



Integration Governance in Cyprus Accommodation, Regeneration and Exclusion

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Executive Summary



Reception conditions in Cyprus have been evolving on a legal and policy level since 2000, with the enactment of the Refugee Law 2000(6)(I). While many positive steps have been taken since, a number of gaps and challenges remain, especially concerning the establishment of a long-term, gender-sensitive policy framework for the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. Due to the lack of plan and vision, a number of asylum seekers have continued to be pushed into homelessness, while the state relies heavily on the

support of local authorities and NGOs in order to cover the gaps. At the same time, local authorities lack the legal framework to design social policies, which limits their scope; instead, NGOs and local authorities, in their turn, rely heavily on European and national funding to implement integration projects that are ultimately short term and often unsustainable. The lack of holistic policies shows on one hand the lack of political will, which in turn feeds Cypriots' negative perceptions towards asylum seekers, and on the other hand, it points to the urgent need to improve public services to migrant populations who live and work in Cyprus. Experience throughout the years has shown that the phenomenon of European countries experiencing an influx of asylum seekers and migrants is not temporary. Due in part to armed conflict, environmental conditions and other motivations, populations will keep being on the move. Cyprus urgently needs to reform its legislation and policies around migration and asylum and provide solutions in order to settle in new communities. Urban regeneration is about using diversity and different skills to secure a vibrant community and make the economy of the state stronger.



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Introduction: Theoretical and historical background

Migration and integration, especially regarding the reception of refugees and displaced people, are two critical socio-political challenges faced in Europe today. Regulated inward economic migration, while still highly contentious, is now structurally embedded in the economies and societies of most EU countries, with countries of both origin and reception finding the tide of migration almost impossible to stem (Czaika and de Haas 2015). In light of this long-term trend, an in-depth investigation of local policy implications created by the immediate and pressing crisis of refugee displacement and arrival is crucial. According to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), over one million migrants and refugees entered Europe in 2015 alone (IOM 2015). This 'refugee crisis', recently characterised as the 'new normal' by the European Commission (2016), is felt both by frontline and final destination states. Despite the principle of allocating the influx according to relative economic strength and country size, as outlined by the EU Task Force for the Mediterranean and in the wider EU strategic guidelines, in practice, countries in both Southern and Northern Europe are being forced to find innovative solutions at local and city levels to manage the arrival, flow and settlement of people. At the same time, we note that human traffickers and smugglers are capitalising on the refugee crisis. Women and children, as primary targets, are disappearing from refugee reception centres; thousands of children have gone missing following their arrival in Europe.

This report, as part of the project titled *Governance and Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees* or GLIMER, attempts to provide **a general framework of existing policies, and gaps thereof, specifically related to housing and primary integration policies in Cyprus**. We will focus on the issues that have surfaced when examining the relationship between existing government procedures and stakeholders. Questions as to whether Europe, and in this case, Cyprus is ready to accept such a volume of migrants, and whether holistic housing policies are in place to ensure smooth integration must be discussed. Other policies crucial to integration such as education, vocational training and employment, will be examined at a later stage of the GLIMER project. The methods used for this research report consist of **desk research**, including a) media reports, b) legislation, c) policies, and d) academic research, as well as **qualitative interviews** with a) government officials working on the issue of reception conditions and integration of asylum seekers and refugees, and b) members of civil society who have also worked with asylum seekers and refugees. A semi-structured questionnaire guide was used to collect data. The issue of migration, asylum and refugees is a gendered issue, as women experience the process differently to men, therefore a gender perspective was taken throughout the interviews and desk research.

