



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

## Support services for victims of violence in asylum and migration

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### Discussion Paper - Greece



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# Support Services for victims of violence in asylum and migration

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## 1. Description of the main elements of the Greek policy

The ongoing refugee crisis of 2015, which is mostly a reception crisis, in combination with the major economic crisis that Greece is still going through, has created many and severely complex problems affecting Greek refugee and migrant population, especially women and children. It is commonly accepted that the Greek welfare state, already in deep crisis when the refugee arrivals started to increase in 2015, was not able to address the needs of asylum seekers arriving to Greece, especially of vulnerable cases. This fact, in addition to the already aggravated situation of Greeks and economic migrants living and arriving in Greece has caused a social crisis for the population in need. As far as refugee women and children are concerned, they mainly face needs regarding accommodation issues, psychological and overall counselling and access to employment since there is cash support by the UNHCR. Lack of information on any of these topics and on asylum procedures is an additional problem. Furthermore, victims of any kind of violence, especially gender based violence (GBV) are particularly vulnerable and need a special approach by professionals addressing their needs.

Greek legislation provides a satisfying scope of legal provisions regarding victims of GBV starting from the Constitution's Articles 4 par.2, 5, par. 2, 116 par.2 followed by specific legal dispositions.<sup>1</sup> Of course, Greece is obliged to follow also the relevant European legislation on the subject. Most importantly, in June 2017, Greece has entered into force the Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA (L. 4478/2017), whereas the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) is about to be voted by the Greek Parliament (the timing of the vote is still to be announced). This treaty opens the path for creating a legal framework at pan-European level to protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.

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<sup>1</sup> L. 3500/2006 Combatting domestic violence and other dispositions, Article 323A of the Penal Code on victims on human trafficking, as amended by L. 3064/2002, which provides that victims of trafficking should receive protection and assistance in relation to accommodation, material, medical and psychological support as well as legal assistance and interpretation.

Especially for women asylum seekers and their children, Greek legislation, along with UNCHR Guidelines, foresees guarantees for women all through the reception and asylum procedure and in case of detention. In brief, such guarantees are the provision of trained (and if needed female) staff performing registration and identifying persons and especially women with specific protection and assistance needs<sup>2</sup>. These individuals, for example women who have suffered GBV or suffer from serious diseases or single mothers, should be submitted to prescribed procedures and the provision of specialised care and protection, such as proper housing and shelters, separate detention from men when detention for these women is unavoidable, counselling, psychological and medical care, mechanisms for reporting abuse, legal assistance, victim support and protection.<sup>3</sup>

The implementation of the legal protective framework for refugee women and their children in Greece concerning the issues mentioned above (accommodation and overall counselling, empowerment and legal aid) required synergies among different actors. Thus, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality (GSGE), as the competent state entity in Greece for combatting all forms of violence against women, undertook the necessary actions to bring together all relevant public stakeholders. The initiative consists of the cooperation between the General Secretariat, the Ministry of National Defence, the General Secretariat of Reception/Ministry of Migration, the General Secretariat of Public Health/ Ministry of Health, The Research Centre for Gender Equality (KETHI), the Central Union of Greek Municipalities, the Association of Greek Regions, the Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government in order to locate the target groups (women refugees and asylum seekers) and to provide services to victims of gender based violence, such as psycho-social support, legal counselling as well as counselling in employment issues, providing shelter, food and when necessary, legal aid. This initiative is based on already existing policies, action plans and structures of the GSGE, such as the National Programme for Substantive Gender Equality (2016 - 2020), and the Network of 62 structures (40 Counselling Centres, 21 Shelters and the SOS Helpline 15900) all over Greece. These programmes initially concern all women, Greek or migrant women, but it was decided to expand the services to women refugee and asylum seekers and to add services such as employment counselling to the ones already offered.

For this purpose, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality by virtue of relevant decisions of the General Secretary for Gender Equality<sup>4</sup>, has established a Coordination Group, which in December 2016 signed a Protocol of Cooperation (PoC) among the aforementioned public actors in order to identify, accommodate and provide urgent services to specifically:

- Women who have been victims of gender-based violence or/and women exposed to serious risk of gender based violence and
- Single women and their children.

<sup>2</sup> The staff working in reception centers and the Asylum Service should inform female asylum seekers and refugees on such provisions and provide female case handlers and interpreters if requested by the Protocol of Cooperation or if the staff thinks that it is necessary due to the vulnerability of the case.

