

*Routledge Advances in Sociology*

# **SOCIAL PROTECTION PROGRAMMES**

**NARRATIVES OF NIGERIAN WOMEN AND  
ANTI-TRAFFICKING PRACTITIONERS IN ITALY**

Michela Sempredon



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# Social Protection Programmes

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This book deals with social protection programmes targeted to people trafficked for the scope of sexual exploitation. It provides empirical evidence on the N.A.Ve programme, in the north-eastern Italian Veneto Region, and its evolution. It elaborates on the programme by narrating the subjective experiences of practitioners and of a specific group of beneficiaries: young Nigerian women – some in transition towards the age of majority.

The book builds on qualitative research, including a long ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews carried out in the period 2019–2021, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It takes an intersectional, social work and humanitarian governance perspective to examine the multiple dimensions of vulnerability (age, gender, geographical origin, type of exploitation) characterising trafficked and sexually exploited Nigerian women. It draws attention to the precariousness of protection trajectories, but also their variability, stressing on the agency of these women. This is done with a postcolonial feminist approach by building on the autonomy of migration and the critical humanitarian governance literature, while shedding light on the temporal tensions between biographical and institutional times.

Calling for greater space for women's voices and for their involvement in the co-development of protection programmes, this book will appeal to scholars of sociology, anthropology, social work and politics, as well as to practitioners and policymakers interested in migration and trafficking.

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## Narratives of Nigerian Women and Anti-Trafficking Practitioners in Italy

Michela Semprebon



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To Sandra and to all the women we interviewed, as young women, daughters, friends, partners, mothers, if they are, if they wish to be. And to my mom, yesterday, today, always and forever.

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# Foreword

By *Giovanna Marconi*

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This book stems from the new knowledge and experience gathered through INSigHT (Building Capacity to deal with Human Trafficking and Transit Routes in Nigeria, Italy, Sweden), an action-research project carried out between 2019 and 2023 by the SSIIM UNESCO Chair of the Università Iuav di Venezia, and funded by the European Union, contracted by ICMPD through the Migration Partnership Facility.

The SSIIM UNESCO Chair on the “Social and Spatial Inclusion of International Migrants – urban policies and practices” ([www.unescochair-iuav.it](http://www.unescochair-iuav.it)) is a research centre established in 2008 at the Università Iuav di Venezia, with the aim of investigating local policies and practices promoting (or preventing) the urban inclusion of foreign residents. Its mission is to contribute to: the building of more inclusive, just and peaceful urban societies; the promotion of socially responsible citizenship, particularly – but not only – of young people; the provision of lifelong learning opportunities for urban stakeholders, focused on tools and methods to reduce socio-spatial inequalities and accommodate differences. By addressing challenges related to inclusion processes of international migrants in contemporary cities, both in the global North and South, the different projects carried out by SSIIM UNESCO Chair aim to counter any form of racism, discrimination, intolerance and exclusionary discourse and to contribute to sustainable urban development, rooted in intercultural and interreligious dialogue, equality, respect of diversities and the strengthening of socio-spatial cohesion.

The SSIIM is highly specialised in research, action-research, awareness raising and capacity building on the local impacts of international migration. Urban governance and space are at the core of the work carried out by SSIIM: on the one hand, it focuses on the daily interface between societies and space, in cities characterised by growing (ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic) differences (spatial practices and representations, new forms of appropriation, re-appropriation and claiming of urban spaces); on the other hand, on how local policies and practices can have tangible effects on the right to the city for all people. As far as the latter is concerned, the SSIIM has carried out several action-research projects in cities of the Veneto Region, Europe and extra-European countries. Embracing an interdisciplinary and multi-agency approach involving close collaboration and

partnership with local administrations and civil society organisations, the activities promoted by the Chair always strive to have an impact on the ground, contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, and SDG 11 in particular.

In this framework, the INSigHT Action was conceived as a public policy laboratory, including both capacity building and research activities. The former were carried out by the project partners, namely: Associazione 2050 and Equality ATI in Italy; Pathfinders Justice Initiative and Nigerian Women Association in Nigeria. Training (targeting law enforcement officers, cultural-linguistic mediators and teachers) were among the most relevant activities they implemented. As far as research was involved, the team adopted an experimental and innovative approach including ethnographic action-research methods to inform and favour exchanges between local policymakers, law enforcement agencies and key stakeholders on the trends and challenges of human trafficking, but also to co-design efficient strategies to better deal with the phenomenon. The added value of this approach consists in the collection of evidence-based material drawing from interviews and participant observation in social protection programmes targeted to people identified as victims of trafficking. Recommendations were built together, step-by-step, with practitioners, to enhance their self-reflexivity and sense of ownership over the project.

The bulk of this action-research work is collected in six reports on Italy, Nigeria and Sweden, all freely downloadable from the SSIIM UNESCO Chair's website. In Nigeria, the research work was focused on mapping anti-trafficking projects implemented between 2011 and 2019 and on examining rehabilitation programmes targeted to returnees. The research in Sweden explored the policy interventions undertaken to combat and prevent trafficking, with attention to the extent to which they also deal with intra-European movements. The research in Italy aimed to analyse the functioning of the N.A.Ve (Veneto Region Anti-trafficking Network) – a social protection programme that is considered as promising practice at EU level and was among the first to be implemented in Italy – and two emerging issues connected to trafficking in human beings, namely (i) intra-European movements and the mobility of trafficked migrants in the area between the Italian–Austrian border of Brenner and the city of Bozen; (ii) the phenomenon of begging by Nigerian nationals in Italy and in the Venice area particularly. Besides the reports, four policy briefs were produced and widely disseminated. Conceived as tools for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to support discussions and advocacy activities, the briefs are centred on four key-topics: (i) returns to, and reintegration in Nigeria of, trafficked women; (ii) begging activities by Nigerians in Italy and the connection with exploitation and trafficking; (iii) intra-European movements and the protection of trafficked women in Italy and Sweden and (iv) social protection programmes for people identified as victims of trafficking in Italy.

It is on the basis of the empirical material gathered throughout the research in Italy that Michela Sempredon wrote this book. Michela was part of the SSIIM

UNESCO Chair's research group from 2016 to 2021, when she obtained a position at the University of Parma, but has continued to work on the INSigHT Action until its completion. Passionate, dedicated and extremely determined to get the most out of field research – both for scientific purposes and to support local actors in rooting their action on evidence-based knowledge – she coordinated four junior researchers, together with whom she carried out research in Italy, Sweden and Nigeria. Michela focused this book on the subjective experiences in the N.A.Ve project, in the Veneto Region, as narrated by practitioners and beneficiaries, a group of young Nigerian women. With this work she sheds light on a scarcely explored topic, the protection trajectories and the aspirations of Nigerian women, with a particular temporal focus (completion of their social protection programme, transition towards the age of majority, pre- and ongoing pandemic periods). In doing so, Michela embraces a postcolonial feminism perspective and draws from several strands of the academic literature, particularly that of social work, – less frequently adopted in this field of research, as opposed to criminological and clinical perspectives. To Michela goes my deepest gratitude for having fully grasped the spirit and principles underpinning the mission of the SSIIM, by giving voice to marginal populations and by contributing to advancing knowledge and awareness on human trafficking and social protection, as a researcher, activist, woman and dear friend.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

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**N.A.Ve:** Network Antitrattra per il Veneto (Veneto Region Anti-trafficking Network)

**N.A.V.I.G.A.Re:** Network Antitrattra per il Veneto Intersezioni Governance Azioni Regionali (Veneto Region Anti-trafficking Network Intersections Governance Regional Actions)

**SPRAR:** Sistema di Protezione per Richiedenti Asilo e Rifugiati (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees)

**CAS:** Centri di Accoglienza Straordinaria (Centres for Extraordinary Reception)

**SIPROIMI:** Sistema di protezione per titolari di protezione internazionale e per minori stranieri non accompagnati (System for the protection of holders of international protection and for unaccompanied minors)

**SAI:** Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione (System of Reception and Integration)

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# Glossary

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**Labour Directorates (Direzioni del Lavoro):** operate at provincial and interregional levels, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. Through Labour Inspectorates (Ispettorati del Lavoro), they carry out surveillance and regulation duties relating to the labour normative framework.

**Prefectures (Prefetture):** are peripheral bodies of the Ministry of Interior, with representative functions at the provincial and metropolitan levels. Their main task is to ensure the coordination of State administrative activities at peripheral level. Since 2011, among other tasks, they have published public tenders to outsource the management of CAS asylum seeker reception shelters and have monitored them.

**Territorial Commissions: (Commissioni Territoriali):** are the body responsible for asylum determination in Italy.

**Questura:** is an office of the Department for Public Safety (Dipartimento della Pubblica Sicurezza) of the Ministry of Interior and has competence over the provincial territory. Its main duties are to grant public order and public safety, to prevent and repress crime. It also exercises administrative functions associated with the issuance of passports and of residence permits for migrants.



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# Introduction

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This book is an output of the EU INSigHT Action, an action-research project that took place between 2019 and 2023 and included capacity building and qualitative research activities on social protection programmes in Italy, Sweden and Nigeria. The book builds on the research carried out by the Italian research team, including Michela Sempredon, as the Principal Investigator, Serena Caroselli and Serena Scarabello as researchers. Part of the work presented here builds on Sempredon *et al.* (2021), but also on the many stimuli provided by the INSigHT final conference, the series of webinars organised between March and November 2021 and several webinars and conferences that we attended as panel organisers or presenters.<sup>1</sup>

The focus of the book is on the subjective experiences of a group of Nigerian women in social protection programmes in Italy, specifically in the N.A.Ve project, in the north-eastern Veneto Region. These women were trafficked for the scope of sexual exploitation, entered the programme over the past seven years and, at the time of our interviews, in October 2020, were about to complete the programme or had recently completed it. Our aim is to give voice to these women, as they are scarcely represented in public and political discussions, and to contribute to countering stereotypical depictions that over-portray them as deserving victims, failing to consider their *lived* experiences. Ultimately, we would like to add to the critical debate on counter-trafficking programmes and social work scholarships, while favouring programme improvements. The voices of the women will be complemented by those of practitioners who were interviewed on their experiences of the programme and of work with Nigerian women. We will adopt a temporal lens to interrogate the tensions between Nigerian women's biographical and practitioners' institutional times. We will also throw light on pending challenges and on the micro (individual resources), meso (relational and network resources) and macro level (policies and programmes) factors that can arguably help interpret Nigerian women's trajectories in the programme. Two specific sections will focus on the temporalities of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the transition, of some beneficiaries, to the age of majority.

The book will appeal to scholars of sociology, anthropology, social work and politics, as well as communities outside academia, such as migration



and anti-trafficking practitioners and professionals, social workers and other stakeholders involved and interested in migration and trafficking. It will call for women's increased involvement in the co-development of protection programmes.

### **Sex exploitation, counter trafficking programmes, subjective experiences**

Research work on trafficking and exploitation has developed along two main strands: on the one side, sexual libertarian theories addressing sex work as labour, on the other, radical feminist ones considering prostitution as a patriarchal form of violence against women (Kempadoo and Durisin, 2020). These two strands build on different ideas about people's agency and their inclusion in claims for rights and protection, with implications in terms of gender and race relations. According to the first strand, labour migrants have been systematically deceived about working conditions (i.e., pay, hours) and have been physically or sexually abused. Scholars of this tradition consider trafficking and prostitution as inextricably linked (Weitzer, 2014) and prostitution as a form of female subjugation (Pateman, 1983; Miriam, 2005). They emphasise the violence of this practice more than its labour dimension (Jeffreys, 1990). The second strand considers migrants to be competent actors with knowledge and agency. It questions the term "trafficking" and its interpretative frames (Andrijasevic, 2010; Doezema, 2010; Uy, 2011; Shoaps, 2013; Mai, 2016; Fehrenbacher *et al.*, 2020), suggesting they overlook significant aspects of the phenomenon, including forms of institutional violence (Farmer, 2004). The experience of many migrants can be situated between these two poles. Some do not fully realise the terms of their agreement with enablers (i.e., specific working conditions and risks) and have difficulty in repaying off their debt; some provide their consent initially, but later face unexpected conditions or consent to a task initially considered unpleasant, but eventually undertaken as acceptable (Weitzer, 2014). Coherently with this view, some scholars have adopted intermediary perspectives on the topic (Doezema, 1998; Davidson O'Connell, 2006; Koken, 2010; Abbatecola, 2018). They look at the sex market as a sector comprising both exploited people and autonomous workers and argue that sex work can also be a form of emancipation. We are in line with this view. We believe that trafficking is a socially constructed depoliticised category (i.e., Malkki, 1996; Ticktin, 2011; Pinelli, 2013) that muffles the voice of people, disregards their agency, and generates ahistorical subjects. This happens in association with the labelling process of victimisation, that creates moral hierarchies of "deservingness" (O'Connell Davidson and Anderson, 2006) and hierarchies of legal status (Isin and Turner, 2007; Rigo, 2007; Anderson, 2012), resulting in mechanisms of "denizenship" (Hammar, 1990). We will therefore depart from the stigmatised representation of victims of trafficking (Christie, 1986; Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; Uy, 2011), by drawing from a postcolonial feminism lens that will help us focus on women's agency (Sharma, 2003; Kapur, 2004; Agustin, 2007; Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016), beyond a

Eurocentric interpretation of migration, trafficking and asylum. Such a framework will hopefully encourage the reader to think about the *lived* experiences of people, rather than looking at them through judicial and socially constructed categories (i.e., asylum seeker, victim, etc.) (Karakayali and Rigo, 2010). It will hopefully encourage the reader to look at them as people, rather than “different others” (Fanon *et al.*, 1963; Said, 1979), a stigmatising category that flattens the complexity of their stories.

We will dive into Nigerian women’s stories by examining their trajectories (Schapendonk, 2012) in the N.A.Ve social protection programme, their motivations and aspirations, the obstacles they faced and the support they received. Coherently with the mobility research strand (Cresswell, 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006), we will adopt a dynamic lens to migratory paths, by addressing daily performances and struggles as they unfold along different temporalities, with periods of mobility and immobility, acceleration and deceleration, rest and re-orientation. Moving beyond methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002) and embracing the autonomy of migration approach (Karakayali and Tsianos, 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013), we will dig into power relations as they emerge in everyday life (Burawoy, 2000), in a tension between individual agency and structural constraints (Ortner, 2006). The experiences of Nigerian women will be at the core of our analysis, as an empirical object to be investigated through micro-spaces of encounter (Larkin, 2015) with anti-trafficking practitioners (and other actors). While this book can only represent a fragment of these women’s trajectories and our findings cannot be generalised, we will strive to account, as much as possible, for the complexity and heterogeneity of their life stories.

Why are we focusing on Nigerian women? As we explained in more detail in Semprebon *et al.* (2021), a peak of arrivals of Nigerian women was recorded in Italy in the period 2015–2016. They represented the main target of the N.A.Ve programme and other counter-trafficking programmes in Italy. This target group was the focus of the INSigHT Action accordingly. Movements of Nigerian women (and men) had been recorded earlier (see Monzini *et al.*, 2002) but attention to them has grown more recently. Movements of Nigerian women (and men) are still recorded in Italy and Europe. EU Commission data (2020) suggest a decreasing trend is underway, but these data concerns only people who were officially recorded and does not comprise movements internal to Europe (*ibidem*). It must also be said that while Nigerian women have been mostly associated with sexual exploitation, there are contrasting claims regarding what type of exploitation is more prevalent among people of this and other nationalities. The media have disproportionately focused on sex trafficking and so have films, documentaries and newspaper reports (Farrell and Fahy, 2009; Gulati, 2011; Weitzer, 2014). What is sure is that increasing attention has been paid to counter-trafficking and protection.

Although testimonies of early assistance to people working in the sex market date back to the mid-1800s (Sloan and Wahab, 2000), social workers’ engagement

with the topic has grown in the last two decades (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012; Okech *et al.*, 2018), alongside anti-prostitution campaigns (Sanghera, 2011). Okech *et al.* (2018) remarked a rise in research work since 2017, with only about a third presenting empirical findings, thus encouraging more qualitative research at the international level. We take up this call, with specific attention to the Italian case, where accounts of anti-trafficking interventions can be found mostly in the grey literature (see also Semprebon *et al.*, 2021).

### ***The missing voice of counter-trafficking programme beneficiaries***

While some descriptions have been provided of the plethora of response models around the world (Macy and Johns, 2011; Dell *et al.*, 2019; Timoshkina, 2019), much less space has been devoted to beneficiaries' voices (Russell, 2018; Cordisco Tsai, Lim and Nhanh, 2021; Lockyer, 2022), with a few exceptions (Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; Macy and Johns, 2011; Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014; Rajaram and Tidball, 2018). By narrating Nigerian women's experiences of the N.A. Ve protection programme, we intend to further fill this gap and to provide insights for discussions, beyond the reasons for the "deafening silence of trafficked people" (Clemente, 2022: 280). We firmly believe that listening to marginal people is important to acknowledge the dignity of their lives. It is crucial to challenge the paradigms that interpret the obstacles they face as "private problems" or "pathologies," rather than public issues questioning the adequacy of policy interventions that constrain their access to the rights they are entitled to (Bassel and Emejulu, 2014).

We will look at women's experiences through the lens of subjectivity (Biehl *et al.*, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2010) to investigate dynamics of power and processes of construction of the self. Feminism perspectives have worked on subjectivity *as a process* leaving a possibility for change and (social) boundaries re-definition. According to Butler (1997), subjection is the process of becoming subordinated to power, but also of becoming subject, of challenging and transforming power structures despite oppression (Butler, 1990). The intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989) throws light on the several layers of institutional violence (Farmer, 2004) that women can suffer, simultaneously (Smith, 1983; hooks, 1992), on the grounds of gender, age, geographical origin, violence suffered, motherhood. The multiple dimensions of their identity imply intersectional needs that protection mechanisms can fail to address, in a tendency to focus on cultural and ethnic background. As users' profiles are becoming increasingly complex, the risk has been remarked for social workers to recur to cultural simplification that reduce their complexity by forcing users into "manageable" categories (van der Haar, 2009) (see Chapter 3).

We will focus in particular on the agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) of Nigerian women as performed through subjective temporalities (Griffiths *et al.*, 2013). In contemporary social theory, the relationship between migration and time was taken up two decades ago (Cwerner, 2001), but there has been a recent

revival (23Griffiths *et al.*, 2013; Grønseth, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Migration regimes and structures of control strongly affect the temporality of migrants through the state's management of borders (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), but also through camps that impose a state of confinement (Andersson, 2014) wherein migrants are forced to traverse multiple temporalities, from past to present, from one present to another (Coutin, 2005), in conjunction with reception, protection normative frameworks, regularisation procedures, etc. We interviewed our respondents at a specific time interval in which they were still experiencing the pandemic restrictions, but also at a time when they were about to leave their protection project or had recently left it. For some, it was the time of transition towards (formal) adulthood – they were turning 18 –, which meant facing changes in institutional support.

## The research design

As explained above, this book aims to explore the subjective experiences of a group of Nigerian women in the N.A.Ve social protection programme, *vis-à-vis* those of practitioners. Our research design builds on an applied research approach, aiming to put narratives at the centre (Jackson, 2002). This involved the co-construction of the research project together with N.A.Ve practitioners. The proposal was written following consultations and the mapping of needs emerging from the field. An intense ethnographic fieldwork was carried out throughout the INSigHT Action in order to build knowledge in a collaborative way (Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009). To this end, we organised several informal meetings, seminars, and webinar sessions to present our on-going findings, validate them with practitioners, build on confrontation with them, while stimulating reflexivity for all of us (Mosse, 2006). It was more difficult to involve the women we interviewed because most of them had left the protection programme and it was hard to contact them.

Self-reflexivity was a crucial tenet of our methodology. We took Melucci's (1998) suggestion seriously that the construction of the research and analysis of empirical findings cannot be detached from the researchers' positionality. The INSigHT Italian research team comprised three privileged, white, western female citizens. Although the three of us were all precarious researchers, at that time, we could interview some Nigerian women only because they were forced into immobility (in protected shelters). This calls into question our position as somehow complicit to the contemporary regimes of migration (Andersson, 2014). At the same time, during part of the research work, I was the voluntary legal guardian of a young girl who entered the N.A.Ve. This overlapping of roles was not planned. Careful consideration was put – and discussed with practitioners – on potential issues of incompatibility of these two roles, including the extent to which the best interest of the guardianee could be compromised by my role as researcher. Arguably, the two roles eventually proved beneficial and did not act to the detriment of the young girl: as a researcher I grew increasingly self-reflexive regarding the guardianship; as a guardian, after explaining my double role to the guardianee,

I could enter research fields that would otherwise have been precluded to me (i.e., progress meetings with the guardianee, the interview with the Territorial Commission that evaluated her asylum application). Arguably, I could also be more empathic with the women I interviewed. I explained I was the guardian of a fellow Nigerian woman and shared my concern on her and their protection.

Our research incorporated a combined qualitative methodology. It consisted of a long ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews and was aimed to study institutions (Nader, 1969), but also to look at borders (Baumann, 1996) and ambivalences between beneficiaries' biographical times and practitioners' institutional times, programme cultures and goals, thus studying-them-across (see Gazit and Maoz-Shai, 2010). These are the research questions that we have addressed:

- 1) What are Nigerian women's subjective experiences as beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve programme?
- 2) What are practitioners' subjective experiences with Nigerian women and what are the factors, in their view, that contributed to positive trajectories? What are the difficulties they have experienced with this specific target group, if any?
- 3) To what extent are there tensions between Nigerian women's biographical times and practitioners' institutional times?
- 4) What insights do they give us on institutional times and programme cultures? To what extent are the lived experiences of Nigerian women reflected in anti-trafficking programmes?

We chose to undertake a long ethnographic observation, in order to explore institutional approaches and cultures and, where possible, observe how Nigerian women's subjective experiences (Biehl *et al.*, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2010) were affected by them.

The observation amounted to more than 300 sessions of N.A.Ve staff coordination meetings, monitoring meetings with beneficiaries, meetings with partners. It was undertaken between June 2019 and September 2020. From March to September 2020, most of the observation was done online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it regarded mostly staff coordination meetings. A two-day focus group was organised with cultural-linguistic mediators, in September 2020, to further analyse their perspective of the N.A.Ve. We observed practitioners and women across the N.A.Ve's spaces, with some limits in access to the field. Consent by practitioners was preliminarily granted for coordination meetings, monitoring and progress interviews with beneficiaries across all programme phases (see Chapter 1 for details on the phases), but it had to be constantly re-negotiated. Consent by beneficiaries was sought each time we attended a meeting or an interview in their presence.

At the beginning of our observation, we noticed diverging approaches by practitioners across provincial areas of the Veneto Region, hence we decided to undertake research with attention to the N.A.Ve but also to local teams. Each of the

three researchers, including myself and two other colleagues, focused on a specific provincial area: Verona, Padova, Venice. Our observation terminated in May 2020, when we conducted interviews with practitioners and Nigerian women. In line with a narrative inquiry approach (Riessman and Quinney, 2005) we focused on asking respondents for *their* insights on their experiences. A total of about 40 interviews were organised with practitioners in the period May–July 2020, some face-to-face, some online. Seventeen interviews were carried out with Nigerian women in October 2020. All interviews lasted between one and three hours. They were transcribed, coded, and analysed manually.

All interviews with the women, except one, were organised in person, following facilitation by practitioners, but not in their presence, mostly in the offices or meeting rooms of shelters. Practitioners facilitated the interviews, asking the women whether they were available (and filtering out some women that they reckoned to be still facing vulnerable conditions). As a result of this filtering process, some of the women considering us as part of the N.A.Ve, although we explained, at the beginning and throughout the interviews, that we were not staff members. It is an aspect that must be remembered when reading the empirical findings. It must also be underlined that the interviews were undertaken when the women had terminated, or were about to terminate, their programme. Arguably, this made them feel freer to express their thoughts, including critical aspects of the protection programme. In carrying out the interviews we realised that all respondents often referred to temporal ambivalences and clashes in temporalities, hence the specific perspective of this book.

We will address the participants of our research as practitioners or respondents or interviewees to refer to the N.A.Ve staff, and beneficiaries or women or respondents or interviewees to refer to the women who joined the N.A.Ve programme. We will also use the term trafficked person whereby the general term “people” or “women” may generate confusion. We will use the terms victims of trafficking and unaccompanied minors when referring to the normative frameworks or as used by practitioners. We are aware of the wide debate on the usage of various terms, such as victim of trafficking, survivor, trafficked person, at the intersection of neo-abolitionists and sex-positive approaches (see Chapter 3 for more details). We will not recall the debate. However, we are taking an intermediary position claiming that not all people in the sex industry are trafficked and exploited, but that all people should be able to work safely and have access to support, while also stressing the particularly vulnerable conditions that trafficked people are likely to encounter with respect to other people working in the sex industry. Our choice of the terms to be used is linked to our intention of avoiding any re-victimisation and of remembering, first of all to ourselves, that we are talking about people. Additionally, we will use either the term shelter or protected shelter or reception facility to refer to the actual places where beneficiaries of counter-trafficking programmes are hosted.

Several women expressed their gratefulness for the time we dedicated to listen to them. In line with other authors, we think that the interviews can be regarded

as somehow “therapeutic” to participants if they are listened to in an empathetic manner, when they choose to share their experiences (Birch and Miller, 2000; Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong, 2008). Some women warmly invited us to make their voices heard and help practitioners better understand the overall phenomenon of trafficking. A woman insisted that most of the attention of counter-trafficking initiatives is focused on women exploited in prostitution, whereas, as she stressed, there are multiple forms of exploitation to which women, but also men, have been subjected. She insisted we should bring this up.

### **The structure of the book**

The book is organised into four chapters. The first presents the Italian anti-trafficking framework, that provides the normative basis for social protection programmes. It will look at its evolution, since the early 2000s, when the first programmes were implemented, up to the most recent years, which followed the introduction of the Anti-trafficking National Plan. Attention will be given to provisions for adults as well as unaccompanied minors. We will argue that despite positive elements, such as the introduction of art. 18 and of the Zampa Law, critical issues are evident in the anti-trafficking system, concerning the implementation of norms and integration with the asylum system. The chapter will then outline the anti-trafficking project of the north-eastern Italian Veneto Region, the N.A.Ve, by describing the steps that led to its establishment and the characteristics of Nigerian beneficiaries. The second chapter discusses Nigerian women’s representations of their experiences and diverse trajectories in the N.A.Ve. Drawing from the autonomy of migration perspective, and from postcolonial feminism and intersectionality, we will depart from the representation of Nigerian women as victims, to address the main challenges they encountered, pointing to micro, meso and macro level factors. Time will be a transversal dimension of analysis to highlight the tension between biographical and institutional times. Two specific sections will focus on the temporalities of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the transition, of some beneficiaries, to the age of majority. The third chapter aims to present the critical issues that emerged in the N.A.Ve programme. It will introduce an overview of the literature on the topic, by drawing from academic scholars addressing social work, anti-trafficking interventions, asylum seeker and refugee reception. It will then indicate the challenges that practitioners reported in dealing with beneficiaries, particularly the target group of Nigerian women. It will argue that the following dimensions can best explain practitioners’ representations: social protection and related institutional cultures (victimisation, labelling, infantilisation), the complexity of users’ profiles and insufficient attention to intersectional needs (gender, age, family needs, parenthood), structural issues, particularly including the fragmentation among the asylum, anti-trafficking, and welfare systems. The chapter will also highlight individual, relational and structural elements that were reported to positively impact on the protection path of women. The book closes with a concluding chapter, reporting final remarks and suggesting the way forward for research.

## Note

- 1 Semprebbon, M., Scarabello, S., Caroselli, S., Bonesso, G., Paper Presentation “Cultural-linguistic mediators in anti-trafficking programmes in Veneto. Ethnographic reflections,” Espanet Annual Conference, online, 17–19 September 2020; Semprebbon, M., Caroselli, S., Scarabello, S., Bonesso, G., Chairs of the Workshop “Institutional and biographical times of counter-trafficking at the time of Covid-19 and beyond,” Conference of the Italian Society for Applied Anthropology, online, 3–6 December 2020; Semprebbon, M., Paper Presentation “Secondary movements and the impact of mobile controls at the Brenner border: the experience of migrant Nigerian women victims of trafficking,” Imiscoe Annual Conference, online, 7–9 July 2021; Barberis, E., Angelucci, A., Johansson, M., Semprebbon, M., Chairs of the Panel “Social work in front of migrations during and after the pandemic,” Espanet Annual Conference, online, 8–11 September 2021; Semprebbon, M., Paper Presentation “Findings of the INSigHT Action: Building capacity to deal with human trafficking and transit routes in Nigeria, Italy, Sweden,” Seminar “Beyond the crossing. Identification and support of women victims of trafficking: an exchange of practices and strategies of the post-pandemic in the EU” online, 28 February 2022; Semprebbon, M., Paper Presentation “Nigerian Women and Social Protection programmes in Italy”, Imiscoe Annual Conference, online, 29 June–1 July 2022.

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# Social protection programmes in Italy and the experience of the N.A.Ve

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## Social protection programmes in Italy: the normative framework for adults and unaccompanied minors

### *The Italian normative framework on human trafficking*

The Italian legislation on human trafficking and serious exploitation consists of the following laws and policy documents: art. 18 of Legislative Decree 286/1998;<sup>1</sup> Law 228/2003;<sup>2</sup> Legislative Decree 24/2014;<sup>3</sup> the Anti-trafficking National Plan.

Art. 18 of Legislative Decree 286/1998 gives people victims of trafficking the right to a residence permit and to social protection, not only whereby they collaborate in police investigations against their exploiters (judicial channel), but also if they do not (social channel). Art. 18 has positively influenced the debate on national and international legislation. Yet, it presents some critical issues. First, the validity of the related residence permit is very limited (six months), although it is renewable. It can be converted into a work or study permit. However conversion to the former is dependent on finding a job and the current socio-economic context in Italy has provided scarce employment opportunities to migrants. Second, art. 18 has been interpreted in a restrictive way (for restrictive interpretations in other countries, see work on the UK: Pearson, 2002): several stakeholders, during our fieldwork, testified that the social procedure has been authorised only in rare cases and that considerable pressure has been put on potential beneficiaries to collaborate with law enforcement agencies.

Law 228/2003 modified articles 600, 601 and 602 of the Italian Criminal Code with the aim of establishing serious and effective punishments to fight new forms of slavery. Art. 13 provided for the establishment of an Emergency and First Aid programme for victims of trafficking and serious exploitation, complementary to the programmes introduced by art. 18. In the following years, these programmes were integrated into a unique one.

Legislative Decree 24/2014 transposed EU Directive 2011/36/EU. It required anti-trafficking practitioners to carry out an individual assessment in light of specific situations of vulnerability, such as those of: unaccompanied minors, elderly people, people with disabilities, women and pregnant women, lone parents with children, people with mental health problems, people subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical, sexual or gender-based violence.

Art. 10 called for improved institutional coordination, aimed to overcome the fragmented assistance to vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees, victims and potential victims of trafficking.

The first Italian Anti-trafficking National Plan<sup>4</sup> was adopted pursuant to art. 9 of Legislative Decree 24/2014. It covered the period 2016–2018 and it aimed to provide a multi-year intervention strategy to prevent and raise awareness of trafficking and serious exploitation and to favour access to protection. The Plan identified the Department for Equal Opportunities as the authority responsible for coordinating, monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of the anti-trafficking normative framework and anti-trafficking interventions. It set five priorities, in line with the EU Strategy towards the eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings 2012–2016, thus providing a strategy for the country: (1) identifying, protecting, and assisting victims of trafficking, (2) stepping up the prevention of human trafficking, (3) improving outcomes regarding the prosecution of traffickers, (4) improving coordination and cooperation among key stakeholders, (5) increasing knowledge on emerging issues and trends related to all forms of trafficking and providing effective responses. The plan encouraged the adoption of a gender-sensitive<sup>5</sup> and transnational approach, besides improved policy integration and the strengthening of the referral system. Implementation resulted, thanks to resources made available by the Department for Equal Opportunities, in the launch of 21 regional projects. A second Plan, covering the period 2022–2025<sup>6</sup> was approved in November 2022, with enhanced attention to the various forms of trafficking and exploitation, particularly labour exploitation, and the strengthening of the referral system.

### ***The Italian normative framework for the protection of unaccompanied minors (and child victims of trafficking)***

Specific reference to children is made in the Italian Civil Code (titles X and XI) and in art. 10 of the Italian Constitution, stating that Italy conforms to international law principles on children, starting with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Legislative Decree 286/1998 provides for: the issuance of a residence permit in association with a situation of trafficking and serious exploitation (art. 18), as mentioned above; respect of the principle of non-refoulement for minors (art. 19); and of the best interest in all decisions regarding them (art. 28). Legislative Decree 142/2015 further stresses the best interest of the child and underlines the right to participate and to be heard, the right to an adequate risk assessment, to assistance in adequate reception facilities with trained professionals, psychological assistance (art. 18), legal information on rights and procedures, the appointment of a legal guardian and the support of a cultural-linguistic mediator (art. 19).

More recently, Law 47/2017,<sup>7</sup> the so-called Zampa Law, was passed, following several years of advocacy on the rights of unaccompanied minors. The Law filled significant gaps, by introducing provisions on: multidisciplinary age assessment, simplification of regularisation procedures and speeding up of minors'

access to the asylum system, creation of a list of trained volunteer guardians by juvenile courts, prohibition of refoulement at the border, support for “assisted and voluntary return,” provision of adequate legal assistance, support towards the age of majority (Rozzi, 2017). The Law has not been fully implemented yet, but a very positive step forward has been made concerning minors’ long-term support, one of the most critical issues of their protection. A few years after the passing of the Zampa Law, a Circular Letter, signed by the Ministry of Interior on 3 January 2019, promoted the “*prosieguo amministrativo*” – as set out in art. 13 of the law – that is to say the continuation of minors’ protection programmes, if it is in their best interest, following the achievement of the age of majority and up to the age of 21. Although there is ample agreement, at European and international level, that the best interest should be at the core of any decision and procedure concerning unaccompanied minors, the definition of this principle tends to be based on diverging cultural assumptions (Oswell, 2013; James and Prout, 2015) and overarching political goals (Thompson *et al.*, 2019). With the increase in the number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Europe since 2014, an overall trend has been observed of cost-reduction measures resulting in inadequate protection (Peyroux, 2021; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021a).

### ***The intersection between the anti-trafficking and asylum systems***

To regularise their legal status, victims of trafficking generally undertake the social channel (of art. 18) and/or the asylum procedure. Until recently, the anti-trafficking and asylum systems were unconnected, although the first UNHCR guidelines on international protection in Italy,<sup>8</sup> dated 2006, stated explicitly that victims of trafficking may fall within the Geneva Convention definition of refugee and may therefore be eligible for international protection. The more recent 2017 guidelines by UNHCR<sup>9</sup> stressed that belonging to a gendered group can be associated with forms of discrimination and persecution, taking the form of abuse, harassment, violence. A similar interpretation is reflected in the Istanbul Convention, ratified and implemented by Italy through Law 77/2013.<sup>10</sup> In line with both interpretations, people can be granted refugee status on the grounds of gender. In turn, trafficked asylum seekers, particularly but not only women, can fall within the category of refugee as they are likely to be in danger in case of return to their country of origin.

Victims of human trafficking were explicitly mentioned in the list of vulnerable people following the recasting of the EU Qualification Directive 2004/83/EC and Reception Directive 2003/9/EC. Upon transposition, Italian Legislative Decree 142/2015<sup>11</sup> recognised victims of trafficking as vulnerable people and addressed the much-needed harmonisation of the anti-trafficking and asylum systems, building on UNHCR guidelines. With reference to identification and referral, the latter suggest that Territorial Commissions (the bodies responsible for asylum determination) should suspend any interview with asylum seekers, whereby indicators of trafficking emerge, and refer them to the nearest anti-trafficking agency.

Concerning access to reception, protected shelters have been funded by the Department for Equal Opportunities. Access to these facilities is dependent on anti-trafficking practitioners' assessment of individuals' exposure to a current danger (of exploitation) in the location in which they ask for protection. In favour of a wider application of this principle, there have been indications (see Esposito *et al.*, 2016), confirmed also during our fieldwork, that people may be in danger in several locations, in Italy and in other countries too.

Protected facilities normally share the following features: shelters' addresses are, mobile phones cannot be used by beneficiaries for the first few weeks (or longer), practitioners exercise more control over beneficiaries' daily life, with respect to asylum seeker reception facilities. On the one hand, these rules are aimed at protecting beneficiaries by preventing exploiters from contacting and threatening them; on the other, they are often perceived as too strict and have been pushing beneficiaries to abandon and potential beneficiaries to choose not to enter protection programmes, as we shall see in Chapter 2.

Legislative Decree 24/2014 set out the ambitious objective of overcoming fragmented assistance, by facilitating referral between the asylum system, the anti-trafficking system and other welfare systems (i.e., for families and minors). In practice, this should result in the possibility of transferring beneficiaries from one reception circuit to another: transfers from SAI (Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione – System of Reception and Integration) shelters for asylum seekers and refugees to anti-trafficking shelters, if beneficiaries are in situations of contingent danger connected to exploitation, or vice versa, whereby no contingent danger is evident and SAI facilities may be more adequate for beneficiaries (i.e., because of less rigid rules).

As explained in more detail in Semprebbon and Pelacani (2020), the asylum system in Italy is characterised by a double-track reception scheme, an ordinary and an extraordinary one. The origins of the ordinary system can be traced back to the National Asylum Plan that was institutionalised by Law 89/2002 under the name of SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees). In 2011, a second system was set up to cope with increasing migration flows, associated with the Arab Spring. Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS) were established, under the responsibility of the Civil Protection Department. They were created as a temporary solution addressing the limited accommodation capacity of the ordinary system. Over time, this solution was consolidated and eventually institutionalised, in 2014. As defined by Legislative Decree 142/2015, asylum seekers and refugees are accommodated in SPRAR centres – later renamed SIPROIMI (System for the protection of holders of international protection and for unaccompanied minors), in 2018, and SAI, in 2020. When available places are insufficient, asylum seekers and refugees should be accommodated in CAS (the majority of asylum seekers and refugees are still in fact accommodated in these facilities), according to a system of progressive quotas, based on a proportional percentage of each region's inhabitants and of the resources provided by the national fund for social policy.<sup>12</sup>



The SAI consists of a network of reception projects, with public entities as leading partners and social cooperatives as implementing actors. They provide integrated reception services aimed at favouring beneficiaries' autonomy (room and board, health assistance, language-cultural mediation, multicultural activities, support for job seeking, legal assistance). The CAS are under the direct responsibility of Prefectures<sup>13</sup> and are generally managed by social cooperatives. They have been criticised for having lower minimum standards of service than SAI (Marchetti, 2016; Fabini *et al.*, 2019; Semprebon and Pelacani, 2020; Della Puppa and Sano, 2021).

It should be mentioned that Decree Law 113/2018 reconfigured the Italian asylum legislation, with negative impacts on migrants and victims of trafficking, including particularly the abrogation of humanitarian protection<sup>14</sup> and the creation of the SIPROIMI, which replaced the SPRAR and restricted access to refugees, holders of subsidiary protection and unaccompanied minors. Asylum seekers, who could also include victims of trafficking, were destined for lower standard CAS facilities. The recent changes introduced by Decree Law 130/2020 re-introduced the possibility for asylum seekers to access SIPROIMI facilities, now renamed SAI. As a result of the described policy changes, access to reception has been stratified and intermittent, impacting negatively on migrants' protection.

## **The N.A.Ve network**

### ***The evolution of the anti-trafficking system in the Veneto Region<sup>15</sup>***

The Municipality of Venice started monitoring street sex work, on a regular basis, in 1996. Sex work involved mostly women of Romanian or Eastern European nationality, who were selling sex for the first time in their lives and were not familiar with health prevention (use of condoms, sexually transmitted diseases, and prevention of pregnancy). Through regular (weekly) street outreach contacts, anti-trafficking practitioners monitored their socio-economic conditions. Some of the women started confiding that sex work was not a choice. They had been forced to do it, by means of violence, deception and coercion and wanted to break free from their exploiters. This is how a specific sub-group was created within the municipal unit "Città e prostituzione" (City and Prostitution), with the main aim to address exploitation. In the same year, an amnesty had been passed by the central government. Some women started asking for support with regularisation. The women who accepted to collaborate in police investigations against their exploiters were granted a short-term residence permit that covered (only) the period of the collaboration (up to the penal proceedings). Thanks to intense advocacy work, sex workers were progressively granted the right to work and earn a living. Further advocacy promoted the revision of the normative framework, in 1998, and the introduction of Legislative Decree 286/1998 and the above-mentioned art. 18. In 2000, the Italian Government Department for Equal Opportunity started delivering annual funding for social protection programmes. The first programme, in the Veneto Region, was activated in the same year by the Municipality of Venice.

The local authority also launched a toll-free anti-trafficking helpline to assist people who wanted to break free from exploitation in the north-eastern regions of Friuli Venezia Giulia, Veneto and Trentino Alto-Adige. In 2007, a National Anti-trafficking Helpline<sup>16</sup> was created. Based in Venice and funded by the Department for Equal Opportunity, it has been centralising calls from all Italian regions ever since.

As of 2006, a second set of anti-trafficking interventions was funded, based on the provisions of Law 228/2003 (art. 13) that required the organisation of first assistance to victims of trafficking. Two anti-trafficking projects, based on art. 18, were already operating in Venice and Verona (where most of the calls for help, in the region, were being received). Hence, the idea emerged of developing a unique integrated project, covering the entire regional territory. This laid the ground for the establishment, ten years later, in 2016, of the N.A.Ve, the Veneto Region Anti-trafficking Network. In the meantime, European Directive 2011/36/EU, which required the development of a unique intervention chain (including activities of first assistance and social protection), had been transposed in the Italian legislation, resulting in the integration of art. 13 and art. 18 projects.

### ***The structure of the N.A.Ve network***

The N.A.Ve is a unique integrated system that provides social protection to victims of trafficking.<sup>17</sup> It provides specialist services not embedded in the mainstream welfare provision. Migrants can access protection regardless of their legal status, age, nationality, gender and type of exploitation (sex work, labour, begging, forced involvement in criminal activities, forced marriage, etc.). Well before the launch of the N.A.Ve, starting in the early 1990s, the municipal unit City and Prostitution, had been dealing with sex workers, carrying out outreach work, as well as mediation interventions with residents complaining about street sex work. Sex workers were involved, by the now President, and members, of the *Comitato per i diritti civili delle Prostitute*, (Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes), based in Pordenone (north-eastern Italy) in the elaboration of a “zoning policy,” eventually introduced by the Municipality of Venice. It was the first experiment of this kind in the country, and it had a double aim: on the one side, to define areas in which street sex work would be permitted; on the other, to ensure adequate assistance and protection to sex workers in these areas. In the following decade, increasing resources were devoted to the implementation of urban safety measures that targeted sex workers’ clients, and sometimes sex workers too. In more recent years, the N.A.Ve has cast increasing attention to victims of trafficking (sex but also labour exploitation), to the detriment of sex workers. In the author’s view, this has arguably been done as a result of the Municipality’s changing political stance.

Three annual projects have been carried out by the N.A.Ve, each lasting 13–18 months: N.A.Ve 1 (September 2016–November 2017), N.A.Ve 2 (December 2017–February 2019), N.A.Ve 3 (March 2019–May 2020). N.A.Ve 1 obtained a

total funding of 1,600,000 euro for one-and-a-half years. N.A.Ve 2 and N.A.Ve 3, received a slightly higher amount of funding (1,800,000 euro). Co-funding by the Veneto Region has been provided for a total of about 50,000 euro.

Following two project extensions, associated with the pandemic, a new project was launched in 2021. N.A.Ve was renamed N.A.V.I.G.A.Re (Network Antitrattra Veneto Intersezioni Governance Azioni Regionali – Veneto Region Anti-trafficking Network Intersections Governance and Regional Actions). While the N.A.Ve was led by the Municipality of Venice, the N.A.V.I.G.A.Re is led by the Veneto Regional Authority. Other partners have comprised over 50 stakeholders, including both public and private actors: social cooperatives and third sector organisations, regional authorities in north-eastern Italy (Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia); municipalities in the Veneto Region; local socio-health authorities and districts; trade unions and workers' associations; law enforcement agencies; juvenile detention centres; Territorial Commissions; Labour Directorates;<sup>18</sup> universities; etc.

The N.A.Ve is structured in six regional units:<sup>19</sup> the Outreach Unit, the Crisis and Evaluation Unit, the Social Inclusion Unit, the Reception shelters Unit, the Socio-legal Unit, the Cultural-linguistic mediation Unit. Their tasks will be introduced in Chapters 2 and 3. Additionally, two working groups have been created: the Labour Inclusion Working Group and, in the past year, the Working Group “Psicologhe a bordo” (Psychologists on board). Coordination meetings are regularly organised by each unit. Local units, including the practitioners of all units working in each provincial territory, are active in the cities of Verona, Padova, Venice, Treviso, Rovigo. All provincial territories of the Veneto Region are involved in the N.A.Ve, exception made for Belluno, that is covered by the Venice local unit.

