



The time is now: A plan to realise the potential of refugees in Greece

An analysis of the benefits of integration support from the reception stage

International Rescue Committee Hellas | September 2020

Summary



Ammar, who arrived in Athens from Syria in 2018, was supported in finding a job by the IRC. Since COVID-19 started, he felt the need to help and has been making masks for the community. *Apostolis Nikolaidis/IRC*

Supporting the integration of refugees has become an issue of priority for Greece. The International Rescue Committee (IRC), with longstanding experience in supporting refugees and asylum-seekers in many countries around the world, believes that integration is a pathway that, in order to be successful, should begin as soon as possible and should also be supported in a way that takes into account the strengths and needs of refugee women in particular.

It is vital that increased investment at the reception stage includes core integration support for asylum-seekers, irrespective of nationality, while they await a decision on their claim. Such support should include access to interpretation, case management services, cultural orientation classes and intensive survival language classes, as well as information and support to obtain the documents and services required in order to access accommodation, employment, education and healthcare. Given the length of asylum procedures in Greece, withholding these integration support measures until status determination could set people on a path towards social exclusion and lead to a deterioration in mental health, which is clearly counterproductive.

The positive effect of employment on social inclusion and personal well-being is undeniable and numerous studies have shown that early interventions for integration benefit both refugees and asylum-seekers and the receiving society¹. At the same time, research recognises the extra hurdles refugee women face in accessing integration support programmes and the labour market². This is why countries with a long history of receiving refugees offer early support and invest in targeted integration measures for refugee and asylum-seeking women³. Provision should also be made for people who may never be able to access the labour market due to age, disability or illness.

The recent challenges with the exits of recognised refugees from state-provided accommodation and cash assistance painfully exposed the lack of support many of these people have had to become self-sufficient⁴. Hundreds were found homeless, with no language skills or necessary documents, and no clue of what to do⁵. The COVID-19 outbreak further exacerbated existing difficulties related to the integration process of refugees and asylum-seekers who were not in the formal labour market, and were therefore excluded from expanded social protection measures in response to the pandemic in Greece.

In this briefing, the IRC recommends that Greece seizes the opportunity of the ongoing negotiations on the next European Union (EU) Multi Annual Financial Framework⁶ to devise a pragmatic long-term integration strategy and an accompanying action plan to evaluate its progress, through measurable indicators. The briefing also proposes that this strategy: foresees integration measures from the reception stage; focuses on lifting the administrative obstacles to obtaining the documents and services required in order to access accommodation, employment, education and health; includes targeted measures for refugee and asylum-seeking women; and delivers continuous and long-term support for socio-economic inclusion.

Introduction

Greece is at a point where it is vital to support the integration of the over 50,000 people granted international protection since January 2015.⁷ Their integration is key to their survival and ability to thrive, as well as to social cohesion. Access of refugees and asylum-seekers to the labour market is a key factor in ensuring their effective social inclusion. Work can improve self-esteem and mental health, and create vital social interactions and networks that can boost integration.

In Greece, the right to work is guaranteed to refugees and asylum-seekers by law.⁸ However, these populations are at a disadvantage in navigating the labour market. They are **hindered mainly by their lack of Greek language skills and difficulty in obtaining the documents and services required in order to access accommodation, employment, education and healthcare, but also by discrimination and lack of connection to the Greek job market or relevant social networks.** Additional barriers, such as difficulty in having their previously acquired knowledge and skills recognised and obtaining new qualifications in Greece, are coupled with a progressive atrophy of skills through prolonged displacement and life in refugee camps.

THE OBSTACLES ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND REFUGEES FACE ARE WIDESPREAD, PERSISTENT AND LIKELY TO BE EXACERBATED IF NOT ADDRESSED IMMEDIATELY AND WITH A LONG-TERM, STRUCTURED APPROACH.

Having often exhausted their financial assets to reach the country, they also face a high national unemployment rate.

The COVID-19 outbreak further exacerbated existing vulnerabilities linked to precarious living conditions and limited access to information for refugees and asylum-seekers in Greece. Social safety nets are also often unavailable to refugees and asylum-seekers who are not in the formal labour market, many of whom were excluded from expanded social protection in response to the pandemic in Greece.

