Fassin, 2005; Taliani, 2019). Even in the absence of such dynamics, it emerged that **in the field of services and support for protection seekers there is a risk of discretionary practices that reproduce a rewarding perspective whereby the person who is considered "deserving" is helped even beyond the real possibilities, while the one considered "lazy" or "undisciplined," does not enjoy the same consideration and activation** (Fassin, 2005; Pinelli, 2019; Taliani, 2019, Fabini et al, 2019). In sum, it can be said that the long stay in hyper- crowded, hyper-regulated and hyper-isolated contexts fosters the *exacerbation* or *ex novo* creation of vulnerable situations (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021b). If big reception centres were already described in the previous *report* as "parking lots"[59], in this part of the research – which focuses on the experience of protection seekers and the services they turn to – they are often synonymous with isolation, stasis, failure, and lack of self-realization (Pasian et al. 2020; Sanò et al. 2021; Degli Uberti, 2021).

A different argument can be made for those who have never benefited or who no longer benefit from access a reception centre, albeit for different reasons. In the case of independent or shared living projects with people not seeking protection, it is possible to find several advantages given by a freer and less regulated living context, which usually also creates the conditions for a different kind of social insertion. For example, *Araphan*, a young Ivorian worker who has experienced both CAS reception and the "Refugees Welcome" housing project. He describes such contexts almost as "the difference between night and day". He describes the CAS, in which he lived for at least 2 years, as a "transparent prison," in which migrants were put "like a herd," with sporadic relations with the staff working there and from whom he often even received threats. Differently, the fortunate experience of domestic reception he had within the "Refugees Welcome" project, to which he gained access due to a fortuitous contact with a reception worker, radically changed *Araphan*'s situation, leading him not only to obtain an eight-grade education and continue his studies, but also facilitating his job placement.

59 See our first Report, p.99.

5.4 Exploitation and trafficking in the destination context

One topic that allows for a further example of the issues discussed in this section is that of trafficking and exploitation. These are two deeply intertwined issues, both in terms of procedures and in terms of reception and access to services. In general terms, it has already been mentioned that anti-trafficking associations and agencies also engage in assistance to attend tribunals, police stations, hospitals, and schools (Semprebon et al., 2021). **In the case of Veneto, it was pointed out that the dialogue with the Territorial Commissions of the regional territory seems to be progressively increasing their sensitivity towards the recognition of forms of protection, provided that they identify the "indicators" elaborated by UNHCR.**[60] This has been possible not only because of the work done in synergy with other institutional actors, but also because of the growing number of projects and actions related to the issue of trafficking and labour exploitation (e.g., "Diagrammi" project).[61] Social workers point out that there is, however, always a risk of worsening relationships and accessibility to services in the area (particularly with respect to the police headquarters and the hospitals), as facilitation is in the hands of individuals working in those contexts. Consequently, as *Marco*, a social worker, stated the risk is having to start from scratch in creating these inter-institutional channels when these individuals are replaced, assigned to other positions, or retire. In general, it can be said that people who are lucky enough to benefit from projects related to the issues of trafficking and exploitation can count on concrete forms of support, which can then facilitate their local work on the territory in contact with institutions, services, and the local community.

Regarding **sexual exploitation**, compared to the years between 2015 and 2021 there has been a gradual decrease in street presences and a shift of the phenomenon to new forms (indoor and online, also due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which made it necessary to rethink the usual places of sex work). This information has been given by *Stefano* and *Francesca*, two interviewees working in the field of anti-traffiking in Veneto. According to the reports of some street unit workers and what was also confirmed by their night outings, now the presence of sex workers from Eastern Europe and trans women from South American countries appears preponderant. Taking part in some of these outings allowed for direct feedback of what was stated in interviews and informal conversations. Also, regarding sexual exploitation, the current situation related to the Covid-19 pandemic has brought additional issues of access to services and public transportation by sex workers (with and without documents). To a lesser extent, even the anti-Covid vaccination has created unexpected problems for some sex workers vaccinated in their home country or in Italy, who for a long time did not receive a green pass. We had confirmation of this problem talking with some sex workers from Eastern European countries.

In the same vein as the experiences recounted in Lazio, the Veneto's anti-trafficking projects has focused primarily on the issue of trafficking for sexual exploitation. *Stefano*, *Marco, Luca* and *Francesca* confirmed that this area of intervention was the major focus during the past 10/15 years. In both regions, it was mentioned that there has undoubtedly been an increased focus on the issue of **labour**

60 According to UNHCR guidelines on human trafficking, indicators of this phenomenon can be the age on departure or arrival, low-class economic background, etc. Officially, these elements aim at signalling the presence of a person who can be victim of trafficking and potentially in danger. Thus, institutions in charge of taking decisions over these applications, may rely on the "referral procedure" to a NGO or association specialized on these issues before taking the decision. Further information can be found at the following link:https://www.unhcr.org/publications/legal/443b626b2/guidelines-international-protection-7-application-article-1a2-1951-convention.html (Last consulted on 27th July 2022). See also the report produced by GRETA: https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/-/greta-publishes-its-third-report-on-the-united-kingdom (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)

61 For more information on this, see the project website: https://www.diagrammi.org/nord/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022)

exploitation and, to a lesser extent, that of "illegal economies" (mainly related to drug selling). During the interview, these respondents told that this was also related to the activation of specific regional or supra-regional action plans aimed at raising awareness of these issues. If the agro-pontine territory of Lazio has usually been in the news for the problem of labour exploitation in agriculture, the Veneto territory also came to the headlines for several cases of labour exploitation in almost all provinces. This aspect makes the pervasive rhetoric of the productive Veneto problematic, as it is indeed based on the systematic labour exploitation of migrants with or without documents.[62] Such cases range from agriculture to manufacturing, from shipbuilding to publishing. *Marco* and *Stefano* reported that in Veneto the labour exploitation cases in question involved citizens of Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and some West African countries (Senegal, Gambia, Mali). *Fabio*, who does not work in the field of anti-trafficking, but in a help desk of the same territory, said that it is common the phenomenon of seasonal workers who are frequently exposed to exploitation in the field of agriculture. He told of having personally met undocumented migrants who move to southern regions of Italy during the summer and then in the winter they come back to Veneto for the harvest of radicchio.

An example related to the issue of labour exploitation is that of a Malian citizen, whom we got to know in a series of meetings held at the "Sportello Rar" (Protection seekers and Refugees Desk) of the municipality of Padua. The undocumented migrant in question was there to understand whether he should apply for international protection repeatedly, or whether there were other opportunities to regularize himself in Italy. His story revealed that he had been numerous times in Rosarno (a town in the Calabria region of southern Italy) during the harvest season, as well as in Piedmont and, at other times, in France. On that occasion, he was informed by *Laura* (the legal advisor of the help desk) of the possibility of obtaining another permit related to labour exploitation. This possibility was pertinent as he had recently been sought as a person of interest in another exploited migrant's case in Rosarno. Although this former Malian protection seeker had been accompanied by some Italian volunteers, and although in a second and third interview he had been given a translation into Bambara language by a relative and a cultural mediator, respectively, he decided not to take the proposed route. Indeed, he preferred not even to wait for a discussion with a lawyer on which of the two paths to take (reiteration of the request for international protection or emersion from labour exploitation), deciding to travel to France again in an irregular condition. The mention made of the issue of denouncing his exploiters, which came up at the third interview, had deeply concerned him, making it clear that if he had to choose, he would still prefer the reiteration of international protection. Deciding to move back to France demonstrates a clear agency and competence in knowing how to move through the meshes of a system of protection and control that can be overtaken by those with the contacts and knowledge to do so. At the same time, his case demonstrates the complexity of the issue of labour exploitation and the risk of sinking back into such situations in the absence of tangible alternatives that can be considered "effective" and "safe" for the people directly affected (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a).

Another situation of particular interest, which shows the **complex dynamics of trafficking and exploitation, as well as the limitations of a single-perspective approach**, is that of two women met in Lazio: *Anta*, Senegalese, and *Anna*, Ugandan. Both shared an experience of **domestic violence and labour exploitation** in this area. Both arrived in Italy by plane and found themselves living in conditions of irregularity and exploitation, with all that this entails at the existential level, freedom of movement and

62 Local news reports have shown in the past 3-4 years a sharp increase in complaints and emergence from labor exploitation. An example can be found at the following link: https://www.collettiva.it/copertine/lavoro/2022/03/30/news/flai_cgil_veneto_la_nostra_regione_tra_le_piu_colpite_dal_fenomeno_del_caporalato-1997597/ (Last consulted on 27th July 2022).

self-perception. *Anta*, who arrived in Italy at just 15 years old, found herself forced to live with an uncle in Tuscany for 6 years and then suddenly ended up in a CPR. *Anna* arrived in Rome in conditions of previous exploitation by a Jordanian family that had reduced her to a situation of semi-slavery. In both cases, the support provided by anti-violence centres was decisive in allowing their regularization and the possibility of moving to protected facilities from which they could start again, starting with learning the Italian language and a series of job orientation courses.

