

# ANNUAL REPORT 2022



Refugee Women's Centre



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# 1 - Presentation of the RWC

The Refugee Women's Centre is a French association that aims to create safe spaces for vulnerable people. We support women and families living in informal camps on the Franco-British border, particularly in Calais and the Dunkirk area, in Grande-Synthe, Mardyck and Loon-Plage. Our work involves meeting the basic needs of women and families in exile, supporting them in their efforts, and facilitating access to rights, including medical care, emergency accommodation, and legal information. We are also campaigning for the effective implementation of a decent reception and accommodation policy.

RWC has existed in Grande-Synthe since 2015, and became an association under the law of 1901 in April 2017. The organization is multicultural, multilingual, and non-mixed. In 2022, the field team was comprised of volunteers and two salaried employees - Marie Fillâtre, project manager, and Sophie Roux, social worker—who inaugurated the salaried positions in April. The association was run by a five-strong executive, comprising two co-presidents, Caroline Cottet and Frances Timberlake, a treasurer, Cherley Poiré, a secretary, Nina Limacher, and a human resources manager, Camille Vern. The remote team also included a recruitment officer, Clara Florensa, and a procurement and stock officer, Shanice D'Silva.

The year 2022 has been marked by many changes on the coast of the Franco-British border. At the association level, the end of Covid-19-related health restrictions, inflation, the start of the war in Ukraine, and Brexit have significantly impacted volunteer recruitment and the association's material resources. This year marked the fewest volunteer applications submitted and the lowest amount of material donated, since our activities began in 2015.

Despite these challenges, we managed to create our first salaried positions. The departure of the association's main funder in 2021 has triggered an in-depth restructuring of the financial model and team structure. In January 2022, the team consisted of eight volunteers, including two field facilitators, but then major fundraising drive and the support of new and former funders, we were able to recruit a project manager and a social worker. The arrival of our first two employees in April ushered in a period of significant change in the way the team operated.

In 2022, RWC won the Raja People France award, the UN Women's Generation Equality Voices Resilience award and the Women's Foundation Coup de Pouce award.



## Our values



Collaboration

Respect



Intersectional feminism



Non-oppressive practices



Solidarity

## 2 - Context in 2022

### The French-British border

In 2022, a number of contextual changes impacted the informal settlements along the French-British border. The police, military, and logistical resources redoubled their need to "secure" the border, including activities such as the deployment of resources by Frontex following the Brexit; renewal of a UK budget envelope for law enforcement resources in France; purchase of new technologies; and increased presence of law enforcement officers by day and night. In 2022, 20 people died at the Franco-British border.

The frequency and violence of evictions also increased in 2022. In 2021, Human Rights Observers teams observed at least 1,226 evictions in Calais, and 61 evictions in Grande-Synthe. In 2022, they documented 1,669 evictions in Calais and 60 around Loon Plage, where the Grande-Synthe informal settlement has been moved. These evictions are increasingly violent.

Moreover, the number of people on the move crossing the sea is increasing every year, with 60% more crossing the channel than in 2021. This is also the case for women and families: we met 2,136 women, including 38 pregnant women, and 1,887 children, including 485 under the age of five. We have also noticed changes in the nationalities of the women we have met in the Dunkirk area, where the vast majority were Iraqi Kurds. Since spring 2022, we have been supporting an increasing number of Eritrean and Ethiopian women, as well as a minority of Indian and Sri Lankan women. We have also been meeting an increasing number of Iranian women, as a direct result of the growing violence in their country.



In the Dunkirk area, the informal settlements were mainly in Grande-Synthe. Since November 2021, the people on the move have been pushed back to the neighbouring commune of Loon-Plage, followed by Mardyck, both belonging to the Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque, on land belonging to the Grand Port Maritime de Dunkerque. The Grand Port Maritime de Dunkerque comes under the authority of the French government, through the Directorate-General for Infrastructure, Transport and the Sea and the Ministry of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy. These changes have resulted in increased difficulties in dealing with the public authorities, who are difficult to identify and reach, and who pass the buck on many areas of responsibility.

