

The Hidden Population: A Firsthand Look at the Refugee Experience in Rome

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All Roads Lead to Rome

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This report is based on first-hand interviews with refugees living in Rome. Many face complicated legal situations and/or fear persecution in some form, so their names have been changed to protect identities.

Refugees are a diverse and hidden population in Rome. They are often viewed through a monolithic lens, but their experiences actually vary greatly. This is due largely to a complex Italian asylum system which creates an information gap that makes integration more difficult. This paper will use first-person interviews with refugees in Rome to investigate the problems of the Italian system of refugee reception and integration. Two existing solutions will be explained which focus on bridging the information gap and creating a legal passage for entry into Italy.

Part I: “Italy is a shit country.”

“What’s your favorite aspect of life in Rome? The food, the people, the history?”

I was talking in Italian with a refugee from Afghanistan named Mahmoud¹ at the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center (JNRC) in the heart of Rome. He doesn’t understand much English, but he’s lived in Rome for 7 years and speaks fluent Italian. I was trying to break the silence and implore Mahmoud to talk about his experiences in Rome. I’d been living in the city for just two months as a study abroad student and could go on for hours about the beauty of the language, the quirky interactions with locals, and my favorite churches and gelatterias.

Mahmoud’s hardened face makes him look much older than his 31 years. He glumly ponders my question for a few moments before muttering, “The air.”

“Is there anything else you like here?” I inquire. “The language, the city’s beauty?”

“Nope, just the clean air,” he responds. “*Italy is a shit country.*”

Mahmoud’s experience in Rome and perspective on Italy had been quite different from mine, but was not an uncommon one among migrants.

- “Everyone hates Italy, especially immigrants...Because the community does not accept immigrants. The community doesn’t want us to work. They don’t accept us.”²
- “I’m suffering a lot here. Whites and blacks do not mix as well in Italy as in the United States.”³
- “In Afghanistan, you die in 1 day. Here we are dying every day.”⁴

Many refugees sleep on the streets, cannot find work, and face racism from Italians. With all these negative experiences, *why would anyone leave their family and risk their life to make the dangerous journey to Rome?*

Certainly, many do not have much of a choice, fleeing from war, persecution, terrorism, or unjust imprisonment in their home country. The situation is often just too dire at home to have any hope of raising a family in a country decimated by violence. Many asylum seekers often have family members back home counting on them to make enough money to bring the rest of the family to Europe.

But for some, there are opportunities for a better life in Rome. They secure housing, make friends, find a job, or begin taking classes. Lamin⁵ is studying political science at John Cabot University, Achmed works two jobs, and Zia⁶ takes Italian classes with the non-profit that runs

¹ Mahmoud (refugee from Afghanistan). Interview by author. March 20, 2017.

² Achmed (refugee from Afghanistan). Interview by author. April 26, 2017.

³ Mamadou (economic migrant from Senegal). Interview by author. May 1, 2017.

⁴ Sari (refugee from Afghanistan). Interview by author. May 1, 2017.

⁵ Lamin (refugee from Gambia). Interview by author. March 9, 2017.

⁶ Zia (refugee from Afghanistan). Presentation to the author’s class. April 18, 2017.

his SPRAR, an integrated Italian reception network aimed at helping asylum seekers regain independence.

“Rome is good,” a Nigerian named Adewale⁷ tells me. “They are lovely people, especially towards foreigners...We can go to a café and people are nice. I never complain.”

So which narrative of Rome is true: a shit show or a land of opportunity?

Part II: The information gap

As one begins to investigate the experiences of refugees in Rome, it becomes clear that they are not a monolithic group. They vary based on nationality, reasons for fleeing, educational attainment, language competency, socioeconomic status, and attitudes towards Rome. But there is another fascinating divergence which stratifies refugees: the information they know about the asylum process, their rights in Rome, and what to expect before they left home.