Social protection programmes last on average 18 months, as indicated in art. 18 of Legislative Decree 286/1998, and are organised in six phases:

- **Outreach phase:** referring to contacts by N.A.Ve's Outreach Unit Practitioners operating with sex workers in either Verona (one unit) or other cities of the Veneto Region (a second unit). Outreach contacts also include informative workshops, organised in N.A.Ve office spaces and in asylum seeker reception shelters.
- **Fuga** (literally “escape”) (minimum two weeks): referring to beneficiaries' first contact with the Crisis and Evaluation Unit. If they are facing an imminent risk, they are offered to be transferred to a so-called “punto di fuga” (escape shelter) immediately.
- **Reflection phase** (minimum two months): referring to the phase following the Fuga. Potential beneficiaries are offered to be transferred to a temporary shelter, following their agreement to do so, and invited to take time to decide whether to progress to the Social Inclusion phase, thus eventually entering the social protection programme. In the meantime, health checks are carried out and, normally, the procedures for regularisation activated.

- **Phase zero:** referring to the transitory phase in which, if the potential beneficiaries agree to join the social protection programme, the Crisis and Evaluation Unit practitioners transfer responsibility to the assigned Case Manager (a social worker working in a local authority). This phase can last from a day to a few weeks (or more), depending on the specific circumstances of the individual. It is mostly an administrative and organisational phase.
- **Social Inclusion phase** (minimum five months + potential six months extension): referring to implementation of the social protection programme. The Case Manager takes responsibility over beneficiaries' and their programme.
- **"Sgancio"** (literally "unhook") (minimum four months): referring to the final phase of the social protection programme. When Case Managers and Reception shelter practitioners agree that beneficiaries are ready to leave the programme, they start working on the exit. This phase can be extended, if the main objectives of the programmes have not been met, including access to regular employment and decent housing, or if beneficiaries' conditions are (still) vulnerable.

N.A.Ve is a network centred on a local governance approach. Anti-trafficking "cases" are taken up by local authorities; third sector actors, on their side, are entrusted with management of reception shelters and implementation of outreach activities.<sup>20</sup>

### **The N.A.Ve's beneficiaries**

N.A.Ve was (and N.A.V.I.G.A.Re is) a relatively small project, including about 60 to 120 beneficiaries per project (Table 1.1).<sup>21</sup>

More beneficiaries received some form of support than the beneficiaries indicated in the table, although not all benefited from the services available in the project. The official numbers reported in the table are underestimated for two main reasons: the number of unaccompanied minors was indicated in annual reports only until February 2019, as funding for this target group was no longer received afterwards; some beneficiaries (i.e., asylum seekers hosted in SPRAR/SIPROIMI/SAI or CAS or unaccompanied minors hosted in dedicated shelters) did not enter the N.A.Ve, but were supported for specific needs (i.e., legal advice). It should also be specified that while social protection programmes normally last for 18 months, many beneficiaries overstayed. This was particularly the case in 2020,

*Table 1.1* Beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve 1,2,3 projects

<i>Period</i>	<i>Adults</i>	<i>New adult beneficiaries (of total adults)</i>	<i>Unaccompanied minors</i>	<i>Males (of total beneficiaries)</i>	<i>Females (of total beneficiaries)</i>	<i>Transgender (of total beneficiaries)</i>
Sept. 2016–Nov. 2017	66	46	6	12	60	0
Dec. 2017–Feb. 2019	124	85	20	21	122	1
Mar. 2019–Aug. 2020	124	54	0	35	89	0

because of the COVID-19 pandemic, that caused the interruption of internships, the upholding and/or non-renewal of job contracts and increasing difficulties in accessing decent housing. Further assistance was necessary for beneficiaries who would have otherwise remained stranded but was not “counted” in official financial reports. Moreover, assistance was provided, in the form of follow-ups, to beneficiaries that terminated the programme, and to “territorial beneficiaries,” that is to say beneficiaries who receive legal and other forms of support, but not accommodation. We will come back to this type of beneficiaries in Chapter 3.

The N.A.Ve has had some specific budget allocation for particularly vulnerable beneficiaries, but it has not always been the case. Budget has not been available for unaccompanied minors, nor for lone mothers and beneficiaries with mental health issues, increasingly relevant targets for the anti-trafficking and asylum systems (fieldwork notes, Social Inclusion Unit coordination meeting, Venice-Mestre, 16 January 2020). The data is unclear about how many people identified as victims of trafficking may be hosted in asylum seeker and refugee shelters, as there are no official registrations, but also because reception practitioners are rarely sufficiently trained to identify indicators of trafficking and refer individuals accordingly.

Beneficiaries of outreach work (including contacts established by the N.A.Ve practitioners prior to potential access to social protection) have included Romanian women, with strong seasonal mobility, since the first decade of the 2000s and up to the present day. A second main target has been Nigerian women, with a peak recorded in the period 2015–2016. They are still engaged in sex work, particularly in the territories of Verona and Padova, although in lower numbers compared to the pre-pandemic period. Other groups comprise: a few Italian and Chinese people; Bulgarian women, in Venice; some Hungarian women, mostly of Roma origins, in Treviso; Latin American women and transgender, in Treviso and Venice. Male sex workers were reached out to in Mestre and Marghera (Venice), and in Padova, but they eventually disappeared. According to local outreach units, they are likely to be involved in the drug trade (fieldwork notes, Outreach Unit Coordinator, Equality, Padova, 1 June 2020).

As testified by Outreach Unit practitioners, the number of people in the streets dropped to almost zero during the (Italian) COVID-19 lockdown (March–May 2020), with some very rare exceptions of Romanian women. In Summer 2020, sex workers started working in the streets again, but numbers were very low – no more than ten individuals in each city of the Veneto Region.

The number of children in the streets has never been high in the last 20 years, as confirmed by the National Anti-trafficking Helpline, contrary to what Save the Children (2019) stated (fieldwork notes, outreach activity with Equality/Mimosa, 31 January 2020). Some young Nigerian girls, aged 16–17, were also encountered in the streets, mainly in Verona, mostly in the period 2015–2016 (fieldwork notes, Outreach Unit practitioner, Verona, 4 June 2020). Concern has been raised that some exploited children may be “invisible” (fieldwork notes, Outreach Unit Coordinator, Equality, Padova, 1 June 2020). Similar worries have been

expressed by Lost in Europe (2021) and Save the Children (2021), indicating that unaccompanied minors may arrive in Europe and continue their journeys throughout the continent without adequate support, leading many to abandon reception shelters. On the Nigerian target more generally, including not only young girls but also women, a further word of warning must be spent with regard to numbers. Movements internal to Europe have increased considerably. Nigerian women are still arriving. We are referring to young women who (often) arrived in Italy in their minor age, travelled through one or more European countries to then return to Italy. Not to be underestimated is the extent to which these women may still be in conditions of severe exploitation indoor, hence not visible by street outreach units and largely invisible to institutions. During our fieldwork, several N.A.Ve practitioners suggested that some women may return to forced sex work, unless they can secure a decent employment.

## Notes

- 1 “Testo unico delle disposizioni concernenti la disciplina dell’immigrazione e norme sulla condizione dello straniero” (Unique Text with provisions relating to immigration and norms on the condition of foreigners). Available at: <https://www.parlamento.it/parlam/leggi/deleghe/98286dl.htm>. Last access: 19 March 2023.
- 2 “Misure contro la tratta di persone” (Measures against the trafficking of human beings). Available at: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2003;228>. Last access: 19 March 2023.
- 3 “Attuazione della direttiva 2011/36/UE, relativa alla prevenzione e alla repressione della tratta di esseri umani e alla protezione delle vittime, che sostituisce la decisione quadro 2002/629/GAI” (Transposition of EU Directive 2011/36). Available at: [www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2014/03/13/14G00035/sg](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2014/03/13/14G00035/sg). Last access: 19 October 2022.
- 4 Available at: [www.pariopportunita.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Piano-nazionale-di-azione-contro-la-tratta-e-il-grave-sfruttamento-2016-2018.pdf](http://www.pariopportunita.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Piano-nazionale-di-azione-contro-la-tratta-e-il-grave-sfruttamento-2016-2018.pdf). Last access: 19 December 2022.
- 5 Directive 2011/36/EU was the first to adopt a gender-based approach to the trafficking of human beings, recognising that women and men, girls and boys are trafficked in different circumstances and need gender-sensitive forms of assistance and support.
- 6 Available at: [www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Piano-anti-tratta-2022-2025.pdf](http://www.retesai.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Piano-anti-tratta-2022-2025.pdf). Last access: 19 December 2022.
- 7 “Disposizioni in materia di misure di protezione dei minori stranieri non accompagnati” (Provisions for the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors). Available at: [www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/04/21/17G00062/sg](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/04/21/17G00062/sg). Last access: 12 December 2020.
- 8 Available at: [www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/linee\\_guida\\_identificazione\\_vittime\\_tratta\\_0.pdf](http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/allegati/linee_guida_identificazione_vittime_tratta_0.pdf). Last access: 20 December 2022.
- 9 Available at: [www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2021/01/Linee-Guida-per-le-Commissioni-Territoriali\\_identificazione-vittime-di-tratta.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2021/01/Linee-Guida-per-le-Commissioni-Territoriali_identificazione-vittime-di-tratta.pdf). Last access: 20 December 2022.
- 10 “Ratifica ed esecuzione della Convenzione del Consiglio d’Europa sulla prevenzione e la lotta contro la violenza nei confronti delle donne e la violenza domestica” (Ratification and implementation of the Convention of the Council of Europe on prevention and the fight against violence against women and domestic violence). Available at: [www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2013/07/01/13G00122/sg](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2013/07/01/13G00122/sg). Last access: 12 December 2020.

- 11 “Attuazione della direttiva 2013/33/UE recante norme relative all'accoglienza dei richiedenti protezione internazionale, nonché della direttiva 2013/32/UE, recante procedure comuni ai fini del riconoscimento e della revoca dello status di protezione internazionale” (Transposition of Directive 2013/33/EU with provision on the reception of asylum seekers and Directive 2013/32/EU with provision for the recognition and revocation and of the status of international protection). Available at: [www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg](http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/09/15/15G00158/sg). Last access: 12 October 2022.
- 12 More details on the quota system are included in the “Intesa tra il Governo, le Regioni e gli Enti locali sul piano nazionale per fronteggiare il flusso straordinario di cittadini extracomunitari, adulti, famiglie e minori stranieri non accompagnati” (National Agreement between the Italian Government, Regional Authorities and Local Authorities to deal with the exceptional flows of non-European citizens, adults, families and unaccompanied minors) Available at: [www.prefettura.it/FILES/AllegatiPag/1247/Accordo%20Conferenza%20Unificata.pdf](http://www.prefettura.it/FILES/AllegatiPag/1247/Accordo%20Conferenza%20Unificata.pdf). Last access: 3 July 2018.
- 13 See Glossary.
- 14 The humanitarian protection is a form of non-EU harmonised national (not international) protection that exists in some EU Member States. Nowadays it is normally replaced by subsidiary protection.
- 15 This part was prepared based on the interview conducted with the N.A.Ve Coordinator (3 June 2020), unless otherwise specified. The details on the organisational structure of N.A.Ve have been put together throughout the ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the INSigHT Team and are drawn from Semprebbon *et al.* (2021). Responsibility for any mistakes must be associated with the author only.
- 16 For more information see the website: <https://bit.ly/2S3irZF>. Last access: 1 October 2021.
- 17 For more information on the N.A.Ve see [www.progettonave.it/](http://www.progettonave.it/) (updating is in progress) Last access: 1 December 2022.
- 18 See Glossary.
- 19 To the best of our knowledge, the main structure of the Veneto Region anti-trafficking project has not changed, but evolutions have been in progress since the launch of the N.A.V.I.G.A.Re. We will consider the structure of the regional project as it was at the time of our fieldwork and interviews, until July 2020.
- 20 Two other anti-trafficking projects in Italy have adopted a similar approach to the N.A.Ve: the Lombardy Region and the Liguria Region projects, led respectively by the Municipality of Milan and that of Viareggio. The former co-plans and co-designs interventions with implementing actors, that, similarly to the Veneto Region, are social cooperatives, while also monitoring implementation to ensure objectives are reached. The latter manages only the administrative part of the project, while fully delegating coordination, implementation and monitoring. The remaining projects in Italy are managed partly by regional authorities (eight) and partly by private cooperatives (ten) (fieldwork notes, N.A.Ve Coordinator, 3 June 2020).
- 21 These data draw from the reports that the N.A.Ve was required to produce, on an annual basis, to comply with administrative requirements by the Department for Equal Opportunities that funds the project. The data was provided for the scope of this publication and is not available online.

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# **Nigerian women and their experience of the N.A.Ve social protection programme**

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This chapter is dedicated to the young Nigerian women who entered the N.A.Ve social protection programme, in the north-eastern Italian Veneto Region, over the past seven years. As anticipated in the introduction, in the context of the INSigHT Action, we interviewed 17 women, aged 17 to +20, in October 2020, five months after the end of the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy. The interviewees were either finishing their protection programme or had finished it in the previous months.

We aimed to collect the women's representations of their N.A.Ve experience and of their trajectories, from the moment they accessed the programme to the moment of its completion. We purposely decided to focus on this phase of their lives to give them voice on a topic on which their voices are rarely heard (Russell, 2018; Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021; Lockyer, 2022). We were further convinced of our choice during the organisation of the interviews. When practitioners approached the women to ask whether they would be available to talk to us, many firmly expressed the wish not to be asked any questions on their travel to Europe and their life in Nigeria. Some of them explained they were not willing to go through painful details any longer, referring particularly to their travel to Italy (fieldwork notes, informal chat with Reception Practitioner, 12 October 2022; informal chat with Case Manager, 7 October 2022). Omitting episodes of violence and hardship can allow women to take up a position of protagonists in their narratives. Story lines can be weakened, in their agency dimension, by detailed descriptions of continued violence. They can be interpreted with, and forced into, a victimhood perspective (Andrijasevic, 2010). Focusing on the women's experience in the social protection programme also allowed us to consider their migratory path beyond their country of origin and open up to future scenarios (Appadurai, 2013).

This chapter examines our interviewees' trajectories, by highlighting the micro (individual resources), meso (relational resources, such as interactions between beneficiaries and practitioners, but also with family and friends) and macro level (policies and programmes) factors that influenced them. Drawing from the autonomy of migration perspective (Karakayali and Tsianos, 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013), postcolonial feminism (Sharma, 2003; Kapur, 2004; Augustin, 2007; Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016) and

intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), we will depart from the widespread representation of Nigerian women as (more or less deserving) victims, to look at the challenges that they encountered in their programme, including reception (rules, tensions in co-habitation, availability of free time, completion of the programme), access to employment and housing, but also relational issues with practitioners, social workers and other people they have met along their path. Time will be a transversal dimension of analysis, with attention to entrance in, permanence in and completion of the social protection programme, to highlight the tensions between biographical and institutional times, between past, present and future. Two sections will be specifically dedicated to the temporalities of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition, for some of the interviewees, to the age of majority, to emphasise the peculiar challenges they involved.

We explained in the introduction the usefulness and the limits of semi-structured interviews, as a methodological tool, especially with individuals in precarious conditions (on the one side they allow to collect representations, on the other these representations must be read in light of their performative dimension, by bearing in mind that some women, who perceived us as part of the N.A.Ve, may have felt they had to show gratefulness, as deserving victims). We still decided to interview some of the N.A.Ve Nigerian woman beneficiaries in order to provide their representations vis-à-vis those of the practitioners. We wanted to listen to them. Several times, when asked about their experience, they expressed the willingness to pass their message onto practitioners and potential future beneficiaries. This is what we try to do in this chapter. We are convinced that silencing the voices of individuals, particularly individuals who have experienced marginal conditions and multiple forms of violence, can result in the perpetuation of violence and in the reinforcement of stereotyped representations. Therefore, as researchers, we aim to contribute to the literature on anti-trafficking programmes by bringing in the voice of women and girls, in the hope to promote reflexivity, on the side of both researchers and practitioners, but also to share “*new imaginaries of hope that go beyond the battle for citizenship*” (Martignoni and Papadopoulos, 2014: 39). In giving voice to our interviewees, we are conscious we are inevitably filtering their narratives with our interpretative lenses and that we are only representing a fragment of their lives.

### **Trafficked women: representations, agency, trajectories**

In the media, in advocacy work and also in some academic research, human trafficking has been often portrayed by recurring images of helpless female victims (Marchionni, 2012; Barnett, 2016). The stigmatised frames of the “ideal” victim (Christie, 1986; Hoyle *et al.*, 2011) and the “perfect victim” (Uy, 2011) have produced “ideal types” that reduce the complexity of people’s experiences (Hoyle *et al.*, 2011) and de-humanise them. Various scholars have raised criticism on the predominant representations of victimhood promoted by anti-trafficking organisations, highlighting how they produce further stigmatisation (Cojocar, 2016)

and insufficient acknowledgement of individuals' agency (Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; Nichols *et al.*, 2018). They confine people's lives within an interpretative framework of oppression or else translate them as a *mere* form of resistance to normative and discursive structures, leaving no acknowledgement of voice and agential dimensions.

It has been posited that the (social) construction of the trafficked victim echoes policy-makers' objectives rather than people's actual experiences (Davy, 2015; Baker, 2018). Trafficked women, as all individuals, act, re-act and take decisions in every step of their lives and migratory paths (Kapur, 2004; Kempadoo *et al.*, 2005; Andrijasevic, 2010). They are not just victims of trafficking (Cojocaru, 2016). Additionally, emancipatory paths can involve forms of exploitation too. Women can cope with exploitation whereby they have no other immediate alternatives for survival (Cabras, 2015; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021). Some situations of "excessive" suffering have shown that agency cannot be separated from exploitation: fragments of agency can be tracked (also) in the consent to (temporary) exploitation, not only in the capacity to exit from it (Mai, 2016).

To move beyond the victimhood framework, we have adopted the lens of subjectivity to explore the experiences of Nigerian women, as embedded in a specific political and social-economic context (Andrijasevic, 2010; Doezenia, 2001; Mai, 2013, 2016). The former is associated with the migration and anti-trafficking systems, characterised by marginalising power relations and the stratification of rights, the latter with the Italian peninsula, a country which offers limited employment opportunities to migrants, often in low-wage sectors and/or in the informal market.

Drawing from the autonomy of migration scholarship (Karakayali and Tsianos, 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013), we consider trafficked women as mobile individuals who make choices about actions to be taken and destinations to be reached, who have the capacity to develop their own tactics to configure and reconfigure their lives, in face of constraints deriving from migration regimes and (limited) social and economic opportunities. Mobility is intended in geographical terms, but also with reference to transition between different legal statuses (i.e., asylum seeker, refugee, victim of trafficking, etc.) (Schuster, 2005), status insecurity and the stratification of rights connected to it (Morris, 2001; Kofman, 2002).

The autonomy of migration perspective views migration as a response to contingent political and economic conditions, but also, more importantly, as a fundamental component in the unfolding of political and social life (Karakayali and Tsianos, 2005; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). It stresses the agentic dimension that is always present in individuals' lives, before, during and after forms of institutional control and power are imposed onto them. We believe that this dimension can be best observed through empirical analysis, by focusing on people's engagements and on their "*trajectories*" (Schapendonk, 2012). When research, policy and interventions are based on occasional anecdotal and stereotypical understandings of human trafficking, rather than punctual

empirical evidence of people's trajectories, the risk of unproductive, if not counterproductive, and harmful effects on the targets of interventions is likely to increase, because they do not reflect *lived* experiences (Todres, 2011; Lockyer, 2022).

The concept of "trajectories" has been used to examine the life paths of migrants who travel to Europe. We will use it with reference to a specific temporal phase of our interviewees: their path through the N.A.Ve social protection programme. In anthropological terms, the concept recognises that there is no single trajectory, but multiple and varied trajectories. It emphasises the relevance of individuals' decisions, with respect to events that may have different meanings for different people, depending on when, where and how they occur and are experienced. It warns from unidirectional and frictionless descriptions of migration and draws attention to dynamics, processes, expected and unexpected turning points.

Schapendonk (2012) identified three main elements of trajectories: aspirations, facilitation and velocity. Aspirations include thoughts, wishes, desires, dreams that project individuals into the future (Carling, 2002). They may change over time due to personal, political, social and economic factors or else persist despite them; they differ from intentions, as they are not directly related to (feasible) plans. Facilitation is linked to relational ties, either strong or weak (Granovetter, 1973) or even transient ties (Peters *et al.*, 2010), translating into forms of temporal support. Velocity refers to the mobile and immobile quality of trajectories.

Perceived and actual immobility is frequently experienced by migrants, in connection with their precarious legal status, often aggravated by a state of uncertainty and suspension produced by the asylum determination process (Hunt, 2008; Gill and Good, 2019) and combined with a more general condition of precariousness (Khosravi, 2010; Brekke and Brochmann, 2014), involving limited access to housing and employment. The failure to bring suspension to an end can cause distress and a deep sense of powerlessness in individuals, affecting any sense of time and agency (Griffiths, 2014). Yet, the autonomy of migration approach encourages scholar to take migrants' experiences seriously by addressing the formation of new meanings and practices beyond normative constraints.

This is not to say that migrants' and trafficked women's trajectories always translate into simple and bright futures, thanks to or in spite of the welfare support they may receive (Cojocaru, 2015; Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016; Barnett, 2016). Many are the variables that influence their trajectories, as we shall see, including micro, meso and macro level factors, as well as (sometimes unexpected) turning points in their lives.

## Agency and its temporal dimension

*"Human agency [must be understood] as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future*

*projects within the contingencies of the moment). The agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity (...) if it is analytically situated within the flow of time. (...) As actors move within and among these different unfolding contexts, they switch between (or “recompose”) their temporal orientations – as constructed within and by means of those contexts – and thus are capable of changing their relationship to structure.”*  
(Emirbayer and Mische, 1998)

Despite the evident relevance of the temporal dimension, the temporalities of migration remain underexplored. The non-linearity of migration dynamics has been largely investigated in spatial terms, while the temporalities have been often left implicit. Times “*migrate with people*” (Cwerner, 2001: 7) and affect migrants’ lives in many ways. Yet, the temporal attitudes and habits of migrants, compared to those of the host society, have occupied a residual place in migration studies (Elchardus *et al.*, 1987) or have been explored in isolation (Cwerner, 2001).

Time is particularly relevant in the context of migration studies and migrants’ lives. There is scope to examine disruptions (Cwerner, 2001; Griffiths *et al.*, 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), on the one side, and stages of “*permanent temporariness*” (Bailey *et al.*, 2002; Simmelink, 2011), on the other, including many phases of migrants’ trajectories connected to the regularisation process, but also entry and permanence into asylum seeker reception facilities. Besides, there is scope to scrutinise:

*perspectives of, orientations towards, and horizons limiting the future, the present, and the past; temporal norms referring to the sequence, duration, timing and tempo of socially expected patterns of behaviours, actions, careers and life paths (...) [time as] a quantifiable resource that is allocated, bought, hired, wasted, co-ordinated, and used for various purposes; an “environment” in which human action can be located and change measured; behavioural rhythms and practices that express cultural identities and differences; (...) embedded times, characteristic rhythms of natural and technological processes, and their far-reaching social and environmental consequences.*

(Cwerner, 2001: 14)

Migration can be conceptualised as a process of becoming, in association with movements (Sager, 2006), but also immobility, as explained above. Immobility recalls temporalities of waiting that may take the shape of inactivity, but can also constitute intentional types of inaction (Bissell, 2007), filled with emotional experiences of patience and impatience, tiredness and restfulness, anger, fatigue. Waiting can be grounded in distinct ways in different contexts. It is produced, embodied, experienced, resisted across various migrant spaces (Conlon, 2011): migrants who present themselves as victims, who patiently wait and show gratefulness for reception, are often considered passive, although they may rather

follow the script that is expected from “authentic refugees” (Schuster, 2011). Yet, Griffiths *et al.* (2013) suggest that (apparent) inertia may have transformative effects when experienced in an anomalous, unusual situation and may even provide the chance to enjoy aspects of life that are otherwise constrained.

The experience of social and individual time does not proceed in line with the passing of chronological time (Griffiths *et al.*, 2013). Migrants are in a constant flow intersecting past, present, future (Grønseth, 2013). Each set of time describes and represents a fragment of people’s time and yet does not contain it fully. No set of time can reflect the entire temporal experience of any individual and yet all sets of time affect their lives, revealing contingent circumstances and constraints, alongside processes of self-development, adaptation and adjustment to the host society and participation.

Migrants’ temporalities exemplify their conditions as “alien others” (not only in legal terms) and yet migrants are first of all people, whose experience, in many respects, does not necessarily differ from that of natives (Cwerner, 2001). Scholars continue denying coevalness with and between migrants and non-migrants (Çağlar, 2018), but they coexist, together with their temporalities, with natives, making up a “complex temporal architecture” (Gasparini, 1994: 420, cit. in Cwerner, 2001). Nonetheless, time can provide a salient dimension to conceptualise migrants’ specific experience and to voice feelings of frustration and discouragement.

Time can throw light on the *perceived* disconnection between personal biographical temporalities and the temporalities of the institutional structures that migrants interact with and are controlled by, as well as the clash between migrants’ expectations of moving forward and the lengthy and cumbersome procedures of the migration regimes (Griffiths, 2014). In this sense, the possibility of giving sense to the future is crucial for individual agency (Bear, 2014) and it throws light on decision-making processes. Because of their precarious conditions (Brekke and Brochmann, 2014) – beyond the precariousness of their legal status (Anderson, 2010) – migrants are likely to make decisions based more on opportunism rather than strategic planning (Johnson-Hanks, 2005). Decisions are not only taken upon departure, but all along the migration path, according to subjective temporalities (Griffiths *et al.*, 2013) that cannot be assumed, but must be situated in time and space, in the actual *lived* experiences, in contrast to other institutional regimes (Gell, 1998), such as those of reception (Coutin, 2005; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Griffiths, 2014).

Gell (1992) argues that to navigate in time, humans develop several representations or “time-maps,” making a distinction between temporal social practices and temporal personal experiences. These time-maps are only partially related to the passage of “real” time, yet they shape and mediate people’s personal experiences of it. By exploring how time is internalised by migrants we can therefore improve our understanding of their subjective agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), in face of the politics of time (Cwerner, 2001) that characterise the asylum and anti-trafficking systems. People are controlled not only in the way their mobility is

constrained, but also through the management and control of their individual temporalities. According to Nobil Ahmad (2008), migrants are constantly compelled to adapt to their immediate circumstances, given the instability of their lives in camps. This prevents them from achieving any upward mobility and makes them “*stuck in a vacuous present fraught with anxiety and question marks about tomorrow*” (315). Migrants can hardly “*reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future, because it is determined by forces outside of people’s control.*” (Ramsay, 2019: 388) Following this logic, we would be left to think that asylum policies trigger processes that undermine any “promise of stability” (Tsing, 2005). It should be noticed that the subjective expectations of migrants are influenced by the time of permanence in the host country (Cwerner, 2001) and its duration (Hammar, 1994; Roberts, 1995). As people become more attached to a place, their time horizon is likely to expand (Piore, 1979) and their attitudes towards time can vary, contradicting or confirming the temporalities of the steps associated with the standard “migrant career,” each associated with a legal status (alien, denizen, citizen) (Cwerner, 2001).

Certainly, migration policies are charged with the political responsibility of creating forms of inequality, by disposing of people’s own time and movements (Fontanari, 2019). At the same time, the exploration of migrants’ narratives of their *lived* experiences (of policies) can shed light on claims for “temporal justice” (*ibidem*), with “*feelings and actions in opposition to the power relations that hinder the possibility of building their life projects in the near future*” (240) and that dispose of their biographical time. This perspective does not aim to suggest a *sui generis* temporal experience of migrants, nor to provide a comprehensive overview of their trajectories. It aims to emphasize migrants’ subjective experience of time, how they manipulate it (Flaherty, 2010; Flaherty *et al.*, 2020) or “trick” it (Moroşanu and Ringel, 2016; Cwerner, 2001). Tricks exemplify the subjective strategies that individuals use to exert their agency in relation to time. They can attempt to manage, structure, change, bend, speed up, slow the time they are experiencing in face of their needs, but also of contentious events and contradictory frameworks.

### **From agency to subjectivity**

Feminist scholars have promoted a gendered perspective of migration, raising attention on women’s subjective desires for mobility, how they inform their migration projects and path to inclusion. They have developed analysis of migration flows challenging the view of male (only) labour migration, pointing to the efforts and struggles of women to achieve their goals. Critical feminist scholars also gave further visibility to the agency of women in the sex sector (Sharma, 2003; Kapur, 2004; Augustin, 2007; Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016), which was obscured by a predominant victimhood perspective, labelling trafficked women as wounded individuals with no voice (Doezema, 2001) and entirely dependent on their exploiters (Morokvasic, 2004).

Empirical research has highlighted the power relations characterising asylum seeker reception systems and asylum procedures and how they tend to produce passive subjects, through forms of surveillance and control and by asking migrants to prove their truthfulness (Sorgoni, 2011; Pinelli, 2015) as deserving beneficiaries (Fassin, 2005). Thus, becoming a beneficiary of protection can be associated to a process of subjection (Butler, 1997). In this process, migrants can be impacted by multiple dimensions of domination. Crenshaw (1989), similarly to other black feminists (Smith, 1983; hooks, 1992), drew attention to the simultaneity of experiences of oppression that individuals, and in particular women, can experience, as women, black women, workers, mothers, etc. Different layers of oppression can impact on individuals and produce differential forms of exclusion grounded on various axes of discrimination, such as gender, race and class.

Humanitarian interventions can weaken the chances for individuals and their wishes to be acknowledged and can ultimately prevent self-determination (Harrell-Bond, 2005) that, at least on paper, is often the actual objective of similar interventions. Trafficked women must be loyal to the ideal type of victim, in order to be able to aspire to and pursue inclusion (Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016). However, even in contexts of subjection, agency is always present (Pinelli, 2013). Reception and protection facilities are sites of control and confinement, but they are also sites where acts of agency are practised. (Malkki, 1996; Sanyal, 2014; Martin, 2015)

Beneduce (2015) refers to the “the moral economy of lying” to account for how Nigerian women arrange details of their story to meet eligibility criteria, as set by anti-trafficking practitioners and asylum officials. Concealment can operate as an empowering mechanism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001) in situations of vulnerability: women may confess they partly “accepted” conditions of exploitation, if they want to present themselves as powerful and experienced; they may deny it, if they need to portray themselves as deserving victims. Recalling the performative theory of Butler (1988), (gender) identity is not stable, but is constituted in time and space and involves some possibilities for transformation, although bound by social sanctions.

While recognising the criticism advanced on humanitarian projects, we believe that reception and anti-trafficking programmes can represent a “condition of possibility” (Butler, 1997) and potential transformations, under specific circumstances, as will be explained through this chapter and Chapter 3. They provide a shelter for protection and dedicated support to favour access to decent housing and employment to people that experience marginal conditions and can normally count on limited social networks. On their side, in order to benefit from these resources, migrants must become “skilled social navigators” (Vigh, 2009) that are “*able to adjust [their] knowledge of map, position and plot to a multiplicity of experienced and anticipated influences and forces.*” (429). In fact, agency comprises the capacity to deal with oppressive situations, respond to them, adapt to and/or negotiate restrictions, depending on the position that individuals occupy, the resources they have and wish to obtain. Becoming subjected [to a power system]



involves both becoming subordinated to it and becoming (political) subjects, by developing the capacity to read the forms and dynamics of power and potentially challenging them (Butler, 1997).

Inspired by Andrijasevic (2010), we aim to analyse Nigerian women's subjectivities by "treating" their narrations as representations of these women's experiences but also as experiences of subject formation in themselves. In this perspective, agency can be conceptualised in terms of resistance as well as in terms of individual subjects taking up multiple subject positions and constantly re-defining their roles as protagonists as they wish to play it in the process of subject construction (see also Mahmood, 2005; Moore, 2007).

### **Women's perceptions of anti-trafficking programmes**

Research on human trafficking has grown considerably over the past two decades, but the voice of people who are hosted in anti-trafficking programmes are still largely absent from research on programmes and policy (Russell, 2018; Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021; Lockyer, 2022), although with some exceptions (Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; Macy and Johns, 2011; Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014; Rajaram and Tidball, 2018). Even less literature consists of writings authored by people who were trafficked (i.e., Gerassi and Nichols, 2018; Doychak and Raghavan, 2020).

As Brennan (2005) observed, trafficked women have been voiceless for several reasons: fear of retaliation against themselves and their families, on the side of exploiters; temporalities of recovery; concern over forms of stigmatisation by their community and co-nationals. De Angelis (2014) further noticed that trafficked women have not been interviewed in the context of policy evaluations, nor for the scope of GRETA (Group of experts on action against trafficking in human beings) reports. Their exclusion has been motivated by the principle of avoiding unnecessary re-victimisation, but, as a side effect, it has muted them. Women possess knowledge which remains unknown mostly because they are not asked for it. In a similar vein, Clemente (2017) argued on a deafening silence of trafficked women in Portugal, where organisations are mostly concerned on fighting and prosecuting criminals, and NGOs tend to speak on the behalf of people, rather than allowing researchers to speak to them. As a result, the scant research informed by trafficked people is based on empirical material collected through contacts in the street and other locations where people are exploited (i.e., Santos Neves and Pedra, 2012; Santos, 2014, cit. in Clemente, 2017), raising questions on the extent to which the field of anti-trafficking is accessible to researchers and under what conditions, as we also explained in the Introduction.

It remains evident that policy-makers as well as scholars have often talked *about* women more than *with* women (Erel and Reynolds, 2018) even though the importance of incorporating the voice of marginalised groups has been stated (i.e., Gentlewarrior *et al.*, 2008). Listening to marginal people means overcoming a paradigm that interprets the challenges they experience as "private problems," or "dysfunctional pathologies" rather than public issues that require

adequate interventions to protect them and ensure their rights are granted (Bassel and Emejulu, 2014). This is not to suggest that there is no research presenting the voices of trafficked people at the intersection of trafficking and migration (Andrijasevic, 2003, 2010; Agustin, 2005; Pascoal, 2020). They have advocated themselves for their involvement at all levels of anti-trafficking policymaking and programming and some scholars have supported their call, while criticising on-going exploitative forms of inclusion (Todres, 2011; Murphy, 2014; Foot, 2015; Countryman-Roswurm and Patton Brackin, 2017; Lockyer, 2022). Lockyer (2022) has underlined the lack of evaluation and assessment on the effectiveness of protection services and insufficient space for users' feedback (Davy, 2015; Long and Dowdell, 2018; Munro-Kramer *et al.*, 2020), arguing that including users' perspectives is crucial to ensuring appropriate interventions. Collecting their experiences is essential to improve understanding of their needs and priorities, to verify to what extent they match with programmes' goals, thus contributing to programmes' improvement (Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021; Lockyer, 2022). Whereby these interventions target women, it is those same women's *lived* experiences that we should listen to.

Some relevant studies reported that women resent being hosted in closed shelters, particularly when they perceive no safety risks (Surtees, 2013; OHCHR, 2014). Resonating feelings of victimisation (OHCHR, 2014; Hacker *et al.*, 2015), beneficiaries describe shelters as "prisons" that made them feel trapped and anxious (Vanderhurst, 2017; Semprebón and Oluwafemi, 2021). Too many rules cause similar feelings of constraint (Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021), though they may be challenged whereby space is available for negotiations. Other studies suggest that continuity of care and support is valued and fosters increasing feelings of safety, while also favouring social inclusion and the development of social networks (De Angelis, 2014).

To the best of our knowledge, where they have included women's experiences, research accounts of anti-trafficking programmes have mainly done so by "taking a picture" of a given temporal fragment of their permanence in a programme. Less attention has been paid to the experience of entry and exit and to the evolution of the experience of permanence, including the challenges and transformations it implied. Social protection programmes are often very short, particularly in face of long waiting times for regularisation, but also of individual trajectories that may require dealing with traumas and health issues. At the same time, they may extend long enough to create dynamics of dependence, as will be argued in this chapter. This calls for improved attention to the tension, and likely clash, between institutional times and biographical times that often do not coincide, as will be shown.

Before moving to the narratives of Nigerian women, we should recall another crucial aspect of *active* listening. Listening to people means listening to their voices, but also trying to make sense of their silences (Massari, 2017) and emotions. In line with the "affective turn" (Clough, 2007), emotions can be included in the analysis of agency. Emotions are embedded in specific cultural and historical structures and, therefore, can be useful to reveal societal power relations

(Luhmann, 2006; Biehl *et al.*, 2007). Well beyond individuals' intimate sphere, research can shed light on the political meaning of emotions. It can recognise markers of institutional power and interpret the vulnerability caused to people as politically produced.

### **Nigerian women narrating their social protection trajectories in the N.A.Ve**

In this section, we will present the findings of the 17 interviews we conducted with Nigerian women, all from Edo State, concerning their experience of the N.A.Ve social protection programme, while also shedding light on their trajectories and the challenges they encountered. Before proceeding, we will provide some background information on their profiles.

As it emerged through our interviews, informal conversations with Case Managers prior to interviews and our ethnographic observation, most of the women arrived in Italy when they were less than 18 years of age (13 out of 17). Some of them travelled through other countries before arriving or returning to Italy and/or travelled through Italy, forced to move from one city to another. For some, it took more than a year before reaching the Veneto Region and approaching the N.A.Ve. It was so for Orobosa: she arrived in Italy when she was turning 17 and reached Veneto a year later. "I was really exhausted when I met N.A.Ve!" she repeated many times during our interview. All the women entered the N.A.Ve after turning 18. The N.A.Ve is a programme for young adults, as explained in Chapter 1. Nevertheless, most of them (11 out of 17) had the first contacts, and were provided some support or at least interviewed by one of more N.A.Ve practitioners, before reaching the age of majority. Some of the women have suffered from health issues, many still suffer from severe traumas – details will not be disclosed here. A few of the women continued receiving pressure, from their exploiters, to pay their debts, while in reception. To regularise their status, only three of the women applied for an art. 18 residence permit – two through the social channel (see Chapter 1 for a description on art. 18), most applied for asylum, in some cases after obtaining a residence permit as "unaccompanied minors." Three women collaborated with law enforcement officers by reporting their exploiters, with hardly any outcome in terms of prosecutions, as far as we know.

A few women mentioned their families but only in passing. Some have regular contacts and significant relationships with family members, some rarely talk to any. Only one woman mentioned her children, one living with her and one living with her mother in Nigeria. Pressure to send remittances was mentioned by a few women, particularly with reference to the COVID-19 lockdown period, as well as the perceived sense of intergenerational responsibility, particularly towards younger brothers. None of the women manifested the will to return to Nigeria, if not to visit their family, partly because they were aware that they could (temporarily) not do so, due to the mobility restrictions of their refugee status. Most of them explained they were willing to settle in Europe, not necessarily in Italy.

We will now turn to the women's narratives. These will be organised into ten sections: first contacts and entrance in the N.A.Ve; the social protection programme and reception; the relationship with practitioners; internships and access to employment; free time; religion; the asylum procedure and regularisation; the "sgancio" and the completion of the project; the transition to the age of majority; the COVID lockdown. Each section will focus on a specific sub-theme and will be marked by the rhythm of time, as it was experienced, coped with, and challenged, by our respondents.

### ***"I believed them because they were truthful": the first contacts and entrance in the N.A.Ve programme***

The women we interviewed entered the social protection programme through different channels of referral, testifying the consolidation of the network built by the N.A.Ve: Omosigho was referred by a Pentecostal pastor, a rather unusual case in Veneto; Osaigbovo by a local LGBT association, with whom she got in touch upon arrival in the region; Uyi by the local Caritas;<sup>1</sup> Osasenaga by the Territorial Commission – the body in Italy that is responsible for asylum determination –; Abies and Osayi by asylum seeker reception shelters. Only Ehi contacted the N.A.Ve directly, through the Antitrafficking Helpline (see Chapter 1). Like other women, she had probably been encouraged to do so by her exploiters, a dynamic that was observed several times in 2015–2016 (see Chapter 3). Seven of the women were identified as unaccompanied minors, thanks to collaboration between local Outreach Units and the police (see Chapter 3 for more details on the partnership).

Outreach contacts normally take place when women are in conditions of exploitation. This is one of the reasons why Efe, Iyore and Aisosa had multiple contacts before entering the programme. Aisosa's trajectory was particularly long and complicated. She met outreach practitioners several times and was repeatedly taken to a shelter for unaccompanied minors, but regularly escaped from them. After two years she decided to remain in the shelter she had been transferred to. At that time, she was nine months pregnant. The imminent birth of her daughter changed her priorities. Her decision must, therefore, be situated in this specific timeframe, in contingent rather than strategic (planning) terms (see Johnson-Hanks, 2005). The decision of other women was influenced by family members, outreach volunteers, words of mouth, the perceived lack of better alternatives and the fear of future stigmatisation. In most cases, entry to the programme can be associated with a "turning point" and women's determination to change the direction of their lives. It must also be stressed that all women entered the N.A.Ve with high expectations to improve their conditions, although they were not all clear about the conditions of the programme, as will be explained throughout this chapter.

When Osarobo arrived in the north of Italy, she met some N.A.Ve outreach practitioners and religious-based outreach volunteers too. The former referred her to the Crisis and Evaluation Unit for risk assessment. Osarobo confided she was not feeling well and was accompanied to health checks several times, which

contributed to building rapport. Her decision to join the N.A.Ve was not rapid. It was one of the volunteers, whom she learnt to trust, that convinced her to abandon sex work and join the N.A.Ve. The volunteer's Outreach Unit had been collaborating with the network and knew it was more resourceful for inclusion. From our research, it emerged that this religious-based Outreach Unit convinced a few other women to stop selling sex and enter the N.A.Ve, after considerable insistence they should start a better life. Reticence was due to the fear of retaliation and to remain stranded without an income.

I met Pina many years ago, in 2017. She helped me a lot, she took me to the hospital for checks and she helped for many other things, and proposed me to enter [the programme], but I always said no. (...)

When I met her that time, she asked me: "are you here again?"

Yes, I had seen her several times. And she said: "so what can I do for you?"

It was then that I started with the interviews on my story (...).

Before arriving in the programme, I was in Genova and then I changed city because of the reason that brought me to Italy... I had heard about the programme from an Italian that does voluntary work in the church. He always came to the streets to talk with me and girls and then he convinced me to leave [the streets]. After three days I was in N.A.Ve [he put me in touch with the project]. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osarobo, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 20+ years)

When I saw those people in the road [religious-based outreach volunteers], it was not the first time. There was a place where I normally stood and they came to meet me and always told me: "Please, you are too beautiful for this work, this work is not for you, we can help you." I believed them because they were truthful, they said "we cannot give you everything, but we can give you the little that we can." This hit my heart and I thought I should trust them. So, I called them one day. I know they were expecting me because for long they had been telling me to leave the street (...). That was the day I left. They came to pick me up [and took me to the shelter].

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

If trusting outreach volunteers and practitioners proved hard for Osarobo and Efe, trusting law enforcement officers was even harder for Isowa, because she did not know them and they were wearing a uniform: lack of trust can be attributed to previous negative experiences with law enforcement officers (Farrell *et al.*, 2019), but also with their approach. Police officers are not always trained to deal with young girls in a child- and women-friendly manner (see Chapter 3). Contacts, during patrols, are generally very short with little space for empathic approaches:

officers stop women in the streets – generally after a call by social services, warned by Outreach Units –, take them to the *Questura*,<sup>2</sup> refer them to social workers or accompany them to a dedicated shelter. The intervention of social services is normally activated immediately after police patrols, hence a confusion of roles is often generated, as Osasenaga explained: “it is all government staff” (see extract on page 14). We will return to this point in Chapter 3.

I meet this project when I was 17, in 2018. The police stopped me and asked me how old I was. First, I lied. I said I was 21, while I was 17. So, they said I was too little for that [prostitution], I should be in the camp, where they would take good care of me and help me with documents. I didn't believe them at first. It was the first time I met them, so I did not believe them. And they had a uniform. Then they took me to the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager].<sup>3</sup> I did not want to stay there. He said I was underage and could not stay outside in the streets and that it was his responsibility to get me off there.

(interview, Isowa, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

Returning to Efe's narration, while she did not trust volunteers at first, she was eventually persuaded when she felt their help was genuine, “they were truthful,” she said. Later in the interview, she explained she got convinced they were interested in her well-being rather than on collaborating with the police (see also La Rocca, 2008). The fear of being stigmatised, by co-nationals, as a sex worker, adding to the pressure exercised by her grandmother further contributed to her decision, as she vividly explains next.

I had a friend and she told me: “You want to go to Caritas? I stayed there for a year, they did not give me my document and did not help and then they threw me out.” I thought this was not good. It was difficult to decide after this, but I thought I had to do it. When my grandma found out I was doing prostitution she got angry. She never expected that from me. I was also disappointed with my own self. Walking in the streets, sleeping with different men. What future did I have? When I went home that day, I took the decision to stop taking the money from the road and it was so difficult for me, but I told myself: “I am done. I need a good life for myself. Who wants to marry a girl who does that job?” It was hard for me, but I decided. (...) Then it happened. I am another person. My name is Efe, not Giulia. One day I told the people that helped me [religious-based Outreach Unit] that I was ready. (...) I told my grandma: “You see, I cannot send you money now because I need to change job.” I changed my life, and it turned in a way I never experienced: it was amazing! They [Reception Practitioners] took my phone, so the beginning was hard, as I used to call my family and I couldn't. My grand mom said: “Take your time. Don't go to the street. Your happiness is what I want.” So, I told myself: “no stress, stay and

see what happens.” And this is how I decided to stay. God helped me. I can tell other girls: it takes a lot of patience! What people think about you is more important than money. I am happy now, very very happy. (...)

I was not seeing any future. Sometimes, even now when I think back, I tell myself: “is this me? I have a house, I pay the rent, I save money every month and work hard and it is good money. They are not dirty money; our body is the temple of God. Now I can be proud of myself. Now I have a good boyfriend and my dream came true.”

