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INTERNATIONAL



“I WANT TO DECIDE ABOUT MY FUTURE”

Uprooted women in Greece speak out



Amnesty International is truly amazed by the resilience of the women interviewed for this publication. Image taken at Melissa Network, Athens, July 2018.



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“We need a space where we can feel safe; where we can express our fears and our demands can be heard.”

Mina, from Iraq, living with her two young children in a camp outside Athens, July 2018*

UPROOTED WOMEN IN GREECE SPEAK OUT

Thousands of women and girls fleeing persecution and conflict undertake extremely difficult and dangerous journeys to Greece.

This publication focuses on their voices and in doing so shines a light on the immense courage and strength with which uprooted women and girls are responding to their situation.

Some have fled sexual and physical violence and discrimination in their countries of origin only to face further violence and abuse on the road at the hands of people smugglers, border guards, state officials or relatives.

* Indicates that, at their request, women's names have been changed.



The hardships of the journey are not accidental. On the contrary, Europe's closure of borders to people seeking protection is exposing women and girls in particular to foreseeable risks.

With no possibility to travel legally, women and girls are compelled to make a journey fraught with risks in the hope that Europe will provide a place of safety where lives can be slowly rebuilt. For many, those hopes are shattered on arrival in Greece.

Trapped in overcrowded and squalid EU-sponsored camps on the Greek islands, women and girls are exposed to several dangers, including harassment and sexual violence. They are having to grapple with a dysfunctional reception system on the islands and the mainland that keeps thousands of people in camps with poor sanitation and medical care, and that were never intended or equipped to house people long-term. Whether living in flats in urban areas or in camps, the lack of adequate information and female interpreters is a major obstacle to accessing essential services, such as sexual and reproductive health or legal aid.

Since March 2017, Amnesty International has spoken to more than 100 women and girls living in camps and flats in and around Athens and on the Greek islands in one-to-one interviews or focus groups.

Regardless of nationality, personal circumstances or hopes, all had one thing in common: an urgent need to be heard. All had crucial things to say about their rights, safety, wellbeing and the challenges ahead. They also had clear demands for change.

This publication draws on their insights and reflects their stories, not only of adversity, but also of the life-changing initiatives set up in Greece, such as community female-friendly spaces where women and girls come together, access services, rebuild support networks and gain the knowledge and skills they need to create a better life for themselves and their families.

Greece has a legal obligation to provide women and girls living in the country with protection, ensuring dignified and safe reception conditions, fair access to asylum as well as integration opportunities for those who remain. Greece must fulfil these responsibilities and in doing so guarantee women and girls the opportunity to actively participate in discussions and decisions that affect them.

The responsibility for their living conditions in Greece lies not only with the Greek authorities, but with the rest of Europe as well.

The deal between the EU and Turkey, adopted by European leaders in March 2016, and European asylum rules are the two main factors which lie at the heart of many of the problems experienced by refugees, including women and girls.

First, because the deal is forcing many women and girls to remain on the Greek islands in camps fraught with dangers. No improvement in camp conditions, however necessary they may be, will ever be sufficient to mitigate the risks stemming from confining refugee women and girls on the islands. Second, because the European asylum rules oblige Greece, as the country where refugees first arrive, to bear the brunt of the responsibility for their assistance and many other European countries refuse to change this unfair system.

European leaders should welcome their fair share of people fleeing violence and persecution. They should offer safe and legal routes to Europe and reform the European asylum system to make it fair and compassionate. Failure to do so is not only failing people in urgent need of protection, it is also failing the people of Europe more widely who are losing confidence in their governments' ability to stand by the EU's founding human rights principles.

Amnesty International is deeply moved by the courage and generosity of all the women and girls the organization met with and thanks each of them for taking the time to share their personal experiences and views.

The organization is also grateful to the organizations and individuals who facilitated the contact with the women and offer great support to them. In publishing this document, Amnesty International hopes it will contribute to their fight to improve the situation for themselves and for others, and that it will assist in getting their voices heard by those with the power and responsibility to protect them.

Women's experiences in Greece must be listened to and acted upon.



CONFRONTING FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY

“There was no choice. Either you are left behind in the middle of nowhere with criminals [smugglers] who would do anything to you. Or you squeeze on that boat despite the risks.”

Bahar, from Afghanistan, describing the journey from Turkey to Greece with her three children, March 2018*

PERILOUS JOURNEYS

The refusal of European governments to open safe and legal alternatives to perilous land journeys or across the Aegean Sea is putting women and girls at increased risk of violence, including sexual violence and human trafficking, on the way.

Women and girls make up an increasing number of those arriving in Greece seeking refuge.

While in 2015 most of those arriving from Turkey were young men, since 2016 more and more women – most from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan– are among those seeking international protection in Europe.



