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## Civil Society Organizations in the Protection of Female Refugees: The Case of Greece

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Civil Society Organizations in the Protection of Female Refugees: The Case of Greece

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### Abstract

Gender - related issues are central factors causing refugee flows, but also act as an impediment in the unhindered settlement and integration of female refugees in their receiving country. However, the gender aspect, as explained in the intersectionality theory, is often neglected in refugee rights' analysis. Women refugees deal with continuous hardships before and during their journey, but their quest for a better life does not stop at the arrival on the European continent. Discrimination and Gender- Based Violence follow them at their arrival also in Greece, a major hosting country. The analysis below aims in this context to showcase the risks that refugee women face before, during and after their displacement, taking as a main paradigm the case of Greece. After that the effectiveness of the response system, through the collaboration of governmental and non - governmental actors, like NGOs and civil society organizations in Greek territory is examined. This paper establishes a causality between gender and dangers or insufficiencies faced by refugees and enlightens understated aspects of this issue.

**Keywords:** Refugees, Gender-Based Violence, Civil Society Organizations, NGOs, Greece

### Introduction

According to United Nation Refugee Agency's (UNHCR) Global Trends report 89.3 million people were forced to flee their home, because of conflicts and/or subject to fear of persecution and human rights violations by the end of 2021 (UNHCR, 2022a). This number is made to comprise a wide range of people and groups, and more precisely refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced and stateless persons. All these groups are subject to the same vulnerabilities from the moment they flee their country to the moment they reach the destination country, where things are also very often complicated. In this paper by referring to refugees, a person who is forced to leave their house is implied. From a stricter scope, what is distinctive in the refugee case, according to the definition given by the Geneva Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951) is that refugees have a "*well - founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a social group or political opinion*". Together with the 1967 Additional Protocol (UNHCR, 1967) which extended the scope of

the Convention, the Refugee Convention constitutes the legal basis and a benchmark of the refugee law. It seems that today, more than ever, refugee law shall be carefully monitored and even be reviewed with a view to more durable solutions, as the numbers showcase a rise of 8% of people being forced to flee their countries in 2021 in just a year, number which is expected to further increase in 2022, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (UNHCR, 2022b).

Greece, due to its location between three continents and its geomorphology including extensive coastlines shaping the European external borders, has always been receiving large flows of migrants and refugees aspiring to enter European territory from all sides: from the Balkans, the former Soviet Union's Republic's, Africa, Middle East and Asia (Fouskas et al., 2021). However, large attention has been drawn to the waves of incoming populations in Greece and the problematic reception system between 2015 and 2017, where these populations were mostly asylum seekers and refugees from Syria, with the harsh image of a drowned child refugee on Turkish shores being the wakeup call, not only for receiving countries but for the whole European continent (Fouskas et al., 2021). During this period, the pressure put on the routes that lead from Turkey to Greece has been unprecedented and the burden put on the Greek asylum system extreme, therefore creating a humanitarian, but also social crises, aggravated by the already problematic economic and political context of a country hit by the global economic crisis. While solidarity, awareness and humanitarianism have triggered feeling of support of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers across the globe, there have also been parts of the society targeting these vulnerable populations as "threats" or "criminals" and claiming them as unwanted (Fouskas et al., 2019).

Despite rising trends and subsequent growing needs, refugee law seems to have been left behind in several aspects, like the protection of women and girls. This is particularly important as according to UNHCR's (2022b) yearly statistics, almost half of the refugee population (45%) consists of women and girls. But before proceeding to examining the gender dimension of the discriminations faced by refugees, we shall make an important distinction between sex and gender, a distinction made by the UNHCR (2002): While sex refers strictly to biological features, the term used in this paper, that is to say gender, takes into account social and cultural identities. However, it can be wrong to examine gender-related claims on a gender mainstreaming basis and to insert the gender dimension horizontally in this analysis, as even though it is considered to integrate a gender equality perspective in all domains of public life (Council of Europe, n.d.) it often does not have the anticipated results. An interesting alternative is represented by the intersectionality theory, which holds that sometimes multiple forms of discrimination overlap, and generate problems and needs to which the existing norms cannot

