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INTRODUCTION

More than 4,000 women aboard the Aquarius in its two years of operations

Over the course of two and a half years of operations in the central Mediterranean, the Aquarius and its SOS MEDITERRANEE teams assisted 4,694 women, out of a total of 29,523 people rescued over the past two years (an average of ca. 16%). How many women have perished at sea during this time period no one can accurately say. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) registered the deaths of 15,062 people that drowned in the central Mediterranean between January 2014 and end of 2018.\(^1\) Numbers are likely to be much higher.

Twice as many pregnant women

From one year to the next, the percentage of pregnant women welcomed aboard the Aquarius has doubled, climbing from 4.5% in 2016 to 10.6% in 2017, a figure that remained roughly equivalent in 2018 with 10.2%. In 2017, the majority of women assisted on board were Nigerian, Eritrean, and Guinean (Guinea Conakry). Women traveling alone, came mainly from Nigeria (65%), Eritrea, and Ivory Coast.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the percentage of women rescued by various vessels off the coast of Libya, amounted to 13% in 2016\(^2\), 11% in 2017\(^3\) and 9% in 2018\(^4\) of the total arrivals in Italy.

Systematic sexual violence

Many of the women received aboard the Aquarius have been victims of sexual violence during the course of their migration, particularly in Libya. The scars of the mistreatments suffered can often be observed both physically and mentally. When arriving on the ship, women, men, and children are often affected by skin diseases (especially scabies), which are a direct result of the poor conditions in which they lived; in Libya, this mostly means in detention. Many people also suffer from hypothermia and dehydration due to the conditions of their crossings, and from medical burns caused by prolonged exposure to a mixture of salt water and fuel aboard the rickety boats.

The “shelter”: a safe haven for women and children aboard the Aquarius

The Aquarius has a space specifically dedicated for women and their children: the “shelter.” As soon as they arrive on the ship, they have the opportunity to change their clothes, to eat,

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\(^1\) “Missing migrants”, site of the IOM, [http://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean](http://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean).


\(^3\) “Refugees and Migrants arrivals to Europe in 2017”, UNHCR, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/62023.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/62023.pdf).

rest, and be attended to by the medical staff. On several occasions, the Aquarius’ clinic has been transformed into a delivery room. Over the course of the past two and a half years, five babies were born aboard the Aquarius.\(^5\)

This press kit gives an account of the experiences of the female survivors and the experiences of the women who work to make SOS MEDITERRANEE possible, at sea and on land.

1. LEAVING THE LIBYAN HELL, ARRIVING IN THE AQUARIUS’ SHELTER: WOMEN AND THEIR STORIES

Hope for a better life, the Libyan hell

There are many accounts told by men and women that settled in Libya in the hope of finding a better life who finally had no choice but to flee the country that they now refer to as "hell". Permanent insecurity, the risk of kidnappings, ransom demands, blackmail: these are stories, the teams aboard the Aquarius have heard hundreds of times.

At the beginning of 2018, a young woman from Mali, her husband and their two children were rescued by the SOS MEDITERRANEE team. Arriving in Libya at the end of 2012, she decided to join her husband, who left shortly before to settle in the city of Derna where he hoped to make a better living. Back then, she was 19-years-old, and he was 18. "He was working in a cement factory, and I was a shop assistant in a clothing store." \(^6\)

Their children were born in Libya, "But they are not Libyans: Blacks have no rights in this country."\(^7\) The family lived modestly in Derna, until the day the factory closed, and the road was blocked by Islamists: "Everything became much more expensive. And to be able to feed our children, it was complicated. (...) The work was pointless: either we were paid half or we were not paid at all. For a woman, going out alone onto the streets had become impossible: they catch her, lock her up and call her husband or her family to demand money ... As long as the money is not paid, she stays locked up, and they hit her, or worse ... ".