Refugee and asylum-seeking women face increased challenges in integrating and should be understood as a specific group requiring particular attention – their strengths and needs need to be taken into account in any strategy seeking to improve integration outcomes. Comprising one third of all asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece today, their socio-economic inclusion is of vital importance and should be mainstreamed throughout all interventions.

The obstacles asylum-seekers and refugees face are widespread, persistent and likely to be exacerbated if not addressed immediately and with a long-term, structured approach. Therefore, integration support such as access to interpretation, case management services, cultural orientation classes and intensive survival language classes to asylum-seekers, irrespective of nationality, should begin as soon as possible after arrival. This is key in order to avoid aid dependency and social exclusion. Early labour market access for asylum-seekers is deemed to be a key determinant of long-term integration outcomes and, increasingly, countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden are ensuring early access to dedicated integration measures.⁹

In Greece, despite efforts by certain municipalities, NGOs, and most recently the HELIOS programme for refugees, run by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)¹⁰ and partners, with funding from the European Commission, integration support has so far been fragmented and insufficient. **It is crucial that Greece transits from ad hoc responses to the implementation of a coherent and comprehensive strategy on integration, which provides long-term support, starting at the reception stage and taking into account the strengths and needs of refugee and asylum-seeking women.**



Moussa is from the Ivory Coast and participated in the IRC - Citi Foundation programme 'Rescuing Futures'. His dream is to open the first Ivorian restaurant in Greece. *Elena Heatherwick/IRC*

The IRC's programmatic approach to integration



IRC Hellas co-organised the first Job Fair in Athens in 2019, bringing together employers with refugees and migrants looking for employment. *Generation 2.0 for Rights, Equality and Diversity*

The IRC's integration programmes around the world are designed to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers can thrive in receiving countries and contribute to their local communities economically, socially and culturally. Our familiarity with countries with very different experiences of migration based on their geographical position, social, economic and historical contexts, continues to strengthen our ability to provide integration support taking into account a wide variety of structural factors. In the USA, the IRC has decades-long experience in welcoming over 400,000 refugees. In Europe, we currently implement integration programmes, directly and through partners, in Germany and Greece, as well as through an expanded network of 16 additional countries through the European Resettlement and Integration Technical Assistance (EURITA) project¹¹. From this experience we know that, given the opportunity to thrive, refugees and asylum-seekers can meaningfully contribute to local economies as consumers, employees and business owners.

The IRC's labour market integration programming in Greece focuses on interventions to support vulnerable people, whether refugees, migrants or Greeks, to attain financial independence and stability. Since 2017, directly or in cooperation with partners, the IRC has provided employment and self-employment services and training to over 2,100 people. Over 1,800 people have benefited from our employment services in Athens, which include one-on-one career counselling, job readiness training seminars, weekly business Greek classes and group job search sessions. Through outreach the IRC team effectively develops and maintains relationships with prospective employers that facilitates job placement for the participants of the programme. An average 18% of career counseling beneficiaries find employment in the duration of our

programme in the following sectors: tourism and hospitality, the humanitarian sector, production, facility management and household support services. 7 out of 10 report working formally and in full time jobs, while the majority (59%) are asylum seekers.¹²

At the same time, we have provided business education to over 380 young people, as preparation for self-employment. Through business plan competitions, the IRC provides mentoring and small grants for the support of business ideas.¹³

Based on our holistic and long experience in integration programming, we make the recommendations set forth in this briefing.

The Greek context

Integration is a multifaceted two-way process which requires considerable efforts by all parties concerned, the newcomers and the receiving society. For a long time, Greece was considered a transit country and refugees arriving had plans to move on to other European countries. As such, they did not necessarily make learning Greek or finding a job a priority. At the same time, the Greek state was caught in a humanitarian emergency, more concerned with reception conditions and asylum processing than integration. It has since become inescapably evident that thousands of people are here to stay and they need to be supported in order to become self-reliant and integrate into Greek society.

Still, integration support remains patchy especially on the islands, with very few, mostly voluntary initiatives for language courses and non-formal education. On the mainland, the situation is slightly better, with some municipalities, NGOs and grassroots organisations providing language courses and non-formal vocational training in the camps and urban settings, as well as the HELIOS programme run by IOM.