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

Word of mouth by co-nationals encouraged some women to contact the social protection team. In the case of Efe, co-nationals rather discouraged her. What made a difference were family bonds. She lost both parents at a very young age and has been very close to her grandmother ever since. Her fear of disappointing her prevailed over the responsibility to send remittances. This casts light on Nigerian women’s complex and varied relationships with their families, that scholars rather tend to describe as negative: young girls take up the role of “sacrificial lambs” to contribute to the upward mobility of their family and, in turn, their family organise the first encounters with enablers that will take them to Europe (Caretta, 2015; Ikuteyijo, 2020).

Efe was also concerned about the stigmatisation she could encounter if/when looking for a potential future husband, confirming stigma is central in the experience of trafficked women (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012; Iziengbe, 2017; Eghafona, 2018), whose imaginary future relationships must be culturally and historically located in (gendered) power dynamics (Braidotti, 2002). Efe’s representation of her decision to leave the streets was strongly marked by the rejection of the “street name” she used as a sex worker and the willingness to distance herself from the moral stigma attached to it and to the “dirty money” earned from sex work. The motive of “no future perspectives” seems to perform a narrative function, allowing the young woman to distance herself from prostitution and to contrast it with a much-hoped better perspective. It shows a subjective process to construct herself as a decent “pure” (in religious terms) woman and perhaps also deserving beneficiary (Andrijasevic, 2010). In a similar vein, Osarobo, never mentioned the word “prostitution.” She explained she was in a city “because of the reason that brought [her] to Italy” and heard about the programme. Both women left sex work and joined the N.A.Ve to improve their mobility. Arguably, by doing this, they negotiated a position of socio-economic confinement tied to their immigrant status (*ibidem*).

The capacity to negotiate her subjective position, as deserving beneficiary, emerged also from Abies.

I was in the camp in Mira [Venice]. So, they introduced me to the project N.A.Ve, because they help the girls, do you understand? I was introduced in

2018. I left my project in Mira [Venice] and I came to N.A.Ve on 25 February 2019. (...) I started coming to this place [the office] to do the interview with them. (...) Since they saw I was serious, they asked me to join the project. (...) She [Socio-legal Practitioner] was very nice, she encouraged me a lot. She asked me to be strong and not to think too much because I had too many things on my head and she said “Do not worry, everything will be ok, just focus on what you are doing.” Yes, I really wanted to leave the [previous] camp because they didn’t do much for me. I just went to school. I really wanted to do something and learn. My boss told me that it was better for me to go to N.A.Ve because it will give me a lot of opportunities and they will help me find a good job. In N.A.Ve they asked me to make a decision, if I wanted to join or remain [in the camp] and I got confused, I had to decide what to do. They started talking to me about the project (...) and I said ok, no problem, since they put me in a good position to find a job. I was tired of sitting at home all the time. This is the reason why I said yes.

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

The words in the extract describe well Abies’ confused state of mind when she had to decide whether to enter the N.A.Ve. She was faced with a fragmented protection system, which included the N.A.Ve as a more resourceful project. However, what eventually prevailed was her fatigue of an endless “waiting time” experienced in the previous camp, clashing with her willingness and determination to move forward. Determination was a crucial individual variable in her case, as in Efe’s.

When somebody is determined to do something, she will focus on it, because I know that a lot of girls will not leave [the streets], even if you tell them you are going to help them. They don’t do it if they do not feel ready. And you can't force anybody. Of course, all of us need this determination. If you believe in yourself, things will work out fine for you. Choose the right way! But everybody is different, you know.

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

Entering a protection programme involves some requirements. Osasenaga explained to us that women are expected to tell their (migratory) story to practitioners. The same was confirmed by Abies. This is one of the main challenges for women: access to a social protection programme involves some form of re-victimisation, as the literature on humanitarian interventions (Fassin, 2005; Mai, 2016) has long been stressing. In addition, institutional timings often collide with women’s biographical ones and their readiness (or not) to share personal details of their life. If they ever feel ready at all, or accept to share them despite it, they can do so after a long time, a subjective time that can hardly be measured.



Osasenaga was referred to by the Territorial Commission: she had missed two interviews because she did not feel ready. She talked about her travel to Europe with a N.A.Ve Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner, years later, upon joining the social protection programme, with no time pressure. The interview with the Commission was then rescheduled. At the time she talked to the Practitioner, she had eventually paid off her debt, testifying that exploiters' impact on women goes beyond pressure for payment and threats of retaliation, to influence their decision-making process.

Before you start the project there is a "hot seat," that is the big question. They want you to say your story but not everybody wants to say it. (...) Maybe they think they will be arrested, they are really scared, not ashamed, no, they are more scared. Some of them think the *operatori* [protection practitioners] are the police and they will ask for information [on exploiters]. They confuse them because it is all government staff. (...) Some people do not want to report [to the police]. I did not want to report as I had already paid [my debt] and I wanted to start a new life.

(interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance  
in 2019, +20)

Uyi's decision to enter the N.A.Ve did not coincide with the interruption of sex work in itself. She narrated of a firm caesura away from the streets, following an aggression by a client. She never seriously considered leaving sex work before. The violent episode scared her, made her reflect on her life and realise she had no plans. At that time, in 2018, the Oba of Benin invoked a curse on traffickers.<sup>4</sup> This opened the way for Uyi to move forward. She returned to Italy and eventually joined the N.A.Ve.

The Oba's declaration was expected to have a widespread impact on Nigerian women and free them from exploitation. Narrative evidence collected during our fieldwork suggested it was not so: only very few girls from Edo State took his declaration seriously; girls from other Nigerian states thought it was not valid for them. Moreover, even some girls from Edo State did not feel liberated, testifying the strong power of the traditional juju oath, to which women are forced to subject before being trafficked (i.e., Taliani, 2019).

I had a customer in Sweden... he gave me the money and then he wanted to drop me at the station to get my train. I do not know what happened to him. He held my neck and tried to strangle me to death. A girl saw me while he was pushing me out of his car. She rescued me and helped me to get the train. I went home and I decided to stop as I got really scared. It was then that I realised I had no plans in life. I was getting dressed, going onto the street, coming back home, sleeping and so on. But that was no life. It takes time to understand, that it is nothing you want to continue. I decided because the king of Benin cancelled the curse two years ago and said women did not need to

pay any debt anymore, so there was no reason for me to worry. Only when you get home, they can still threaten you ...

(interview, Uyi, 29 October 2010, entrance 2017, +20 years)

### ***“It is not Christmas every day!” The social protection programme and reception***

How does reception work in the N.A.Ve? What are the objectives of the social protection programme and to what extent do they clash with those of beneficiaries and their needs? In this section, we will address these questions, by highlighting tensions in priorities, modes and temporalities. The narratives of the women we interviewed told us about the attitude of practitioners towards them, the aspects of reception shelters that they enjoyed and did not enjoy, their hopes for the future. The subjectivities of women emerge in their vitality, oscillating between performances (Butler, 1988) as disciplined, motivated, grateful beneficiaries, aimed to convince practitioners – and the interviewers – of their deservedness, and the subtle questioning of the scope and effectiveness of protection. Besides challenging the (long) times of protection, perceived as a deprivation of their liberty, the respondents stressed the importance of free time, the (missed) time of well-being, that can be overshadowed by pre-set priorities of inclusion. Nigeria, their country of origin, sprung up here and there, in a temporal continuum of emotions and experiences, through an active process of re-construction of and reconciliation with their personal trajectories, the same that practitioners often segment into (apparently) neat and discontinuous sections (pre-departure, departure, travel to Europe, arrival in Europe) by focusing on “useful information” to protect them.

As other respondents, Osarobo suggested that life in reception shelters runs smoothly, under the condition that beneficiaries keep busy. When they are not, chances increase of people fighting each other. Another positive aspect was the shelter’s location: it was within walking distance to work, the shops, the hospital, facilitating mobility in the local area.

I stayed a bit less than a year. I liked it because there were four–five of us in the house. I liked it, all girls were busy working [with no time to mess]. There was a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. The house was clean, it was all good. (...) I liked it because I worked close to there, 10 minutes walking, the sea was only five minutes away and the doctor and the hospital 10 minutes. Everything was close, also the shops. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osarobo, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 20+ years)

Esewi talked positively about shared time in the shelter and shared activities with beneficiaries, practitioners, and volunteers, such as eating or going out. Living together also involved fights, linked to the challenge of co-habitation,

particularly when coping with traumas. Like Esewi, several other women mentioned they had, and still have, difficulty falling asleep and sleeping at night, because of worries that keep them awake. The need for time to recover from traumas is not new. It is an on-going issue for Esewi. Here comes Facebook, as a sort of “healing friend” to share feelings with, pointing to the (partial) *coevalness* between migrants and natives (Çağlar, 2018; Gasparini, 1994). Esewi’s words recall the experience of many young people more generally. They tell she is a migrant with worries to deal with, a social protection beneficiary feeling isolated, but they further tell us that she is an adolescent belonging to the *Google generation*, bringing to light the temporalities of technological rhythms (Cwerner, 2001) disrupting night resting activities and overlapping (or substituting) diurnal ones.

I am not well, nor bad, half and half. If you want to ask me what I like about the *comunità* [shelter], I can tell you that we do things together in the sitting room, we watch films, sometimes in the weekend we go out for dinner or to the cinema, sometimes we go downtown. I do not like it to fight with the other girls nor with the *operatori* [practitioners]. And then this makes it even more difficult to sleep. It is not easy for me to sleep, I must take a pill, sometimes I cannot sleep, sometimes I am awake until six in the morning. It is hard for me to sleep because I think about problems, worries, bad things, I think about anything, and I go to Facebook. Then, during the day, I am tired, but I do not sleep. I look at my mobile, I play, I go to Facebook. It makes me happy to be in Facebook and chat with people, to share my feelings, you know, to say how I am. At least you find someone that talks to you and listens to you. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

Ehi also appreciated shared time but stressed the benefit of having a close friend to turn to. She was rather upset for having been transferred to a different shelter and hence forced to leave her friend behind. The decision had been taken by practitioners because they were worried about her friend’s negative influence on her – they were caught stealing a few times (fieldwork note, informal conversation with Reception Practitioner, 13 October 2020). Ehi explained she did not understand the reasons for the transfer. Possibly she did not want to tell us or remember about it, but she communicated clearly how she felt resentful towards the practitioners: she explained the transfer was an imposition deriving from a decision she was not consulted about. From that moment onwards, she closed herself up, only focused on “staying away from trouble,” feeling that practitioners did not understand her and could throw her out of the project. While the transfer was aimed to protect her, it arguably had a disciplining impact on her permanence in the programme.

*Ehi*: I do not know how to explain this, I have explained this to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], to the mediator and to a Reception Practitioner. No one seems to understand me. Every day, they [other beneficiaries of the same shelter] want to fight with me, only with me. If I put my food in the fridge, they use it without letting me know, and when I come back [home] I find no food. (...) My life is not safe in this place, I need to stay away from trouble. I told my *assistente sociale*, but he does not understand this. If I had somewhere else to go, I would go, but I don't. I asked to be transferred elsewhere but they [the practitioners] refused to do so. I do not know what to do. Interviewer: Why do you think these girls are fighting you?

*Ehi*: I don't know, I don't know, sometimes I have asked to myself this question, I have asked them [the practitioners] several times too, but there is no answer. (...) It is making me ... after all I have passed through, I come here to the *comunità* [shelter] and they are making my life miserable.

*Interviewer*: What is your main worry? To be blamed for something?

*Ehi*: Yes, because they may ask me to go out of the project and I do not have anywhere to go. I want to avoid this. I do not want to end up in the street where I have come from. This thing is making me crazy

*Interviewer*: In the previous shelter how were things?

*Ehi*: Things were totally different. It was a different *comunità*.

People would not just sit down and look for trouble. We cooked together and ate together at the same table. And I had my best friend there. She is still my friend, but I left her there when they transferred me here. I did not want to come here; I do not know why I am here.

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

The disciplining nature of shelters is evident in the words of Osasenaga too. Reception is not a time of choice for her. As a “skilled navigator” (Vigh, 2009), she adapted to the rules. She understood it was the only way to stay in the programme when she had no alternative for decent housing. As we will further discuss in Chapter 3, the literature on conditional inclusion highlights the moral and pedagogical dimensions of inclusion initiatives (Hacker *et al.*, 2015; de Waal, 2020; Klarenbeek and Weide, 2020). Access to services is contingent upon individuals' capacity to demonstrate they are good beneficiaries (Schinkel, 2010; Shukla, 2016) and can respond to expectations. It is worth underlining that adaptation for Osasenaga was particularly hard, because she had lived autonomously, in a small flat, before entering the N.A.Ve. and was used to being independent. Experiencing the shelter made her feel she was taking a step back in terms of autonomy. She resented being deprived of her mobile phone. She associated (the use of) this device with her private and most intimate sphere and restrictions imposed by practitioners as institutional interferences in her personal time. Most of the women protested about mobile phone rules. Efe felt she could not call her

family in full privacy (see page 39). Iyore challenged the irrationality of these rules: “they are meant to protect beneficiaries, but they do not, as exploiters are more likely to find other channels to contact women.” (interview, 29 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 16 years)

*Osasenaga*: It is not about whether I like it or not, I do not really have a choice. I am grateful because it is not easy to have accommodation without paying. (...) It was not easy to abide to the rules, you cannot do this and that, but I knew this is only for some time until these people [practitioners] help me. And there is no organisation without rules.

Maybe you have your personal problem, maybe you are worried for your own things, but they just want you to obey to the rules. (...) It is not Christmas every day! But thank God I coped with it.

*Interviewer*: Did they explain the rules and the reasons for them?

*Osasenaga*: I did not understand them. They just told me I could not call at night because people sleep. If you say I do not submit the phone, then there is a *casino* [trouble]!!!

*But you know, the phone is private, people cannot be without it. It was like losing my life.*

(interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20)

Isowa further insisted that shelters have too many rules that remained largely unclear to her. This makes their acceptance even harder for women, to the point that some of them eventually left the shelter. Isowa self-disciplined herself in face of conditions that could not be negotiated, but also challenged them, by contrasting her otherness with respect to people outside the camp, in “real life,” who do not need to abide to rules because they have documents. She positioned herself as a migrant, subjected to the migration regime. We were struck by her use of the term “consent.” Isowa’s narrative seems to indicate a sort of continuity between her condition of exploitation and her condition in the shelter, although we are not suggesting here that the two situations are comparable. However, some similarity in dynamics can be observed. According to several interpretations of the Palermo Protocol, consent is irrelevant to determine the crime of trafficking, because victims are not in the conditions of freely expressing their consent. In Isowa’s words, consent is essential to receive support in shelters, but it is a consent she did not freely give: “Without my consent, they cannot do anything to help me.”

It was quite difficult at the beginning when I thought I was going to be here for a year! I was not okay with everything going around me. I could not use the phone, talk to my family. You can’t sleep in the afternoon. There are a lot of things they ask you to do or not to do, you know. I was not in a camp before, so I did not know how it was. I had to be very patient (...) They did

help me in different ways, but that kind of help ... sometimes it comes with hot! (...) There were a lot of rules. I like rules but they must be easy, not that difficult! Some of my friends left, but I had the patience to stay, as I had nowhere to go. Even now, it's quite difficult. I have two months left. (...) Well, in general, it is kind of difficult if you don't understand their way [of the practitioners]. If you understand their way, it is simple.

Not all places are bad in Italy, but this camp! Oh my God, you cannot enjoy the life you are looking for. The camp is quite difficult because there are things you must do that you do not have to do when you are outside the camp. Let's say if you must go to the hospital and you are in the camp you must go. But I do not go to the hospital much, I am not the type that goes to the hospital if I am sick. (...) Yes, I think it would be different if I had documents! (...) In this project you must let them do what they want, because without your consent they cannot do anything. So, my only prayer is to finally leave the camp and face the real life.

(interview, Isowa, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

Some shelters propose recreational activities, such as sewing and small manual handicraft work. All shelters organise educational activities, including Italian classes. Activities are generally aimed to socialisation and to improving Italian. Omosigho appreciated the *café* that provided a chance to take up her sewing passion again (see page 48). She grew motivated as volunteers acknowledged her skills and praised her engagement. This is coherent with the view that individualised programmes are more likely to be effective. Adopting an individualised approach means addressing the needs of beneficiaries, not only about the content but also the modalities and the velocity of activities. Orobosa was satisfied with her Italian course because she could take time to learn step-by-step, and with the *café*, that she sometimes enjoyed, although she felt activities were going on for too long.

I liked it when the teacher [a volunteer that gave extra Italian lessons] came to shelter and tested our knowledge. It was good because I had to concentrate and I could ask her if something was not clear, if I did not understand. We could ask her questions and she would help. (...) I always went to the *café* [a laboratory with creative activities], but it was like a job. We made earrings, bracelets, flowers, designed stuff for birthdays. There were various activities there [and she shows some of the objects she made]. Sometimes I liked it, sometimes not. There were many elderly people in this *café*, I had no one I could really talk to. Sometimes, I was there with another girl and after the whole morning I would say: "ok, time to go," but they would tell me "You have not done anything yet." *Mamma mia!* I had already finished everything, and I wanted to eat!

(interview, Orobosa 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

The importance of learning and having sufficient time to do it was emphasised by Efe and Omosigho. They described the process by comparing some ways of life (eating, dressing) and working (sewing) in Italy and Nigeria, and by weighing the respective pros and cons. They did so in a temporal non-fragmented continuum of their biographical experience, while bringing together past, present and future and building the “foundations of [a future] house,” as Omosigho metaphorically said. Their narrations suggest that activities that help them reconcile their life in their country of origin and in Italy have a positive impact as they provide a sense of achievement and direction. Yet, learning can take longer than (initially) expected. Efe realised she had learnt how to manage her (pocket) money, and how useful it was to economise, only after leaving the shelter. Most of the women that we interviewed, rather, mentioned the (pocket) money in a negative way: it was insufficient and yet central for them, as they could not work (because of their legal status), and still had to send remittances back home. Money has a clear temporal dimension in their life: it exemplifies the dissonance between institutional times (lengthy procedure for regularisation preventing access to work) and biographical ones (on-going family responsibilities).

I learnt a lot here in the *comunità* [shelter] and with the *café*, because of people [practitioners] who believed in me. (...) I usually woke up in the morning, at 8, I had my internship, then cleaned my room and helped clean the house. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we had Italian classes. In the weekend, we had tasks for cleaning. It was nice, they taught us how to eat together. In Nigeria we don't eat together. I think it is nice that in Italy you talk when you eat, in Nigeria we say it is a bad habit. But we all wait for each other before we start. (...) We also learnt how to dress decent. Elvira [a volunteer] taught us how to dress because some people judge you according to your dress ... I do not think it makes sense, but some people are like this. I think you can dress in any way and be good, but maybe some guys look at you and make you feel uneasy. I mean, you need to defend yourself and be clear: “Hey, I do not want you, I am not interested!” (...)

Ah, you know [she switched the conversation to the pocket money] ... You know the 35 euros [she laughs] they give us. It was not enough, because we are girls, we need to buy cream, soap, you know, so this pocket money was ... oh my God! No, not enough. But we learnt how to economize. They taught me to check all the *scontrini* [receipts] at the end of the month. Now that I live alone, every month I go through the *scontrini* to see how much I spend. Now I understand the sense of it.

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

*Omosigho*: Something very positive in the *comunità* [the shelter] was sewing [that was part of the activities offered to beneficiaries]. It is a positive work. You sew something, like clothes and maybe in the future it can help you. If you don't have money, you have the knowledge to sew. You

can take the size, the fabric with the right quality, everything. You can do everything perfect because you have learned. When I leave the shelter, I can take with me all I have learnt with my hands.

*Interviewer:* When you arrived here, did you know already how to sew or was it the first time?

*Omosigho:* In Nigeria I sewed with hands. When I came here, I thought that if I could use hands, I could learn to use the machine too. They showed me how to do it.

*Interviewer:* Do you think it's better by hand or with a machine? It must be very different, I guess, isn't it?

*Omosigho:* I sew in both ways. I mark the clothes with a pen, then I use a pin to tap the clothes with my hands, then I use a needle to prepare the machine. (...) It is like building a house, you need to build the foundations before you give the shape. The same is for the material you sew. I learnt to sew in Nigeria but here in Italy I continued learning and it is good for my future.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

The time of reception in social protection programmes is also a time of emotion that can point to power relations (Luhmann, 2006; Biehl *et al.*, 2007). Aisosa associated cooking her own food with positive (familiar) feelings, but women are not always allowed to cook in shelters. Aisosa shared another sentiment, constant frustration, for being confined in a shelter with strict rules. Similar feelings are common to all our respondents and are in line with scholarly observations on protected shelters (i.e., Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021). Practitioners were particularly rigid with Aisosa, because of an incident with her daughter (that we will not report here). Iyore, on her side, left the shelter twice, the second time for good. Confinement and the many rules were the main reasons for it. The shelter was perceived as a detention centre, the rules as excessive and non-negotiable.

Sometimes I think what a s\*\*\* life I have! Sorry for the swearing word. I think a lot about my life, I think about the place where I live, I have no freedom, I cannot even have a walk outside, they say no for everything, and this makes me feel bad. It makes me feel I do not even want to leave my room; I do not want to eat any longer. Too many rules, too much pressure, for such a long time!

(interview, Aisosa, 20 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 14 years)

*Iyore:* An *operatore* [Reception Practitioner] came to my room and searched for my mobile in my wardrobe. He told me I could use just one mobile, but there was another boy in the *comunità* [shelter], Phil, who has two



mobiles and he always used both. Some girls and I could not use the mobile for the first seven months! Another girl does not have a mobile, but she has her laptop. I wanted the same!

*Interviewer:* Are you telling me there are different rules for different people?

*Iyore:* Yes, exactly, but they say all rules are the same for everyone! When I asked why, they said it is to protect me, but this is like a *carcere* [prison]!!! And then, well, if I want, I could still call from another phone! Too many rules, I could not stand them. And I had the same rules all over again. After I returned it was the same.

(interview, Iyore, 29 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 16 years)

### **“You have to see, then you can trust”: The relationship with practitioners**

As we explained in Chapter 1, the social protection programme is organised in phases and each practitioner has a specific role. In their narratives, respondents did not always mention a specific phase nor the role of the practitioner they referred to. At the same time, they seemed to perceive the programme in a less fragmented way than practitioners (see Chapter 3). What made a difference in their trajectories was the significance of the relationship they established with a practitioner (or more than one). The gender of (some) practitioners threw light on the quality of some relationships, in part unexpectedly, as will be explained, less so for the country of origin.

The theme of trust is strongly present in many descriptions. One of the professional figures that the women mentioned most frequently are Cultural-linguistic Mediators. They are certainly central in the N.A.Ve, from the very beginning of the social protection programme. They mediate the communication between beneficiaries and practitioners, by translating and providing cultural insights during conversations (see also Phillimore, 2016; McKnight, Goodwin and Kenyon, 2019; Collins and Skarparis, 2020). They are present in interviews and progress meetings with beneficiaries. They often have a calming effect on them, especially when they first approach the N.A.Ve.

I had already known the cultural-linguistic mediator in 2016, when I had a bit of mess with the police. The police found me in a house with Nigerians. Then [when I went to the *Questura*] I met her. I had arrived in Italy in July and in the month of August the police found me. I could not speak Italian; I spoke only English. They gave me the chance to speak to the mediator, so I could speak in English. She helped me with the police and calmed me down, but she helped also later in N.A.Ve. She did not come to the *comunità* [shelter], only the *operatori* [reception practitioners] were there. If you have difficulties understanding something she will explain you. She

explains things also to the others [practitioners and Case Managers]. When we have meetings, she is always there. (...) If I needed anything, I always called her. I called her to help me speak to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], she explained how the project worked. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osarobo, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 20+ years)

Mediators are sometimes called to deal with problems in shelters that were not (completely) solved by Reception Practitioners. They are also contacted by (some) women, as Orobosa and Isowa explained, to ask about more intimate women's issues or to complain/ask about everyday frictions. In the opinion of Ehi, a Nigerian (mediator) can best set problems into the correct framework, because they share the same cultural background.

When I first arrived, I called the mediator if there was something I did not want to ask to Giovanni [Reception Practitioner] if it was personal stuff. I preferred talking to her, because I know her better and she always talked to me in English, it was easier to talk about [intimate] women stuff with her. But she always told me "Orobosa, come on, now we speak Italian" [she laughs]. She encouraged me and helped me speak Italian and improve. Once, she came to the *comunità* [shelter] because we were fighting for food shopping. Giovanni could not solve the problem, so he called her because she is Nigerian, she speaks English, so she spoke to us and helped us solve things. It worked because she is Nigerian and knows how to take things. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Orobosa, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

I do not say everything about me. I keep it for myself. I can ask them [the reception practitioners] about job or project issues, but not confidential stuff. There are things I can only discuss with a lady. Maybe if I tell her I am pregnant or other lady stuff I can tell her more easily.

(interview, Isowa, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

*Ehi*: If there is something I do not understand, she helps me understand. If it is hard for me to speak in Italian, I tell her, and she translates from English or even pidgin.

*Interviewer*: You speak well Italian by now, no?

*Ehi*: Yes, so and so, I am happy if she is there (...)

*Interviewer*: And if the mediator was an Italian person?

*Ehi*: No, it would not be the same. An Italian person would not be fine. Some things can be understood only by Nigerians.

*Interviewer*: Can you give me an example of a situation in which you called the mediator, and it was useful to understand the situation?

*Ehi*: Yes, for example when I first arrived in the project, the *operatori* [reception practitioners] would enter in my room without knocking on the door, both male and female *operatori* and I said this was no good. If there is someone naked in the room, it is no good (...). I tried to explain it to them and then I called the mediator, and we had a meeting to discuss about this. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

The timing of mediation is largely associated with the very first phases of the programme. Esosa proudly explained her Italian had become sufficiently fluent and she no longer needed Mediators' facilitation. She has advanced language skills, compared to other women, due to her educational background and fluency in her mother tongue. Other women insisted they no longer needed mediation nor wanted Mediators to be present in meetings, fiercely reclaiming their achieved autonomy with the language, also by speaking to me in Italian and having chosen to conduct the interview mostly in this language.

*Interviewer*: Do you often speak to or meet the mediator?

*Esosa*: I mostly talk to her for my passport. When we have meeting with my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] she is always there, but I can speak Italian and I can manage by myself. They [the reception practitioners] and the *assistente sociale* always call a cultural-linguistic mediator, to be on the safe side. The first time I met them [the Case Manager and the reception practitioners] she was there. But now I can manage alone [with the language], I am happy I can, and I want to do it by myself. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esosa, 8 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

Osayi reported a problematic relationship with a Mediator. When she arrived in the N.A.Ve, she felt the Mediator translated poorly and often wrongfully interpreted what she said. Having perceived lack of empathy further contributed to her dislike of this role, preferring a direct contact with the Case Manager. What emerges in her words is that language issues may be sometimes (perceived as) less crucial than rapport to facilitate interactions.

I do not trust them [the mediators]. When I first arrived in Italy I met a mediator in the N.A.Ve, I will not say her name. I talked and she translated. I had just arrived, and I could not understand what she was saying because I spoke only

English. When I met her again, I was in the programme, and she asked me: “Are you the girl that lied about her story?” Well, even though you translated for me, and you recognise me you should not say something I said many years ago. If I tell you that my mom is dead, my cousins did this and that, bla bla bla, I have my privacy. I tell you what I want. I do not tell you what you want to hear from me. I tell you what I want and if you are putting pressure on me, I will tell you some random bulls\*\*\*. Look, I really love many people in this planet, but I do not even trust myself, I surely do not trust mediators. I hate mediators. If you say one thing, they translate something else. To all girls that come in the project I always say: “If you want to say the truth about your story, tell it to your *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], use Google translate.” [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osayi, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

The physical proximity of Reception Practitioners certainly lends itself to their role of problem solvers, as shown above. Everyday contacts with beneficiaries have granted constant support for practical issues, ranging from internship to health checks, work-related and co-habitation issues. It has contributed to beneficiaries’ tranquillity and, sometimes, in the words of Amenze, to a sense of “being in a family” that welcomes you, provides advice and share experience to help.

I called him [Reception Practitioner] all the time! (...) I have no problem [she laughs]: if I need anything I ask! (...) Let’s say I must do something about my job, like the job that I do maybe finishes, or maybe I want to ask questions about it. I will call and he will explain for me!

He [Reception Practitioner] did *disoccupazione* [unemployment benefit application] for me. There’s one paper they call ... mmm, I don’t remember the name of the paper you have to sign. So, he told me what to do and what I needed.

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

When I was in the *comunità* [shelter] I would ask Giovanni [Reception Practitioner], he is my dad, Antonio [Reception Practitioner] is my grandfather. Giovanni is my dad because when I first arrived, he was there to welcome me in the shelter and the first person I met. Then I met Antonio [Reception Practitioner], so he is my grandfather because he really talks as a grandfather, he is a man with experience, he is wise. And then there is my mom, Francesca [Reception Practitioner]! And my grandmother and aunties [the mediators] who speaks my language and have always some good advice for me. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Amenze, 15 October 2020, entrance 2017, +20 years)

It is normally reception practitioners who accompany the women to health checks, as they are in charge of their everyday needs. Sometimes, it is Case Managers who take them, but this function is mostly delegated. Women generally understand that Case Managers are responsible for their progress in the protection programme and identify them as the reference person who takes decisions *with* them.

They are all good [the practitioners] I don't know all of them, but if I need to go to the hospital, for a check-up one of the *operatori* [reception practitioners] can accompany me, or if I have any issue with my health they can come and see me. (...) But my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] often calls me and asks me how I feel, and I take all decisions with him. I discuss with him what I would like to do or if I have any question or doubt on something I ask him.

(interview, Esosa, 8 October 2020, entrance in  
2017, 17 years)

The Case Manager is like a father to Ehi. She has known him for a long time, and believes he can understand her, besides being easily reached by phone. Case Managers and practitioners interrogated themselves on the adequacy for male Case Managers to work with woman beneficiaries. The narratives of our respondents, associating the male Case Manager with a “father,” suggest that gender was not an obstacle to develop rapport. On the contrary, it was a good occasion to experience a positive “male-role” and possibly for the Case Manager to rethink Nigerian family relations, as not necessarily imbued with violence and patriarchal dynamics, as they are often stereotypically represented.

*Ehi*: If there is something wrong, I do not like to talk with *operatori* [reception practitioners], I prefer to go straight to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager].

*Interviewer*: Why do you prefer to talk to him?

*Ehi*: Because we have been knowing each other for a long time and I think he can understand me. He knows what I can do or cannot do, because it is just him that is always there. *Operatori* are not always there, in the weekend they are not. In the morning I sent a WhatsApp message to an *operatore* [Reception Practitioner] and explained my problem, but she does not understand all this fighting in the house [the shelter]. I do not want them [social worker and practitioners] to feel disappointed about me, you know?

*Interviewer*: What happens if my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] becomes disappointed?

*Ehi*: If he is disappointed, he will ask me to leave the project, without documents, without house, without nothing. I am very very worried about this! Like, if I fight with someone it is very bad. I do not want to lose my project because I got angry. (...)

*Interviewer:* You can maybe talk to a mediator?

*Ehi:* Yes, yes, I know a mediator since a long time since I first met my *assistente sociale*. It is not difficult to talk to her, but I prefer him [male social worker]. He understands me more than others, I feel more at ease with him. (...)

*Interviewer:* Do you talk to your *assistente sociale* also about women' stuff?

*Ehi:* Yes, I consider him as my father, and I can talk about anything with him. Eh eh [she laughs], sometimes we quarrel, before we quarrelled sometimes, but now I have grown up and I think before I say anything. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

Osasenaga and Esewi reclaimed a direct relationship with their Case Manager. They grew intolerant of the continuous dynamic of triangulation among Case Manager, Practitioners, and Mediators and, in the case of Esewi, the Legal Guardian too: too many people, too many lines of communication that make decisions complicated, too long to be taken and even longer to be waited for. Both women also expressed their irritation for waiting times before each meeting. Case Managers start discussing issues with Practitioners and only then invite beneficiaries to join them in their office. This made the women feel they were not valued, they would not be asked for their own opinion, in short, they felt no space was available for negotiation, although all decisions were regarding their own lives. By narrating their annoyance on triangulation, Osasenaga and Esewi described a subtle form of domination, while also challenging it, by calling for increased involvement. Later in the interview, Esewi explained: "This is why I stop talking when I enter the office of the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager]. I do it every time they do not talk to *me* first." It was her way of resisting.

*Osasenaga:* When you do something wrong, they [Case Managers] threaten you to throw you out of the place [shelter] if you do not obey the rules, do you understand? They just want to warn you, they do not do it maybe

...

*Interviewer:* So, you mean they only reproach you?

*Osasenaga:* Yes, they only call you for negative things.

*Interviewer:* So, if you wanted to ask questions, can you ask for a meeting?

*Osasenaga:* Well, if you want to ask personal questions, you can go to the office [in the shelter] or to the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] and talk to them and they answer but they do not call you to see how your mind is.

*Interviewer:* Did you feel they were not really listening to you?

*Osasenaga:* Yes, that's what I am saying. Some of them are good, while some they do not really care. It depends on the person. When there are

meetings, they [the reception practitioners] would go inside first, with the mediator, to tell your *assistente sociale* I do not know what! They do not let everyone come together and tell their mind and discuss things. They discuss things at your back. (...) When you go inside maybe they have already talked about what happened. But you want to say yourself what happened! And the reaction of the *assistente sociale* will not be the first reaction on the matter because they talked about it already, do you understand?

During the lockdown they found a job for me in a supermarket. I signed a paper and they said they were going to pay me 200 euro/month, do you understand? It was in a very far place. I would leave at five o'clock. Because of the lockdown there were no bus, and it took looong! Do you understand me? They said I had to work there. I worked there and they gave me 100 euros and I said it was not the correct money. It took me three months before they gave me the right money and then I stopped working. They said I did not respect the agreement, but I do respect an agreement if you do the right thing with me (...) When I told the mediator that I wanted to talk to my *assistente social* because it was getting out of hand and I want to leave my job, she talked to him first and when I met him he knew already what had happened, but from her voice!

(interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20 years)

*Esewi*: You know, I wanted to enrol on a nail course to learn the job, I wanted to do it, as another girl in the programme was doing it, but they [reception practitioners and Case Manager] never replied to me. As they did not reply to me when I said I wanted to become a dentist. They said it costs a lot, there is no school for it, this, and that, I do not know if they really asked. I really do not like it when I ask something and they say "Ok, we will tell you." And then they do not say anything or they just say no.

*Interviewer*: What is it that irritates you most?

*Esewi*: When you ask something and they say: "Let's see, I have to talk to the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], the Legal Guardian, this person and this other person to see if we can do it." They never really reply, and you wait forever. The *assistente sociale* did not believe me, not even when there was a big problem coming in the *comunità*! Well, I know the *comunità*, I live there, why don't you listen to me? I live there! And I have a mouth to talk, he did not even ask for my opinion and when we had meetings, they always talked first in his office and I could enter only later. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

While meetings with Case Managers are often experienced as the “time of reproach,” as explained by Osasenaga, for Ehi, they can be also the “time for reassurance” (see page 54) if the relationship is significant. Efe’s and Omosigho’s words gave us some insights on a crucial element in the relationships with Case Managers but also Practitioners more generally: trust. Practitioners expect beneficiaries to have full trust in them, but trust takes time, as the respondents stressed. Time was needed for Efe to “test” if they were really working hard to honour their promises, if they were really aiming to ensure her well-being. Trust requires a process of getting to know people, getting familiar with them. You can trust people when you have hands-on experience that they would not do something bad to you, explained Omosigho, that they will not force you to do anything. Trust means trusting what people tell you, not trusting *the* person, said Osayi. We will return to trust in Chapter 3.

*Efe:* I trusted the lady [Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner] because she fought a lot for me, as the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], the Socio-legal Practitioners, Giovanni [Reception Practitioner] and others. They fought a lot for me to honour their promises. They have tried their possible best for me to trust them!

*Interviewer:* So, you trust them because you feel they have been fighting for you?

*Efe:* Yes, because they did not know me, but they took me like their own [daughter], I doubt that even a Nigerian person would do the same for me. They are very welcoming, Patrizia [Reception Practitioner] too.

*Interviewer:* But I suppose it took you some time to trust them?

*Efe:* Yes, well, when I arrived, at the beginning, I wondered if I could trust them. The lady [Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner] told me: “Next month I will come and pick you up.” She did not come, and I was scared that I could not trust her. I was not sure. But with the help of Patrizia I started understanding and liking her. My spirit just connected with her, and I started believing her words when she recommended I should stay in the same shelter.

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

It’s not easy. Before some people say things out, it takes a lot, it’s difficult. There are people who express what they think, their feelings. There are people who don’t want to talk or share their feelings with other people. They want to keep everything inside. The thing is that you can help that person little by little. If the person becomes strange, you can ask “What is going on? Are you ok?” That feeling does not come out. The feeling continues “eating” that person. There are things some people cannot say. When you see them, they may look happy, but they are not, and they can’t say it to you. It’s important to express feelings, but not everybody wants to express feelings. Some



people think you want to control them. They don't like it. They don't like the idea of control. What we really need is to understand and be understood, because misunderstandings cause so many distractions and mess among everyone. (...) Yes, it was a little hard for me to trust. You must see, then you can trust and believe. You need to see first, when you enter the programme, if you don't know what is inside, you cannot know. Maybe someone you see today, you think how nice this person can be, tomorrow that person becomes somebody you cannot understand. First, you see the person and wonder: "Who is she? What does she do?" You start giving a little trust. You don't know how a person can change tomorrow. It's possible it's not the person you thought. Trust comes when you find a person has not done anything bad. You need time. So, to see, trust and believe, it takes time. You may think that a person is bad. But first you must see it with your eyes, and later you can trust. You can look at people by their actions, not their face.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

You know, I cannot tell my true story to a person that I have only just met two minutes ago. Are we crazy? Absolutely not. I do not trust even the mother that gave birth to me. Sorry, but trusting anyone is committing a bit mistake in life. In general, I do not trust human beings. I am not talking about "trust" in the sense you [interviewer and practitioners] mean. I mean, the problem is not trusting someone but trusting that someone is not telling you bulls\*\*\*. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osayi, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

Reciprocity in sharing feelings was experienced as another important feature of a positive relationship with Practitioners. While the relationship with them is asymmetrical and beneficiaries are aware of it, they appreciated occasions to share feelings: it made them feel that both positive and negative emotions are common to other people and could be dealt with; it gave them a sign that Practitioners had experienced "similar" emotions in their lives, and could understand how they felt and empathise with them.

I do not want to have her around [referring to a Reception Practitioner]. I do not like her; we really do not get along. She always tells me: "If you do not like it, then the door is open for you to leave!" The other *operatore* [referring to another in the same shelter] is different. She does not have this strange manner. She looks at you in a way that makes you want talk to her. She is kind. One day we went downtown for some shopping, and she was also talking about her own problems, with her boyfriend. She was sharing. And then she does things that makes you laugh. Sometimes we fight but then she writes you a message and asks you if you are ok. I was surprised once to receive her

message and I wrote her: “We are fighting, you know, why are you writing me?” And she replied: “Just to know how you are.” That was nice. When we met later everything was ok. So, I always ask her if I need anything or want to talk about something.

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

### ***“I was desperate to work, I needed money”: internships and access to employment***

Most of our respondents undertook an internship before the completion of their social protection programme and all the women confirmed having received considerable support for job hunting. Many were very active in the search and found a job through personal, or indirect contacts (of Practitioners), or following an internship that was positively evaluated. The N.A.Ve certainly facilitated their access to employment, suggesting that the social protection programme represents a “condition of possibility” (Butler, 1997), contributing to projecting beneficiaries towards the future, although it is a confusing and blurred future characterised by little (if any) certainty and several structural barriers, including market opportunities, mis-match between market opportunities and individual skills and resources, legal status.

The internships offered a useful learning opportunity, both for the women who had no prior experience and for those who previously worked in their country of origin. The internship was perceived by many women as a time of emancipation. It was their first chance to access economic resources, as many women explained. It had never happened in Nigeria. Internships were paid, as involved in institutional internships. The payment did not correspond to an actual salary, but it contributed to the remittances that many women must send to their families.

Internships provided the motivation to continue studying and learning, to improve employment skills and open the way for a better future, but also to acquire skills that can be useful in everyday life, such as cooking, in the case of Ehi. The learning process involved some difficulties, including getting used to long working hours and coping with the pressure from employers to speed up the implementation of tasks. Orobosa found it particularly hard to work long hours because of her health problems that caused physical and emotional distress. The patience to teach showed by her manager was appreciated and it positively impacted on the internship. So did the context of internship for Esosa who found it more comfortable to work with co-nationals and people with a foreign background: they shared the experience of a stratified employment position, at the lower end of the employment ladder, as well as similar worries associated with precarious employment, legal and life conditions.

In the first internship I did [with N.A.Ve] I worked as a waitress (...). I did not take orders from the tables, but I did a bit of everything. You know, the

[specific] words are difficult, and I learnt how to pronounce the names of different types of food. I attended a school too and I learnt to prepare coffee and other things, like setting the table. I learnt a lot in the first internship. They were nice and patient enough to teach me. They were all nice, in the kitchen we were all foreigners, and I was better at ease. I worked five hours per day, and I got along well with my colleagues. Sometimes, I felt there was too much work and we had to be very quick. They [the restaurant managers] wanted us to do things very fast, they made me a bit angry for this but in the end, they taught me a lot of things. (...) What I liked is that things are different in my country of origin. There, it is five or six people that do everything [in the restaurant]. It is better here [where everyone has a specific task]. Therefore, I attended a year of a catering school. Then, I realised that I do not want to do just this job. I would like to work as beautician. Still, it is important to have many work experiences. (...) I went to school in Nigeria, but I did not want to study. Here, in Italy, I have understood that it is important. In Nigeria, I attended school until I was 15, but I had not decided what I wanted to do in the future. I liked the idea of becoming a lawyer, but I had to study for this. I like defending people and helping them. (...) My brothers are following their dreams, but I did not follow them. My eldest brother is studying to become a doctor in Benin city. I went to Lagos but when I was 12, we moved to Benin, and we stayed there. Much money is needed to pay schooling and it depends on what you want to do. You can go to school, but you need to have a “big head.” It is not for everyone; it is something for rich people. I like studying, I have not finished studying and I hope I will continue doing so. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esosa, 8 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

Ehi: I do not have a contract yet; I am doing an internship. I am working in a factory where they make pasta. They have just started. It is a new factory. I have been working there for two months now. I am half the way through with my internship and I like it a lot, I like making pasta, breaking eggs. And people are very kind. There is a big machine that does everything, that mix eggs and flour. Today, I have learnt how the machine works, how to switch it on and off. We put the pasta into the plastic container, all neat and tidy. (...) I have learnt how to make pasta and if I want, I can also make it at home!

*Interviewer:* Do you have any idea whether they will offer you a contract at the end?

Ehi: I hope so! They said they will if the internship goes well. They say I am working well but I need to be faster. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

I am doing a cleaning internship [in a women's shelter – different from the one where she lives]. I like it, but it is hard, maybe because it is my first job. Well, I still like it. (...) It is many hours, and it is hard also because of my poor health that makes me feel sick. It was difficult for me to stand for many hours. The doctor told me I need to be careful, and I was worried so I asked Giovanni [Reception Practitioner]: “Are you sure I will not die?” He said I will not, but I still asked to see the doctor, I want to know better about my health. They did explain I need to take medicines though ... [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Orobosa 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

Amenze did more than one internship, similar to other women. The first was particularly stressful, because of the rhythms imposed onto the workers and the bad transport connection that forced her to wake up very early in the morning and to spend much time in commuting. Her second internship was a great experience: her manager offered her an apprenticeship contract, that eventually led to permanent employment. It was not so for all the women we interviewed and it points to a critical issue. While Practitioners activate them with the main intention to open job opportunities, there are cases in which employers (declare from the beginning that they) cannot offer any opportunity. Often it depends on the limited size of their firm. Yet, the risk has emerged of employers using internship to benefit, although for a short period, from a low-cost labour force (see Chapter 3).

The experience of Amenze was positive not only because of the contract she was offered, but also for her professional development. She had worked as a tailor in Nigeria and the internship allowed her to put her skills to good use. Like Omosigho, she recalled with pride her youth in her country of origin and somehow re-appropriated it by seizing the progress she had been making since, in a “flow” of experience intersecting past, present and future (hopes).

The learnt skills were indicated by both Amenze and Omosigho as useful for their careers and their everyday life. Omosigho imagined her future as a married woman and stated her cleaning experience would be useful. In this sense, she reinstated the gender roles she grew up with: “as a woman I need to know how to clean a house.” The internship was not an opportunity to challenge her role, but it still helped her develop some skills that she felt could be useful for a single woman too.

*Amenze:* We make beautiful clothes! In December it will be two years since I started working here. I had a trial period for a few months and then finally they offered me an apprenticeship contract. I am very happy; I like it very much!

*Interviewer:* Had you already done this job before?

*Amenze*: Yes, when I was in my country I worked as a tailor. (...) I could already do the job, but here I have learnt how to use the machine that I had never used in my life. I did it manually before. Now with the electric machine I can work fast, in two minutes I can make a dress if the fabric is already cut. I deal with the accessories, earrings, bags, slippers, pyjamas, many things. (...) In Nigeria we did everything by hand, we used the scissors. The machine does everything. It is easier. Well, I am used to work by hands, and it is easier in this way for me, but by using the machine I can learn how to do it in this way too. (...) [She shows pictures of bags, fabrics, African fabrics, clothes] I also make dresses for myself! Normally I do not buy them, I buy the fabric at the market, and I make them myself.