Their departure for Europe was not part of their plan, but gradually emerged as the only way out to try and escape this misery. She thought of their children first. Stuck in Derna, a coastal city in the east of the country, they waited a week before they could

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\(^5\) During the same time period, the ship chartered by SOS MEDITERRANEE has welcomed 5,755 minors on board, amounting to almost 30% of the people assisted by our teams. 6.5\% of the minors were under 5 years old and 82\% traveled alone (referred to as "unaccompanied minors"). According to the UNHCR, 16\% of the people who arrived in Italy in 2016 were minors, compared to 15\% in 2017. A vast majority of the minors were unaccompanied or separated from their family: 92\% in 2016; and moreover an increase of 132\% in the total number of unaccompanied minors that arrived in 2015 and 2016 (25,846 in 2016 vs. 11,154 in 2015) https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/53447

\(^6\) “Five years in hell for Mariam and her family – ”I would not even send my worst enemy to Libya” http://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/5-annees-en-enfer.
escape, to begin a seven-day journey to Benghazi, about 300 kilometres to the west. "There were some 'bouabas' [similar to police roadblocks] that sent us back." Once there, they spent a few days with an "acquaintance" before leaving for Tripoli, more than 1000 kilometres away. "It took us two weeks."

"We were lucky, we had someone to stay with. We inquired and soon enough people explained how to leave. We embarked, even if we knew the danger." Mariam knows that her family has escaped death and she does not regret the difficult choice she and her husband made: "I would not even send my worst enemy to Libya."

The Crossing

“They told us, ‘Go die in the Mediterranean!’ before pushing us onto the dinghy.” This testimony was given aboard the Aquarius in November 2017, by a young Cameroonian woman, holding her one and a half year-old in her arms. After many long hours adrift on the Mediterranean, without water, without food, without life vests, the young woman finds refuge aboard the Aquarius.

When the SOS MEDITERRANEE rescue team begins a rescue operation, by distributing life vests to all shipwrecked and evacuating the medical emergencies, then they take women and children to safety. Each child is taken onto the rescue boat together with their mother, if present, or another person who is willing to take responsibility for the child until their arrival aboard the Aquarius. Taking the most vulnerable to safety first is a universal principle of maritime rescue.

On the dinghy women and children risk dying from suffocation

Over the past two and a half years of operations in the Mediterranean Sea, the teams of SOS MEDITERRANEE have learned that a particular spot aboard the dinghies is allocated to women. On inflatable rubber boats, they are placed in the centre of the boat. The testimonies collected aboard the Aquarius above all showcase the men’s desire to protect the women by seating them as far away as possible from the water and therefore the immediate risk of drowning. However, our SAR-teams consider this location particularly dangerous. Being seated in the centre of the rubber boats exposes people to an increased risk of fuel leaks that, when coming into contact with salt water, produce a toxic solution that burns skin. The floor of the rubber boats is often fortified with wooden planks, held in position by nails that frequently protrude from the floorboards, meaning that sitting down on them often causes injuries. In the event that the boat takes on water, movements of panic may erupt quickly, with the majority of the shipwrecked unable to swim. People who are seated at the bottom of the boat often are the first victims of drowning on the boat, as a result of being crushed, trampled, and suffocated.

On August 1st, 2017, the Aquarius was called by the Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC Rome) to assist with the rescue of four rubber boats. Eight lifeless bodies were found at the bottom of one of the boats, amongst them the mother of two year-old Sarah, who survived.
On board: A sanctuary at the heart of a safe haven

As soon as the women board the Aquarius, they are brought to a room inside the ship called the shelter.

This room offers women and unaccompanied minors protection. No man is allowed to enter this zone during the transfer to Italy. The shelter is an area of confidentiality where the MSF midwife has a separate treatment room. In this safe space, women can speak freely, even if they rarely speak of their painful experiences. It is mostly men, who talk about the terrible treatment women face in Libya.

Women and girls as victims of human trafficking and sexual violence during their flight

The testimonies of survivors, collected aboard the Aquarius are consistent about the fate of refugee women in Libyan prisons and camps - most of the rescued women have suffered sexual violence, many children were born in Libyan prisons, or grew up there.