<sup>3</sup> See Revised Guidelines for Protecting Women and Girls during Reception and Asylum Procedures in Greece, by General Secretariat for Gender Equality and UNCHR.

<sup>4</sup> Decisions No GSGE/539/31-5-2016, GSCE / 744/20-1-2017.

The procedure for the identification, referral and accommodation procedure for women of the target group in the shelters under the General Secretariat for Gender Equality Network, is foreseen in the above-mentioned Protocol of Cooperation and involves the identification of the target population in the Open Temporary Reception Structures and the Open Temporary Accommodation Structures by competent state authorities' officials and certified NGOs. The procedure of the transfer of women and children to the shelters of the Network of GSGE structures or to the Municipality's Social Services or to the National Centre for Social Solidarity is also described in detail in the Protocol and involves cooperation of the referral mechanisms with the staff of the shelters, obligatory medical assessment, in cooperation with the competent state health care authorities (municipal or public units) and with special guarantees for escort and interpretation for refugee women. Social services procedure is also described in detail (recording social history, assessment of the capacity of the beneficiary to be accommodated, information and counselling of the beneficiary, provisions of services such as food etc.).<sup>5</sup> In the procedure followed by the different actors, competences and responsibilities are shared among them and described for each one of them in detail, so as to avoid overlapping and confusion of the partners.

The responsibility of the Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government to monitor on a weekly basis the accommodation availability in the 21 Shelters of the project, to keep data of the beneficiaries and provide information on the data so as to help design new policies is very important for the positive outcome of this initiative launched by the GSGE.

For the implementation of these synergies and the success of the project for refugee women in need and their children, there have been a series of activities performed by the cooperating actors, even before the signing of the Protocol of Cooperation. Firstly, GSGE has undertaken "legislative" initiatives by issuing relevant circulatates to inform the staff of the Counselling Centres and the Shelters of its Network of Structures on the aforementioned procedures and standards of services provided<sup>6</sup>, whereas the First Reception Service has also officially informed its staff on the Protocol of Cooperation signed for the aforementioned purposes.

Furthermore, there have been trainings carried out by the General Secretary for Gender Equality and KETHI in cooperation with Greek and International NGOs such as DIOTIMA, International Medical Corps, United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF, IOM in Athens, Thessaloniki and the islands, Chios, Lesbos and Rhodes, for the training and empowerment of the staff in the shelters and the Counselling Centres (psychologists and social workers). The topics of the trainings included the protection of women refugees, psychological first aid, asylum procedure, cultural differentiation, GVB case management in cases of emergency situations etc. GSGE has also presented the Protocol of Cooperation in several occasions in many Greek cities and on the islands. In addition to the above training activities, the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government (EKDDA) has implemented training activities with new programmes on employment counselling and updated the

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<sup>5</sup> Article 3 of the Protocol of Cooperation.

<sup>6</sup> Circulatates No ΔΙΑΚ/Φ.5.4/643/31.03.2017 and No Δ 1/644/31.03.2017.

material on the prevention of violence. There has also been a revision and update of the methodological tools and the Operation Regulations of the Structures.

The GSGE has also signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the UNHCR/ United Nations Refugee Agency in Greece, in order to undertake joined actions for the elimination of problems that refugee women and their children are facing in Greece. For this purpose, in cooperation with UNHCR, the GSGE has participated in the SGBV Working Group of UNCHR, and has issued the *Revised Guidelines for Protecting Women and Girls during Reception and Asylum Procedures in Greece*, for the information of the staff of the reception services and NGOs that operate on the field, a leaflet for refugee women in English<sup>7</sup>, Arabic and Farsi which describes the services offered to them, a relevant poster in English, Arabic and Farsi and material of the shelters in English, Arabic and Farsi.

In addition, GSGE has offered training material to the staff of Counselling Centres and Shelters, as *it is of high importance to have all stakeholders informed about the new asylum conditions, the legal status of the refugee women of the target group, documents possibly required, etc.*<sup>8</sup>

More specifically, there has been material on the following topics:

- Human Trafficking<sup>9</sup>
- Muslims – Cultural and Religious Differences – Manual for the staff of First Reception Services<sup>10</sup>
- Vulnerable groups – Manual for the Staff of First Reception Services<sup>11</sup>
- Information on the Asylum Procedure for those arriving from Turkey before 20.03.2016 and who are in Open Reception Centres (Asylum Service)
- Information on the Asylum Procedure for those arriving from Turkey after 20.03.2016 (Asylum Service).

