



**Refugee Women's Centre**

**ANNUAL REPORT**

**2020**

# Introduction

## Presentation of the organisation

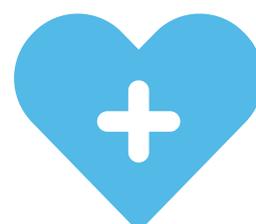
The Refugee Women's Centre is a French association that aims to create and maintain safe spaces for vulnerable people. We support women and families in the informal camps on the French-British border and in particular in Grande-Synthe and Calais. The Refugee Women's Centre has existed in Grande-Synthe since 2015, and became a non-profit association in April 2017. The association is managed by a collegial board of five people, which includes two co-presidents, the treasurer, the secretary and the human resources director, as well as a coordination team for our field activities. The team has the particularity of being multicultural and multilingual English-French-Kurdish.

## Mission and social purpose

We accompany women and families who are in transit in the Hauts-de-France. We work in a mobile way to meet them and follow them during their journey in the north of France. Our work consists of guaranteeing basic necessities, accompanying them in their procedures and facilitating access to rights, including medical care, accommodation and legal advice. At the same time, we advocate for the effective implementation of a policy of reception and dignified housing and support all awareness-raising actions that promote integration.

## VALUES

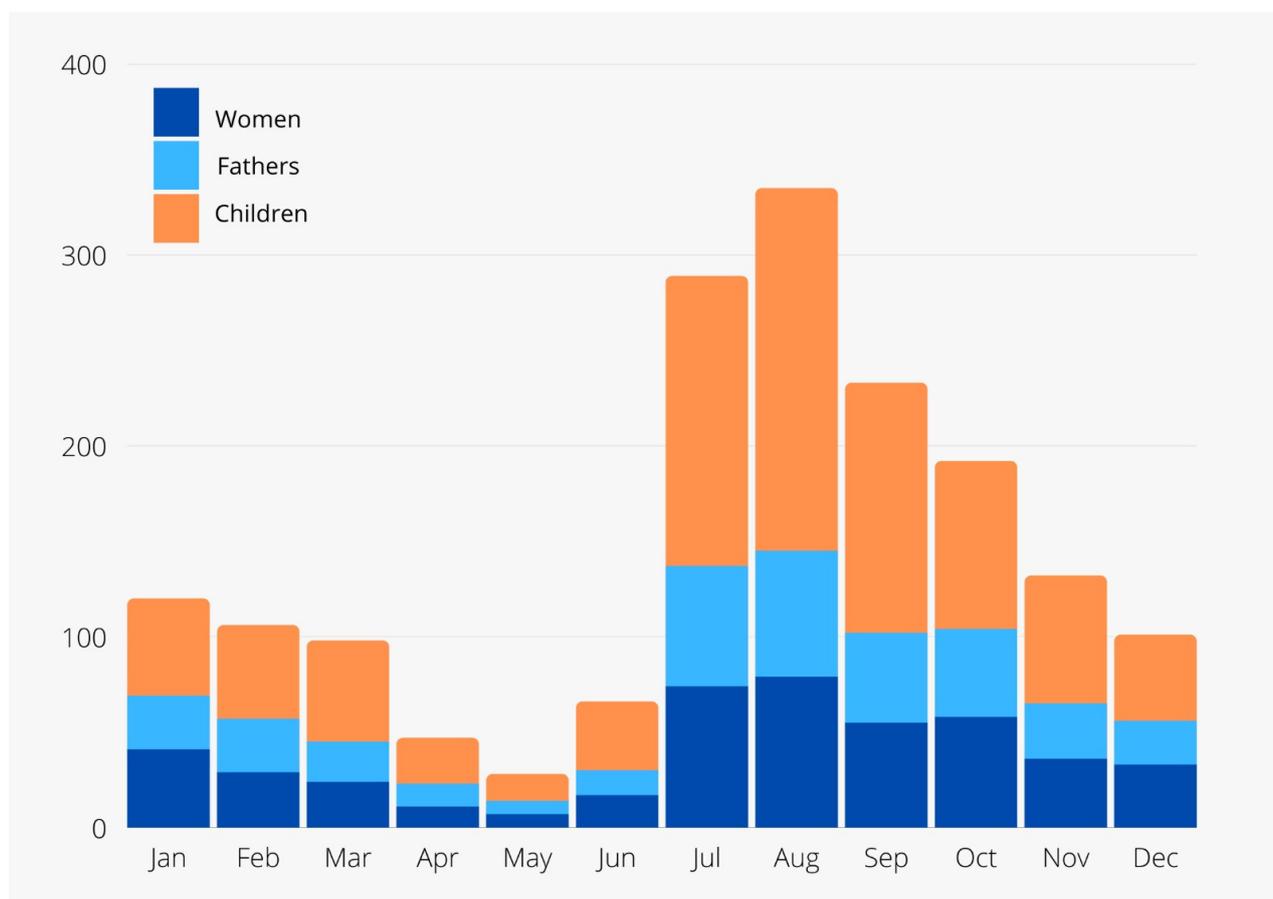
**RESPECT, CARE, COLLABORATION,  
INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM,  
ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE,  
SOLIDARITY**