sufficiently answer (Bouchard & Meyer-Bisch, 2016). In response to that, the European Union (EU) seems to be using broader approaches in its policymaking, while separate member states have gone as far as to create Single Equality institutions (Steans, 2013). Sadly enough, there is still a long way to go especially in refugee matters, even though the first ‘Policy on Refugee Women’ has been adopted since the 1990s (UNHCR, 1990). However, neglected, gender equality and gender-related issues are and should be an important aspect of refuge, as gender inequality causes and is caused by displacement and therefore it shall be of big interest. It is therefore true that refugee women consider part of an already fragilized population, mentioned in this paper as People of Concern (PoC), but are subject to greater discriminations and are exposed to greater risks than their male counterparts, for reasons relating to their gender identity.

In this context, an effort is being done through the course of the latest years in order to respond to gender-related claims by enhancing women’s roles in the society, as well as mitigate and prevent violence and discrimination against females. As for refugee matters, that prospect is clearly reflected in the effort done by UNHCR lately. It can be traced in the fact that gender – related claims are taken into account in the latest Global Strategic Priorities (GSPs) set in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2022b) and in the institution of a first policy “on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence (GBV)” by UNHCR (2020). Therefore, it looks like the alarming situation for girls and women, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and even men and boys among PoC that suffer from GBV is being monitored and an effort to institute a framework for their protection has already started.

For real progress to be done, specialized plans are to be undertaken by the UNHCR, but a more holistic approach is needed, and multilateral cooperation and support of governmental and non-governmental actors shall be guaranteed to ensure its effective implementation. Targeted services needed to respond to the above-mentioned needs are often provided by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in an effective partnership with the UN, and also with national governments and municipalities. This is particularly true in Greece’s case, a country which constitutes one of the first receiving EU states. As explained above, Greece has faced an unprecedented crisis with waves of refugees reaching its territory in 2015-2016. It is thus reasonable that a large number of NGOs and civil society organizations have been active in the protection of refugee rights in general, and more particularly of female refugees in an effort to contemplate the losses of a totally centralized system of response to these needs. However, as with the refugee law in general, the protection of female refugees even with the participation of civil

society organizations has a long way to go, especially in a context of economic instability where gender, ethnicity, and class intersect (Galata, 2022).

This paper seeks primarily to examine what are the risks deriving from gender inequalities that affect female PoC and especially refugees, in order to highlight the need for immediate action, taking as a paradigm the case study of Greece. After that, efforts for the eradication of gender related exploitation will be monitored through actions undertaken by civil society entities and NGOs and the gaps in this framework will be detected. So, in the first chapter of this paper the risks that refugee women face during their journey are described in order to be able to understand the extent of the problem examined. The next chapter is devoted to female refugees and the challenges they face at their arrival in Greece. The methodology of this mapping is mostly based on the analytical examination of all NGOs included in the national register of Greek and Foreign Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) dealing with international protection, migration and social integration issues as provided by the Ministry of Migration & Asylum (n.d.). After that, focusing on the Greek case we will try to track the NGOs that, through their partnership with UNHCR, national and local entities, play a decisive role in this direction. Lastly, the conclusions on their effectiveness will be noted. In general, this paper aims to shed light on a neglected aspect of refugee matters, the one concerning the gender dimension, in an effort to highlight the need to move forward from male paradigms to asking gender-linked questions as far as refugee matters are concerned.

## **1. Risks that Refugee Women Face**

Even though females are subject to discrimination, exploitation, and violence due to patriarchal structures of the societies in every social context, special attention shall be drawn to the refugee case. One could reasonably argue that refugees are more vulnerable because the circumstances, like displacement, encampment or even return, render them often dependent on refugee institutions and people that behold power. This doesn't necessarily imply the generation of violence but can surely be an accelerator of the emergence of violent outbreaks, mostly affecting women. A second accelerator is the lack of public awareness, as the gender dimension is often overlooked when the protection of refugees is brought up in public discussion, even though the refuge is experienced differently based on gender related factors.