*Interviewer*: Did you also do an internship before starting with your trial period?

*Amenze*: Oh, *mamma mia*, yes, but the first was sooo stressful! I washed the dishes in a restaurant kitchen, helped sort out the garbage, cleaning. It was a bit hard, they called me here and there, *mamma mia*, I could not continue! The internship lasted for two months; I was constantly praying it would finish soon but it felt it would never finish! It felt like three years, *mamma mia!!!* I am a quiet person and I do not want anyone to annoy me, I do not want people telling me what to do, I need to focus. In that restaurant it was stressful. I had to wake up at six and get the bus, I could not have breakfast, had to wait half an hour for the second bus and get to work half an hour before the restaurant opened. Now it is easier with the transport. My house is close to the bus stop. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Amenze, 15 October 2020, entrance  
2017, +20 years)

*Omosigho*: It's the nineteenth day of my [cleaning] internship. I am very happy. Patrizia [Reception Practitioner] and the other *operatori* [practitioners] helped me! I can do the cleaning very well now. Sometimes, I forget how to do some things, but then I do it again and practice in the *comunità* [shelter]. You see, everything eventually stays in my brain. You people [referring to the practitioners more generally] think I don't use what you teach me, but I use it very well. (...) I did my internship in a big factory. They have a changing room and I cleaned there, both the men's and women. I cleaned the rooms and the stairs. I cleaned very well! I was so happy to do this, because tomorrow this work will also help me in my own things. Maybe I will live on my own. I can't say I won't marry, as I am woman, and I need to know how to keep my house clean. And should I live alone, I can clean everywhere and make it tidy.

*Interviewer*: Did you clean also in Nigeria?

*Omosigho*: Yes, in the morning when I woke up. The only thing I had was a natural broom, a wounding broom. Every morning, I swept my father's home very well. People saw me doing it. It was all shiny! They would say: "Who has swept this compound this morning?" [she laughs]. It was me!

*Interviewer*: So, you could already clean very well! Have you learned anything more with this internship?

*Omosigho*: Yes, I have learned something. The houses here are not the same as in Nigeria. We have different houses. And the products are different.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

Abies was fully aware that the internship was unlikely to result in a job offer, thus showing an understanding of structural employment issues. She still decided to undertake one, despite being paid little money, in view of her professional development and in the hope it would help her find a qualified job soon. During the interview, she explained she was pressed by the urgency to send remittances back home. When she lived in Nigeria, she had no access to economic resources. Now she did. At the same time, the pressure to provide for her family was growing fiercer precisely because of this window of opportunity, thus showing once again the clash between institutional/structural times, focused on the individual (to be protected and supported) and the biographical times that include not only the needs and wishes of women, but also their responsibility towards their families.

*Abies*: I was desperate to work, I needed money for me and my family, and I really wanted to start. It was not easy. Even if I did not feel fine [health wise], I still needed to work. Some colleagues discouraged me from continuing with my internship and kept saying it was no good money. They said what I needed was a contract. I worked hard during the *tirocinio* [internship] in the hope to get a contract.

*Interviewer*: Were you talking to your reception practitioners about this?

*Abies*: No. It was not just about the money. I wanted to learn to do the job, for the future. Maybe I find another job and the experience will help. I needed to do the job very very well so that if I had another opportunity I could do it. And maybe they would give me the contract. For one month I worked with a person and then I worked on my own. They [the bosses] were testing me. Sometimes, they would give me 10 rooms, as a test. Then they told me they would give me a contract for two months [seasonal contract]. Normally they say that with the internship they will give one-month contract and that would have been fine too. But then they gave me three months! After the pandemic started, I was at home for some weeks and then they called me back. But I had found a new job then. Maybe next year I will work in this hotel again.

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

**“I do not have much freedom”: during social protection**

Our respondents said very little about free time. They grieved the lack of sufficient time for themselves, thus re-appropriating it (Gatta, 2012), in face of the rhythms dictated by shelter schedules. Free time is understood by many women as a crucial time, the time of well-being, the time they can dedicate to themselves, free of hassle, as Osaigbovo described well, and the time of going out with friends, as Omosigho insisted. Ehi re-appropriated her free time by claiming it, as an adult, highlighting how she was experiencing an inversion of her own biographical time. It took her several years to become an adult and be in the position of acting autonomously. Now that she was an adult, she could not manage her time freely, as it was constrained by institutional rules. This made her feel like a child again.

No, no, on Saturdays I don't [work]. In the weekend, sometimes, I just stay home because we only have four hours to go out. If I go out, I go with my friend Osaigbovo. We take a walk and I make pictures. I like it a lot, I do it when I have time! But then, if I ask my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] if I can go to see my friend in another city, he says no. If I want to go out, I need to ask him and I am an adult now! If I want to go out during the day he says yes, but I cannot travel far [no more of a 3-hours return travel by train]. I do not understand why. It is no good. I want to see a friend of mine, but she works and if she comes to see me and I can stay out only four hours and she travels to come here I only have four hours. It is no good. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

I like to enjoy my free time, I want to have hours for me, not only to work or to go to the *café* [a laboratory with creative activities, organised by the reception practitioners]. I can stay one hour in the *café* because I respect the rules, but I also need to relax! In the previous camp I lived in [in another city], on Saturdays, I could stay out all day till late and come back to sleep at 12 pm, during the week at eight pm. So, I had more time to stay out, to do something for me, to meet friends. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osaigbovo, 14 October 2020, entrance in 2020, 17 years)

Sometimes I go to buy something in the African market or maybe I go to the market and have a look around. I do go out because I cannot stay indoor all the time! I need to take some fresh air. I can go and sit down in a park, relax a little, then I come home.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

Practitioners tend to justify the lack of free time (allowed to women) based on the need to protect them. This applies to the first period in which women are hosted in the protection shelters, but limitations extend over the entire programme. It was the case for Aisosa, who has been denied free time out, if not for short walks, because of an incident with her daughter. While there was a clear rationale for it (on which we will not provide details), Aisosa did not understand why these limitations were protracted for so long and kept wondering when the time for protection would finish and for how long she would need to prove she was trustworthy.

Well, I can talk about myself. I do not have much freedom. I do not know what it is like for the others [in the same and other shelters]. I asked Giuditta to talk to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] because this is not good. I cannot take this any longer. I can only go out three hours per week and every day I go to school and then I come back and there is a lot to do with my kid and so on (...) I cannot even take my daughter out. I need to change this because my head cannot work well like this. I cannot take it any longer, I can't. I need more space for me. On Sundays, I am home all day long, and on Saturdays I would like to bring my daughter out, maybe go to the shopping centre. Or maybe we could go out and eat something, an ice cream, a croissant, something like this. At least, I could take her out, she could see other people and she could learn about different places. Normally I just take a walk around here, half an hour with the buggy. I know what I did was very bad for me and her, but it has been a long time since. It is 9 months since this happened.

(interview, Aisosa, 20 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 14 years)

For Osayi, free time means dedicating oneself to leisure activities, that are not part of the everyday (shelter) routine. She enthusiastically undertook several of them, as proposed by practitioners. She enjoyed many of them, while she disliked those in which she was pressed to embark. In some cases, participation in activities (presented as non-compulsory) was described to our interviewees as a prerequisite to receive the weekly pocket money. This was perceived as unfair, as was the lack of involvement in the choice of available activities. De facto it made participation compulsory.

I liked it that they [reception practitioners] gave me the opportunity to take a lot of courses: I have done theatre, a sewing course, a guitar course. Yes, I have done many things. Sometimes, I cannot even remember all of them! They enrolled me in a football team too. This year I am not playing as I need to find a regular job and if I even play, I will explode! Too much! I am done with football for now, maybe next year I will start again. But I like it so much! (...) There is one thing I do not like. When they proposed me things to do, I often got angry because I did not like that, they chose things for me. I did



not like it when they said I had to do things, but they were not compulsory. I was somehow forced to do activities to get the weekly pocket money! You know, the point is that if I like an activity, I dive into it and take it seriously and work on it, otherwise I give it up immediately. Sometimes they got it right, like with the theatre, it was perfect because it allowed me to valorise my personality. Maybe it will never be useful for me but at least it was nice, the course I liked most, and sometimes I tell some of my friends that I should do comedies myself! [she laughs] [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osayi, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

Esewi refers to free time as the time away from the shelter, when she can rest, away from the noise, the fights, the people of the *comunità*. She describes it as the time of quietness, when tension can be eased, when she can have space for herself, manage her time as she prefers. In line with her observations, many women could hardly find spaces of autonomy as their days, in the shelter, were focused on addressing basic everyday needs and on programme objectives.

[in the weekend] I go to my boyfriend's place because I need some time outside the *comunità* [shelter]. I get tired of being always with other people, sometimes I am tired of being home without doing anything. Sometimes, I have so many things in my head, and I feel like going out and drinking ... If I am really angry, I really feel like I want to drink until I get sick. It helps me ease the tension. (...) As I am in the *comunità* all the time, I always see the same people and when I am back all the *casino* [noise and fighting] starts again and when I leave, I feel better, as I do not have to fight or talk all the time. When I am back, the first thing I tell myself is: "Here I am, it is *casino* again, I am back in the *comunità*!" [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

### ***"It helps me forget about worries": the importance of religion and the scepticism about churches***

Religion came up in the interviews as a thorny issue. Practitioners are scarcely familiar with Pentecostal churches and had hardly any connection with pastors or church members. They were reticent to establish contacts and to allow women to attend services. Some women, like Ehi, were quite sceptical about church attendance too: Esewi criticised (some) churches for being places of gossip, stigmatisation, social control, and reproached pastors who always ask for offerings.

Yes, yes, I go to church, but I went only once during the Covid because I was afraid of it. But it is not only because of the Covid. I like it when in the church they speak about God, they do not turn His words upside down, like they use

somebody to preach other things. I do not like it when a person preaches as if *He* was God. In the church I go, they do this. I want to hear what is written in the Bible; I do not want to hear lies. I need to listen to a real man of God. In the church I go, you find people that like to dress up and to show off. (...) I like churches that do not ask for offerings. If I want to help my church I will do it with my heart, not in the way they want. I do not have money right now. I offered to sing. Once they explained me the rule. They told me that if you arrive late, you must pay 10 euro and you have to pay if they organise a party. My boyfriend's brother does not go any more to this church, he changed because he said they do not speak the truth, it is not a good church. The church should not be about gossip! [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

The role of churches in the lives of Nigerian women remains uncertain and ambiguous with respect to trafficking and other criminal activities (Formenti, 2011; Ellis, 2016; Aparad *et al.*, 2019). Yet, for many Nigerian women attending the church is an important component of their lives, while they do not necessarily express preferences on one church or another. Religion is important *per se* and for religious practices. Osarobo started attending an Italian church thanks to a lady volunteer whom she met while living in the shelter. Ese started going with a friend and described it as a shared time for spirituality, while also reclaiming her own spiritual time. "God gives sense of direction, He intervenes in times of need." This is what Amenze explained to us about her intimate relationship with God. She does not attend the church regularly as, in her experience, most pastors are not genuine, but religion is still crucial in her life.

There are many people who come to Italy and have "no right nor left," but I know my own direction. Some girls got pregnant and were left alone. I have never been in that position, thank God, but when I must do something, to decide on something, I ask God. He inspires me to do the right thing. He is a great help to me. He is the first person to whom I ask for help. Always. Those who do not believe in God... that's it "bye bye" to them! God is really good with me, there is not one thing that I asked him and that He did not give me. I never go to church though, but I do pray a lot in my room. It is ok if I behave well with people, I do not steal, I help people when I see they may need my help. I tried to go to the church [Nigerian church] but I did not feel comfortable, they are thieves, they ask for money, they ask if you need help and say they can help and then they ask *you* for money. They ask you if you have a job, but it is for their own interest. There is always something to pay. I know that I should give some money to the church, but they ask you if you have a job and this kind of things ... if you have a good salary, they think you can help (...) They always ask for money, money, money all the time. In Nigeria you can find this type of church too, 90% of them are like this, but 10% are not; 90% of

them do not follow the Holy Bible. They invite people to have a big audience and more money. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Amenze, 15 October 2020, entrance 2017, +20 years)

Going to church helps forget about everyday problems, according to Osasenaga. It is the time where “problems can be put on hold,” not because of institutional and procedural waiting times, but because people “choose to take a break from them.” Attending religious celebrations is described as a healing time, but practitioners do not always allow women to attend, as mentioned above, because they fear churches may be dangerously affiliated with criminal networks. What is interesting about Osasenaga’s digression on the theme during the interview is that she reclaimed time to share her (and other women’s) knowledge about what can be dangerous in their own life.

*Osasenaga:* I work on Saturdays too and only have Sundays off and I go to church. I am Christian. I go to Victory [church]. I like going. When I go, it helps me forget about worries.

*Interviewer:* How did you find out about this church?

*Osasenaga:* It was a friend that introduced me to it. I was looking for a church. When I went, I loved it and decided to continue going. It was not a friend living with me, but a girl I met in the [African shop] where I go. Many girls [in the shelter] do not go to church. And sometimes the *comunità* [the reception practitioners] do not allow me to go, unless it is a catholic church.

*Interviewer:* Why did they not allow you?

*Osasenaga:* It depends on my story, many of the people that brought me here may be in the church and look for me there. But for me this is not possible. It is not inside the church they will look for me and find me. They would follow me when I go to do *spesa* [shopping] [she laughs].

*Interviewer:* Maybe some people in the church are connected to them?

*Osasenaga:* If they know you are in *comunità*, they will not come to look for you. They take precautions. Even if they see you in the church, they will not talk to you.

*Interviewer:* Are you saying this because it happened to you?

*Osasenaga:* No, my case was different. I got my documents fast and they did not follow me, but they still wanted to come after me. I know Nigerian people. If you are in *comunità*, they would not come and drag you, they would be afraid.

(interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20)

Spiritual time is perceived as a time for emancipation. For Abies, going to church (also) meant being able to choose the church she preferred, not necessarily the

“normal” church that people attend in Nigeria. Osayi chose to be baptised to reclaim her right to make religious choices in full consciousness. As she explained later in the interview, she got to know the Catholic church she attends through her Legal Guardian, a catechist in the local parish. In other words, for both women, going to church and taking part in rituals opened up an alternative avenue for further exploration of their own spirituality that gave them a sense of agency they had not experienced in Nigeria.

Yes, I go to church here. I go to a Nigerian church close to here. I go every Sunday. I used to go to the Nigerian church, but now I want to go to a different one, a catholic church. I just feel I want to change. It’s different. I really wanted to go to the catholic church when I was in Nigeria, but I did not have the opportunity because my father went to the Pentecostal church which is the “normal church” [in Nigeria]. When I came to Europe, I said to myself that I wanted to go to a catholic church. It is a desire I have because I could not choose before. After all we all pray the same God, so it does not matter to which church you go, you just go where you prefer.

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

I go to this church [she shows the name of the parish]. I took baptism here, not because I had not taken it before, but I wanted to do it again, I wanted to be conscious of what I was saying and doing. I was not conscious when I did it in Nigeria, I was little. Now I am an adult and I want to make my own choices. I can go to any church, that is not important, even to a mosque. I just believe in a unique God, Allah, Jehovah, it does not matter how you call Him. It is a unique God. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osayi, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

### ***“It is not a one day thing”: the asylum procedure and the thorny path of regularisation***

Regularisation for our respondents involved undertaking the art. 18 procedure (see Chapter 1) or the asylum application. It also involved applying and waiting for other documents, such as the residency permit, necessary to sign job contracts, to open a bank account, etc. In this section, we will focus on the “preparatory phase” of the asylum procedure, when Socio-legal Practitioners “prepare” beneficiaries for the Territorial Commission interview, by collecting their “legal *memoire*.” A few other insights will be provided on the critical issues associated with the art. 18 procedure and collaboration with the police.

A growing body of academic literature has been looking at asylum determination, beyond the examination of the legal doctrine. Focus has been placed on the analysis of the actors involved, how they implement their role and take decisions,

and to what extent and how they interact with other actors throughout legal and administrative processes (for an overview see Gill and Good, 2019).

When going through the collection of legal memoirs, asylum seekers are required to play the role of victims and adapt to victimhood narrative models (Caroselli, 2021; Semprebón *et al.*, 2021), leaving behind the complexity of their personal experience (Oyewumi, 2003).

Looking further into the temporal dimension, the collection of legal *memoirs*, takes considerable time, as we shall see, in connection to the readiness of our respondents to trust practitioners and share their story. This contrasts with the procedural temporalities of Territorial Commissions that rarely consider people's needs when setting the dates and times of interviews. The latter often take place after several months, but this time may not be sufficient for an interviewee to "process" their story. At the same time, the actual interviews may be rushed, with insufficient space for interviewees to explain themselves and be listened to (Veglio, 2017). Cases have also been recorded, in which interviews extended over several hours, instead, with severe psychological effects on interviewees (Semprebón *et al.*, 2021).

Asylum seekers undertake a process of co-construction and translation of personal narratives, with the precise goal of "making them fit" to institutional expectations (Taliani, 2019: 37). They must retrace fragments of their lives through coherent accounts capable of reconstructing a "bureaucratic truth" that will grant them the right to asylum (Veglio, 2017). The credibility of their accounts is often based on asylum officials' stereotypical representations, deriving from their (limited) direct experience with interviewees (*ibidem*; Gill and Good, 2019). Officials expect asylum applicants to report narratives that are coherent, logical and without contradictions, while the latter are likely to emerge when people recall painful memories (Pinelli, 2013; Veglio, 2017; Taliani, 2019). They expect applicants to report (painful) details, although they may be included in, and testified by, social workers' or practitioners' reports (i.e., exploitation in sexual work).

While support for the collection of *legal memoirs* is provided in the N.A.Ve, it is not provided in all anti-trafficking projects, nor in all asylum seeker reception shelters. Osaigbovo's experience in her first shelter testifies to this and the pressure exerted to report her exploiters, to demonstrate her deservingness and trustworthiness (Cheung and Phillimore, 2013). Besides, she was not provided adequate legal information. She was not informed of the various channels of regularisation she was entitled to, including the art. 18 procedure and that of asylum. In comparing the attitude of practitioners in the first shelter she lived in and in the N.A.Ve's, Osaigbovo stressed the importance of patience and respect, that she found in the latter, where she was allowed to take time and was not required to tell her story immediately.

*Osaigbovo*: It depends how the person [Practitioner] behaves with you if you can trust this person or not. When I was in the previous shelter, it was very hard for me because I was very scared of them. I was very confused and

did not know what to tell them, so when I met her [Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner] and I realised she was nice to me, she was calm, I made up my mind that I had to relax. In the other shelter, when the [Territorial] Commission called me, my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] was not nice. She did not even ask me if I wanted to go. She wrote that I was not ready, but she did not even ask me if I was, they decided themselves. When I arrived here, I was afraid the same would happen, but it was not the same. Here they explained me everything and they prepared me.

*Interviewer:* So, the important think for you is to understand what is happening and to Osaigbovo: be involved in procedures, do I understand right?

*Osaigbovo:* Yes, exactly, in the previous shelter they did not even call me to talk to me and ask me anything. So, this was really bad. Also, they told me that if I did not give them information about the *madame* that brought me here, they would not help me with documents. I was sooo worried and confused and did not know what to do. They wanted me to go to the police and say who were the people that brought me here and they did not believe what I had told them. They told me that unless I did it, I would need to leave

(interview, Osaigbovo, 14 October 2020, entrance in 2020, 17 years)

Telling her story to the Practitioners was not easy for Osayi. It was painful and hard because she was not yet familiar with them. It was no easier for Efe to tell her story in front of the Territorial Commission. She felt ashamed and just wanted the whole procedure to be over as soon as possible. She eventually adapted to “playing the victim” and tell the Commission the (details of the) story as they wanted. Her interview went on for hours, as it did for other women, testifying the institutional violence that asylum applicants are subjected to through these forms of re-victimisation. Esewi’s experience of the interview struck me particularly. I was with her, as her Legal Guardian. The interview went on for seven hours, with just a short break for lunch. She cried multiple times and was very tense because of the fear she may forget some relevant details. I still wonder why she was interviewed for so long. Her legal *memoire* had been forwarded to the Commissioner and contained, among other things, ample evidence she had been trafficked and exploited. Yet, the Commissioner said: “We must hear her story from her. This is the procedure” (fieldwork note, 3 October 2020). As with Esewi, other women had no choice but to tell their story to the Practitioners and then again to the Commissioners. To our knowledge, only in the case of Osayi, the Territorial Commission accepted not to interview an applicant hosted in a N.A.Ve shelter, after the Socio-legal Practitioner had forwarded sufficient evidence to evaluate her case and her vulnerable conditions. The same Practitioner had done so for other beneficiaries, but with no positive outcome.

I am lucky that I did not have to go to the [Territorial] Commission to talk about it all. I asked not to go and the *operatori* [Socio-legal Practitioners] asked the Commission if it was possible for me not to go because I was fragile. Otherwise, I would have tried to get the document for one year and that's it. I just did not feel like having personal conversions with people that I do not know. I was looking forward for this nightmare to finish. I do not have a problem in telling people my story because it is something bad, but I have my privacy. Then if someone tells me: "I need to know everything about your story" and they tell me nothing about theirs, well, I get stuck, I do not want to share my story with them anymore. But I had to do it with the *operatori* so I did.

(interview, Osayi, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

*Efe*: You know sometimes you feel ashamed if you tell what your experience is like. But if a person wants to help you, you need to tell the truth, so that it will be easier to help you. (...) When I went to the Commission, they asked me questions and I told them about my story, as they wanted. It was beautiful in the end. It was so nice!

*Interviewer*: Even nice?

*Efe*: Yes, because it produced my documents [she laughs]. Oh, my God. I couldn't believe it. I cried and cried! You know, the Commissioner was a young woman, and she was nice with me. She told me: "If you need time to rest, we can stop." But, you know, when the thing is out, you just want to finish everything as quickly as possible. So, we continued until we finished. It was loong!

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

It took several months to Ehi to open up, as it did for Abies who recalled the insistence of Practitioners to put together details she could hardly remember. They tried to collect Ehi's *legal memoire* several times. On her side, she used each time to "test" them, to ensure their main goal was to help her, not to report her exploiters. This is how she eventually started trusting them. Fellow co-nationals had warned her that telling her story may end up with her being deported and she was scared and reticent.

*Ehi*: She [Socio-legal Practitioner] wrote my story. three times, but I could not tell her the truth because it is really hard. When I was telling her my story, I was new in the project, I could not trust them yet. With her it was much better [she smiles]. Yes, my story is really though, if I think about it, I feel like crying. A lot of time has gone by, they [practitioners] explained me that I had to try and trust them, and I eventually did it, but it took me time, it was hard.

*Interviewer:* When did you start trusting them?

*Ehi:* I did not feel anything special; it was after I spent a lot of time with them, and I decided to do it. I monitored them, the way they work, if they were truthful to me. I wanted to know if the project was real. Before I entered the project, I heard that if you told your story they would deport you to your country, they are not helping you, so I was afraid to say my story.

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

The importance of patience and a welcoming approach was mentioned by Efe when recalling her experience, which also included her collaboration with the police. The presence of the Cultural-linguistic Mediator calmed her down, as did the patience of the Practitioner that accompanied her and of the Law enforcement Officers she talked to. For Abies, patience was crucial, but it was equally important to negotiate the possibility of repeating her story only once.

*Efe:* So, I'm really grateful especially for the patience that, I mean, all of you [referring to the N.A.Ve staff] put together, because it's not easy to be patient. Look, there's a lot of us, you know. But you've got to be so patient with us. It is hard for us. Yes, thank you, because I know I gave you guys a hard time sometimes, but you never gave up because you wanted the best for me. Even when I went to *Questura* to tell my story [art. 18 procedure], at first, I lied, but they were patient and told me I had to tell them the truth. The second time I opened up because I felt that, honestly, I could really try.

*Interviewer:* What worried you about the *Questura*?

*Efe:* I was scared because the police officer in charge of me was a nice man and greeted me in a nice and calm way, upon my arrival, but when it came to the business [when we started talking about my story] he stopped joking and became very serious. He was asking me questions, taking my memories back and back. He was trying to make me remember things even when I didn't remember them, and he would insist and say "Think if you did this thing... ." And then he got stricter with me and said: "Tell me the truth!" I got really scared but I also thought: "Why do I need to lie? They are trying to help me!" So, I decided to open up. Everything. And, at the end of the day, I realised the man was nice. At the end we were laughing again. We also met other times and he came to say hello in the shelter. But My God, it was hard! I had to talk to the man, and he asked me the dates, the month, so I was like "Oh God, I don't remember this!" The cultural-linguistic mediator was there, so it was a bit easier because she was with me and helped me calm down and focus.

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)



It was difficult because you don't want to say the things you experienced before, so when you start saying it ... you know, when you have experienced bad things, it takes time before you start remembering them again. I just told myself to hold onto myself and be strong. (...) They [Socio-legal Practitioners] told me: "What we say now is between me and you, I will not say anything to your previous *operatori* [reception practitioners], I cannot say anything to them, it's just your personal issue." It is not that I did not trust my previous *operatori*, but I took a decision. I said: "Either I say it to them or to the [Territorial Commission] directly, not more than once!" You know, it is really very difficult because it is your personal things. I don't know how to say it. You pass through a lot when you're coming to this place [shelter], maybe something terrible happened to you and when you sleep you always dream of it. Then someone tells you: "You have to explain it to me" and you would not be able to say anything. They cannot understand, it is not their life, not their body. Then you try and say things, but you are not comfortable at all. They [Socio-legal Practitioners] did not rush me. It took me one month to start saying anything. (...) They did not rush me, so I managed to relax, but, you understand, it is not a one-day thing ...

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

### ***"Look! I have my keys now!": the "sgancio" and life after the programme***

As anticipated at the beginning of this chapter, we conducted the interviews with our respondents at the time they were finishing their social protection programme or after they had left it. Hence the narratives reported next must be read in light of this specific temporality.

The final phase of the project is called "*Sgancio*" (see Chapter 1). It literally translates as "unhook," referring to a process of "breaking free." To some extent, it recalls a dynamic of dependence (on practitioners). This could seem paradoxical in a programme whose aim is to break beneficiaries free of the (forced) dependence (on exploiters). Who is breaking free from whom in this context? Is it the practitioners who break beneficiaries free from the programme or vice versa? Our observations and the interviews we collected suggest that the "*sgancio*" is decided by practitioners, in particular Case Managers, in principle with the involvement of beneficiaries. The decision is based on whether beneficiaries have secured a decent accommodation and a job. Alongside the programme, they are called to "internalise" the institutional goal of autonomy set by the N.A.Ve. However, having reached this goal does not necessarily coincide with the readiness of beneficiaries to leave the project, as will be shown.

They can reach different levels of autonomy and, accordingly, may require different levels of extended support. What emerged as crucial for many women

was the awareness they could count on Practitioners, if they needed help, even beyond the project termination. At the same time, some women felt relieved for being finally out of the programme and free from shelter rules, with their own key and flat! (see Amenze's and Efe's extracts on pages 76–78). The “*sgancio*” was perceived by many women as the time to project themselves into the future. Worries, including precarious employment and housing, were not missing. This is why some women were rather reticent to leave.

Osayi was quite autonomous in finding a job. She has rarely been in touch with the Practitioners, but she confirmed she could count on continuous support, if needed. Osarobo was regularly in contact with them and ex-beneficiaries. She was also very much supported by the lady who hosted her, suggesting family hospitality can be an ideal solution for women who terminate social protection programmes. She felt she was treated like a daughter and apart from being grateful for the generosity, she rejoiced the affection of her host. Despite this, the “*sgancio*” was difficult. She struggled to search for a flat. She could only find a single room to be shared with co-nationals and the risk soon emerged of further exploitation, as it happened to Amenze.

*Osayi*: It is going well, I have worked in McDonald's, in a hotel, as a waitress, and in another hotel where I washed dishes and helped in the kitchen. Now I am working as a cook and today I have an interview to start with a new job as a cook, in another place. (...) I found these jobs with the help of the *comunità* [shelter staff] and through girls I know. I told them: “*Bella, sono alla disperazione!*” [Dear, I am desperate!] But I have to say I have also found a lot with the internet. (...)

*Interviewer*: Are you still in touch with the project staff? Or do they call you?

*Osayi*: It is mostly my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] who calls me. I am a *casinista* [I forget, I mess up]. She always tells me: “Ok, I trust that my girl behaves well.” Joking apart, I do not call her much because I do not want to disturb her. She has been very nice. Ahhh [she sighs]. I miss her! I have always liked her because she never put pressure on me. She encouraged me a lot, but she never put any pressure on me. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osayi, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

*Osarobo*: When I finished my project, the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] helped me find a place to stay in Caritas for another six months and then they helped me find another solution, to stay with a family. I rejoice every day for the possibility to live in Italy. Now I have a residence permit for five years, I am working, I would like to continue studying to get the *terza media* [eighth grade].

*Interviewer*: How is it going now with the family?

*Osarobo*: I live with a lady; it is the two of us. She is not married and has no children. I like her because she helps me a lot to learn Italian, to write and read. It is like a grand mom. She is old, I call her grand mom. I do not pay any rent. I will stay with here for six months, I hope longer ... She does everything for me. She treats me like her daughter. She buys food, she helps me, she helps me look for a job. (...) When my project was finished, I had found an accommodation with some Nigerians, but the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] did not want me to take that solution. She said I was just out of trouble and did not want me to end up in trouble again. (...) Now I really would like to study, and I would like to travel, I was never on a plane, you know? I wish one day I could go. But this is my place, I wanna stay here. Now I am not going to the *comunità* [shelter] anymore, but I am always in contact with the people that lived there and the *operatori* [practitioners].

*Interviewer*: Would you like to go back to Nigeria at all some time?

*Osarobo*: Not to live there, not for now. I cannot go back with my documents. I need to wait until 2023. Maybe some time I will go back, but not to stay. (...).

(interview, Osarobo, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 20+ years)

It's ok, sometimes it's ok, sometimes less ok. Maybe they will give me a contract, maybe not. The contract is the big issue now. I would like a contract when this internship finishes. If I get a contract, I can also decide what to do. I would like to enrol in a school to become beautician and then maybe work as beautician, but first I need to finish the *terza media* [eighth grade]. I can do both: work and study but I need to have a job first to pay the school, the rent, the rest. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esosa, 8 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

Look! I have my keys now! I can go home when I want! The day I was given the key, I looked at it and I could not believe it! The key that opened the door was also the key that opened the way to a new life. The first night I slept in the house I took the key with me [she laughs]. (...) Now I can go where I want and before I open the door I can say: "This is my house." Before I did not have the *ospitalità* [document that landlords need signing to certify that renters live there and regularly pay the rent], now I have all I missed. For *ospitalità* they [the previous landlords] asked me to pay 200 euro. I could not do this. I said: "Leave it, if the *carabinieri* [police corp] come to this house, they can throw me out and give you a fine. No thanks." (...) Now I have a rent contract, I pay a bit more, but I am good here. The landlord has not asked for a penny yet. I have been here for two months now, but I signed the contract

yesterday and they have also helped me pay the bills for the first months. They have been nice. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Amenze, 15 October 2020, entrance 2017, +20 years)

Orobosa had also been under pressure with house hunting. She was one of the few women, as far as we know, that were asked to leave because she disrespected shelter rules. Yet, she was supported by the Reception Practitioners until she found a flat. When we interviewed her, she was living with a friend, an ex-beneficiary and was happy about this solution. Her worries regarded her employment situation. She had a job, but it was a seasonal one and while she had become acquainted with job hunting and temp agencies, she was conscious of, and worried about, her precarious condition. When asked about her future plans, she enthusiastically explained she wanted to continue study, as Osarobo and Esosa (see pages 75–76) told us, but she was “putting her future on hold,” focusing on settling down with a stable job first.

*Orobosa*: I left the *comunità* [shelter] a year ago and I found a house close to it. I like it. It is myself and a [female] friend of mine. We got to know each other in the *comunità* and we became friends. I like living with her, because I like talking to her and she speaks Italian more than me so we can exercise. We cook together, we go out together. In the *comunità* you cannot go out, it is different. There are many things you cannot do. Now I can go shopping by myself, I can cook by myself, I do what I want. I like I can do things myself. (...) Although I am no longer in the *comunità*, if there is something I do not understand I can call Giovanni [Reception Practitioner] and he explains me. He helped me a lot when I left the *comunità*. My *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] said I had to leave because I did not respect the rules, but I did not have a place to stay, and I asked Giovanni to give some more days. You cannot find a house in a week! And then I found a place. (...) Now I am working in a camping site at the lake, I go there by train. I leave at six in the morning, I walk to the bus station, then I get the bus and then the train. It is quite far, but I have found a better solution with a faster bus. I need to wake up early in the morning, it is though, because I really like sleeping and I would like to wake up later, but it's ok. When I am off, I always sleep until 10! Well, this job is for the summer, when it gets cold, they will close, and my contract will expire. Maybe I can work again in this camping next summer. I need to look for another job in the meantime as I need to pay the rent. I pay 450 euro and I share it with my friend.

*Interviewer*: And what would you like to do in the future?

*Orobosa*: Well, now I am searching for a job, with *subito.it* and other websites. If I do not find it with the internet, I will try with temp agencies. It works. If they have any job they call me. It happened before. (...) I do

not like cleaning jobs, it is no good pay in hotels, nor in camping sites. If I work in a factory, like where they make ham, a friend of mine told me they pay better. She works in such a factory but for the time being they are not looking for more staff. I could try to find to wash dishes, they pay quite well.

*Interviewer:* apart from work, do you have any project for the future?

*Orobosa:* yes, I need to study to get the certificate for the *terza media* [eighth grade] because I like going to school, but I need to find a job first, that is my priority. Giovanni explained me that with this certificate it is easier to find a job and I can get the driving license which also makes it easier to find a job. So, first I need to find a job, then school, then the licence. I talked to the mediator and told her that my dream was to become an accountant. In Nigeria I did study a bit and wanted to work in a bank. Now I am not sure I want to do this job anymore, maybe I would like to work in the hospital, on the ambulance ... [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Orobosa 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

The big difference is that I feel this is big! I tell myself: “is all this just for me?”

I have nobody telling me stop using the water, I can do what I want! (...) You know, living alone makes you start thinking big. (...) All my life from Nigeria I never thought of a future with my own house. Now I am alone, not as a young teenager, I do things like an adult!

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

The social protection programme has a set duration of about one year, as defined institutionally. This timing is not always sufficient for beneficiaries to become autonomous, according to the set standards. Efe, as other women, stayed in the shelter for longer and still experienced protracted difficulties in finding a flat, as she was required to have proof of a permanent job and several references. Leaving the programme was not only hard because of structural housing issues. As a lonely child who lost her parents at a very young age, she feared losing the affection of Practitioners to whom she got very close during her stay in the shelter.

Osasenaga was very critical of the “*sgancio*,” suggesting that all beneficiaries should be settled before leaving the project and before new beneficiaries enter the programme. She seemed particularly concerned about the risk of further exploitation, that is more likely to come up again when protection comes to an end, unless women have stable future perspectives. She drew our attention to another aspect. Practitioners generally intend autonomy as having minimum resources for survival. She felt frustrated at reaching *that* level of autonomy. It meant she had to lower her expectations. The social protection programme can

offer limited opportunities in terms of internships and jobs, thus potentially contributing to reinforcing the existing employment stratification between natives and migrants, caused in the first instance by structural factors (market dynamics, racism, migrants' precarious legal status, mis-match between labour demand and offer, etc.).

I stayed for one year and six months. Because you know, the programme lasts for one year, but they [the practitioners] are nice. If you do not have a job, they do not throw you out, they give you some months to find a job and place to stay. They can't throw you out because you do not have anywhere to go. I did not have anywhere to go, so they had to give me more time to check for job and a flat (...) It was not easy for me. I cried and said: "I need a job; I need a job" and I believe God gave me the job! [she laughs]. It was the most difficult time! I stayed in the camp [shelter] while working and saving some money. I had already been saving a bit as I had been washing the dishes in a restaurant. With the help of Patrizia and Raffaella [reception practitioners] I got this apartment, and I am grateful. I was so happy. (...) But I still see them. I felt very lonely at the beginning, I was really missing "my family."

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in  
2018, 18 years)

When your time is finished, they kick you out even without work. (...) If your time is finished in the *comunità* [shelter], you can ask your *assistente sociale* [Case Manager]: "Do you understand [what the situation for me is]? If you kick a person out without a job and house... then the person eventually does prostitution because she must survive, do you understand?" You really must settle the person before bringing other people in. They tell you cannot stay forever, but you must ensure each person has a job or their lives will not change. Maybe she has the documents, but it is not enough. Do you understand? It is the only opportunity to really work for it. It is easy to go back to prostitution. And people really want to change their life when they enter this programme. I did not come here just to get my documents. Before I decided to join, I already had my documents. I wanted to join the project to change my life. So many people want to come here to find a room and a job, and they do not want to go back to the streets. But after they complete the project, you still see people in the street or in prostitution because they do not know how to survive. (...) I found this work as *badante* [caregiver] through an agency. I found the agency through a person I was working with in the *comunità*. I did not like the work of *badante* and thought my destiny was better than this. But at the end of the project, I did not have other choices, so I took this. For now, I like it as the family is nice. There are an old man and an old woman. Sometimes the daughters come and visit. I go in the morning and leave in the evening. When I sleep there [because they needed support] they really appreciate it. I had my own room for the time he was in hospital. But it is tiring.

Old people can be very annoying. The man is nice even when the woman screams and tells her to respect the person that works.

(interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20)

“It is my time to go for I have been here for long.” This is what Omosigho told us. She knew she would have to leave eventually and was conscious she had over-stayed – compared to other women. She repeatedly expressed her gratitude for the programme, fitting well into the imaginary of the “deserving beneficiary,” while also expressing her feelings of unpreparedness. Later in the interview, she recalled having felt comfortable with Practitioners taking everything into their hands. She was now scared at the prospect of “switching to adult life” and having to take all the responsibility onto herself. Omosigho’s first contacts with the N.A.Ve took place when she was an unaccompanied minor and she stayed in the project for several years. While the extension of her stay provided her with the opportunity to benefit from longer support, we wonder whether it also contributed to a heightened perception of the transition to adulthood. We will come back to this later.

Yes, I like it to stay here but it is my time to go. I have reached the time because I’ve been here for years. So, it’s time to go now and move on for what they call *autonomo* [autonomous], when you go out to live on your own, maybe alone. Then you need to be strong. I like it here; I have stayed here and learned the language (...). I do not understand everything, and sometimes I ask: “Can you repeat it again please?” But it’s my time to leave, I have been even longer than I even wanted. I can’t look back. They have done so much for me; I have learnt the language and it is not so easy for a beginner. Now I can get a diploma. I am so grateful. (...) This process [in the project] has been long. I am 19 now. I arrived when I was younger. It is time to go. I’m an adult, I’m *quasi* [almost] 20. Next year, I will be 20. They helped me when I was 17, 18, 19 and I’m still with them in this place. It’s a great thing. They have helped me a lot. It’s almost four years now. I decided I must go and pay taxes, it’s not that the government can always feed. Somebody that has a future, things in her mind, can say “Father, I am not staying here with you. You did everything for me, and I have stayed home. Now it’s time for me to take care of myself.” (...) I don’t know where to start, I don’t know where to go, but when you are strong in your life, this is what you do. Foundations are good, foundations will stand. So, I will pay taxes to the government because they helped me go to school every day and it is not easy, it’s very hard. I really appreciate this help.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

Iyore left the programme after having been hosted in two different shelters. She escaped from the first shelter to then ask to go back to the programme. In her

words, things went even worse in the second shelter, because of the many rules. The level of control was still high, making her feel she was not progressing in her life, nor in her autonomy. When I talked to her, she explained to me that she had been asked to leave a few months earlier because of an incident [whose details I will not report here]. She enjoyed her achieved autonomy and did not miss the shelter. She was mostly focused on (surviving in) her everyday life, and she struggled with her future plans, regretting the opportunities she had lost by leaving the *comunità*, including enrolment in an Italian class and in a nursing course, to pursue the career she was hoping for. This is a clear example of how the control implemented in protected shelters severely impacts on beneficiaries' lives. Iyore's words also show the fatigue of "waiting" for things to eventually improve (and rules diminish) and the clash between the (set) times (and objectives) to build one's own path to inclusion and the (missing) time of well-being, pointing to the need for further reflection on the goals (and modes) of social protection.

Now I am very very happy that I am out of the *comunità* [shelter], I feel good because when I was in the *comunità* my [female] friend could not come and stay with me, nor could my boyfriend. There were many things I could not do. You cannot go out when you want, you cannot use the mobile phone, you cannot eat and cook what you like. You cannot do anything, only the things the *educatori* [reception practitioners] want you to do, do you understand? But it should not work like that because I know what I want and what I like and don't like. You have your life, I have my life, do you understand me? (...) I am happy because I have matured, I don't know how to explain this. I am happy because I do not want to go to the streets ... to do all those things, because I am tired. I do not like doing that, but I also want a house to live and when I go out, I want to be happy to come back home. In the *comunità*, it was not like this, because I was not happy there. I have tried to explain this thing to them. *Mamma mia*, how do you say this? When I arrived in the *comunità* I felt bad. I did not say anything to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], because I was hoping things would change and everything would be better. I did not say anything. I waited. But it did not go well. There was too much control, too many rules, I could not stay any longer. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Iyore, 29 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 16 years)

Much more projected into both the near and later future than Iyore, Abies shared with us her dream to complete her studies, as a few other women mentioned. All of them imagined their future in Italy or Europe, not in Nigeria. Abies had started studying in Nigeria but could not continue because she did not have sufficient economic resources. Pursuing her studies became a possibility, as she joined the N.A.Ve. This gave her also the chance, after she found a job, to dare thinking about her dreams, beyond survival and beyond her familiar responsibilities.



Several scholars (Agier, 2009; Khosravi, 2010; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Griffiths, 2014) have emphasised how extended waiting times in camps (that asylum seekers do not understand), combined with a glimmer of hope (that asylum seekers continue holding onto) regulate social interaction: it keeps migrants under control and exercise power over their time. Yet, having a future perspective, although unclear and blurred, does also imply a “condition of possibility” (Butler, 1997), giving individuals a chance to think and move forward despite being subjected to control in their present life. The actual wish to think of a future can be framed as a form of resistance (Fontanari, 2019), as it recalls a sense of opposition to a form of domination (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004).

Interestingly, Ehi’s dream grew during her protection programme. As she confided to us, she would like to work as an *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] in an anti-trafficking project. She mentioned her Case Manager, whom she very much appreciated, to state she would be even better placed to occupy his position, given her direct experience (with trafficking). By doing this she reclaimed an improved involvement of women in the planning of social protection programmes, and she expressed the willingness to become full protagonist of them. To our knowledge, the N.A.Ve project has so far involved only one peer-practitioner in the programme and we believe there is scope for further exploration of this approach.

I would like to cook Italian food in a restaurant. One of my friends is working in such a restaurant. I have begged him to help me work there and he’ll talk with the *capo* [manager] to ask for a *colloquio* [interview] for me. I just want to be able to cook Italian food. My dream is to open my own restaurant! I really want to learn and finish school to do everything well. I could not continue studying in Nigeria and it is my time now to do it here in Italy. I do not want to go back to Nigeria, I want to stay here.

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

*Ehi*: In the future I want to go to school and study. I have already finished the *terza media* [eighth grade], I have got my diploma and maybe next year I will start the secondary school. I would like to become *assistente sociale* [Case Manager].

*Interviewer*: Ahhh, like your *assistente sociale*?

*Ehi*: Yes exactly, because in this project I have had much experience of what *assistente sociale* do with women [beneficiaries] and I was in the programme myself and I know how women feel too, I know the experience they had to go through. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

When I interviewed her, Esewi was looking forward to being independent and moving out of the programme. Even more she longed to be independent from the boyfriend she had at the time of the interview, as she did not trust men. Arguably, through her words, she was breaking free from a gender role she had been subjected to in Nigeria and was reclaiming her own position, as an independent woman in the society.

I would like to become a beautician, a hairdresser or do nails and I would like to live ... no, not with my boyfriend. A friend of mine wants to live with her boyfriend. It is not the same for me. I do not want to be dependent on him. I must have my own things, my own money, I want to be a woman who can be respected, who has her own money. If you must live with a person who gives you money and does not respect you, what can you do? I want to live by myself. It is harder but better. You know, if I have a boyfriend and he tells me lies I do not like it. Maybe we get married and only afterwards I realise he lied to me. This scares me. I like it when people tell me the truth.

Yes, men say a lot of things, like they do not have kids in Nigeria and then it is not true. I do not really trust them. I do not want to continue with a relationship for two years and then I realise things are not ok. I always tell my boyfriend: "It is better if you tell me now if there is something I should know." [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

The dreams and plans of our interviewees are all constrained by structural barriers. Osasenaga pointed to limited employment opportunities, leading her to feelings of frustration. Another structural barrier relates to the difficulty of balancing work and study, according to Ese, as well as Aisosa. This points to the incapacity of social protection programmes to take into due consideration intersectional needs. Programmes do not have specific resources to cope with lone mothers, nor are structured to respond to them. We will return to this in Chapter 3.

When I came here, I wanted to go to school. But they [practitioners] told me they do not have the money to support me for it, so I had to lower my standards. I want to work in a place where they make shoes. I would really like to make shoes. I did not do it before, but there are training schools for this. And I want to do an Italian language course too. The only work they [practitioners] can help me find is cleaning, *badante* ... that is what they sponsor you for. They do not have other opportunities, but I want more than this.