5.5. Gender binarism and the issue of sexuality in reception

Another situation of vulnerability that can be read through intersectional lenses and has gender-related aspects is that of **trans and gender non-conforming migrants**. In Lazio as well as in Veneto, a particularly difficult situation is that of South American migrant women (mainly from Brazil, Peru, and Colombia) who engage in sex work without being in possession of documents and/or without having the possibility to access a range of services in the territory (e.g., social-health services). The outings carried out with the street unit, as well as interviews conducted with anti-trafficking workers, tell of how the sex work of trans women has different challenges than that of *cisgender* migrant women (mostly from Eastern European countries and, to a lesser extent than a few years ago, from Nigeria). These trans women usually have a higher average age (over 40 years), irregularities in identity documents and sometimes a sexual or psychological health condition that would require appropriate care. Based on the reports of social workers encountered in Rome, the combination of these factors makes social and labour inclusion in fields other than the one in which they have worked for the previous 10 or 20 years particularly difficult. During the interview with *Ruggeria*, a Brazilian trans woman, it emerged how assessing the possibility of regularizing themselves in Italy through an application for international protection causes some fears, related to not having documents and having received administrative sanctions from the police. *Ruggeria* stressed that **this path of regularization is not well known by many undocumented trans migrants living in Italy**.

Still focusing on the trans and gender non-conforming subject but turning our attention to paths to self-determination that do not necessarily involve taking hormones or resorting to plastic surgery, *Osas*[63], a genderqueer refugee living in Veneto who prefers to be called by his masculine name, recounted the vicissitudes experienced living with compatriots who are not always willing to acknowledge their elective gender identity. He – who also has a history as a victim of trafficking for sexual exploitation, as well as hearing problems worsened by the journey to Libya – recounted the tough relationship he had with his roommates at the time he was living in a CAS reception centre. This situation had initially led him to spend as little time as possible at home. As a result of forced cohabitation during the *lockdown* for the Covid-19 pandemic, it was necessary to create a different dialogue that then led these roommates to identify him – as requested – with the name of choice (*Osas*). After the creation of this unhoped-for precarious equilibrium, however, his transfer to a not-too-distant SAI reception centre changed things again. He hoped the transfer would have resulted in a significant improvement of his **living conditions**, but he found himself being identified as a boy by his roommates, with whom he has conflicting relations, while as a girl by the staff of the centre in question. This caused him swinging and depressive moods resulting from this disavowal. *Osas* recounted that this situation is only partly mitigated by being in a work context

63 The choice of pseudonym for the interview is interesting in that it is a diminutive that has no clear gender connotation, so it could be diminutive of both female and male names. In the case of Osas, he conceives the use of this name as masculine.

that recognizes and legitimizes his **gender identity**, as well as by being in contact with an association specialized in supporting migrants who do not identify as cisgender and who express non-heteronormative sexualities.[64]

A somewhat convergent story, insofar as related to the issue of **sexual orientation** and not gender identity, was reported by two protection seekers interviewed in Veneto who identify as gay. In the case of *Muraad* (a thirty-something Syrian refugee with a university degree who arrived through the "humanitarian corridors", it was highlighted how episodes of homophobia can occur again in supposedly more protected contexts than those from which they had fled. Such situations can expose individuals belonging to sexual minotiries to further forms of traumatization by compatriots, who were indeed already responsible for traumatic experiences in the country of origin. Alongside the interview, *Muraad* reports that he also experienced sexual violence in Syria and while traveling, as well as having to resort to prostitution in the first period after his arrival in Lebanon. In this case, reporting these incidents to the staff who ran the reception facility did not result in any sanction or protective action, and even led to his hospitalization following his fear of being assaulted again.

The second case is that of *Happy*, a 28-year-old, low-schooled Cameroonian refugee who arrived via Libya after a series of internal migrations punctuated by numerous acts of homophobia. For *Happy*, living for more than a year in a very large CAS reception centre (1,500 protection seekers) and in a particularly isolated location in Veneto made it imperative to implement *camouflage* strategies to avoid running into unpleasant incidents in the daily routine of the facility in which he resided. However, the sharing of information about his sexual orientation among the centre's staff when he was moved to another (but smaller) reception centre in the area caused him deep unease. This was only partly mitigated by the fact that such sharing – manifested only on the last day he spent in the centre – would likely have reduced the risk that the news might also reach mediators and guests in the facility where he lived. Such behaviour also shows the potential medium- to long-term consequences of a naive approach to private matters.

5.6 Resistance and resilience in the face of unexpected situations of vulnerability

In the face of a range of adversities, migrants enact the typical agency of those who have had the (often underestimated) ability to move in the interstices and flaws of systems. In many cases, ethnography and interviews have shown how such individuals have been able to find alternative solutions, rely on the support of compatriots encountered fortuitously during their journey and stay in Italy (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018; Pasian et al., 2020; Sanò et al, 2021). However, people in vulnerable situations do not always decide to seek forms of help and support from compatriots. These situations allow us to make a discourse related also to the **ambivalent role that the community of the country of origin** living in the territory can play, that is, dynamics of support, control, or further exploitation.

For example, *Mithila* (Bangladesh) and *Hania* (Pakistan) have such a difficult history with their compatriots that they categorically rule out being able to count on their support in the future or wanting to ask for it. On the contrary, from their words and experiences it emerges a need to keep away from them and share as little information as possible about their biography with them, as to avoid being judged or controlled. They come to such choices for two different reasons: *Mithila* to shy away from the possibility of a potential marriage while she is trying to plan her life by giving priority to her work, *Hania* to not feel

64 Further consideration about trans refugees in the Italian context, see Vesce & Grilli (2019).

judged for being a long-distance mother with no relatives in Italy or for deciding to undertake a journey to Italy on her own (which one assumes may have been done on foot via the Balkan route, incurring a large debt, although she actually arrived by plane). In this selective unravelling of her own path, it is possible to discern both agency and self-determination, also with attention to the issue of personal safety.

With respect to the ambivalence of the support provided by these networks, the action of those who station themselves near offices and police headquarters to provide answers in the face of defaults or **bureaucratic requests** has been reported in Lazio. As stated by *Martina*, a interviuwee based in Lazio, the most common example is that of people selling at great expense hospitality certificates, which are essential for initiating an application for international protection (repeated or not), as well as other documents or other types of benefits. This role played by compatriots in ambiguous ways in the **informal market of forged identity documents** has also been confirmed by *Laura* and *Alessandra* in Veneto, especially during the years in which many municipalities and reception centres denied the very possibility of guaranteeing civil registration and residency to protection seekers temporarily housed in the territory.[65] However, **in other circumstances, chance encounters with people of the same or other nationalities can be fortunate and even decisive with respect to an obvious situation of prolonged or sudden vulnerability**.

Again, it becomes very useful to refer to what happened to *Hania* (35- year-old Pakistani woman). She recounts how it was a chance encounter with a Bangladeshi man she met on the street who, in response to her request for help, directed her to the local police headquarter to apply for international protection. This request became necessary because of a sudden worsening situation. Indeed, *Hania* had officially arrived in Italy on a student visa (she was a high school teacher in Pakistan), but unofficially to marry a compatriot living in another European country. The sudden end of her relationship with the man and with both his and her family led her to have a sudden need for help, as she no longer had a home, contacts in a foreign country, nor the possibility of going either to his partner's country or back to Pakistan.

