

WOMEN AT SEA

The experiences of women

RESCUED BY THE *AQUARIUS* AND THE *OCEAN VIKING*



SOS
MEDITERRANEE

JANUARY 2023

CIVIL ORGANISATION
FOR THE RESCUE OF LIFE AT SEA



Laurin Schmid /
SOS MEDITERRANEE

Cover picture:



Laurin Schmid /
SOS MEDITERRANEE



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INTRODUCTION

DOING JUSTICE TO THE COURAGE OF THE WOMEN RESCUED BY SOS MEDITERRANEE

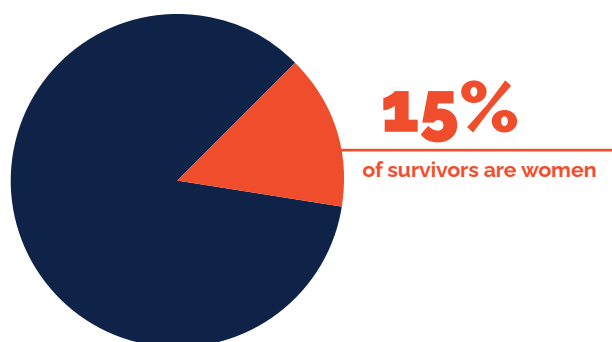
THEIR NAMES ARE ANGÈLE, MAHA OR AYA. THEIR ORIGINS, AGES AND STORIES MAY DIFFER, BUT WHAT THEY ALL HAVE IN COMMON IS THE EXPERIENCE OF HAVING BRAVED DEATH IN THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN - THE DEADLIEST MARITIME MIGRATION ROUTE IN THE WORLD SINCE 2014 - TO ESCAPE THE "LIBYAN HELL" AS THEY ALL CALL IT.

Some are already grandmothers, others are pregnant or have young children. There are also teenagers who have left childhood far too soon, thrown onto the roads of exile without the protection of a parent. The majority are travelling alone, making them twice as vulnerable. All of them were rescued by the **SOS MEDITERRANEE** rescue teams, taken on board the *Aquarius* or the *Ocean Viking* rescue ships. There, they told the story of part of their journey before disembarking in a place of safety, in accordance with maritime law. But what do we know about these women?

"We need to establish the role of women in migration because we sometimes forget, but (...) around the world, half of migrants are women. On these particularly perilous maritime routes, women represent between a fifth and a sixth of arrivals..." explained Camille Schmoll, Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) at the conference "Women in the Mediterranean: faces and migration journeys", organised by **SOS MEDITERRANEE** in March 2021¹. "The mortality of women in migration is much higher than that of men. There is a lack of information to quantify this situation, but we know that because of gender-related vulnerability - when we find the bodies and are able to determine the sex of the victims - we see that women are much more likely to die at sea or in the desert than men," explains the researcher.

1. <https://sosmediterranee.fr/focus/femmes-live/>

FROM FEBRUARY 2016 TO DECEMBER 2022, SOS MEDITERRANEE RESCUED 37,136 PEOPLE IN THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN, INCLUDING 5,489 ADULT WOMEN, I.E. 15% OF THOSE RESCUED.



Often invisible, these women show extraordinary resilience and moral strength. We wanted to let them speak in order to give them back part of the humanity and singularity they have been deprived of. These women's experiences of migration were collected onboard the *Aquarius* between 2016 and 2018 and then onboard the *Ocean Viking* from 2019. During this time at sea, they shared their stories, deepest secrets and fears but also their hope for a better life with women from our teams on board. Such moments were very emotional.

This collection of testimonies aims to make the voices of these women heard, as well as sharing some basic understanding coming from the stories collected on board. It also aims to pay tribute to these women whose courage and strength are an example for the whole of humanity. We hope that it will contribute to raising public awareness of the importance of setting up a European rescue fleet in the central Mediterranean to avoid thousands of deaths at sea.



WARNING

SOME OF THESE STORIES INCLUDE DESCRIPTIONS OF, GRAPHIC VIOLENCE: TORTURE, RAPE, EXTORTION, KILLING AND SHIPWRECK. WE PREFER TO WARN YOU IN ADVANCE.

The material in this collection of testimonies is drawn exclusively from what we were told onboard from the people rescued since 2016 and from our observations at sea. However, many intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)² or the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)³ have extensively documented and corroborated these accounts, particularly regarding the violence - including sexual violence - suffered during the migration process, both in Libya and at sea.

All the first names of the women who testify have been changed to preserve the anonymity and safety of the survivors.

2. Women's Section of UNHCR website: <https://www.unhcr.org/women.html>

3. International Organisation for Migration (IOM): <https://www.iom.int/>



Flavio Gasperini /
SOS MEDITERRANEE

OUR MISSION: BEARING WITNESS MAKING THE STORIES OF WOMEN AT SEA ECHO ON LAND.

EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DIE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN WITHOUT WITNESS. NO ONE KNOWS HOW MANY WOMEN ARE AMONG THE MORE THAN 25,000 DEATHS RECORDED BY THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR MIGRATION SINCE 2014⁴, WHICH STATES THAT "THE VAST MAJORITY OF WOMEN'S DEATHS WORLDWIDE IS CAUSED BY DROWNING (...) AND THAT THE IDENTITY OF [MOST OF] THEM REMAINS UNKNOWN".⁵

In addition to its vital mission of rescue, protection and care for the survivors onboard its rescue ship, **SOS MEDITERRANEE** has another key mandate to raise awareness of the humanitarian tragedy in the Mediterranean and to give a voice to those who survive the crossing. This is its mission of bearing witness. Testimonies onboard our ships are most often collected by the communication officers, but also by other members of the rescue or care team and at times by journalists. Women survivors confide much more easily in the female team members, who have exclusive access to the shelter reserved for the women and their young children.

Marie Rajablat, a volunteer in Toulouse who works as a nurse in the psychiatric sector, embarked onboard the *Aquarius* twice and listened to the accounts of the survivors. She wrote a book entitled "Castaways from hell"⁶. For the women subjected to the worst abuses during their exile for months and sometimes years, this "interlude of humanity" represents a moment of peace where they can finally feel safe. "In these types of encounters, there is no cheating. We go

straight to the very essence of being," explains Marie. "I approach and accompany survivors in the same way I approach people with mental health problems. With my colleagues from the rescue team, we have no other choice than to build ephemeral islands where survivors can find shelter, recover, reconnect with their thoughts and start healing." Marie builds special relationships with women which allow even the shyest to come and talk to her. "The young girls were often the shyest, but once settled with the women and small children, I stayed neither too far away nor too close because when they were ready to tell their stories, I had to be there. Whilst the boys remained quite vague, the girls who were able to speak gave detailed accounts of the hell they had been through."

In addition to sharing these testimonies through SOS MEDITERRANEE's communication tools, our hundreds of volunteers - three quarters of whom are women - work on land to share them in schools, public events, readings of testimonies and many other opportunities where we give voice to the women, children and men rescued by our ships.

4. The IOM's "Missing Migrants Project": <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean>

5. <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/blog/how-lack-data-perpetuating-invisibility-migrant-womens-deaths>

6. This book is available in English for free and can be downloaded from the SOS MEDITERRANEE website: <https://en.sosmediterranee.org/news/the-castaways-from-hell-testimonies-collected-on-the-aquarius/>

WHY DO THEY LEAVE THEIR HOMECOUNTRY?

Although some women may leave their country of origin for the same reasons as men (war, conflict, persecution, poverty, famine, search for better living conditions, etc.), many of them are fleeing from forms of domestic and sexual violence, particularly forced marriages. They sometimes also leave to protect their children, especially young girls from

female genital mutilation (FGM). It is often difficult to summarise in a few words the "causes" of these very complex exile journeys, intertwining multiple factors and numerous elements linked to personal history. However, all the survivors rescued by the **SOS MEDITERRANEE** teams have one thing in common: they all passed through Libya.



44 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

The people rescued by **SOS MEDITERRANEE** since 2016 (women, men and children combined) come from 44 countries in Africa (Nigeria, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Sudan...) and Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Syria, Palestine...). Only the testimonies of survivors who wished to speak to us and did so in a language understood by the teams could be collected and transcribed.

While some people intended to go to Libya to work or as a transit point to leave the continent, many of them did not plan to go there. They were taken there, most often by force, and found themselves trapped. Since 2018, families of Libyan origin have also been taking to the sea to leave the chaos of their country.

Unfortunately, many women and girls who decide to leave their home country in search of a better life "are at great risk of experiencing traumatic violations such as rape, kidnapping, sexual exploitation and even death while on the move."⁷

7. <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/new-report-on-women-and-girls-on-the-move/>

The first person rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE in March 2016 was a young woman



Patrick Bar /
SOS MEDITERRANEE



JEWADA,

from Guinea Conakry, did not want her daughter, who suffers from sickle-cell disease⁸, to be subjected to genital mutilation because she would die of it. . March 2020

*I set out on this journey from Guinea-Conakry for my daughter, Souadou. I have three children, two boys and a girl. **I had to leave my two boys at home with my husband to save my daughter. Souadou is sick, she has sickle-cell disease and my husband's family wanted to excise her. But if she goes through genital mutilation, she will die.** That's why I fled. Every time I went out, I heard my younger sisters talking about excising my daughter. At home, it is forbidden but people do it in secret. I said that if someone did that to my daughter, I would report it to the police. But people didn't understand. They tried to do it once when I was out. I spoke with my husband, and he gave me permission to leave and seek help for my daughter.*

⁸ Sickle-cell disease manifests itself by various signs: acute or chronic anaemia, increased susceptibility to infections, painful attacks caused by poor blood circulation, "vaso-occlusive attacks". (Vidal)

A HIGH-RISK MIGRATORY JOURNEY

The migratory journey undertaken by women, which can last from a few months to several years, takes them thousands of miles, including crossing the Sahara Desert. It isn't rare for them to leave their country alone following a family break-up; some of them are very young, making them easy prey for traffickers who promise help and support, when in reality, they lure them into human trafficking networks.