(interview, Osasenaga, 16 October 2020, entrance in 2019, +20)

*Ese:* I have thought that I want to change, I do not want to do cleaning jobs anymore. They are not for me. I would like to work in a shop, in a café, in a restaurant, something like this. For the time being, I am enrolled in a cooking school, I will start soon on the 20th, if I remember well. The school lasts for three years.

*Interviewer:* Congratulation! You must be happy about it?

*Ese:* Yes, very happy! First, I decided myself I wanted to do this and then I talked to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager]. He asked me: “Ok, that’s good. Are you sure you want to do this?” And I said, I was sure. (...) I found out about this school thanks to Giuliana, a lady who works at Caritas who helped me find information about the school and enrol. Not easy, I must work and study, but I will cope with all of it. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ese, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

**“You are under their responsibility. But then they tell you that you need to behave like an adult”: the transition to the age of majority**

The transition to the age of majority is a temporal phase associated with adulthood, generally framed as a positive new phase of life characterised by improved autonomy. The literature has shown that this transition rather means the end of protection for young people (Lyamouri-Bajja, 2014; ISMU Foundation, 2019) and young people who were trafficked (Siegfriedt, 2016). The minor age is considered as an element of vulnerability, but it suddenly “disappears” when individuals turn 18. Hence, the transition to the age of majority is usually fraught with difficulties (Lyamouri-Bajja, 2014; ISMU Foundation, 2019): permanence in unaccompanied minor shelters is allowed only until the age of 18, then beneficiaries must leave; young people may need to be supported for longer, but support may not be readily available; the legal guardianship (with legal representation and support) comes to an end as minors turn 18.

Only in some cases can minors be transferred to a shelter for adults, depending on several reasons, including for example municipalities’ available resources. As we will see in Chapter 3, minors’ protection is very expensive and municipalities are very reticent in taking up responsibility for them. Most of the young women that we interviewed could enter the N.A.Ve, as this programme can only be accessed *after* minors reach the age of majority and expenses are covered by the central government (see Chapter 1). At the same time, these women were first in touch with and were supported by the N.A.Ve before they turned 18, while hosted in shelters for minors, hence they could benefit from dedicated support earlier on. Additionally, when they turned 18, they were assigned to the same Case Manager they had in their minor age. This was the result of an experimentation which positively contributed to a sense of continuity of their

path and was very much valued by both beneficiaries and Case Managers, as will be seen in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, entering the N.A.Ve still involved some critical issues.

Esosa did not fully understand the rationale of the transfer from one shelter to another. She was informed that it was motivated by her age, but it was not logic to her. This is another example of how institutional times and procedures dictate the steps that beneficiaries must take, sometimes without full understanding of procedures and meanings, and with little involvement in decisions. Esosa's narratives also point to the paradox of age assessment. The definition of young people's "institutional age" is crucial to determine their entitlement (or not) to protection. Upon arrival in Italy, she was given a younger age than she declared. She was "assigned" an institutional minor age, although she had declared to be older. While she was confused about this, she realised that her institutionally defined age gave her the right to a dedicated shelter for minors. Age assessment is in fact crucial in the definition of entitlement to protection. Esosa was paradoxically "lucky" in being identified as a minor, but the same does not apply to all young people. Scholars have criticised the limited reliability of (physical, particularly X-ray) age assessment procedures (Abbing, 2011; Smith and Marmo, 2013), but these are still undertaken. To say more, the actual need for protection is likely to extend over the exact age of 18, but formally the right to protection terminates with it.

They [anti-trafficking practitioners] told me that as soon as I turned 18, I would have to change the *comunità* [shelter]. They told me I did well in the *comunità minori* [shelter for unaccompanied minors]. I did all I was supposed to do. Then they talked to my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], and I don't know how they agreed to transfer me here in this *comunità*. Now, I am 19 years old, although my true age is 20. When I arrived in Italy, they [practitioners] did not believe I was 16, so they wrote I was 15. So, I am 19 now. This is my age in Italy (...), the age I have on my passport. It's the same, it does not matter if you have an age or another. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esosa, 8 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17)

The bureaucratic rationale of the transfer from a shelter for unaccompanied minors to one for adults was clear to Ehi and Ese, but they were still ill at ease with it. Ese had already been transferred several times during the programme (before turning 18), due to institutional choices unrelated to her needs. From a different perspective, Ehi, as well as Isowa, were unhappy about the transfer as they could no longer see their friends every day. They also expressed disappointment with the new shelter rules: they were not very different from the strict rules of the previous shelter and this was perceived as contradictory: beneficiaries are

repeatedly told that once they turn 18, they become adult and are given more freedom to go out. Ese was particularly frustrated by the control that practitioners exercised in her life.

[I had to move] because that was a *comunità minori* [shelter for unaccompanied minors], so I had to. It would have been easier to stay there [where I was before]. I could see my friends more. I did not have much freedom, but I don't have much freedom here either, I thought I would have more. I am only allowed to go out sometimes for a few hours. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Ehi, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 15 years)

[When I first got in touch with N.A.Ve] I was two days in a shelter and then I was transferred to another city. Then I was transferred to another shelter in the same city, with the nuns. After 7 months I was transferred again to another city, and I stayed there for a year and a half. (...) First, I was *minore* [minor], then I changed the *assistente sociale* [Case Manager], you know. I turned 18, I am almost 19 now. When you are 18 you cannot stay in the *comunità minori* [shelter for unaccompanied minors], so I changed place. (...) When they told me I had to move I was quite worried. I felt a bit happy because I was hoping to be a bit more independent, but I was worried, I thought it would be hard. (...) Now I have been here for almost a year. I don't really like it because I am tired of being always alone. I have a flat for myself but the nuns [who run the shelter] are never here and there are rules even here! If I want to go out, I need to call them in Whatsap and I need to tell them where I am going, with whom. Nooo this is too much! Again!!!

(interview, Ese, 13 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 16 years)

The rules did not change, they continued until I left, but there are differences because the previous shelter was for the underage, while the other was for people who are 18 and more. For example, in this [second] shelter, you can use your phone, you can cook your food, you can go out and no one will ask you, but you can't bring people in. So, some rules are kind of different. It's not that hard but it has been a bit difficult too. I thought I had to be patient because it was for my own good: I did not have the documents, a job, all this stuff. (...) I did not want to separate from a friend I was living with, but I had no choice. So, it was difficult to end up without her.

(interview, Isowa, 21 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

All the women who arrived in the N.A.Ve when minors had been looking forward to more independence. As they reached the time of transition, they had to come to terms with the increasing responsibility that Practitioners asked of them, for

example in the management of personal expenses. Esewi was worried about this. While the time of transition to the age of majority involved the thrill of the much-desired freedom, it came with heavier financial obligations, in face of a precarious employment situation, still far from providing a stable job, and continuous pressure by her family to send remittances back home. The increasing burden of responsibility was felt also by Aisosa, particularly towards her daughter. She reclaimed her autonomy as an adult, having been infantilised until she was 18, but at the same time she worried and felt unprepared for adult life, in an inversion of her biographical times.

Like Ese, Aisosa could not tolerate shelter rules anymore, nor the “triangulation” of the decision-making process, expressing frustration for having to “hang on waiting” for a decision that was often delayed or that never arrived at all, while her life was flowing on.

[When I turn 18], I will be able to cook and eat by myself, not with the other girls [hosted in the shelter], I will clean and take care of the flat myself. They [the social workers and the reception practitioners] told me that I will be allowed to sleep outside, but I will still have to tell them. I will not have to pay the rent, but I will have to pay some expenses, like the bus, myself, and clothes, because now I have some money from the *tirocinio* [internship]. I do not know if the money will be enough for me, I am worried about this, my family that needs money ... [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

I have moved here because on my document it was written I was *minore* [minor]. I am 17 now, so next year I'll become 18. I told my *tutore* [Legal Guardian] that when I turn 18, I will leave. I really don't like it to be here. When they [practitioners] first took me to a *comunità* [shelter for unaccompanied minors], the following day I was gone! [she laughs]. I did it many times. I don't like it in these places, it is all *casino* [noise and mess with other beneficiaries]. I need to talk again to them [practitioners], I need to find a job as I need to work as soon as I finish the *terza media* [eighth grade]. I need to get money to provide for my daughter, I cannot ask everything I need to the project, but I am worried. If I need a new pair of shoes, what can I do? I need the money to buy it and I do not have it now! It is just that I do not like asking for things, as a minor you must, but I get bored because maybe they say yes, maybe they say no and before they give you the definite answer three months have gone by, and they make my head spinning! (...) I cannot cope with this anymore. They keep tell me: “Wait, wait, wait to do this and that. I am so tired of this; I want to get my own money!” [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Aisosa, 20 October 2020, entrance in 2016, 14 years)

Of all the women we interviewed, Esewi mostly challenged practitioners' ambiguous tendency to treat her like a child while at the same time, as she was reaching the age of majority, asking her to act like an adult. She recalled being told many times: "You are under our responsibility, until you turn 18," and "you must follow our rules," but also "you should start behaving as an adult" and "learn to manage your own (pocket) money." The disciplining and educational intent of Practitioners emerges clearly here. Esewi described it as incoherent, she felt uncomfortable with it, helpless and angry. Her account vividly exemplifies that the concepts of "autonomy," but also those of "minor" and "adult" are socially constructed concepts. The concept of autonomy is framed by Practitioners to guide their mission, that is to say to support beneficiaries in finding a job and a decent accommodation and ensure they break free of (any risk of) exploitation. The *lived* perceptions of the women clash with this imaginary, as they experience an extended precarious condition and are taught, from the beginning of their social protection programme, that finding a job and a decent accommodation is not easy. The concept of "minors" is associated with young fragile people who cannot work. However, as they become "adult," they must suddenly find a job and a decent accommodation, although market dynamics and the immigration regime make this goal very difficult.

[referring to the weekly meetings organised by reception practitioners for beneficiaries in the shelter] It can be a useful moment to talk about how things go, to see if they change after we [beneficiaries] say something is wrong. They tell you cannot do certain things, like sleep outside at night, because you are still a minor, and you are under their responsibility. But then they tell you that you need to behave like an adult and start paying some things out of your own pocket money to learn how to become *autonomo* [autonomous]. But how can I do it if I do not work and have no money? [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in  
2019, 16 years)

The protection of unaccompanied minors includes the involvement not only of Case Managers and Practitioners but also of a Legal Guardian. When Omosigho was first introduced to her Legal Guardian, she did not fully understand her role. She progressively gathered it as she experienced the guardianship. While the Guardian can be a man or a woman, it was a woman for both Omosigho and Iyore. Normally Practitioners describe them as a "second mom," nominated because decisions on minors must be taken with their parents but unaccompanied minors do not have parents any more or live in their country of origin.

Omosigho recalls spending some pleasant time out with her Guardian, Osayi, referred to her Guardian as a positive support and stimulus in her life (see page 69) Neither of them, nor other women, mentioned any aspect of Guardians' more formal role, like signing regularisation documents and authorisations for health checks, ensuring minors are provided legal advice, etc. When I asked Esewi, whom I had been the Guardian of, she also replied that the Guardian is "a second

mom,” and did not mention any legal function despite the long regularisation process in which I had been engaging with her, together with the Socio-legal Practitioner. In other words, guardianship seems to be mostly associated with the affective support that can derive from the relationship, arguably pointing to women’s understanding, expectations, but also reclaiming of parental support, hence also of their position as minors who should be cared for. It further points to the importance of beneficiaries to build on positive emotional experiences during their protection programme and beyond it.

Iyore had a negative memory of her Guardian. She mostly recalled her absence, having in mind the behaviour of other Guardians, nominated for beneficiaries in the same shelter. On a few occasions, she asked me to be present in meetings with her Case Manager. She knew me from my visits to Esewi in the shelter and had often voiced her wish to have a Guardian too.

When I was introduced to her, they [Case Manager, Reception practitioner, Cultural-linguistic mediator] told me that she was my *tutore* [Legal Guardian]. They told me she was there for me to check if things were ok in school, with my health and so on. I didn’t understand very well but I said OK, I trust you folk. I was happy with her too. Sometimes, she called and asked me if I was ok. Sometimes, she asked me if I wanted to see her if I needed something. (...) I went out for *gelato* [ice cream] or coffee with her a few times. She’s very nice. Now, I am 18 and I have no *tutore* anymore. It works like this.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

“My *tutrice* [Legal Guardian], *mamma mia!*” I think I do not have a *tutrice* [Legal Guardian]. She does not call me. Only once I asked if I could go out with her and she said OK and I went with her downtown, but she has never come to the *comunità* [shelter] to see me. She does not call me to know how I am. During the lockdown, I asked for her phone and Nuria [Reception Practitioner] told me that she had to ask if it was ok for me to have it. Maybe I spoke to her once or twice, maybe she has written me twice or three times, no more. If I do not write her, she does not write me, nor call, and she never met my *operatori* [Reception practitioners] and my *assistente sociale* [Case Manager]. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Iyore, 29 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 16 years)

She is like a second mom. She takes care of you, as you are still a minor, she does things with you to understand how things are going, like with school and your health, as a mother does. She talks to you, calls you, she also asks how your family is, what projects you have, if you are happy about how things are going or not.

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)



**“I thought I would go totally crazy”: the COVID lockdown**

The Italian government launched the first prevention and containment measures of the pandemic in the first months of 2020, soon after the World Health Organization’s declaration that COVID-19 was an international health emergency. Initially, in early March, the measures<sup>5</sup> targeted specific regions only, such as Lombardy. In the following weeks, they were progressively extended to the entire peninsula. From March to May, Italy experienced a strict lockdown. Restrictions were loosened in May: people could leave their houses, go out and go to work; industrial, commercial and cultural activities started re-opening slowly. For the women we interviewed, similar to other migrants hosted in reception shelters, the lockdown, and the following months with curfews, were a time of interruptions and suspensions: internships were stopped, several people lost their jobs and became unemployed, social activities and (some) educational activities were suspended or re-organised in a virtual mode, residence permits renewal was suspended. This contributed to conditions of increasing precariousness, as pointed out by other authors regarding sex workers more generally in both EU and non-EU countries (Lam, 2020; OSCE *et al.*, 2020; Platt *et al.*, 2020; UNODC, 2020; Burgos *et al.*, 2021).

Efe had to stop her internship, Abies lost her job (see page 92), and her employment situation became more precarious, with short on-call collaborations only, as for many other women in the social protection programme. Orobosa could not finish the eighth grade, as Italian language courses were suspended, although schools continued working, mostly in a distance learning mode. Efe, on her side, was lucky to start an internship in a supermarket, as food-related businesses were less affected by the pandemic.

Most of the women experienced loneliness and the frustration of being forced not to do anything, although they struggled to make themselves busy, as Efe explained to us, while showing her handmade crochet creations. Nevertheless, being supported by the N.A.Ve was greatly appreciated and made the women feel they were not forgotten, nor abandoned just because their protection programme was finished. Although they all knew Practitioners and had known them for a few years at least, a few women confided to us that it was only during the lockdown that they fully realised they could truly trust some of them. To some extent, it strengthened relationships. Having been reassured and helped beyond and despite formal institutional duties, proved the good intentions of Practitioners and their interest in the women’s well-being. In a similar vein, other respondents told us they could really “test” the Practitioners only after their project was over (regardless of the pandemic), implying that trust is not rapidly gained, nor once for all, and that it needs to be constantly re-affirmed. It also throws light on expectations: some women hope that the relationship with Practitioners becomes part of their lives and continues after they exit the N.A.Ve.

Fear of the virus was a strong component of many women’s lives, particularly during the lockdown and in the earliest phase of the pandemic. It was heightened

by everyday alarming news and data on increasing infections and deaths, and by the worries of relatives in Nigeria who heard from the media that the situation in Italy was particularly severe. The spread of fake news in social media, within the Nigerian community (and beyond it), further contributed to frightening the women (Semprebon *et al.*, 2021).

I did this internship because it was the only one available during the lockdown. Patrizia said: “*Vai!* [go],” so I accepted to start it. I could not believe it! I was happy! It was a good experience. I know that during the lockdown it was very very difficult for them [practitioners] to help us find jobs. I felt lucky. When I told my grand mom “I am working”, she said: “What? During the lockdown? What kind of job is it? I hear from the news that everything is closed!” I explained her that supermarkets were open, that’s why I could work there. But she was also worried for me, that I could get ill, that I could no longer find a job.

(interview, Efe, 15 October 2022, entrance in 2018, 18 years)

I had to stop [with my internship] because of the Covid. When I finished my [N.A.Ve] project and left [the shelter] I had my internship, but then ... it was very hard for me. I was in *autonomia* [independent flat, still in the project] and I felt lonely. I had nothing to do all day long. I made plastic bags [she shows them]. I learnt how to make this in Nigeria, I also learnt how to make bracelets. I can do crochet work [she proudly shows some other things she made]. I made a heart! [she smiles] The first month I could not sleep because I was afraid of the virus. Once, a girl [living in the same flat] and I went out, but the police stopped us and told us to go back home. I watched a lot of television and heard information also about Nigeria. I also had to stop the school. Hopefully I will start again next week. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Osarobo, 6 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 20+ years)

*Esewi:* *Mamma mia*, I thought I would go totally crazy during the lockdown; I swear. I could not do anything, only sleep, and eat. I was getting tired of watching TV. We could play volleyball outside as we have a small garden here in the *comunità* [shelter], we were luck for this, but we could do nothing else. Not even see boyfriends, friends. Once my boyfriend came to see me, as soon as the lockdown was over, but he had to sit three meters away from me, *mamma mia!* It was soooo hard. And I was really scared about the virus and videos in Facebook (...)

*Interviewer:* Why were you afraid? Before you told me that you think Covid does not exist?

*Esewi*: Last night, I talked to Osaigbovo [a beneficiary living in the same shelter] and she also said she heard Covid does not exist. She said that her boyfriend says it exists only for elderly people and kills them. I asked if it is true or a lie. I don't care actually, I always wear the mask. But they [the government] must not decide for another lockdown or I will go out anyway!!! I cannot do this anymore. For my birthday [in a few months' time] I want to celebrate outside, not at home. I need to go out of the *comunità*. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esewi, 28 October 2020, entrance in 2019, 16 years)

Fake news and, more generally, the spread of confusing news was reported by all the interviewees, although a stronger concern emerged on the fear that the government could extend the curfew (at the time of interviews, curfew measures were still in effect in Italy) or re-introduce the lockdown, forcing people to stay at home. Abies was rather worried for her family, as she had not send money back home for a while (see page 63), stressing how the precarious economic situation of our respondents did not only affect them, but their families too. This makes the forced (economic) unproductiveness associated with the pandemic period extremely evident, but it further draws our attention to the unproductiveness that beneficiaries experience during their permanence in shelters. They cannot work, due to restrictions of the normative framework – if they are minors or (for a few months) if they are asylum seekers. However, the responsibility of sending remittances is never suspended for some women. They were expected to send economic resources also during the lockdown and pressure for it had continued throughout the pandemic too.

On their side, the N.A.Ve staff supported beneficiaries in several ways during the lockdown, including employment, housing and legal aspects. Thanks to the support of a Practitioner, Abies could apply for unemployment benefit, while through a contact with Caritas she could ask for food vouchers. Uyi found herself stranded without a flat because she was jobless and could no longer pay her rent. At the end our interview, she explained me that the N.A.Ve Practitioners had mobilised their professional and personal networks to help her get a temporary place in a reception shelter.

When the pandemic came, we stopped working and did not know how to go about it. My *assistente sociale* [Case Manager] helped me to apply for *disoccupazione* [unemployment benefit] and put me in a list for some kind of *buona spesa* [food vouchers] (...) they gave me 300 euro for two months from the *Comune* [Municipality] (...). She did many things although I was not in the project anymore. As far as you start with N.A.Ve, even when you leave, if you need assistance you can ask for help and they can help you. They say: "If you need our help, you can call us any time!" (...) When I heard about the virus I was really scared. Every day I was really scared, I don't normally

use the *guanti* [plastic gloves], but I always used *guanti* and *mascherina* [face mask] and changed them all the time. When I heard I had to stay home it was very very difficult. I was not able to pay my rent for four months and I wondered: “How will I survive?” But I got help from Caritas. I was calling home. I was worried. I just pray we will not have a lockdown again!

(interview, Abies, 10 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17? years)

Despite its negative impacts, the COVID lockdown was not an entirely negative experience for all the women. Efe started her internship as a warehouse worker that involved night shifts, hence she did not perceive social isolation as much as other beneficiaries. Omosigho explained it was a hard period for her and she did suffer from loneliness, but she eventually coped with it. It was a creative phase of her life. She practised singing to get distracted from sad thoughts and she wrote a song. She started singing it during the interview, while recalling the lockdown, while projecting herself into the future, with hopes and dreams. Her faith in God was crucial for her positive attitude and her determination to look ahead and overcome discouragement.

Esosa made good use of time during the lockdown, by joining an online course on how to find employment. It was useful for her skill development, but also for the rhythm it gave to a repetitive slow daily routine. We can certainly draw a parallel between the suspended time of the lockdown and the suspended time, with endless waiting times, that migrants experience in shelters. While the COVID time suspension was an unexpected exception for large segments of the population, it was a (partly) “known” condition for the women hosted in the protection shelters, made worse by the restrictions that affected social relations. Some of them, like Esosa and Omosigho reacted well to it, for others it made their condition even more unbearable, as Esewi explained above.

For me it was ok. I was at home, with my mobile, I slept, ate, woke up, I read books, newspapers (...). [At the time] I was looking for a job as shop assistant, so I was looking up [on the internet] for cloth materials, how to make garments, I studied. I attended an online course on how to find employment. It was Elisa [Reception Practitioner] who told me about this course. It was useful, not too difficult for me and it gave me something to fill the day and the time that never went by. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Esosa, 8 October 2020, entrance in 2017, 17 years)

*Omosigho*: I tried a lot [before I could find a job], Raffaella and Patrizia checked for me, they looked around for me. (...) It was difficult because we were just coming out from Covid, and nobody wanted to employ people. They already had people, so they were afraid to accept new people.

*Interviewer*: How was it during the lockdown for you?

*Omosigho*: I felt sad, I'm not lying to you. Like everybody. People cried a lot. It was very difficult. It was difficult to stay indoors. I woke up, I ate, went to bed, that's it. I could not go out and I was looking for a job, at that time, but could not find any! I thought it was finally the time for me to work and then the Covid arrived. I told myself: "What is going on? I don't understand! Am I the only person in this situation?" Later, I don't know how but I said to myself: Ok, no problem, even living in this life is a big grace. I take the grace of God to live here. It's ok. And God made it beautiful!

"My life is beautiful, my life is beautiful ..." [she starts singing]. Eh eh, I sing, I don't write the music, but I sing. I do not know how this song came. I wrote it. It just came and everything got together. I got that grace. When I work for something, I do it perfectly, it comes very smoothly. People will love it. I was even imagining, maybe I'll sing this song that people don't like. But people love it. I was so surprised and happy!

When I sing, I think, think, think and forget other [sad] things. When I sing, it makes me happy. When I have that joy, I begin to do things and carry on.

(interview, Omosigho, 19 October 2020, entrance in 2018, 17 years)

## Final remarks

The interviews we conducted with Nigerian women point to the diversity and complexity of their trajectories. Drawing from the autonomy of migration literature and from postcolonial feminism and intersectionality, but also from a temporal perspective, has arguably helped us trace some common elements in their stories, especially as far as structural issues are concerned (particularly in connection with the migration regime). Most importantly, it has prevented us from assimilating the women's representations into a unique "Nigerian" narrative.

During the interviews, women repeatedly projected us into their future, while distancing themselves from prostitution and their past. Considering our positionality – some women perceived us as part of N.A.Ve, hence the "institution" – the women's narratives must certainly be interpreted in view of their (likely) performance as "deserving beneficiaries." At the same time, we argue that their subjective narratives provided a "tool" to link up past, present and future "biographical pieces" and reconcile their life trajectories. Their life trajectories are *in fact* often dis-integrated by institutional mechanisms (i.e. the asylum procedure, but also the procedure to access social protection) that tend to focus on "isolated sections" of people's lives.

Women's representations challenge some widespread interpretations, for example of family bonds and religion. While the families of trafficked women are often portrayed as complicit in trafficking, far less attention is paid to the positive

influence that family bonds can have, as Sonia testifies. Regarding religion, many respondents stressed the importance of religious practices, more than religion per sé, highlighting their emancipatory dimension. Furthermore, they contested practitioners' interpretations of Nigerian churches as exposing women to the danger of re-trafficking.

Looking at their trajectories in the N.A.Ve, our interviewees experienced multiple channels of access to protection. All of them explained their decision to enter the programme was motivated by a "turning point" in their life, matured alongside high expectations of social mobility. Access was still demanding. All women found it hard to trust practitioners, and even more law enforcement officers. All of them were very reticent to share personal, often painful details, about their life, as required by risk assessment.

Our respondents framed the N.A.Ve as a "condition of opportunity" that they seized. A few of them underlined the lack of alternative (in their life) and the "forced choice" to adapt to the set narratives and expectations of practitioners. All of them lamented the many rules of protection programmes, particularly the fact they are not always clear in their rationale and can hardly be negotiated. They called for a direct unmediated relationship with practitioners and Case Managers, free of triangulation approaches, as the latter require careful consideration by several practitioners for any request put forward by beneficiaries, with the result that responses are delayed.

Regarding relationships with practitioners, trust emerged as a key issue, deriving from the length of the relationship, rather than other variables such as gender or nationality. When asked about Nigerian Mediators, the women invariably showed appreciation for their linguistic support in the first phases of protection. They expressed irritation for the extension of mediation until the completion of the programme, which frustrates their autonomy.

If, on the one side, our interviewees appreciated the resources provided by the N.A.Ve, they challenged the extended times of protection (and associated regulations, such as the prohibition to use mobile phones), perceived as a deprivation of their liberty, forcing them to experience confinement. The importance of free time was mentioned by drawing attention to the missing time of well-being, which can be overshadowed by pre-set (programme) priorities of inclusion. Some of the women's subjective narratives contrasted their "otherness" with respect to documented people outside the camp. By doing so they positioned themselves as migrants subjected to the migration regime, thus ultimately problematising it.

When facing the "sgancio," and with it the end of the protection programme, Nigerian women experienced a sense of freedom and liberation, but also feelings of fear for the precarious life path that laid ahead. Their words suggested protection programmes can create dynamics of dependence, to some extent recalling those of exploitation that they aim to counter in the first place. They also suggest frustration for an autonomy that sometimes is reached but only to survival levels, far from satisfying beneficiaries' aspirations. Looking at employment, for

example, practitioners have strived to favour access to internships and jobs in different sectors, but the employment market offers limited opportunities for this target group, particularly in sectors that can reinforce gender roles and stereotypes (caregiving, cleaning, etc.). Yet, internships are a time of emancipation for women, regardless of their outcomes. Money has a central temporal dimension in this sense. It is during internships that many women access economic resources for the first time in their life. At the same time, internships recall the dissonance between institutional times (lengthy procedure for regularisation preventing access to work) and biographical ones (ongoing family responsibilities).

The lens of temporality was adopted to interpret our findings transversally but also with specific reference to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to the age of majority, that we identified as specific time intervals in the life of our respondents. Regarding the former, Nigerian women experienced a time of interruption, frustration (for suspension) and fear (connected mostly to fake news). These made their trajectories even more precarious, but partly similar with native adolescents who, to a certain extent, experienced the same restrictions. For many women the lockdown was a time to consolidate relationships with practitioners too: they experienced they would not be left alone, although their project was over.

Regarding the transition to the age of majority, we have explained how age dictates entitlement to rights, although age assessment procedures are unreliable. Yet, minors' entitlement to protection finishes once they turn 18. Some of the women we interviewed (who met the N.A.Ve before turning 18 and were first accommodated in facilities for minors) could enter the N.A.Ve and benefit from further support for a few more years, but it is not so for all young people. To say more, young people must move to a shelter for adults once they reach the age of majority and are likely to change Case Manager too. As we explained, an experiment was made in the N.A.Ve to grant continuous support by the same Case Manager for young beneficiaries. This proved particularly positive for them, particularly at a time of transition, characterised by an inversion of biographical times: institutions treat young people, who are less than 18, as children (i.e. they cannot work); as soon as they turn 18, they are expected to (suddenly) become adult and find a job quickly (in spite of limited job opportunities), with the result that beneficiaries experience mixed feelings of happiness for the achieved autonomy and fear for their unpreparedness to face the job market. In the next chapter we will further explore the tension between biographical and institutional times and interrogate the institutional cultures that inform the N.A.Ve and the work with Nigerian women.

## Notes

- 1 Caritas is a well-known religious institution that has delivered charity support since 1971. Its work at the local level is implemented in Italy through more than 200 local organisations (Caritas Diocesane), which are engaged in diverse social activities, such as drop-in centres, observatories on poverty, parochial services, shelters, etc.
- 2 See glossary.

- 3 The Italian term “assistente sociale” is hereby translated literally as “social assistant” because our interviewees used this term. In general, the term “assistente sociale” can be translated as “social worker,” although social workers as professional figures have a specific role in Italy that cannot be compared to that of social workers in other countries. In Italy, people with a training/education background as social workers can occupy different positions in the public or non-profit or profit sectors. However, the professional figure of social workers is mostly associated with jobs in social service departments of local authorities, whereby they generally “take up cases” of specific target groups (i.e., families, children, lone mothers, etc.).
- 4 In 2018, the Oba of Benin – that is to say the highest traditional and religious authority in Edo State, Nigeria – invoked a curse on traffickers to liberate women and girls who had been and could be subjected to the juju oath, a traditional ritual used by traffickers to make victims swear they will not report to the police how they were trafficked to Italy.
- 5 More details on the specific measures and restrictions adopted can be found at this link: <https://www.altalex.com/documents/news/2020/02/24/coronavirus-misure-governo>. Last access: 10 October 2022.

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# Practitioners and their experience of the N.A.Ve social protection programme

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### Social protection programmes

Social work is described as particularly well placed to carry out interventions with trafficked people, as social workers' ethical code of conduct requires them to support individuals (Hodge, 2014; Okech *et al.*, 2018). Yet, social workers' attention on the protection of this target group has grown recently (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012; Okech *et al.*, 2018), although evangelical work with them started in the mid-1800s, with rescue workers, settlement workers, friendly visitors, benevolent workers, reform workers (Sloan and Wahab, 2000). In the past two decades social work became linked to anti-prostitution campaigns and social workers took up the challenge of trafficking in conjunction with a disproportionate portrayal by the media of *sex* trafficking (Sanghera, 2011).

Okech *et al.* (2018) presented an overview of the international social work literature dealing with anti-trafficking interventions and noticed that almost half of the contributions have been written by scholars in the US and only about a third present empirical findings. This book aims to provide an empirical contribution accordingly, as far as anti-trafficking programme approaches are concerned, specifically in Italy.

Studies on social protection programmes include critical studies (Lee, 2014) and reviews of the literature (see Timoshkina, 2019; on the US: Macy and Johns, 2011; Davy, 2015; Orme and Ross-Sheriff, 2015; Dell *et al.*, 2019), interviews with shelter practitioners in Asia (Hacker, Levine-Fraiman and Halili, 2015), Europe (Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; Cox, 2018; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021; Clemente, 2022), the US (Nichols *et al.*, 2018) and Africa (on Nigeria: Paasche *et al.*, 2018; Semprebon and Oluwafemi, 2021). Only a few include interviews with beneficiaries (in Asia: Hacker *et al.*, 2015; the US: Koegler *et al.*, 2021), as explained in Chapter 2, and little evaluation has been carried out of whether these programmes are meeting the needs of their target groups (Macy and Johns, 2011; Wilson *et al.*, 2015; Muraya and Fry, 2016; Koegler *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, implementers, which are often NGOs, have little (if any) opportunity to discuss and self-reflect on their interventions and the knowledge produced with the anti-trafficking apparatus (i.e., Semprebon *et al.*, 2021; Clemente, 2022).



There is a plethora of response models around the world (Macy and Johns, 2011; Dell *et al.*, 2019; Timoshkina, 2019). According to Timoshkina (2019), they differ in geographic scope, conceptual framework, structure, governance scheme and funding sources. Some models address all forms of human trafficking, others focus on a particular category, most often sex trafficking. In some cases they build on grassroots interventions, as in the N.A.Ve model in Italy (see Chapter 1); in others they follow a top-down approach, as in Sweden (Johansson and Semprebon, 2020). Most models are implemented by secular, religious and faith-based organisations and comprise a large spectrum of activities, such as provision of health and social services to trafficked persons, advocacy, research, awareness-raising. Shelter facilities take the shape of hostels, apartments, closed and open shelters, emergency shelters and independent homes for beneficiaries facing the stage of reintegration (Bjerkkan *et al.*, 2005; Timoshkina, 2019). Organisations may operate either on a voluntary basis or with government funding, although the scarcity of stable, adequate funding has been mentioned as a challenge (Steiner *et al.*, 2018).

On their side, beneficiaries of anti-trafficking systems have expressed needs associated with the use of basic services, such as accommodation, food, medical care, legal advice, education, vocational training (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2007; Hacker *et al.*, 2015), but also support to address barriers to health recovery, to favour independence (i.e., Macy and Johns, 2011; Okech *et al.*, 2018) and to manage family financial responsibilities (Surtees, 2013).

Social protection programmes in Italy are relatively recent (see also Semprebon *et al.*, 2021). The first dedicated government funding dates back to 2000, but it was only in 2016 that provision was made for integrated projects including first assistance and protection, as explained in Chapter 1. A few reports have been produced, since the second half of the year 2000, that describe the functioning of the anti-trafficking apparatus in the national territory (Prina, 2007; Brunovskis, 2012; Castelli, 2014; Pascoal, 2020). In the last decade, evidence on the organisational models of specific projects has also been produced for the following regions: Emilia-Romagna (Braglia, 2016), Liguria (Abbatecola and Popolla, 2019), Piemonte (Carchedi, 2006). To our knowledge, only a comprehensive overview is available: it reports the findings of a survey distributed to anti-trafficking projects (Castelli, 2014). It shows that the main implementing agencies are non-profit organisations and social cooperatives. A few projects are run by faith-based Catholic organisations. In Italy, civil society and NGOs have played a central role in supporting people identified as victims of trafficking and have struggled to keep the theme high on the political agenda, while also contributing to the development of adequate measures (see also Beretta *et al.*, 2016; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021). In the wider framework of migration policies, service outsourcing has become a widespread phenomenon in the Italian context (Scotto, 2016; Vitiello, 2019; Semprebon, 2021), although coordination among stakeholders can be poor (Campomori and Ambrosini, 2020; Semprebon, 2021). In the counter-trafficking apparatus, most projects are based on strong public-private partnerships, with

a growing role of public entities, particularly regional authorities. Despite the continuity of funding, almost half of the project practitioners declared they were engaged in (further) fundraising, at regional and EU level.

According to Castelli (2014), projects offer a variety of services ranging from reception (70%), to drop-in centres (about 50%), employment inclusion (about 50%), and other services, such as indoor and outdoor outreach activities, first assistance associated with dedicated helplines, Italian language courses (6.4%), health consultation and check-ups (5.1%), psychological support (3.8%), cultural-linguistic mediation (1.9%), legal assistance (1.3%), awareness-raising with the community. This confirms the variety of approaches evident in work with migrants more generally, oscillating between the provision of mainstream to that of specialist services (Barberis and Boccagni, 2014)

### **Models of social protection and social work approaches targeted to exploited people**

Response models underlie a specific conception of sex trafficking. Neo-abolitionists think of prostitution as a crime and a severe violation of human rights and push for its abolition. They tend to equate all forms of commercial sex with human trafficking (Soderlund, 2005; Andrijasevic, 2010; Gerassi and Nichols, 2018; Timoshkina, 2019). The so-called “sex-positive” responders distinguish sex trafficking from consensual sex work and contend that the latter is a legitimate form of labour and that people should have the right to do it safely (*ibidem*). Other scholars and intellectuals position themselves in an intermediary position between neo-abolitionists and sex-positive responders, claiming that not all the people in the sex industry are trafficked and exploited, but that all people should be able to work safely and have access to support (Gerassi, *et al.*, 2017), thus stressing the vulnerable conditions of victims of trafficking. This is our position too.

Diverging interpretations of prostitution, trafficking and human rights principles have translated in different typologies of service provision. Neo-abolitionists are generally in favour of raid-and-rescue approaches aimed to liberate people from exploitation (Soderlund, 2005; Ahmed and Seshu, 2012; Gerassi *et al.*, 2017). Among them, supporters of faith-based responses, prioritise religious values and principles and promote the adoption of methods that rehabilitate people, in moral terms, from the experience of trafficking. They use prayers in outreach work and encourage people’s participation in religious ceremonies during programmes (Perdue *et al.*, 2012). Others prefer harm reduction interventions (Rekart, 2005) aimed to support people who are not able or not willing to exit the sex industry – due to fear of retaliation by exploiters, financial needs, etc. – and to assist them with health care, legal advice and other types of support (Gerassi *et al.*, 2017; Timoshkina, 2019).

Three main approaches have been identified in the literature with reference to social work with trafficked people: the ecological, the strengths and the victim-centred approach (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014; McIntyre, 2014). The ecological

framework draws from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and highlights the interrelationships and reciprocity between individuals and the micro (individual level), meso (agency collaboration and coordination) and macro (policy development and implementation) systems in which they act. Within this framework, social workers can intervene on multiple levels with a multidisciplinary method, acknowledging individuals' agency on the environment and vice versa. Both Hodge and Lietz (2007) and McIntyre (2014) have adopted it for the study of anti-trafficking interventions. We will similarly consider all three levels, although the aim of this book is not to evaluate the programme under analysis. The strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2002; Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014) emphasises social workers' efforts to build relationships of trust with beneficiaries and professionals too. The third, the victim-centred approach, has been predominantly used in the criminal justice literature (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014) and has been criticised for the priority accorded to prosecuting traffickers, to the detriment of people's protection (Anderson and O'Connell, 2002; Brennan, 2014; Brunoovskis and Skilbrei, 2016; Molland, 2019).

The main declared objective of NGOs working with victims of trafficking is to support beneficiaries to break free of exploitation, by promoting their empowerment and the achievement of autonomy in the search for housing and employment (on Italy: Castelli, 2014; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021; on experiences in other international contexts see Timoshkina, 2019 and Muraya and Fry, 2016). Critical attention has been brought to the terms empowerment and autonomy, suggesting they are drawn from a Western ethnocentric perspective. What does empowerment and autonomy mean for the targets of support? We addressed this issue and the contrasting views of beneficiaries in Chapter 2 and we will further discuss it in this chapter, by digging into the views of practitioners. According to Comaroff and Comaroff (2001)

*“the autonomous person, that familiar trope of European bourgeois modernity (Taylor, 1989), is a Eurocentric idea (...) the definite, singular article describes an imaginaire, an ensemble of signs and values, a hegemonic formation: neither in Europe, nor any place else to which it has been exported, does it exist as an unmediated sociological reality (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 60f) (...) we shall call into doubt the universality of “the autonomous person” by recourse to an anthropological insistence on cultural and historical specificity (see La Fontaine, 1985).*

(267–268)

Citing Türken *et al.* (2016), Zavaroni *et al.* (2021) highlight the political nature of the term “autonomous individuals,” suggesting it is often mobilised as the implicit conception of individuals in neoliberal welfare systems. It is understood as a natural predisposition or an ethical achievement, on the one side, or an inner non-functional attitude that needs fixing, on the other.

The victim-centred approach, but, to some extent, all the described approaches, carry the risk of patronising people and making decision *for* them, rather than *with*

them, producing more harm than good (Ahmed and Seshu, 2012; Wachter *et al.*, 2016), as they are embedded in a “*gendered system of power and discipline under a paternalistic state*” (Lee, 2014: 214), as we shall see. A specific critical feature of this system is the closed-shelter policy. Due to concerns regarding possible retaliation from traffickers – but also the need to ensure that beneficiaries are reachable and ready to testify (against their exploiters) in court (OHCHR, 2014), several restrictions have been introduced in shelters that limit people’s liberty of movement. Facilities have come to resemble detention-like structures (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012; Surtees, 2013; Lee, 2014), requiring beneficiaries to ask for permission before leaving, even for employment- and schooling-related activities (Hacker *et al.*, 2015), consistent with an approach of “*carceral protectionism*” (Musto, 2010). Excessively restrictive conditions have negative impacts on people’s lives, making them feel isolated, reducing their sense of independence and preventing empowerment (Cagney *et al.*, 2019). Paradoxically, in this context, while generally recognising the protective intention of anti-trafficking practitioners, scholars have questioned the capacity of the apparatus to protect people and prevent further exploitation both during and after the completion of their protection programme (Brennan, 2005; Brunovskis and Surtees, 2008; Giordano, 2014; Serughetti, 2017; Abbatecola, 2018).

Not to be underestimated is also the fact that support measures are often conditional to collaboration with police forces (Musto, 2010; Clemente, 2017; Johansson and Semprebon, 2020; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021). Even in Italy, where art. 18 (see Chapter 1) has opened a channel for regularisation that does not require any collaboration in investigations, beneficiaries have been put under pressure to do so, and the lack of uniformity in the implementation of the normative framework has *de facto* failed to grant access to assistance (Beretta *et al.*, 2016; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021) and has exposed them to “*secondary victimization*” within the criminal justice and the legal systems (Shapland *et al.*, 1985; Campbell, 1998; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021).

Pushing this criticism further, with reference to the Portuguese context, Clemente (2022) argues that the anti-trafficking system is flattened on the objective of building a protective apparatus more than on the actual protection of people, in line with the widespread view that the fight against trafficking and traffickers has been prioritised over the protection of victims (Anderson and O’Connell, 2002; Molland, 2019; Brennar, 2014). By “*privileging technical policy discourses, and depoliticizing interventions, counter-trafficking becomes configured as a refined ‘dispositif’ (Foucault, 1977, 1980) for expanding the bureaucratic control of the state.*” She further states that

*the persistence of certain trafficking ideas and unresolved politics – which fails to bring any meaningful benefit to its ‘victims’ – is closely linked to the need that state and non-state actors have to maintain distance from debates and interventions that create tensions and compromise the counter-trafficking apparatus.*

With reference to anti-trafficking responses more generally, several scholars have highlighted the widespread adoption of a normative narrative of victimhood that considers beneficiaries, and women in particular, as powerless victims (Crowhurst, 2007; Hoyle *et al.*, 2011; Cojocaru, 2015; Nichols *et al.*, 2018). The definition of “sexual humanitarianism” proposed by Mai (2016) is useful to explain how humanitarian interventions with women (both migrant and trafficked women) have treated them as passive recipients deserving of protection, based on a hierarchisation of vulnerability, associated with sexual and gender categories. Anti-trafficking institutions have contributed to imposing a standardised representation of “ideal victims” (Christie, 1986; Hoyle *et al.*, 2011) onto women, thus defining the borders between true and false victims, as part of a process of protection that mobilises moral over political arguments (Doezema, 2001).

The victimhood discourse is central in the construction of trafficked people. It is even more so in the construction of child trafficking (for a review see Muraya and Fry, 2016; on Europe: Eastmond and Ascher, 2011; Allsopp and Chase, 2019; Buchanan and Kallinikaki, 2020; Larkin and Lefevre, 2020; on Asia and Africa: Nikku, 2013; on the US and Mexico: Gozdziaik and MacDonnell, 2007; Clayton *et al.*, 2019; Hounmenou and O’Grady, 2019). Recognising children as victims of trafficking results in entitlement to specific protection. At the same time, this legal provision creates a moral hierarchy of deservedness (O’Connell Davidson, 2011), disregards their right to regularisation and asylum, fails to recognise the agency of different children, disguises their powerlessness as citizens (McLaughlin, 2018). The concept of childhood was constructed based on Western, white, middle-class and privileged values that explained childhood in terms of innocence and adult dependency. Cultural anthropology contributed to raising the view that children are competent actors (James, 2001) and encouraged scholars to deal with the dilemma of addressing both diversity and similarity in children’s experiences (James and James, 2004). Separated children are not passive recipients of social work interventions (Larkin and Lefevre, 2020) and do express agency in the micro-spaces of encounters (Larkin, 2015). Hence, in order to understand how practitioners strive to grant children’s rights and promote their empowerment, it is important to look at the relationship they develop with them (Larkin and Lefevre, 2020), including the interplay of relational power relations and affective practices that can shape (mis)understandings and prevent the development of trust. It must also be noticed that, in the context of the criminalisation of undocumented migrants, childhood is no longer a stable category deserving of protection, but can become subject to scrutiny and suspicion (McLaughlin, 2018).

More attention to the targets of services does contribute to reflections on the role of individual practitioners and the type of relationship they construct with beneficiaries. The institution of a Case Manager, as a single or main point of contact, is argued to be crucial for a positive protection programme (Macy and Johns, 2011; Davy, 2015). Case Managers are in a strategic position to observe the evolution of beneficiaries’ protection path. They can gain insights on people’s experiences, as they are affected by the anti-trafficking system, the migration

system, family and relatives, with a temporal lens. Light has been thrown on the importance of trust among Case Managers and other practitioners, to avoid an incoherent and fragmented service delivery (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014; Davy, 2015). The former can act as a “*kaleidoscope, where the understanding of multiple reflections (perspectives and needs of clients, professionals, and systems) mirror and intersect needs of clients, professionals, and systems and provide a unique and optimal image*” (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014: 16). Whereby people experience exploitation and victimisation (Surtees, 2013; Hacker *et al.*, 2015), the development of trusting relationships is even more crucial (Clawson *et al.*, 2007; Cossar *et al.*, 2014; Preble, 2015; Moore *et al.*, 2018). People can re-learn how to trust, following experiences of coercion, through positive relationships with practitioners (Preble, 2015). It is equally important that staff trust beneficiaries, value them and take them seriously (Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021). On their side, Houston (2015) and McLaughlin (2018) warn us about the risk of underestimating power relations. Case Managers and practitioners generally possess higher economic, symbolic and cultural capital and can therefore enact relations characterised by oppressive social norms and discourses (Houston, 2015). Even though they aim to pave the way towards beneficiaries’ independency, they may well position themselves in a way that legitimises them as supporters (McLaughlin, 2018).