In addition, these new communities are increasingly far from bus stops, with the nearest being a 45-minute walk down a major road. As a reminder, the bus network in the Dunkirk area is entirely free, and is the only form of public transport. For women and families, this distance is a real obstacle to accessing everyday services such as supermarkets, laundromats, public toilets, and hospital services. As a result, they have lost some of their independence and ability to act. There are very few services or information points that come directly into people's homes. For example, the PASS (Permanences d'accès aux soins de santé) services require a journey to the hospital, for which women and families are now dependent on associations.



Living conditions in the camps have continued to deteriorate, as no drinking water, hygiene or sanitation facilities have been installed to keep people hydrated and ensure access to showers, toilets, and laundry facilities. This has harmful consequences for the mental and physical health of the people we support, as well as for their sense of well-being and dignity. Women and young children have specific needs and may therefore have additional or accentuated difficulties. We established a shower slot in a Grande-Synthe gymnasium on Sundays, with a shuttle service provided by our team, for women and their children. Despite the time and effort put into this service, it is clearly insufficient to meet the needs of everyone. We played an active part in the referral of these water access issues to the Human Rights Ombudsman (see section 5 on advocacy). This observation is shared by the Calais area, where people surviving in camps suffer from a lack of access to water.

# People supported in 2022

**Calais**

**1427**

**622**

**583**

**People**

**Women**

**Children**

**Dunkirk area**

**3656**

**1514**

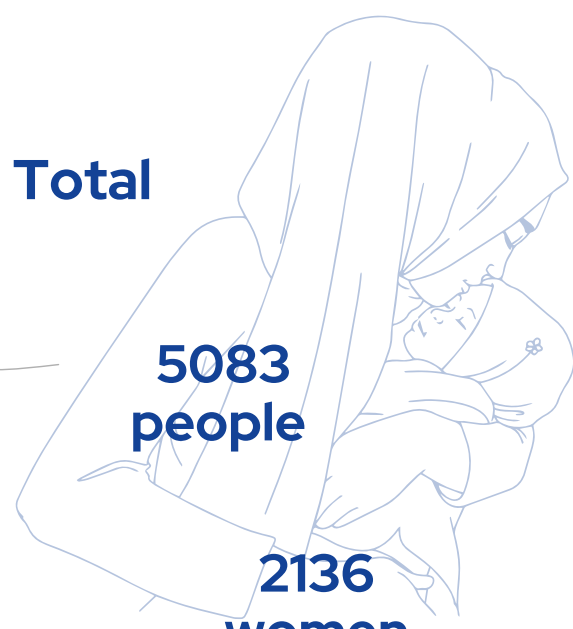
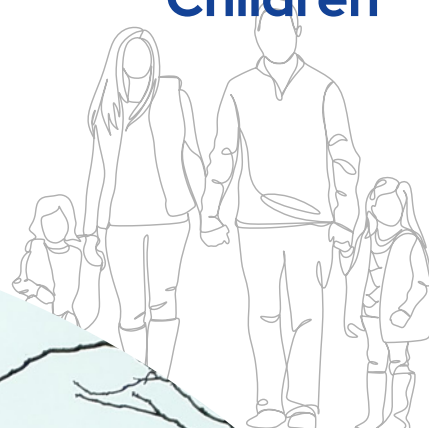
**1304**

**Total**

**5083  
people**

**2136  
women**

**1887  
children**



### 3 - Material support

The increase in the number of people living on the coast, combined with the increase in evictions, has strained our stocks of sleeping equipment. Even as needs increased, drastic reduction in donations and the rise of inflation left the organization with limited resources, resulting in fewer items distributed than in 2021.