"Crossing the desert sometimes leads to death: migrants travelling in (...) the Sahara face risks that pertain both to the danger of crossing this vast desert, and regional insecurity..."⁹

9. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migration-in-west-and-north-africa-and-across-the-mediterranean.pdf>

In addition to the dangers of crossing the desert - where they are sometimes abandoned without water and even shot - migrants are victims of robbery, physical violence, enslavement, torture and extortion of all kinds during their journey. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and human trafficking networks linked to prostitution. Some are even victims of such violence when in domestic slavery in transit countries and in Libya.



JAYA,

22 years old, from Cameroon, crossed the Sahara without food or water.

April 2022

*I left Cameroon when I was 17, after being forced into marriage. I can't talk about it because it's very painful, too painful. I first went to Nigeria, then to Benin and Niger. At the border with Niger, I was kidnapped with other people fleeing their country. A group of men asked us to pay 500,000 CFA francs [about €760] to be released. **They told us to call our families to get the money and beat us during the call. I had no more family to call. I couldn't be released. Those who were like me were put on trucks.** We travelled through the desert for three days. Without food or water. Three people got sick during the journey. Two died. They were thrown into the desert. Once in Libya, some people climbed onto the trucks. They bought one or two or three of us. I was bought on my own by Mr Ibrahim.*

LIBYAN HELL

"Libya is one of the main hotspots for violations, and human rights abuses are severe. Many women and girls report incidents of rape in detention centres or forced prostitution. They are also at risk of being trafficked for sexual exploitation as they seek work to finance the rest of their journey. Women are much more vulnerable than men, especially when travelling long distances on foot, and are often abused by smugglers, sometimes at gunpoint."¹⁰

While some women describe in detail the horrors they have experienced, many men report witnessing violence against women and girls in Libya. Many women bear the physical and psychological scars of repeated assaults, or become pregnant as a result of rape in formal or informal detention centres.

10. <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/new-report-on-women-and-girls-on-the-move/>



ANGÈLE,

27 years old, from Cameroon, bears the scars of repeated rape in Libya.

January 2021

*What they do to women there can't even be called rape. There is no name for what they do to us. It takes place every day. But to see them raping boys and babies is worse. **They force little children to do things. If the mother tries to stop them, they rape her. They have guns, iron bars, they put out their cigarettes on your body. And they film everything. They rape you in front of your baby, in front of your child, they don't care at all.** If you go to "prison" ¹¹ with your husband, they rape your husband in front of you. I escaped because they left me for dead. They threw me in a container outside, completely naked. At a certain point, rape didn't mean anything to me anymore. I let them do it. If you refuse, they can kill you. It happens every day. I have cigarette burns all over me. I carry the evidence of this violence all over my body.*

11. Survivors often refer to formal and informal detention centres as 'prisons'.



When travelling alone, women and girls are often targeted by human traffickers and smugglers. If they do not have enough money to pay to cross the Mediterranean, they may be forced to have sex with the smugglers in exchange for "room" on a boat. Many report multiple rapes by the guards in the detention centres, in addition to the lack of drinking water, food and basic hygiene, not to mention the lack of access to health care. Some women have given birth in these unsanitary centres without assistance, sometimes as a result of rape.

¹² Médiapart *Les Violences sexuelles détruisent les femmes migrantes. (Sexual violence destroy female migrants).* in French, for subscribers only, 28 January 2021.

In January 2021, Nejma Brahim, a journalist from Médiapart who boarded the *Ocean Viking*, wrote an article about the violence against women in which she recounted the experiences of Lisa, Aïcha and Tatiana, raped and tortured by their jailers in Libya¹². According to the journalist, such violence is one of the reasons why the death rate of women is higher than that of men on the migration routes.



AYA,

a 22-year-old mother of twins from the Ivory Coast, relates the abuse by guards in Libyan detention centres.