The Italian asylum process is a maze of bureaucracy and uncertainty which creates varying expectations and realities for asylum seekers. How long the process takes depends on who you ask:

- “The commission will make a decision within 6 months.”⁸
- “It usually takes 2 years, 3 years at worst.”⁹
- “With Afghans it is easy to get our documents...For Africans it is much more difficult. They’ve been here 3 or 4 years and they’re still waiting on their documents.”¹⁰

According to a report by the IMF¹¹, the commission should decide in 3 days from when the interview occurs, but a decision typically takes 6-12 months, with an appeal on a negative decision stretching for another 6-18 months. Even these estimates, however, can be a bit too idealistic.

In addition to how long the process takes, many refugees are often unsure about the implications of being fingerprinted and applying for asylum in a country. The EU’s Dublin Regulation¹² “obliges asylum seekers to apply for asylum in the first safe country that they are able to enter.” Once refugees are fingerprinted in a safe EU Member State, they may only apply for asylum in that country. A perhaps not-so-unintended byproduct of this regulation puts oversized pressure

⁷ Adewale (refugee from Nigeria). Interview by author. April 26, 2017.

⁸ Lamin.

⁹ Adewale.

¹⁰ Achmed.

¹¹ Aiyar, Shekhar, and Bergljot Barkbu. *The Refugee Surge in Europe: Economic Challenges*. Publication. January 2016. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2016/sdn1602.pdf>.

¹² Ambrosini, Maurizio. "Better than Our Fears? Refugees in Italy: Between Rhetorics of Exclusion and Local Projects of Inclusion." In *Refugee Protection and the Role of Law: Conflicting Identities*, edited by Susan Kneebone, 235. New York: Routledge, 2016.

on the Mediterranean countries which border North Africa and the Middle East (i.e. Italy and Greece).

The intent of this regulation is to have refugees apply for asylum in the first safe country they enter, whereas any secondary movement is not for asylum purposes (often economic)¹³. Before obtaining full-time, legal work in another country, they must obtain permanent residence in the first country (typically requires living 5 years in a country) and then obtain a visa to work abroad. Many asylum seekers are unaware of this regulation before they enter Europe. Refugees often move throughout Europe in search of a place where they can find employment and housing, only to be sent back to the country of their first arrival. That is why many of the men at JNRC are back in Italy – Sari was sent back from the UK; Achmed was kicked out of Belgium. Regardless of if they were aware of the regulation or ever intended on staying, arriving on the shores of Italy and having their fingerprints taken there meant asylum seekers would not be legally allowed to work elsewhere in Europe.¹⁴

Part III: Who's to blame?

There are numerous factors which could play a role in creating this divergence in outcomes and information gap among refugees. One way of understanding these factors is by categorizing them into two groups: refugee-based or Italy-based. In other words, in what ways can this variance be attributed to certain characteristics of the refugees themselves and in what ways to systemic problems in Italy.

Refugee-Based Factors

There could exist certain factors, such as language, attitude, and pre-existing knowledge of how the system works, which could impact how a refugee navigates the Italian asylum process. While few refugees know Italian before arriving (though many who stay longer than a few months will learn it from different non-profit offerings), knowing English or another language which is spoken in Europe can greatly increase one's chances of thriving. The most quickly and effectively integrated refugees I met already had a proper fluency in English before coming to Italy. It's essential for discovering opportunities, building personal networks, understanding rights, learning laws, and seeking advice.



Adewale from Nigeria (left) and Nick (author) outside the Joel Nafuma Refugee Center

¹³ Ibid, 237.

¹⁴ There are exceptions to the Dublin Regulation for family reunification, resettlement, and marriage, which are beyond the scope of this paper and will not be addressed here

There are misconceptions and unrealistic expectations which distort refugees' perceptions of Italy and can put them at a disadvantage. Some aren't aware of the Dublin Regulations or, more broadly, what asylum is when they arrive on the shores of Italy. A refugee's first interactions with the police can be vital and one must be aware of what should and should not be said – mentioning your desire to get a job could label you as an *economic migrant*, a distinction which could prevent you from getting non-refoulement (protection from deportation to your home country) and other benefits. Offering your fingerprint will prevent you from applying for asylum elsewhere in Europe.