Some scholars have called for training to improve intercultural competence, particularly as far as the intersectional needs of migrants are concerned, including, for example, those of migrant mothers with children (Taliani, 2019; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021). Other authors insist that training should provide evidenced-based materials to enhance understanding of migration and human trafficking in their various forms (Nichols and Heil, 2015; Jones and Lutze, 2016). Intercultural training can certainly be beneficial to strengthen social workers’ and practitioners’ competence, but it can also foster simplistic visions of cultural issues and reinforce stereotypes (van der Haar, 2009; Eliassi, 2019). Social workers have been put under pressure by more and more complex users’ profiles and they run the risk of adopting cultural simplifications in order to reduce the complexity they are faced with (van der Haar, 2009). In this sense, growing attention has been placed on the need to improve people’s involvement in the design and implementation of services targeted to them, also in view of promoting empowerment (Nichols and Heil, 2015; Timoshkina, 2019). Interesting examples of involvement include peer mentorship and collaboration in education programmes, while the participation of target users may be still absent in other activities such as fundraising and protection interventions (Wachter *et al.*, 2016).

### **The refugee literature and asylum seeker and refugee reception**

The refugee literature has been addressing issues concerning the reception system that are relevant to discussion on the anti-trafficking system too. These two systems are connected, although they have been often operating in a fragmented

way. Besides, trafficked people can be hosted in asylum seeker or refugee shelters because of the failure of referral mechanisms to identify them as victims of trafficking (Sempredon *et al.*, 2021). Next, we will look at the refugee literature.

Fassin (2005) talks of “humanitarian governance” to illustrate the compassionate approach characterising the asylum system, where moral sentiments and a charitable attitude are deployed towards poor, vulnerable people (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Malkki, 1996; Agier, 2010), victim of the socio-cultural system of their country of origin, who deserve to be helped to find their way to autonomy, in the Western sense of the term (Pinelli, 2011; Taliani, 2019). Such an approach is found in several studies on reception in Italy (i.e., Avallone, 2018; Fabini *et al.*, 2019; Della Puppa and Sano, 2021) and in other EU countries (Glorius and Doomernik, 2019). Within the reception system, asylum seeker and refugee shelters produce individuals that are expected to accept the conditions of reception passively (Harrell-Bond, 2005) in order to be assisted and supported towards emancipation. This means individuals must subject themselves to a position of grateful debtors that does not recognise their agency, nor their migratory plans. It means they must deal with practitioners with an ambiguous role that tends to oscillate between assistance and control (Pinelli, 2015; Marchetti and Pinelli, 2017; Fabini *et al.*, 2019). Practitioners support migrants during their stay to favour their autonomy. They can do so with condescending attitudes, regardless of the age, gender, parenthood background of beneficiaries (Zavaroni *et al.*, 2021), that are likely to infantilise them (Malkki, 1995), in an attempt of re-education (to Western values) (Vacchiano and Vailati, 2011). The literature on conditional inclusion usefully point to the moral, pedagogical and contingent dimensions of (some) integration programmes (Hacker *et al.*, 2015; de Waal, 2020; Klarenbeek and Weide, 2020). In these contexts, access to rights and inclusion are contingent upon individuals’ behaviour and their ability to demonstrate they are “good” migrant citizens (Schinkel, 2010; Shukla, 2016), by striving to achieve socio-economic independence, to improve language fluency and to adapt culturally (Lentin and Titley, 2011; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; Hackl, 2020; Vianelli *et al.*, 2022). Practitioners can also enact forms of control and surveillance that limit the liberty of migrants and marginalise them. Their attitudes are not neutral. They can lead beneficiaries to conditions of dependency worse than those experienced prior to their entrance into the reception system or their arrival in the destination country (Manocchi, 2014). They can paradoxically prevent beneficiaries’ autonomy, running counter to the declared objective of reception projects. They can frustrate individuals struggle for self-determination, with dynamics similar (and yet different) to those of exploitation (Malucelli, 2001; Brunovskis and Surtees, 2007).

Shelter staff are not exempt from stereotypical interpretations and prejudices towards migrants (Sigona, 2003; Nawyn, 2011; Manocchi, 2014) and can contribute to their re-victimisation (Beneduce, 2019). Massari (2017) calls for the need to find appropriate spaces where practitioners can listen to migrants and migrants can express themselves more easily, also through silence. Some scholars suggest that cultural-linguistic mediation can provide a useful tool for active listening,

particularly to address intersectional issues (Phillimore, 2016; McKnight *et al.*, 2019; Collins and Skarparis, 2020). According to the literature (Nigris, 1996; Favaro and Fumagalli, 2004), mediation can be articulated into several intervention levels: the informative and orientation level, the linguistic and communicative level, the cultural and intercultural level, the psycho-social and relational level. Each level involves a variety of tasks that can be carried out through two different methods: the inter-linguistic approach, based mainly on translation, interpreting and language studies (Gentile, 1996; Wadensjö, 1998), and the intercultural approach, which focuses on the anthropological and sociological aspects of mediation (Nigris, 1996; Bowling and Hoffman, 2000; Castiglioni, 2006; Luatti, 2016). To date, modes of mediation with asylum seekers are still understudied, even less attention has been devoted to mediation with trafficked people. Where they are available, Cultural-linguistic Mediators are often called on an ad hoc basis or too late to ensure useful interventions, because of service fragmentation (on Italy, where mediation is quite widespread: Luatti, 2016; Semprebón *et al.*, 2021). Only in rare cases are service providers able to provide interpretation/mediation services (and other specialist services) in-house (Koegler *et al.*, 2021).

Simone and Boiano (2018) suggest that the category of deserving vulnerable victim has become incorporated in forced migrants as a prerequisite not only to stay in camps but also to apply for international protection. Some migrants have come to be seen as deserving individuals rather than individuals entitled to rights. This is particularly evident in relation to residence permits for victims of trafficking, which are inextricably linked to collaboration with law enforcement officers, as explained previously (Musto, 2010; Brunovskis and Skilbrei, 2016; Clemente, 2017; Johansson and Semprebón, 2020; Semprebón *et al.*, 2021). Like the systems of reception and counter-trafficking, that of asylum seems to be guided by the objective to support people on the condition that they abandon their cultural practices, associated for example to religious and traditions rituals. People are asked to assimilate the Western narrative model of victims (Taliani, 2019), while practitioners fail to consider their actual experiences (Oyewumi, 2003) and any ambiguous relationships with figures such as traffickers or exploiters. The latter have exploited them, on the one side, but have also facilitated their migration project and may share with them intimate feelings, on the other (Peano, 2013).

It is evident that the humanitarian approach we have described can produce precariousness (Khosravi, 2017), but in order to understand how, we must consider the role of the state in creating the structural economic and social conditions that limit mobility, sustain inequalities and exploitation through the migration regime and its intersections with migration, employment, gender, race (Davidson O'Connell, 2006; Anderson and Andrijasevic, 2008; Andrijasevic, 2010; Anderson, 2013; Molland, 2019). This is even more relevant when addressing trafficking. Focusing on this phenomenon with mere attention on transnational networks of traffickers obscures the role of states in regulating migration flows and (not) introducing legal migration routes, which ultimately de-politicises the discussion on trafficking. The absence of an organic policy of migration and the



lack of integration between the asylum and counter-trafficking interventions, limit the effectiveness of the support provided to migrants and, what is worse, leave them vulnerable to further risks of exploitation (Doran *et al.*, 2014). Women are particularly vulnerable to these risks (Pinelli, 2013) and their trajectories are more often characterised by abandonment and marginality (Pinelli, 2019).

### **To what extent are protection programmes intersectional?**

Feminists and social scientists (Dorlin, 2005; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992) have contributed to an improved understanding of how the intersectional perspective can help prevent the crystallisation of categories (Crenshaw, 1989) and promote a dynamic, rather than static interpretation of social processes. The Nigerian women who are the main protagonists of this book are black women, migrants, they have experienced exploitation, severe traumas and violence, come from a country characterised by widespread forms of patriarchy, (mostly) from disadvantaged families, are of childbearing age and arrived in Italy when they were less than 18 years old. These are all elements that marked their life and will continue to do so. Each and all of them are crucial for understanding their life path and journey and an intersectional perspective is precious in this regard. It has another advantage. It can help highlight to what extent protection agencies have adopted intersectional approaches and instruments and to what extent this has contributed to improving beneficiaries' protection.

Concern has been expressed about the lack of coordination among service providers (Nichols and Heil, 2015; Jones and Lutze, 2016; Gerassi and Nichols, 2018), which is likely to hinder comprehensive responses to migrants, if not to prevent knowledge of the actual existence of relevant services (Zimmerman, 2010). The result is that people may even fail to reach out for help. Researchers have criticised the fragmented nature of both the counter-trafficking and the asylum system, often flattened on an emergency logic (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Pinelli, 2015; Marchetti, 2016; Scotto, 2016; Pitzalis, 2018), dependent on rigid rules of funding with little space for intersectional considerations (Semperebon *et al.*, 2021). Both systems, similar to welfare ones, have had to deal with austerity programmes and related cuts in resources, that have affected programmes with intersectional objectives in particular (Bassel and Emejulu, 2014; Emejulu and Bassel, 2015).

Scarce consideration for intersectionality implies looking at men and women as a-historic and universal categories (Malkki, 1996) and failing to consider individual experiences. It is likely to add to the experiential continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987; Krause, 2015; Freedman, 2016) suffered by trafficked people, along a temporal and geographical axis (Scheper-Huges and Burgois, 2004; Freedman, 2016): following various forms of violence to which migrants and exploited people are subjected throughout their migration experience, they can become subjected to forms of structural violence (Farmer, 2004) that are intrinsically connected to the former (Pinelli, 2011; Speed, 2016). Institutional systems of asylum and anti-trafficking label women as vulnerable victims, thus frustrating their

struggle for self-determination (Nawyn, 2011; Manocchi, 2014). Their access to legal protection is often constrained because of failures of the referral mechanism (Santoro, 2018), but also frequently “suspended” because of long bureaucratic waiting times. This throws light on the relevance of the temporal dimension that we will focus on next.

### ***The temporality of migration regimes and reception***

A growing body of research has discussed the relevance of time, temporalities and temporal processes in the context of border and migration regimes (Cwerner, 2001, 2004; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Andersson, 2014; Griffiths, 2014). Cwerner (2004) uses the term “time politics” to refer to “*the temporal relations that are set in motion by a series of individual agents and collective agencies in order to exert power over each other in a particular field or area of social organization*” (71–72). These temporal relations can activate mechanisms of power, defined by Cwerner as “temporal technologies,” that impact on people’s lives.

Migration policy has been largely preoccupied with short-term issues (Castles, 1995: 306) and emergencies, as explained above (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Pinelli, 2015; Marchetti, 2016; Scotto, 2016; Pitzalis, 2018), with less consideration for migrants’ trajectories and inclusion. A “hurry and wait pattern” (Mortland, 1987: 397) has become increasingly evident in migration control systems that can be described as simultaneously too fast and too slow. Griffiths *et al.* (2013) suggest that both aspects of time characterise the lives of migrants and contribute to producing a sense of uncertainty: on one side, asylum seekers’ claims are streamlined and rushed, with scholars raising concerns on the poor quality of legal processes (i.e., Hambly and Gill, 2020). On the other, they must wait a long time for appointments (i.e., regarding asylum procedures, routine medical appointments, etc.) and yet be readily available when the appointments are eventually set.

Migrants’ trajectories are best described by liminality (Wilson and Donnan, 2012). They tend to be suspended for a protracted period of time. Because of residence permit restrictions and related limitations to employment, they can be waiting endlessly before being in the position to work and helplessly feel they are wasting time trapped in bureaucracy. Liminality is also experienced in shelters and camps. The latter have a crucial role in decelerating migrants’ mobility (Papadopoulos *et al.*, 2008; Missbach, 2013). Permanence in shelters is often extended due to lengthy procedures of asylum determination, not without consequences on people’s lives. They are thrown into a state of “*permanent temporariness*” (Bailey *et al.*, 2002; Simmelink, 2011; Vosko *et al.*, 2014), preventing any projection into the future and holding them back in an endless waiting time (Pinelli, 2011).

With specific reference to trafficked people, Dell *et al.* (2019) identified three specific stages of service needs: immediate and short-term needs associated with rescue; on-going needs in relation to protection and recovery; medium/long term, including access to education and employment, language support, legal support; and long-term needs for inclusion (see also Macy and Johns, 2011; Davy, 2015;

Muraya and Fry, 2016). This reminds us that needs evolve and change at different temporal phases and reinforces attention on the importance of taking people's temporalities seriously. Yet, transversal to the phases of protection is the need for continuous support (Bick *et al.*, 2017) by a referent figure, as explained above (Macy and Johns, 2011; Davy, 2015).

One main critical issue has been detected in anti-trafficking programmes with regard to temporality: a short time frame (Murphy, 2018) that can place beneficiaries at risk of further victimisation, if not resulting in destitution (Nicholson *et al.*, 2019), hence the failure of providing sufficient support to exit from exploitation (for the UK: Balch, 2015; Beddoe *et al.*, 2015; Gallagher and Featonby, 2019; Schwarz and Williams-Woods, 2022; for Italy: Semprebon *et al.*, 2021). We think that the complexity of anti-trafficking programmes should also be examined in light of the temporal regimes of migration and asylum (Coutin, 2005; Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Griffiths, 2014), as anticipated in Chapter 2. These regimes have created forms of inequality by disposing of people's mobility and time (Fontanari, 2019). Thus, by looking at the temporalities they can generate, through "time techniques" (Bear, 2016), we can contribute to highlighting forms of inequality but also bring forward migrants' claims for rights and temporal rights (Fontanari, 2019).

### **Our interviews with anti-trafficking practitioners**

In light of the above literature, we carried out an intense ethnographic observation in the N.A.Ve project, in the northeastern part of Italy, and 41 interviews with the practitioners, including unit coordinators and staff. Our main aim was to look at the services provided, to investigate to what extent practitioners manage to address beneficiaries' needs and with what approach. As we explained in the Introduction and in Chapter 1, the N.A.Ve project is organised in six phases, including: outreach, *fuga* (escape), reflection, phase zero, social inclusion, *sgancio* (completion of the project). We interviewed staff involved in each of these phases. We will look at the challenges they face in dealing with beneficiaries, and in particular the target group of young Nigerian women and will highlight the tension between the biographical temporalities of beneficiaries, those of practitioners and institutions.

We should recall that the Nigerian women we interviewed were aged 17 to +20. N.A.Ve practitioners – including those we interviewed and those we did not – are mainly females, aged 25–50, with a background in social work, or educational science and pedagogy, or psychology. Some of them have a permanent contract with a local authority in the Veneto Region, particularly but not only Case Managers; others, especially Reception Practitioners have temporary contracts. What must be underlined is that, with respect to the asylum system, we have observed a much lower rate of personnel turnover (fieldwork notes, N.A.Ve monitoring meeting, 11 September 2020), which contribute to knowledge and expertise building and, in our opinion, favours the development of rapport with beneficiaries.

***“They appreciate that we recognise them and distinguish them from the mass”: first contacts, identification and entrance in the N.A.Ve programme***

Practitioners meet potential beneficiaries directly through outreach work or through the referral system, including mainly referrals by the Territorial Commissions [the bodies responsible for asylum determinations], the police, the Anti-trafficking Helpline, the Outreach Units.

Outreach activities are structured in two types of interventions: on sexual and labour exploitation. We will concentrate on the former, for which, the units operate across the regional territory, with day and night shifts, twice a week. Outreach Units comprise Outreach Unit practitioners, Cultural-linguistic Mediators (on an ad hoc basis) and trained volunteers. The staff use a car to drive through the region and make contacts with people in the streets. It is an ordinary car, with no logo, that people have learned to recognise and distinguish from police cars and clients’ cars. Nigerian women are particularly scared of the police, as we shall see.

Establishing a relationship with workers in the sex industry has been key to the N.A.Ve’s “harm reduction” approach in the N.A.Ve Outreach Unit. This has meant focusing on individual needs, primarily healthcare, and promoting preventive measures, such as contraception and facilitated access to the voluntary interruption of pregnancy – aimed to deter unsafe abortions (i.e., use of medicines without consulting doctors or informal out-of-clinic providers).

We approach the women in a friendly way, we greet them. The big difference is between old and new contacts. First, we introduce ourselves to the new[ly arrived] girls and we explain who we are, we give them our leaflet, our telephone number, we explain what we can do and we offer them a warm tea. If it is the first time that we meet a girl, we avoid “making an inquisition.” If the girl feels like chatting, we continue chatting, otherwise we do it little by little [in the following meetings]. If it is a girl whom we know already, it could be that she starts telling things, asking information. They appreciate that we recognise them, and distinguish them from the mass, that we remember about them and what they told us the first time. Our outreach work includes an implicit objective (...) to analyse the situation of the territory and monitor if there are new dynamics that we should be aware of when preparing our interventions (...). Of course, our main goal is harm reduction: we distribute condoms, educate people to prevention and contraception and we try to limit any harm as much as possible, while avoiding any judgement and by actively listening to the people. (...) We think that health issues should come first. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Outreach Unit Coordinator, female, 01 June 2020)

The Outreach Coordinator stressed the importance of an active listening approach and of avoiding overwhelming women with questions and judgemental attitudes,

particularly in first encounters. She underlined the importance of a caring approach with people, who want to feel recognised and cared for. Monitoring the conditions of work and the number of people in the streets ultimately responds to the same objective: following up on people's trajectories and be ready to address new emerging needs. The overall approach of the units is very much focused on needs, as they are expressed by individuals, rather than programme objectives. Practitioners can encounter women several times before any need is explicitly brought forward: taking time, being patient is essential. Much attention is paid to avoid putting women under pressure.

Recently, outreach practitioners have experienced the ad hoc involvement of Socio-legal Practitioners, due to increasing requests of support on regularisation. This exemplifies the units' attention to individuals' needs. All the people contacted by the Outreach Units, in the period 2019–2020 – during our fieldwork –, invariably expressed another need: access to health care. Nigerian women hardly ever asked for medical check-ups or exams. Their knowledge on sexual health is often limited. Sometimes, they ask to be accompanied to a gynaecologist, but it generally happens in coincidence with a pregnancy or the willingness to interrupt it.

Apart from N.A.Ve's, other Outreach Units are active in the regional territory. These are faith-based organisations that involve volunteers. They do not provide health assistance, nor condoms, that are contrary to their religious ethics. Rather, they engage in informal conversations with people in the streets and offer to share a prayer. Their aim is to convince women to stop prostituting.

We focus more on solidarity. Our proposal [for the women we meet] is to leave the streets. Clearly, this makes sense in a context of trust. If we meet a girl who is pregnant, unless she decides otherwise... You know, we are a Catholic community, we have our rules and values. If a person decides to keep the baby, we tell her not to go to the streets and we provide support during the pregnancy and to give birth, because girls in this situation are very fragile. Obviously, if the person decides not to keep the baby, we stand by her in any case because we can still do so: we meet her during our outreach work, we still put forward our proposal [to stop prostituting]. Abortion concerns more Romanian women and we tell them to make do. We give them an alternative, which is to keep the baby and, if they want, consider the possibility of adoption. If they want some help, we tell them they should leave the streets, although it is a tough choice, we know it. If this is their only income, they can try, but it is difficult, you understand? Then maybe, little by little, they can make some steps forward. (...) Prayers have always been part of our interventions as well as approaching them with a holy card, because when girls see the cross or Mary or Jesus Christ, they understand immediately who we are. They call us "those of the prayers, while they call N.A.Ve those of condoms." [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Faith-based Outreach Unit Volunteer,  
male, 08 June 2020)

As observed during our fieldwork with the faith-based unit mentioned in the extract above, young Nigerian women do welcome the opportunity to pray together. Many are very religious. Others decline the offer. The approach of the unit is friendly, although it tends to be judgemental. Volunteers set clear boundaries between “morally bad” work (prostitution) and “good” work (other jobs) and repeatedly insist women should leave the streets. A few girls abandoned sex work, including a few very young Nigerian girls whom we interviewed, and entered the N.A.Ve, thanks to an on-going collaboration between the faith-based and the N.A.Ve’s units.

On a regional level, most outreach contacts with Nigerian girls, and most contact with young Nigerian girls aged less than 18 in Veneto, were made in Verona, where higher numbers of Nigerian trafficked people were reported by the local Outreach Unit, compared to other provincial cities. Interviews with the Local and National Police in Padova, Venice and Verona confirmed it.<sup>1</sup> Seven of our respondents were identified as unaccompanied minor victims of trafficking by the N.A.Ve staff, in partnership with law enforcement officers, the Social Inclusion Unit and the faith-based Outreach Unit mentioned. These young women eventually joined the N.A.Ve, some after multiple contacts (as in the case of Yyore and Aisosa).

As stated in the Regio Decree Law 1404/1934 (art. 25bis)<sup>2</sup> – and in Law 269/1998 (art. 2),<sup>3</sup> Public Officers are required to report any person under 18 who is presumed to sell sex. Based on ongoing partnerships, Outreach Units call the police whenever they meet a young person who looks younger than this age. In turn, the police reaches the person, reports to the Public Prosecutor’s Office and ensures the person is transferred to a protected shelter. This is how the procedure was described.

The Outreach Unit identifies the suspected minor, calls the police if the practitioners are sure she/he is a minor, or call the Case Manager if they are unsure about the age. The Case Manager collects all the information and informs the police that in turn start searching for the person in the street. (...) When the Case Manager calls the police, the neutral harm reduction intervention by the Outreach Unit can be jeopardised (...). We have had to work on how [to collaborate], to teach [police] officers that if they find a black girl who is presumably less than 18, they cannot report she is an adult just because she said so. We have had another problem. The police arrived, sirens blaring soon after the Outreach Unit had left. Brilliant! This is how you scare girls off! We have worked a lot with the police to identify young girls. We did manage with some, working until 10 in the evening. Sometimes, we also tried contacting clients if we could no longer find a girl in streets. We asked them to call the police and then go and collect the girl. The police would stop the car and take the girl to the police station. The police was very helpful in this regard and some clients very collaborative. (...) As always, it is people that make up institutions. Practices are connected to the heads of units and based

on set priorities. I am not sure whether it is connected to specific investigation priorities, on specific forms of exploitation or something else, but, in past years, when we dealt with Romanian women, law enforcement officers used to be more involved. I do not think it depends on skin colour. Maybe investigating on Nigerian trafficking is much more complex as it is investigating on young girls aged less than 18. It is an issue of achieving the goal maybe. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, male, 26 May 2020–24 June 2020)

As the extract shows, the collaboration between the N.A.Ve and the police has positively contributed towards the identification and protection of some young Nigerian girls, not without critical issues. According to the Case Manager we interviewed, police interventions have been affected by investigation priorities. He suggested that the prosecution of traffickers have prevailed over the protection of people (see also Anderson and O'Connell, 2002; Brennan, 2014; Brunoovskis and Skilbrei, 2016; Molland, 2019) and that the prosecution of some traffickers may prevail over that of others, depending on the likelihood of achieving positive investigative outcome. Further critical issues in the collaboration have been recalled during a fieldwork observation with a N.A.Ve's Outreach Unit and they concern the complexity of implementation. It is difficult for the police to identify underage girls, because of the limited age range (16–20) and because they often declare to be of adult age, as forced by their exploiters; to ensure rapid interventions upon receiving a call, as they are understaffed and overwhelmed with work; to ensure the prompt transfer of minors to a protected shelter because of the scarcity of available places and the reduced functioning of the referral system in off-work hours; to approach women with a woman- and child-friendly manner, because of insufficient training. Outreach units strive to swiftly call the police, but practitioners must pay attention not to generate confusion in roles. Calls can only be made after the contact with the young person is terminated and practitioners must leave before the police arrives. This procedure is particularly important as migrant women rarely trust law enforcement officers. Unless the roles of outreach units and law enforcement agencies are clearly distinguished, the risk is high for outreach work to be severely compromised (fieldwork notes, Outreach Unit evening monitoring, Verona, 20 June 2020).

Nigerian women do not trust the police because they are afraid of being deported. Lack of trust can also be attributed to prior negative experiences with law enforcement officers (see also Farrell *et al.*, 2019) and a potential confusion of roles, as practitioners suggested and the experience of Isowa highlighted: police interventions normally follow that of the Outreach Unit and this can contribute to the perception they have the same role (and power to deport). In this respect, Outreach Unit Practitioners have diverging opinions on collaborations with the police. The Case Manager in Verona pointed to the risk of police action jeopardising outreach work, but collaborations have been on-going, due to his

responsibility to minors as a Public Officer. Outreach Practitioners in Padova are more sceptical about collaborating:

The first tool that we have is the relationship, they [women and girls in the streets] hardly tell you that they are minors, and if they do we have to ask ourselves why they are telling us. This doesn't normally happen. It happens that we have suspicions or that someone tells us that the girl is young and documents do not confirm it, as many Nigerians have documents indicating adult ages. Using our tool, the relationship, in the street is very difficult because of the limited time that we have. We build relationships by taking people elsewhere, for example to a health check. We make people understand that health is important for working. Or we have to wait for people to ask us for medical help, on pregnancy or something else. Then you have the opportunity, time and space to organise an in-depth interview [at one of N.A.Ve's offices]. One thing that we must absolutely avoid is to do things in a hurry and contact the police immediately if meeting a suspected minor, because it does not help much and above all it is likely to inhibit any further contact. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Outreach Unit Practitioner, female,  
08 June 2020)

Time and place are important. Outreach work must not be rushed, and the streets are not an ideal place to develop any significant relationship with women, hence accompanying them to a health check becomes an opportunity to provide harm reduction support but also to develop rapport. It takes time. It requires outreach workers to carefully consider whether and when the police should be contacted, as their intervention can prevent any future contact and nullify outreach efforts.

Following outreach work, some women may ask for an appointment with the Crisis and Evaluation Unit (see Chapter 1), whose practitioners are available on a 24-hour rotation shift. The main task of the unit is to meet potential N.A.Ve beneficiaries and conduct a risk assessment. If they are facing an immediate risk, the practitioner informs the Helpline and starts contacting escape shelters to find an available place. Calls for assessment can be received also by the Helpline. Most often they are made by anti-trafficking projects staff, but also by Labour Inspectorates, law enforcement agencies, lawyers, asylum seeker reception shelters, NGOs working with migrants, social services, etc. Over the last year, an increasing number of calls have been made by Territorial Commissions, following interviews with asylum seekers whose story pointed to indicators of trafficking. The Crisis and Evaluation Unit has been put under pressure by these referrals. As reported by the Coordinator, in 2019, 153 cases were referred to N.A.Ve by Territorial Commissions in Veneto and 13 by Commissions outside the region (interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioner, female, 28 May 2020).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there are cases in which presumed victims of trafficking contact the Helpline or the Crisis and Evaluation Unit directly, but this happens



rarely, following co-nationals' word-of-mouth. It did happen more frequently in the period 2015–2016.

Nigerian women used to arrive in Crisis and Evaluation practitioners' offices, particularly in Verona, with a paper in their hands and the name of the Practitioner written on it. Daily observations of this peculiar and yet frequent dynamic caught the Practitioner's attention. She eventually realised that the women had been guided by their exploiters, with the objective to "take advantage" of the protection system and start the regularisation procedure soon, so that they could be exploited "regularly" with no risk of deportation. It is unclear whether exploiters considered that the women may stop selling sex and enter the protection programme. However, practitioners put an end to this dynamic, to avoid incurring the risk of "facilitating" exploiters. Although we do not have any evidence in this sense, we argue they may have failed to protect women instead, as the women stopped calling by the office. For sure, contacts cannot grant any positive outcome in terms of terminating exploitation, but they open up alternative avenues that can represent a first step in this direction, if the women are willing.

Many women got in touch with us [Crisis and Evaluation Unit] in Verona. It was all Nigerians. In the beginning, I did a whole lot of filtering. I found out there was a rumor according to which they [the woman] could come here and ask for me. I observed a trend was developing. They all came here because they knew they would quickly get an appointment at the *Questura*<sup>5</sup> for regularisation. Then the women would disappear because they got the papers. So, we started saying no, that's enough, we won't send them to the *Questura*, unless they go through an interview with us first. And then they stopped coming, because they could no longer achieve their goal. It was evident that there was someone sending them to our office. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioner,  
female, 28 May 2020)

Generally speaking, the Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners organise more than one/two interviews with potential beneficiaries to undertake their risk assessment and decide whether they can join the social protection programme. In the words of one Practitioner, it takes time, up to several weeks or more. Many potential beneficiaries have never heard the term trafficking and do not understand what it means. Practitioners can use indicators to guide their work but individual trajectories cannot always be reconducted to set indicators. Most importantly, women are generally scared, ashamed and/or traumatised to disclose personal details, resulting in accounts that are likely to be incoherent and compounded by the language barriers (Clawson *et al.*, 2007; Nsonwu *et al.*, 2018). Some potential beneficiaries may have interviews for weeks while still entrenched in exploitation, some may come forward after breaking free from it, some may be in and out of exploitation multiple times.

If the interviews provide sufficient information to Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners to determine the risk of exploitation, women are offered the chance to join the social protection programme. *De facto*, these practitioners act with considerable discretionary power. Scholars suggested that professionals may lack the specialised training necessary to recognise the signs of human trafficking, particularly in view of the constantly changing dynamics of trafficking and the complexity of individuals' journeys (Macy and Johns, 2011; Timoshkina, 2019). However, the N.A.Ve staff have accumulated several years of experience in this regard, thanks to a specific dispositive providing continuous training and support: twice a month, a regional coordination meeting of the Crisis and Evaluation Unit is organised where all the Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners meet to share and discuss "cases." It is a crucial moment for coordination, mutual support, and reflections on on-going trends in exploitation and trafficking, as well as on similarities and differences across territories. Nevertheless, practitioners, of various N.A.Ve units, often reported their difficulty to keep up with the ever-evolving patterns of the phenomenon and with people's changing profiles.

Is it enough for us to be specialists? Cases are more and more complex. The provision of art. 18 programme is no longer sufficient, as the social inclusion team is also testifying, by reporting on cases of drug dealing and substance abuse. Victims are increasingly vulnerable. It is hard to deal with such complex profiles, to develop know-how and build capacity to adopt new methodologies. To face new scenarios, we need new instruments for inclusion. (...) We need to think in terms of targets, complex needs for the users that are changing before our eyes. This is the new challenge: how to offer a dignified life and a form of integration that makes sense, for example based on the characteristics of mothers, of their children, to create a situation of tranquility, to avoid re-victimization linked to situations of poverty. This is our challenge to be faced as N.A.Ve., as a territorial network of local authorities and services. We need to understand the needs expressed by people. We need to understand where *they* want to start from, we can't impose ourselves with our views, we need to consider their migratory project. The solution we propose is not necessarily of interest them, so we need to start from the idea *they* have about their future life. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit  
Coordinator, female, 28 May 2020)

We have seen various changes since we started working with trafficked people. There were many more girls from Eastern Europe in 2015. Then there was a boom of young Nigerian girls and we had to change our approach. Now the number of girls from Nigeria has been decreasing over the last year or so. Now we have older Nigerian women that have been here [in Europe] for some time and have had a long path in Italy or outside Italy. Many are over 25 and have done a couple of years on their own and therefore they have

a different experience from the girls who arrived at 18 or 19. And then we have had an increase in males due to labor exploitation, which has started to grow again. (...) This requires another approach from that we had with a very small number of Nigerian users, mostly with adolescent issues. Now we have adults, sometimes with children or families. (...) Sometimes there isn't enough time to start reflecting on the on-going changes of our target groups and on phenomena... This does not scare us, as we have got used to a flexible approach over the years as we have always worked with people suffering from addictions and psychiatric problems hence, I think we have the right mindset, and we know the relevant services on the territory to go about them. The problem is the complexity of issues: a person who is victim of trafficking and exploitation and has also problems of substance abuse is a complex person that requires very careful attention on each aspect. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Director and  
Coordinator, male, 17 June 2020)

In the face of increasingly complex profiles, practitioners describe social protection programmes as inadequate, with specific concern for young lone mothers with children, a target that forces them to think about intersectional needs, but also trafficked people with psychiatric problems or issues of substance abuse, who require access to a variety of support services. Both targets point to the need to improve the collaboration with, and integration of, social protection programmes and other local welfare services. The Crisis and Evaluation Unit Coordinator insisted that increased attention must be put on the actual objectives of beneficiaries, that decisions must be taken *with* them rather than *for* them (see also Ahmed and Seshu, 2012; Wachter *et al.*, 2016), while bringing into perspective the dimension of time, including the present, where *they* want to start, and the future, what *they* envisage about their future.

Consideration for the present suggests a reflection on whether beneficiaries want to join a social protection programme at all. According to data by the National Anti-trafficking Helpline, for the period 2017–2019, only one third (33%) of the people who met the Crisis and Evaluation practitioners in the Veneto Region – 73.2% of whom were women – eventually started the social protection programme. Regarding the others: 36% were not motivated to start it, 13% chose not to start it because shelter rules were perceived as too strict; 11% were not identified as victims and were not offered to start the programme, 7% interrupted the reflection phase (or were in a phase of transition to social inclusion).<sup>6</sup> This data highlights that while access to social protection programmes is in part filtered by practitioners (11% were not identified as victims), it very much depends on the decision of potential beneficiaries to join the programme, contributing to de-constructing the idea of helpless victims. Our respondents explained to us that entry into the programme is linked to a turning point in their lives, when they choose the programme as the best solution for them. The stories of Osarobo and Aisosa exemplify this well (see Chapter 2).

In a similar and yet different vein, the Crisis and Evaluation Coordinator used the term “crisis” with reference to a central moment for potential beneficiaries, involving a movement, from a position (of exploitation) to another (the social protection programme) in which an opportunity comes up to break free (from exploitation). In the view of the Coordinator, it is crucial for practitioners to be present when the “crisis” comes and to be clear with potential beneficiaries about their role: it is not a role of identification, but one of protection only.

Crisis is a word that is not used by everyone... I remember that we created and used it because it derives from the experience of our work on trafficking and from a big discussion that we also had with our previous Coordinator. I have always thought that for a person to choose, consciously or not, to get out of a condition of exploitation, there must be a moment of crisis, as in everything in life, otherwise you don't move from your situation, whether it is positive or negative. The working hypothesis that we had developed is that the practitioners must be present and try to inhabit that moment of crisis and that moment of crisis very often occurred in the presence of police forces, for example. In that situation it is very evident that social workers have a different role than the police (...) What I have always considered as the innovative aspect of our anti-trafficking system is the fact of physically going to see the person, as a social worker, when she/he is meeting the police and show that our work is different, it is not the collection of her/his story. I no longer use the term identification in my work as with this approach we actually meet the person when the identification, which for me is a police term, has already been made by police officers. My job at that moment is to go and make the person understand what is happening, why the police has activated me and provide information on their rights, then reassure them and say: they called us, we don't know your story, but the police told us that you have been the victim of a crime, in Italy you have these opportunities, so if you want, right now, we can take you to a protected shelter, you don't have to pay anything, you stay there, you rest, you take the time you need, we will continue to give you information and no one can find you. So, it's clear that the idea is to develop a relationship of trust (...). I still believe that the tools of educators, psychologists, social workers must all be used to build an empathic relationship, because it is in the face of this type of relationship of trust that you manage to relate to the person, and she/he will evaluate how to re-define her/his migration project. That crisis becomes therefore an opportunity for change. The person can also go back to the previous situation, but in any case something changes. There is a risk of returning to exploitation of course, but we always leave our contact details. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit  
Coordinator, female, 28 May 2022)

The Coordinator located the crisis moment in encounters with the police, as her team often experienced this dynamic. However, as it emerged in many coordination meetings (i.e., fieldwork notes, Crisis and Evaluation Unit coordination meeting, 13 January 2020), the “crisis” can occur at different times, as she explained herself, before or after police encounters or in situations in which the police are not encountered at all. What seems common in all situations is that several contacts with any of N.A.Ve staff take place before the crisis takes shape. This partially diverges with the testimonies of the women we interviewed. It is worth recalling that many of them mentioned turning points associated with aspects concerning their biographical life (pregnancy), external factors (an aggression) and the pressure (and fear of disappointment of) family members, partly connected to periods of their life preceding any contact with the N.A.Ve staff.

### ***The social protection programme and reception***

N.A.Ve beneficiaries are hosted in reception shelters, including both lay- and faith-based facilities. Following the recent establishment of a dedicated Reception Shelters Unit, meetings have been organised on a regular monthly basis with the main goal of ensuring a minimum homogeneous standard of reception (fieldwork notes, Reception Shelters Unit coordination meeting, 3 March 2020). Differences apply in how shelters understand “community life,” as will be explained, but also on access rules. For example, faith-based shelters do not host women who decide to undertake a voluntary termination of pregnancy, because abortion is contrary to Catholic principles. While different opinions are generally respected, tensions have emerged among practitioners in coincidence with the scarce availability of reception places and the lack of transparency on beneficiaries’ trajectories.

We felt a little different regarding the voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP). It happens that we host girls who had a VTP and that’s fine, but if we host a girl who is pregnant and then decides to interrupt it, we ask our colleagues to transfer her to another shelter because we don’t agree with this choice. Everyone in the [N.A.V.e] system knows how we think about this, but sometimes we feel a bit like a *mosca bianca* [black swan]. We are pro-life and therefore we try and support girls and tell them: “very well, we know that the social protection programme lasts about a year, and we know that it is difficult for a girl who is expecting a child to do it, but we take care of you and the psychological difficulties you may go through.” They are not always aware of what VTP means, especially Nigerian girls. We heard some of them say: “It’s a blood clot, I will have children another time.” They don’t think about what it means psychologically and therefore we try to tell them clearly that there are also other ways to deal with it, that they can think about adoption upon birth. (...) It happened that some girls were transferred to our shelter later than expected, after they did a VTP, and we were not informed about it. This wasn’t nice. I understand the difficulty that they system can encounter

when there are few or no places available, but they should inform us and give us the chance to talk to the women. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June 2020)

When beneficiaries arrive in a reception shelter, practitioners explain to them the basic rules of cohabitation (i.e., use of individual and common rooms, timetable of activities, etc.), ask them to sign a contract and agree they will be respected. According to practitioners, this should be a moment in which beneficiaries take up responsibility. By definition, a contract is a document signed by two parties (at least), testifying an agreement, but none of our respondents referred to it. They rather described shelters as places with unilaterally defined rules.

Everyday life in shelters is organised around different activities, ranging from Italian language learning to laboratories to develop manual and/or other skills, collective activities, such as eating and cleaning, etc. Increasing space has been given to beneficiaries to self-organise themselves for cooking. It has become evident that food, as an intimate issue, is a crucial element of well-being. Practitioners did not explicitly refer to free time, if not to recall beneficiaries' requests for more liberty to go out. As mentioned in Chapter 2, free time is another central theme for women's well-being.

Beneficiaries are introduced to rules and exposed to the disciplinary character and instruments (i.e., rule boards) of shelters (see also Lee, 2014) upon entry. Then, they are given time to "learn by doing" and assimilate how "shelter life" unravels. Notwithstanding, practitioners are aware of beneficiaries' fears of rigid rules, particularly when they first arrive.

As soon as they arrive, we usually offer lunch if they arrive at that time. Then we explain some basic rules. We explain all the specific rules little by little, as time goes by. Often it is girls who start asking. We have a board that contains some information: the rules inside the house, the calendar of activities, how to deal with garbage, everything is there. So, the first two days the girls are overwhelmed with information. Then we explain the rest slowly. (...) We let things happen, a moment of difficulty will soon arrive. Then we explain that we are not sharing the shelter because we chose to share it, so we have to find a way to get along. (...) A few days after the person has entered, we organise a collective meeting and we explain everything in more details. Girls get a little scared. They often say: "Oh my goodness, how many things and rules!", but in my opinion it is only at the beginning. Then they understand that we are not ... how can I say it? We only try to convey a "familiar atmosphere" and make things work. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June 2020)

An interesting discussion on rules and regulations emerged during a coordination meeting.

Reception Practitioners and Case Managers interrogated themselves on the usefulness of rules, questioning whether they are functional to beneficiaries, in terms of guidelines on shelter life, or rather to Reception Practitioners to facilitate their work. This highlights the tension between two different attitudes: on the one side, a diffused pedagogical attitude (on integration programmes see Hacker *et al.*, 2015; de Waal, 2020; Klarenbeek and Weide, 2020) by Reception Practitioners, who work on an everyday basis with beneficiaries, on the other, an attitude prone to favour (or avoid discouraging) self-determination by Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners, whom, however, only see beneficiaries before they enter the N.A.Ve and not on a regular basis, hence with a different role. During the meeting, the proposal was advanced not to focus too much on rules, but rather on developing individual projects for each beneficiary and on improving coordination between practitioners across units and programme phases.

*Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner 1:* in our team meetings, we are reflecting a lot on the need to develop individualised projects, but then in other units, such as the Reception Shelters Unit, reflections seem to follow a different direction aiming to make reception management homogenous.

*Case Manager:* well, it derives from the experience with beneficiaries that compare their different situations in different shelters...

*Crisis and Evaluation Coordination:* alright, but is it not part of each person experience to deal with their own situation and any rule they encounter? And should it not be the responsibility of practitioners to deal with any difficulty they may encounter?

*Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner 2:* the Reception Shelters Unit is preparing a standard regulation and I wonder whether it will be shared with us too? It would be important for us to reflect with them on this aspect as we contribute to choosing, with Case Managers, to which shelter beneficiaries should be transferred to.

*Crisis and Evaluation Coordination:* I think we should structure a regulation to help people in the programme understand where they are, not to facilitate the educational challenges of practitioners... otherwise it becomes a sort of paradigm of our work. I think we should focus on preparing a specific programme for each beneficiary when they move to the shelter.

*Case Manager:* I agree, what is missing now in fact is the presence of Case Managers in Reception Shelters coordination meetings. [my translation from Italian]

(fieldwork notes, Crisis and Evaluation Unit coordination meeting, 19 February 2020)

In line with a pedagogical attitude, aimed to re-educate beneficiaries to Western values (Vacchiano and Vailati, 2011) and to encourage them to adapt culturally (Lentin and Titley, 2011; Holmes and Castañeda, 2016; Hackl, 2020; Vianelli *et al.*, 2022) in view of their inclusion into Italian society, some practitioners (in

faith-based shelters), consider it imperative to teach “Italian manners,” hinting to calls for assimilation. Others state that beneficiaries are in the position of debtors (towards the shelter and the Italian state) (Harrell-Bond, 2005) and should, therefore, be grateful and work hard to “conquer” their autonomy. This view is in contrast with a human rights approach, claiming beneficiaries’ rights to protection and assistance, and is coherent with a neoliberal idea of autonomy, charging individuals with full responsibility for achieving it.

The message that I think we must convey is that if you live with an Italian family, you must understand their habits and then it is easier for you to live in Italy. If you live in a place with co-nationals, you are likely to take your cultural habits with you. You should not abandon them, I am not saying this, but you can have a different eye on other people’s culture if you live with an Italian family. You can understand the cultural context in which you live. (...) In my opinion, the beautiful side for beneficiaries to live with a family is to have an opportunity to better understand the world in which they are living. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Volunteer, female,  
18 June 2020)

We think that there is a moment for everything, girls can make little steps for each little thing. This is our philosophy: you must conquer things. Everything requires time, you must get there with your own efforts. If we give everything to them as a gift, we will see no step forward. All these years we have noticed that they often think that everything is due to them. The Italian state must give them money. Do I have to give you things? Does the state have to give you things? I don’t have to give you anything at all, nor the state. So, we try to make them understand that we can build their path together, we can help them, but the path is theirs, they must work hard on it and go on. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June  
2020)

Reflecting on the challenges of shelter cohabitation, various practitioners affirmed their effort to build a “sense of community,” perceived as a positive boost to beneficiaries’ reception experience. Opinions on what this “sense of community” should entail and what its functions should be are varied. Some practitioners mentioned collective activities, organised on a regular basis, to create opportunities for sharing time and favouring bonding dynamics. Beneficiaries appreciate these a lot, especially whereby they have little (if any) family ties (like Osarobo) or social relations. Specific collective activities, such as cooking and eating together, have also been found to provide women with ideal informal settings to raise and share critical issues and for practitioners to bring them up constructively. The informality of such settings has been experienced as valuable because people suddenly



realise that their feelings are not unique to them and can be challenging for others too. For other practitioners, it is rather a “family atmosphere,” in the literal sense of the term, that must be offered, to favour beneficiaries transition to adulthood. This view reveals concern for women’s biographical temporalities, particularly whereby they have missed fundamental steps of their adolescence (see the second extract below). However, it is a Western adolescence that is imagined here, characterised by the (still) crucial role of parents and the imposition of rules to set limits and help young people mature. The adolescence that these women *experienced* is hardly considered. A passing reference is made to the victimisation to which they were subjected. Their *lived* adolescence remains in the background, as if it never existed as such. Yet, they did experience it (or the beginning of it): in Nigeria (not always) with their parents, during their travel to Europe (separated from their parents, but accompanied by enablers), and upon arrival in Italy. At the time of our interviews, they were still experiencing their adolescence, in (mixed) minors’ shelters, in coevalness with non-migrant adolescents (see also Çağlar, 2018), but with economic responsibilities towards their family, in an inversion of roles with respect to Western families. Arguably, the idea of adolescence that was mobilised is imbued in Western assumptions. It fails to fully address the complexity of the women’s experience and most of all their agency, projects and desires.