Setting the scene

The Republic of Cyprus (RoC) gained its independence from British colonial rule in 1960. Due to the 1974 Turkish invasion, the country remains the only divided country of the EU, with a buffer zone, controlled by the UN, also known as the Green Line. The northern part of the island is occupied by Turkey and has declared itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), to date, only recognised by Turkey. In 2004, the Republic of Cyprus joined the European Union (EU) and the *acquis communautaire* applies only to the southern part of the country. It is important to view developments in Cyprus migration policy in light of this fact. The 'Cyprus issue', which continues to dominate political discourse and permeate policy in every affected field, has had a galvanising effect on the Greek-Cypriot community in terms of their continuing efforts to preserve a sense of 'national identity'¹ which has direct

¹ Vassiliadou, M. (2002), '[Questioning Nationalism: The Patriarchal and National Struggles of Cypriot Women within a European Context](#)', No.4, pp. 459-482, *European Journal of Women's Studies*.



impact on the designing of policies, legislation and strategies in relation to migration.

The literature evaluating the development of migration policies in Cyprus indicates a dramatic transformation over the past 30 years²; Cyprus has evolved from a country of emigration to one of immigration. Historically, Cyprus has had a relatively low influx of asylum seekers due to its geographical isolation from mainland Europe as well as its exclusion from the Schengen area, which makes it difficult place from which to access the rest of Europe. At the same time, its “*asylum policies, especially regarding family reunification*”³ make it even less appealing as a destination country for immigrants and asylum seekers. Thus, the first asylum application only registered in the late 1990s (Spaneas, et al, 2009)⁴.

The situation started to change around 2004 with Cyprus’ accession to the EU: asylum applications increased by a staggering 563%⁵. From 839 applications received in 2002, the numbers skyrocketed to 4,032 in 2003 and 9,285 in 2004⁶. In the 2000 – 2004 period, Cyprus received the largest proportion of asylum seekers, considering the fact that Cyprus is the third smallest of the 28 EU states⁷.

Following this surge, 2005 to 2015 saw a progressive fall in new applicants (in 2015 there were only 1,560⁸ applications). More recently, due in part to the volatile geopolitical situation in neighbouring countries, the number of applications have begun to rise once more. The latest numbers, up to end 2017⁹, show that Cyprus had 5,263 pending asylum applications and 9,800 recognised refugees including those granted temporary protection. At first glance, 5,263 might seem a negligible amount of asylum applications, in comparison to the 58,661¹⁰ submitted for instance in Greece in the same year. However, when taking into account the Cyprus population, on a per capita basis, it would be equivalent of approximately 360,000 new applications in the UK or 470,000 in Germany¹¹. According to the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre’s (ASRC) global statistics, in 2013, Cyprus ranked 5th in relation to asylum seekers, which are 3.01 per 1,000 inhabitants, while Sweden ranked 6th with 2.88 asylum seekers per 1,000 inhabitants¹².

As we discuss below, this sudden soar in applications has created unprecedented challenges due to the lack of legislative and administrative structures in place to deal with a high volume of asylum seekers¹³. At the same time, the specifics of the Cyprus political situation have placed the country in a unique position, compared to fellow EU member states. Although there are no precise statistics on the manner in which asylum seekers enter Cyprus,

² Patsalidou, A., and Christodoulou, J., (2018), *The Governance and Local Integration of Migrants and Europe Refugees, Cyprus*, Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS).

³ Muiznieks, N. (2015), ‘Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, following his visit to Cyprus from 7 to 11 December 2015’, Strasbourg, Council of Europe. Available at [http://rm.coe.int/ref/CommDH\(2016\)16](http://rm.coe.int/ref/CommDH(2016)16).

⁴ Spaneas, S. and Cochiou, D. (2018), ‘Country perspectives, Asylum system in Cyprus: a field for social work’, University of Nicosia and UNHCR Cyprus.

⁵ Strovolidou, E. (2005) *Cyprus: The twisted reality behind the statistics*, UNHCR. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2005/11/41e690364/cyprus-twisted-reality-behind-statistics.html>

⁶ Solidarity Fund, Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Cyprus. Available at http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/sf/sf.nsf/sf26_en/sf26_en?OpenDocument

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Drousiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

⁹ UNHCR Global Trends Report (2018) ‘Forced displacement above 68m in 2017, new global deal on refugees critical - UNHCR Cyprus’. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/cy/2018/06/19/forced-displacement-68m-2017-new-global-deal-refugees-critical/>

¹⁰ Greek Asylum Service (2018) Ministry of Migration Policy. Available at http://asylo.gov.gr/en/?page_id=110.