February 2020

*One day they caught a baby. They hit the mother. They beat her up, again and again... They told her all she had to do for them to stop was call her parents for them to send the ransom money. **But her family couldn't pay, and she had no husband. So, one day they grabbed her baby, dug a hole, and put the child into it.** They started pouring sand on the baby until its head was covered. The baby was screaming. After ten minutes, they took him out of the hole and gave him back to his mother.*

There are many stories of men and women who moved to Libya hoping for a better life and who had no choice but to flee the country that had become a true "hell" as they call it. Others were brought there against their will. The **SOS MEDITERRANEE** teams

have heard hundreds of testimonies of permanent insecurity, especially for anyone with dark skin, risk of kidnapping, confinement in overcrowded detention centres, enslavement, torture and even arbitrary assassinations.



EFE,
30 years old, from Nigeria,
was sold in Libya and witnessed summary executions.

December 2016

*Once there was a couple. The guards came and raped the woman in front of everyone and put her husband on a chair for him to watch. They put a gun to his head and hit him with the butt if he tried to turn his head away... That was the day that they moved us to a different prison¹³. They made us believe that we were going to go to sea that night. In fact, they took us to Zaouia, one of the worst prisons. **When we arrived, men had been shot by the guards. They were lying in pools of blood on the ground. Some were dead. Others died during the night. It was terrible. I stayed there for a week.***

13. Survivors often refer to formal and informal detention centres as 'prisons'.

CROSSING THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN

To escape the "Libyan hell", men and women, sometimes entire families, pay large sums of money to smugglers. Groups are rounded up at night and crammed onto unseaworthy and overcrowded

boats, often without enough water, food and fuel to cross the almost 200 miles of sea separating them from Europe. Many people have told us that they refused to board but were forced to at gunpoint.



Jérémie Lusseau /
SOS MEDITERRANEE



ZEINEB,

19 years old, from Mali, was on the boat where 90 people died at sea. She was the only woman who survived.

November 2016

Right from the start, people said that we couldn't take this boat because the engine was making a strange noise and there was water in the bottom. We were beaten and thrown onboard [...] Then the waves grew bigger, and the boat capsized. Most of us could not swim. The boat was pushed by the wind. People were clinging to each other. Everyone was screaming. The boat was drifting further and further away. I don't know how I managed to reach it. I can't swim. (...) Then the big ship approached, and they threw us life jackets.

During the crossing, women and children are often placed in the middle of the inflatable dinghies because the men believe this protects them from direct exposure to waves, the swell and the risk of falling overboard. But this position puts them at greater risk of being crushed, of suffocation and of severe burns from the mixture of seawater and fuel, which is extremely corrosive to the skin and gives off toxic fumes. In addition, the bottom of the dinghies is reinforced with wooden planks joined together with protruding nails, which frequently cause injury. On occasions where the boat takes on water, panic quickly takes hold as most of the survivors cannot swim. People sitting in the bottom of the boat are often **the first victims of drowning in the boat itself, as a result of pushing, trampling and suffocation.**

In some wooden boats, they are crammed into the hold where the risk of suffocation and drowning is even greater. If the boat is unstable and capsizes, they have no chance of surviving.

Our teams have had the terrible task of bringing to shore several lifeless bodies of men and women found at the bottom of these dinghies. This was notably the case during a dramatic rescue carried out by the crew of the *Aquarius* on July 20th, 2016, reported by Maryline Baumard, journalist at *Le Monde* national newspaper, who boarded the boat during this mission¹⁴. Twenty-two bodies were found at the bottom of the boat, among which twenty-one were women

14. « Migrants : les vivants et les morts à bord de l'*Aquarius* » (Migrants: the living and the dead on board the *Aquarius*), Maryline Baumard. *Le Monde*, July 20th, 2016. (in French)

“On July 20th, death invited itself onto the *Aquarius*”.

MARYLINE BAUMARD,
journalist at *Le Monde*

“It was around midnight when their dinghy set off, along with other boats. It was around 4 or 5 in the morning that panic set in onboard. Our boat had a hole in the hull, the water started to rise, the floor came up, so people panicked. They tried to move, but it was impossible because of the number of people onboard. Some girls who were sitting in the middle got trapped and were crushed or drowned in the water mixed with a lot of spilled petrol”, says Ousmane [a survivor of the wreck]. *“When they boarded, two of them seemed already very weak. They were taken there, but [they] coughed so much that they couldn't stand the first diesel fumes”,* adds Yacoub, 20, Ousmane's friend. The young man would like to find logical explanations for the deaths of these young women. Deep down he knows, as Ousmane explains, that *“that night, the fear of dying turned each of us into a warrior fighting for survival. People were screaming, praying and everyone was only thinking about saving their skin.”*

Photo illustration

 Narciso Contreras /
SOS MEDITERRANEE





AINA

recounts her rescue as her boat sinks.