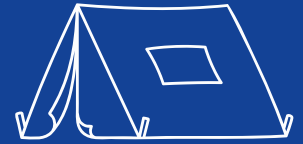
Donations were exceptionally low in 2022, particularly from collection groups in Germany and the UK. Many associations have shifted their focus to the response for the war in Ukraine, initially shifting monetary donations, then material donations towards the summer period. We have lost established partnerships that were essential to our work, including an annual donation of 300 sleeping bags from a German donor. Jogging suits and winter clothing were also not readily available for groups outside Eastern Europe and Ukraine. Ultimately, we had to fundraise to buy some of the items that we were unable to obtain through donations.

The war has also affected collection groups due to the economic situation in the UK and the EU. Some groups that organised clothing and fundraising collections and events lost access to their storage space or had to pay higher fees to maintain their activity. Ukraine-focused grants have been secured to keep their warehouses running and pay their own costs, but this has made it impossible to maintain support to other areas, such as the French-British border.

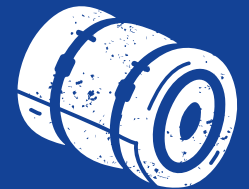
To compensate for the drop in donations, we had to buy tents in bulk directly from China. We were also fortunate enough to receive a donation of 400 tents from a group in Greece. We also raised money through fundraising and long-time supporters, which enabled us to buy basic hygiene items and underwear every month.

The year 2022 was also marked by an optimisation of our storage space in the warehouse we had invested in from winter 2021. This project to redesign the space is still under way in 2023, but we have already built 5 extra shelves to make the area safer for volunteers.

### Bedding items distributed



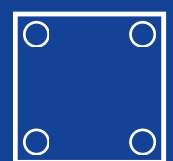
**846 tents**



**1039 sleeping bags**



**1927 blankets**



**343 tarps**



## 4 – Psycho-social support, guidance and accompaniment

Our daily presence in the camps, material support, and facilitation of activities enable us to build trusted relationships with the women, which forms the basis of our psycho-social support. To illustrate this, we have chosen to present two anonymised situations that clearly illustrate the risks and problems encountered by the women, and the type of support we can provide.

The people who benefit from specific support are generally single women, with or without children, who are victims of gender-based violence (GBV). They may be victims of coercion, forced sex work, theft, assault and so on. Being a minority group and having no safe environment to live in, they represent a particularly vulnerable population.

Situations where families are separated during crossings - as described in scenario 2 - are becoming increasingly common on the northern coast of France, especially in the autumn/winter period when crossing opportunities are limited and therefore highly sought-after.

The lack of psychological support at the border means it is not possible to offer support tailored to the needs of the women and families we meet. The institutional services do not have the same time frame as that of exiled people, do very little "outreach," and struggle to overcome the language barrier.