From January to July 2018, at least 99 people have lost their lives trying to cross the Aegean sea. Since 2014, the number is at least a staggering 1699. Many women told Amnesty International about the terrifying sea crossing. ‘I thought I was dying’, said Maya*, a Syrian woman who arrived in Greece with her 5 children. Amnesty interviewed her in Rafina camp outside Athens, May 2017. The photo is taken on the island of Kos.



NUMBER OF REFUGEE AND MIGRANTS TRAPPED IN EU SPONSORED CAMPS ON THE GREEK ISLANDS (AS OF 21 SEPTEMBER 2018)

HOTSPOT	CAPACITY	CURRENT POPULATION
Lesvos	3,100	8, 675
Chios	1,014	2,266
Samos	648	3,809
Leros	860	679
Kos	816	1,248
TOTAL hospots	6,438	16,677
Total other forms of accommodation on the islands (flats, hotels, NGOs, etc)	2,658	3,227
TOTAL ON THE ISLANDS: 19,904		

**Source: National Coordination for border control, Immigration and Asylum, Ministry of Interior*

All of the women interviewed by Amnesty International said they had no choice but to use people smugglers. Fatima*, a 27-year-old Afghan woman who travelled to Greece with her two younger sisters, expressed to Amnesty International in February 2018 her frustration and deep sense of powerlessness:

“When the European governments closed the doors to refugees we [as women] got more exposed to the abuses of the smugglers. And you cannot ask the police or anyone else for help because you are ‘illegal.’ Smugglers take advantage of that.”

Women described how they had to wait for days in secret houses in one of the coastal cities in Turkey before being taken to the coast; some also had to spend several nights in the open air near the coast if the weather prevented them boarding rubber dinghies.

“When we got to the coast near Bodrum [in Turkey], the weather was very bad. Smugglers told us to wait there. We stayed there for 20 days. It was cold and wet. There was not enough water or food. We didn’t know any of the people in the group. They were nice, but the smugglers weren’t... They pushed my mother away, when she begged to go back to Bodrum. I was so scared, I couldn’t sleep at all. When I wanted to go to the toilet, my brother walked with me away from the group. But the smugglers followed us once, so we ran back. After that, I did not pee for so long that I became ill”

“Yara”, 22, from Syria, travelling from Turkey to Greece with her mother and her 17-year-old brother, March 2018

Many other women told Amnesty International how travelling in remote places with unknown men made them feel extremely uncomfortable and unsafe. Women travelling alone were at particular risk of physical, verbal and sexual harassment by smugglers. One woman told Amnesty International that she was asked to give away her teenage daughter for marriage to a smuggler:

“They harassed me a lot. One smuggler was very persistent. He said: ‘I’ll send you to Germany by plane but give me your daughter’. Of course, I didn’t but I’m still afraid of them.”

Women also said that they were sometimes harassed by the police, gendarmerie, and locals in Turkey as well as their own relatives or individuals making the journey with them. Another woman from Iran living in Athens in March 2017 described to Amnesty International how her husband forced her to have sex with smugglers when they ran out of money to continue their journey.

TRAPPED ON THE ISLANDS

The strength and resilience shown by women on the journey is extraordinary. However, when they arrive on one of the Greek islands in the eastern Aegean, instead of the much-needed rest and sanctuary they are entitled to, they encounter the devastating consequences of the deal between the EU and Turkey.

Since 20 March 2016, asylum-seekers arriving on the Greek islands have not been allowed to move onto mainland Greece because the EU-Turkey deal requires that they are returned to Turkey. The returns are not happening in the numbers envisaged by EU leaders and as hundreds of people are reaching Greek shores on a weekly basis, the effect of the EU-Turkey deal is to trap thousands of people for months on the Greek islands in inhumane conditions. Their lives are on hold, and this is having a tremendous impact on their mental health.

As of 21 September 2018, more than 19,500 people were stuck on the islands. The majority stay in EU-sponsored camps (also called “hotspots” or Reception and Identification Centres) on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos, and Leros. Women account for 34% of the people; 12% of whom are girls under 18. The remaining 66% are men, of whom 17% are boys.

People with family reunification claims or individuals who are considered “vulnerable” – including pregnant women, new mothers or survivors of torture and sexual violence – are meant to be exempted from staying on the islands and should be able to eventually move to mainland Greece. But officers and medical staff in the camps do not always have the skills or time needed to identify those who should be exempted. And even when people are identified, they have to wait for several months until space is found for them on the mainland.



July 2017, activists and refugees came together on the Greek island of Lesbos to demand action from EU leaders.





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INHUMANE CONDITIONS

“Inhumane” is one of the words most used by women when describing the five EU-funded camps. Overcrowding in these camps is at a crisis point with almost 17,000 people living in five camps which were designed for around 6,400. The Moria (Lesvos) and Vathy (Samos) sites are especially crowded.

Lack of hygiene and sanitation, insufficient clean drinking water, streams of raw sewage and infestations of mice and rats are common in all camps. Several pregnant women described to Amnesty International having to sleep on the floor and having very little, if any, access to antenatal care.