The effects of an asylum seeker's attitude towards his/her situation has a large impact, not necessarily on the information gap, but on the overall perception of the experience. Achmed's impression of the Italian bureaucracy is that they let asylum seekers control their own fate. They seem to say, "Go find your way, build your own life. Whether you want to build your life or destroy your life, it's up to you." Many refugees don't have the long term intention of staying in Italy, adding a psychological layer which decreases the desire of pursuing certain durable solutions. A refugee needs 8 years of *testa media* and high school in Italy simply to have eligibility to study at an Italian university.¹⁵ For those who hope to move back home when the conflict is over or move on to another European country once it is legal to do so, the motivation decreases to pursue extensive integration in Italy.

Italy-based factors

In his book on refugee protection and law, Maurizio Ambrosini¹⁶ presents four different political approaches countries can take on forced migration. The *passive tolerance* approach views refugees as "a problem to be avoided" because there is "a lack of political will to establish rules for recognition and reception centers." The *closure without alternative* takes a cynical approach to refugees and views them as "unscrupulous exploiters of the generous welfare states of receiving countries" and thus tries to close borders and prevent refugees from entering. *Protection without integration* views refugees as victims who cannot be refused help, but are still a burden to the host country. It involves offering temporary and purely humanitarian reception efforts aimed at "the preservation of life, but no investments are planned to stabilize those refugees who are accepted." Finally, *integration without protection* is related to the first approach and occurs when refugees exist on the margins of society and their integration is tolerated and akin to that of economic migrants. The state provides little, "leaving the task of providing for their needs to ethnic networks, poor sectors of the labour market and solidarity organizations."

To oversimplify the Italian government's efforts at protection and integration in recent years, they have maintained open borders and offered shabby reception centers, legal protection, and limited benefits to asylum seekers, but the system is disorganized and, from the perspective of many refugees, offers insufficient help. These deficiencies in the system point contribute greatly to the information gap and wide variance in experiences among refugees. One can hold a few different theories about why these deficiencies exist.

¹⁵ Lamin.

¹⁶ Ambrosini, 243.

One view is that Italy simply lacks the economic and organizational capabilities to get much beyond a combination of a failed form of protection and integration, where many asylum seekers eventually receive legal protection (after a few years), but either end up homeless and unemployed or scrape by on low or illegal wage markets and the generosity of community groups. Rental housing has seen an increased demand and can be more difficult to come by due to the deteriorating economic conditions after the economic crisis of 2008 and subsequent tightening of lending conditions by banks.¹⁷ Decreto Legislativo 142/2015¹⁸ gives asylum seekers in Italy the right to work 60 days after their application is lodged, but this is almost never the case in reality. The residence permits are often delayed and even when received, few can actually find jobs. Italy has an unemployment rate of nearly 12% and hasn't seen annual GDP growth over 1.1% since 2011 (their 2016 rate of 1.0% ranked 8th worst in Europe)¹⁹. In 2015, general government debt²⁰ was 132% of GDP, 2nd highest of EU countries, behind only Greece. The Italian economy was not necessarily fit to effectively receive and integrate the 123,370 asylum seekers who lodged applications in Italy in 2016.²¹

Related to this challenging economic outlook is an apparent lack of political will on the part of the Italian government to do much to change the disorganized system, a mixture of passive tolerance and protection without integration. To look more closely at this, one can examine the relationship between the government and refugees in regards to housing in Rome. International asylum law gives asylum seekers a right to shelter. Many are given temporary shelter in reception centers or camps, but these often become overcrowded and after a decision is reached many refugees are on their own find housing. For many, this means sleeping on the streets or in informal squatter communities. A Mediciens Sans Fronteirs report²² indicates there may be as many as 10,000 refugees living in informal settlements in Italy. The Diritto all'abitare (Right to



Getty Images: Migrants move a tent at a refugee camp next to Tiburtina train station in Rome

¹⁷ Nur, Nadia, and Alejandro Sethman. "Migration and Mobilization for the Right to Housing in Rome: New Urban Frontiers?" In *Migration, Squatting, and Radical Autonomy*, edited by Pierpaolo Mudu and Sutapa Chattopadhyay. New York: Routledge, 2017.