# Overview of 2020

## Number of people supported by month in 2020



2020 has been a year of unprecedented challenges around the world. Northern France was no exception. Conditions for exiles in the border region have continued to deteriorate due to increasing restrictions on access to rights by the French government, increasing hostility from the border police deployed by the British government, and a lack of support throughout the health crisis.

Here is a snapshot of our activities in 2020:

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# JANUARY

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Lynne Jones (former MP and children psychiatrist) visits Northern France for a training.

RWC speaks at a conference on northern France at the London Refugee Solidarity Summit.

RWC sends a letter to the French interior minister, Council of Europe and European Commission regarding the situation for women and girls in northern France.

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# MARCH

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Baqer, a teenage boy RWC worked closely with, died as he was run over by a train. His family and the wider community who knew him mourn, in anger.

The first national confinement begins - RWC reduces its team to two persons staying in northern France.

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# APRIL

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We continue distributions and phone support 6 days/week, with just two coordinators on the ground.

We set up a working group for women in Calais to ensure important information is shared between all the groups still operating.

Cabin showers and toilets are installed in a warehouse in Grande-Synthe, where up to 600 people are staying. Large-scale eviction force people to move to Puythouck (a natural reserve), where regular forced evictions re-begin.

RWC works intensively on data collection and testimony taking, by phone and in person, regarding the impact of the Covid crisis.

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# MAY

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Gradual deconfinement: RWC re-begins *maraudes* and shifts with the organisation Human Rights Observers.

We gradually move back into our support to women in Calais, as more people arrive and are living outside

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# JUNE

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Our team goes from two to seven members - we are a team of 3 volunteers and 4 coordinators. We re-begin psychosocial activities with women and families outdoors.

Calais Women's Day at the Secours Catholique day centre re-starts, providing women with a non mixed safe space twice a week.

We participate in inter-associative working groups of the *Plateforme de Soutien aux Migrant.e.s.* (Migrant Support Platform), such as the "advocacy commission" which works to give displaced people a voice and analyzes public policies.

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# JULY

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Large increase in the number of women and families sleeping rough in Calais, with available shelters either full or closing as the country deconfines.

In Grande-Synthe, we establish a separate women's distribution area where we run our activities. Living sites are increasingly spread out due to evictions.

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# AUGUST

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Joint emergency tent fundraiser with the organisations Utopia 56, Mobile Refugee Support and Solidarity Border.

Roughly 5 new families arriving each day. For the first time this year there are more members of families than single men in Grande-Synthe

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# SEPTEMBER

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Death of Aleksandra Hazhar, the newborn of a family RWC worked closely with, following an emergency cesarean after the family was arrested by police on a beach and held for an extended period without help.