Women also have to spend their limited cash on sanitary pads which are not always provided.

“Everything is dirty here. It’s impossible to keep clean and when we have our period, it is very difficult.”

Adèle, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), interviewed in February 2018*



Moria refugee camp on Lesvos, February 2018. The camp is still severely overcrowded. As of 21 September 2018, more than 8,600 people were staying in the camp, which has a total maximum capacity of 3,100.



A tent in the Vathy camp on Samos, Greece. February 2018.



© Yara Boff / Tonello / Amnesty International

Adèle* arrived on the island of Samos with her sister in December 2017 and was staying in Vathy camp when Amnesty International spoke to her in February 2018. Although the camp was designed for 650 people in prefabricated containers, in September 2018 had 3,800 people living there mainly in makeshift shelters.

“For two months, we slept in a small tent near the toilet... There was no electricity and it was very cold. And when it rained, the water soak[ed] through the tent. We are now in a container with another family of four. Still difficult. My mother suffers from severe back pain and cannot climb up and down the camp to see a doctor.”

Saman, 19, from Afghanistan, interviewed in February and August 2018*

Women are coming together to help each other cope with these grim conditions.

Yvette*, from Cameroon, was living in the Moria camp, one of the largest in Greece, when Amnesty International met her in March 2018. More than 8,700 people are staying in this camp which was designed to hold 3,100. When the camp was severely overcrowded, Yvette gave up her bed for pregnant women.

“I am a mother, so I understand their difficulties. I can imagine how hard it is to be pregnant in Moria”, she told Amnesty International. Yvette was also volunteering with a local organization helping with the cooking and food distribution. “I keep myself busy [so as] not to lose it”, she said.

AMAL'S STORY

Amal, a Palestinian refugee, worked as a medical statistician in a hospital in Damascus, Syria. She was one of the members of staff who protested against the hospital's policy of treating only military casualties, not civilians. Some of those who protested were arrested or disappeared, so Amal fled, fearing for her life.

She arrived in Lesbos in July 2017, where she heard about the EU-Turkey deal for the first time.

“For five days, we stayed in a tent all together: men, women and children. People referred it to as the ‘prison tent’. I was shocked and hurt to be treated as a criminal.”

Amal speaks English and has managed to find some work as an interpreter for several organizations in Lesbos. She doesn't live in Moria anymore but her thoughts are still with the many women staying there.

“Every day is getting worse in Moria. The camp is so cramped that even Section C [only for single women] is full now and women traveling on their own are staying in big tents in the arrival area for two or three months, very unprotected”, she said in August 2018.



© ↑

Amal from Syria used to live in the Moria camp on Lesbos, March 2018.

DAILY DANGERS

“Refugees need protection. If the Greek government cannot take care of us, let us go. Don’t keep us here.”

Yvette, from Cameroon*

Severe overcrowding and cramped living conditions are making the camps extremely dangerous places for everyone, but especially for women and girls, for unaccompanied children and people fleeing persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

“I don’t feel safe or comfortable in the tent with...strangers. I leave the camp early in the morning and then I return at night. I spend the whole day in Alpha Centre [a community centre set up by Samos volunteers] or I stroll by the sea.”

Maysa, 25, from the city of Aleppo in Syria. She arrived alone on Samos in December 2017. When Amnesty International met her in February 2018, she was staying in Vathy camp.*

Everyday activities such as taking a shower or going to the toilet become dangerous for women and girls because many facilities do not have locks and there are not enough toilets and showers in a separate area for them. Poor lighting in the camp makes getting water or simply walking around at night stressful and risky.

“[The] shower in the camp is cold and there is no lock. Men walk in when you are inside. There are no lights in the toilets. At night, sometimes I go to the toilet with my sister or pee in a bucket”.

Adèle, Samos camp, interviewed in February 2018*



Vial camp, Chios. January 2018. When darkness comes, so does the fear. Many women in various camps told Amnesty they were too afraid to leave their tents at night.





Many of the women enduring the awful conditions are still trying to come to terms with the trauma of past abuse. For such women, the insecurity and dangers they experience in Greece are a constant reminder of the violence they sought to escape.

“I don’t manage to sleep and I still have a lot of nightmares because of the past.”

Abigail is from Cameroon. She had fled to Istanbul to escape domestic violence, sexual abuse and death threats at the hands of her husband. In Istanbul, she found work in a sweatshop, but was sexually abused by her employer. A smuggler helped her to cross the Aegean. When Amnesty International spoke to her in February 2018, she was sleeping in a small tent on Samos.*

Women persecuted in their countries because of their sexual orientation or gender identity feel at greater risk.

Simone*, a 20-year-old lesbian woman, left her country after being subjected to violence, including rape. On Samos, she still found herself at risk, living in a container with eight people, including four men.

“Where I come from homosexuality is illegal and my family severely beat me when they found out I was lesbian. They kicked me out of the house. Here I feel very nervous because I am sharing the container with four men I don’t know. I don’t want anyone to know about me. I stay all day outside the camp and come back only at night, but I don’t sleep well.”

