

OXFAM & GCR HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN GREECE PROTECTION AND COVID 19 RELIEF IN LESBOS ISLAND

QUALITATIVE IMPACT STUDY REPORT



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This paper was written by Sophia Dassyra with the assistance of Patrick Guyer and Lianne Hekman at Oxfam Novib, in the context of the project “Oxfam & GCR Humanitarian Response in Greece: Protection and COVID-19 relief in Lesbos Island”, generously funded by Crisis and Support Center (CDCS), French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs.

**GCR - OXFAM HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN GREECE - PROTECTION AND COVID-19 RELIEF
IN LESVOS ISLAND - QUALITATIVE IMPACT STUDY REPORT**

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a qualitative impact study on the services and activities of the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR) on the island of Lesbos. The aim of the research was twofold: first, to explore and understand the relevance of the services for the people who have received them, in view of their needs. Second, the aim was to identify the link between what GCR promises and what it delivers. Ultimately, the research aims to inform program quality improvements and advocacy. The data that informs this evaluation consists solely of the views of refugee women who have benefited directly from GCR's services. Interviews were conducted by an external consultant in November 2020. Based on the overall evaluation, conclusions are drawn on how GCR can improve their responses.

This report answers the following research questions:

1. How relevant were activities and services sponsored by GCR for the women themselves? Which ones could have been more relevant and how?
2. What expectations did service recipients have initially? How clear do they feel GCR was in its portrayal of its services?
3. Do women who have received services from GCR feel that they got what GCR promised them? To what extent were their expectations met? In what ways did services fall short of their expectations?
4. What skills and/or knowledge do women who have received services from GCR take away from them?

2. BACKGROUND

The Greek Council for Refugees is a Greek NGO which was founded in 1989 with the purpose to provide social counselling and legal aid to asylum seekers, recognized refugees and other vulnerable groups in need of protection, such as unaccompanied minors, single women with children and victims of human trafficking. GCR provides legal assistance and social support (language instruction, job placement) through a large staff of lawyers, job placement scientists, social workers, psychologists, interpreters. It is the largest Greek NGO exclusively dedicated to refugee issues. GCR's work on Lesbos is supported by a humanitarian project of Oxfam (Oxfam Humanitarian Response in Greece – Protection and Covid-19 Relief in Lesbos Island), partly funded by the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Centre de Crise et de Soutien.

Lesbos island hosts a large number of asylum seekers. According to information provided by the Ministry of Public Order and Civil Protection, as of end of October 2020, 19.527 asylum seekers were located in the Aegean islands, with Lesbos hosting at least 9.037.¹ According to UNHCR data, most new arrivals in 2020 are from Afghanistan (46%), Syria (19%), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (7%) and Somalia (7%).² Until August 2020, the Moria Reception and Identification Centre (RIC) hosted the majority of the population. However, on the 8th, 9th, and 10th of September 2020, several fires broke out in Moria camp, leading to its complete destruction. Containers, tents, equipment, asylum offices and RIC facilities were burnt down. Thousands of people fled from Moria camp and were left homeless. A new emergency accommodation site was set up in Kara Tepe area, Mavrovouni or Moria 2.0. As of the end of September, 1023 tents and 10 Rubb Halls have been placed. Before entering the facility, all people had to undergo a rapid COVID-19 test. A quarantine area was created at the new site to host positively tested asylum seekers. As of the end of October 2020, the estimated population of the new emergency site was almost 8.000³. The site has been operating as an emergency shelter facility, covering only immediate and urgent needs of the population in terms of shelter, food, water, sanitation and medical care.

¹ <https://infocrisis.gov.gr/11136/apotyposi-tis-ethnikis-ikonas-katastasis-gia-to-prosfygiko-metanasteftiko-zitima-tin-15-11-2020/>

² https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/82840?fbclid=IwAR0dJpEDHu84LJm-jt4r1SErU2xmErMPmSQS7hR_3VOBaz0xiZLWst-GOUo

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/greece/new-camp-worse-moria-thousands-living-abysmal-conditions>

3. METHODOLOGY

This impact study uses a qualitative methodology. Data were collected through in-depth interviews.⁴ The in-depth interviews consisted of six in-person one-on-one interviews, two in-person dual interviews, and three one-on-one telephone interviews. All of the interviews took place on 4 and 6 November 2020 at GCR premises on Lesvos. The GCR offices was one of the few spaces available on Lesvos where interviewees and the research team could meet in compliance with coronavirus protocols and restrictions on gatherings and movement. The offices had a meeting space large enough to accommodate social distancing of researchers and interviewees, and interviewees were able to access the facility in spite of mobility restrictions to receive needed services from GCR. Interviews were conducted by an external consultant using a semi-structured interview questionnaire developed by the Impact Measurement and Knowledge Team of Oxfam Novib in collaboration with GCR and the consultant. The methodology that has been applied in data collection and analysis is based on the principles of qualitative narrative enquiry. The narrative approach relies on the written or spoken words or visual representation of individuals. The approach used in this study focused on the lives of individuals as told through their own stories (story telling techniques).