HELIOS

In the second half of 2019, IOM started HELIOS, a programme aimed at *'promoting the integration of beneficiaries of international protection currently residing in temporary accommodation schemes into the Greek society'*¹⁴. The first large-scale integration project in Greece, HELIOS is a very welcome initiative. It includes Greek language learning, cultural orientation, job readiness and life skills, as well as accommodation and employability support. However, lack of sufficient information, strict enrollment criteria¹⁵ and exclusion from national services has so far resulted in small numbers of people registering and even fewer being able to enjoy the full range of support. In its operation of one year, about a third of eligible refugees have enrolled (13,633 out of 31,679), while less than one third of those enrolled (3,800 people – 1,563 households) have received a rental subsidy in total.¹⁶

HELIOS provides integration support to recognised refugees for six months, which is not enough time for most people to achieve socio-economic inclusion. The constraints imposed by the short timeframe are exacerbated by limiting access to recognised refugees, most of whom have already been in Greece for years, most probably out of work while waiting for a decision on their asylum claim. Together, these limitations mean that refugees may still not be ready to enter the job market when they 'graduate' HELIOS. **Therefore, a similar project of integration support should be available to asylum-seekers, so that newcomers can be supported for a longer period of time and before losing motivation and skills throughout lengthy asylum procedures.** Despite considerable shortcomings in the Greek reception system, a large part of the asylum-seeking population in Greece has their immediate needs of housing and food covered by the state through EU funding. As a result, they would in principle have more time to learn

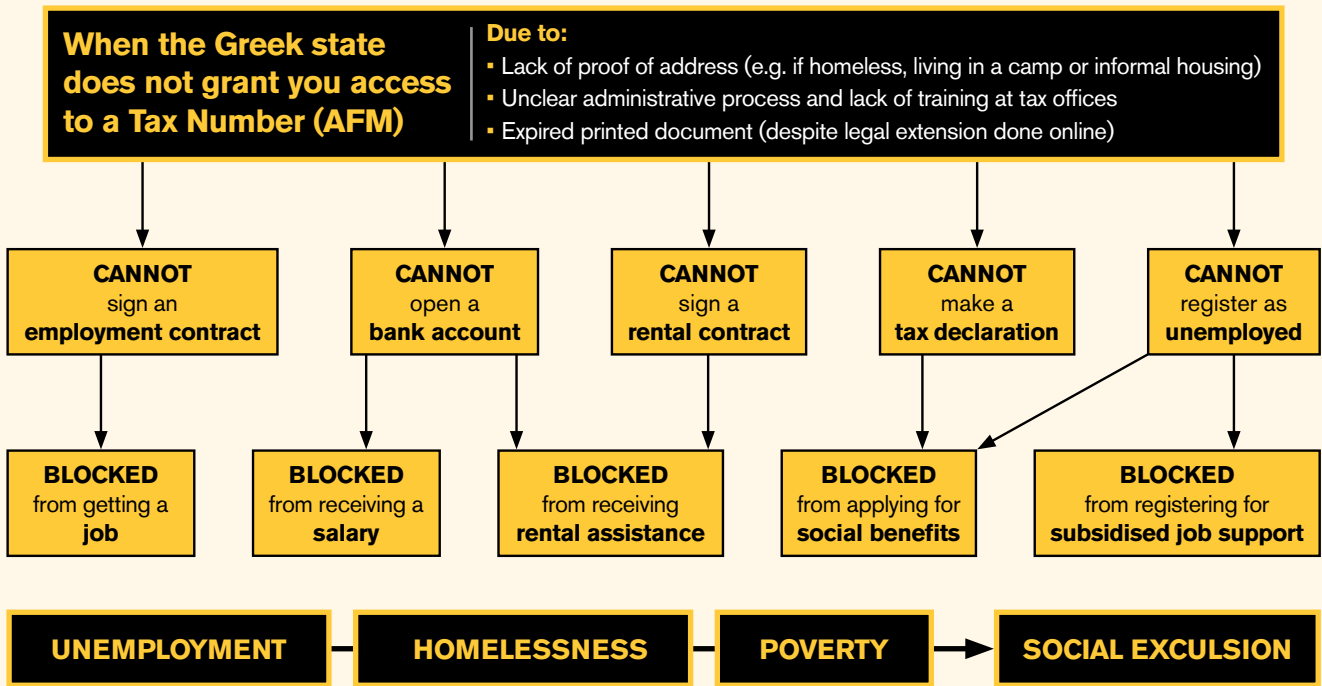
the language and culture, so that they are closer to self-reliance by the time they gain status and assistance ceases.