SARINA’S* STORY

From an early age, Sarina, now aged 29, knew that she was a girl, not a boy. Her older brother routinely subjected her to violent abuse because of her gender identity. Sarina told Amnesty International:

“My brother sometimes used to tie my hands with metal chains and beat me with them. My mother was unable to help... When my brother burnt my hands, my mother could not stop it. Everything I did, for [my brother] was a mistake. I felt that I had to flee [my country] because my life felt that it had no value.”

Sarina fled to Turkey, but her brother found out she was living as a transgender woman and issued a death threat against her. Other members of her family warned her that she ought to leave.

Sarina had no choice but to flee again, this time to Greece. Once on a Greek island, she felt very uncomfortable in shared accommodation because she never knew how people would react to her gender identity. She was verbally and sexually abused in the camp and harassed by police. Sarina was eventually transferred to a shelter outside the camp, but continued to experience hostility from other residents. She told Amnesty International:

“I would like to live [a normal life]. I would like to live in Germany, study the language and become a hairdresser...to live a life, to be respected.”

FROM CAMP TO CAMP: LIFE ON MAINLAND GREECE

There are around 45,500 refugees and migrants living in temporary accommodation places on the mainland. Many arrived just before European countries along the Balkans route sealed their borders in March 2016, triggering a totally avoidable humanitarian crisis in Greece. Others have been exempted from the EU-Turkey deal and transferred from the Greek islands.

For thousands of uprooted people seeking protection, Greece is turning into a destination rather than a transit country due to lack of legal and safe options to continue the journey in Europe.

For some women, memories of the journey to Greece are still too vivid; they don't want to risk any further travel and hope to restart their lives in the country. For others, despite the challenges of finding a job in a country battered by a deep financial crisis, the kindness and solidarity of Greek people gives them hope for the future.

Whether they are staying in Greece as a matter of choice or because they do not have safe options to move to other countries, many of those remaining in the country for long periods of time are enduring harrowing reception conditions also in the mainland. As of the end of July 2018, there are more than 16,400 people living in the 26 temporary camps on the mainland. This despite the fact that the humanitarian crisis in Greece is one of the best resourced crises by the EU and international donors.

In 2017 the Greek government closed some of the worst sites and replaced tents with containers in others. But the camps remain unsuitable for long-term stays and so far, the Greek government has not prioritized replacing them with more appropriate shelter. Quite the opposite. This year, three camps that had previously been shut because they were uninhabitable have been reopened to address the shortage of shelter for the increasing numbers of people arriving across the Greece-Turkey land border and the islands.

For the people trapped in camps for prolonged periods, the trauma of not knowing what the future will bring is exacerbated. Women interviewed have repeatedly asked to be moved out of camps to other forms of housing where they can enjoy more privacy and feel safer, such as the urban accommodation scheme in rented flats run by UNHCR with the support of NGOs, municipalities and EU funds.



The arrival terminal of an unused airport in the Elliniko area, Athens, May 2017. The camp was closed in June 2017.



But the 20,400 flats available are insufficient. This lack of adequate housing, coupled with the failures to conduct timely and effective assessments for vulnerability, mean that pregnant women and women with young babies have no choice but to remain in camps.

Many women living in camps said they felt they had been abandoned. In July 2018, Amnesty International met a group of visibly distressed Yazidi women from Iraq staying in Skaramagas, located near Athens. One said:

“We feel totally forgotten. Some of us have been in the camp for two years and nothing is changing. We don’t know what will happen to us. We can’t do anything here and our children are getting crazy. And after all this time, I can hardly communicate about my problems because no one speaks our language.”

Women and girls interviewed by Amnesty International spoke about insecurity in the camps. For instance, in Skaramagas, there was no official manager on site and no security checks at the entrance for several months in 2017 and early 2018. Anyone could go in and out at any time of the day or night and humanitarian organizations working in the camp reported that smugglers and people carrying weapons had entered the camp. Since April 2018, private security guards have been stationed at the gate and the Greek authorities have appointed a camp manager. But women still feel afraid, particularly in the evenings, as a Syrian woman explained in July 2018:

“I spend most of the time in the container because I don’t feel safe. There is a lot of alcohol in the camp and there are fights every day. I never go out at night and I don’t allow my children to stay on their own outside, even if it’s close by. The police do not intervene. They don’t want to know what’s happening here. No one is protecting us.”

The lack of facilities and the poor conditions in camps place a particularly heavy burden on women who often shoulder the majority of care responsibilities for children and other relatives. The psychological impact of prolonged stays in camps is profound. Women spoke of their anxiety, nightmares, lack of sleep and depression – symptoms all corroborated by the humanitarian organizations working in the camps.

“Everyone loses their mind here.”