## 2. Impact and assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the policy

This policy has already resulted in giving care to 151 beneficiaries, 126 of whom have been sheltered in the structures of the network. 79 out of the 126 are refugee mothers and 164 children have also been sheltered and offered services in the structures of the mechanism.

The initiative has also already made a significant difference in the provision of services to refugee women and their children through the training and open activities described above. These activities, along with the experience of the implementation

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.isotita.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EN\\_trifold\\_isotita\\_out\\_small.jpg](http://www.isotita.gr/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EN_trifold_isotita_out_small.jpg)

<sup>8</sup> Protocol of Cooperation.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/Prints/44\\_331\\_15foreas%20%281%29.pdf](http://www.firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/Prints/44_331_15foreas%20%281%29.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/Prints/34\\_MUSLIMS\\_PRINT\\_CULTURAL\\_AND\\_RELIGIOUS\\_DIVERSITIES.pdf](http://firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/Prints/34_MUSLIMS_PRINT_CULTURAL_AND_RELIGIOUS_DIVERSITIES.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [http://firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/Prints/33\\_VULNERABLE\\_GROUPS\\_PRINT.pdf](http://firstreception.gov.gr/PRIImages/Prints/33_VULNERABLE_GROUPS_PRINT.pdf)

of the Protocol of Cooperation with so many public actors, is already an experience to build on in order to make the public sector in Greece more innovative and for providing a holistic approach. This investment derives from the initiative's innovative character and from its ambitious goal to connect different public sectors such as the signed parties of the Protocol of Cooperation, along with NGOs and individual professionals on the field and "force" them to cooperate both on a horizontal and vertical level through a detailed procedure to offer a wide scope of support services to refugee women and children.

The challenges in implementing this policy are the result of its character described above, namely the collaboration of many field actors and the synergies needed for addressing the needs of Protocols of Cooperation. However, the implementation of the initiative is ongoing, services are provided and there is a provision for expanding the existing structures and improving the data collection system in order to also use the data collected for the planning of new policies in the field. Of course, sustainability of the initiative depends also on the economic situation of the country, as the effective support of women in need requires the employment of trained professionals who already do a great job under difficult circumstances. As mentioned above, this initiative was already part of the action plan of GSGE. The GSGE finances part of its field work by ESPA programmes and is also having ad hoc synergies with other actors to support its activities with funds from EU programmes.

Furthermore, the continuous arrivals on the Greek islands, the geographical restriction imposed on the persons arriving, who are eventually stranded on the Greek islands<sup>12</sup>, where they suffer from ongoing violence leads to the widening of the target group, thus severely challenging the effectiveness of the services provided through the abovementioned procedures.

Of course, provision of interpretation and intercultural mediation is an ongoing problem, as all services are provided under the condition that an interpreter and/or cultural mediator is available. This condition is absolutely crucial for the positive outcome of the project, as the target group consists of women that are often fleeing from violence, they find themselves for the first time in a condition of self-determination and are expected also for the first time to decide for themselves and their children trusting professionals in the structures involved in the project. Intercultural awareness is very important in this field. A more specialised problem is that many women victims of violence are reluctant to leave the camps, as they think they will be losing the right to the UNHCR cash programme, which requires a known address, whereas the address of the structure is supposed to remain secret. There has already been a communication between GSGE and the UNCHR to ensure that this problem will be solved with the issuing of a certificate by the Structure and with the beneficiaries being informed through leaflets translated in various languages, that their right to the cash programme will not be lost if they are sheltered in the structures of the mechanism.

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<sup>12</sup> See MsF "Confronting the mental health emergency on Samos and Lesbos - Why the containment of asylum seekers on the Greek islands must end" available at: [https://msf.gr/sites/default/files/msfpublications//2017\\_10\\_mental\\_health\\_greece\\_report\\_lowres\\_spr\\_eads.pdf](https://msf.gr/sites/default/files/msfpublications//2017_10_mental_health_greece_report_lowres_spr_eads.pdf)

Finally, integration of refugee women will pose new challenges, as the above described initiative will no longer deal with emergency situations, but with long term needs of a population that will eventually stay in Greece.

### **3. Main questions and issues for debate**

- Are there similar initiatives in other EU countries? How do they operate? (Institutional arrangements and procedures). Do they have the same challenges and problems and how are they dealing with them?
- How is the situation on the Greek islands seen by EU countries and how does it affect European Asylum Policy?
- How are protection mechanisms in other EU countries dealing with intercultural awareness issues?
- In how many countries is there a National Integration Plan and which are its main goals?
- Can we cooperate towards a European Mechanism of Protection of refugee women and how?