The role of chance encounters and events also return in the experiences of *Anna*, a 24-year-old Ugandan woman, *Mayra*, a 37-year-old woman from El Salvador, and *Khatuna*, a 29-year-old woman from Georgia. In the first case, *Anna* was systematically exploited and kept segregated by a Jordanian family who had moved to Italy, from whom she was enslaved even before the move. It was only when she managed to make a call through an Italian man she met on the street following her escape that she was able to get information on where to seek help. In Rome, *Anna* found herself disoriented and without knowing how to go to the office indicated to her, but the encounter with a kind Filipino woman made her escape from severe labour exploitation and domestic violence possible. This woman decided to take *Anna* to an anti-violence centre, which allowed her to trigger the whole procedure that then brought her to a shelter. In the second case, the situation is quite different in terms of profile, as *Mayra* was a woman with a university degree who worked in a hospital and had a different skin colour that allowed her to pass through the Spanish-Italian border controls without major problems. After a few days spent in a hotel, *Mayra* found herself in the despair of not knowing where to go. It was an encounter she had in a park with another woman that allowed her to activate an application for international protection. This woman, with whom she then remained in touch, agreed to include her home address as a place to which she could address any communications regarding her request for international protection. Finally, *Khatuna* arrived in Italy with her husband and children (aged 5 and 7) following a tumultuous situation in her country (Georgia)

65 As documented in last year's report, this practice has been curbed thanks to the pronouncements of local Tribunals that have legitimized the claims brought by various lawyers in defense of protection seekers who found themselves in such situations (see first Report, p. 69).

that made it imperative to flee. Arriving in Italy in January 2020, she spent a few nights in a Roman park, and it was only thanks to a passer-by that she got information on how she could apply for international protection and find housing for herself and her family.

In talking about the complexity of social interactions, **it is relevant also to remember they creative ways through which protection seekers express their resilience or skills to cope with the arrival of adverse events**. For example, *Hania* turned to painting to cope with the trauma of being stranded in Italy and away from her 9-year-old son, who, in the meantime, was engaging in self-injurious behaviour and attempted suicide because of domestic abuse by his uncle. Painting soothed her on many sleepless nights in a medium-sized CAS in an isolated area of the Veneto. Similarly, *Serge*, a protection seeker from the Democratic Republic of Congo, stated that he did not feel the need to seek psychological assistance as he processed his problems by writing periodically in a diary. *Mithila*, a woman in her 20s from Bangladesh, with a family history marked by separation and domestic violence, referred to the enormous moral support she found in her sister (also living in Italy) and in a Romanian roommate at the shelter house in which she had been living for about 10 months. In some cases, protection seekers and refugees proposed the resources that would help them to the people with whom they co-habited; for example, *Hania* asked the coordinator of the CAS where she lived if they could propose to all the people staying at the CAS centre that they engage in gardening near the facility, to distract them from their difficult thoughts and to give them the chance to learn something new.

In general, the **protection seekers often described associations and listening centres as spaces where they could talk about themselves and establish new contacts**. One example is that of *Djibril*, who, through attending an Italian course organised by a local association, met people with whom he could share a home and establish relationships of mutual support. In that very place, he met also his current Italian fiancé, who facilitated him also in finding a good and well paid job.

5.7 Conclusions: supportive and neglect relationships in procedures and reception

In conclusion, the people we encountered during the research showed that their needs were not always addressed by a particular service or procedure**. Several testimonies did acknowledge the relief and support offered by a listening centre or psychological counselling at a specialised centre, sometimes outside the system of reception centres. Others reported the concrete forms of support they encountered in SAI centres where they lived or at the first-level associations they approached. However, other testimonies showed how protection seekers in vulnerable situations sometimes decided to take other paths to try to address their needs**.

In these cases, and in many others, we see the resistance and resilience of people facing situations of vulnerability. Several boys who arrived as minors and women who were trafficked showed their resistance by not breaking down in the face of the profound struggles they encountered in Italy, even in the face of one or more denials for protection (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a). Others recounted their attempts to seek alternative spaces of expression that might be more welcoming than those in which they resided, such as other social contexts where their concerns could be heard and where they could find concrete resources and support (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018). In other cases, support came through contacts they made at the shelters where they stayed, or by leveraging transnational contacts that were meaningful to them.

This section highlighted the role of chance encounters in gaining access to information to regularise one's position or to find a place to live. Similarly, some cases revealed the ambivalent role that recourse to people coming from the same country, who are not always disinterested observers, can play. More in general, in this section **we documented the impact of the legislative changes over the timings of procedures and of reception**. In both cases, a long wait can be the source of additional problems or the feeling of being entrapped by a system that they can leave, but considering the potential adverse consequences.

VI. VULNERABILITIES AND MIGRATION POLICIES

6.1 Vulnerability and obstacles in accessing protection

This section looks at vulnerability in relation to the bureaucratic-regulatory system. **We explore whether and to what extent current legislation, as well as procedural and reception measures, are actually capable of identifying, assessing and addressing a varied set of vulnerable situations**. With respect to the impact of policies, **we consider whether the institutions responsible for screening, assessing, and supporting these services grant equal attention to requests for protection, or if there is evidence of discretionary practices, differential treatment and non-fullfillment of what guidelines officially recommend.** At the same time, we offer examples of how protection seekers and staff at support and assistance services suffer from the lack of an effective strategy that considers the complexity and intersections of vulnerability (Pasian & Toffanin, 2018). The examples also reveal how certain measures and operational practices have exacerbated existing situations of vulnerability or even caused them to arise due to dysfunction in the protection system. In general, this section attempts to link administrative and day-to-day issues to broader macro-structural processes that are local, national, or supra-national in scope (Tazzioli, 2018).

Comparing the interviews we conducted with migrants to those with staff at support and reception services, one fact emerges unequivocally: **the national and supra-national normative system that defines the contours of what are defined as "vulnerabilities" has many gaps**. In the first report, we shed lights on how the asylum system in Italy does not always recognize and properly address the complex situations of vulnerabilities experienced by protection seekers. Despite the elasticity that characterise the implementation of specific guarantees acted by decision makers and legal actors, some situations of vulnerability remain overlooked or are fostered by various obstacles and contradictions. The path to identify, recognise and support those who arrive is far from linear or free of contradictions. In many cases, it is possible to draw a correlation between a protection system designed on an emergency basis – tending to reproduce a "single-factor approach" to vulnerabilities – and the persistence, intensification or emergence of various forms of precarity, marginality, distress and suffering.

However, such situations are not always analysed in their complexity and seen to intertwine multiple determinants. **In several cases, we found a disallowance of some situations of vulnerability** (for instance related to a younger/mature age or psychological problems) **over others** (related to a certified disease, or to a disability), **or an underestimation of the processes that brought them about and the consequences they might have in the medium- to long-term**. This occurred both at the level of procedure and at the level of support and reception services. While avoiding generalised discourses, the ethnographic research we conducted in Lazio and the Veneto revealed the differences in treatment according to factors such as age, gender, nationality, the presence/absence of relatives, legal status and more.

There is a clear **a relationship between the absence or long wait for documents, difficult (precarious) access to housing, challenges in social and employment inclusion, and increased vulnerability and suffering** (Fabini et al, 2019; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021b; Busetta et al., 2021). Research has highlighted how a series of policies focused on the cost-benefit logic of reception

and on the need to speed up procedures to reduce the pending load of Territorial Commissions and Tribunals has detracted attention from the issue of vulnerabilities, particularly those that are less obvious or toward which there is currently less attention or sensitivity.[66]

As many reception and first-level reception service workers have witnessed, the big reception centres policy shows that a **feeling of loneliness and endless wait** exposed to structural phenomena that exist in the local territories (such as labour exploitation). As a consequence, entering in these exploitative dynamics without the chance to report and then emerge from them does worsen the psychological and living conditions of those housed in the centres (Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021b; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021). In other cases, access to procedures is complex and unwelcoming to people in vulnerable situations. The most fragile and vulnerable people who pass through first-level services and NGOs are those who are most likely to be deprived of supportive social contacts that can mediate their request with the institutions connected to the procedure. In particular, police headquarters – where the application for protection is formalised – were the central subject of criticism among the migrants interviewed. According to some of them, this is the arena that needs the greatest amount of change. *Gioia*, a Venezuelan person granting international protection, suggested "humanising the procedure and giving real opportunities for inclusion," while others (*Muraad*, *Araphan*, *Djibril*, respectively from Syria, Ivory Coast and Mali) complained about the slow, disrespectful if not outright racist, treatment they experienced at the police headquarters.