ADMINISTRATIVE OBSTACLES

In order to get a job, rent an apartment, eventually be eligible for benefits or even receive a rent subsidy through HELIOS, one must have a social security number (PAAYPA/AMKA), a tax number (AFM) and a bank account. Unfortunately, there have been many obstacles to acquiring these, mainly because proof of residence is needed but also lack of information on their necessity or the procedure to obtain them¹⁷. Refugees living in reception sites, squats or with friends and family are unable to provide this proof, while some civil servants in certain tax offices have demonstrated unwillingness to emit a tax number to refugees, despite the fact they are entitled to it¹⁸. Indicatively, even in UNHCR-provided ESTIA accommodation, where 22,076 asylum-seekers and refugees have the support of social workers, only 56% have a tax number (AFM) and a mere 5% have a bank account¹⁹ because proof of residency can be complicated by a lack of bills addressed to inhabitants or by the unwillingness of certain local tax offices. This has become a vicious circle that hinders refugees from exercising their rights and using available services (see diagram p.5). **It is therefore crucial that the State informs asylum seekers and refugees of the need and procedure to obtain the documents required in order to access accommodation, employment, education and healthcare, as soon as possible after arrival and addresses the obstacles in trying to access services.**

OVER 50,000 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN GRANTED REFUGEE STATUS SINCE JANUARY 2015 AND ANOTHER ESTIMATED 50,000 WILL BE GRANTED IN THE NEXT COUPLE OF YEARS.

Path to social exclusion



LEGISLATION

Recent legislation (L. 4674/2020 of 11.3.2020) has reduced the time a person can stay in the reception system and receive cash assistance from six months to one month after recognition of their refugee status. At the end of May 2020, about 9,000 recognised refugees were asked to leave state-provided accommodation and their cash assistance ceased²⁰. Following pressure from NGOs, including the IRC²¹, International Organisations and municipalities, no forced evictions took place. Still, hundreds of refugees ended up squatting in Athens squares²² following the exits, as they had no shelter, information, language skills or a job. **This limitation of post-recognition support further adds to the need to support people with information and access to national services, survival language skills and cultural orientation classes as soon as possible after their arrival and while they await the outcome of their asylum claim. The expectation that people will achieve self-sufficiency within a mere month and having received no previous support is unrealistic and is setting refugees up for failure.**

According to the Greek asylum service, over 50,000 people have been granted international protection or subsidiary protection since January 2015 and there are 97,023 asylum applications pending.²³ At a recognition rate of over 55% in 2019, this means that at least 50,000 asylum seekers currently in Greece will be recognised as refugees and will settle down here. **It is key that these people are given the support they need as soon as possible, throughout the time it takes to process their asylum claim and on the basis of a**

plan tailored towards socio-economic inclusion and ultimately, self-reliance.

NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR INTEGRATION

The Greek National Strategy for Integration (NSI)²⁴ was published in July 2019, a crucial step to define Greece’s objectives vis-à-vis the integration of third country nationals and related actions to achieve them. By recognising the importance of supporting the integration of, not only refugees, but also asylum-seekers, the NSI rightly asserts that education, training and adjustment to employment conditions and work culture should start at the reception stage. Unfortunately, so far, the NSI has remained under-utilised and integration support has been fragmented. **It is crucial for the Greek state to transit from ad hoc responses to the implementation of a coherent and comprehensive strategy on integration, and an action plan for achieving it.**

In the framework of the new EU Multi Annual Financial Framework 2021-2027, member states need an Action Plan or Strategy for the integration of third country nationals. This offers an excellent opportunity for Greece to update and present a coherent and realistic national strategy for the integration of migrants and refugees, starting at the reception stage. This should not be viewed as a box-ticking exercise to access EU funds but as a real opportunity for positive reforms²⁵. **In addition, for it to be a sustainable and measurable framework, the NSI requires an outcome-oriented action plan – paying particular attention to results rather than actions and outcomes rather than outputs.**