From times to times, the Geneva Refugee Convention has been accused for not including in its refugee definition the gender or even sex as potential causes of refuge, even though oppression arising from other factors is central and although in some areas gender related factors might be the reason why

women are not safe in their countries (Indra, 1987). It is true that women often face life threatening situations in their countries just because they are women: subject to GBV and/ or strong discrimination and deprivation of fundamental rights and freedoms they are forced to leave their homes. Some very enlightening examples of this argument are Syrian girls that are forced to marry early, even before their womanhood or girls from African countries that suffer kidnapping, genital mutilation and sexual violence from an early age (Buckley-Zistel & Krause, 2017). Also, displaced women are reported to have a higher possibility of having been victims of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in their past lives (Kelly et al., 2021).

Even when these women decide to flee from these situations in their countries of origin, they are often faced with even more violence during their journeys. As in order to leave their countries most of these women are obliged to depend on smugglers, it comes to no surprise that the feeling of insecurity follows women and girls in their journey too. In their interviews to Amnesty International (2018) women refugees reported that not only did they feel unsafe, but also, they were more likely to be harassed during their journeys. Especially when traveling unaccompanied, females are even more vulnerable for several reasons: it can be true that females in the patriarchal societies where they flee from are not economically independent and even in the various stages of their refuge the scarce resources are often allocated to men due to obsolete hierarchical structures (Indra, 1987). That means that females traveling alone will be obliged to follow more dangerous routes which cost less and, extremely fragile and in need of money, might fall prey to smugglers, police, gendarmerie, aid workers and locals of the receiving country that might seek to take advantage of them. To avoid these threats, girls are forced to commit early marriages, just in an effort to find a “protector” during their journey. Unfortunately, in such cases it is common that females are raped by people beholding power, while they leave in awful conditions and cannot seek help as they are faced as “invisible and illegal”. Another important issue for single women that can’t or don’t want to be reunited with husbands is that it is harder for them to obtain refugee status (Johnsson, 1989). In general, displaced females usually are more introverted due to experiencing family separation, psychosocial stress and trauma, health complications and fear of harassment, but also because in “traditional societies” it is men that undertake the task of finding information and apply for asylum for the whole of their families (Amnesty International, 2018). As a result, women facing all the hardships of the refuge are found to be completely helpless not knowing their refugee rights.



## 2. Greece as a Destination Country for Female Refugees

All the above-mentioned hardships confronted by females during their journeys are not accidental, but more like a reality stemming from the European asylum policies and the closure of borders for refugees that seek a safer environment in European states. As women can't travel legally and safely, they are forced to depend on smugglers and exploiters exposing themselves to foreseeable risks in the quest for better life perspectives. But the reality is far from what refugees have anticipated as after a dangerous and tiring journey, when they finally make it to the European borders they are faced with renewed hardships.

Greece is one of the major European reception countries because of its location, hosting 119.650 refugees under UNHCR's mandate by the end of 2021 (UNHCR, n.d.) At their arrival in Greece refugees are stack in crowded EU- funded camps, mainly in the islands of the Aegean Sea, where they might remain for much longer than initially expected. Because of European laws, in this case the Dublin Regulation, Greece bears the responsibility for examining the asylum application lodged in by refugees that first reach its land (UNHCR, 2003). Not only does this law put an asymmetrical burden on several member states, Greece included, but at the same time it is the beginning of a problematic reception system. In general, Greece has two major social assistance systems for displaced people: the one, funded by the EU, starting from the moment they reach Greece's territory, while the other, assumed by the national social protection system, from the moment they acquire refugee status. Both systems have separately proved to have weak points and have been inefficient in the treatment of the humanitarian crisis stemming from the large flows of incoming populations, and at the same time the transition from one system to another is rather problematic and leaves asylum seekers with no help for the transitional period (Tramountanis et al., 2022). Almost the only way for refugees to leave Greek territory is by family reunification for members of a nuclear family unit (Amnesty International, 2018). That results in reunification requests taking very long to be examined, and at the end, often being rejected even ignoring serious reasons imposing reunification like humanitarian or dependency links. It is mostly unaccompanied women and minors that demand to be reunified with their husbands and dads abroad that the poor reception system leaves exposed to serious risks. This reality is clearly portrayed in the last statistics published by the Greek Ministry of Migration & Asylum (2020), where it is reported that out of the 28,158 outgoing demands to member - states in the period of June 2013 to January 2020 only 18,381 have been accepted and 15,193 have been realized.