We implement a new ground team structure, with long-term volunteers to fulfill specific needed roles.

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# OCTOBER

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Death of the family of Shiva Rasoul, with her husband and three children, during a sea crossing. Heavy media coverage led to this family becoming emblematic of the dangers of Channel crossings.

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# DECEMBER

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RWC's official new Calais team is created, with a dedicated coordinator.

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# PEOPLE HELPED

IN 2020,

**464** WOMEN



\*25 PREGNANT

FATHERS **381**



**900** CHILDREN



FAMILIES **436**



**1,745** PEOPLE



**Responding to  
evolving challenges**

# RESPONDING TO EVOLVING CHALLENGES

The last year has seen many significant shifts in the situation faced by displaced women and families in northern France, and to which RWC has had to quickly adapt. As the living conditions in both Calais and Grande-Synthe have rapidly degraded, and access to basic rights have been even more restricted, the team has been presented with unprecedented challenges.

To the credit of our tireless volunteers and coordinators, RWC has been able to rise to these challenges and continue effective and community based holistic support to the women and families we work with, vital input into inter-associative advocacy actions, and ongoing awareness raising regarding the situation for displaced people in northern France.

## COVID-19

The impacts of the global outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020 were particularly harsh for displaced people in northern France. As national confinement measures were implemented on 17 March, in Grande-Synthe the only water source was twenty minutes by foot from the nearest living site where over 500 people were living in a crowded abandoned warehouse with no waste disposal and no sanitation facilities. At this time, there were around 30 families living in these conditions, including 40 young children.



In Calais meanwhile, the beginning of the confinement period saw an increase in police violence and discrimination targeting displaced people, including physical attacks on certain communities as well as restrictions in accessing bus services—at the time one of the only forms of transport available to people given the decrease in train services.

Following this, we gradually built back up over the summer months to a fully functioning team. Following the announcement of confinement measures, all associations present were forced to dramatically limit their services, meaning that access to the most basic needs, including food, hygiene products and bedding, became difficult. RWC took the extremely difficult decision to reduce its services, as all volunteers left and only two coordinators remained to manage operations.

Between March and May we continued a limited ground presence meeting and distributing to new families, and continuing information and casework support by telephone.

Women in particular were hit hard during this period, particularly by the lack of access to sanitation facilities and regular presence of support associations who provided a trusted point of contact in case of insecurity or risk of violence. However, the reduced RWC team managed to continue daily phone support to the vast majority of families in the area, and ensure they were informed in their native language of their rights and of how to access to relevant services including accommodation and healthcare.

As the confinement measures were gradually lifted from May onwards, the RWC team expanded its size and its services again and was able to step up its ground presence, with the relevant health and sanitation measures in place. The lessons learnt during the first confinement were implemented again later in the year when the second confinement came into place.

## **Channel crossing and fatalities**

2020 also saw the concretisation of new crossing routes between France and the UK. In part due to the ongoing securitisation and militarisation of the port and Eurotunnel areas that has made lorry crossings more difficult, and in part due Covid-19 resulting in reduced freight vehicle movement, people in northern France were forced to seek out new, and by nature more dangerous, means to reach the UK.

RWC has raised strong concerns regarding the danger of these crossings, and is firm in informing people about both the risks involved and about possibilities to remain in France rather than cross to the UK. We have openly criticised the lack of safe migration routes available to people on the move, and the restricted access to both the UK and French asylum systems, that we believe has resulted in these new risks being taken.



Small boat crossings in the Channel have also created new challenges for RWC's work, particularly in responding to distress calls during or following attempted crossings. In light of this, we have sought out regular trainings for all team members on responding to distress calls as well as on the law in this regard.

We have also been confronted by multiple tragic deaths of individuals we have closely worked with. Following each of these, we worked closely with partner organisations to support the individuals and communities affected, to carry out the relevant administrative and legal procedures, and to communicate carefully with third parties including the media.