¹¹ Calculated based on the formula used in calculating the equivalent per capital for 2007 by Hennis-Plasschaert, 2008, European Parliament, ‘LIBE committee delegation report, on the Visit to Cyprus’. Available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/200902/20090226ATT50476/20090226ATT50476EN.pdf>

¹² Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (2018) *Statistics on Refugees and Asylum Seekers Worldwide*. [online] Available at: <https://www.asrc.org.au/resources/statistics/world-statistics/#1409812498-2-8>.

¹³ Ibid.



according to reports¹⁴, the majority enter via the occupied areas in northern Cyprus, and cross the Green Line¹⁵, in order to submit an asylum application¹⁶ in the RoC. We note that although there are authorised points of crossing along the Green Line, these are not considered official entry points into the RoC. Asylum seekers also enter Cyprus via ports and airports. According to one interviewee, “*there was an increase of asylum seekers entering the Republic via boats and more specifically, in 2017, there were nine such arrivals*”. At the same time, the news reported: “*With mainland Europe now harder to enter, [things have] changed somewhat in the years since 2015. Family members of those already here are arriving illegally via sea or through the north over the buffer zone. Official statistics now show a 56 per cent rise in asylum applications in 2017 and around 40 per cent in the first five months of this year*”¹⁷.

Most recently (2016-2018¹⁸), asylum seekers’ main countries of origin have been the following: the Syrian Arab Republic, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Egypt. Cyprus complies with the internationally recognised definition of asylum seekers and refugees drafted by the UNHCR in the Geneva Convention of 1951¹⁹. It is important to note that, due to the way in which the Greek language is gendered, the terms ‘migrant’, ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’, that are used in the Cyprus public dialogue, refer by default to the male migrant, the male asylum seeker and the male refugee (*ο μετανάστης, ο αιτητής ασύλου, ο πρόσφυγας*). The terminology has a number of implications when designing policies and strategies: assuming a male gender when talking about members of the above group discourages the potential to pursue woman-centred strategies and approaches in theory and in practice. Women’s experiences throughout their journey, including the application process and the process of reception and integration is very different to those of men. Cases were reported to interviewees where, “*women were sexual harassed on the boat when travelling in Cyprus*” and “*women were forced into prostitution when looking for housing... she was forced to sell sex in order to sleep on the sofa*”. Cases such as these remain unreported or even if they are reported, we often see that the state turns a blind eye. For this exact reason, we believe it is important to examine the issue of asylum under from a gender perspective.

The Asylum Context

The application process: a short description

The reception conditions in Cyprus have been evolving on a legal and policy level since 2000, with the enactment of the Refugee Law 2000(6)(I). While many positive steps have been taken which have resulted in more simple and time-efficient application procedures, a number of gaps and challenges remain, especially concerning the establishment of a gender-sensitive policy framework on the integration of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. As a result, the policies that have been implemented tend to be lacking in long-term solutions. Although the legislation is in line with international conventions and European directives, the necessary gender perspective has not been integrated. It is not a coincidence that the UNHCR has sought to complement the Convention by issuing