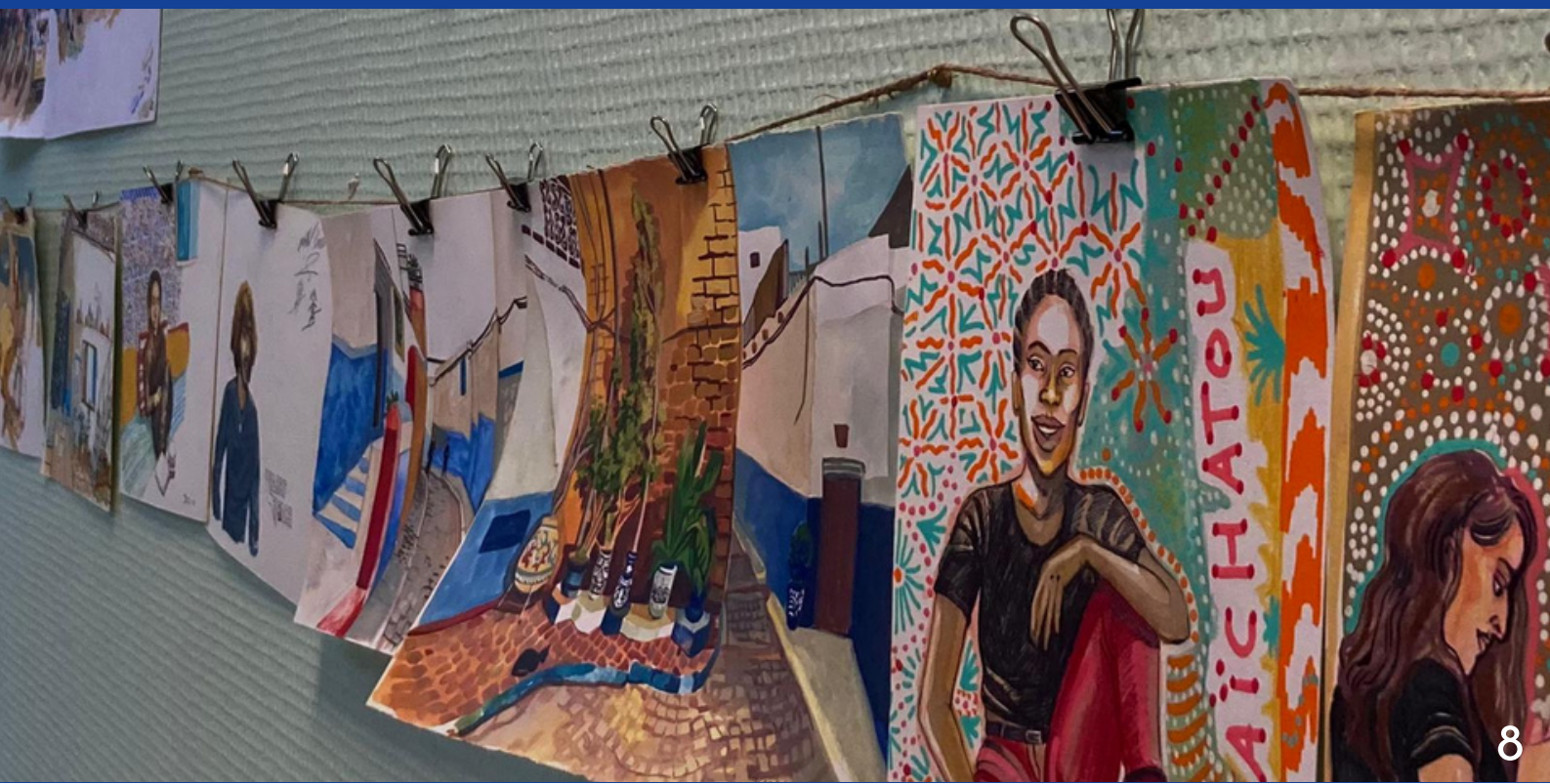
## Scenario 1 – Dunkirk

*A single woman arrived in the Dunkirk camp after being victimised by a man who robbed her of all her financial resources during her journey. During an attempted crossing, she injured her ankle and could no longer walk properly. She lived in a shelter house during her convalescence. During this time, a lone man, also present in the house, took advantage of her injury to establish dominance and harassed her. Simultaneously, the woman was considering applying for asylum in France.*

In this situation, the RWC team provided support for dealing with GBV, and handling administrative procedures (the medical problem being dealt with by the reception centre team and health professionals). The first priority was to ensure that this woman was protected from the first man who had abused her during the trip: no more telephone contact, concealing the place where she lived, etc.

Following this, the issue of the man in the accommodation needed to be tackled. This second stage was carried out in conjunction with the team responsible for the shelter house. The man was transferred to another location, and the woman was taken away from the region for several days to stay with host families, in order to rest, protect herself, and take a step back. She did not wish to initiate legal proceedings or receive psychological support.

From an administrative point of view, the RWC team directed this person to the relevant local players (La Cimade, lawyers): several meetings were organised to understand her situation and explain the relevant procedure. Subsequently, she decided to leave for England.