**DEVELOPING  
RWC WORK**

# Developing RWC WORK

## A new RWC project in Calais

Ever since RWC began running services for women and families in Calais following the demolition of the Calais 'Jungle' camp [*bidonville*] in 2016, we have faced challenges responding to the changing needs in Calais whilst not diminishing our existing services in Grande-Synthe.

The different demographics and varying issues faced between women and families between the two areas have posed difficulties for RWC's small team to provide sustainably for.

Over the Spring and Summer of 2020, the number of women and families arriving in Calais increased rapidly to levels not seen since the time of the Calais 'Jungle'. As our already reduced team quickly became overstretched, we decided to implement a new approach to support services in Calais.

Reflecting on experiences learnt over previous years, RWC set out a long-term strategy plan to create two well-coordinated teams to oversee the two different sites and thus ensure more sustainable and targeted support to women and families in Calais.

This exciting new strategy began being implemented in September, with the support of the Haella Foundation and Choose Love. By the end of the year, we had hired an experienced coordinator to manage the new Calais project, increased the size of the team from six to ten volunteers and found a second house for coordinators in order to ensure the wellbeing and sustainability of all team members.

This allowed us to have team members and a coordinator present every day in Calais in order to respond quickly to new arrivals and specific support needs, to closely monitor the changing ground situation, and to better integrate into the network of partner organisations—objectives which were never previously possible for RWC.



# VITAL GROUND WORK

## Vital ground work

The need for both material and information support by the communities we work with has only increased over the course of 2020, due particularly to the challenges outlined above.

We continue to give out 'orders' from women and families six days a week, including clothing, shoes and hygiene items. We do this in as personalised and non-transactional way as possible, believing firmly in an approach which provides as much dignity and choice as possible.

Tents and bedding are provided systematically to new arrivals, as we meet them and inform them of services in the area. Throughout 2020, we distributed 722 tents in Grande-Synthe and (4076-722) camping items. In Calais, we gave out 44 tents and 104 camping items.





We used the summer following the first national lockdown to restructure our ground team, and introduced four new middle-term positions: Community link volunteers for Calais and Grande-Synthe, an activities volunteer and a warehouse volunteer. This has allowed these different parts of our work to flourish, and ensured a continuity in the development of them.

We have relied enormously on the financial and material donations received from generous supporters who have kept us going over the years, including (but not limited to!) O's Refugee Aid Team, Tahsin Khan, Donate 4 Refugees and the Dulwich and West Norwood Labour Women's Forum. This is in addition to Choose Love and the Haella Foundation whose generous financial support has allowed us to continue developing our services.



**Strengthened  
casework and  
psychological support**

## Strengthened casework and psychological support

In both the Calais and Grande-Synthe areas, we have continued to develop our community-based psychosocial support work to women and families. Since the departure of close partners Gynaecologists Without Borders and Planning Familial from the area, much more of the work of medical follow-ups and DV/SGBV support fell to RWC.

Over the course of the year, we therefore began developing a local network of other, non-migrant focused organisations working on these questions in order to build referral pathways for women in need and to increase our own access to expertise as a team.

We have worked increasingly closely with partners Doctors of the World and the French Red Cross in order to ensure adequate support and follow-up to women's sexual and reproductive health issues. We collaboratively created *fiches d'orientation* for issues ranging from pregnancy, to contraception, to gender-based violence.

The introduction of the new 'Community link' positions, for both Calais and Grande-Synthe, aims to ensure that we always have the required linguistic and cultural mediation competencies in the team. This has allowed us to retain the very community-focused approach of our work.

We established a partnership with the UK-based 'Maternity Aid Cascade' project, who has provided trainings on maternity support for women in displacement as well as providing us with regular material support including vital hygiene and baby products.

RWC joined the 'groupe décès', a network of Calais-based actors working to document and honour deaths at the border as well as coordinate responses to them, in terms of supporting friends and family members, beginning administrative and legal procedures and communicating with the media. This has been a vital resource for RWC and one into which we have also inputted a lot.