¹⁴ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

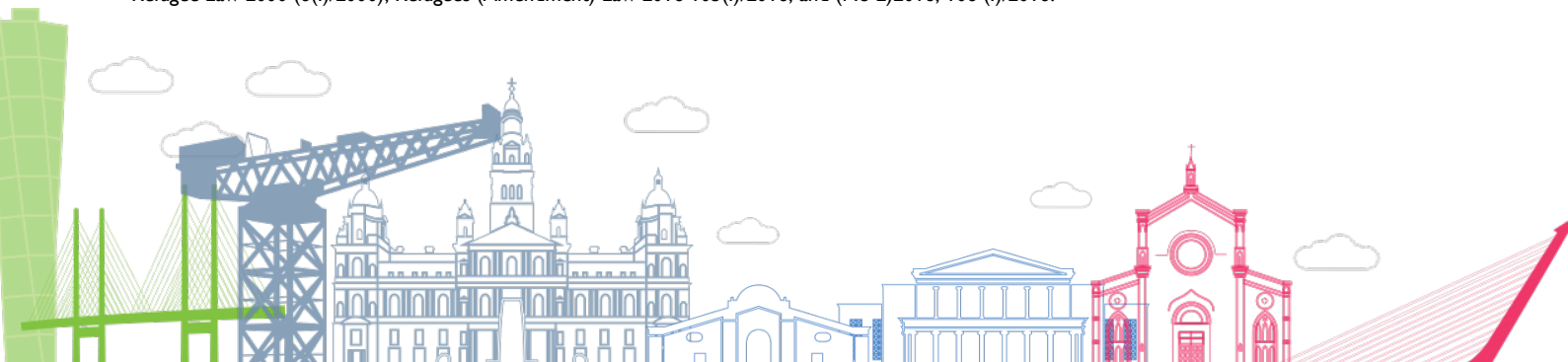
¹⁵ Asylum Information Database (AIDA) (2018) *Access to the territory and push backs - Cyprus* | *Asylum Information Database*. Available at: <http://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/cyprus/access-territory-and-push-backs>.

¹⁶ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

¹⁷ Cyprus Mail (2018) ‘Cyprus protests EU’s new migrant scheme’. Available at <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/08/12/cyprus-protests-eus-new-migrant-scheme>

¹⁸ Statistics collected during the research phase with the Asylum Service.

¹⁹ Refugee Law 2000 (6(I)/2000), Refugees (Amendment) Law 2016 105(I)/2016, and (No 2)2016, 106 (I)/2016.



a number of tools and guides to help female asylum seekers and refugees²⁰.

According to the legislation²¹, once an irregular asylum seeker has set foot in the RoC, via any entry point, they must immediately inform the authorities of their intention to apply for refugee status. If for any reason there is a delay in filing an application, they should provide reasons of the delay. Further, an asylum application must be made at the Aliens and Immigration Unit, which is a dedicated police department, and should be addressed to the Asylum Service of the Ministry of Interior. Where the applicant is in prison or detention, the application should be made at the place of imprisonment or detention. Once the application is made and lodged, asylum seekers have access to material rights under the material reception conditions that also includes housing.

As mentioned, in this general framework of asylum, the gender perspective is absent. As with any other human rights issue, the asylum process is a gendered phenomenon and has to be dealt with as such. One example of the process overlooking gender is the widely accepted practice that the application is made by the male head of the family; his partner and other members of the family being thus considered his dependants. As a result, allowances such as cash or vouchers²² are issued to the head of the family and therefore managed by him. According to our interviewees, this can create practical implications for asylum cases, e.g.:

“the couple has separated and when a refugee woman was called to the immigration office they insisted on seeing her husband as well even though she had tried to explain that their folders have been separated”.

Such cases can create other gender-related issues, e.g. refugee women losing their individual agency, or a proliferation of intimate partner violence. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that asylum seekers do not have a large range of options when it comes to housing: there is the option to stay temporarily at the Kofinou Reception Centre (discussed further below), or private housing. However, such measures are considered to be the beginning of an integration process. Given the fact that Cyprus broadly views migrants as short-term residents, questions are raised in relation to their access to basic human rights.