The failure of this strategy was showcased during the 2015/6 refugee and humanitarian crisis that the already economically and politically emasculated Greece went through. Since the beginning of the

century, migrants internationally have increased 42% according to UNCHR's Global Report for 2021, half of this population being women. In 2015-2016 the influx of displaced people trespassing the Greek borders reached a peak: almost one million refugees and migrants reached Greek territory aspiring to reach European states (Tzavella & Sakellaridis, 2020). To face this crisis, which has been characterized as humanitarian, the Balkan states closed their borders, and the EU signed a deal with Turkey. This implies that entering Greece, the displaced can't pursue their lack in other European states as borders have closed and at the same time, they even find it hard to move to the Greek mainland, as according to the EU - Turkey agreement those who are not entitled to asylum must be returned to Turkey. This results in the entrapment of a large number of people in the Greek islands, with hopes for a better future shattering on arrival in Greece for them. On the 18th of August 2022, it is estimated that 2,991 are trapped in the islands of the Eastern Aegean Sea, a number that is nothing compared to those of previous years as the crisis has been defusing lately (Ministry of Migration & Asylum, 2022).

As the European rules and regulations make the journey of PoC even more perilous, it is only safe to assume that the risks for women and girls are further increasing. Having survived the dangers and the traumas of their past lives and of their transition, when finally reaching European territory in Greece they are subject to violence anew. On arrival to Greece, some of the refugees will remain in camps that are made to host displaced people but with no special provisions for females, while others will be promoted to the mainland, where despite their fragile status they will be left helpless.

Camps were initially inspired as a place of first reception of PoC, in order for them to settle until their requests have been examined to increase security and control migration and refugee flows to Europe. However, the reality is far from that. Camps that were designed as interim solutions host refugees for long periods even though they do not have the qualifications. In these overcrowded camps life conditions are reported to be humiliating: access to basic rights, as hygiene, sanitation, medical support, clean drinking water etc. is not guaranteed and of course the first victims are females, who live in shared and usually mixed tents with unknown men (Amnesty International, 2018). Camps constitute dangerous places for everyone, but especially for females, for unaccompanied minors and people escaping mistreatment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Shared facilities with no chance of privacy (i.e.: facilities with no locks, no control of entrance in the camps) and no provisions for security make living in the camps an unsafe environment for them and burden their mental, apart from their physical health. Risk of GBV and Sexual Violence (SV) is increased in these conditions. Studies report that 69.3% of female migrants, including refugees, have experienced SV since they have entered Europe, not only by fellow refugees and migrants, but even more by people



with an official mandate (national authorities, members of NGOs etc.) (Robbers et al., 2018). The problem showcased in these alarming numbers is in reality even more serious, considering the fact that SV is often underreported, because within camps there are no safe places for women survivors of GBV. Usually, women have to report to not specialized men, which can be from uncomfortable to dangerous and deter women from reporting and therefore being supported in their effort to overcome their trauma. Camps in general function as a closed society, which is made to represent the patriarchal structure of the outer world. That means that males occupy the role of the “breadwinner” and are the sole responsible for the females of their family unit. Any effort to empower women within the camps and insert them in social life, combined with the feeling that men can’t leave up to their roles, as they are dependent on third people’s aid during their journey and at their reception countries, can be seen as a threat. IPV is higher during these periods, but so are the feelings of dependency of women: females put on with violent outbreaks as they fear to live unaccompanied in camps, they have no knowledge of their rights and asylum procedures and feel like they have no way out of toxic relationships.