**SAFER SPACES  
FOR WOMEN**

## Safer spaces for women

In Grande-Synthe, at the start of the year we were granted access by the City Hall to a municipal space where we could run weekly activities with women and children. Alongside our partners Project Play who ran educational activities with children, we established these afternoons as safe spaces where women could come and have respite from the harsh outdoor living conditions, participate in activities, or simply relax, charge their phones and speak to us and to each other. Activities included English classes, crafts sessions, pampering – one of the women's favourites! – and art.

Following the first Covid-19 confinement this space was unfortunately closed, but in the Summer months that followed we were able to establish our own safe activity spaces in the newer outdoor living sites where we continued running relaxed sessions with women.

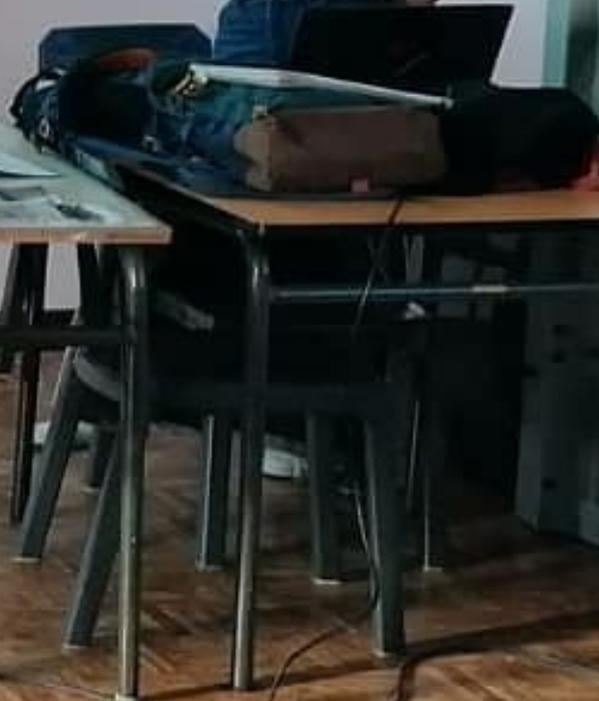
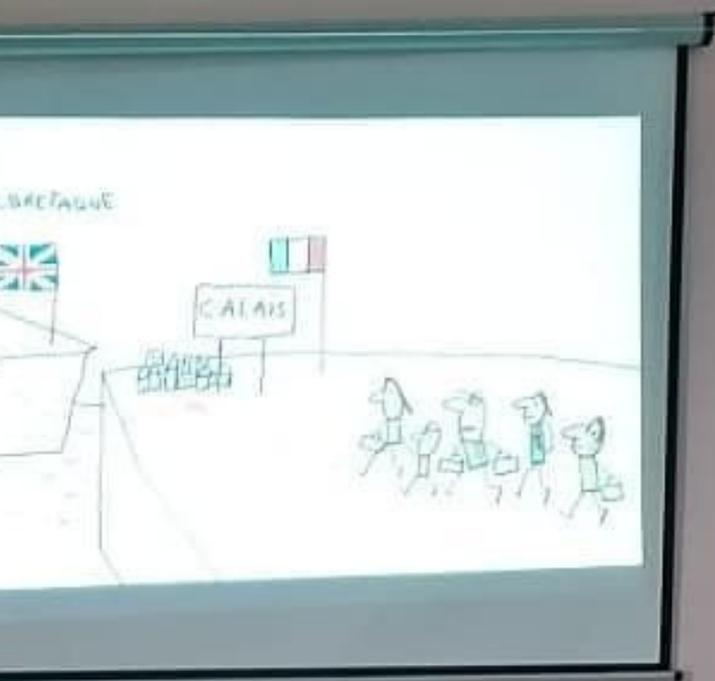


In Calais, throughout much of the year we continued to assist with the running of weekly women's days at Secours Catholique's day centre, which, with our support, were increased to bi-weekly by the end of the year.