March 2017

*The smell of petrol is intoxicating. I feel like I'm going to pass out at any moment. Despite the fuel fumes going to their heads, people still find the energy to panic as they see the water rising inside the boat. I am about to give up... but suddenly the light of a big ship appears on the horizon. "Stay calm". These are the first words the rescuers shout to us in English, French and Arabic. **But panic is growing inside me. We are sinking. Because of the petrol fumes, I don't understand anything, my mind is drifting away (...)** I don't know the name of the woman who died next to me.*

RESCUES AND INTERCEPTIONS

When the **SOS MEDITERRANEE** rescue team begins a rescue operation, after calming the survivors and distributing life jackets to all those in distress, **they evacuate the urgent medical cases and then seek first to bring the women - especially the pregnant women - and children to safety.** Children board the lifeboat with their mother or a designated carer until they get onto the main ship. Getting the most vulnerable to safety first is a universal principle of sea rescue.

In 2018, Libya was given responsibility for search and rescue in a large area of the central Mediterranean

(reaching far into international waters), which had previously been handled by the Italian coastguards. Since 2018, Europe has been funding, equipping, and training the Libyan coastguard to intercept boats in distress trying to escape this hellish situation at the risk of their lives. Those intercepted are then forcibly returned to Libya in a cycle of violence and abuse. Many told us: **"I would rather die than return to Libya"**. Some of the survivors told us that they had been forcibly returned several times. According to the IOM, one in two people fleeing Libya by sea has been forcibly returned to Libya and detained "in appalling conditions".¹⁵

15. <https://twitter.com/OIMItalia/status/1468642810073161729>



MAHA,

48 years old, from Syria, was intercepted twice by the Libyan coastguard with her eight-year-old son before being rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE.

November 2021

*The only solution was to go to sea. So, we tried, three times. The Libyans [Editor's note: the Libyan coast guard] intercepted us twice. The first time, they told us that we were safe, that they were there to rescue us and would not send us to prison. But it was a lie. Once we were brought back to the port, they took our picture, and we were taken to prison [Editor's note: detention centre]. (...) **I decided to try again. I couldn't bear to see my son live a life without hope. So, I gathered all my courage and we set off again.** It was dark, the waves were huge, I felt seasick. But this time you appeared, and from the first second I knew you were not the Libyans. You spoke to us calmly and respectfully.*


OUR MISSION: PROTECTION A SHELTER FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Upon arrival onboard our rescue ship, the team identifies the most vulnerable people; those who have been particularly exposed to physical and/or psychological suffering and therefore require appropriate medical and humanitarian attention. This also includes very young girls and pregnant women. All members of the team on board are trained in psychological first aid. Above all, it is a matter of remaining alert: listening to those who wish to talk; identifying the silent ones and knowing how to pass the baton to the members of the medical team when the stories become too difficult to hear.

The *Ocean Viking* has an area called the women's shelter, reserved exclusively for women and children under the age of twelve: as soon as they arrive, women are taken there. They can change clothes, eat, rest, and consult the medical team. No men are allowed to enter this area at any time during the crossing, not even the crew.

In this safe space, women sometimes speak freely, although most of them do not talk about their painful experiences. Sometimes it is the men on board who describe the appalling treatment women are subjected to in Libya.

WOMEN'S SHELTER

 Anthony Jean /
SOS MEDITERRANEE

 Flavio Gasperini /
SOS MEDITERRANEE



THE SONGS OF THE WOMEN SURVIVORS

Viviana is one of the SOS MEDITERRANEE search and rescue (SAR) team members. In the shelter reserved for women and children on the *Aquarius* and subsequently on the *Ocean Viking*, she listens with compassion to the most terrible stories, the gentlest songs, the laughter and also the tears.

Usually, the women sleep a lot when they arrive. They are exhausted by the night spent at sea, sometimes by several days adrift, and by everything they lived through in Libya. They did not get enough to eat in the detention centres and are weak. They are given blankets. Sometimes, some of the women sleep so long that crew members play with their children to enable the mothers to rest. The atmosphere in the women's shelter is relaxed and calm. There is something magical about it... These women do not know each other yet they help each other, even with the newborns, they are like a close-knit family.

Sometimes, in the shelter, the women sing with voices like angels. It creates a magical connection between them. I don't know how they manage to sing the same song together, it's unbelievable: they come from different countries and they don't speak the same language but these songs are so soft, so gentle! During these moments, many women also cry.

*One day, we performed a rescue. There were about 400 people in a wooden boat. I was the boat leader of the rescue dinghy, "Easy 3", in charge of the communication with survivors. At one point, ten Eritrean women boarded our boat. We had to wait at sea for the other two lifeboats to evacuate survivors to the ship. One of the women spoke to me on behalf of all the others because she was the only one who spoke English. She said, "All the women here want to thank you! **You are our sister!** Thank you!" Then they started to sing. It was a truly incredible moment. In the middle of the sea, when they had just faced death and the first thing on their mind was singing. It was their way of saying thank you. The Eritrean women's singing is really very gentle, very soothing. It was beautiful and incongruous at the same time.*

Scenes of women singing in their shelters or on deck with the men are quite common - especially when, after days of being stranded at sea, the maritime authorities finally assign a safe port to disembark the survivors. One of these magical moments was caught on camera by Hippolyte, a reporter on board, when the women improvised the song "Ocean Viking: you deserve our trust," in January 2021.