## Scenario 2 – Calais

*A family consisting of a woman and her 3 children were in transit in the Calais area. During an attempt to cross at night, the mother was violently separated from her children when boarding the boat: she was stranded on the beach while her children remained in the boat. On the way back to Calais, she was the victim of an attempted sexual assault . She then arrived at the Secours Catholique women's/family day centre (where the RWC has its offices) in a state of shock.*

Given the urgency of the situation, we had to react accordingly and work collectively with our partnerassociations (Secours Catholique, Watch The Channel, ECPAT). After being listened to in a state of shock, the woman was accompanied to a calmer place. Simultaneously, the aim was to find out whether the children had managed to reach England, and subsequently find a way of contacting them and the authorities. In terms of emergency accommodation, several solutions were mobilised: public accommodation, a state solution, and a women/family shelter. Attention was paid to her needs in terms of medical and psychological care.

The children were found on the other side of the Channel and contact was established to explain and clarify the situation before they were declared as unaccompanied minors to the English authorities. As a result, a family reunification procedure was initiated, and the children were placed with a foster family pending the arrival of their mother. However, given the long wait and the children's testimonies of irregular and uncomfortable questioning from their foster family, she decided to join them on her own. Despite numerous exchanges explaining that this could be detrimental to her, the pain of separation was too great. The family is now reunited.

## 5 - Advocacy

Our advocacy capacity has been limited in 2022, following the departure of our main funder in 2021 and the transition of our team. Nevertheless, RWC has taken part in various inter-association advocacy projects, particularly in the Calais area.

### **Participation in the Advocacy Commission in Calais with organizations including Secours Catholique, Utopia56, Human Rights Observers, and the Plateforme Solidarité Migrant.e.s.**

Neither the Calais suburbs nor the town of Calais include the living quarters of people on the move in the waste collection system. As a result, a lot of waste accumulates there, which has a major impact on public health, the environment and the town's image, as well as on the dignity of the people on the move themselves.

A number of actions have been taken, including waste collections involving people on the move, volunteers, and Calais residents in the camps. A sculpture was created from the waste collected. The issue has also been referred to the local authority and a member of parliament.

The Advocacy Committee had not been active for some time: as in other organisations, long-term advocacy work requires stable employees who can commit themselves over the long term, in order to move away from a permanent emergency situation.





## Participation in the collective referral to the French Défenseur des Droits on the lack of access to drinking water, hygiene and sanitation facilities

Lack of access to water has a disastrous impact on the physical and mental health as well as the sense of dignity of exiled women, girls, and children. The situation in Calais and Dunkirk is the worst in mainland France.

We collected testimonies from single women, unaccompanied minors and mothers, using CERFA forms. Following this collection, we drew up an [association statement on access to water](#).

This project was carried out collectively, with associations from Ouistreham, Calais and Dunkirk. The referral was coordinated by Solidarity International, with whom other projects continued in 2023, including the UN UPR.

## Letters to sub-prefectures

During the winter period, the RWC sent several letters to the sub-prefectures concerning the malfunctioning of emergency accommodation services (I15 and CAES for the Calais area) and the shelters organised during the Plan Grand Froid (in Dunkirk).

## Participation in monthly women's and families' meetings in Calais

The arrival of the project manager and social worker has also been an opportunity to revitalise the women's meetings in Calais. These meetings were an opportunity to take stock of the situation and follow up with the women and families supported, and to work on letters and other advocacy projects with Secours Catholique, Utopie 56, the Plateforme Solidarité Migrant-e-s, as well as Project Play and ECPAT in certain situations.



# 6 - Safeguarding and team

## Safeguarding practices

We understand "safeguarding" as "protecting people's health, well-being and rights, enabling them to live free from harm, abuse and neglect" (National Health Service definition). This notion refers as much to attitudes towards people on the move as to the day-to-day lives of those involved at the border.