Since February 2016, the Aquarius completed 250 rescue missions, according to Doctors Without Borders (MSF), during the same period, 205 cases of sexual abuse were reported by the on-board medical teams. Amongst them were 17 minors. 57% of the victims of sexual abuse came from Nigeria: 12% of which had suffered sexual abuse in their home country, 22% on their journey and 42% once in Libya. MSF’s medical team also noted significant psychological trauma and severe physical injury to these women.

➔ A midwife aboard the Aquarius (2017): "One of the women explained that she had been raped several times with the shaft of a Kalashnikov. (...) I have heard this statement or similar ones many times, but I can never get used to it. Some women have been abused so badly that they no longer know the difference between having sexual intercourse and being raped."

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7 « Sexual violence and sex trafficking – at home, en route, in Libya and in Europe. Nigerian women and girls along the central Mediterranean migration route”, MSF, January 2018
8 Ibid.
Of all the rescued that were interviewed by the MSF teams in 2017, 30% were victims or potential trafficking victims. 72% of respondents were abducted at least once since leaving their countries of origin. Many testimonies report repeated brutal searches by the hostage-takers. Women and young girls are particularly vulnerable to trafficking networks, which also have links to prostitution, especially in the Nigerian community. From the moment they leave home until their arrival in Europe, they are caught in a downward spiral, often without being aware of it.

The ordeal of mothers

Every woman that would like to do so has the possibility to get checked for a pregnancy on board of the Aquarius. According to MSF, in 2018, 63 out of the 2673 rescued women were pregnant.

A young woman could only be recovered dead from a dinghy - she had died from the consequences of a stillbirth

During a rescue operation in November 2017, the SOS MEDITERRANEE team recovered the lifeless body of a woman from a dinghy. Her fellow travellers said that she died shortly after leaving Libya, where just a few days before she had given birth to a stillborn child. Due to the lack of food and care and being exposed to daily violence, pregnant women and mothers are particularly vulnerable and defenceless in Libyan prisons.

⇒ A young woman from Cameroon, whose child was born in the desert on the way to Libya, relays (Aquarius, November 2017): "In prison, a woman died after giving birth. We had severed the umbilical cord with thread because we had nothing, no doctors, no care. We did not wash.

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They put drugs in our food so we would sleep; the water was not drinkable. My child was born in Niger in the desert. In Libya, the baby and I spent five months in prison in Sabratha. I still breastfeed him, to protect him. He is one and a half, but much older than his age, that's because he has seen so much bad. He cries a lot and often says 'pang pang pang' because he heard so much of that [gunshots] in Libya.”

**Six Births Aboard the Aquarius**

Surrounded by stories of extreme trauma experienced by the women both on their journey and in Libya, there have also been some happy moments aboard the Aquarius. Since the launch of operations in February 2016, six babies: Alex, Newman, Favour, Mercy, Christ and Miracle, let out their first cries on the ship.

1- Alex: named in honour of the captain of the Aquarius

In late May 2016, a child was born aboard the Aquarius: a first for the ship. It was a moment of rare happiness for the crew, who is used to tragic events aboard the ship rather than celebration. The child’s parents, Bernadette and David, chose the first name Alex, in honour of Alex Moroz, then captain of the Aquarius. A few hours after the birth, in line with maritime tradition, captain Moroz presented the birth certificate to the parents.

2- Newman: a new life for a new (little) man

Otas and Faith undertook the crossing of the Mediterranean with their two children, five- and seven-years-old, in the hopes of giving them a better life in Europe. Upon leaving Libya on an overcrowded rubber dinghy, Faith felt the first contractions. Terrified at the thought of giving birth in the middle of the sea, in a corrosive mix of fuel and sea water, she was relieved when she saw the Aquarius, where she gave birth to Newman, the new man!