When asylum applications are examined, some individuals and especially those who apply for family reunification and fragile females (i.e., pregnant women or survivors of severe violence) may be moved to the mainland of Greece, in the quest for better conditions than those in the camps. Additionally, PoC that were trapped in Greece after the Balkans and European borders’ closure live in the mainland. There, they mostly settle in accommodation places, which include rented flats funded by NGOs, municipalities and the EU to host vulnerable populations. But while females might have thought that by reaching the mainland their lives would be ameliorated, their odyssey does not end there either. The flats available according to Amnesty International’s (2018) Report amount to 20,400, a number insufficient to respond to the needs of all females in need. That eventually means that even vulnerable females might be stuck in camps or be left without helped in the mainland of Greece, out of any protective framework and without help. Although it seems positive to overthrow the restrictions imposed by NGOs, these women have not yet, in most cases, acquired legal status and they can’t earn their living. As a result, they are absorbed in the underground economy, they fall prey to exploiters and trafficking networks, who might expose them to prostitution and sex favours. The best-case scenario implies that they will be absorbed in labor works that might be painful and burdensome. UN Women facts (n.d.) reveal that migrants, especially migrant women, have higher labor force participation rates (72.7%) than non-migrants (63.9%). No matter the type of work produced by women, whether it is paid or unpaid, or whether it is manual or in the services sector, it is often invisible because of the immediate classification of female labor as unskilled, the clustering of female labor as

unskilled, intersecting with the prejudices for ethnic minorities that confine them to unskilled jobs, further aggravate marginalization and gender segregation in employment (Galata, 2022). But even for those who manage to settle in special flats, the conditions still remain harsh. The aid they receive is seriously limited and these women are often isolated and have feelings of loneliness and abandonment. These feelings are further aggravated as soon as they realize they have difficulty communicating even if they wish to, because of the lack of female interpreters and broader personnel. Even though Greek law has provisions to ensure that displaced women receive language support, there are technical inefficiencies that deprive them of their rights. That could mean that women avoid sharing their physical and mental health problems, as they do not have the tools to communicate them and because of the difficulties they have faced they feel more reserved and suspicious towards men interpreters. Here, the problems in the referral system between law and police systems shall be added. Even though survivors of GBV have the legal right to report violence even without having acquired legal status, and their right not to be deported is guaranteed in this case, sometimes the reality is different because of the lack of legal knowledge and sensitivity even within national agencies (Liapi et al., 2018). Their suffering is prolonged and access to public health institutions for the provision of nursing and health care, even though available to them free of charge since 2016 in Greece, is not guaranteed in practice. With the adoption of law 4368/2016 the most vulnerable groups of migrants and refugees living in Greek territory and even if they have not yet acquired legal status, have direct access to the National Health System (Fouskas et al., 2019). However, the overcrowded facilities, the unhygienic life conditions and the lack of adequate means and services make the implementation of this law difficult (Vozikis et al., 2021). In general, women are found totally lost when in new environments after having gone through all these tortures, not knowing their rights and not receiving the support they need.

### **3. Protection of Female Refugees in Greece: Mapping of the Relevant NGOs**

It has therefore been proved that the situation for female refugees at their arrival in Greece is bad and does not look set to improve, as the economic and political situation of Greece is pressing towards the opposite direction: attention is taken away from refugee matters even though it is an absolute necessity and obligation to assist such vulnerable populations.

The need for a framework strong and capable of assisting female refugees and migrants in their empowerment and inclusion is clearer than ever. The corrosion of this protective framework has further precipitated the vulnerability of these populations. Considered that half of the world's refugee population consists of women and girls, the fact that only 4% of the UN agencies' projects were