First of all, the presence of militant associations and collectives has an impact on the lives of people on the move. These actors fight against state violence and for the improvement of living conditions for people in transit on the coast. However, their practices on the ground should not be excluded from critical analysis. For example, in a system where the relationship between accompanying persons and accompanied persons exists, the absence of training and protocols can lead to further complications for the women and families supported by the RWC (differences in treatment, negligence, endangerment, etc.). That's why the association organises awareness-raising and monitoring sessions, establishes rules, and regularly questions its approach, so that its behaviour is adapted to the realities on the ground and so that it encourages women to take action.

Secondly, people working at the border, whether volunteers or employees, have a heavy workload in a violent environment. Emotional and professional exhaustion, even burn-out, is a major risk. RWC tries to establish a framework for this commitment, to avoid sacrificial and competitive tendencies, with the objective of providing teams with a healthy atmosphere that respects themselves and others. We are aware that people experiencing physical or psychological distress could be more inclined to have inappropriate attitudes towards others and themselves.



SOLIDARITÉ AVEC  
LES FEMMES EXILÉES

Thanks to the development of the Safeguarding Network - a working group of the associations and collectives mainly housed at the warehouse - in which the social worker participates, the RWC has been able to strengthen its support for the team. For between 6 and 17 hours a month, this network meets to discuss the issues that motivate those working in the field, and tries to come up with a collective response in order to build a common working base. The network organises training sessions to raise awareness among newly arrived volunteers. There are also "leaving Calais" workshops, film screenings on militant burn-out and themed discussion groups. In partnership with the Refugee Resilience Collective, psychological support slots are also available to voluntary workers at the border.



The Safeguarding Network's highlights this year have been the creation of incident reports and corresponding protocols, and the drafting of a welcome document for future volunteers.

The first point is to provide a means of reporting incidents involving volunteers in their workplace (in the warehouse and in the field). The aim of this process - which can be anonymous - is to improve the day-to-day lives of people working on the coast, and to reduce systemic violence (sexism, racism, etc.). These incident reports are then used to draw up protocols and rules to govern the relationship between volunteers and each other, and between volunteers and people on the move.

The second point refers to a welcome document distributed prior to arrival in the Calais and Dunkirk areas. The aim is to help people who want to get involved to understand the environment in which they will be working. This tool was developed in response to the lack of information on the emotional and professional intensity of life in the warehouse, field missions, the living conditions of people on the move, cohabitation between volunteers, state violence and so on. All these factors can overwhelm people and prevent them from taking a step back. The idea is to make future volunteers as aware as possible and give them the opportunity to prepare for their mission in the best possible way.

## Team life



At RWC in particular, the association takes care to provide the best possible support for all volunteers in their work and daily lives. In addition to the field sessions, the team shares the same house, which means they spend a lot of time together and find it difficult to break away from what they see and experience during their working days.

A training programme is followed by each person new to the RWC. This includes content specific to the association (training in the field, how to manage emergency telephones, how to interact with women, how to sort donations, etc.), as well as themes run by partners (information and guidance for new arrivals with Channel Info Project, safety at sea with Watch The Channel, rights in relation to the police with Human Rights Observers, prevention of trafficking with ECPAT, etc.). The aim is to build up a team that is aware of the different situations encountered during the commitment.

Depending on needs, RWC facilitates access to sessions with psychologists (in partnership with Refugee Resilience Collective), and organises mediation and discussion groups. With regards to our approach to the field, meetings are planned to reflect on the constant changes in the field and the rotation of volunteers, and therefore of energies, competencies and skills. As for the salaried team, they take part in monthly supervision and practice analysis sessions with psychologist Pierre Bialès, who is used to working with people on the frontier.