Benefits of early interventions for receiving societies

According to EU law²⁶, asylum-seekers waiting for a decision on their application must be provided with certain necessities that guarantee an adequate standard of living. Greece, like any EU country, must therefore ensure that asylum applicants have access to housing, food and clothing, as well as healthcare, education for minors and access to employment. Asylum procedures in Greece are very lengthy: the decision on an asylum claim can take years. This means that the Greek state is responsible for supporting thousands of people, for long periods of time, with all the above social services, including monthly cash assistance if they are unemployed. Currently, 89,400 asylum-seekers²⁷ receive modest monthly cash assistance, through EU funds. Empowering and equipping asylum-seekers, irrespective of nationality, to eventually ease their access to the labour market therefore makes financial sense for the Greek state and the EU.

The benefits of even temporary active engagement with the receiving society, including its labour market, are multiple. Even if the asylum applications of some people are rejected, early support for their integration should be considered valuable on both an individual and a societal level. Early interventions, such as understanding how the receiving society works, learning a new language or acquiring digital skills, have knock-on effects, and can even save public spending on mental healthcare. Indeed, it has been proven that restrictive integration policies are linked to poor migrant health outcomes in high-income countries.²⁸ Moreover, gaining transferable skills can be of benefit if people ultimately move to another country or return to their home country.

Equally, the negative effects of aid-reliance, social exclusion and marginalisation during this initial period, should not be overlooked.²⁹ Social exclusion, whereby individuals or groups are not able to participate fully in society as a result of unemployment, low skill levels, ill-health or other factors, can have long-term consequences for the well-being, safety, security and economic viability of societies.³⁰ Inaction risks a 'lost generation' of socially excluded populations and a further increase in anti-migrant sentiment.

In any case, the demographics of arrivals and recognition rates in Greece indicate the likelihood of that more than half of all asylum-seekers will ultimately be entitled to refugee status and a life in the country: more than half of refugees and asylum-seekers arriving in Greece from 2015 onward come from fragile, conflict-ridden states such as Syria (25%), Afghanistan (19.8%), and Iraq (9.9%) with recognition rates at first instance (i.e. not counting appeals decisions) at 98.5%, 69.1% and 68% respectively.³¹ The overall recognition rate at first instance in 2019 was 55.9%.³² Finally, with crises becoming more protracted, particularly in these countries of origin, the likelihood not just of obtaining status but actually staying for the long-term increases, calling once again for integration support at the asylum application stage.



“The most difficult thing was accomodation and getting a job. Integration is hard. Because of the language. It’s not an easy language to learn. I speak English but I still have problems communicating.”

Salah Star Sadeeq, 30, refugee from Iraq, who participated in the IRC-Citi Foundation programme ‘Rescuing Futures’.

Martha Roussou/IRC

TACKLING SOCIAL EXCLUSION, WHEREBY INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS ARE NOT ABLE TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN SOCIETY AS A RESULT OF UNEMPLOYMENT, LOW SKILL LEVELS, ILL-HEALTH OR OTHER FACTORS, CAN HAVE LONG-TERM BENEFITS FOR THE WELL-BEING, SAFETY, SECURITY AND ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF SOCIETIES.²⁸

