



The E.U.–Turkey Agreement Fails Refugee Women and Girls

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In March 2016, the European Union and Turkey announced an agreement to reduce and address the significant flow of refugees into Europe. Following this announcement, some refugees were returned to Turkey; Greek reception centers were turned overnight into detention centers; and borders along the Balkan route were closed, leaving approximately 50,000 refugees in Greece. More than half of these refugees are women and children, many attempting to reunite with husbands, fathers, and other relatives who traveled ahead to destination countries in 2015.

Over the last six months, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) has undertaken a series of assessments to understand women's and girls' access to humanitarian and legal protection along the European refugee migration route.¹ From May 22 to June 1, 2016, the WRC traveled to Greece and Turkey to assess the legal and humanitarian implications of the E.U.–Turkey agreement for refugee women's and girls' protection.² This brief focuses on initial findings and recommendations from Greece. A full report on the missions to both countries will be available later this month.

Findings

As a result of the E.U.–Turkey agreement and the closing of borders to refugees wishing to travel to their desired destinations, Greece immediately changed from being a “transit” country, where refugees remained only a few days, to hosting refugees in a system that was not designed to offer legal or humanitarian protection on such a scale. As a result, refugees are living in a variety of makeshift sites, official camps, and detention centers, many hastily erected, in isolated areas across the country. These sites, some in derelict factories and warehouses, are unsafe and unfit for people to live in, with poor air circulation and insufficient supplies of water, toilets, and showers. Almost no sites were designed to mitigate the risks of gender-based violence (GBV), and there is limited assistance to GBV survivors or support for other vulnerable refugees, including children and pregnant and breastfeeding mothers.

The Greek government’s site selection appears to be indifferent to the needs of refugee women, children, and families. Critical humanitarian actors face countless bureaucratic obstacles to accessing sites and providing assistance. Nearly all the refugee women WRC interviewed reported feeling unsafe, unable to access basic services or to understand their legal options. These poor conditions, combined with complete uncertainty about their future, have led to great risks of harm and alarming mental health concerns among refugees, including thoughts or attempts of suicide.

The lack of a clear and sufficiently resourced legal protection system exacerbates the situ-

ation. Refugee women and girls lack information about their options, partly because of inadequate access to legal information and counsel, and partly because the Greek asylum system does not meaningfully facilitate access to legal protection in the first place. Many refugees have no valid Greek documentation permitting them to be in Greece because they are unable to register for status as a person seeking protection. For example, depending on nationality, some initial registration papers expire in as little as a month, with no possibility for renewal. A GBV survivor may not have her registration paper with her when fleeing an abuser, even if still valid; without this, she may not be able to access critical services or transfer to a shelter. As a result, many refugees either fear or are unable to access services, and thus are vulnerable to arrest and detention. Although the forthcoming pre-registration procedures will, it is hoped, eliminate these concerns, meaningful implementation may take several months to reach all refugees.

Refugees also face barriers and extreme delays in accessing other legal protection, such as family reunification or relocation. The current system, which uses Skype as a means to lodge an asylum or other legal protection claim, is dysfunctional and under-resourced; nearly everyone WRC interviewed reported having been unable to connect to the Greek Asylum Service at their appointed time. And although some refugees can relocate to other E.U. member states to seek asylum, the process leaves refugees stranded for months and is not accessible to many refugees of certain nationalities. Of the 20,000 target

goal for relocation by mid-May, to date fewer than 1,000 refugees have been transferred from Greece. Finally, there are serious concerns that the rights of refugees returned to Turkey, especially non-Syrians, will not be adequately protected, nor will there be appropriate access to medical, psychosocial, legal, and other critical services.

While the Greek government should take meaningful steps to improve the situation of refugee women and girls, the political decision by the E.U. to close borders, implement harsh policies that attempt to deter, and return refugees to Turkey was a catalyst for today's dangerous circumstances for women and girls. As WRC has found across all four of our assessments, the E.U. must do more to implement a coordinated, Europe-wide response to ensure protection for refugee women and girls.

Recommendations

The WRC recommends the following changes be implemented both immediately and in the long term.

For all refugees, regardless of nationality, **the Greek government should:**

- **Establish and implement meaningful processes that ensure access to a fair and timely review of any individual's asylum claim or other legal protection eligibility**, such as relocation or family reunification, together with E.U. member states where required. Ensure refugees can access information about the legal process in a language they understand.



A woman and her one-year-old baby at the refugee camp in Idomeni, Greece.

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- **Coordinate with UNHCR and humanitarian organizations in the selection and designation of sites, ensuring suitability for refugees' safety and ability to access basic services.** All sites should be built or adapted for compliance with the IASC *Guidelines for Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings* and the Sphere Standards
- **Ensure that GBV survivors, regardless of their legal documentation, can access medical and psychosocial support, and safe spaces/women's shelters** as a lifesaving intervention.

- **Prioritize maternal, newborn, reproductive health, child health, and adolescent sexual reproductive health care in all sites**, and deploy cultural mediators and interpreters in public hospitals.
- **Increase the availability and accessibility of mental health, psychosocial, and legal support service points**, ensuring proper identification of cases and referrals, taking into consideration cultural and linguistic needs.
- **Establish alternatives to detention and camps that respect social and economic rights.** No refugee should be detained unless the government can demonstrate that he or she poses a risk to public safety.

The European Union and member countries should:

- **End policies that ultimately result in discrimination by nationality and unequal access to legal mechanisms** such as asylum, family reunification, relocation, or other legal protection.
- **Immediately reinforce resources of the Greek asylum service and other national authorities implementing the humanitarian response and adjudication of legal claims.** All assistance should be conditioned on the requirement that the Greek refugee response

respect the rights and needs of refugees, regardless of nationality or other status.

- **Implement a rights-respecting E.U. policy towards all refugees and asylum seekers that assumes burden sharing – with E.U. support – among E.U. member countries.**

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Notes

1. The previous reports are: WRC, UNHCR and UNFPA, *Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis* (November 2015), http://wrc.ms/Prot_risks_Eur; WRC, *No Safety for Refugee Women on the European Route: Report from the Balkans* (December 2015), http://wrc.ms/Balkan_rpt; WRC, *Falling Through the Cracks: Refugee Women and Girls in Germany and Sweden* (February 2016), <http://wrc.ms/protection-germany-sweden>
2. WRC uses the term refugee to refer to all those in Greece who arrived with the goal of seeking some sort of legal protection in Greece or other European countries, which could include asylum, family reunification, or relocation.