Our style is “familiar.” We are a big family. We always have a lot of discussions about attitudes, dressing codes, in a group. We have seen that discussing together reassures women, because they feel they share similar thoughts and experiences. It happens that they tell us: “Ah, then this thing didn't just happen to me.” Therefore, what was perceived as a giant problem can be re-considered. If we need to reproach a girl for minor issues that concern other girls too, we do it collectively, with other girls. (...) We often talk about our approach in [coordination] meetings [with other Reception Practitioners]. Someone disagrees, thinking that every girl has her own path and must be approached individually (...). We try to organise collective activities at least once a week, if not more. We organise a collective lunch and cook together, for example, once Nigerian, once Italian, once Romanian. We do things together. And also the [handicraft] laboratory that we organise is aimed to do things together. There are many things that we do together. There are scheduled moments and moments that also come up spontaneously. It is in the more informal moments that problematic issues emerge. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June 2020)

The first form of protection that we provide is not to lock them [beneficiaries] up inside and ask them to respect the rules, but to welcome them into our home, into our hearts. Then there’s what we need to do in practical terms, take care of disadvantaged people, without any delay. If we lose them, we

lose them for life. (...) They have not experienced the time of adolescence. What we want to do here is to somehow give them the chance to experience the stages they have missed, and we do it by creating a “family atmosphere.” This takes a long time and often girls realize what we try to do only long after they’ve left the shelter. They see the limits, the rules we must give them, although they have their own families and should know about rules. Sometimes, being firm with rules is difficult, but it helps them grow. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Coordinator, female,  
15 June 2020)

We have a different collective dimension [from other shelters]: the main thing is to meet them [the beneficiaries], spend time together with them, have a few words, both individually and with the whole group living in each shelter. It is important to stay in the shelter with each and every one and to discuss even the slightest daily tensions, before they grow to catastrophic situations. We regularly organise a lunch, a dinner, an afternoon tea, whatever, together to “test the waters.” It takes time but it is essential. These are the moments in which relational problems arise. (...) The fact that a practitioner is always present is also crucial, as a point of reference. Sometimes beneficiaries wait for the practitioner to arrive to talk to him/her... sometimes there are people who mess up things in the house and it is practitioners that ask to talk to them individually to settle things. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Director and Coordinator,  
male, 17 June 2020)

Life in reception shelters is described as relatively smooth, although the above extracts highlight that a reference person should always be present to make beneficiaries feel they are not abandoned and to address problems as they arise, thus preventing their escalation into conflict.

Two thorny questions have generated tension between beneficiaries and practitioners, as the women we interviewed narrated and practitioners confirmed: the distribution of pocket money and the use/control of smartphones. The pocket money is given to beneficiaries for personal expenses, on a weekly basis. The amount is similar in each shelter (around 30 euros), but slight differences may apply. Whereby beneficiaries are transferred from one shelter to another, or get to know beneficiaries of other shelters, they sometimes lament what they perceive as unjustified unequal treatments. Regarding smartphones, beneficiaries cannot use them when they first arrive. This rule is valid for one or several months, again with differences across shelters. As we explained in Chapter 2, beneficiaries perceive this rule as unfair and useless, as it does not grant their safety. They expressed considerable irritation for the strong impact it causes on their lives instead: it “cuts them off” from their social networks and the “world outside the shelter,” making them feel isolated (see also Cagney *et al.*, 2019). It deprives them of time they

consider as private, time that fills them with gratification useful to counter boredom. On their side, (some) practitioners are firm on their position to prohibit the use of phones, at least for the first period of reception, in partial disagreement with other colleagues. This position is motivated by the necessity to prevent on-going contacts with exploiters, but also to test beneficiaries' capacity to put up with rules and to start preparing for working routines, including the need to rest at night.

One problem is with the pocket money. The problem is the amount because each shelter had its own amount and its own way of distributing it. Therefore, when beneficiaries are transferred from a shelter to another, if the pocket money is higher, they are happy, otherwise they complain. So, we have eventually defined how to regulate this matter and have defined a fixed standard amount. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Director and  
Coordinator, male, 17 June 2020)

We are still fighting on this, even with other practitioners and Case Managers. When a new beneficiary arrives, I insist they should not have the phone, at least in the first period. This protects them from dangerous calls. It also gives us the chance to understand what each beneficiary is like if they adapt and accept the program. It's such a delicate phase and the telephone puts them in touch with so many different opinions, it's a risk. (...) And then as soon as they regain possession of the phone, they are constantly with it. (...) There are facilities that just let them use it, facilities that prohibit its use only for a short time. (...) For us it is also an issue of getting used to staying awake during the day and not at night. This is crucial in view of their access to employment. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June  
2020)

Cultural-linguistic Mediators were mentioned as a potential precious resource to explain rules, upon beneficiaries' arrival in shelters (fieldwork notes, Reception shelters coordination meeting, Padova, 15 January 2020). They could further contribute to addressing cultural issues, as suggested by practitioners themselves. Throughout our participant observation to N.A.Ve meetings, we sometimes noticed the tendency to build simplistic explanations by drawing from cultural stereotypes, based on nationality. An example regards conflicts in reception shelters between Nigerians and other African or European nationals, as evident from the abstract below.

We have had to think about some cultural issues. It would be useful sometimes to have Cultural-linguistic Mediators with us. The Romanian girls we worked with were quite like the Italian girls we had in the shelter. (...) With the Nigerian girls we had to reflect on cultural aspects, such as the fact that

they never look at you in the eyes, they take off their shoes while you talk to them, etc. It is different habits. These are small things, we even laugh a little about them (...), but we also had problems of conflicts between Moroccans and Nigerians. Well also with a Romanian girl, but she had psychiatric problems, so it was related to her specific health issues. Among Nigerians there were girls fighting on aspects of hygiene and cleaning. And food was often an issue of contention with girls of other nationalities, because Nigerian food smells strong, even for me. It was one of the things I was having a hard time accepting myself. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June 2020)

A third critical issue uncovered by several Reception Practitioners concerns beneficiaries' profiles rather than the management of shelters. The profiles of the women they host are increasingly complex. The Nigerian women who arrived in the N.A.Ve over the past two years are older than those who arrived in earlier years (20–30 versus less than 18), they have been in Italy for more than a few years, they may have been in other EU countries too. Many suffer from psychological problems and need support. This is now new. What is new is that their profiles comprise multiple layers of vulnerability, developed over time, mostly before practitioners met them. A dedicated Working Group, called "Psicologhe a bordo" (Psychologists on board) has been recently established by a few N.A.Ve practitioners with a background in psychology to address this issue. Their main aim is to promote reflections on psychological needs, an aspect that has not received specific funding so far, thus calling for more attention and advocating for dedicated resources (fieldwork notes, Social Inclusion Unit coordination meeting, 22 April 2020)

### ***The relationship between practitioners and beneficiaries***

A core feature of the N.A.Ve is the crucial role assigned to local authorities and Case Managers, who make up the Social Inclusion Unit. They are responsible for setting programme objectives and for their attainment, in line with the mission of social workers. The main goal of the social protection programme is to support beneficiaries' self-determination and help them become autonomous, in terms of employment and housing.

One of the greatest concerns of Case Managers is the increasingly vulnerable condition of young Nigerian women, from a psychological point of view but also in terms of employability. This makes the goal of autonomy more challenging. Participation in the programme can generate frustration on the side of beneficiaries and Case Managers too. The N.A.Ve offers good economic and human resources, compared to other welfare programmes. Lack of economic resources hardly ever emerged as a concern throughout our fieldwork. Paradoxically, this may generate even more frustration for practitioners, whereby objectives are not

reached. Should programme objectives be re-calibrated? This is what a Case Manager wondered, during our interview. Throughout our fieldwork, we gained the impression that although Case Managers think about inclusion goals individually, based on the profile of each beneficiary, they run the risk of focusing on programme objectives rather than people, differently from what happens, for example, in the outreach phase, which is totally focused on responding to people's needs as they emerge and change. Case Managers' attitudes seem strongly anchored in the belief that the social protection programme is the best option for beneficiaries, but it may not. Besides, beneficiaries may have different goals or different opinions on how to reach them. Particularly during the COVID pandemic, in several coordination meetings, the question was raised of whether a reasonable main objective could be building a significant relationship with the women (fieldwork notes, Social Inclusion Unit coordination meeting, 22 April 2020).

The frustration of not achieving programme goals was further emphasised with respect to Case Managers' mandate towards beneficiaries but also with respect to their role and collaboration with other colleagues in the N.A.Ve. In their view, the role of Case Managers should include project management, coherently with a general framework defined within the N.A.Ve.

The goal that I have in mind, sometimes I have it too much in my head and it's not good, is the autonomy of the person. What the legislation says is that we should accompany people towards autonomy, free them from violence, regularise them through art. 18, use available tools, such as job placements, to find a job. Autonomy is a central word in my work, regardless of whether I work with victims of trafficking or other users. The issue of autonomy becomes challenging when I am dealing with people with psychological and cognitive issues and no employment skills. What sort of autonomy can we help them reach? It is not the autonomy we could achieve 10 years ago, with other target groups. It was different then. The chances to find a job for Nigerian girls are not many. (...) I shared my worries with Case Managers, I don't know how many of my thoughts have been absorbed. I have told myself: "I have to re-think what I mean by autonomy, otherwise I won't find a way, it's frustrating for me, for the person, for everyone." So, I told myself: "I'll give my best and use all the tools that the N.A.Ve provides me with." (...) The N.A.Ve gives many good resources that makes you think you have everything, you can achieve a lot of goals with people. Usually, when you work with local authorities, you have zero resources, you have no internships for example, therefore you must be hyper-creative with possible solutions. In the N.A.Ve, you have so much: Socio-legal Practitioners, internships, Cultural-linguistic Mediators, you have a really rich and professional package of resources, but sometimes not even this is enough and then you ask yourself: "Is it me who is doing something wrong or do we have to re-calibrate our goals?" [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 19 May 2020)

Some say that Case Managers should also be project managers, in the sense that they define the objectives of the individual projects together with the person but also other colleagues, who should operate coherently with a general framework defined by the N.A.Ve. Projects are individual, but with a common path that the person will undertake, from start to finish. Case Managers should activate the resources necessary to do so, monitor the various stages of the process, indicate the times for each step and be available to beneficiaries as a reference person, a guide, to provide a direction. (...) Social inclusion programmes last for a year-and-a-half, four times more than the time that other colleagues, such as Crisis and Evaluation practitioners, must work with beneficiaries, but we have objectives that often cannot be attained and of course we still do or best to pursue them. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 26 May 2020–24 June 2020)

Case Managers work with several other N.A.Ve colleagues, each with specific functions, as explained. Beneficiaries meet and work with all (or many) of them and are often confused by the multiplication of actors and roles. Arguably, Case Managers are ideally placed to act as a “kaleidoscope” (Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014: 16). Not only do they need to ensure fluent communication with colleagues, they should also be preoccupied that beneficiaries are full aware of each practitioner’s task. They must “keep the pieces together.” Beneficiaries, as we saw in Chapter 2, generally associate them with the figure that ultimately takes decisions on every step of their path, according to specific timings set for entry, inclusion and termination. These timings are mainly defined by the programme, although Case Managers have some flexibility to adjust them to people’s temporalities, conditions and resources. Yet, as a Case Manager complained, people’s needs can “get lost” in between programme phases, in a process of “parcelling” of hyper-specialised practitioners’ competences.

It is hard to “jump on a running train,” after the reflection phase, we need to regain possession of our role, in order to build a clear and effective relationship of help with beneficiaries, we have to be clear on who is the main reference person (...) which is difficult if beneficiaries started building a relationship with other colleagues upon arrival in the N.A.Ve. But it is Case Managers that must keep the pieces together! [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, male, 27 May 2020)

The fragmentation of roles and phases experienced by Case Managers is well highlighted in the extract above and it clearly points to the risk of losing sight of beneficiaries’ path. This was the scope of the so-called “phase zero,” an intermediary programme phase introduced to anticipate beneficiaries’ entry into the social inclusion programme. It was aimed to facilitate communication between Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners and Case Managers. However, due to difficulties of

coordination, this phase is often rushed into a single meeting in which Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners share beneficiaries' fact-sheet with the Case Manager and transfer responsibility onto them (fieldwork notes, N.A.Ve monitoring meeting, 29 May 2019). Another critical node emerged concerning reciprocal trust.

Case Managers expect to be informed about beneficiaries by Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners before the Social Inclusion phase starts. On their side, Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners feel that Case Managers put their evaluation under discussion whenever beneficiaries' behaviour does not conform to it, failing to consider that people change. Perhaps, due to the complexity of Case Managers' work, there is a tendency to assume that profiles are rather static, to the detriment of focus on beneficiaries' evolving subjectivities and diverging attitudes with each practitioner. Surely, improved communication between Case Managers and Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners would be beneficial. The same can be said regarding communication with Reception Practitioners. We must consider that beneficiaries live in the same shelter with fellow beneficiaries, but each may have a different Case Manager. This gives raise to potential complaints for perceived or actual discrepancies in case management, usually re-directed to Reception Practitioners, who are regularly in the shelter, but who can hardly address this challenge without Case Managers.

What I see is that whenever they receive a new case, social workers, Case Managers, feel a new problem is arriving. This is the institutional culture that I perceive in municipalities. They try and avoid these problems as much as possible. Otherwise, I really do not understand why this phase zero is not working. We have constructed this phase as a phase of coordination, to build together an evaluation on each beneficiary. What I find, however, is that our evaluations as Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners is put under discussion again and again. I introduce a person to a Case Manager and hand over responsibility for him/her, the Case Manager starts working and as soon as a problem emerges, they ask us why we did not mention it. Well, human beings can be unpredictable... within a few months they can change 20 times! [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit  
Coordinator, female, 28 May 2020)

One of the critical issues for us is that beneficiaries live in shelter with other beneficiaries, and they compare each other's situations. Two people with the same background, who live in the same shelter can have a different Case Manager, the relationships with them can be different, but we are the ones who must manage this aspect, on an everyday basis. Beneficiaries carefully observe what practitioners and Case Managers do, and the outcome of their work. On this matter there can be much tension and confusion which are difficult for us to deal with. Therefore, we discussed many times with Case Managers. There are Case Managers who give their telephone number to beneficiaries and those who fully delegate the relationship to Reception

Practitioners and only see beneficiaries in formal meetings to check on the achievement of inclusion goals. This messes us things, make them complicated to deal with. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Director and Coordinator,  
male, 17 June 2020)

Looking at reception, we found that shelters – when managed by more than two practitioners – are organised in areas: socio-sanitary services; legal support and regularisation; trainings, internships and employment. This approach has a triple scope: first, social services normally operate in the same logic, with several providers, thus beneficiaries can get used to this logic – in case they needed welfare support after the end of their programme; second, each practitioner can focus on a single area, improve expertise and consolidate collaborations with relevant actors in the local territory; third, beneficiaries can interact with different practitioners. This organisation, that is apparently rigid, allows beneficiaries to consult a different practitioner, if the relationship with any of them is not working. *In fact*, the women we interviewed did not refer to shelters' division in areas. They all mentioned a practitioner whom they considered as a reference person (see also Macy and Johns, 2011; Davy, 2015), who was either a Reception Practitioner or a Case Manager or, in a few cases, a Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner. As we explained in Chapter 2, they normally develop a privileged relationship based on closer (everyday) proximity (with Reception Practitioners) or the duration of the relationship (most often with a Case Manager).

In our team, we are divided into areas. Each practitioner, with a full-time contract, oversees one: the health area, the regularisation area, the area dedicated to work and internships. This organisation derives from our experience and vision. We provide a service, and we should be perceived as service providers and develop specific expertise on each area. It is also more functional to the relationship with beneficiaries, in the sense that if their relationship with any practitioner does not work, there are other practitioners they can refer to. The idea is to provide more relational channels. For us it is equally important to have an eye on everything, not to focus on a single user but have all of them in mind. And then it is closer to reality for beneficiaries: they will never find themselves with a single service provider. I must add that because we always have 200 things in mind, of course we cannot remember everything, but if we are focused on a specific area, like regularisation, it is less likely to forget. This organisational mode is perhaps a bit harder to deal with, but it works well. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 17 June  
2020)

Case Managers insisted they must build a significant relationship with beneficiaries. All practitioners agree on this point. Our fieldwork showed us that



beneficiaries observe them in encounters, each considered as a unique event in which they experience inclusion or exclusion (see also Larkin and Lefevre, 2020). Encounters are specific sites in which trust can grow (or fail to grow), as beneficiaries verify to what extent Case Managers (and practitioners) are truly engaging for their benefit. Trust is central and can only be constructed over time, as a Case Manager explained well, highlighting the temporal dimension of the concept. Drawing from his experience, he underlined that the most positive relationships were those developed with young Nigerian women who were in the programme for longer. The interviews with women confirmed it.

The social worker is what Pittalunga (2003) calls “the trusted stranger” is someone who works on the relationship with users. Because you are a stranger, the relationship must be built over time, the person must have sufficient time to trust you. We are aware that the target people we are working with now [referring to Nigerian women] do not trust us and cannot be trusted, because they are often sent [by their madame] with the mandate to screw up our service, to regularise and are forced not to say they are minors. Therefore, it is difficult to build a relationship based on trust. (...) It is important to have time. When I think of the girls I have worked with in this period, we have had the most positive outcomes when they were in charge of my office for longer, like they arrived as minors and stayed for several years. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, male, 27 May 2020)

The significance of trust has been identified in other research work (Preble, 2015), particularly as far as children and young people are concerned (Clawson *et al.*, 2007; Cossar *et al.*, 2014; Moore *et al.*, 2018). Some scholars have observed that trust should be bi-directional: it is not sufficient for beneficiaries to trust practitioners. It is equally crucial for them to feel trusted back, to feel valued and taken seriously (Cordisco Tsai *et al.*, 2021). Practitioners encounter beneficiaries in a context of power asymmetry, and they should be constantly aware of the dimension of power. By self-legitimising their role of supporters (Houston, 2015; McLaughlin, 2018), as the Case Manager above seems to do, they can develop unidirectional relationships, failing to get involved in the relationship, with an active listening and self-reflexive attitude.

Individual variables were also found in the relationship with practitioners, and more generally, in the positive outcome of programmes: beneficiaries’ motivation to join and stay in the programme was stated to be a central element. If motivations are not strong and, most importantly, do not coincide with the programme’s objectives, the latter are unlikely to be achieved, beneficiaries are likely to be disappointed and abandon the programme.

This is a problem ... having sometimes to work with people that you understand have specific motivations they have not expressed but that clearly differ

from those of the programme. This makes things difficult. (...) I have a case in mind. A Reception Practitioner reported that a beneficiary was not really engaging in the programme. He had the feeling she was not taking the programme seriously and was not interested in finding an internship. Eventually I gave up. Perhaps that girl felt that we were abandoning her, but there was not much we could do with her, she had not even started to engage at all. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 19 May 2020)

Accompanying and building relationships: that's our goal. We need to allow people to stay in the relationship, if they want, and therefore to have a chance to build a relationship with us, to think about their actual motivations to stay in a programme that has a limited duration in time, that aims to make them autonomous and free them from exploitation or in any case accompany them in a path of dignity... I don't want to make any moral judgments on people. It is ok if a person decides to sell sex, for example. The important thing is that people are free to do it, choose to do it. (...) For sure motivation is a crucial element. The programme can be successful only if the beneficiary collaborates. If people feel they are "parked," like in a parking space, ask for the rights they are entitled to and expects practitioners to act accordingly, we will not achieve any outcome. We must work a lot during meetings to motivate beneficiaries, since the very beginning. We need to make them understand it is their project that they are starting and that the progress depends first of all on them. We must be clear about what we can do and what they have to do on their side... [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 26 May 2020–24 June 2020)

Practitioners and Case Managers have diverging opinions on why motivation may be low and what should be done in this case. Some think beneficiaries may lose their motivation and decide to quit the programme as soon as they obtain a regular residence permit; others firmly disagree.

I have in mind three beneficiaries that abandoned the project. They did so after having obtained a regular residence permit, with our support. This testifies a clear plan that contrasts the pact they had signed with us, and I think this applies to most cases, not all. You can see immediately if a person is motivated, by looking at her/his behaviour. You also have to consider that the international protection system has greatly affected the functioning of the anti-trafficking system. People think that we [the anti-trafficking staff] are functional to regularisation and it is our job to remind people that regularisation is but a part of a wider project idea. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 11 June 2020)

As evident in the extract above, some Case Managers consider the goal of regularisation as instrumental and not genuine, because it is just one of the pieces of the “inclusion puzzle.” While we see the effort of Case Managers to think of beneficiaries’ path holistically, this attitude recalls the literature on “conditional integration” (Hacker *et al.*, 2015; de Waal, 2020; Klarenbeek and Weide, 2020): beneficiaries can be offered an opportunity to integrate, but under specific conditions only. We could not collect data to further elaborate on the motivations of the three beneficiaries who left the programme. It could be cases associated with pressure by exploiters – recalling dynamics pointed out previously –, or intolerance of rules (see the case of Iyore in Chapter 2). At the same time, we wonder whether the above Case Manager’s interpretation underestimate the relevance of regularisation for beneficiaries and may reflect an over-concentration on individual beneficiaries, with little attention to intersectional aspects. The women hosted in the N.A.Ve are daughters and sisters. Women’s migration is the result of a collective family project. This is likely to cause financial anxiety (Le, 2017; Cordisco Tsai, 2017; Smith-Brake *et al.*, 2021). Families expect remittances, beneficiaries strive for money, hence a job, which requires regularisation. Some practitioners consider beneficiaries’ concern about their families as excessive and encourage them to “think about themselves” (see page 153), but intergenerational obligations are strongly anchored to their motivation and life path, as many women explained to us during our interviews (see Chapter 2). Needless to say, regularisation is central for beneficiaries, and we think it requires further attention. We suggest that practitioners should listen more to beneficiaries’ priorities, without assuming their lack of interest for the social protection programme just because they decide to leave it. In our view, Outreach Practitioners do show this listening attitude: they focus on people’s objectives and are prone to adapt their services accordingly (i.e. by involving Socio-legal Practitioners). Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners and Case Managers have also demonstrated a listening attitude by introducing and consolidating the implementation of “territorial projects.” These are projects that do not involve accommodation in shelters, but only legal (and sometimes other) forms of support, with the aim to best deal with individuals’ needs (i.e., unwillingness to enter a protected shelter).

Besides Case Managers and Reception Practitioners, Cultural-linguistic Mediators are deemed as a crucial resource to facilitate communication with and understanding of beneficiaries and their life projects. They collaborate with all practitioners throughout the Veneto Region, but they are not integrated in the programme and are rarely involved in coordination meetings. Mediation services are outsourced to a social cooperative and mediators collaborate on an ad hoc basis, as other scholars have noticed for interpreters (Kogler *et al.*, 2021). Many Reception Practitioners insist they should visit shelters regularly, stating their role would be useful in preventing conflicts. On their side, mediators lament their late involvement, when conflicts have already burst out (fieldwork notes, Social Inclusion Unit coordination meeting with Cultural-linguistic Mediators, online, 28 May 2020).

The presence inside shelters would be fundamental. It is not only important in interviews. We think they should be part of the process of protection, in daily life, they should visit shelters once a week to see how things go. It would help with managing conflicts, and it would help them to be more aware of what issues come up. Being a mediator, in our view, does not only require having been in Italy for many years and coming from a foreign country, being able to speak a given language and know a little about a specific country of origin. It requires learning how daily life here unfolds. This would facilitate the relationship with beneficiaries. If you tell them they should call the mediator if they need to ask for anything, but the mediators do not call them regularly to know how they are, and only see them once a month, for progress meetings with Case Managers, it is difficult to establish relationships. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Coordinator, male,  
26 June 2020)

Shelters have big difficulties in managing some tensions with beneficiaries. I always encourage them to call and involve us, as mediators, in the shelters. Mediators do not “steal” anything of their responsibility but can help. I want to make sure that the project goes well, so I cannot be involved only when a problem arises. I have often been called when there is a problem in the shelter or with the Case Manager, but we should anticipate tensions and issues with a constant presence that can accompany beneficiaries in their path. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Cultural-linguistic Mediator, female,  
10 June 2020)

According to some practitioners, Cultural-linguistic Mediators should have a migratory background and should come from the same country of origin of the beneficiaries they work with. This is expected to favour an empathic relationship and to help practitioners understand the backgrounds of origin. Mediators generally share this view. We wonder to what extent mediators may equally contribute to reinforcing stereotypes, particularly if they have not returned home for a long time and do not have regular contacts with diaspora groups. As the Reception Practitioners above suggested, it may be more important for Mediators to be present in everyday life and build relationships with beneficiaries from there, while avoiding judgemental attitudes (fieldwork note, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioner, female, 28 May 2020). A Mediator’s narrative confirmed the risk of judgement across generations. From her point of view, increasing difficulties are evident in developing trustful relationships with girls who have recently arrived through the Central Mediterranean route and Libya, because of the degrading and traumatic treatment they experienced, but also their very young age. Nigerian Mediators like her belong to a different generation and recall having had a different, more grateful attitude, when they arrived

in Italy (fieldwork note, Cultural-linguistic Mediator, Venice, 23 June 2020), thus criticise young girls.

Crisis and Evaluation Unit practitioners consider the collaboration with Mediators essential in the very initial contacts with potential beneficiaries. They facilitate the communication from a linguistic point of view, as beneficiaries rarely speak Italian or have sufficient fluency to understand specific information (i.e., legal procedures). Beneficiaries carry with them traumatic experiences and using their mother-tongue can facilitate (emotional) communication. The possibility for Nigerian women and girls to speak in pidgin or broken English is extremely helpful. They can feel more comfortable in explaining cultural and biographical details. N.A.Ve practitioners normally expect Mediators to make conversations smoother by translating and addressing verbal and non-verbal misunderstandings. In progress meetings and interviews conducted by Case Managers, as well as other practitioners, the role of Cultural-linguistic Mediators is pre-negotiated each time, depending on agreed objectives and based on individual situations, thus requiring considerable flexibility on their side. Mediators may be asked to adopt a reassuring attitude or to translate only. They may be asked to engage in the conversation or translate only. They are open to adapt their role, depending on the setting and the practitioner they work with, but they highlight the lack of symmetry in working relationships (fieldwork notes, Case Managers and Cultural-linguistic Mediators coordination meeting, 28 May 2020, online).

If mediators are very useful in the first phases of protection, in advanced phases they can represent an antithesis to the process of inclusion and beneficiaries may be irritated by their presence (see also Chapter 2).

The fact that a girl needs to be supported by a mediator all the way through the program is detrimental to autonomy. Do we really have to have a mediator till the end of protection programmes? We should work in the direction of not needing a mediator at all. At the beginning, when women enter the programme, it is essential to have mediators with us, but as time goes by, we should be able to work without mediation otherwise what message are we putting forward to beneficiaries? You will always need a mediator? What sort of integration is this? We need to operate towards “weaning practitioners from mediators”! [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioner,  
female, 28 May 2020)

### ***Access to work and internships***

Internships and job placements are a component of social protection programmes. Access to internships, job placements and employment is a pillar of the social inclusion phase, alongside Italian language courses and support to find decent housing. It is key to economic independence and inclusion and it contributes to

reducing the risk of further exploitation following the completion of the programme, if not even before it (Brennan, 2005; Brunovskis and Surtees, 2008; Giordano, 2014; Serughetti, 2017; Abbatecola, 2018). This is why the N.A.Ve staff aim to ensure beneficiaries can find their way to stable employment conditions before concluding the project.

The precarious conditions offered by the Italian job market does not facilitate this task, even less so for people of migrant origins, with pending regularisation conditions or temporary residence permits (fieldwork notes, Labour Inclusion Working Group coordination meeting, 18 June 2020). Additionally, the N.A.Ve has faced growing challenges with the target group of young Nigerian women, having low educational levels and scarce work experience that hardly match market demands.

Before we set up the Labour Inclusion Working Group, internships were not sufficiently at the centre of social protection programmes' objectives. Until a few years ago, we were lucky enough to place 80% of beneficiaries in internships and even to ensure they would be offered a good contract afterwards. In recent years this thing has changed, it has become harder with the Nigerian target that we have now. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Labour Inclusion Working Group  
Coordinator, 29 June 2020)

While Case Managers focus on the inclusion path and the progress made by beneficiaries, Reception Practitioners undertake skill evaluations with beneficiaries, as the social protection programme advances, which implies support in writing a CV, analysis of the skills acquired in previous trainings or jobs, observation of beneficiaries in daily life to assess soft skills. The Labour Inclusion Working Group has a strategic mission, consisting in matching internship and employment opportunities with beneficiaries' profiles and networking with local stakeholders. As the above extract testifies, before the Working Group was set up, about five years ago, work placement opportunities were more easily available, and they resulted in a job contract. Soon, practitioners realised that more and diversified opportunities had to be sought in other economic sectors, by developing new partnerships. As the Labour Inclusion Working Group Coordinator repeatedly observed during coordination meetings, internships are still available in few sectors only, contributing to employment segregation. However, it must be stressed that thanks to considerable efforts by the Group, beneficiaries have been introduced to internships in multiple sectors.

The Working Group was established because we needed to expand our network, because finding jobs was central to the programme, and we needed to develop good practices further. Our database of available partners was good, but it was saturating, therefore we needed to open up to new sectors and connect with all provincial areas, as each is different and requires a specific

approach. As we established this Working Group, it became essential for us to meet regularly to discuss and share our experiences and the steps we were making. (...) Of course, we always ask beneficiaries what they would like to do, but to be honest, people's ambitions are penalised a lot, although we keep in mind their interests and undertake a competence evaluation with them. Sometimes we must explain that they must put their wishes "on hold." Someone wants to be a nurse, someone to open a bar. We may have to "resize" their wishes, because people must face the reality and what is available for them. We must engage with those sectors in which we can find opportunities, in which beneficiaries' skills match the demand. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Labour Inclusion Working Group  
Coordinator, female, 29 June 2020)

The extract demonstrates the considerable engagement by the Working Group to favour beneficiaries' access to employment. This has been done in face of structural and stratified economic conditions that marginalise migrants and even more so migrant women (Bloch *et al.*, Galvin and Harrell-Bond, 2000; Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi, 2019; Marchetti *et al.*, 2021), through the systems of immigration and asylum (Davidson O'Connell, 2006; Anderson and Andrijasevic, 2008; Andrijasevic, 2010; Anderson, 2013; Molland, 2019).

According to recent data, a total of 62 internships were activated by the N.A.Ve in the period December 2017–May 2020. The main sector was the hotel industry (50% of interns). This is the sector that was mostly hit by the pandemic, and it has been slowly recovering. In the period March 2019–May 2020, the main sectors included: the hotel industry (33%), cleaning (18.2%), agriculture and flower (9.1%), commerce (6.8%), baking (3.4%), textile (6.8%). A negative aspect is that some of these sectors, the hotel and food industries, tend to offer temporary and seasonal contracts and can hardly grant financial stability. Moreover, practitioners have rarely been in the position to address beneficiaries' employment ambitions, as they rarely match with existing opportunities in the Italian job market. Internships are therefore offered to beneficiaries as occasions to build their skills for specific sectors.

There are critical sides to internships. Some employers portray stereotypical representations of African interns, including the example of slow implementation of duties (see extract on page 146). Apparent slowness can be connected to various factors, such as insufficient explanations of duties and misunderstandings, a critical aspect that emerged in various meetings (i.e., fieldwork notes, Labour Inclusion Working Group coordination meeting, 18 June 2020; Crisis and Evaluation Unit coordination meeting, Padova, 19 February 2020). Interns are not always adequately introduced to their tasks and supervised. Some employers do not dedicate sufficient time to the training of interns and can use them only as a cheap labour force – especially in small firms. The Labour Inclusion Working Group is aware of the risk of exploitation. For this reason, it has been organising regular supervision sessions to ensure that interns learn new skills and employers

comply with internship agreements (working hours, assigned tasks, etc.) (field-work notes, Labour Inclusion Working Group coordination meeting, 18 June 2020). Additionally, the Group has preferred activating internships in firms with whom collaboration has consolidated. A Working Group member stated that, in her experience, no internship was ever interrupted because of exploitation. It can happen that firms ask interns to work for more hours than agreed, but in this case N.A.Ve supervisors intervene to re-instate the agreement.

There is another side to the coin. Internships are activated in the hope that beneficiaries can get a job upon completion. While this aspect is discussed before the internship starts, it clearly cannot be negotiated. Cases are not rare in which no contract is offered, because the firm is not satisfied with the intern or, more often, because the firm cannot employ more people and was not transparent on this matter. This aspect may question the usefulness of internships, but as a practitioner explained, internships are crucial to find employment. No job was found without an internship preceding it. Arguably, this proves the difficult path to employment for the women and the stratified circumstances they encounter, compared to (some) natives – young natives can also experience similar conditions. The difficulty of women's path is connected not only to the difficult match between demand and market offers, but also to their precarious legal status: employers require internship and job contracts to be concluded by the expiry date of residence permits. In various meetings of the Labour Inclusion Working Group, this theme came up and it was explained that employers are scarcely knowledgeable about residence permits, renewal and bureaucratic issues concerning migrant regularisation, to the detriment of their potential employment in the medium-longer term.

It has happened that firms exploit interns. It happens not only with N.A.Ve interns. Sometimes firms are aware they are exploiting interns, sometimes they are not. Sometimes, firms do not know well how to implement internships and ask interns to work for extra hours that are not included in the agreement. In these cases, we talk to the employer and make sure they do not do it again. In rare cases they continued asking for extra hours. As far as the N.A.Ve is concerned, I am not aware of any internship that was interrupted because of exploitation. We sign agreements with firms that we know or are reliable, we build the collaboration with them. Let's see that the worst that can happen with the firms we work with, apart from asking for extra hours, is that they do not keep their promise to offer a job contract after the internship. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Labour Inclusion Working Group  
Member of staff, female, 09 June 2020)

Internships are crucial [for beneficiaries]. We have never managed to find a job for beneficiaries without activating an internship first. If we did not have this instrument, the beneficiaries that we support would not be in the position to build employment experience, they would not have an opportunity to



make themselves known to employers and enter in the job market. For us it is an essential tool. Often, we extend the internship. The critical issue is how firms consider the internship. We need to carefully monitor its evolution to ensure that firms do not take advantage of the intern without any real intention to employ them at the end of the internship. We are a pain to firms; I call them every week to ensure everything is going well. Today I took part in a monitoring session, and I was getting really angry...! [because the agreement had not been respected]. In general, we activate internships with firms with whom the collaboration has been consolidated, after several internships and we constantly monitor, revise and negotiate the conditions of activation but also the actual implementation because we can have contacts with a member of staff, not always with the head. And then there is this issue with the residence permit: firms are prone to propose internships or contracts only until beneficiaries' residence permit expires, not beyond that date and it is a continuous struggle with the firms, their consultants, their heads, to explain how regularisation and renewal work! [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner and Member  
of Labour Inclusion Working Group staff, female,  
26 June 2020)

Internships can take different forms. Many are undertaken with a local firm or social cooperative, but some shelters also organise “observation internships” with the aim to explore beneficiaries' skills and provide opportunities to practise Italian and familiarise beneficiaries with the “unwritten rules” of employment (working with a regular timetable, arriving on time, etc.), to start learning a profession and, not least, to “beat the day,” thus preventing isolation and alienation.

We think that having a laboratory inside the shelter helps a lot to “beat the day” and help them [beneficiaries] prepare for work, for precise schedules. The fact they have a schedule to respect, that they must engage in activities and do them well is helpful, I think. They learn to prepare their workstation, to clean it, to dress and arrange their hair properly. (...) They would always stay on the couch and watch TV; they wouldn't even go for a walk. They don't know what it's like to work 8 hours, that your legs may hurt, you get tired, pain in your back, a whole series of things that work brings with it. There is also an issue with speed. Some employers have lamented they [Nigerian women] are too slow. In other words, what we try to do is to teach them some “rules” they will find when they start working. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 23 June  
2020)

Practitioners did not mention the payment that beneficiaries receive for their internships. It is not a salary in the strictest sense, but, as we explained in Chapter 2, it provides women with economic resources, sometimes for the first time in

their lives, hence, women perceive internships as a positive time of emancipation, regardless of the outcome in terms of employment.

### ***The thorny path to regularisation***

As we observed many times during our fieldwork, many practitioners agree on the relevance of regularisation for beneficiaries' inclusion, but some practitioners are focused on the inclusion programme, comprising also, but not only, the compliance with regularisation procedures. This is one of the nodes reported by the Socio-legal Practitioners. They suggested that basic legal training should be provided across units to shared minimum knowledge of legal issues and their impact on beneficiaries. In the wider Italian context, Socio-legal Practitioners are not homogeneously present in all anti-trafficking projects, if they are at all, suggesting the role is barely recognised. In Veneto, the Socio-legal Unit has only recently been growing (from two to four practitioners) and it does not have the capacity to ensure support to all beneficiaries. Its activities aim to inform and orient beneficiaries on their legal status and the channels they can use for regularisation. The practitioners generally accompany beneficiaries to the *Questura*, particularly in the first steps of the regularisation procedure (i.e., fingerprinting) and support them during the asylum or in the art. 18 procedure, that involve detailed knowledge of how procedures work and familiarity with officers, so that they can be easily contacted if procedures get stuck.

We have decided that we don't do all the [legal] accompaniments, it would become difficult, but we do the first accompaniments when beneficiaries must approach the *Questura*, where it is important for us to be there, for example, when a person starts the asylum application or if they receive an expulsion order and wants to apply for asylum, as we must explain to police officers that they cannot transfer them to a detention centre, or also when people re-apply for asylum as indicators of trafficking have emerged since they first applied. These are important moments in people's life, and it is crucial for us to be there. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Socio-legal Practitioners, females, 25  
May 2020–6 July 2020)

The Socio-legal Practitioners emphasised the “social” nature of the legal support they provide, the efforts they put in building a relationship with the people they assist, an aspect that, in their view, is crucial and yet not taken into consideration by lawyers and other legal practitioners.

We coined the term socio-legal support. We thought about how we could contaminate lawyers' terms and we started referring to ourselves as Socio-legal practitioners. We feel best represented by this term. Although some lawyers have highlighted the importance of working on the relational dimension of their socio-legal approach, I realised that this role, in reception shelters, is

often taken up by a legal consultant, that is an external lawyer, if it is taken up at all. At the same time, lawyers have increasingly recognised the importance of a socio-legal approach, so we started using the term. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Socio-legal Practitioners, females,  
25 May 2020–6 July 2020)

Being present in crucial moments of beneficiaries' programmes, Socio-legal Practitioners can become reference people for beneficiaries, with whom they develop a relationship of trust. Some Case Managers, therefore, reclaim a stake in this role and more involvement in legal procedures.

If there is a legal unit operating outside the programme and dealing with regularisation only, but not participating to other units' meetings, the risk is that we lose sight of an important part that greatly influences the relationship with beneficiaries. We have never really discussed this aspect, but it would be important to involve Socio-legal Practitioners more or to create opportunities for Case Managers to also accompany beneficiaries in legal procedures. Accompaniments to the *Questura* for regularisation are very significant. The person who accompanies beneficiaries to an appointment to obtain a residence permit becomes a significant figure for them. There are three pillars for beneficiaries, that show them that we can be trusted: regularisation, work and housing. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 26 May  
2020–24 June 2020)

One the main critical issue of regularisation concerns the long procedure and the frequent delays involved in obtaining or renewing a residence permit. These are obstacles that impede access to internship and jobs. On these grounds, practitioners have increasingly considered asylum applications as a privileged channel for regularisation. It is generally faster, at least in the first steps, compared to the art. 18 procedure, and it normally leads to longer residence permits, whereby people are granted the status of refugee.

If we apply for asylum immediately, beneficiaries receive a temporary permit within 2 months and can continue in their project. Without a permit they cannot even access a traineeship. Hence, a couple of years ago we started suggesting to women they should apply for asylum, if they agreed, rather than go through other channels. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Practitioner, female,  
23 June 2020)

Both Law Enforcement Officers and Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioners confirmed that the asylum procedure has become a privileged channel for regularisation,

to the detriment of the art. 18 procedure. As we explained in Chapter 2, beneficiaries can access this procedure without collaborating in police investigations, but they may be pressed to do so. To this end, it must be specified that a higher number of collaborations has been recorded in some cities of the Veneto Region, thanks to consolidated engagement by the N.A.Ve with the police. This resulted in improved understanding of the reciprocal roles, languages, and approaches and increasing “tuning” with beneficiaries’ needs and fears. Prioritising beneficiaries’ protection to collaboration in investigations has meant avoiding putting them under pressure, taking time until women felt sufficiently comfortable to talk, providing a Mediator to favour communications and, most importantly, offering women full support to access the social protection programme, thereby demonstrating their well-being came first. Regrettably, even where collaborations were fruitful, they did not necessarily lead to the prosecution of traffickers, due to delays and dysfunctionalities of the criminal justice system. Based on her experience, a Crisis and Evaluation Practitioner indicated that prosecution offices can take over a year to authorise the arrest of traffickers, after investigations are closed. Beneficiaries terminate their protection programme after a year and the completion may coincide with the time when exploiters are informed they are under investigation. On the one side this can compromise investigations, on the other it may expose victims of trafficking to severe risks. Practitioners have, accordingly, become sceptical about involving women in collaborations (fieldwork notes, 28 May 2020).

Concerning the asylum procedure, it may be Socio-legal Practitioners who support beneficiaries in activating it or it may be activated by beneficiaries themselves, often with the help of a lawyer before they get in contact with the N.A.Ve. In similar cases, Territorial Commissions contacted the N.A.Ve Crisis and Evaluation Unit, following interviews with asylum seekers that pointed to indicators of trafficking. According to UNHCR guidelines,<sup>7</sup> the task of the Unit, within the referral system, is to offer asylum seekers the possibility to start a protection programme. Misunderstandings have become evident regarding what is expected from the N.A.Ve. Practitioners lamented that Commissions asked them to interview asylum seekers and write a report to “certify” whether they are (true) victims of trafficking, thus *de facto* identifying them. Yet, their role, in the N.A.Ve, is that of assessing if they are in a situation of danger and can therefore be entitled to protection. They focus on the current conditions of asylum seekers in the host country, not on their (previous) migratory experience, nor on their country of origin and its safety (from persecution), which is the focus of Commissions to determine the right to asylum. As a result, Practitioners have become weary in taking up this responsibility, not only because it is not their job, but also because they are unsure of whether their intervention eventually goes to the benefit (or the detriment) of applicants.

Every now and then it’s like they hope we have a magic wand and give them the label “trafficked,” so that they can let the person through the asylum procedure, even if the person doesn’t speak. I cannot read in their minds and know whether they are lying. (...) My report is not a like a medical

certificate. I can undertake a “rough” assessment, but it is for the scope of protection only. I can say whether the story I am told by women makes sense, but I can’t tell you whether she is a victim, if she does not provide me with elements to say so and it is not my job to do this. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Crisis and Evaluation Unit Practitioner, female, 28 May 2022)

Both Crisis and Evaluation Practitioners and Socio-legal Practitioners recommended that Commissioners should be supported in improving their understanding of trafficking and the socio-cultural issues connected to it. As it emerged during a meeting, local Commissioners were found to be unaware of the stigma that women can face upon returning to Nigeria – which in turn may result in families no longer welcoming them and in an increasing risk of a new forced migration. They were found scarcely knowledgeable about gender and sexual orientation issues (fieldwork notes, meeting between Crisis and Evaluation Unit practitioners and the Territorial Commission of Verona, 20 January 2020). With the aim of contributing to Commissioners’ capacity building, the Crisis and Evaluation and the Socio-legal Practitioners have been struggling to respond to Commissions’ requests. It has proved complicated, as interviews with applicants take time. As explained in Chapter 2, they may require multiple sessions, before people start sharing their migratory and trafficking trajectory, if they do at all. It can take more time than Commissions’ bureaucratic schedule allows (normally a few weeks), highlighting a clash between beneficiaries’ (unpredictable) biographical times and institutional (set) times. The reports written by practitioners must somehow translate, in legal terms, the experience of trafficking that the women share with them (Taliani, 2019). Women learn to use terms that white people can understand and to fit their story into pre-set categories, but this process involves further victimisation (Shapland *et al.*, 1985; Campbell, 1998), in a continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987; Krause, 2015; Freedman, 2016): from the violence suffered during their migratory trajectory to the institutional violence (Farmer, 2004) enacted by the asylum system. In this context, Simone and Boiano (2018) suggest that the category of “deserving victim” has become incorporated in migrants not only in reception but also in the asylum process.

### ***The “sgancio”: when the social protection programme is finishing***

When Reception Practitioners and Case Managers agree that beneficiaries have achieved the programmes’ goals and are ready to complete it, the so-called phase of “*sgancio*” (literally unhook) starts. This is the time when women are approaching the conclusion of their social protection path and are informed they will have to leave the shelter soon. During this phase, reception shelters receive lower payments and have less resources to draw from. Part of the support provided to beneficiaries may derive from the goodwill and discretion of practitioners. This is even more so in the follow up, after beneficiaries have left the shelter. Yet,

the “*sgancio*” is a very delicate phase that would rather require extra resources because beneficiaries need help and time to find adequate accommodation and employment and these tasks are particularly challenging, as will be reported.