Darya, from Afghanistan, interviewed in one of the three camps with appalling conditions in the area of Elliniko, Athens. The camps were finally shut down in June 2017 following repeated demands from the women and men staying there, as well as national and international organizations.*

The situation does not look set to improve soon. The Greek government has not appointed sufficient staff and major humanitarian organizations are gradually moving out of Greece mainly due to lack of funding. There are fears that access to essential healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health; information; and legal assistance in camps could deteriorate further.

Some women with small children in the camps try to escape the unbearable conditions by attempting to stay in other camps hoping for something better. In July 2018, Amnesty International spoke to two women from Syria who were staying in a different camp from the one they had been transferred from on the islands. One of the women was eight months pregnant and the other had delivered her one-month-old baby in the camp. Camp authorities were not offering them and their family the option of registering in the camp. This posed several problems for them, including lack of access to essential pre and post-natal medical services.

“This is very difficult now, they haven’t given us anything, not even blankets to put on the floor. All we have we’ve collected from the street. I must look after my one-month-old baby and three small children. I need a better place.”

Alma, from Syria, living in Skaramagas with her family, including four young children.*

In worst-case scenarios documented by Amnesty International, women, including pregnant women or those with small children, have had to spend days homeless with the rest of the family outside camps because they cannot access shelter.

LACK OF FEMALE INTERPRETERS IMPEDES ACCESS TO SERVICES

In camps set up on the mainland, medical needs, including access to mental health services, are in theory covered through a special programme with EU funds. Following legislative changes in February 2018, healthcare in public hospitals is now available and free of charge to asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece. But a lack of female interpreters and female personnel within those services is preventing women from accessing them. “I don’t feel comfortable talking about problems with male doctors or male interpreters. I don’t go anymore”, a Syrian woman said when referring to appointments with doctors.

Women said that female interpreters and female interviewers are especially important during “vulnerability” assessments and asylum interviews both on the islands and mainland. Greek law provides for language support, but in practice this is not available to many of the women seeking refuge. The lack of female interpreters in camps, hospitals and shelters is a barrier to accessing essential services.

“In the second interview, I had to talk about the past abuse I suffered in Iran and the sexual assault I experienced in Greece in front of a male interpreter. He was not taking me seriously. He laughed at me.

After the interview I was disoriented, very stressed out. I couldn’t even find my flat. After the experience, I repeatedly asked for a woman to do the interpretation. I would not talk in front of that man again. In the end, I was heard but I had to be persistent. Other women may not do it and their stories are then untold.”

Azadeh is a survivor of sexual violence*

Language barriers and a lack of interpreters, combined with a general unfamiliarity with the new environment and limited information provided about services, result in some women feeling too scared to leave the camps or flats for days. This exacerbates their isolation. “I hardly go out. It’s too overwhelming”, said an Afghan woman living in a flat with her three children in October 2017.

Even when they know about the existence of the services, many women living in flats told Amnesty International about the difficulties they face finding the time to seek these services because they have to take care of children and the elderly or have other household responsibilities.



Women staying in three camps set up in the old Olympic area of Elliniko, Athens, May 2017.



INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION, SUPPORT AND PROTECTION TO SURVIVORS

Many women and girls seeking refuge have experienced sexual or physical violence in their country of origin, on the journey and/or in Greece. Efforts by the Greek authorities to prevent and protect survivors from such violence have so far been wholly inadequate. The layout of the camps and the severe overcrowding, particularly on the islands, are exacerbating the risks of sexual assaults and violence.

In 2017 the UNCHR received reports from 622 survivors of gender-based violence stranded on the Greek islands; around 30% of the violence occurred after the person arrived in Greece and 80% of survivors who reported violence in country during the second half of the year were female.

Alarming though these figures are, the truth is likely even worse, as sexual violence is hugely underreported for a number of reasons. Many women and organizations supporting them told Amnesty International that women are reluctant to come forward with formal complaints due to social stigma, fear of reprisal from perpetrators, lack of trust in the protection system or because they believe that they will be stuck in Greece if they report the violence.

Insufficient resources and specialized staff in camps also means that survivors of gender-based violence are not identified and therefore not provided with the protection they need.

In June 2017, various Greek authorities at the national and local levels signed a protocol to coordinate the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers who are survivors of gender-based violence. The measure includes the coordination of referrals to the 40 women's counselling centres and the 21 state-run shelters for all women survivors of violence across the country, including Greek citizens. However, the impact of the protocol remains very limited. One of the problems is that Greek shelters are not always equipped with interpreters and the necessary services to support uprooted women.

AVA'S STORY

Ava*, a young woman from Afghanistan, sought help after enduring physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her partner in the camps and in a flat. She spent 10 months in two different shelters. She told Amnesty International:

“It took me some months to talk about the terror I was facing. Finally, I opened up to the psychologist of Solidarity Now [a Greek NGO] and I moved to a shelter with my daughter. I feel better because I’m free from my husband but life here is very difficult... Interpreters only came once or twice a week for specific hours. I had to use Google Translate to get help.”