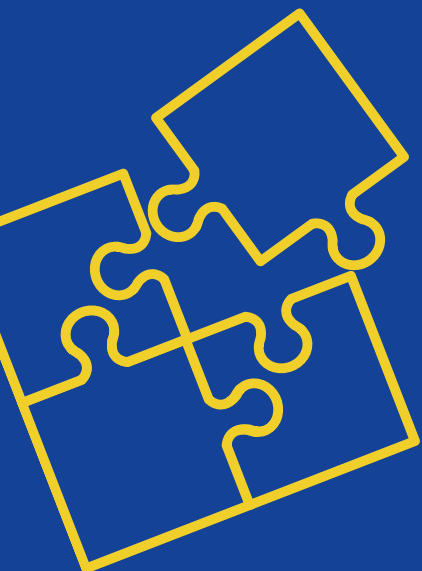
The work is organised in such a way that each volunteer has two free days a week and two weeks' holiday every two months. An individual meeting is scheduled once a month (check-in), where active listening allows each volunteer to freely express her observations, difficulties or preferences. Similarly, a one-to-one meeting at the end of the volunteer period (check-out) is offered to take stock of the period that has just passed.

In addition, the RWC encourages caring communication within the team. Given the regular turnover of volunteers, a set of house rules was drawn up this year to provide a framework for daily tasks and the organisation of the home: meals, shopping, cleaning, room allocation, etc. The rules also specify the monthly amount allocated for food and welfare. The rules also specify the monthly amount allocated to food and well-being.



A well-being budget is set aside for the whole team. This gives them the opportunity to spend some quality time together to unwind from the violence at the border. This money can be used for a restaurant or a group outing. The RWC wishes to provide a pleasant environment by offering the team ways of sharing moments other than the field sessions, with the option of distancing themselves from the territory.

## 7 - Challenges 2022 and prospects 2023



As mentioned earlier, it has been very difficult for us to recruit volunteers willing to commit for several months. This may have been due to a number of factors: the end of health restrictions on travelling abroad (in 2020 and 2021, many volunteers in the Nord had planned missions abroad and were forced to stay in France), the economic context (fewer and fewer young people can afford an unpaid mission), the situation in Ukraine and local missions all over Europe, and finally the steady decline in media coverage of the camps in the Calais and Dunkirk areas.

Consequently, we went through periods in 2022 with a very small team: some weeks with just 2 or 3 volunteers to cover the two areas, with the difficulty of reducing our presence on the ground because of the constant needs. This meant that we had to put our activities on hold twice, in August and during the festive season at the end of the year.

Additionally, a change in team structure always comes with its share of difficulties. Despite the obvious need for coordination, the change from an all-volunteer team to one coordinated by two salaried employees caused some tension and required time to adapt and discussions, particularly on the sharing of tasks, transparency and hierarchy.



In 2023, our team structure will continue to evolve, with the aim of making our support for people on the move more sustainable and professional, and offering better working conditions for the members of the association. We have further strengthened our human resources. We have created a third salaried post, restructuring the positions with a field coordinator for Calais, one for the Dunkirk area and a social worker. We have also created six-month trainee positions: a warehouse and stock manager, and a communications officer. We have also increased the volunteer support budget to cover the full cost of accommodation and food. We hope to continue in this direction.

