

POLICY GAPS AND LIVED EXPERIENCES:

THE VULNERABILITIES OF REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING WOMEN IN GREECE

Nouha Elyazidi, Sara-Emily Khan, & Mindy Vorpahl



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Greece has deliberately constructed a hostile environment for refugees and asylum-seeking women through deterrence-based policies that contradict its obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention, EU asylum directives, and domestic anti-discrimination law. Refugee women struggle to access the legal support necessary to navigate employment, healthcare, and essential services.

01. THE CRISIS IN NUMBERS

INDICATOR	STATISTICS (2025)
Initial Asylum Applications	52,180
Camp Residence	22,622 (3,882 children)
Camp Support Staff	58 camp doctors (1 doctor per 390 residents) 168 interpreters (1 interpreter per 135 residents)
Main Countries of Origin and Their Asylum Recognition Rates	Afghanistan (99.8%) , Sudan (99.4%) Syria (91%), Palestine (98.5%)
Overall Asylum Recognition Rate	70.6%

Source: Refugee Support Aegean Sea - Asylum procedure and reception statistics in Greece in 2025

02. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Greece ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1960, yet evidence consistently shows the government prioritizes deterrence over protection. Greece's Mediterranean geography makes it a primary EU entry point, with most arrivals fleeing conflict or persecution in Afghanistan, Syria, Sudan, or Somalia. The 2015 Refugee Crisis exposed the tension between initial European solidarity with human rights and the rapid shift to far-right, anti-migrant rhetoric that has become increasingly prevalent in the past five years.

Greece's economic situation, public distrust in the government, and the rise in right-wing, anti-migrant politics have been weaponized to scapegoat refugee populations. Today, even as Greece's economy recovers, the institutional damage to refugee services and support remains severe.

03. METHODOLOGY

This research draws on qualitative data collected during desk research and field work conducted in Athens, Greece, through semi-structured interviews and small focus groups. In total, 19 respondents were interviewed; 13 women and 6 men representing 8 different refugee-serving organizations from a range of backgrounds in social work, law, translation, and management. Two participants were refugees who also worked in refugee services. All interviews were thematically coded based on international law, EU law, domestic policy, gender norms, GBV, camp conditions, and language barriers.

Limitations: Direct refugee participation was limited due to ethical and logistical constraints.

Research was conducted exclusively in Athens, and barriers identified may be more severe in rural areas and camp settings. Findings are reflective of the period of fieldwork, but should be considered alongside rapidly shifting Greek domestic policy



An Inflatable Boat with Syrian Refugees Just Arrived Safely to Skala Sykamias, Lesvos island, Greece. 29 October 2015, 15:36:54 Wikimedia [Ggia](#)

04. KEY FINDINGS

1. **Robust laws, deficient realities:** All interview respondents confirmed that written Greek law contains no explicitly discriminatory provisions and is relatively robust. The problem is the difference between written law and lived reality. Legal protections exist, but are practically inaccessible due to political resistance, bureaucratic barriers, and structural marginalization. The asylum system requires documentation and a consistent narrative that many refugee women, particularly GBV survivors, cannot provide, especially not without legal guidance.
2. **EU Frameworks:** The 2024 EU Pact on Migration and asylum, expected to be fully operational by mid-2026, increases border detentions, expands pushback mechanisms, and externalizes migration responsibilities to countries like Turkey that only grant conditional refugee status to non-Europeans. The EU-Turkey deal and the Greek Joint Ministerial Decision designate Turkey as a 'safe third country' for five nationalities, allowing Greece broader jurisdiction to reject applications.
3. **Inhumane Camp conditions:** Reception and accommodation facilities were universally described as prison-like; geographically isolated on former military bases (not found on Google Maps), without women-only sleeping quarters or functioning bathroom locks, and chronically understaffed and under-resourced. The infamous Moria camp, designed for 1,000 people, once held 20,000. Women report a high level of miscarriages due to a lack of access to medical care and alarming rates of sexual abuse and harassment.
4. **The criminalization and defunding of NGOs:** The government has labeled many refugee-serving organization and their staff as 'enemies of the state' and introduced legislation allowing felonious charges for aid workers accused of 'smuggling'. The loss of USAID funding in January of 2025, combined with severe cuts to UNHCR and the UN Fund for Victims of Torture, along with EU funding gaps, has devastated programming. NGOs have been expelled from the camp settings, eliminating significant support for women, while the government fails to fill the gaps.