¹⁸ ASGI. "Access to the Labour Market - Italy." Asylum Information Database. 2017.

<http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/Italy/reception-conditions/employment-education/access-labour-market>.

¹⁹ "Italy." Trading Economics. 2017. <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/italy/gdp-growth>.

²⁰ "Government Finance and EDP Statistics." Eurostat, May 3, 2017.

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/government-finance-statistics/statistics-illustrated>.

²¹ ASGI. Country Report: Italy. Asylum Information Database. December 31, 2016.

²² "'Fuori Campo'. L'accoglienza Che Esclude." Mediciens Sans Frontieres. Accessed May 02, 2017. <http://fuoricampo.medicisenzafrontiere.it/>.

Inhabit) movement helps mediate the awkward tensions between refugees and the police. There have been public efforts to clear out these public occupations, but they are often half-heartedly enforced.

Adewale lives in one of these squatter communities and describes their interactions when the police tried to evict them:

I'm on the streets. We were staying outside, but it was too cold. We stay at a building no one is living in. One day the police came and told us we had to go. I said, 'Where should we go? *Silence* Okay, we'll go to your house.' *More silence* So, they let us stay.

The government is in an awkward balance between wanting to stop this illegal activity and recognizing that they cannot meet the needs of this population. Because there is not enough political will to incite action towards either outcome, these conditions persist.

Another explanation for the system's flaws is that Italians are actively preventing the reception and integration of asylum seekers, pushing towards the *closure without alternative* approach. From the creation of Identification and Expulsion Centers (CIEs) (detention centers with shabby conditions which receive and often deport new arrivals) to the abolition of the Mediterranean rescue mission 'Mare Nostrum' (though this was dismantled at the prodding of other EU countries), Italy has moved towards a policy of discouraging refugees to come.²³ At the border, some security guards prod refugees to move beyond Italy: "*Vai a Germania* [Go to Germany]. You will have work, you will have a better life, you will have better housing. No one will stop you."²⁴

This feeling of not being wanted extends beyond these not-so-subtle suggestions about where to settle. Many refugees feel there are deliberate attempts to prevent them from integrating. Sari wasn't allowed to renew his asylum application without listing a permanent residence, referencing Article 5 of the Piano Casa Housing Plan which prevents people from registering a formal residence in an occupied public building. For the thousands of homeless and squatters, this denies them the rights connected to residency, including education, political participation, and eventual citizenship.

The reality is certainly a combination of all these factors. Part of the disparity of experiences is due to the refugee themselves: their competency in a relevant language, existing knowledge of how to navigate the asylum system, and attitude towards living in Rome. But Italy is quite far from being able to wipe itself clean from blame. A struggling economy combined with an inconsistent asylum system has created a society which sits somewhere between passively tolerating asylum seekers and actively trying to prevent them from entering and integrating. This complex relationship between refugees and the people of Italy offers the context necessary to understand before offering solutions.

²³ Nur and Sethman.

²⁴ Lamin.

Part IV: Possible Solutions

Of all the information analyzed above, some of the most significant problems facing refugees as they enter Rome is a lack of information about the reality of what lies ahead and challenges in forming personal networks. The misinformation distorts expectations and creates obstacles in navigating through the asylum system. Developing a strong personal network is crucial for finding opportunities to secure housing, find a job, and integrate into a community. Two solutions which address these problems are the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) "Aware Migrants" campaign and the Community of Sant'Egidio's "Humanitarian Corridor."

"Aware Migrants"²⁵ is an informational campaign organized jointly by IOM Coordination Office for the Mediterranean in Rome and the Italian Ministry of Interior to raise awareness among potential migrants about the dangers of the journey to Italy. It is based on the principle that *Information is Empowerment* and the understanding that many migrants "are unaware of the dangers and risk of migrating assisted by smugglers, not only at sea or in the desert, but also in transit countries like Libya." This is mainly done through a series of videos created by migrants and for migrants, shared via social media. They share their hardships in detail and offer alternatives to either find new opportunities in their home countries or seek safe, legal passage to Europe. The goal of this campaign is to alert potential migrants of the realities of the journey to Europe so they can make an informed decision about how to migrate or whether to migrate at all.