Even in the most "successful" experiences, the stumbling block represented by post-reception housing placement often came up (Pasian et al, 2020; Sanò et al. 2021; Degli Uberti, 2021). This was probably the most common issue mentioned in the interviews, together with the length of procedures. The problem of housing seems to be related less to policies than to procedures. However, research shows how prolonged unsuitable reception does not create the conditions for inclusion (either socially or in terms of housing) for those who apply for protection. Similarly, **procedural criteria that consider a certificate of residence, domicile or hospitality as easy to access demonstrate how much the procedure itself is centred on an idea of the protection seeker/refugee that is completely disconnected from the social dynamics that characterise the territories and contexts of daily life.**

However, not all of the protection seekers talked about institutions in the same way. The testimonies of two refugees highlighted the challenges of housing from another perspective, that is, of personal safety. *Muraad* did so on the grounds of sexual orientation, while *Osas* emphasised gender identity. Indeed, *Osas*'s situation called into question the gender binarism on which the whole scaffolding of reception is built, while *Muraad*'s testimony denounced the risk of homophobic incidents within reception contexts, among both the protection seekers and reception staff. Both suggested that the number of reception places in sheltered facilities should be expanded for people with SOGIESC claims, so they can feel safer. Another issue frequently mentioned is the restrictive approach of the reception system, both at the national and local level. **Some shelters are available for families (including single-parent families), or single individuals, but the management struggles when a father or a mother becomes parent in the middle of the procedure and reception experience, or when s/he request family reunification**. For instance, *Hania* (Pakistan) remained stucked for many months in the CAS centre where she was hosted, because the SAI shelter that potentially could host her after having granted the international protection did not confirm its availability when the staff discovered that she applied for the reunification

66 Limiting ourselves to a couple of examples, until a few years ago, the issue of torture or sexual violence against young men, or the issues of labor exploitation versus sexual exploitation (more visible) were underestimated. Further information on these different treatments can be found in the paragraph 4.2 of the first research report.

with her beloved young child. In that case, according to *Gianmarco* (social worker) the reason was that specific SAI centre has only two typologies of apartments: one for single men or single women, and one for extended families, none for single-parents.

Several organisational measures related to migratory governance came out in late summer 2021, a time when Italy – like other countries – committed to accepting a quota of Afghani nationals following the Taliban takeover. The arrival of some 5,000 Afghanis created the need to quickly arrange their reception, along with the desire to guarantee them a faster procedure than they would have experienced had they not arrived through the exceptional arrangements provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In this case, ethnographic research in the months after their arrival revealed that several beds at CAS centres and a few at SAI centres, officially unclaimed, were being denied to people who had arrived on foot along the Balkan route (from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, in particular). This unavailability or delay also affected those who had already been waiting for some time to enter a SAI reception centre after they had been granted international protection. The reason for this was a ministerial indication to consider some beds "blocked" in order to reserve them for the Afghans who had just arrived by the airlift organised by Italy in August 2021. In some striking cases, **newly-arrived Afghan refugees** – perhaps arriving between July and October 2021 after a traumatic, long journey that lasted for months – were denied entry into an extraordinary reception centre because the beds were "reserved" for Afghanis arriving by plane at that same time. This became an issue of status and social class, creating internal "competition" within the group of protection seekers, triggered by organisational criteria set by certain policies. In these cases, decisive results were obtained only by taking legal action to demand the inclusion of destitute individuals who were fully entitled to a place in reception. But these decisive actions were not consolatory, as they were acts of resistance that depended on access to information and influential contacts. Other situation of competition for get access to a SAI centre is very common between migrants who finally granted international protection, but that Servizio Centrale does not "prioritize", because they are not considered "particularly vulnerable", and those who have urgent problems related to health, family issues or personal safety who usually wait less, especially in case some NGOs act together with them. This scenario shows a scarsity of places available in SAI centres in relation to a high request and number of people potentially eligible to them.

Another contradiction emerged from national and European policies that governed how repeated asylum applications were handled in various European countries subject to the **Dublin Regulation**. Some of the stories we collected during our fieldwork underline the need to completely rethink the Dublin Regulation, if not to think about abolishing it. This system appeared partially responsible for producing situations of profound vulnerability. *Karin*, a Nigerian interviewee and a "Dublinated" in Italy who ended up in a CPR in Rome, pointed to the risks of suicide associated with deportations and procedures that, in many cases, showed little respect for internationally sanctioned fundamental rights. Several protection seekers had moved between European countries – with procedures still open or closed – due to work, to reach relatives or to benefit from their wider social network. These examples show how borders can be crossed and reveal the agency of migrants, who reached out to their own contacts to create opportunities for socio-occupational advance. This, however, contrasts with policies restricting so-called "secondary movements" (Zimmermann, 2009).

Men such as *Keleta* (a 26-year-old Eritrean in Lazio) or women like *Joy* (a 33-year-old Nigerian) demonstrated both the porous nature of borders and how personal intentions could not adapt to the constraints placed on movement. *Keleta* lived in Sweden for a few years before returning to Italy. At the time of the

interview, due to the challenge of socio-occupational insertion, he was considering a new trip abroad to Germany, where he had some contacts, although he was currently living in a SAI shelter. He said of himself, "I thought a bit, I thought too much", to stress that all the challenges he encountered during the first years spent in Italy had the consequence of developing psychologic problems (in fact *Keleta* is hosted in a SAI centre for people having severe psychological and psychiatric problems). On the other hand, *Joy* was living in Sweden and periodically came back to Italy. When talking about her reception path, she referred to how bad she felt she was treated and to the fact she could have neither reimbursement for travel expenses on public transportation nor for what concerns medication. Indeed, she only came back to Italy to continue her visits with a doctor she trusted and to meet with friends from Nigeria.

During the research, **some protection seekers explained how the Dublin Regulation led to the failure of their migration project and forced them to reinvent themselves elsewhere**. A clear example is in the stories of *Sara* from Jordan and *Hamed* from Iran, who had a similar study and work background but who experienced two rather different trajectories. *Sara* migrated with four minor children at the age of 45, taking a flight to Italy and then traveling to Germany, her intended destination. *Hamed*, instead, migrated alone when he was about 26 years old and walked all the way to Greece, then boarded in Italy and managed to reach Norway, his final destination, using a fake passport. *Sara* recounted her difficult reception in Germany and constant move to various centres, until a night when – after a party in the middle of winter – the police raided her home and proceeded to deport her family to Italy. What exacerbated the trauma of this resettling in Italy was the fact that her children had laboriously learned German and were starting to develop good social interactions with their peers. *Sara* recounted how her youngest son, who had just been deported to Italy, cried constantly and would not take off the bracelet from the party he had attended just a few days earlier. Furthermore, in the period immediately following their arrival, her son refused to study Italian because he was afraid that something similar to what he had just experienced might happen again.

In contrast, *Hamed*'s case tells of an international protection procedure initiated in Norway by escaping checkpoints in Greece, Italy, and the Netherlands. His overall impressions concerning the Norwegian institutions in charge of assessing his application for international protection were negative, as was the reception he received. In particular, he found the questions he was asked to be particularly invasive. Following two denials, he decided to leave voluntarily because the government in office at that time had declared its intention to deport those who had been denied international protection to Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, *Hamed* decided to return to Italy and to apply for international protection. Once he was granted refugee status on religious grounds, he decided to return to Norway because he was in contact with some compatriots who could guarantee him a good job. It then happened that, upon discovering the irregularity of his identity document, he was expelled from the country. He decided to move to France and then Germany, but when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, *Hamed* became homeless and developed a very acute form of depression. He did not seek help for his problems, convinced that no association could or would help him since his documents were linked to Italy. When he returned to the Veneto in 2020 to renew his refugee status, he decided to ask for help. He managed to enter a SAI centre through social services and Caritas (a religious association supporting poor people); he had not benefited from any reception support yet and was in a very vulnerable situation. The experiences *Sara* and *Hamed* recounted show how situations of vulnerability can also emerge as a result of European-level procedures and policies that do not adequately consider the rootedness and social networks of migrants (Collyer, 2004).

This section shows how much the main risk of protection policies is that of not identifying, recognising or supporting those who are most vulnerable due to the obstacles and the restrictive attitudes of protection system. This scenario shows the difficulty of finding alternative responses to situations of vulnerability that are not given due consideration. There are also some who have never had the opportunity to access a reception centre or who have been unable to go back to one following a series of denials and failed attempts to relocate abroad (Fontanari, 2021). In these cases, people who are newly arrived, subjected to the Dublin Regulation, homeless and undocumented experience multiple vulnerabilities, as they are unable to access basic services, such as medical care, except through emergency services. The ethnography carried out in the Veneto and in Lazio found that several people who had newly arrived on foot, passing through Italy or coming back because of the Dublin Regulation, had an urgent need for medical care but were unable to access medication except through the back door. Fortunately, they were treated by first-level services, voluntary-based associations, NGOs, and volunteer doctors. However, these are emergency measures that only plug the gaps in a highly restrictive system that leaves many people vulnerable and prevents them from accessing critical services.

The cases just mentioned reveal the major limitations of a hyper-bureaucratised reception system that fails to offer support to the requests of those in situations of vulnerability. For this reason, if "upon entry" many protection seekers call for more "humanitarian corridors" so that they would not have to live through the traumatic events they experienced, then "upon exit," they suggest loosening the restrictions that prevent protection seekers from moving to other European countries where they might have a social and family network, or where their professional profile is more expendable. The alternative is to work for better recognition of their educational qualifications, previous work experience and the potential of people seeking protection, taking into account, of course, their specific needs (e.g., the additional difficulties in single-parent households).