Integration as a path to access basic human rights

“Local integration in the refugee context is the end product of a multi-faceted and on-going process, of which self-reliance is but one part. Integration requires a preparedness on the part of the refugees to adapt to the host society, without having to forego their own cultural identity. From the host society, it requires communities that are welcoming and responsive to refugees, and public institutions that are able to meet the needs of a diverse population. As a process leading to a durable solution for refugees in the country of asylum, local integration has three inter-related and quite specific dimensions.”²³

The theory of integration is not an easy concept²⁴ and there is an ongoing debate of what integration means in theory and in practice. The participants in this project revealed differing positions with regard to their understanding of this and other migration-related concepts. Throughout the research, we tried to ensure that there is a focus on

²⁰ Handbooks, tools, policies and other resources on refugee women can be found at: www.unhcr.org/women

²¹ Refugee Law 2000 (6(I)/2000), amended by Refugee (Amendment) Law 2016 105(I)/2016, amended by Refugee (Amendment) Law (No 2)2016, 106 (I)/2016

²² See section “Material reception conditions: an obstacle to integration”

²³ Strovolidou., E. (2005) Cyprus: The twisted reality behind the statistics, UNHCR. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2005/1/41e690364/cyprus-twisted-reality-behind-statistics.html>

²⁴ Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, (2008), ‘Integration of female migrant domestic workers: strategies for employment and civic participation’, University of Nicosia Press.



knowledge of the real situation, rather than on a discussion of terminology. To this end, in the course of the research, we asked all interviewees what integration means to them as professionals working on daily basis with vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers and refugees. Interestingly enough, and although each participant thought of integration differently, most agreed that it should be a two-way process where the state should “*show willingness and create a welcoming environment for asylum seekers and that asylum seekers on other hand should respect the culture, legislation of the country*”. The two participants who disagreed, warned that certain asylum seekers look to take advantage of the state, and therefore “*although the state should be inclusive, they should also take precautionary measures*”.

It is without a doubt that integration is directly connected with reception conditions. At the same time, it is also important to define the actors and institutions who are responsible for the implementation of relevant actions and policies, as well as the particular workings of the Cyprus system of integration.

According to one interviewee, “*when it comes to reception and integration policies, Cyprus seems so be the only country in Europe where the asylum services are centralised and very little is done by local authorities and NGOs*”. This is also evident in the formal structure of the system, where local authorities have no power nor the independence, financial and other, to design and implement local policies for their communities. This is due to the fact that the centralised government does not provide them with funding for implementation of actions. This could be due to diverse factors, including political power and local culture. According to most interviewees, it’s a result of “*cultural traits infiltrating the general perception of the government’s role*”. One interviewee elaborated, “*this is due to the fact that in Cyprus there is a prominent sense of family values rather than a sense of community, which leads people to rarely seek or expect help from the state. As a result, the government does not feel that it will be held accountable for any mistakes and errors. In addition, there is also the general perception that providing asylum seekers and refugees the bare minimum is enough*”.

This research report uncovers that current reception conditions cannot support a sustainable integration process. As a response to this systematic weakness, we seek to explore the potential of urban regeneration. We also look into how the diversity brought in and the skills held by asylum seekers, refugees and migrant populations can be used in order to secure a vibrant community and strengthen the economy.

Through our review of the literature and qualitative research in order to understand the workings of asylum seeker and refugee integration, we find a critical weakness: Cyprus is failing to collect key information about asylum seekers and refugees; information that is paramount in the design of policies and strategies leading to a comprehensive integration process. Key missing information includes data on education (e.g. asylum seekers’ / refugees’ level and type of education), employment (e.g. level and type of skills) as well as other characteristics, for example health status. Equally important is the fact that Cyprus does not disaggregate data by sex. All these statistics are important for the receiving state to understand the migrant population, and to design policies that will be in line with the needs of both the aforementioned group as well as the country. Collecting sex- disaggregated data, in particular, helps to mainstream gender into policies and actions. Such policies assist asylum seekers to integrate more smoothly, and in another sense, make better use of the diversity and skills that migrant populations bring in, to boost the state on both the economic and social levels.