3- Favour: four rescues and a birth

11 December 2016: On a little wooden boat with 36 passengers, of which 7 were women and 8 unaccompanied minors, was also 9 months pregnant Cynthia, who was already counting down the hours. She left everything behind in Nigeria when her husband passed away, just to find herself alone on this little boat, bucketed around by the waves. Fortunately, the crew of the Aquarius locates the small wooden boat; people from four more boats were rescued that day.
Around 4 AM, Cynthia’s contractions set in, and the next day, around 1 PM, she gives birth to a beautiful baby boy: “It had been a very long day and we were all very tired, but this birth made everyone so happy! This baby brought a lot of joy on board,” said Marina Kojima, then MSF midwife aboard the Aquarius.

4- Mercy: a song about the only girl to have been born on board thus far

On March 21, 2017, a birth aboard the Aquarius is the topic of a tweet by a journalist from Nice-Matin, staying on board at the time. It inspired the song “Mercy” by duo “Madame Monsieur,” subsequently nominated by a vote of the French audience to represent France at the Eurovision Song Contest 2018.

➡ Emilie Satt, the singer of the group, tells us: “We were moved by this story. (...) [Mercy] is a song of hope. It talks about what hope symbolizes in the middle of horror. It’s a testimony. And we are its ambassadors. (...) We were moved by this story on March 21, 2017. (...) When we were writing, we did not think about the Eurovision contest. But we thought that it might be a great thing to carry this song as far as possible, to several European countries.”

5- Christ: a new-born in a drifting wooden boat

The incredible story of Christ, born in July 2017, was a new situation for the SOS MEDITERRANEE teams. As they approached a small wooden boat drifting under the blazing sun, the crew noticed a woman and her very young baby. The baby was still attached to his mother by the umbilical cord. The young Cameroonian mother had given birth on the little boat in the middle of the sea, surrounded by men.

Alice Gautreau, MSF midwife on the Aquarius at the time, recounts: “This birth will leave its mark on my career forever. (...) A delivery, which I wasn’t part of. I got this radio call (...) to let me know that there would be a woman and her baby coming on board and that the baby was still attached to the mother by the umbilical cord.”

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13 “‘Mercy’ est une chanson d’espoir et nous en sommes les passeurs,” [‘Mercy’ is a song of hope, and we are its ambassadors,”] 20 minutes, January 20, 2018, https://www.20minutes.fr/television/2205555-20180120-destination-eurovision-groupe-madame-monsieur-presentera-chanson-espoir
6- Miracle, the famous survivor from the bridge
It was at 3:45 p.m. on Saturday, 26th May 2018, that he uttered his first cry in the clinic on board the Aquarius. His mother, who could barely believe having survived the multiple brutalities she faced during her imprisonment in Libya and the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, let out a sigh: “Miracle”. This should be the name of her beautiful son, who weighed 2.8 kilogram at the time of his birth.

The survival of mother and child is indeed almost a miracle. While being detained in Libya for more than one year together with her partner, the young woman was beaten, tortured, starved and blackmailed, but finally managed to escape. She went out on the sea for the first time on Wednesday, but the motor of their rubber boat broke down just metres away from the shore, forcing the occupants to go back to land. The smugglers told them to stay hidden until their return. The young woman stayed in the same spot for more than 24 hours, without water or food, terrified. The smugglers came back one day later, pushing the refugees onto the rough sea one more time, for a crossing that is no less terrifying. When the mother and her newborn finally stepped out onto the deck, the survivors celebrated them amid joyful cheering.

2. Portraits of the women of SOS MEDITERRANEE

Time and time again, members of our SAR team are female: Women with fascinating profiles and backgrounds. Here, they and their female colleagues on land report on their work with its particular environment and the challenges it presents every day.

MARY – a 21-year-old SAR-Team member from the UK

Mary was born in Essex in East England. At the age of 16, she moved to South Wales for her schooling and started a traineeship as lifeboat pilot at the UWC Atlantic College. In that capacity, she began volunteering for Sea Watch on the island of Lesbos while also working on her interest in photo-journalism, taking a look at the refugee crisis in Greece. Deeply affected by the situation, she put down her camera and signed up as pilot of a rescue vessel in Lesbos before joining SOS MEDITERRANEE.