6.2 The need for an intersectional gaze on policies and for understanding the multiple vulnerabilities of protection seekers

Considering the dimension of temporality (Griffiths et al, 2013) along with the need for an intersectional approach (McCall, 2005), this research has highlighted some particularly critical situations that deserve more attention, investment and intervention at the level of social policies. One example is in the number of **cisgender women who, during their time in Italy, found themselves becoming single parents**. In many cases, these were women who became mothers shortly after their arrival in Italy or elsewhere in Europe (Mendola & Busetta, 2021). This situation further complicates their social positioning and the daily challenges they face for social and economic inclusion while the procedure for international protection (or an Article 18-related pathway) runs its course. As mentioned earlier, of particular note is the vulnerable condition of women who migrated alone and who were exposed to trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Concerning the procedural aspect, **social workers of anti-trafficking NGOs** take a positive view of the preparatory actions offered to these women (interviews, being escorted by NGOs, facilitation to the services on the territory) and of the positive consolidation of the **referral system** through conventions with the Territorial Commissions and a periodic series of meetings on a weekly or monthly basis. However, with respect to the issue of **reception**, some criticisms remained, especially as regards the restrictive regulations on residents' ability to use the telephone and move about freely (a situation experienced and re-

ported by some Nigerian women, such as *Victoria*, placed in several shelter homes and minor communities). Others, however, stressed the need to move beyond the stereotypical and victimising idea created by trafficking and gender guidelines (Ticktin, 2014; Mai, 2018; Taliani, 2019). Similar criticisms have been directed to the standardisation of operational measures, which are incapable of adequately considering phenomena such as the intra-national displacement and transnational mobility of trafficked women or of those involved in what are generally framed as "illegal economies" (Mai, 2018).

Their situation becomes even more critical after a series of denials and due to the sudden exit from the formal reception circuit and/or their relocation to another European country. In many cases, they made the latter choice in the hope of having better luck of being regularised, and of finding a social network that could take charge of their daily vicissitudes and needs (related to work and assistance in the area of care). **Such transitions often result in even greater vulnerability, as they also make the migrants dependent on other individuals (not necessarily from the same country) to mediate bureaucratic and basic issues for them, concerning, for example, hospitality, housing, their livelihood and relations with basic services in the area**. We encountered these women both in our research in Lazio and in the Veneto. The stories these women told highlighted how pregnancies, violence of various kinds and abusive contexts were intertwined with false promises of regularisation by partners, clients, employers, or acquaintances.

Discussions with workers from first-level services and anti-trafficking and anti-violence agencies (for instance, with *Laura* and *Alessandra*) confirmed that **these women (pregnant or with children) came back to them mainly to request support for regularisation or housing**. Such requests are, in some cases, difficult to resolve, as policies regulating access to the legal process and to reception measures are blind to those who have an irretrievably closed procedure or who already benefited from it in the past and who are, therefore, prevented from accessing a SAI reception centre. These cases seem to fall under a kind of punishment of the Italian protection regime, which does not easily find solutions for those who voluntarily withdrew from previous CAS centres or who were removed as a result of violating internal regulations but who may have been unaware of the consequences of these actions due to a lack of access to information (*Glory*). This issue illuminates a poorly organised reception system that finds it difficult to be self-critical and flexible toward people in precarious situations (Sanò & Della Puppa, 2021).

Many of the interviews shed light on the extent to which existential precarity and a different scale of priorities characterised the roughest paths. As an example, the priority of work and access to forms of socialisation are not thought of as virtuous "spurs" that can foster inclusion or rootedness. On the contrary, some restrictive measures at the micro and macro levels make insertion pathways controlling and increase vulnerability. Many of the respondents reported these **different perceptions of priorities**, along with communication difficulties, particularly by those who mentioned a protracted sense of failure that had transnational repercussions and supra-individual implications. For example, women like *Hania* (Pakistan) and *Karin* (Nigeria) directly linked their malaise and vulnerable situation to being far from their children. Therefore, they called for increased efforts to facilitate quicker and more effective family reunification policies. These difficulties point to a perception of vulnerability centred only on individuals rather than thought about in relational terms, considering the perspectives of those directly affected (Fassin, 2013; Taliani, 2019; Beneduce & Taliani, 2021).

Staff at the centres have shown how important it is to activate an intersectional gaze that considers the age of these women, if they became mothers due to sexual or domestic violence, their exposure to further circuits of exploitation, and whether or not they could count on the support and presence of sig-

nificant contacts (e.g., children or partners, perhaps having made a request for family reunification). The issue of parenthood is also central because, from a gender perspective, being mothers – whether single or in a larger family – forces these women to take into account the presence of children (Mendola & Busetta, 2021). The shift of priorities from personal autonomy to the need to support their children, in Italy or abroad, sometimes implies accepting conditions of exploitation (Martorano, 2021).

In these cases, only the joint action of first-level services, social services and NGOs can make up for a series of administrative-bureaucratic measures. In many cases, these actors temporarily buffer **particularly dramatic situations that risk leaving single-parent families homeless**. In this way, the activation of a series of contacts ranging from listening centres to anti-violence centres, from the shelter houses of anti-trafficking agencies to parishes, has made it possible to find alternative solutions to emergency situations.

Some workers have reported that, although the admission of number of women in this type of situation is not numerically significant, it is nonetheless on the rise. Challenges in line with the evolution of social phenomena signal organisational gaps and the long-term effects of a range of national and local policies. Although they may be transient, as migrants, the services that do exist make up for institutional shortcomings by providing information, initial support (a few nights in a hotel and meal vouchers), and referral to other services that may be able to take them in. However, in several cases, some of these women tend not to return. On this, services continue to question whether this means that their goal was simply to access information and contacts, or whether it indicates that they then went to seek answers elsewhere (Fontanari & Ambrosini, 2018; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021a). Something similar happens to **under-age or newly arrived youth from the Balkan route**. They are sometimes sucked into labour exploitation or grey forms of intra-community support. Here, too, we see how much the absence of timely responses from Italian institutions on their placement in reception centres and basic access to a range of services can lead to a slide into new forms of vulnerability.

6.3 How uncertainty affects integration dynamics

Here, we shed light on some of the major critical issues and gaps highlighted by protection seekers and people working in support and reception services regarding policies regulating reception in Italy. Some interviews with protection seekers and social workers highlighted the **challenges related to linguistic barriers and to the lack of stable employment opportunities.** The cuts in costs and services that have affected CAS reception centres produced the following situation: there are groups of people who do not always know the territory and who have limited tools to integrate themselves without intermediaries – especially when compared to those who have benefited from other opportunities, such as SAI centres. This situation causes them to be exposed to multifaceted and permanent situations of exploitation. This is particularly evident in the case of people who have lived for a long time in isolated centres and who experienced different forms of institutional abandonment, or people who found themselves undocumented and bound to a repeated procedure (Pinelli, 2018; Sanò et al, 2021; Declich & Pitzalis, 2021).

A good example of these dynamics is the story of *Omar*, a 27-year-old Senegalese protection seeker who had always lived in CAS but who, because of his skills, managed to find a regular job with a good salary. Following a particularly difficult bureaucratic process, he suddenly found himself at risk of losing everything. This was due to the negative response on this case by the Court of Cassation in the winter of 2021, which led the CAS coordinator to ask him to leave the apartment as soon as possible. For a time,

Omar found himself clinging to the "special protection" pathway, fortunately available to him after the Lamorgese Decree came into effect. However, the loss of housing in the CAS created the conditions for him to lose his job, as the non-regularity of his documents no longer allowed him to work. He recounted the profound difficulties he met not only in finding a room, as a Black migrant, but also in acquiring a regular rental contract on which to eventually rest his application for the renewal of his residence permit for "special protection". As *Osas* pointed out too, it is important to open a more general discourse regarding **job insecurity** (short and discontinuous contracts, internships, etc.) that refugees are exposed to in and out of reception, and how these contracts exacerbate the challenge of finding housing and building a future. These testimonies show that until parallel action is taken with labour policies that can enhance paths to non-exploitative job placement with housing and income support policies, many refugees and protection seekers may suddenly sink into vulnerable situations.