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destined for females in 2014 highlights the extent to which the situation is problematic (UN Women, n.d.). Since then, there has been an effort to address gender-related claims by integrating women in the society and by responding to violent outbreaks resurging from gender related issues. The Global Strategic Priorities (GSPs) set by the UNHCR (2022b), aim to bring in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's values and commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit with a view to protecting PoC. The focus on gender-based issues can be traced in the fact that among the eight operational GSPs two of them focus on People of Concern (PoC) for this paper. More precisely priority number three focuses in preventing and protecting against exploitation and violence, while priorities number six and seven focus on the empowerment, guidance and enhanced participation of vulnerable groups, which particularly concerns females. At the same time, the UNHCR (2020) has instituted its first distinctive strategy "on the Prevention of, Risk Mitigation, and Response to Gender-Based Violence", which is further enhanced by the above-mentioned GSPs. The UNHCR in this new policy acknowledges that gender-based violence remains a major problem affecting PoC and mostly women/ girls but also boys, because of the patriarchal structures of the societies and gender inequality. It is highlighted that Gender-based violence constitutes an infringement of fundamental human rights, despite the fact that the extent of the problem is hidden due to GBV being underreported, even more among PoC. The Strategy focuses on creating a protective environment for children of concern, girls and women, members of the LGBTQI+ community, PoC with disabilities and on involving men and boys in this process. The purpose of this strategy is thus not only to protect vulnerable groups from GBV and to assure the conditions that will help minimize and eventually eradicate such risks, but also to respond to the needs of survivors of GBV among PoC. However, UN strategies are no more than directives for states and their effective implementation can only be guaranteed through the partnership with national authorities and civil society's organizations, like NGOs. In Greece, it seems like the extent of the migration and refugee crisis is such that national authorities have to be assisted by NGOs to assure the protection of fundamental rights and liberties of female refugees. That is why, the UNHCR in Greece has a close partnership with a number of NGOs in order to respond to special needs of PoC, female rights included.

It is true that the primary responsibility and the coordinator role lays on state entities, like KEELPNO, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality, the KETHI, the National Social Solidarity Center and different Ministries (i.e.: Ministry of Migration & Asylum, Ministry of Justice). However, a considerable number of national and international NGOs are active in Greece, and mostly in large

metropolitan areas like Attiki, Central Macedonia and in areas with large refugee populations, like Northern Greece, in the Evros area and the islands of the Northeast Aegean Sea (and mostly Lesvos).

**Table 1: NGOs that are active in protecting female refugees in Greece, by area of service and area of activity**

NGOS	Area(s) of Service	Area(s) of Activities
<i>A21</i>	Psychosocial Support	Thessaloniki
<i>Arsis</i>	Education & Entertainment, Housing, Psychosocial Support	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Babel</i>	Psychosocial Support	Athens
<i>Because We Carry</i>	Education & Entertainment	Lesvos
<i>Boat Refugee Foundation</i>	Medical Services	Lesvos
<i>Caritas Athens</i>	Housing	Athens and other cities of the mainland
<i>Catholic Relief Services</i>	Housing	Athens and Thessaloniki
<i>Danish Refugee Council</i>	Interpretation	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Diotima Centre</i>	Legal Support, Medical Services, Psychosocial Support	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Drapen / Havet (Stagona)</i>	Education & Entertainment	Athens, Nea Kavala refugee camp and islands of Greece (Lesvos, Samos)
<i>EarthMedicine</i>	Physical Rehabilitation	Lesvos
<i>EPAPSY</i>	Housing	Athens and other cities of the mainland
<i>Faros</i>	Education & Entertainment	Athens
<i>Fenix</i>	Legal Support, Psychosocial Support	Lesvos
<i>Goodwill Caravan</i>	Housing	Athens
<i>Greek Council For Refugees</i>	Housing, Legal Support, Psychosocial Support	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Hellenic Red Cross</i>	Housing	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Hestia</i>	Psychosocial Support	Athens
<i>Iliaktida</i>	Education & Entertainment, Housing	Lesvos
<i>International Federation of Red Cross</i>	Housing, Interpretation	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland

<i>International Rescue Committee</i>	Medical Services, Psychosocial Support	Athens, other cities of the mainland and islands of Greece (Lesvos)
<i>Intersos</i>	Psychosocial Support	Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Khora</i>	Education & Entertainment	Athens
<i>Lesvos Solidarity</i>	Education & Entertainment	Lesvos
<i>Médecins du monde</i>	Medical Services, Psychosocial Support	Athens, other cities of the mainland and islands of Greece
<i>Médecins sans frontières</i>	Medical Services, Psychosocial Support	Athens, other cities of the mainland and islands of Greece
<i>Melissa</i>	Education & Entertainment, Psychosocial Support	Athens
<i>Metadrasí</i>	Education & Entertainment, Housing, Interpretation	Athens, other cities of the mainland and islands of Greece
<i>Nostos</i>	Housing	Athens
<i>Omnes</i>	Housing	Kilkis
<i>Perichoresis</i>	Housing	Katerini
<i>Praksis</i>	Housing, Medical Services, Psychosocial Support	Athens, other cities of the mainland and islands of Greece
<i>Solidarity Now</i>	Education & Entertainment, Housing, Legal Support, Psychosocial Support	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Starfish Foundation</i>	Education & Entertainment	Lesvos
<i>Terre des Hommes</i>	Psychosocial support	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland
<i>Together For Better Days</i>	Education & Entertainment	Lesvos
<i>UNICEF</i>	Education & Entertainment	Athens, Thessaloniki and other cities of the mainland