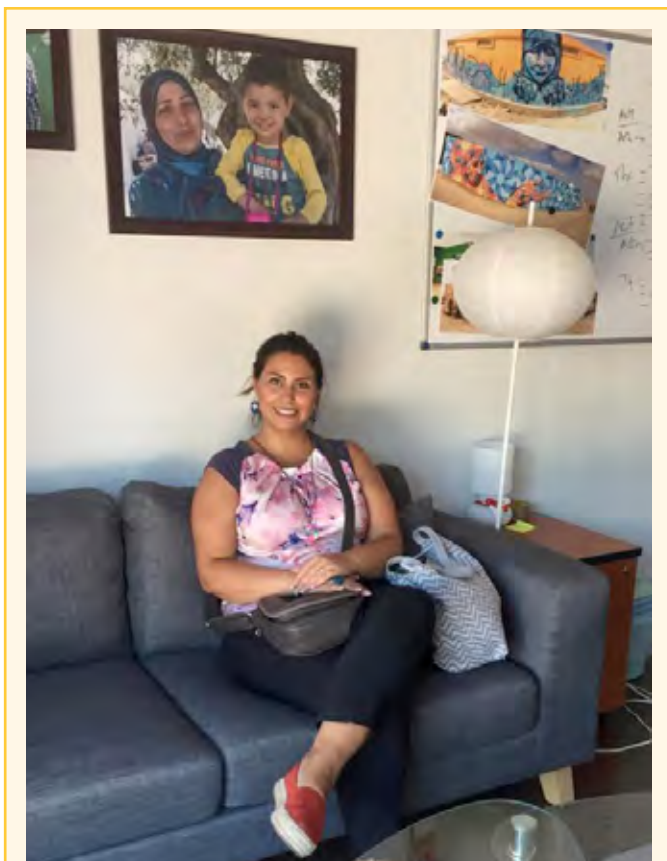
Benefits of early interventions for the individual

Research shows that early intervention is critical to the success of integration policies in the longer term.³³ Early intervention is especially desirable when asylum procedures, as is the case of Greece, are long, as inactivity has a clear de-motivating effect for many newly arrived people keen to start learning and working.

Offering support services such as training at an early stage may also prevent the 'blunting' of individuals' existing professional skills whereby knowledge is lost or becomes outdated and which, in addition to inactivity, hinders the reintegration of unemployed asylum-seekers into the labour market. Indeed, in Greece, by the time one is granted refugee status, years after arrival, precious time has been lost and the ability to adapt to a new life, and a job, might have been damaged permanently.

Similarly, the mental health benefits of being active and, even better, employed, should not be overlooked. A World Health Organisation report identified unemployment as "one of the main factors associated with poor mental health outcomes for refugees"³⁴ which can undeniably lead to depression and disempowerment.

Asylum-seekers and refugees may find themselves in challenging circumstances upon arrival, often dealing with the consequences of long and perilous journeys, complex healthcare needs, lower educational levels³⁵ and skills atrophied through prolonged displacement and trauma³⁶. It is therefore crucial that case management mechanisms for labour market integration are implemented, and take into account individual needs. While employment is typically the most effective way to fast-track both social and economic integration, it may not be equally attainable for all.³⁷ People-centred and strength-based case management approaches can support more vulnerable individuals to navigate and participate in their new societies. Participating in language and cultural orientation classes, as well as vocational training as soon as possible upon arrival, is beneficial in itself. Meaningful access to benefits can be life-saving, so an investment in the provision of trained interpreters is needed to bridge the initial language gap while asylum seekers start learning the local language.



"Being a refugee brings depression because we left our home. When I am working I have a good feeling, I feel better!"

Negin Khosrojerdi, 32, refugee from Iran, who participated in the IRC-Citi Foundation programme 'Rescuing Futures'.

Amadeus Canals/IRC

OFFERING SUPPORT SERVICES SUCH AS TRAINING AT AN EARLY STAGE MAY ALSO PREVENT THE 'BLUNTING' OF INDIVIDUALS' EXISTING PROFESSIONAL SKILLS AND WHICH, IN ADDITION TO INACTIVITY, HINDERS THE REINTEGRATION OF UNEMPLOYED ASYLUM-SEEKERS INTO THE LABOUR MARKET.

Taking into account the strengths and needs of refugee women

The process of socio-economic inclusion is even more complicated for refugee and asylum-seeking women, who also often take on family and childcare obligations, may be survivors of gender-based violence or may lack prior work experience or familiarity with local culture and the work environment. A recent IRC report³⁸ showed that refugee women are less likely to be engaged in paid work than women of the receiving country, facing challenges and barriers as both refugees and women.