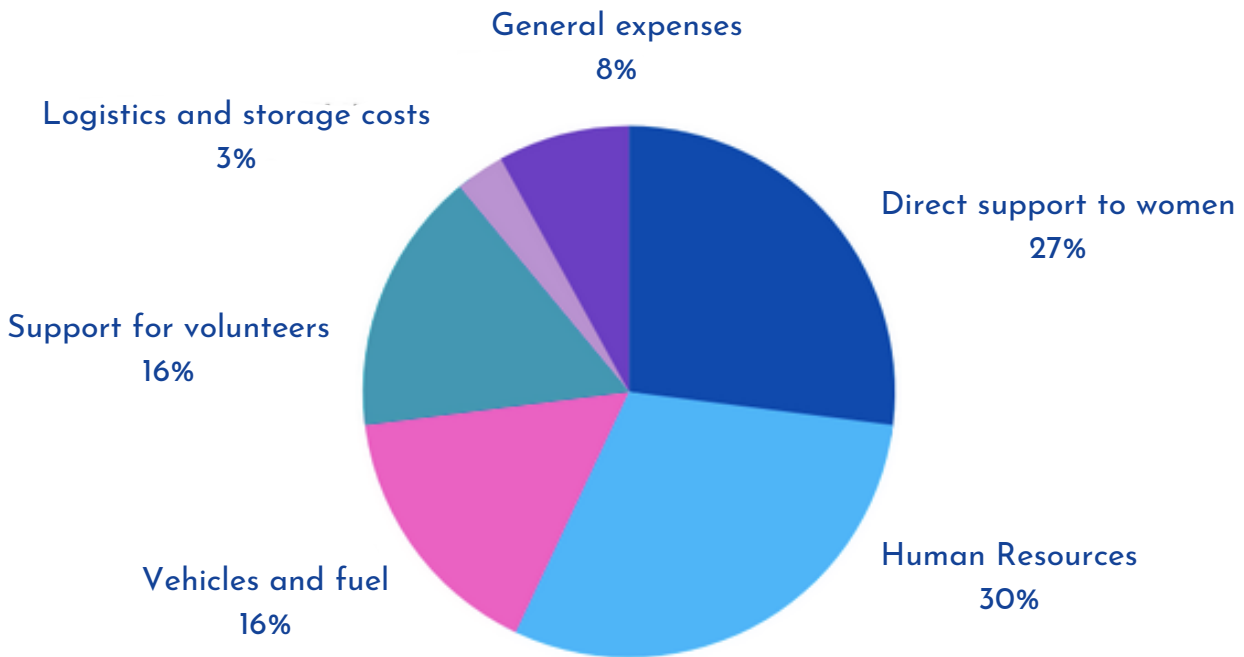


## 8 - Finances

For the year 2022, the Refugee Women's Centre has managed a budget of €158,529.93. In recent years, the Refugee Women's Centre has seen its activities evolve rapidly, due to a growing budget, an increase in the diversity of funders and growing needs on the ground.

The charity receives no public funding and continues to exist only thanks to the support of organisations and foundations. Our income comes from private grants, fundraising activities that we organise individually or collectively with other associations, collections from the general public, membership fees and the sale of goodies.

A key element in the process of increasing the budget for 2022 has been to strengthen our human resources capacity in line with the needs of our volunteer teams and the growing number of women and families that the Refugee Women's Centre supports every year.



The Refugee Women's Centre's budget breaks down into seven main areas of expenditure:

Human resources costs: €47,997.75

Direct support for women and families through material and psycho-social support: €41,530.38

Costs related to the mobility of our activities in the field: €25,624.39

Support for volunteers: €25,063.82

Operating costs: €12,535.21

Logistics and storage costs: €5,363.82

Miscellaneous expenses: €434.22

# 9 - Acknowledgements

## To our partners



## To our funders



**And a huge thank you to our incredible volunteers, amazing staff and to all members of RWC**

Aimie, Catarina, Léo, Lucy, Alessandra, Alessia, Alex, Alison, Ana Luz, Anouchka, Ariana, Carina, Carmina, Charlotte, Chiara, Chloé, Léo, Emily, Emily, Eva, Hanna, Jasna, Josephine, Karina, Leila, Lowri, Nawel, Maé, Noémie, Sarah, Tharuni, Yekbun, Sophie, Marie, Clara, Shanice, Aileen, Ellen, Victoria, Louise, Camille, Frances, Cherley, Caroline and Nina.

Report written by Marie, Sophie, Caroline, Shanice, Cherley & Nina.

Photos: RWC team & Fondation Abbé Pierre.