Click here to see the video :
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnW5JLkei38>

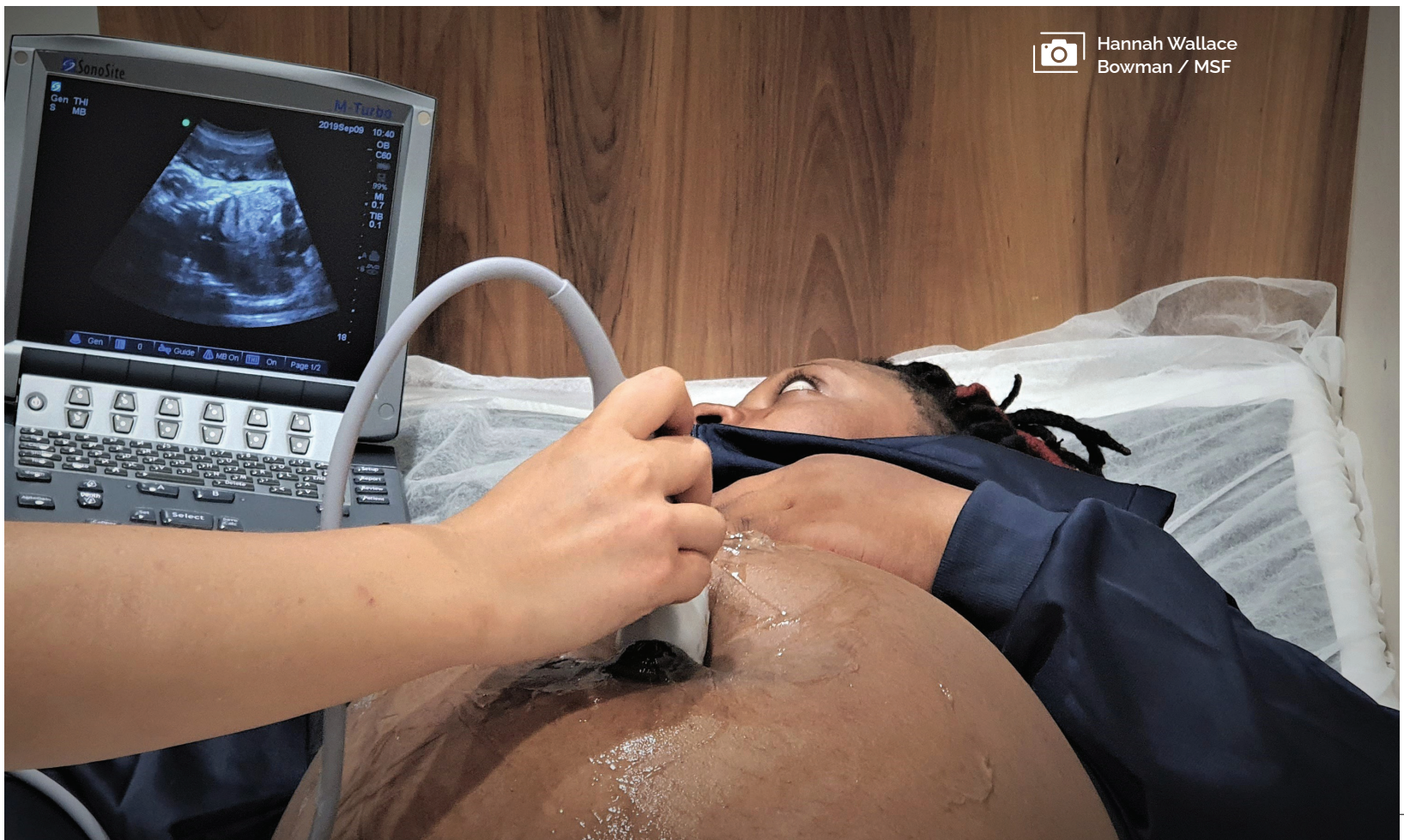
THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES (IFRC): OUR PARTNER ONBOARD TO HELP PROTECT THE SURVIVORS

Since September 2021, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) works alongside the **SOS MEDITERRANEE** teams to provide post-rescue support onboard the *Ocean Viking*, until disembarkation in a port of safety: medical care, psychological support, protection but also helping meet the survivors' basic needs. The medical and protection team includes a doctor, a nurse, a midwife and professionals able to identify and help people who are particularly vulnerable and in need of special protection, such as pregnant women, unaccompanied minors and victims of human trafficking.