Recent OECD evidence shows that refugee women take longer to gain a foothold in the labour market compared with refugee men.³⁹ They also have lower levels of receiving-country language skills compared to men in the first two to three years after arrival, related to the fact that they frequently receive less integration support than men, both in terms of language training and active labour market measures.⁴⁰

Early employment carries a number of benefits in particular for refugee women, including economic empowerment, increased gender equality and social inclusion.⁴¹ With women comprising 32.5% of all asylum applicants in Greece since 2013, a total of almost 100,000 women,⁴² the importance of supporting them on their integration pathway becomes particularly apparent. From our experience in Greece, many women cannot access employment or vocational training because they are tasked with looking after young children. Among single mothers, this can lead to long-term exclusion and vulnerability. While Greek women face the same challenges, asylum-seeking and refugee women may have reduced social and family networks, knowledge of available childcare services or lower income to address these challenges.

Cultural orientation and language courses that offer a safe space for children would be a significant way to address gender disparities in accessing the labour market. Similarly, survival language courses that focus on oral use and basic digital skills training should cater to women who do not have the capacity or literacy skills to follow courses focused on the acquisition of a certification.

Several OECD countries, with a long history of successfully integrating migrants into the labour market – including Canada, Germany, and Sweden – have recently announced or implemented specific measures for refugee women, including targeted language training, second chance programmes, and outreach activities⁴³. **Greece should therefore follow this example and invest in targeted integration activities for asylum-seeking and refugee women, as early as possible upon arrival.**

EARLY EMPLOYMENT CARRIES A NUMBER OF BENEFITS IN PARTICULAR FOR REFUGEE WOMEN ... WITH WOMEN COMPRISING 32.5% OF ALL ASYLUM APPLICANTS IN GREECE SINCE 2013, A TOTAL OF ALMOST 100,000 WOMEN,⁴² THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING THEM ON THEIR INTEGRATION PATHWAY BECOMES PARTICULARLY APPARENT.



“Learning the Greek language is the main integration problem. Without the language I cannot communicate with people and I cannot find potential job opportunities. I started learning Greek one year ago, after two years in Greece. It’s a difficult language.”

Fariba Amini, 31, refugee from Afghanistan who participated in the IRC-Citi Foundation programme ‘Rescuing Futures’.

Elena Heatherwick/IRC

Conclusion and recommendations

As evidence indicates, the IRC believes that integration of refugees is a pathway that, in order to be successful, should begin as soon as possible. This means offering core integration support, such as access to interpretation, case management services, cultural orientation classes, intensive survival language classes as well as support to obtain the documents and services required in order to access accommodation, employment, education and healthcare to asylum-seekers while they await a decision on their claim. Given the length of asylum procedures, withholding integration support until status determination could set people on a path towards social exclusion and deterioration of mental health and is clearly counterproductive for the individuals seeking protection and local communities alike. Even if people ultimately leave, our experience shows that there are clear and immediate benefits to newcomers being engaged in activities and involved in local communities, as soon as possible.

Whilst all refugees and asylum-seekers face a range of challenges associated in navigating and adapting to their new communities, refugee and asylum-seeking women face additional barriers. Concrete obstacles include the possible absence of affordable child care, gender-based violence, pre-arrival disadvantages in education and digital skills, as well as a lack of employment history. Therefore, targeted measures are needed in order to cater for their strengths and needs.

The IRC recommends that the Greek government seizes the opportunity of the ongoing negotiations on the next EU Multi Annual Financial Framework to update and start implementing its national strategy on integration at a large scale within 2020. This strategy should include:

- **An action plan with specific targets and indicators to measure the success of the National Strategy, as well as annual progress reports;**
- **Specific programmes for integration support at the reception stage, such as provision of interpretation, case management, survival language and cultural orientation classes to all asylum seekers, irrespective of nationality, as soon as possible upon arrival;**
- **Measures to effectively include asylum-seekers and refugees in national services, such as the provision of a social security and a tax number, as well as a bank account, which would in turn allow them to access all their legal rights: gainful employment, safe shelter, healthcare, education opportunities, integration support and benefits;**
- **Targeted measures that cater to refugee and asylum –seeking women’s strengths and needs, such as childcare options during classes and specially-designed language vocational courses, including digital skills courses;**
- **Case management mechanisms for socio-economic inclusion, taking into account individual needs; and**
- **Continuous and long-term support for socio-economic inclusion.**

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Front cover: A skillful entrepreneur based in Athens, Fariba participated in the IRC/Citi programme 'Rescuing Futures' which provides business training to young refugees. *Elena Heatherwick/IRC*



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