Shelters can be a lifesaver for women enduring physical and psychological violence. But for uprooted women such as Ava it can also increase their sense of isolation with no friends around and little to do:

“In the first shelter, I felt I was in a prison. I couldn’t do anything and there was no place for my kid to play.”

Ava was moved to a second shelter after her husband found out where she was. She told Amnesty International:

“The shelter was much better. The social worker is very nice and is telling me about the courses and services. Still no interpreters but my English is getting better now and I suffer a bit less.”

After 10 months in shelters Ava was asked to leave, putting her under enormous pressure as she and her daughter tried to recover and find some stability in their lives. She is now sharing a flat with an Afghan woman but finds the system very difficult to navigate and worries for other survivors of violence who are seeking safety.

“I managed to find something but what about others? The same day as me a woman with three children was also asked to leave. What is she going to do? I’m still worried about her.”

EUROPEAN RULES TEAR FAMILIES APART AND EXACERBATE THE RISKS WOMEN FACE

European governments are closing their eyes to the suffering of thousands of people who reach Greek shores in search of a place of safety.

The majority will remain in Greece as European asylum rules – the so-called Dublin Regulation – set out that asylum-seekers must apply for asylum in the country where they first arrive. Greece, as the country of first arrival, bears the responsibility of assisting and protecting them, with only few exceptions.

Family reunification is almost the only way people can move safely from Greece to another European country. However, it is severely restricted: asylum-seekers can only reunify with their nuclear family members: spouses, children, or in the case of unaccompanied minors, other relatives in other EU countries.

Women travelling alone or with children account for most of the people waiting to be reunited with relatives in other countries. There are also families stranded in Greece hoping to join their children who travelled alone to other European destinations. Many have been stranded for over a year.

Since 2016, European countries, mainly Germany, have received over 14,300 reunification requests from Greece and around 12,500 have been accepted. Reunions have happened in around 9,200 cases.

Women recounted how the prolonged separation combined with little or no information on the process are impacting on their mental health, exacerbating their anxiety and depression.

Moreover, the definition of “family” in EU law is restricted to members of the nuclear family. Exceptions to the definition, such as reunification on humanitarian or dependency grounds, are not always accepted. This means that, for instance, elderly women or women survivors of violence with extended family links in other countries are at serious risk of being left behind in Greece.

GOLROZ' STORY

Golroz is from Afghanistan and has been stranded in Greece since February 2016 with three of her four children, her husband, her aunt and a young niece. She spoke to Amnesty International in May 2017 and July 2018. Her older son lives in Germany.

“I think of him every day.”

When Germany accepted her family reunification request in mid-2017 she was relieved. But her 65-year-old aunt, known as Bibi, would have to stay in Greece because only the direct family members and Golroz's young niece had been accepted.

Bibi is like a second mother to Golroz. They lived together in Afghanistan after Bibi's four sons were killed. Golroz could not leave her behind when the family decided to embark on the perilous trip to Europe in search of safety. In Greece, they supported each other in the harsh conditions of the camps, including sleeping in a tent outside the terminal of the unused airport in Athens for several months.

With the help of a lawyer from a Greek NGO, the decision has been appealed twice. The family appealed on the basis of Bibi's age, the strong family links, her dependency and her health: Bibi has been diagnosed with Hepatitis B, Osteoporosis, Otitis and has cataracts. But the appeals have been rejected.

Amnesty International met the family in Thiva and Elliniko camps in 2017 and in their flat in Athens in July 2018. In the city they were attending German lessons, preparing to start a new life in Germany.

“We do lessons every day. It's difficult with the children. We take turns with my husband so I can study a bit.”

She still can't believe Bibi won't be travelling with them.



When Amnesty International met Golroz and her family in July 2018, they were preparing to go to Germany. Here they are pictured doing their German homework.



SAFE HAVENS, PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

**“I want to go somewhere I can
build a future for my children...”**

Layla, a mother of two in Skaramagas camp*

**“I want to be independent. I have two
children, I have to think about them.”**

Amara, living in a flat in Athens*

“I want to work after I learn the language.”

Aisha, living in a flat in Athens with her daughter
and her mother*

WOMEN AS DECISION-MAKERS

Despite the challenges, setbacks and uncertainty, many women continue to strive, with remarkable resilience and determination, to influence their situation, to take back some control over their lives.

It is vital that women are involved in decisions affecting their lives. To arrive at decisions that effectively protect their rights, women must be consulted and given the opportunity to inform the relevant authorities of their needs.



Yasaman from Iran works as an interpreter for the Melissa Network. The photo is taken May 2017.



Sadly, such consultations rarely happen. As a result, crucial information is missing when decisions are made and the specific help and assistance women and girls so urgently need are not forthcoming.

The women Amnesty International interviewed wanted to contribute outside of their work in the home; they wanted to learn new skills, be able to participate more in society and live independently. Women need the opportunity and support to claim their rights and express their needs. Few are in a position to do so without being provided with female interpreters. Because many women are frequently the primary care givers for their families and are therefore busy looking after and protecting their dependants, without childcare services many are unable to attend meetings or training sessions. Such services are also crucial for any integration process.