RWC provided food and activities for these afternoons, during which specific workshops were often organised including on sexual and reproductive health and asylum rights.

Whilst the majority of women in Calais were housed in local citizen or charity shelters, such as Maria Skobtsova House, RWC ensured regular support to these hosts. We dropped off weekly food packs from our partners at Refugee Community Kitchen and Calais Food Collective, provided clothing and hygiene products, and made sure to spend important time with the women and families hosted, establishing a strong link of trust and support.

Much of the psychosocial support we do has been made possible by our dedicated Référent Social (coordinator of casework) and our Activities Manager. The latter position was introduced in the last quarter of the year, and has strengthened our provision of structured, resources and targeted activities with the women and families we support.



**Advocacy and  
Awareness**

## Advocacy & awareness raising

How our advocacy works: RWC has used the challenges faced throughout 2020 to develop and more clearly define its advocacy strategy in relation to pushing for improvements in the situation for displaced women and families in northern France. Our strength lies in our unique and nuanced knowledge of the situation on the ground, thanks to being present six days a week in the various living sites and having coordinators and volunteers who are able to communicate with people in their native languages.

We are therefore well-positioned to collect reliable and updated data from the ground, as well as first-person testimonies to go towards legal cases or wider advocacy efforts.

Throughout 2020 we worked closely with partners, particularly Human Rights Observers and Utopia 56, to collect daily data on access to, and breaches of, fundamental rights. This has gone towards inter-associative advocacy efforts, *interpellations* of authorities and legal challenges.

Moreover, our close link with the women and families that we work with allows us to enhance the *pouvoir d'agir des personnes exilées* through ensuring the voices and needs of displaced people are brought to the forefront of inter-associative projects, often led by organisations who are unable to spend time on the ground with the communities.



## At municipal level

We try to engage as closely as possible with both the local population and municipal authorities on questions of migration. In March, we co-organised joint public gatherings in Grande-Synthe and Calais to raise awareness about the number of people living outside, accompanied by a petition calling on the Calais Préfet to open appropriate accommodation structures.

Throughout the year, we participated in collective associative actions to call on the Mayor of Grande-Synthe to respect the fundamental rights of displaced people residing on his territory, including open letters focusing primarily on the need for an improvement in living conditions in the camps.

We also try to engage with the local population to raise awareness about the work we do. In December, we gave a presentation to primary school students in a school in Hazebrouck alongside our partners Project Play, informing them about the situation for displaced families in their area and leading some educational activities around migration. Both us and the children loved it!

## At regional level

Over the course of the year, we sent regular communications to the Préfecture documenting the numbers of people denied access to accommodation centres under their charge on a daily basis.

## At national level

During the outbreak of Covid-19, RWC in conjunction with partner organisations, began a social media campaign #Confinésdanslarue to raise awareness about the plight of displaced people still sleeping outdoors in the region. We shared daily information updates and encouraged participation from other groups working with destitute people in the area.

During 2020 Human Rights Watch visited northern France and met with RWC to discuss the situation for women and families living rough

## At European and international level

Following a successful roundtable event at the European Parliament in December 2019, on the situation for displaced women and girls in northern France, we followed up by sending letters, highlighting our main concerns and recommendations to a selection of French government ministries, UK parliamentarians and EU institutions. This fell under our strategy to raise the question of gender in relation to the issues facing displaced women in northern France, and bring this to the attention of different authorities rather than just those habitually approached on migration issues.

Later in the year, as Covid-19 hit, with partners we jointly alerted the French Défenseur des Droits and seven UN Special Rapporteurs on the dire situation faced by those living rough along the coastline.

# In the media

Despite our small size and capacity, RWC has made it into national French and British media and helped to influence the narrative around women in migration.

Over the year we continued to work with some media and journalists to raise awareness about important changes or events on the ground. We also supported certain women and families who wished to speak to the media to do so.