A total of 13 women asylum seekers took part in the interviews. All of them participated in GCR social service activities. Their ages ranged from 16 to 34 years old and their countries of origin included Iran, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, DRC, Ivory Coast, and Cameroon. Interviewees were recruited from refugees and asylum seekers receiving services from GCR on Lesvos during the research period. Women clients of GCR with appointments for social and psychological support services during the research period were asked to share their views for an evaluation of GCR's services and 13 accepted the invitation to participate. The non-random selection of interviewees and the use of GCR facilities to conduct the research are among the limitations of this research. However, pandemic-related restrictions limited the options available to the research team, and the collaboration with an independent consultant to conduct discussions and interviews was an intentional step to limit the possibility of positive bias in the views expressed.

⁴ While Focus Group Discussions were initially planned, it was not possible to conduct them due to COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time.

4. FINDINGS

This section outlines the findings from the interviews. Subsection A first looks at what services the women received from GCR and how relevant the women felt these services were. It also looks at which of the women's needs were still unmet. After that, subsection B will describe if the women's expectations of the services they received were met and how they perceived GCR's communication about what to expect. Finally, subsection C will outline the skills the women took away from their experiences with GCR.

A. Relevance of services received

The main services that all interviewees have received from GCR are the following:

- Psychological support sessions
- Social Services
- Provision of Non-Food Items (NFIs), mainly clothes, shoes and mobile sim cards
- Legal services

Regarding the needs the interviewees expressed, there were some notable differences. These differences seemed to relate primarily to demographics such as age and personal status (e.g. pregnancy), and time spent on Lesvos. Other factors such as origin explained differences to a lesser extent. Pregnant women and mothers for example tend to rely more on medical services, whereas younger women or women without children tend to focus more on education and employment opportunities. Additionally, the less time an interviewee spent on Lesvos, the more they expressed basic needs such as NFIs. The more time spent on Lesvos, the more interviewees expressed complex needs such as training. Nevertheless, all services provided were deemed relevant to the needs of the women who participated in this study.

First of all, social services were seen as the backbone that brings everything together. The social worker is the point of reference in order to accommodate different needs varying from facilitation with state bureaucratic processes, liaison with medical services (hospital appointments), and referrals to GCR or other NGOs for services such as legal and psychological support and language classes. The women who participated in this study feel very close to the social worker and quite comfortable to address their versatile needs.

Secondly, the psychological support services were deemed as highly relevant as well. The psychological support provided by GCR was deemed to be pragmatic and well-adapted to the difficult contexts in which asylum seekers and refugees find themselves and in which services are provided, with a focus on building up resilience and strength to overcome difficulties. Interviewees mentioned that they received targeted support to deal with past traumatic

experiences and current relationships with other people in the camp, and practical advice on how to deal with anxiety and insecurity and how to plan for the future.

“I receive different services from GCR, like legal & social services and I am very happy with them. However, for me, the most important are the psychological sessions that I have every week! I feel very lonely and these sessions give me strength and courage to go on. It is a feeling of warmth like home!” - 25 year-old woman, Kurdistan

The combination of living conditions in the new camp, amount of time spent on Lesvos and insecurity regarding state asylum processes, creates lots of anxiety and discomfort. Most women who participated in the study also carry a heavy psychological burden related to their personal stories back home and their journey to Greece. There are several psychiatric conditions including general anxiety disorder, PTSD and sleep disorders that require prescribed medication on top of the psychotherapeutic / counselling services provided by the GCR psychologist. GCR staff are trying to fill the psychiatric gap by collaborating with private psychiatrist(s), since the hospital ones did not accept appointments, at least not during the time of the study.

“I would like to see a psychiatrist. I suffer from anxiety and because of the conditions in the camp I am getting worse. I am also asthmatic, at nights I cannot sleep and rest; it is very cold and wet and my stress makes things unbearable” 28 year-old woman, DRC

Thirdly, one of the most relevant services is the hospital liaison. Talking to a specialist doctor and starting a treatment for different conditions that women face indeed provides a sense of much needed care and safety. Pregnant women and mothers of young children specifically, report that facilitation of access to healthcare services is one of the most valuable services they receive.