If we were to proceed to the mapping of NGOs working to respond to the female refugees' needs described above, we shall definitely begin with the NGOs working to provide housing to displaced females. That is because structures of accommodation are the bare minimum for the protection of women that reach Greek territory and have nowhere to go. This is primarily state responsibility but as mentioned above, in practice, there are some implications. So, the UN undertook action, through the UNHCR, which funded the program ESTIA (from 2015 to 2020). During this period, ESTIA has provided housing to 21,616 people in need in Attiki, Northern, Central & Western Greece, the islands and Crete, while it has also been providing them economic support, through allocation of prepaid cards, marking the first steps for their integration in Greek society (ESTIA, 2020). For female refugees this

could mean that they could ameliorate their life conditions not only in terms of access to hygiene, education, and social life but also in terms of safety. The program, although funded by the EU, has been implemented thanks to effective partnership with municipalities but also a number of NGOs. Namely, the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC), as well as the Hellenic Red Cross, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), METAdrasi and Caritas Athens were the NGOs which supported the economic support program and Praksis, Arsis, Solidarity Now (SN), METAdrasi, CRS, Nostos, Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), Iliaktida and Perichoresis NGOs, as well as the Omnes Association were mostly implicated in the housing program. (ESTIA, n.d.).

Since 2021 and 2020 accordingly, these 2 programs have been assumed by national authorities renaming the program as “ESTIA II”. Unfortunately, it has been announced that the aid provided within this renewed framework has been reduced to only 10.000 in view of the termination of the program in 2022 (Ministry of Migration & Asylum, 2022). Some of the NGOs mentioned above (like Praksis, Arsis, SN, Iliaktida or Goodwill Caravan that mostly implements emergency anti-trafficking protection projects) have been providing more targeted services, in the framework of the ESTIA program, so as to ensure a place for women, men and people of the LGBTQI+ community survivors of GBV, while safe places for women are also provided by the shelters Mosaico and Orange House. The only guesthouse for victims of human trafficking is available thanks to the Damaris Community House (Liapi et al., 2018). The effectiveness of these services is however limited because of the problematic system of referral. As for access to medical services, it is primarily the Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF), the Medecins du Monde (MdM) and Praksis that assume action for the coverage of medical and clinical need of refugee and migrant populations<sup>1</sup>, while in islands like Lesbos, a large number of NGOs has been active especially during the refugee crisis of 2015/6, and not always with good intentions. Some additional NGOs with considerable action in Lesbos camps (i.e. Moria) are Boat Refugee Foundation, and Earth Medicine that provides programs of physical rehabilitation, targeted to survivors of harassment among others. As Liapi et al. (2018) note, the problem with these generalized services is that sometimes they are ineffective in responding to the needs of survivors of GBV as the personnel are not always educated in such matters. An effort to overcome these weaknesses is undertaken by specialized UN agencies like the UNHCR, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and other entities and NGOs like the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and DIOTIMA centre. The covid-19 pandemic has highlighted

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<sup>1</sup> The pivotal presence of NGOs to address the medical needs of the refugees is not surprising, given the prominent role that NGOs have acquired in Global Health Governance (Sidiropoulos et al., 2021).



the need for convergence between states concerning the mechanisms of providing basic healthcare services within an international framework of cooperation (Batakis et al., 2020), and refugees should be included in the provisions. To face the trauma caused by incidents of GBV, and as the state agencies can only provide limited time and resources to support programs, there are also NGOs that provide psychosocial support. These include Terre des Hommes (TdH), IRC, MSF and Mdm, Fenix as well as DIOTIMA centre, GCR, SN, Melissa Network, Babel, Hestia Hella, A21, Praksis, Arsis and Intersos acting in the mainland as well as in the rest of Greece to name a few (Liapi et al., 2018).