The joint data collection, advocacy and media efforts of our network of associations between Calais and Grande-Synthe has been successful in bringing to public attention the ever-worsening

situation for displaced people living in the informal camps in the area. As outlined above,

RWC has played a vital role in this. By the end of the year we had welcomed visits from the Défenseur des droits, the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, multiple French parliamentarians and international NGOs including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. All of these helped to raise the profile of the populations that we work with, and our input with regards to women and families was key in ensuring the most marginalised were heard

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of The Guardian website, including the logo, search bar, and navigation menu. Below the menu, there is a featured article with the headline: "I have destroyed my life for my children: the families trying to cross the Channel". The article is categorized under "Human rights in focus" and "France". A yellow banner indicates "This article is more than 1 year old". The article is supported by "HUMANITY UNITED". The website also features a "Support us" section with "Contribute" and "Subscribe" buttons.

## Exilée irakienne dans le Nord-Pas-de-Calais, elle perd son bébé après une intervention policière

Article réservé aux abonnés

En septembre, une femme enceinte de huit mois, son mari et ses deux enfants ont été interpellés alors qu'ils s'apprêtaient à tenter de rejoindre l'Angleterre. Malgré les demandes répétées de la jeune Irakienne, les secours ont tardé à être appelés. Son bébé est mort trois jours après sa naissance. Une plainte a été déposée et l'IGPN a été saisie.



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of Le Monde website, including the logo and navigation menu. Below the menu, there is a featured article with the headline: "Ministers warned more deaths in Channel inevitable after family dies trying to reach UK". The article is categorized under "SOCIÉTÉ" and "IMMIGRATION EN EUROPE". The article is written by May Bulman, Social Affairs Correspondent, and dated Friday 30 October 2020 12:49. The article text reads: "Charities say 'hostile' response to rise in crossings is pushing people to take more perilous journeys, while migrants vow to continue trying to cross because they have 'no other option'". The article is supported by "Le Monde" and "Tout Libé en illimité". The website also features a "Consultez le journal" button and a "Se connecter" button.



# Finances

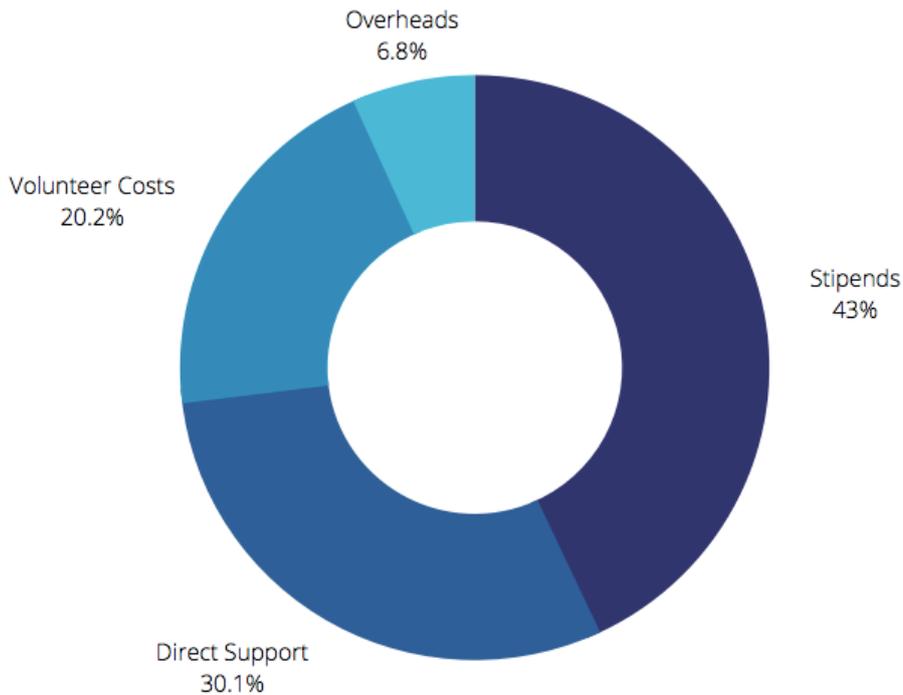
# Finances

The Refugee Women's Centre is entirely funded by private donors and private grants. Throughout 2020 we were funded by Help Refugees/Choose Love. The charity does not receive any public funding, and only exists thanks to the support of other charities, and most importantly, thanks to the generous financial contributions from donors. We are lucky to be able to count on this amazing support and greatly value each contribution that is made to us in 2020. It is thanks to all of you that we are able to maintain our work.