“She (the SW) helped me too. For example, she booked an appointment for me and my kids at the hospital. Before the appointment she called me to remind me the time, the name of the doctor and to make sure that I had understood where exactly to go & what to do. I feel really well cared for” - 27 year-old woman, Cameroon

Additionally, NFIs such as clothes and mobile sim cards are seen as a way to make “life look normal again”, as one interviewee (32 year-old woman, DRC) mentioned. The provision of these items is therefore perceived as relevant. This is especially the case for the provision of mobile sim cards, and not only for practical reasons. Through this service, interviewees learn to establish and maintain a consistent communication network between them, GCR staff and their community, through different media and apps. The facilitation of communication serves

as a “safety net” by enhancing the feeling of belonging and by reassuring beneficiaries that when in need, they will be heard.

“I learned how to use the phone card, to put credits on my phone. They brought me to [Mosaic](#), to do language classes. So now I can go alone there and start my course. I went to the hospital with the Social Worker, I don’t feel ready to go back on my own. When you go alone, they don’t listen to you. The Social Worker promised that she will accompany me again, if I need to see the doctor. I feel safe when she is with me.” - 20 year-old woman, DRC

Overall, beneficiaries often expressed a warm feeling towards GCR, having the impression of a “holistic service” provided to them. This is the result of good coordination and collaboration of different services and programs that GCR runs in Lesvos, including legal services (i.e., documentation portfolio & preparation for the asylum interview). Some interviewees reported that GCR feels “*like home, like a family*”, in the words of one interviewee (23 year-old woman, Cameroon).

UNMET NEEDS

Although the interviewees rated the services provided by GCR as highly relevant, there are still some unmet needs. Beneficiaries are facing major problems in relation to:

- a. **accommodation** (the new camp has basic infrastructure shortages; moreover, there is no proper winterisation provision);
- b. **medical care & hygiene standards in the camp;**
- c. **education** (livelihoods skills and languages);
- d. **community & recreational activities.**

Next to these areas, there is the undisputable need to further enhance the psychological support currently provided by GCR, for example by adding one more psychologist to the team and also establish a formal collaboration with a psychiatrist to help with the prescription of medication, where needed.

Medical care, in general, is a great need since camp conditions are far from ideal. They do not provide a hygienic environment to heal existing health conditions such as allergies, asthma, the common cold and the flu. This is especially true when taking into account the COVID-19 outbreak, and complicated pregnancies that some of the women are dealing with. Moreover, many people seem to have contracted scabies, again due to low hygiene standards within the camp. Therefore, apart from facilitating access to healthcare services (e.g. hospital

appointments), health education initiatives regarding hygiene standards and ways to overcome the insufficient camp infrastructure in this area, could be really helpful.

Given the time needed for the Greek state to process asylum claims, Lesvos has been and will continue to be a mid to long term home for many beneficiaries, under this light, education, community and recreational activities are much needed programming components. In that sense, introducing educational and recreational activities within the program, might help beneficiaries to acquire strength and optimism in order to cope with difficulties that depend on state decisions and cannot be addressed through a program (e.g. camp accommodation). Lastly, the interviewees expressed a need to be integrated into the Greek society: introduced to the local culture and habits. The current camp situation does not convey cultural and social knowledge that could foster future integration, and current conditions do not prepare people for entering Greek or other European societies. Activities such as training in for example civil rights and responsibilities, housing and employment, or local customs and habits could help with this.

“Every time I visit Mytilene town, I like to observe the local people; I can’t stop thinking that the camp is not the real Greece. I would love to know more about the people, how I can adjust to the way of living, where & how I will live and work, if they give me asylum,..., you see, even simple, everyday things that Greek people already know because they were born here...” - 20 year-old woman, DRC

B. Expectations & communication

The interviewees generally rated the quality of GCR services as high, and therefore enjoyed high satisfaction levels. This also meant that they did not have expectations that weren’t met. Instead the services were often better than expected.

Communication of services by GCR staff was perceived as reliable, down to earth, to the point, accurate and consistent. The interviewees noted that GCR staff has a direct and humane form of communication, having done extensive outreach work within the camp and having established effective communication channels through the use of technology and social media. While there is no formal complaint process, interviewees reported that when misunderstandings or other complications arise, interviewees stated that issues were dealt with quickly through dialogue and mutual understanding.

“It has been very difficult for me to understand how things work, like asylum documents, medical appointments, even some camp rules. The GCR social worker, explained everything patiently, in a very simple way and now I feel safer about what I

can or cannot do or what to expect. Whenever I have a question or a problem she responds immediately and this is really nice” - 23 year-old woman, DRC

GCR has also recently designed a digital client feedback form with support from the Impact Measurement and Knowledge Team at Oxfam Novib which clients will be invited to fill out anonymously after receipt of psychological support services. This form compiles feedback on services received and also provides a platform for complaints about services or staff conduct.

The timing of GCR’s response was considered satisfactory and very fast compared to previous experiences with, for example, other NGOs. The women who participated in this study stressed that it takes, on average, a week to get their first appointment after first contact.