5. **Systemic gender-based violence:** Interview respondents suggested that 80% of women have experienced gender-based violence during their journey or in Greece, and UNHCR estimates 90% of refugee women and girls experience rape on their journey in the Mediterranean. Greek asylum practices lack gender-sensitive training, law enforcement is dismissive of assault reports, and fails to support survivors. Because GBV is not formally codified as asylum grounds at the Greek or EU level, women who flee persecution on this basis are sometimes denied.
6. **Intersectional discrimination: Race, Religion, and Gender:** A stark racial hierarchy exists within the Greek asylum system. Ukrainian refugees were given housing, work permits, and social security within weeks, while Afghan, Sudanese, and African women wait years for the same rights. Religious discrimination, specifically targeting visible Muslim women, with mosque access restricted, cultural centers closed, and discriminatory political rhetoric. Safe country designations have dangerous repercussions, for example. FGM asylum claims were rejected because the practice is technically illegal in the applicant's country of origin.
7. **Language and Interpretation Barriers:** Only 168 interpreters serve 22,000 camp residents. Interpreter services are often male-dominated, forcing women to recount sexual trauma through male interpreters, causing underreporting that directly weakens asylum claims. Issues arise when interpreters may come from backgrounds with opposing ethno-cultural tensions or share personal details about the asylum seeker.
8. **Digital divide:** Greece's shift to e-services for official asylum-related matters has disproportionately excluded women with limited digital literacy, unstable internet access, or visual disabilities. Online platforms are poorly translated, frequently crash, and change without notice, leading to missed deadlines or denied applications. Physical asylum offices have been significantly reduced.

Refugee Voices:

“We leave war to enter hell... Especially for women, 80% experience rape or gender-based violence and are abused at every point in their refugee journey.”

05. POLICY OPTIONS

Key Recommendation at the EU & International Level

Reinstate UNHCR & IOM oversight in all Greek reception facilities with enforceable standards

Reform EU Pact to codify GBV as asylum grounds, revise 'safe country' designations to include individual persecution

Redirect EU migration funds to refugee-serving NGOs/CSOs directly

Establish formal investigations into Frontex and the Greek Coast Guard violence

Enforce equal processing timelines across nationalities, and audit nationality-based hierarchies

Key Recommendation at the Greek Law Level

Extend the 3-month employment grace period, preserve the PAAYPA numbers during status transitions

Reform camp conditions to restore women-only spaces, functioning locks, lighting, security, and NGO access

Provide state-funded legal aid from the first asylum interview, not only for appeals

Simplify custody documentation pathways for single mothers and GBV/rape survivors

Restore accessible in-person asylum services and fix digital platform translation and reliability

Key Recommendation & NGO Level

Produce a unified, cross-coalition multilingual service guide with icon based version for those with low literacy

Institutionalize trauma-informed, gender-sensitive intake protocols, and match female interpreters to female clients

Shift women's programming to city-based hubs with integrated childcare where camp access is blocked

Coordinate EU-level advocacy through larger network organizations through the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)

Strengthen case management continuity for the most vulnerable population

06. CONCLUSION

The situation refugee and asylum-seeking women in Greece are facing is not primarily a resource problem, it is a systemic and political one. Greece systemically violates the right of the very people its domestic, regional, and international obligations aim to protect. The legal architecture to protect these women exists; what is missing is the political will to enforce it and the accountability mechanisms to compel compliance.

The women enduring these violations are not just abstract statistics. They are mothers, survivors, professionals, and human beings navigating a system designed to exhaust them into leaving. Their resilience is extraordinary, and our policy obligation is to empower and protect them.

EU institutions must hold Greece accountable for documented violations of binding obligations. The Greek government must close the gap between written law and lived reality. NGOs must be protected, funded, and empowered, not criminalized. And GBV must be recognized as a basis for international protection. These are not radical demands, but methods of upholding legal obligations.



World Press Photo 2016 at The New Church-De Nieuwe Kerk-Dam in Amsterdam. Holland 15 April 2026, 10:04:29 Jmersina | Wikimedia



Steve Evans: Free to Cross - Refugees at the Border November 20, 2015 Flickr Photos



Freedom House: Syrian Refugees June 4, 2015 Flickr Photos