To further support victims of GBV and females in their effort to stop being dependent on abusive partners or other people beholding power that might exploit them as already explained, there is the need to help them familiarize with their rights and provide them with legal guidance. While the different local bars are supposed to offer free legal support to displaced people, in reality this system turns out inaccessible and not known among them. This particular gap is covered by NGOs, like SN, Fenix, DIOTIMA and GCR that not only give legal advice to people who need it taking into consideration factors like gender or sexual orientation, evolution particularly important for survivors of GBV, but also undertakes the task of representing them in Court if needed. But even once the knowledge of their rights is assured, females can't acquire access to them if interpreters, and even more female interpreters, are not provided in public services and agencies, so that they can communicate their needs. While there are public agencies provided by the KETHI and the municipalities in camps, assisted by NGOs like METAdrasi, these services are often only available within camps, rendering it impossible for women and girls to have access in hospitals and other services. An effort is being made by the Spanish Red Cross, METAdrasi and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Greece to offer services of interpretation to state services, as well as to other NGOs to facilitate their action.

Finally, after having faced the first and most fundamental needs of female refugees and migrants, the focus shall be shifted to empowering them, and educating the general population in an effort to include them in Greek society and prevent similar incidents of GBV from arising. This implies support in the inclusion, by organizing for example social events, educational activities, seminars for boosting females and making them more autonomous or for instilling the respect to female and human rights within the general population or even courses of language acquisition. Such actions are organized by Solidarity Centers supported by NGOs, as for example Blue Dot run by SN & Unicef, Mosaik funded by Lesvos Solidarity, and Tapuat, also funded by Unicef and partners, as Together for better days and Iliaktida and other independent NGOs like Melissa, Chora, Faros, METAdrasi and Arsis depending on

the area. Another example of an NGO active in the camps of Lesbos and mostly Moria, is Because We Carry, that focuses on the embellishment and cleaning of camps, and even more zones for unaccompanied women and minors, in order to enhance the quality of their lives and the organization of events, like yoga festivals for the empowerment of children (Because We Carry, 2019). Girls, women and especially mothers benefit from targeted actions undertaken by DRÅPEN I HAVET (stagona) NGO, which organizes classes of sewing, sports or other leisure activities solely for females, apart from providing necessary goods for mothers, like diapers (Dråpen i Havet - Stagona, 2021) and other NGOs focusing on the empowerment of women, like the Starfish Foundation.

## Conclusion

All in all, it has been proven that the response system to the risks faced by refugee females is lacking effective planning, especially as far as facing emergencies is concerned. It is not rare to see female survivors of violence being left helpless in their effort to overcome their trauma and excluded by the society of their receiving country, in this analysis the case study being Greece. In Greece, the centralized response mechanisms fail to assume the burden of managing the complex situation generated by flows of PoC and at the same time to provide targeted services to fragilized females. That is why action undertaken by NGOs is deemed necessary to make up for inefficiencies. However, the dispersion of information and services results in overlapping claims, confusion and rambling procedures. The deficiencies of the system of response to gender-based claims are even more obvious as far as men, unaccompanied minors, and members of the LGBTQI+ community survivors of GBV are concerned. This aspect of GBV is further overlooked and data available, especially in the case of minors, is not credible as violative incidents are rarely recorded, while at the same time there are no NGOs and civil society's organization targeting these vulnerable populations. Some of the existing NGOs show early stirrings of engagement in such issues, but for sure there is a lot to be done to assure the protection of victims of GBV among refugee populations. It is an absolute necessity to assure the decongestion of camps, especially in the islands of the Aegean Sea. Further on, it is important to guarantee to females and PoC at risk access to basic rights, like digne accommodation, knowledge of their rights, services, interpretation, opportunities of inclusion and empowerment, staffed with females. In order to get there, awareness on refugees but also on gender - related matters shall be raised among PoC and the general population.

*“Never forget that a political, economic or religious crisis will be enough to cast doubt on women's rights. These rights will never be vested. You'll have to stay vigilant your whole life.”*

- Simone de Beauvoir

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