In July 2018, the Greek authorities published a new national strategy for integration. This includes the aim to ensure that migrant and asylum-seeking women who enter the country irregularly have access to the regular labour market and “to basic services and goods”. For this strategy to be successfully implemented, women themselves must be consulted and listened to.

Several of the women Amnesty International spoke to wanted to settle down in Greece. For some of them, memories of the journey to Greece are still too vivid; they don’t want to risk any further travel and hope to restart their lives in the country. For others, despite the challenges of finding a job in a country battered by a deep financial crisis, the kindness and solidarity of Greek people give them hope for the future:

“When we arrived in Greece the idea was to go to a different country. But this was before we met the Greek people. We value how they are treating us, and now we would like to stay.”

Soraya, a young woman from Afghanistan living in Athens with her husband and three children, July, 2018

WOMEN-ONLY CENTRES OFFER

LIFE-CHANGING SUPPORT

Centres for uprooted women only, both on the islands and on the mainland, offer life-changing support and services for many people. These centres are often set up by women and local grassroots organizations, and respecting women’s agency and providing interventions and activities that empower them are at their core.

Centres provide a range of services that can help women to rebuild their lives, including psychological and legal support and classes to acquire language and other key skills. They also provide crucial information on sexual and reproductive health. Such centres can act as a bulwark against isolation in the camps and flats.

Women-only community centres and other spaces where women can gather safely play an important role in helping them adjust to their new lives in an unfamiliar environment; to learn from one another on how to navigate the complex reception system and where to get help; and to establish new support networks.

“Such a simple thing as being greeted properly, looked in the eye and seen as a human being.”

Mary, from Gabon, describing the importance of such a centre, July, 2018*

THE MELISSA NETWORK – “A PLACE OF HAPPINESS”

The Melissa Network, a day centre in Central Athens, was set up by Greek and non-Greek women to offer a safe haven for women trying to make a new life in a new country. It is run by a network of migrant and asylum-seeking women and provides workshops and courses for other uprooted women. Their main goal is to empower women to take control over their own lives.

“I came to Melissa to learn the language. For me, Melissa is a place of happiness.”

Zahra, who fled Iraq with her family*

“The whole point was to use it as a metaphor [Melissa means honey bee in Greek] for migrant women coming to Greece from all over the world, bringing in stories of suffering and separation but also ideas, skills, talents and hopes for the future and all the things that they contribute to the weaving of the social fabric in this society.”

Nadina Christopoulou, a Greek anthropologist and one of the co-founders of the Melissa Network



At the Melissa Network in Athens, July 2018. Founder Nadina creates a safe and welcoming atmosphere, a break from the otherwise harsh realities of life.



© Lene Christensen/Amnesty International



Photo taken at the Melissa Network in Athens. July 2018



On Lesbos, the Bashira refugee women’s centre offers a place to relax, take a shower and make new friends – an essential break from the daily hardship of the camp. Sonia Andreu Barradas, the manager of the centre, described how women are often very reserved when they first arrive.

“After a while they understand that they are safe there and open up. It becomes the place where they cry, laugh and dance.”

Bashira also organizes legal, psychological, social, health services, language support classes, arts and crafts

On Chios, the organization Action for Women runs the Athena Centre which has offered psychological, legal and medical support to more than 600 uprooted women since it opened in July 2016. Its founder, Gabrielle Tan, has spoken to the women who have come to the Centre about their hopes and dreams. She told Amnesty International:

“These women never saw themselves as victims. Rightly so: they are survivors. They just needed resources and a stable environment, to rebuild and transition into a new chapter.”

Women-only centres and similar safe spaces bring women together so they can share experiences and form crucial friendships.

“We are like sisters”

A year ago, Farahnaz and Mohzgan from Afghanistan met at the Melissa Network in Athens.

Mohzgan told Amnesty International:

“When Farahnaz feels sad, I try to make her happy. I empathize with her. We are like sisters.”

Access to such support centres enables women not only to help themselves but to go on to help others.

“To me, Melissa is like a mother to a baby that can’t walk. They took my hand and helped me to walk... I want to do good things. I want to teach women that they are not weak. That I have learned here at Melissa.”

Farahnaz, July 2018.



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← Bashira Centre, Lesbos, March 2018.



© Lene Christensen/Amnesty International

SORAYA'S STORY

On 12 March 2016 Soraya, a 24-year-old Afghan mother of three, arrived on Chios with her family after a strenuous journey that included the dangerous sea crossing from Turkey. The images of her son shaking with fear and retching in the small rubber dinghy are forever seared into her memory.

“Always I say ‘bravo!’ to myself for passing that sea, because I wanted to make a better future for my children.”