Situations such as those experienced by *Omar* and *Osas* resonate in the testimonies of many others we encountered during the research, both among those who negatively ended their reception journey and those who left with a regular document in their pocket. In the latter cases, even with an excellent command of the Italian language, legal documents and permanent employment contracts, most of the people interviewed reported their frustrations searching for a place to stay. Thus, the centrality of **housing** emerges as an indispensable step in moving to the next reconstructive phase of one's life and planning one's future. These difficulties, which the participants voiced in all of the provinces where we conducted research, shed light on the immediate effects of a series of criminalisation policies towards migrants, particularly women, Black migrants and those who arrive via the central Mediterranean route or the Balkan route (Khosravi, 2010; Tazzioli, 2018; Campesi, 2018; Fabini et al, 2019; Ciabarri, 2020; Della Puppa & Sanò, 2021b; Sòrgoni, 2022). The material concreteness of housing seems to almost overshadow a range of discriminatory practices related to skin colour, social class, religion or language barrier that most of those interviewed in Lazio and the Veneto reported.

The centrality of **housing** emerged in another testimony, this time from an almost 60-year-old Pakistani man, *Mohamed*, currently on a medical permit and housed in a SAI centre. After arriving in Italy in 2012 and receiving a denial that he failed to appeal in time, he plunged into housing dependency and was hosted by a compatriot involved in shady dealings. After being assaulted at that house, he spent several years as a homeless person, visiting soup kitchens in the city and even attempting to move to Spain, before deciding to return to Veneto. During his time on the streets, he developed a number of illnesses for which he did not seek immediate help, as his compatriots told him that he would risk prosecution if he showed up at the hospital without an identity document. Following a sudden hospitalisation in August 2017, *Mohamed* learned of his heart problems, hypertension, and diabetes. Upon discharge, and facing the possibility of returning to the streets, he was strongly urged to go to the municipal dormitory, where he was initially not admitted as he was not in good standing with his documents. Only through the intervention of a far-sighted doctor was he then able to gain access to that facility for the next 2 years, initiate an application for a residence permit for medical treatment, and later gain access to a SAI centre. Although *Mohamed* found some temporary answers with respect to housing and his health problems, he has continued to battle the bureaucracy. In order to apply for disability benefits and access public housing, the criteria set by national and local governments exclude migrants who do not possess a passport. His passport, unfortunately, has been blocked indefinitely due to proceedings against him in his country of origin, and he was asked for a bribe to unblock it. This example illustrates how a series of political and institutional closures can suddenly worsen the situation of long-staying migrants, how such situations

can sometimes improve thanks to the actions of particularly sensitive individuals, and how bureaucracy makes it extremely complicated, if not impossible, to resolve complex situations in the medium- to long-term.

As mentioned, **housing insecurity and the fear of what life will be like after reception is the *leitmotif* of almost every interview we conducted in the Veneto and in Lazio**. Whether for single women or for those with children, young people just over the age of 18 or entire households, or people forced to live with chronic illnesses, there is a great deal of concern surrounding the housing issue. For instance, *Nour* and *Abdul* (both from Syria), during the interview, frequently repeated the fear of being asked to leave the reception centre without having at least a job contract, especially considering that they are a big family with more than one child. A sense of profound precariousness unites those who the system excludes or discards as "not credible" and "not deserving" of some form of protection (Beneduce, 2015; Sòrgoni, 2019; Gribaldo, 2021), and those who, in contrast, have been deemed not only "credible" and "deserving," but who also successfully insert themselves into the new social context in just a few years, leaving behind their traumatic experiences. The latter, after a period spent in SAI centre of about 1 to 2 years, are invited to leave the centres and are generally accompanied in this transition with forms of support to help them pay rent for the first 6 months. However, the risk of leaving the shelter "without a parachute" and finding themselves on the street and exposed to exploitation is just around the corner, as happens to undocumented people who nevertheless remain on the territory, reliant on some social network or on first-level services (Sanò et al., 2021; Degli Uberti, 2021).

Thus, there is still a question about what "autonomy" means for the institutions and people of direct interest here, and there is the issue of the disconnect between people's subjectification and the pathways designed by the policies and services to which they turn. Some of the testimonies, like *Serge* (Democratic Republic of Congo), show the need to create new formulas of listening and support, because the line between getting sick from welfarism and institutional abandonment is blurred. As *Victoria*'s testimony (Nigeria) showed, the time to listen and the time to trust can also be very long: bureaucratic time and people's time do not always go hand in hand. In her case, it took 3 years before she fully trusted the social worker who was following her as a trafficking victim after she arrived as a minor. Only after this long period she was finally able to tell her true story, after previously giving two or three false versions. In general, the long timeframes of the reports do not align with the short timeframes of SAI's reception, which is organised around projects lasting about 1-1.5 years. If people come from a very long CAS process and obtain a positive outcome in the Court of Cassation after 5-6 years, how will they be able to take advantage of the time spent in a reception project with average staff and services? Similarly, how can they rebuild a life after the same protection system has expelled them, leaving them homeless or in exploitative conditions?

Finally, the effect of actions and policies regarding migration shows its contradictions and responsibility in producing situations of vulnerability **through evictions and de-funding of all those spontaneous housing projects from below that have tried to offer support beyond the logic of call of bids** (e.g., *Cristina*, a 32-year-old Ethiopian woman has been living for about 10 years as an occupant of a hotel in Rome together with her two children, aged 5 and 7). Examples of this are the experience of Baobab and other NGOs or informal and supportive groups in Rome (e.g., Pensare Migrante) that provide forms of housing support and first aid to the most vulnerable people depicted here, including those who do not view Italy as a final destination, but simply as a place of transit (Fontanari, 2018).

VII. CONCLUSION

This report is the result of a qualitative research investigating the views of migrant people who live or have lived in Italy and have needed – to different degrees – protection because of one or more situations of vulnerability. The purpose was to offer a perspective based on protection seekers' experiences, on the meanings and forms taken by vulnerability, as well as to understand the range of protection and support measures provided.

Considering their experiences in Italy as protection seekers, **protection seekers identify the slowness of the procedure as one of the major aspects that can contribute to the worsening or onset of vulnerability situations**. Waiting for the convocation from the Territorial Commission or, in the case of an appeal, for the ruling of the Tribunal or the Court of Cassation, has a significant psychological impact: it makes life choices, social inclusion, and the possibility of socio-occupational integration unstable. Some people report that the slowness of procedures and the restrictiveness of decisions pushes migrant people toward precariousness and increases dependence on compatriots rooted in the territory. Furthermore, this leaves room for possible dynamics of exploitation or intermediation to services.

Protection seekers argued that institutions in charge of assessing different forms of vulnerability do not always provide satisfactory responses to their needs for protection, especially those who came into contact with Territorial Commissions and Tribunals before 2018. Respondents stress that these institutions should ask less invasive questions and improve their ability to listen. This is compounded by the need to take greater account of violence experienced in countries of origin or transit. In general, protection seekers stress the importance of arriving more prepared to the asylum interview, therefore it is crucial to insist on better access to reliable information and greater disclosure of what their rights are in the different protection systems. It also emerges how **identifying and taking charge of vulnerabilities is not always easy, also because of the limitations of an excessive standardization of operational procedures observed, both in the decision-making and taking charge spheres.** Access to information also means a different mode of listening. In this regard, support centers (for instance, help-desk giving free information and helping protection seekers in navigating bureaucratic issues and gaps of asylum system) could be strengthened (or opened, if they are not present) at the beginning of the procedure, so that any situations of vulnerability can be brought to light more quickly. Several people in vulnerable situations report that they have not been sufficiently reached by such services, as in the case of homeless and undocumented people.

Further elements to work on in the future to improve the way the protection system identifies, recognizes, and supports the pathways of people in vulnerable situations is related to the **possibility of providing concrete forms of support in and out of the reception system.** Some migrants emphasize in particular that privileged channels of recognition of educational qualifications and previous professional experience should be enhanced in order to avoid subaltern inclusion, which is almost systematic at the moment. Second, many stress the importance of strengthening "humanitarian corridors" and overcoming the Dublin Regulation. While the former would ensure a safe access not riddled with violence and harassment, the latter action would avoid the vulnerabilizing effect of having to reset the life built in a European country through deportation to the country of first arrival in the EU.

Regarding reception and support services, many protection seekers interviewed think that a major problem is the multiplicity of forms of reception and the dissimilarity of services provided, as well as their location. Indeed, living in a large CAS centre in a rural and isolated setting is often mentioned as an example of a system that leads people to become vulnerable during their long reception routes, as well as an example of institutional neglect. On the contrary, smaller reception centers allow for a better relationship of proximity between staff and migrants housed. A further critical element is the presence of rules perceived as restrictive and a lack of flexibility with respect to people's life paths, both upon entry and exit from the reception system. Some people complain that they have experienced incidents of racism or infantilization from both social workers and the local population. This issue has been reported by people living in rural settings in the Veneto as much as by people living in Rome. Thus, the **importance of listening and of ongoing training of staff working in support and reception services comes back**. Over the past few years, these services experienced a considerable turnover which, in turn, has resulted in the loss of professionals/people with significant experience in the field.