ONBOARD CONSULTATIONS

The *Ocean Viking* has a clinic on board with a medical team leader, a doctor, a nurse and a midwife. In addition to first aid treatments, the most common illnesses and conditions treated onboard include severe skin burns caused by the mixture of fuel and sea water in the boats, dehydration, hypothermia, skin diseases such as scabies due to the detention conditions in Libya, lung diseases and malnutrition. Additionally, it is common to see wounds from gunshot and abuse, psychological distress caused by the abuse in Libya and generalised pain.

The midwife onboard is responsible for taking care of women and young children and the women often confide in them. They can conduct a clinical examination and a pregnancy test if the women wish.





Flavio Gasperini /
SOS MEDITERRANEE

THREE QUESTIONS TO PAULINE MIDWIFE ON BOARD THE OCEAN VIKING

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH CONDITIONS OF THE WOMEN YOU MEET?

Since 2016, in addition to pathologies also encountered by men [see p. 19], the women rescued by **SOS MEDITERRANEE** have suffered physical, psychological and sexual violence during their migratory journey... Such violence generates not only immense suffering, loss of dignity, but also short and long-term medical and psychological consequences. Women can contract sexually transmitted diseases or face unwanted pregnancies. Yet, most of them did not have access to health care for months or even years. Infections and unwanted pregnancies that are not medically treated in Libya can also lead to complications such as chronic pelvic pain, pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility... These complications directly affect the women's mental health through anxiety, depression, addiction or social isolation which can sometimes lead to suicidal behavior. Pregnant women are also particularly vulnerable because they are excluded from all preventive care and monitoring of their pregnancy.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN TYPES OF CARE YOU PROVIDE?

We can provide urgent medical care in a clinic located on the Ocean Viking's rear deck. We give pregnant women a check-up to monitor the progress of their pregnancy, identify any pathologies and prevent complications. We have even delivered babies and cared for newborns. Depending on the situation, we sometimes request the help of maritime authorities for medical evacuation. We explain to the survivors - both women and sometimes men - the medical care we can provide people who have been sexually assaulted. Emergency contraception is available to any woman who has experienced sexual assault up to five days before her arrival on the mothership. We also have treatments to prevent infections (HIV, Hepatitis B and other sexually transmitted diseases).

WHAT MEMORIES DO YOU HAVE FROM YOUR ACTION AT SEA?

Beyond the medical care offered, we seek to lend a sympathetic ear and bring kindness onboard. For example, some women have confided in me part of their stories, which they had never shared with anyone before. I think it's important that they feel free to share what they often cannot tell their family or friends, and that this will perhaps somehow allow them to somewhat alleviate their load to pursue their life. Despite the hardships and horrific experiences they have been through, these women remain full of hope. I never cease to be amazed by the courage and strength that stem from this hope. For some of them, hope means, one day, living in a peaceful country. For others, it is to study or to offer their children a chance to escape the cycle of violence they grew up in. **As the days go by onboard, witnessing these women and children open up, for a moment smiling and sharing stories, remains a very powerful memory for me.**

BRAVE MOTHERS : SIX BIRTHS ABOARD THE *AQUARIUS*

SOME WOMEN TRAVEL WITH YOUNG CHILDREN, SOMETIMES INFANTS WHO WERE BORN IN LIBYA'S UNSANITARY DETENTION CENTRES. SOMETIMES THEY HAVE LEFT THEIR COUNTRIES TO PROTECT THEIR CHILDREN - FROM IMMINENT EXCISION, FAMILY VIOLENCE, LACK OF HEALTHCARE ...- OR SIMPLY TO OFFER THEM A BETTER FUTURE. OTHER WOMEN, INCLUDING TEENAGERS, ARRIVE ONBOARD PREGNANT, SOMETIMES VERY CLOSE TO TERM. SINCE **SOS MEDITERRANEE** BEGAN ITS OPERATIONS AT SEA IN FEBRUARY 2016, SIX WOMEN HAVE GIVEN BIRTH IN THE CLINIC ONBOARD THE *AQUARIUS*.



DESTINÉ-ALEX: named in honour of the captain of the *Aquarius*

At the end of May 2016, a great moment for the crew, more accustomed to heartbreak than to joy on board. Bernadette gave birth to a beautiful boy that she and her partner, David, named Destiné-Alex, in honour of Alex, the captain of the *Aquarius*.

NEWMAN: a new life for a new (little) man

Faith and Otas had undertaken the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea with their two children, aged five and seven. Having left Libya on an overcrowded inflatable, the mother felt her first contractions, but fortunately she gave birth to Newman on board the *Aquarius*, under the supervision of the medical team on September 12th, 2016.