After several months living in makeshift conditions, the family were moved to a flat in Athens. That was when Soraya’s friends told her about the Melissa Network. Going regularly to the centre has empowered her to stand up for herself. She told Amnesty International she is not afraid to talk openly about women’s rights, something that would have been unthinkable for her before.



Soraya from Afghanistan.

“Women have rights. I want to decide about my future. The most important thing is to achieve this and for men to understand this too... As women, we have to fight to achieve our rights, for us and for our children. My dream for myself and for all women is to have the freedom to make our own decisions.”

Now Soraya is hoping to start a new life in Greece with her husband and children. She is amazed by the warm welcome they have received from local Greek people and she is eager to learn the language.

FIROOZA'S STORY

Being part of a strong women’s network made all the difference to 33-year-old Firooza from Afghanistan. She came to the Greek island of Chios from Turkey with her husband and four children. After a month on the island, she hid in a hotel to escape her husband’s beatings. Terrified, she did not dare to speak to anyone. Then a woman from the Athena Centre for women on Chios came to see her.

“She told me that I deserve a better life. She used to come and pick me up from the hotel.”

At the Athena Centre, Firooza was able to share her story and her hopes with other women in similar situations. She talked to a psychologist and got help with organizing various appointments for the asylum process and to receive medical assistance.



© Maria Ostad/Amnesty International



Firooza from Afghanistan is no longer afraid to stand up for herself.

“On my own it would have been impossible with my state of mind.”

At the Athena Centre, she felt comfortable and safe enough to start to study English. Now Firooza has custody of her children and shares a flat with another single mother in Athens. Her aim is to get a job and her own flat and be able to fully support herself and her children.

“I am completely different now. I’m not afraid anymore.”

WOMEN'S DEMANDS, WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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“As women, we need to fight to achieve our rights.”

Soraya from Afghanistan. July 2018

Uprooted women and girls living in Greece have confronted fear, uncertainty and violence. These resilient survivors are determined to rebuild their lives.

These are the 10 overarching demands they are making. Their fundamental rights are currently being violated, and those in power should listen to their voices and act on their words.

The Greek authorities, in close coordination with non-governmental and aid agencies have a key role to play in fulfilling the demands about reception conditions and access to services and asylum in the country.

But other European governments also need to step up to their obligations to provide women and girls with the protection they are entitled to.



Women's experiences in Greece must be listened to and acted upon.



1. SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION.

Camps should be the exception and a temporary measure. Women travelling alone or with children, survivors of violence, pregnant women, new mothers and those who face persecution because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, among other groups, should be offered an alternative to camps from the moment they arrive. Hygiene, sanitation, safety and security in reception centres should urgently be improved.

2. STOP CONFINING PEOPLE ON THE ISLANDS.

The Greek authorities, supported by other EU governments and the European Commission, should end the deliberate confinement of asylum-seekers and migrants on the Greek islands and transfer them to adequate accommodation on mainland Greece, taking into account the particular risks facing women and girls. Ensure that vulnerability assessments result in women and girls having access to the specialized services they need.

3. PROTECT WOMEN AT RISK OF VIOLENCE.

Increase the number of appropriately trained staff in reception camps and urban areas who can identify and prevent violence against women. Ensure women at risk have information about and access to shelters and ensure accommodation provided guarantees them the security and stability necessary to recover and rebuild their lives. Guarantee adequate counselling, medical assistance and legal aid.

4. MORE FEMALE INTERPRETERS AND STAFF.

Increase the number of female interpreters as well as medical, psychological and social assistance staff in shelters, temporary reception centres, urban settings and during the asylum process.

5. ACCESS TO INFORMATION.

Provide information about access to services, the asylum process and emergency protection in languages people can understand.

6. FULL ACCESS TO SERVICES.

Increase the capacity to offer mental health support to women and girls; ensure access to sexual and reproductive health services in reception centres, hospitals and clinics; and offer education and more language opportunities to women and their children, considering women's childcare needs.

7. SUPPORT SAFE FEMALE ONLY SPACES.

Promote, fund and collaborate with community-based initiatives, set up in consultation with women and girls, to empower women and help their integration.

8. LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES.

Include women's perspectives, skills and capacities in government plans to increase employment options as part of an integration strategy for refugees and migrants in the country.

9. WELCOME REFUGEES.

European leaders and institutions must open safe and legal routes to Europe and offer alternatives to dangerous and irregular sea and land journeys. They should also open legal options for travelling from Greece to other European countries. A further urgent change that must be made is to ensure faster and expanded family reunification options and agreement on a fairer system to accept refugees reaching Europe's shores. Finally, no one seeking safety should be sent back to countries where they are at risk of human rights violations, including gender-based violence.

10. FULL PARTICIPATION

Above all, women and girls know what is needed to ensure their safety and a better future. Their meaningful involvement in consultations, plans and measures that affect them is crucial to guarantee their success.

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL
INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT

e: contactus@amnesty.org

t: +44-20-74135500

f: +44-20-79561157

e: contactus@amnesty.org

t: +44-20-74135500

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