Protection seekers and social workers suggest more insistence in the initial phase with Italian courses and professionalizing paths that can then allow for better social and labor inclusion. As far as the language barrier is concerned, it is not only to be attributed to protection seekers, but also to territorial institutions and services that are not equipped to receive people who are not Italian speakers. Regarding pathways to employment, the importance of employment inclusion should be recognized for its impact at the psychological level, as it makes possible to reduce, at least partially, previous or current situations of vulnerability. These are also crucial in reducing the risk of depending on other mediators or entering exploitative dynamics. Indeed, people who do not feel listened to and supported in the initial period also run the risk of ending up in networks related to non-legal activities in later stages.

Special attention should be given to people in **multiple situations of vulnerability**, who should receive additional forms of psychological support to process past experiences and create a planning centered on their present and on the enhancement of their skills. Some participants pointed out that specific situations of vulnerability related to gender and age (men/women, minors/elderly) are not always adequately supported. In some cases, there is the perception that support is focused toward people with disabilities or serious health problems, who usually have an easier path in terms of reception, access to services, and care by highly qualified staff.

Some participants emphasize that we need to go beyond mere "protection" by offering more freedom and opportunities for socialization. Although some initiatives are organized within the framework of SAI centres in some territories, several participants recount situations of restriction to freedom of movement, particularly in shelter homes for victims of trafficking.

Some participants suggested thinking about initiatives involving their households and the organization of intercultural events to create new social ties. Several people also emphasized the importance of long-term support guarantees for people with other forms of protection, as the key difficulties are related to maintaining residence permits for reasons other than international protection. As highlighted in this report, a sudden job or housing insecurity can jeopardize a years-long journey of social integration, with major repercussions on the health and stability of protection seekers, as well as on the institutions and services to which they usually turn.

ANNEX

Appendix I

Research contexts visited during the ethnographic fieldwork

Table 1.1

Reception Centres and Support Services visited in Veneto

	Typology of Centre/Service	Place	Management	Size	Guests/Users
1	SAI centre	Venice (town)	Coges Coop don Milani	Medium	Men
2	SAI centre	Venice (rural)	Il villaggio globale	Small	Men, women and families
3	Help Desk	Venice (town)	Project Jumping	//	Undocumented and homeless
4	SAI centre	Padua (town)	Coges Coop don Milani	Medium	Men, women and families
5	SAI centre	Padua (rural)	Porto Alegre, Città Solare, Il Sestante, Coges Coop	Medium	Men
6	CAS centre	Padua (town)	Orizzonti	Medium	Men, women and families
7	Help Desk	Padua (town)	Sportello RaR (mucipality)	//	Undocumented and homeless people
8	Help Desk	Padua (town)	Caritas	//	Undocumented and homeless people
9	SAI centre	Treviso (rural)	Una casa per l'Uomo	Small	Men
10	SAI centre	Treviso (rural)	Consorzio Restituire	Medium	Men, women
11	Help Desk	Treviso (town)	Caritas	//	Undocumented and homeless people
12	Projects for people involved in human trafficking	Verona (town) and Padua (town)	Comunità dei Giovani, Mimosa, Equality coop	Small	Men and women victims of human trafficking and labor exploitation

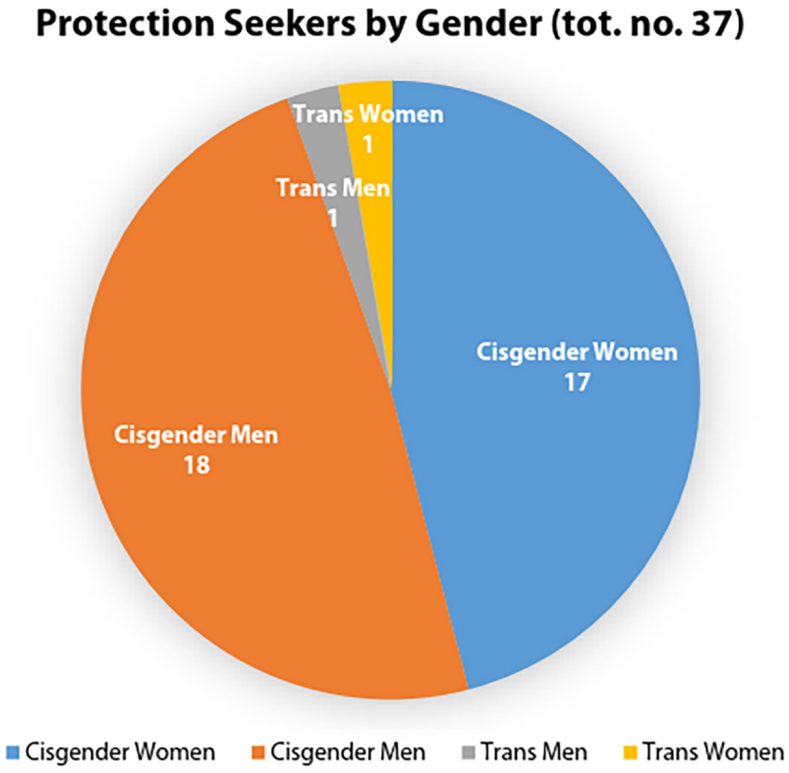
Table 1.2

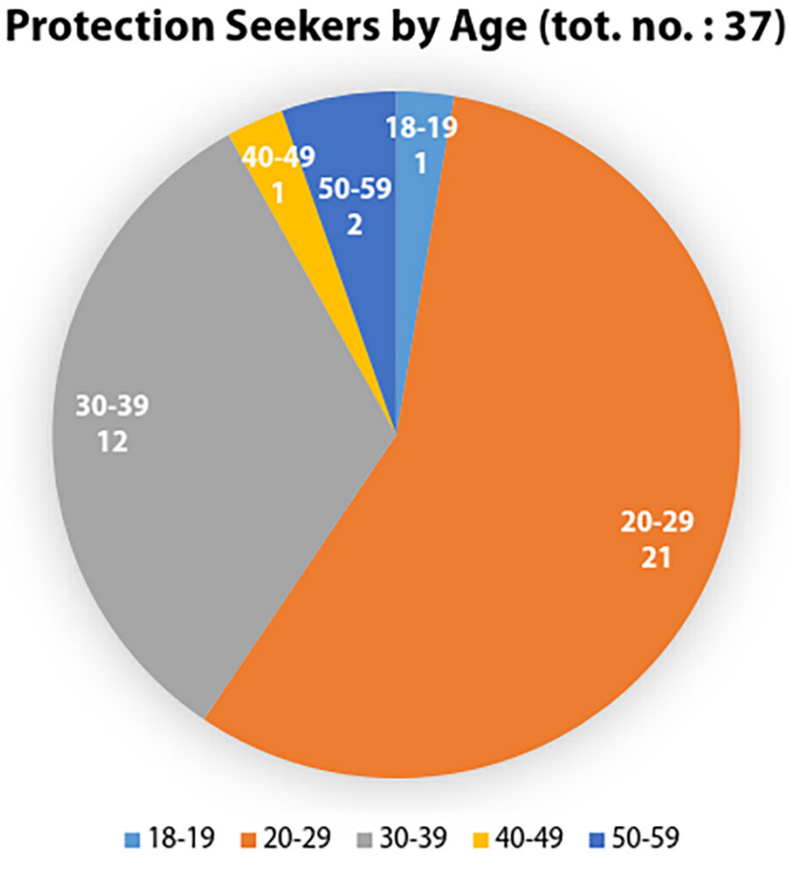
Reception Centres and Support Services visited in Lazio

	Typology of Centre	Place	Management	Size	Guests/Users
1	SAI centre	Rome (town)	Project Kairos	Small	Men
2	SAI centre	Rome (town)	Centro Astalli	Small	Men
3	SAI centre	Rome (town)	Arci	Medium	Women and Families
4	SAI centre	Rome (town)	Idea Prisma 82	Small	Families
5	CAS centre	Rome (rural)	Home	Medium	Families and women
6	Help Desk	Rome (town)	Binario 95 and Help Centre	//	Undocumented and homeless people
7	Help Desk	Rome (town)	Centro Astalli (Samifo)	//	Centre for medical treatments (open also to undocumented migrants)
8	Help Desk	Rome (town)	Baobab Experience	//	Undocumented and people in transit
9	Projects for people involved in human trafficking	Rome (town)	Be Free, Differenza Donna, Magliana 80, Il Cammino, Parsec, Ora d'Aria	Small	Men and women victims of human trafficking and labor exploitation
10	SAI centre	Latina (town)	Il Quadrifoglio, Astrolabio	Medium	Men, Women and families
11	SAI centre	Latina (rural)	Gruppo Umana Solidarietà	Small	Men, women and families
12	CAS centre	Latina (rural)	Diaconia	Medium	Men