Accountant firm Cabinet ACTIGES, a local accounting and advisory firm, located at 2 Rue de Turenne 59110 La Madeleine, has validated our 2020 accounts.

## Expenditures in 2020

Overheads 6,128€  
Volunteer costs 18,267€  
Direct Support 27,200€  
Stipends 38,918€

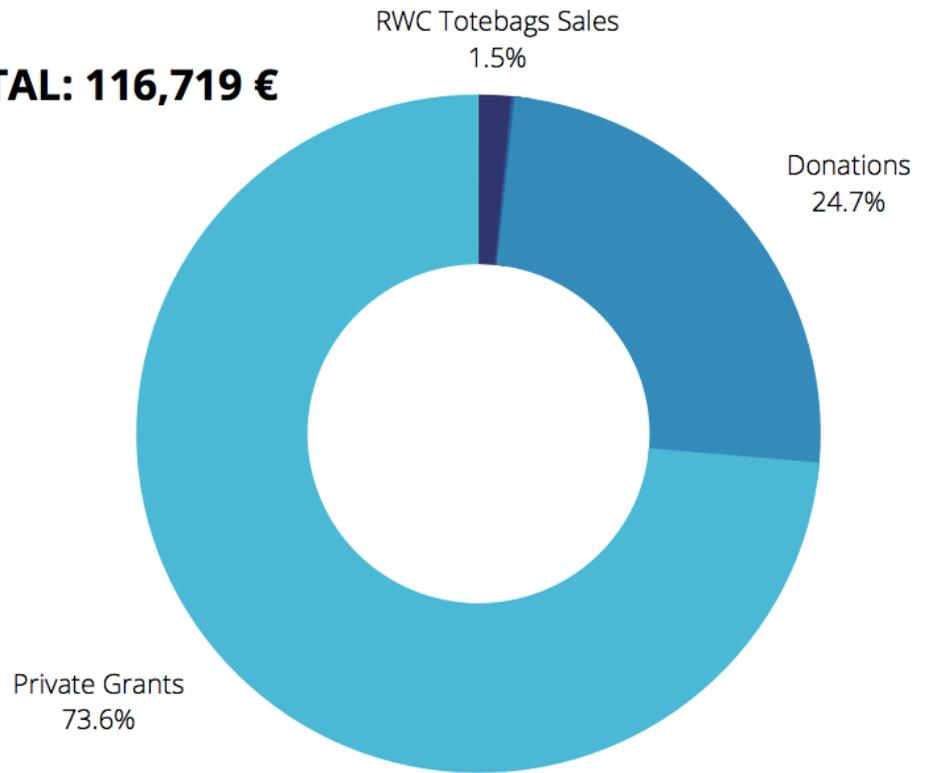


**TOTAL: 95,512 €**

## Income 2020

Private Grants 85,918€  
 Donations 28,805€  
 Membership 185€  
 RWC totebags sale 1776€  
 Miscelannous 35€

**TOTAL: 116,719 €**



We would like to thank the wonderful volunteers who were part of our team in 2020: Amy, Cerriwen, Chloe, Grainne, Hanane, Juliette, Jess, Lily, Lizzie, Louise, Mathilde, Nicoline, Nina, Pippi, Rojin, Rosslynn, Serena, Sophie. As well as our coordinators: Alanna, Ana, Clara, Élise, Florence, Frances, Léa et Vaina. Finally, we would like to thank our partners:



Thanks to Frances, Sally, Ana, Tilly, Caro and Camille for the creation of this report.