A fundamental reason for the importance of the information-sharing which Aware Migrants facilitates is because of the lack of options for legal passage to Europe for forced migrants. The "Humanitarian Corridors"²⁶ established by the Community of Sant'Egidio creates another legal option. The Italian Ministry of the Interior has allowed representatives of the Community of Sant'Egidio to administer 1,000 humanitarian visas to migrants at registration centers in Lebanon, Morocco, and Ethiopia. The visas, which require screening by Italian consular authorities before being administered, are intended to be an option for those in vulnerable conditions, such as victims of torture, families with children, the elderly, sick people, and persons with disabilities.

This project is entirely privately funded and costs the Italian government nothing, but the benefits are immense. It provides families with a safe, legal passage to Italy (once they have a humanitarian visa, they can simply buy a plane ticket to Rome rather than risk human trafficking or death by paying smugglers to sneak them in), an opportunity to apply for asylum, and immediate integration resources. The families are given Italian lessons, housing, education for minors, and sponsorship from local parishes. They are given an immediate network to facilitate their integration into Italian society.

²⁵ "IOM, Italy Launch AWARE MIGRANTS Campaign." International Organization for Migration. August 08, 2016. <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-italy-launch-aware-migrants-campaign>.

²⁶ "Dossier: What Are the Humanitarian Corridors?" Community of Sant'Egidio. April 27, 2017. <http://www.santegidio.org/pageID/1165/langID/en/itemID/756/Dossier-What-are-the-humanitarian-corridors.html>.

Part V: Conclusion: Looking forward

Pathways to successful integration generally have less to do with interventions on the part of public institutions and more often feature the use of two main resources: social networks and NGOs, especially those related to Catholic Church.²⁷ While Aware Migrants has the support of the Italian government, it very much operates like a grassroots campaign and leans heavily on the influence of social media and personal relationships to address some of the issues refugees face before they migrate.

The Humanitarian Corridors by themselves are not an answer to all of the problems refugees face. The 1,000 refugees who will use this passage are a drop in the bucket compared to the millions of migrants in North Africa and the Middle East considering fleeing to Europe. But the Community of Sant'Egidio has found a way to navigate within the boundaries of the Italian system to offer safety and a welcoming social network to a group of the most vulnerable refugees. "We have no political or economic power," says Paolo Mancinelli²⁸, a spokesperson for the Community of Sant'Egidio, "but we can set an example for Italy and for the rest of Europe."

It is their hope that other NGOs, faith-based organizations, and even EU Member nations might one day adopt their model for outsourcing the administering of visas across the Mediterranean and establishing a larger channel for legal passage to Europe. But they are also trying to incite a more fundamental philosophical change in Italy (and other European countries) in how society views the influx of foreigners.

"Look at history, people have almost always opposed immigrants," Paolo adds. "There are sacrifices at first, but you become a better community and country for it." Paolo and the Community of Sant'Egidio's approach to refugees is not one of *passive tolerance* or *protection without integration*, but one of *welcoming and support*.

It's unfortunate that some refugees view Italy as a "shit country." The contradictory information, complex asylum system, lack of housing or employment options, and outright racism make integration nearly impossible for many refugees. Given these conditions, it's no surprise that some refugees view Italy as a "shit country." A coordinated effort between the government, NGOs, religious communities, and grassroots movements ought to focus on the information gap and legal pathways for migration and integration. If given the opportunity to actively participate in society and viewed as gifts rather than just victims or welfare-leeches, refugees present an opportunity to add to the rich fabric of Italian society.

²⁷ Ambrosini, 241.

²⁸ Paolo Mancinelli (member of the Community of Sant'Egidio). Interview with the author. May 27, 2016.

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