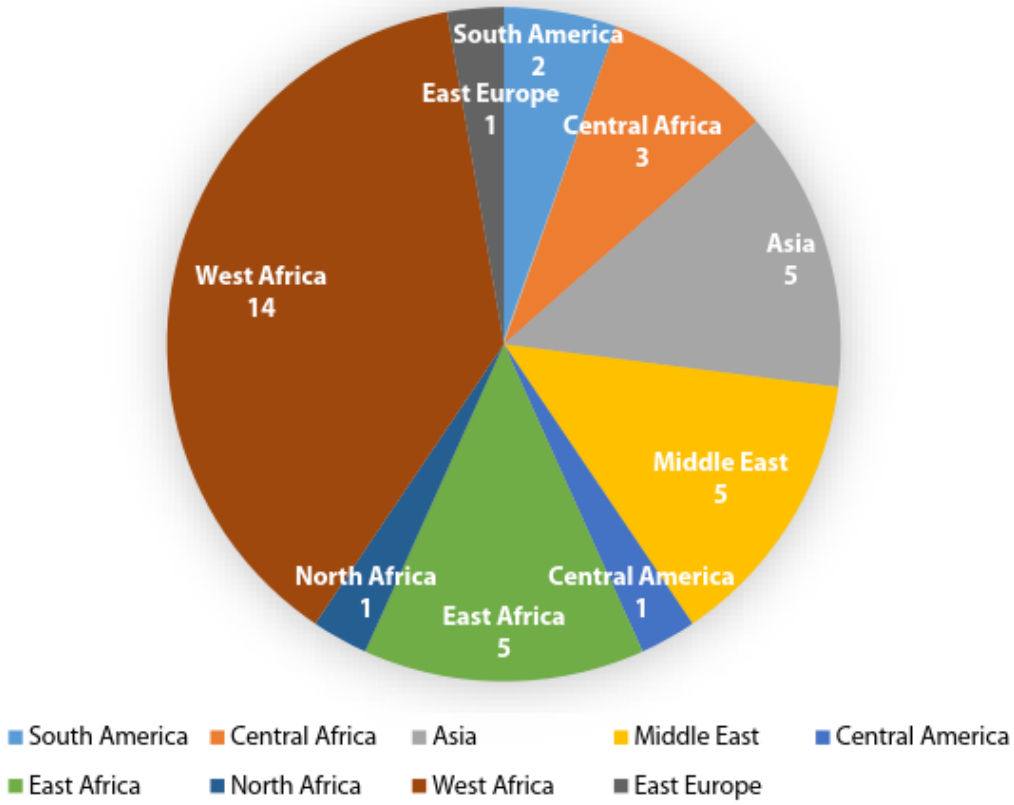
Appendix 2:

Data on protection seekers and social actors who have been interviewed

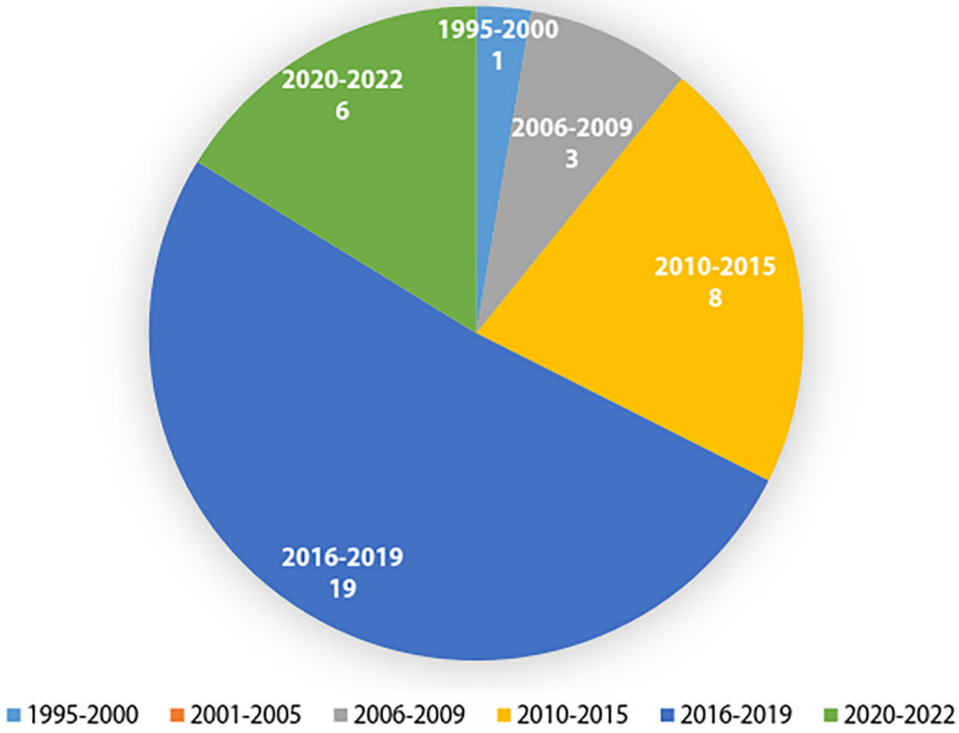


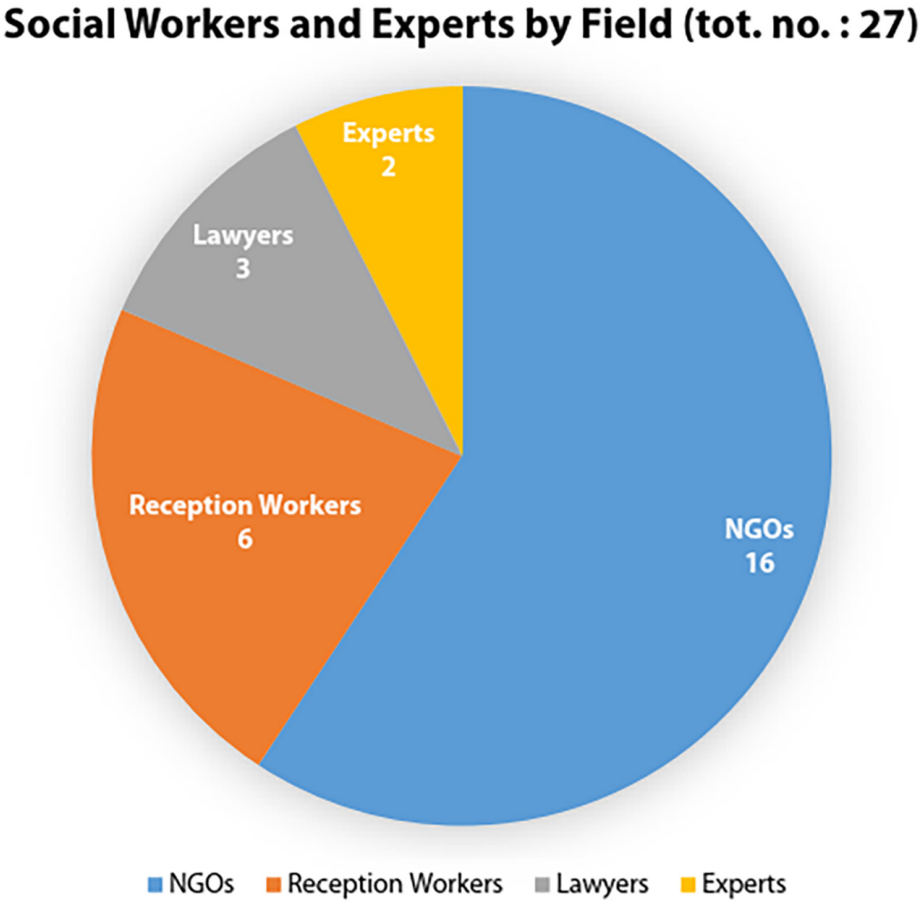


Interviewees by Macro-Geographic Area (tot. no. 37)



Protection Seekers by Date of Arrival (tot. no. : 37)




Social Workers and Experts by Field (tot. no. : 27)
Experts
2
Lawyers
3
Reception Workers
6
NGOs
16
NGOs
Reception Workers
Lawyers
Experts

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