There is one scene in particular that will never leave Mary’s mind: A 18-year old Somali woman, pregnant when she was rescued.
Exhausted and emaciated to her limits, she had to be evacuated to Malta to give birth to her child. Since the beginning of the rescue operations, there have been two emergency evacuations of pregnant women.\textsuperscript{15}

"The woman and I were the same age, but our lives were completely different – opposite. It was I who helped her, not the one who was helped. I tried to empathize with her: If I had been in the same situation, what would I have done, what would have been my decision? Would I have survived? We can never forget that the people we encounter are the strongest ones, because they have made it this far. Many do not even make it through the desert. At some point I started to ask myself all these questions. I hope that will never find ourselves in their position."

Mary was deeply influenced by this experience and wants to study midwifery soon.

**MADELEINE** was the first woman to serve as SOS MEDITERRANEE SAR-coordinator aboard of the Aquarius in 2017.

In 2016 Madeleine was captain of Dignity I, a MSF rescue-ship in the central Mediterranean. Prior, she spent 15 years on various ships on all oceans – three of them as captain. After sailing with Greenpeace-ships, she worked as a logistician on a MSF ship in front of the coast of Yemen, then on an expedition to explore under water volcanoes near Fiji, and as first and second officer aboard the „Astrolabe“ on trips to the French Antarctic station Dumont d'Urville.

Her family background matches her humanitarian engagement: „...I have been going to sea for 30 years now. I was 22 when I was out at sea for the first time. I had decided to become a journalist and went sailing for one week and felt so at ease with the world around me. [...] I come from a cosmopolitan family: My father is from Egypt, my mother is Scottish. In the early 60ies, my father emigrated to Great Britain. He was lucky back then, he could just take an airplane and apply for asylum. He was a doctor, well-trained and educated, so things in exile were easy for him. Nevertheless, he never obtained British citizenship. I can understand the feeling of not belonging to a country, to a State, which all those that are never recognized experience. My father was lucky. The rest of my family has emigrated from Egypt in recent years. They are Copts, a persecuted Christian minority, and in recent years living conditions have become very difficult for them."\textsuperscript{16}"

\textsuperscript{15} "You see the worst cases of human suffering. All these scared faces looking at you. This stuck with me for a while", SOS MEDITERRANEE, \url{http://sosmediterrane.org/logbook-68-you-see-the-worst-cases-of-human-suffering-all-these-scared-faces-looking-at-you-this-stuck-with-me-for-a-while/?lang=en}.

\textsuperscript{16} "A bridge between maritime and humanitarian worlds" – Madeleine Habib, new SAR Coordinator on board the Aquarius, SOS MEDITERRANEE, \url{http://sosmediterrane.org/logbook-76-a-bridge-between-maritime-and-humanitarian-worlds-madeleine-habib-new-sar-coordinator-on-board-the-aquarius/?lang=en}.
Viviana was born on Sicily. Since 2017 the young woman is SAR-team member aboard the Aquarius:

“...functions on board: pilot of RHIB [rescue speedboat], logistical management, assistant for operations on deck... Not to mention the maintenance of the Aquarius in which we all participate, and that is a real sailor's job! Aboard the Aquarius I really feel as if I am bringing together the three passions of my life: the sea, meeting and learning about other cultures and helping people. I think my strongest memory from the Aquarius was the day I hugged a tiny baby - just a few weeks old - as his mother boarded the boat. His skin was all raw from scabies. Wrapped in his blanket, he was so light that he seemed not to weigh anything. And I thought, "Here on our boat we can give him at least a little hope for life." My worst memory is very recent. It dates back to our last rescue, or rather our last series of rescues, when we rescued 4 boats in two days. Amongst the boats in distress was one with no one on board. We found traces of life: clothes floating here and there, plastic bottles... But we never found out what had happened to the occupants of this rubber boat; whether they had been rescued and if so by whom and in what conditions...

The European network of SOS MEDITERRANEE on land is mostly female: At least one woman heads each of the four European associations. In Germany, Verena Papke is Managing Director of SOS MEDITERRANEE Deutschland e.V..