“GCR psychologist & social worker came in our tent, they asked some questions about the conditions & the needs. One week after they called us to give an appointment. Since then, every time I have an issue, they are willing to help. They call me back immediately when I reach out for them.” - 25 year-old woman, DRC

In addition, the interviewees noted that GCR staff were proactive, informal and flexible in their communication. The staff initiate contact in an organized way, for example to share relevant information, to initiate an appointment, to remind someone of an appointment, or to follow up on issues. The informal and flexible way of communication is very effective in view of the difficulties women face in their life at the camp. For example, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, exiting the camp is restricted to a specific number of people per day, resulting in many ad hoc modifications and rearrangements of appointments and in daily planning. Having an adaptable communication structure helps overcome these setbacks efficiently. Not only is this type of communication considered practical, it also serves as a “safety net”, enhancing feelings of belonging and protection, as described previously.

“You know, it is not always easy to leave the camp. It happened a few times that I had an appointment with GCR and I couldn’t go. The psychologist was very understanding and tried immediately to find another appointment. She also sent me a confirmation letter to show to the police. I really appreciate that she understands what happen here, in the camp and tries to help.” - 30 year-old woman, Iran

Depending on the capacity of the specific program, it could be useful for GCR to create some sort of leaflet or written material about specific GCR services in different languages. This way, the organization could reach more women and potential beneficiaries, in a more formal way and on a larger scale.

C. Capacity strengthening

The interviewees noted several ways in which they had strengthened their capacities. This fell into two categories: practical, mainly digital skills, and more long-term empowering skills.

First of all, interviewees reported that they acquired basic digital skills. Linked to the provision of mobile sim cards, the women were offered training on how to use the internet, social media and e-mails - all of these were viewed as being of utmost importance, in view of the increasing remote communication needs due to COVID-19. It could therefore be useful to consider formalizing a basic digital training within the program structure, particularly as digital communication skills were perceived as empowering. As mentioned before, it allowed the interviewees to express themselves, interact, build relationships, and gradually acquire more independence.

Secondly, most women suggested that through psychological, social and legal support, they regained a sense of confidence and strength as well as a feeling of regaining control over their lives.

"I feel as if I am regaining my life. Things are hard but getting better now seems possible. Before meeting with GCR we had no faith in ourselves. Now we are more empowered. We know that we can have things done..." - 34 year-old woman, Ivory Coast

Some interviewees also mentioned that they had learned to be patient and adaptable, and had increased their resilience and motivation to move forward.

"I feel stronger and more patient. I have found ways to put up with the things I don't like in the camp. I have now adapted to reality and this way I see things more clearly and make better decisions about my life and my future." - 30 year-old woman, Iran

5. CONCLUSION & LEARNINGS

All in all, the services offered by GCR through Oxfam and French Ministry of European and Foreign Affairs (Centre de Crise et de Soutien) funding are deemed well-structured, relevant and effective in covering most needs within their reach. Psychological and social support in particular help alleviate part of the daily burden that the women experience, as they provide them a sense of protection, belonging and ability to move forward. The interviewees did not report any unmet expectations, and rated the communication of GCR staff as timely, reliable

and flexible. In addition, they reported that they had gained both practical skills from their experiences with GCR (mainly digital communication skills), as well as a sense of increased empowerment.

Accommodation and living conditions remain a challenge and put a lot of strain on asylum seekers and refugees, and on single women and mothers especially. While it is not within the scope of GCR's program to address accommodation and living conditions, there are some things that GCR could optimize in order to alleviate some of the stress that these circumstances cause. Based on the results of the interviews, the following recommendations have been formulated:

1. Strengthen the psychosocial support by hiring more staff and by creating stable psychiatric service provision.
2. Introduce training and education modules, for example on health hygiene, language, and practical skills.
3. Introduce cultural and community activities, aimed at giving beneficiaries' lives a sense of normality and acquainting/integrating asylum seekers and refugees with the local culture and habits (this has so far not been possible within the camp).

GCR will take the findings and the recommendations of this research into account when reformulating project planning and implementing supporting activities. GCR will explore and initiate partnerships with other respected actors in the field to cooperate on the delivery of the suggested services.

The GCR psychosocial team based on Lesvos will ensure that the interviewees who participated in this research receive feedback on the findings so they will be aware of how their contributions have been used. This will be a priority and will be implemented through individual follow-up meetings (or small group sessions when possible), in order to share the findings of the research with them. Results of this research will also be made available to refugees, asylum seekers, staff, supporters and other stakeholders of GCR.



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Whenever I have a question or a problem she responds immediately and this is really nice”.

- 23 year-old woman, DRC



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- 34 year-old woman, Ivory Coast