While in most of the cases the programme terminates following a collective decision that beneficiaries are ready to leave the shelter, there are also cases in which beneficiaries leave earlier than planned, if they find a job. They can also be asked to leave in face of a unilateral decision if they disrespect rules or are not motivated to engage in the programme. As far as we know, this has happened very rarely. One specific case was recalled by a Case Manager.

The programme can finish earlier than set times because the person leaves. It happened to me, and I was really pleased because the girl decided to leave after finding a job and a decent flat to live in. She had used the cognitive tools she had and the support we provided and managed to do a very good project. So, this was an early very positive conclusion of the programme. There are also cases in which there is a unilateral decision to interrupt the programme because we realise that the person is not committed, has no real motivation to continue, hence a fundamental element is missing for the programme to succeed. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 19 May 2020)

In several cases, the programme was extended, especially for beneficiaries whose conditions were particularly vulnerable. In others, beneficiaries can be transferred to asylum seeker and refugee reception facilities, if the need emerges for longer support and specific competence that the N.A.Ve staff does not have, suggesting efforts have been done to develop collaborations with the asylum system and to overcome fragmentation.

There are alternative solutions if extension is not possible or beneficiaries are not particularly vulnerable. They can be transferred to an asylum seeker and refugee shelter, where places are available. This happens when we think that the person should still be supported but it would be best done in other facilities that can have specific competences that we do not have, for example on drug and substance abuse. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, male, 26 May 2020–24 June 2020)

What is often missing in social protection programmes is sufficient time. Art. 18 sets out for programmes to last one-and-a-half years, but often more time is needed to achieve any of the programme goals (i.e., fieldwork notes, Case Managers and Reception shelter Units joint meeting, 28 May 2020; see also Murphy, 2018) and Case Managers are ill at ease in communicating this to beneficiaries, although all programme information and deadlines are explained as soon as they start the programme.

When extended, the programme can continue for at least a few more months, to provide beneficiaries more time to get settled. Notwithstanding the possibility of extending the programme and the fact that – to the best of our knowledge – no beneficiary has been asked to leave unless a decent accommodation and at least a temporary job was available to them, the short duration of the protection path is a clear example of how institutional times clash with individuals' times. It is even more evident in the words of a Reception Practitioner, who described the reticence of beneficiaries to leave and come to terms with temporal rules unless they feel ready. Accordingly, the final phase of the programme can involve tensions. To favour beneficiaries' transition, the N.A.Ve can offer them the opportunity to transfer, with (or without) fellow beneficiaries, to an independent flat, under the supervision of Reception Practitioners, for some months.

It could be that I accompany the person [referring to beneficiaries] to self-determine themselves, which doesn't mean putting the cross on "project concluded." I strive to conclude the programme, however, only when we have reached the programme objectives. They [beneficiaries] know there are deadlines in the project and they know that sometimes we can extend them, as we do many times with minors, for example. The main difficulty I have experienced is asking myself what stage of the inclusion path we are at, how many months left we have ahead and then tell the person [I am working with], if we are running out of time. I'm a bit of a mess, I guess, or rather a bit of an anarchist in this. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, male, 27 May 2020)

*Interviewer:* Are beneficiaries aware that they must leave when the project is finishing?

*Respondent 1:* oh, my goodness, no! It is difficult to make them understand this and the concept of "becoming autonomous." Some keep "clinging" on the programme, even if we explain them from the beginning the timing, the steps, etc.

*Respondent 2:* then it depends on the target. Nigerians are more likely to cling onto services. They think that something more can be given to them. When they are about to finish the programme, they can ask about their social worker [Case Manager]. (...) They rarely ask during their programme, but they do in the end. It often happens that this moment is rather conflictual ... it is a bit like when teenagers leave their home. We always try to put to value this moment, to celebrate it properly, but there are also times when it is not an easy moment. Then we try and find other strategies to accompany beneficiaries. Not all people have the same approach and expectations. Proposing a dinner to celebrate can work with North Africans, with Sub-Saharanans it's a bit different and it does not always work. A way to accompany beneficiaries is to transfer

them to a flat, where they can experience autonomy and better perceive the change they are about to face in their life. Well, it is a difficult phase, we also need to tell beneficiaries to start saving some money. In the meantime, they should have a job and just start thinking about to pay for their expenses. (...) First you tell them how much they must save for the rent, then you look for a flat with them. We must tell them this is not a phase in which they can send money back to their families. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Coordinator and Practitioner, female and male, 26 June 2020)

The “*sgancio*” is a challenging phase. When it approaches, beneficiaries’ difficulties with employment become more urgent. They have worsened with the COVID pandemic, because various sectors in which beneficiaries can find a job have been severely impacted by the restrictions. Finding a decent accommodation is also problematic. Nigerian women and girls are often offered to share a flat with co-nationals, but this carries the risk of exposing them to further exploitation, as some respondents confirmed (see Chapter 2). On their side, estate agents have scarce propensity to rent flats to migrants and refugees, unless they have a permanent employment contract and can provide additional guarantees for the payment.

It is increasingly difficult to find a decent accommodation. Often, they [beneficiaries] find a room through their co-nationals, but these networks can be dangerous because they can mean further exploitation. (...) Sometimes Nigerian girls called us for help. It hasn’t happened many times, but they told us of dramatic situations. Co-nationals can ask for sexual services in exchange for a room. (...) When we ask estate agents, they have absurd requirements, such as two permanent job contracts and ask for really expensive rents. In any case, we terminate the project only when we are sure that the beneficiary has a place to stay. We also collaborate with local actors to find rooms or small apartments, perhaps for a year or so, in the social housing sector, for example. We activate the network of former beneficiaries. (...) [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Coordinator, male, 26 June 2020)

At operational level, the critical elements of the finale phase of the project remain both employment and housing. It’s hard for both women and men. Before COVID it was more a problem with housing, even Nigerian girls, whom we were most worried about, had a job contract upon leaving the shelter. Maybe just a room, very often they asked a Nigerian woman to share



a room, although this left them with the difficulty of not having a regular contract. Now the housing problems upon completion of the programme are even harder and the same is with work. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Director and Coordinator, male, 17 June 2020)

To address issues of housing, the idea was discussed, during a coordination meeting (fieldwork notes, Reception Shelters Unit coordination meeting, 03 March 2020), to create a “guarantee fund” that could help beneficiaries, by reassuring estate agencies that the rent can be covered for several months. Other avenues of support could derive from the Regional Authority. Following the revision of the regional social policy, an opportunity opened up to address critical housing issues for trafficked people by means of a specific welfare measure, the RIA (*Reddito di Inclusione Attiva* – Income of Active Inclusion). It is a measure aimed to prevent poverty. While this group of users were previously excluded from it, they are now included in the list of entitled individuals, testifying to a timid step forward in the mainstreaming of services.

After beneficiaries leave the reception shelter, practitioners try to follow them up. They keep in touch through occasional telephone calls that they make to beneficiaries or vice versa. Some shelters organise seasonal parties at Christmas time, and this becomes an occasion for catching up. Research emphasises the role of supportive relationships in facilitating existing processes (Hotaling *et al.*, 2004, Hickle, 2017). While this literature refers to existing sex work, we argue supportive relationships are relevant also in the phase of “*sgancio*.”

Women lacking social support may feel isolated and struggle to leave exploitative networks behind (Davis, 2000). Some practitioners suggested that the relationship with beneficiaries is likely to become more symmetric as they leave the shelter. In our opinion, this is an encouraging factor that makes it more likely for women to reach out to practitioners in case of need. To say more, a practitioner suggested that keeping in touch can be useful to involve (some) ex-beneficiaries as peer-educators in the social protection programme. It is an experience in its infancy but, we think, very promising.

Some girls asked us for help after leaving because they lost their jobs. We could help them with some food vouchers and to look for another job. When they complete the programme, we wonder what will happen to the relationship with them. I must say that almost all of them positively surprised me. Something is left of these relationships. Even when the relationship is somehow instrumental on their side, they get to trust us, perhaps even more when the project is over, because the relationship becomes more balanced or maybe because they realise the work that we did for them. (...) There are girls who understand that they do not longer want to be in exploited labour. They may call us because they do not want to go back to that, and they ask us for help. And the fact of asking us instead of reaching out to co-nationals that can exploit them is for sure a positive sign. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Director and Coordinator, male, 17 June 2020)

We are in touch with countless people for follow ups. This stage is complicated. As a project, we do keep in contact with all the people who stay in the area over the years, if they want to. We invite a lot of people to our Christmas party. We have done it for many years. (...) Our follow-up mandate is for six months, but we go even further. It is very useful also for us to keep in touch, as it gives us an overview of the people we have been working with. We have involved some of them in our work as peer educators and it has been very positive. Introducing beneficiaries to people who were in the programme and perhaps come from their country and can tell their experience is very helpful. The mere fact of seeing them physically and seeing that they coped with their life is positive. So, this is another way to build up relationships also with the people that leave the shelter. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Coordinator and Practitioner, male, 26 June 2020)

During a coordination meeting, a discussion revolved around beneficiaries' trajectories and when they can be defined as a failure. There is a propensity for Case Managers and practitioners to consider a failure all situations in which beneficiaries do not achieve the programme objectives (fieldwork notes, Case Managers/Crisis, and Evaluation Unit coordination meeting, 11 June 2020). Particularly over the last years, following the experience of the pandemic that further challenged social protection programmes, as we will be explained, doubts have been cast on the extent to which it is realistic to expect that all beneficiaries reach the set goals and whether practitioners should rather concentrate on providing tools to favour their self-determination.

The vision that many colleagues have is that when a beneficiary abandons the programme it is a failure and all the work that was done get lost. I think that there may be still something good that worked out and maybe the person left when no more help is needed. The person can always come back and ask for help, if her/his contract expires or any trouble comes up. (...) It's not that they [the beneficiaries] must finish the programme and reach the "finish line." The goal is to give them tools, to make them understand how bureaucracy works, where and how to deal with health and work issues. Little time may be enough for a person, and it may be useful in the end. Our job is to give them an increased chance to reach autonomy, to avoid further exploitation. With some targets we have realised that you can push people to reach the programme goals, but it is just not their goal, hence it will not be useful at all. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Practitioner, female, 26 June 2020)

What about trajectories considered as successful? What elements do they include, according to practitioners? According to a Case Manager, successful cases are

fluid, simple cases. They are cases in which social networks work, in which beneficiaries can manage these networks well and find help to search for housing, employment, but also to build a supportive circle of people (fieldwork notes, Case Manager, Venice, female, 10 June 2020). Another Case Manager recalled the example of a woman whose Italian was very good, who grew up in an urban context, with a higher educational profile (with respect to other women), and with little (if any) pressure on the side of her family for remittances, and with pending challenges regarding only the strengthening of social networks (fieldwork notes, Case Manager, Venice, 10 August 2020). It is a rather unusual case though. Similar representations give us a few interesting insights into Case Managers' (and practitioners') imaginary of positive trajectories. First, both refer to the importance of social networks, an element that is certainly crucial in the Italian context to look for housing and employment – also for a native person, but particularly for migrants, as we explained above. Second, the “fluid” nature of cases seems in contradiction with the conditions that beneficiaries normally experience. Practitioners are aware of this, hence “fluidity” can arguably be intended as a smooth process of inclusion favoured by beneficiaries' engagement, thus stressing their own activation.

People's trajectories are varied and never straightforward and people's objectives can change over time, depending on individual, but also external factors, such as, again, the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing from the experience of the women we interviewed (see Chapter 2), we believe it is crucial for the programme to involve beneficiaries in all decisions that concern them. It is crucial to consider their expectations and to re-negotiate objectives at each step, rather than treating them as set once and for all. People change, objectives can and should change too. This brings us back to a reflection that emerged during a seminar that we organised in October 2021 to present some of our research findings to the N.A.Ve staff. “*Chi sgancia chi?*” [Who leaves whom?]. Is it the practitioners that ask beneficiaries to leave or beneficiaries that leave the programme? We have explained that, normally, it is practitioners that decide, although in some cases beneficiaries decide to leave earlier. However, it is interesting to rethink this question in terms of the actual relationship between practitioners and beneficiaries. In Chapter 2, we reported that some women were happy about finally leaving the project, notwithstanding the fact it was beneficial to them. They expressed the need to be “set free” from the project. As we argued, while programme conditions cannot be compared to those of exploitation, that include, among other things, deception, there is a common element between the two: the “dependence” they create or can create. Practitioners must therefore be careful not to recreate (some of) the conditions that they aim to free women from.

### ***The transition to the age of majority***

Age is a crucial (temporal) element in institutional protection. Special provisions are made for victims of trafficking under 18 years of age (Steiner *et al.*, 2018;

Timoshkina, 2019), as prescribed by the anti-trafficking and children normative frameworks. These include entitlement to a legal status, a Legal Guardian and to be accommodated in dedicated shelters (see Chapter 1). As soon as young people turn 18, they have no longer the right to specific protection. The transition to (formal) adulthood is therefore a determinant time in people's trajectories. Their path to inclusion can be abruptly interrupted, if they have not reached autonomy or else alternative provisions are made for their support in terms of housing, employment and regularisation. It must be also underlined that the working rights of minors from poorer countries and their legitimate wish to earn money have been hardly addressed, although a large group of minors start working well before they reach the age of majority, as did (some of) the young women we interviewed. This depends on a general Western assumption that they should grow up with their parents and attend school before starting work (Dottridge, 2021). In fact, this assumption denies them the possibility to work and makes it difficult to take full responsibility for their family in the country of origin, as they are expected to do. It derives that when they turn 18 they are likely have no job, which can make them even more exposed to risks of exploitation than adults.

In other words, the achievement of the age of majority is a complex time, characterised by radical changes and disruptions (see Hancilova and Kanuder, 2011; ECRE, 2018). In line with Save the Children (2019), our fieldwork highlighted several nodes connected to this phase for minors, including shelter accommodation, the interruption of legal guardianship and regularisation.

Regarding shelter accommodation and minors' social inclusion more generally, in 2019, the N.A.Ve stopped accepting young people less than 18 years of age in the social protection programme. They can enter the N.A.Ve only upon achievement of the age of majority. Prior to then, they must be hosted in shelters for unaccompanied minors, as the normative framework requires, with a specialised social worker taking responsibility as the main reference person in charge. In spite of this, one of the Case Managers involved in the N.A.Ve, started working with some young beneficiaries when they arrived in Verona, aged 16–17, paving the path for a positive experimentation of prolonged social inclusion programmes.

During our fieldwork, many practitioners repeatedly emphasised that minors represent a heavy financial burden to public finances. The Zampa Law (see Chapter 1) introduced the so-called "*prosieguo amministrativo*" measure, that provides for local authorities to continue assisting minors, where they have not achieved a sufficient level of autonomy, until they turn 21. However, shelters for unaccompanied minors are rather expensive, and it can be challenging for local entities to continue assisting them beyond the age of majority. The N.A.Ve has supplied municipalities with fundamental economic resources that allowed the Case Manager to continue working with beneficiaries and prevent the disruption of their protection programme. In his opinion, the possibility of extending the programme and ensuring continuous support (see also Macy and Johns, 2011; Davy, 2015; Bick *et al.*, 2017; Larkin and Lefevre, 2020), with the same Case Manager, has greatly favoured the construction of a relationship of trust with

young beneficiaries, as more time was available to work on inclusion. This is certainly an example of good tentative efforts to address the short time frame of anti-trafficking projects and to promote the improved integration of the counter-trafficking system and the welfare system (for minors). The *prosieguo amministrativo* in Northern Italy has been scarcely used: social workers are often unaware of this opportunity or are reticent to use it, whereby funding for reception is not available.

Social workers are not the only actors involved in minors' protection. Many other actors are responsible for them. In the view of a N.A.Ve Practitioner, the engagement of (too) many actors can lead to "excessive protection" and be detrimental to minors. They can be asked several times to report personal details about themselves. While on the one side this can be rightly motivated by getting to know the minor and providing ad hoc support, it can result in further victimisation.

I can think of situations of "excess protection" that can be negative in terms of protection. This happens when too many people interfere in the work that practitioners and Case Managers carry out with minors, who have often been subjected to traumas and multiple forms of violence. This can also lead to project failure. For example, asking the minor to report his/her story many times is not a form of protection but rather perpetuates the violence they suffered from. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Outreach Unit Coordinator, female,  
01 June 2020)

The plethora of actors involved with minors also include Legal Guardians. They act as a "third party" that oversees and grants minors' protection. Guardianship comes to an end when young people turn 18 and discussions have been on-going on how this support could be prolonged beyond the achievement of the age of majority. At the same time, some N.A.Ve staff pointed to critical issues of guardianship well before this phase of transition. Guardians should be appointed as soon as possible, but considerable delays – of several months – have been recorded in the Veneto Region. Many guardians have been appointed shortly before the achievement of the age of majority (see also EMN, 2015). Furthermore, the N.A.Ve practitioners experienced a varying engagement of guardians, with many being hardly ever present at meetings and hardly developing a relationship with minors.

If they are nominated, we [practitioners and Case Managers] ask them to be involved. In many cases, they are nominated too late, because procedures are not automatic. Sometimes, before Case Managers ask for their nomination, minors reach their majority age. When they are nominated, it is up to guardians to decide to what extent they want to be involved. If a guardian is also a lawyer, he/she is likely to take up many guardianships. When this is the case, they cannot follow minors very well, if not from the strict legal point of view. These are the cases in which we ask them to authorise us to take

decisions with minors so that their project is not slowed down. But, of course, there are guardians that are much more involved, especially if they have just one or two guardianships. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter for unaccompanied minors Practitioner, 16 June 2020)

A third challenge concerning minors' transition to the age of majority is regularisation. Minors are entitled to a "residence permit for minors." This permit should be converted into a residence permit for work or study once they turn 18, but this is not automatic. Minors are required to have a passport, which is often hardly possible for them, having left their country of origin without the possibility to safely return. An alternative for regularisation can take place through the channel of the *prosieguo amministrativo*, which is therefore not only useful for providing continuous accommodation, but also for the renewal of their residence permit. Yet, the *prosieguo* has been scarcely used, as explained above. Moreover, the regional Court for Minors has not always provided authorisation for it.

In theory, when minors turn 18, their residence permit can be converted into a residence permit for work or study if they have a passport. If they don't have a job, they can apply for a residence permit for "job search." Nigerian girls do not have a passport with them; hence they generally must go through the art. 18 procedure or an asylum application. The residence permit for "job search," only lasts for 6 months, so the *prosieguo* is important because it can give access to a residence permit that lasts a little longer, until they turn 21. For us, as Case Managers, it is not difficult to pursue the channel of the *prosieguo* as the N.A.Ve provides us with a "parachute" (in economic terms), helping us cover the costs of continuous accommodation for the minors. With municipal resources alone, it is hardly possible to continue working with minors. (...)

I know, however, that the Court for Minor in the Veneto Region has sometimes authorised the *prosieguo* but has been more reticent to authorise it for minor victims of trafficking. I do not know why. In other regions it is not so. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, male, 27 May 2020)

Various sources testify that minors are provided insufficient legal support (i.e., ASGI *et al.*, 2018). The N.A.Ve Socio-legal Practitioners confirm several challenges in this regard. Practitioners and Case Managers often lack sufficient legal expertise to understand the implications of suspending minors' rights, for example by delaying asylum applications, and overlook legal issues. We think there is a risk for them to focus on the technical dimension of their work, while leaving less space for the political one (more generally on social work see: Humphries, 2004; Fargion, 2008) associated with beneficiaries' rights.

I can tell you of my experience with minors. In practice, there are many actors that have responsibility on minors. So, we need to share these responsibilities and work together to find a common line of work. Therefore, as Socio-legal Practitioners we often wait a little before we start working with minors. Introducing them to too many information and issues as they arrive can be confusing. It is already very confusing for them to have so many people around. In some cases, our early intervention can be useful if we need to collect their story or support them to report it to the police. The good thing is that we have a social work/educational background, not a legal one, hence we know when and how to re-direct the minor to another practitioner, at each step of their programme. We know whom we should work with and why. This is very important as working with minors requires a protective setting. What is also important for us is that in each setting we have an occasion not only to provide minors with the relevant legal information but also to train practitioners on legal issues, as competence in this sense is often scarce. We do this with a vision of advocacy. We know that if we train colleagues, over time they will be in the position to recognise relevant legal elements and act accordingly to support minors and ensure they have access to the rights they are entitled to. For example, our colleagues hardly think about asylum applications in the case of minors. They think about it only if there are no other avenues for regularisation available to minors. This is because they do not have sufficient knowledge of regularisation and related rights. It requires training. Therefore, it is also important that guardians are competent. Applying for a residence permit for minors does not exclude applying for asylum. The normative framework does allow this. It is minors' right to do so. The problem is that in many cases each colleague works with focus on its own specific role and programme phase only, without looking at minors' protection more generally and they often oversee legal aspects. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Socio-legal Practitioners, females,  
25 May 2020–6 July 2020)

### **The COVID lockdown<sup>8</sup>**

The explosion of the pandemic and the beginning of the lockdown (in Italy), in March 2020, brought several consequences on sex workers. These included the impossibility of working in the street, the lack of income and growing economic hardship (Caroselli *et al.*, 2020; Lam, 2020; Platt *et al.*, 2020; Cabras and Ingrasci, 2022) and more generally increasing precariousness (Burgos and Del Pino, 2021; Semprebon *et al.*, 2021; Cabras and Ingrasci, 2022). Third sector and international organisations called for intervention to facilitate sex workers and trafficked persons access to protection (OSCE *et al.*, 2020; UNODC, 2020). As the Italian government imposed the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 (see

Chapter 2), all the activities of the Outreach Unit had to be reformulated. People working in the sex market disappeared from the streets. Outreach Practitioners had to stop working in the streets. Access to shelters, for the people who wanted to exit from exploitation, became more complex and long, due to the introduction of new health requirements, such as COVID tests. As weeks went by, some people started contacting the Anti-trafficking Hotline, in face of the lack of alternative economic income. This was particularly the case for Eastern European women and some Nigerian women too. Most calls were not pertinent to anti-trafficking work. Particularly during the months of March and April 2020, and later in November of the same year, people called primarily to ask for information on the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

Outreach Units started organising themselves to reach target groups indoors – some of them stopped working and remained locked up in flats, others started working indoors. Practitioners distributed food, sometimes in collaboration with municipal and volunteers' services. Reaching out to women indoors represented an opportunity for the N.A.Ve to maintain direct contacts with them and collect information on their living conditions.

Concerning the women who were undertaking their social protection path, at the time of the lockdown, projects were generally extended (i.e., fieldwork notes, Social Inclusion Unit coordination meeting, 22 April 2020), due, among other things, to difficulties with housing and employment, but also with regularisation procedures: asylum applications and the renewal of residence permits were suspended until August 2020.

Sometimes the conclusion of beneficiaries' project has been delayed because some steps have not been made yet or because of challenges beneficiaries are facing with the job and housing market. Now with the COVID it is even harder. We all try as much as we can to extend projects. 3 or 4 months more can really make a difference and help people find a more stable situation, hopefully with a job they will not lose because of the crisis that many sectors are facing due to the pandemic and all the related restrictions. Many also have problems with their residence permit renewal or with asylum application. A lot of procedures got stuck. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, female, 19 May 2020)

Internships were deferred, the search for employment and housing too. The N.A.Ve staff strived to keep contacts with employers, in view of future internships and job openings, but also started looking into sectors less impacted by the pandemic restrictions, in the hope of finding new opportunities for beneficiaries.

Well, it is not easy from the employment point of view, particularly at this time of Covid. Some firms do not even reply to our inquiries, as they cannot even keep their own staff. So, we also ask if they can offer an internship,



but is not easy either. We try our best. There are opportunities but it is for positions that require a much higher level of education than our beneficiaries normally have. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Shelter Practitioner, female,  
23 June 2020)

Every Monday morning, we get into the car and go and deliver the pocket money to the beneficiaries that are about to conclude their project and live in autonomous flats. We are also lending some money to beneficiaries who have just moved out, with the agreement they will repay us as soon as they manage to get a job. In this period there is also a problem with people who had become autonomous, had their job but are now unemployed because of the COVID. Not sure how long this will last. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Reception Coordinator, male, 26 June  
2020)

From the economic point of view, many beneficiaries started worrying not only for their own situation but also for their families in the country of origin. The women we interviewed reported this several times (see Chapter 2), while practitioners did not mention this aspect during interviews or coordination meetings, focused as they were with the beneficiaries. Increasing concerns regarded not only the material conditions of people but also psychological ones. Practitioners' work largely moved online and so did the work of Cultural-linguistic Mediators. No more interviews and progress meetings could be organised in person. Contacts were all made by phone (fieldwork notes, Outreach Unit coordination meeting, 3 April 2020). Practitioners repeatedly perceived the frustration of women feeling their lives were suspended due to forced isolation. While schools and universities soon organised distance-learning, it was not the same for Italian language classes for adults and migrants who were therefore impacted by the pandemic in this sense too. Most of all, practitioners experienced that online meetings could rarely replace meetings in person: the setting was very different, they were missing a pre-meeting and post-meeting phase too, all functional to making the conversation flow more easily and making beneficiaries more comfortable. They were also hardly functional to counter the spreading of fake news on COVID-19 across the Nigerian community, giving mediators a hard time in trying to calm down and reassure some women (fieldwork notes, Outreach Unit coordination meeting, 3 April 2020). Overall, the lockdown, but also the following months, characterised by curfews, were generally rather challenging for people.

This COVID pandemic has tremendously impacted on our work and on the relationship we were trying to build with our beneficiaries. There is a huge difference between seeing people in person and online. It is very different. Sometimes video calls simply do not work. If there are decisions to be taken

you need time, time in person to discuss and maybe take a tea and have a break and then continue discussing. Progress meetings with beneficiaries are generally moments in which there are a lot of things to talk about and beneficiaries have a lot going on in their heads and at the same time we must go through the project objectives. All phases of the meeting are important and the setting: the pre-phase and post-phase. Everything is functional to the meeting. Online calls can work for quick communications, but not when decisions must be taken and important steps made. [my translation from Italian]

(interview, Case Manager, Municipality of Venice, female, 26 May 2020–24 June 2020)

## Final remarks

The interviews we conducted with practitioners gave us the chance to investigate their working experience with Nigerian women, to interrogate our fieldwork findings on people's cultures *versus* institutional cultures and to examine women's representations vis-à-vis those of practitioners.

Evolving dynamics of trafficking and exploitation and the increasingly complex profiles of trafficked people have made it difficult for N.A.Ve practitioners to carry out risk assessments and offer protection programmes adequate to deal with all the needs of Nigerian women. Despite this, practitioners reported of positive trajectories of protection, in line with the representations of Nigerian women. In particular, they argue that access to the programme is challenging for beneficiaries and is generally associated with a turning point in their biographical life. Practitioners define it as “moment of crisis,” referring (also) to moments in which beneficiaries meet the N.A.Ve staff and/or law enforcement officers. At the same time, they highlighted the agency of women as crucial taking this decision. Practitioners are in line with beneficiaries also in describing internships as fundamental steps to favour employment, although in a stratified market that can rarely match the wishes and aspirations of women. Additionally, widespread agreement was confirmed that the relationship between practitioners and beneficiaries is the most important resource that the N.A.Ve can offer, during the protection programme but also beyond it, regardless of the objectives that can be achieved in terms of beneficiaries' autonomy. The length of the relationship (and regular proximity) determines how significant relationship can become for beneficiaries. Other variables such as gender and nationality appear as less relevant. Regarding nationality, practitioners often referred to Cultural-linguistic Mediators praising their support and stating they are central in the programme, although they collaborate on an *ad hoc* basis and have not yet been involved, if not occasionally, in reception shelters. Here they could be a precious resource to deal with conflicts, particularly when beneficiaries first arrive.

Reflecting on their experience, practitioners described successful beneficiaries' trajectories by pointing mainly to individual factors (strong motivation) and meso

factors (consolidation of social networks). Structural factors (associated with the migration regime) remain often implicit in their narratives. Interestingly, practitioners talk about “programme failure” whereby beneficiaries do not reach programme goals. Arguably, this highlights two issues with reference to institutional cultures. On the one side, some practitioners are focused on programme objectives and consider the programme as the best option for beneficiaries, underestimating the fact that people change, as do wishes, plans and needs. Objectives should be revised and re-negotiated over time accordingly, based on people’s *own* objectives. On the other, (some) practitioners concentrate more on the “technical” aspects of their mandate and less on the political one, including beneficiaries’ regularisation and inclusion *vis-à-vis* the constraints of the migration regime.

As explained throughout the chapter, we cannot stress enough how impressed we have been as researchers, during our fieldwork, with the engagement and level of self-reflexivity of many practitioners. We have participated in several discussions on how to improve interventions to best address beneficiaries’ needs. We were told that people in the streets want to feel cared for and this is reflected in outreach work. We were told that many people find it hard to deal with co-habitation rules and this is reflected in the development of “territorial projects” that offer diversified forms of protection. Regarding rules we have been wondering whether they are aimed to guide and support beneficiaries in shelter life or rather functional to practitioners to manage their role more comfortably. *In fact*, we noticed in interviews that practitioners’ narratives often contain seeds of a neoliberal idea of responsibility emphasizing individuals’ role, rather than the structural factors that constrain their agency.

The temporal lens has been precious to investigate institutional cultures, as it was to listen to beneficiaries’ representations of the protection programme. The importance of time was recalled repeatedly throughout the chapter, with reference to the length of the relationship with practitioners, the length of the programme and of protection, not least the time dictated by programme phases, that parcel beneficiaries’ lives into fragmented steps with the risk of losing sight of their path and biographical times. The tension between institutional and biographical times appears most evident in the inversion of biographical times. Beneficiaries experience such inversion in the transition to the age of majority: they are treated as children first and then suddenly as adults. They experience it in the long (waiting) path to employment that forces migrants to be “on hold” although constantly pressed by family responsibilities. The tension between institutional and biographical times is exemplified further by the limited duration of protection programmes, that is not always sufficient to cope adequately with beneficiaries’ needs. Practitioners are aware of this and the stories of the Nigerian women we interviewed demonstrate their efforts in this direction, for example through the implementation of the tool of the “*prosieguo amministrativo*.” It must be stressed that many critical issues are associated with structural institutional factors that practitioners have struggled themselves to deal with, including the long strenuous asylum and regularisation procedures and, in the last years, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

Our journey through the N.A.Ve, the experiences and representations of the practitioners and the young Nigerian women they have been working with is about to terminate. In the next chapter we will try and resume it, by recalling our research questions, sharing the main findings we have collected and the interpretations we have proposed, while opening up some of the themes that we believe would be worth exploring further in an ever-changing scenario that we, as researchers, find ourselves extremely challenging and yet fascinating to follow up.

## Notes

- 1 Interview, Head of the Local Police, Venice, 10 September 2020; Local Police Officers, Padova, 24 June 2020; Questura National Police Officer, Padova, 24 June 2020; Questura National Police Officer, Venice, 10 September 2020; Vice-Questore, Verona, 29 October 2020.
- 2 Regio Decree Law 1404/1934 “Istituzione e funzionamento del Tribunale per i minorenni,” art. 25 bis “Minori che esercitano la prostituzione o vittime di reati a carattere sessuale” (“Establishment and functioning of the Juvenile Courts,” art. 25 bis, “Minors who prostitute or victims of crimes associated with sexual activities”).
- 3 Law 269/1998 “Norme contro lo sfruttamento della prostituzione, della pornografia, del turismo sessuale in danno di minori, quali nuove forme di riduzione in schiavitù,” art. 2 “Prostituzione minorile” (“Normative provisions against sexual exploitation, pornography, sexual tourism involving minors, as new forms of slavery”).
- 4 In line with the trend in Veneto, data by the National Anti-trafficking Helpline, for the period 2017–2019, indicate that the crisis and evaluation units in Italy received most calls from: Territorial Commissions (4455). Other calls were received from: CAS shelters (841), private third sector actors (525), Outreach Units (506), potential beneficiaries (without the support of any stakeholder) (456), social services (446), law enforcement agencies (432), friends (of potential beneficiaries) (265). This information was drawn from the 2020 Report of the National Anti-trafficking Helpline.
- 5 See glossary.
- 6 To our knowledge, details on the qualitative aspects of these data are not available on the national scale.
- 7 UNHCR (2017) ‘L’identificazione delle vittime di tratta tra i richiedenti protezione internazionale e procedure di referral. Linee Guida per le Commissioni Territoriali per il riconoscimento della protezione internazionale’ (The identification of victims of trafficking among seekers of international protection and referral procedures. Guidelines for Territorial Commissions). Available at: [www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2021/01/Linee-Guida-per-le-Commissioni-Territoriali\\_identificazione-vittime-di-tratta.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2021/01/Linee-Guida-per-le-Commissioni-Territoriali_identificazione-vittime-di-tratta.pdf) Last access: 2 February 2021.
- 8 This section draws mostly from Caroselli et al. (2020).
- 9 This information was drawn from the 2020 Report of the National Anti-trafficking Helpline.

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# Conclusions

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The focus of this book is on the subjective experiences of a group of Nigerian women in the N.A.Ve social protection programme, in the north-eastern Italian Veneto Region. Their narratives were complemented by those of the practitioners who worked with them. Nigerian women were the main beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve (and other anti-trafficking programmes in Italy), in the period 2015–2018. More recently, arrivals from Nigeria have diminished, but migratory movements have not stopped and have gradually included movements internal to Europe.

Drawing from the autonomy of migration, the migration and social work literature exploring humanitarian initiatives, we adopted a postcolonial and intersectional lens and built on qualitative research findings to explore the tensions between Nigerian women's biographical times and institutional times. Our aim was to give voice to the women we interviewed, as they are scarcely represented in debates concerning protection programmes. We hope this book contributes to making their voices heard and provide insights for programme development, while contributing to countering stereotypical depictions that over-portray them as deserving victims, failing to consider their *lived* experiences. Although our findings cannot be generalised for the universe of anti-trafficking programmes in Italy (and outside it), they point to themes that are relevant to, and partly confirm, the existing literature, and shed light on programme cultures. In this chapter, we will try and answer the questions that guided the book: what are Nigerian women's subjective experiences as beneficiaries? What are practitioners' experiences with Nigerian women, what factors contribute, in their view, to positive trajectories, and what are the difficulties experienced with this specific target group? To what extent are there tensions between Nigerian women's biographical times and practitioners' institutional times? What insights do they give us on programme and institutional cultures?

The fieldwork called us to shift our attention from the cultures of beneficiaries to institutional cultures. Nigerian women have reported very different experiences and representations of them, although some common elements are evident, as will be explained next. Entry into the N.A.Ve was rather challenging for many, requiring a strong determination to change direction in their life, in face of a turning point, but also acceptance to be subjected to a secondary re-victimisation: upon entry, beneficiaries must share with practitioners their travel trajectory to Europe,

including details of trafficking and exploitation, and the same details must be reported again later to Territorial Commissions, if applying for asylum (Shapland *et al.*, 1985; Campbell, 1998).

The N.A.Ve programme certainly represented a “condition of possibility” (Butler, 1997). It contributed to projecting beneficiaries towards the future, although it is a blurred future characterised by uncertainties and structural barriers. All women started the N.A.Ve with high expectations of improving their conditions. Their trajectories have been positive overall, in spite of the challenges they encountered during and upon completion of the programme, including difficult cohabitation (i.e., fights with other beneficiaries, sleeping issues), rigid rules (i.e., use of mobile phones), associated with the closed shelter policy, delays in regularisation, but also the need, for some women, to sacrifice their aspirations vis-à-vis scarce employment opportunities. Many of our respondents resented the lack of sufficient space for negotiation regarding programme rules, pointing out critical aspects of what can be described as a conditional-inclusion programme (Hacker *et al.*, 2015; de Waal, 2020; Klarenbeek and Weide, 2020). Yet, they did challenge them during our interviews. Three positive elements stood out, among others, in the narratives of many women, all with a temporal dimension: sufficient time to learn through the programme; access to an internship as a time of emancipation, giving them (sometimes for the first time) access to economic resources, and a chance to re-elaborate their life-trajectory in continuity from past, to present and future (by putting value to skills acquired in the country of origin and during the internship); continuous significant relationships with a person of reference (Macy and Johns, 2011; Busch-Armendariz *et al.*, 2014; Davy, 2015) who could be trusted.

On the side of practitioners, we observed a strong engagement, with regular coordination meetings, organised by each programme unit, to stimulate self-reflections and promote constant improvement in addressing beneficiaries’ evolving needs. Some specific meso and individual factors have been indicated as having a positive impact on women’s trajectories. First of all, the development of a significant continuous relationship of trust with a reference practitioner, as highlighted also by the beneficiaries; the development of relationships with people – beyond the programme –, to consolidate a “safety net” in view of social inclusion in the local territory. Some practitioners recalled a crucial individual factor: motivation to enter and stay in the programme. Other individual factors include higher educational level, higher language fluency, pre-existing employment skills and lower family pressure (for remittances), but these applied only to a few women.

Structural factors, on their side, have made the work with Nigerian women difficult: endless, frustrating, victimising bureaucratic procedures of regularisation; negative outcomes of internships (not leading to a regular contract); the COVID pandemic – besides the migration regime –, that contributed to the precarity of migrants, in terms of housing and employment access. Notwithstanding structural issues, practitioners testified the challenges of working with a group of Nigerian women who, at the time of our research, portrayed increasingly complex profiles (i.e., psychiatric problems, multiple forms of exploitation). In

our view, rather than pointing to a specificity of this target group, it prompts to the need of improving the integration of anti-trafficking, asylum, and welfare systems to best cope with emerging needs. In the last phase of our research work, the theme of motherhood emerged forcefully. It concerned a few Nigerian women who arrived from Germany or other northern European countries, where their application for asylum had been rejected. It is a theme that remains open for investigation and that highlights the importance of an intersectional perspective.

Moving to the core question of this book, to what extent have tensions emerged between Nigerian women's biographical times and practitioners' institutional times? While tensions are evident at higher institutional levels (i.e., dissonance between lengthy institutional procedures for regularisation, preventing access to work, and biographical times, involving the need to find employment and cope with family responsibilities; dissonance between the requirement for women to report their story when Territorial Commissions schedule an appointment and the women's readiness to do so), we will highlight next some tensions at the (N.A.Ve) programme level.

First, the short timeframe of the programme (and the frustration of practitioners when professional objectives are not achieved) clash with the long waiting times for beneficiaries to obtain a residence permit, to secure decent accommodation and employment, and the associated risk of getting trapped in exploitation again. Second, the programme is focused on individuals to be protected and accompanied towards autonomy, meaning finding a house and a job, thus leaving little space for biographical needs, such as responsibility towards the family of origin, desires of maternity, etc. Third, concerning permanence in shelters, the women we interviewed contrasted the time of (pre-set priorities of) inclusion to that of (missed) *free* time, suggesting a tension between the two and the perceived deprivation of time for well-being. Fourth, while practitioners with a background in psychology have been working towards the development of good practices for mental health support, it seems to us that the short timeframe of the programme can represent an impediment, as mental health can require a much longer period of support. Fifth, cultural-linguistic mediation is understood as a crucial tool for the entire duration of the programme, but while it is largely absent in a crucial space, that of reception – whereby both practitioners and beneficiaries feel it is useful –, in the final part of the programme many women reclaim their achieved (language) autonomy and the right to a non-mediated communication. Sixth, the narratives we collected testify to an inversion of the women's biographical times: it took them several years to achieve the majority age and be in the position of acting autonomously, but upon entry into the programme they cannot manage their time freely, constrained as it is by institutional rules. This makes them feel again like children, as stressed particularly by young women who are less than 18 years old and are still “children” in normative terms.

What we explained so far gives us some insight on programme cultures and the extent to which the *lived* experiences of Nigerian women have been reflected in the N.A.Ve programme.

At the more general level of governance, it must be observed that the Municipality of Venice (leader of the programme until it was handed over to the Regional Authority), has increasingly been adopting a focus on trafficking rather than sex work, arguably due to shifts in local political orientation, but also to available funding to support trafficked women (as opposed to sex workers). However, we must further stress the strong engagement of N.A.Ve practitioners to address beneficiaries' needs beyond their "labelling." The story of N.A.Ve and how it was established, provides us with a fundamental explanatory variable. Its bottom-up nature has been crucial, as the "on-field" experience of several practitioners matured over the years, thanks to stable funding (compared to asylum seeker reception projects). As we stated in Chapter 1, local authorities have a central role in the N.A.Ve, but their involvement has been varied, depending on political orientation and available resources. This has resulted in diverging dedication by Case Managers. Where dedication has been higher, interesting examples of experimentation can be found, such as the continuous assistance, by a Case Manager, to unaccompanied minors beyond their majority age.

At the programme level, we already mentioned (above) secondary victimisation, both upon entry and in connection to asylum procedures. We would like to raise attention to the attitude that several women had during our interviews: they distanced themselves from prostitution, thus arguably protecting themselves from (the risk of third?) re-victimisation by researchers. They did so by drawing our attention to their present and future plans and negotiated their position as migrants facing the challenges of socio-exclusion produced by migration regimes.

During our fieldwork, we could recognise scattered traces of infantilising (Malkki, 1995) and assimilation approaches, but also awareness, by some practitioners, of the risks of an overly "cultural" interpretation of women's challenges and trajectories. The goal of empowering and accompanying to autonomy is central in practitioners' narratives and we discussed the tendency to consider them in western ethnocentric terms (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). In other words, autonomy is intended as the achievement of socio-economic independence, improvement of language fluency and cultural adaptation, coherently with programme objectives, not necessarily with people's individual needs. Still, concern for individual needs has been a constant element of outreach work and it is evident in the development of "territorial projects," developed in view of offering individualised assistance, focusing on legal, employment search and psychological support rather than accommodation.

While various authors have argued for the adoption of an ecological (highlighting the interrelationships between individuals and the micro, meso and macro) and strengths perspective (focusing on beneficiaries) to examine protection programmes, we think that future research should focus further on the temporal dimension, looking at the tensions between institutional and biographical times, but also on intersectional elements that can help look at beneficiaries by carefully considering gender, age, motherhood, family roles, migrant status, all aspects that are interlinked and similarly determinant in trajectories and that require the

integration of protection systems. With specific reference to time, we think that improved coordination across the units and programme phases would be beneficial to prevent practitioners from focusing on their technical responsibility on “cases” while overlooking the political responsibility associated with the rights of people, thus losing sight of beneficiaries.

As we explained throughout the book, we applied a temporal lens to interpret the various phases of the protection programme, but also two specific temporal intervals: the transition to the age of majority and the COVID-19 pandemic. The former shows well how institutional mechanisms, such as age assessment and the rigid times of children and young people protection, including accommodation in dedicated shelters, can go to their detriment and impact negatively on positive trajectories. Age assessment procedures have been described as unreliable and yet they determine access to protection. Rigid times for shelter accommodation highlight that the normative framework is still weak in addressing the challenges of the transition to the age of majority. The institution of the “*prosieguo amministrativo*” is certainly a positive step in this direction. Attention to the transition to the age of majority allowed us also to observe other clashes between institution and biographical times, for example the temporal inversion that young people (who are less than 18) experience: they cannot work because they are (institutionally) considered as children and yet most of them have previous working experiences, thus feeling infantilised and comprised in their family responsibilities; when they turn 18 they are suddenly expected to work but the employment market is fraught with obstacles. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, our interviews confirmed the challenges reported by other authors regarding both practitioners and beneficiaries, particularly the fact that the pandemic has worsened the precarity of migrants. At the same time, they further pointed to the specificity of individual experiences, including (partial) coevalness with natives, the importance of religion, etc.

We strongly recommend improved involvement of beneficiaries in the design and implementation of services targeted to them, as an element of empowerment (Nichols and Heil, 2015; Timoshkina, 2019), but also to ensure a full understanding of the many aspects permeating the life of migrants, affecting their inclusion and yet, in our opinion, underestimated by some practitioners: the importance of regularisation, the (positive and negative) role of families of origin, the function of religion. Improved involvement can arguably be achieved by finding appropriate spaces to listen to beneficiaries, but also through mechanisms such as peer-support groups, an experience in its infancy in the N.A.Ve that would be worth exploring.

Additionally, we recommend future research should be carried out on: beneficiaries’ long-term trajectories, also with reference to various interlinked forms of exploitation and movements within Europe, contextualising risks and conditions and interrogating the capacity of programmes to protect beneficiaries from further victimisation, but also to avoid creating conditions of dependency worse than those experienced prior to their arrival (Manocchi, 2014). We cannot stress

enough the importance of adopting an ethnographic approach that has the merit to promote the full involvement of research participants throughout the research and their reflexivity, that allows the co-production of evidence-informed and policy-relevant findings, by offering multiple occasions for knowledge sharing and building. This was our experience in the INSigHT Action, although restrictions were experienced with regard to the involvement of beneficiaries, shedding light on the limits of access to the field. At the end of this research experience, we are even more convinced that silencing the voices of individuals, particularly marginal individuals, can reinforce stereotypical representations and, even worse, perpetuate the violence they have suffered. In spite of the engagement of practitioners and the inclusive goals of N.A.Ve, we have shown how this social protection programme is not exempt from (institutional) violence. While we must add a word of warning not to conflate the regional project with the social protection programme and the individual practitioners, we feel, as researchers, that we should continue striving, alongside engaged practitioners, to overcome any form of violence, particularly in projects as these that are aimed to assist people who suffered multiple forms of violence and protect them from further victimisation.

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