MERCY: a song about the only girl born on board to this day

On March 21st, 2017, Taiwo gave birth to Mercy. This birth on the *Aquarius* was tweeted by a journalist onboard, which inspired the song "Mercy" by the duo "Madame Monsieur" who sang it as the French entry at the 2018 Eurovision song contest.¹⁶



CHRIST: he was born adrift in a wooden boat

The incredible story of Christ, born in July 2017, is unique for the **SOS MEDITERRANEE** teams. Under a blazing sun, a young woman from Cameroon gave birth in the middle of the sea, surrounded by strangers and in an overcrowded boat. When boarding the *Aquarius*, the newborn was still attached to his mother by his umbilical cord.



FAVOUR: four rescues and a birth

Cynthia left Nigeria following the death of her husband and found herself off the coast of Libya on a small wooden boat, nine months pregnant. Four boats were rescued by **SOS MEDITERRANEE** that day, including hers. On December 11th, 2016, the midwife, Marina, rejoiced: "It was a very long day, and we were all very tired, but this birth made everyone so happy!"

MIRACLE: a survivor celebrated on the deck

It was 3:45 p.m. on May 26th, 2018, when Miracle was born in the *Aquarius*' clinic. Having survived a year of abuse in Libya and the sea crossing, his young mother whispered: "Miracle". Introduced to the other survivors on the deck by the midwife, the 2.8 kg boy was welcomed with much joy.



16. MERCY: https://youtu.be/6ft3_DOajNY
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercy_\(Madame_Monsieur_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercy_(Madame_Monsieur_song))



Destiné-Alex : Yann Merlin / SOS MEDITERRANEE • Newman : M. Panzetti • Favour : Laurin Schmid / SOS MEDITERRANEE • Mercy : Patrick Bar / SOS MEDITERRANEE • Christ : Narcisso Contreras / SOS MEDITERRANEE • Miracle : Guglielmo Mangiapane / SOS MEDITERRANEE

DISEMBARKATION

According to Maritime Law, a rescue is not completed until those rescued have disembarked in a Place of Safety. In the period between 2018 and 2022, waiting to be assigned a port of disembarkation by the maritime authorities can take several days, sometimes even weeks, further weakening the most vulnerable people on board. It regularly happens that

pregnant women who are close to term are found to be in need of emergency evacuation.

The moment of farewell, before reaching land, is often full of emotion after such intense moments. The women, the children and men leave for an uncertain future with only the dream of a new life to clutch onto.



MARIAM,

from Libya, travels with her husband and their four children, aged 6 to 12, to escape the chaos in her country.

September 2021

There is no security and no future in Libya. The only way to save my family and my children was to leave by sea. I can't imagine my children becoming militiamen or smugglers. I can't let that happen. (...) I want my children to be educated, to behave well, to be caring and to build a life worth living. I don't want them to do immoral jobs just to get money.



Laurin Schmid /
SOS MEDITERRANEE

TO FIND OUT MORE



Find all the testimonies of the women, men and children rescued by SOS MEDITERRANEE on <https://en.sosmediterranee.org/voices-from-the-sea/>

ADDITIONAL REPORTS WITH TESTIMONIES OF PEOPLE RESCUED BY SOS MEDITERRANEE:

In Search of a safe haven - the sea as the only option. Crossing the central Mediterranean. HRAS, December 2021. A Human Rights at Sea's report based on the testimonies of people rescued by the *Ocean Viking*.

https://www.humanrightsatsea.org/sites/default/files/media-files/2021-12/HRAS_In-Search-of-Safe-Haven_Publication_DEC21_SP.pdf

Castaways from Hell – Testimonies collected on board of the *Aquarius*. Marie Rajablat (text) and Laurin Schmid (photos)

This book is available in English for free and can be downloaded from the **SOS MEDITERRANEE** website: <https://en.sosmediterranee.org/news/the-castaways-from-hell-testimonies-collected-on-the-aquarius/>

CREDITS

The illustrations in this booklet were created gratuitously by the French graffiti artist, Laec, based on photographs of women rescued by the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE. She was inspired by photographs taken onboard our ships by Laurin Schmid, Hara Kaminara and Hannah Wallace Bowman.



See more of Laec's work on Instagram: www.instagram.com/laec.art

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SOS MEDITERRANEE

#TogetherForRescue

RESCUE, PROTECT, TESTIFY

SOS MEDITERRANEE is a European maritime and humanitarian organisation for the rescue of life in the Mediterranean. It was founded by citizens in May 2015 in response to the deaths in the Mediterranean and the failure of the European Union to prevent these deaths. Its teams have three core missions: to rescue the lives of those at sea, to protect the survivors until their disembarkation in a Place of Safety and to raise public awareness on the tragedy unfolding in the Mediterranean Sea. **SOS MEDITERRANEE** works as a European association with teams in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland.



www.sosmediterranee.org



Anthony Jean /
SOS MEDITERRANEE