

Finding accommodation for undocumented women is among the most problematic and resource intensive issues facing front-line NGOs. In Belgium, where the lack of subsidies for women's shelters to house undocumented women form a significant barrier in terms of access, migrant community organisations spend a significant amount of their time supporting survivors of violence to find accommodation. *"It's almost impossible to find a shelter specialised in domestic violence for an undocumented woman in Brussels, so they end up turning to homeless shelters which are not at all suited to help them or often, they find precarious accommodation with friends or acquaintances"*, explains Monica Pereira of Brazilian community organisation **Abraço**. To overcome the difficulty in finding shelters to accept undocumented women in Paris, **Femmes de la Terre** produced a small address book listing all the centres hosting survivors of violence, some of which do host undocumented women.¹¹²

The **Support Group for Undocumented Women** (*Steungroep voor Vrouwen zonder Verblijfsvergunning – SVZV*) in Amsterdam works to house undocumented women who come to their drop in centre. *"Housing is really a big issue"* said Federica Armandillo. While the situation has improved since 2009, when a national fund to reimburse women's shelters came into effect, frontline NGOs still spend a significant amount of time securing places as shelters are unfamiliar with the initiative, lack places, or claim there is not enough prospective of undocumented moving out. Operated solely by volunteers, SVZV is continually working to house undocumented women through its evolving informal network of churches and organisations. In addition to having one room available in a house shared with another organisation, they liaise with a several contacts ranging from the *Sisters of Charity*, who can house women and children up to six months, to the left-wing social movements and the Amsterdam squat-scene.

INDEPENDENT SHELTER FOR UNDOCUMENTED WOMEN IN THE NETHERLANDS

Huize Agnes, based in the Dutch city of Utrecht, was opened by retired nurse Henny van der Nagel. *"I never met an undocumented woman before opening this shelter,"* she explained. *"But I read my newspapers, so I knew the problems. And I could imagine how the life must be for them"*. While termed an "emergency shelter" in Dutch, it houses undocumented women and children for up to two years.¹¹³ During PICUM's visit in 2011, women from Bangladesh, Nigeria, Suriname, Algeria, China, Guinea, and Cameroon were staying there.

Located in a secret address, the shelter originally offered food, a bed, and a small allowance, but soon realised that the extent of the issues facing these women would require a more holistic approach. *"We are trying to work on their future which means that the whole range of issues are addressed: health, education, legal, social and financial,"* highlighted Henny. *"We look at their legal situation; if they don't have a lawyer, or not a good one, we put them in touch with legal contacts here in Utrecht. The women learn Dutch and we help them to find work. We help them to address their future; if they want to stay in Holland irregularly then we help them to do that with dignity, or if they want to go back to their country we can find out about programmes."*

112 The address book is available in print version at the association, contact details at: <http://femmesdelaterre.org/>

113 Girls of any age can be housed, while for boys the cut off age is 12 years old.

As a volunteer-based initiative run by limited private donations, a key strength of Huize Agnes has been its mobilisation of other volunteers to provide support through donations or training. Residents have received training ranging from Dutch society, fire prevention, first aid, and contraception to biking lessons and road safety. The prolonged stay and personal nature of the shelter means that women are likely to disclose further details regarding violence, which can in turn improve their application for legal stay.

The shelter has been in high demand since doors opened 2006 with over 70 women housed. Established to accommodate to women without documents, a home, or income, *Huize Agnes* also receives requests to house those with temporary documents as well as women from “new” EU member states¹¹⁴. *“In the Netherlands, there are too many women who don’t have a safe place to stay”, explained Henny, “Shelters like this are badly needed, it’s just a little bit of help for a much larger problem - women are so much more in danger, especially those with children.”*

The **No-one is illegal Network** in Sweden and **Free Movement Network** in Finland have provided support and shelter to undocumented women for many years. With no resources apart from the solidarity and commitment of their network, local volunteers provide shelter to undocumented men, women, and children in their own homes.

On 8 March 2010, the 100th anniversary of international women’s rights day, the **“Ain’t I A Woman” Campaign** was launched by the *No-one is Illegal* network in Sweden.¹¹⁵ Bringing far reaching public and political attention to the lack of support and justice afforded to undocumented women’s experiencing violence, the launch affirmed that this campaign was seeking to secure the rights that women had been fighting for all this time were also enjoyed by undocumented women.

As Trifa Shakey from the campaign explained *“It is a shock for those from other European countries when we talking about the situation facing undocumented women. It’s also a big shock for Swedish people and organisations; they are questioning “Is that true? Are we leaving women in the street? Forcing women into prostitution because they can’t work or have a*



Logo “No one is illegal”, Sweden

shelter? Is that they country I am living in?” They don’t want to see it. Someone else will take care of it. It’s just a temporary problem”.

In Sweden, mainstream organisations and support services for women experiencing violence are largely supported by the state. In these highly regulated systems, proof of entitlement is required and social security codes are methodically checked at first contact. Undocumented migrants generally avoid these services for fear of being reported, and those that do approach them are systematically turned away. It is therefore not uncommon for undocumented women’s existence and experience

114 Currently nine member states of the EU require Bulgarians and Romanians to acquire a permit to work. So although they joined the EU in 2007, these nationalities can face difficulty to access legal employment or state support.

115 Blog available at: <http://aintiawomankampanjen.wordpress.com/englishespanol/in-english/>