The European Funds Unit was created Under the Cyprus Ministry of Interior, which aims, in part, to support actions in relation asylum, migration and integration. We examine these aims, by first drawing attention to the fact that the Unit has not prioritised a horizontal consultation process in its designs. As our interviewees confirmed: “*no consultation with civil society nor with local authorities*” took place. Evidence also suggests that the gender aspect is also



missing from the Unit's action priorities. Integration projects, usually implemented by local authorities, focus on providing legally-residing third country nationals, such as asylum seekers and refugees, with language courses, cultural events and other soft-skills training. While these efforts are laudable in themselves, one wonders why the bulk of the funding seems to go towards initiatives such as TV programmes showcasing ethnic cuisines, when all the while that asylum seekers are struggling with far graver issues, such as homelessness. To provide a wider social perspective, one could say that 'soft' projects do little to nothing in challenging the widely held views of Cypriots towards third country nationals. The general political and public debate, including in the media, is either negative towards migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, or tends to ignore them completely. The *Special Eurobarometer on the Integration of Immigrants in the EU*²⁵ has indicated that about half of the Cyprus population consider immigration as a threat rather than an opportunity, going as far as to disagree with the statement that immigrants have the potential to enrich mainstream culture. The same research showed that 65% believe that immigrants take jobs away from locals. In terms of the importance afforded to the issue in the political arena, although migration (including asylum seekers and refugees) has been a critical issue in Europe over the last few years, it was not touched upon during the recent presidential elections (2017). It was simply left out of candidate manifestos and not talked about during the public debates among the candidates.

There are, however, projects delivering promising practices in the arena of migrant integration in Europe. One innovative programme, MiHub²⁶, is co-funded by the European Commission from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (90%) and the Republic of Cyprus (10%). The aim of the project is to provide practical assistance, support and information to migrants under the status of refugee, asylum seeker, international protection, domestic worker, student or resettled refugee. The help centres are located across the four major cities in Cyprus (Nicosia, Larnaca, Limassol and Paphos). The project employs 16 social counsellors, who have to date served more than 3,130 migrants. The services provided include guidance around employment, housing, education, language courses, health and social benefits.

As we can see from the above examples, local authorities play a crucial role in the integration of asylum seekers and refugees. However, they lack a dedicated budget in order to implement activities in the course of their day-to-day work and are therefore restricted to working within the parameters provided by the central government. Local authorities, to keep up with the needs of their communities, must participate in EU or national projects allowing them to implement projects such as language courses. However, such projects are short lived and there is no continuity to their actions and therefore no sustainability. Such projects should be over and above their yearly budget provided and approved by the state, and funding from EU or national projects should come in to support their existing actions. Interviewees suggested that the role of local authorities is superficial, meaning that they tend to tick boxes on the implementation of integration actions, although they also note that "*the officers involved in the projects try to make the most out of it in order to have real impact on the communities*". This is the result when policies are designed to be centralised; it takes power away from the local authorities to design social policy. Local authorities need a framework in which to work towards long-term, sustainable actions, instead of implementing short-lived projects according to the decisions handed down by the central government. According to one interviewee, "*the municipalities are trying to design projects from childcare services to language courses, but these projects have an end date, while the needs of refugees are ongoing*".

²⁵ European Commission (2017) 'Integration of immigrants in the European Union'. Available at <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2169>

²⁶ MiHub is implemented by the Cyprus University of Technology in Limassol, the University of Nicosia, Neapolis University in Paphos and the Cardet research centre. <http://www.mihub.eu/en/>



The role of NGOs is also very important in the integration process. NGOs and local authorities are in everyday contact with asylum seekers and refugees, making the former best placed to argue for the needs of the latter group. Despite this, funding remains a huge obstacle. While the police and social welfare services have signed memorandums of understanding with NGOs, formalising the relationship, this move has not led to decentralised actions, but instead to the setting up of a framework whereby the state buys services from the third sector in order to implement key activities. While not necessarily a negative practice, it leads to questioning the dynamic between the state and civil society, and whether NGOs effectively ‘filling in the gaps’ is the best way of working to help migrants integrate into society. It is not the intention of our project to answer such questions. However, throughout the project, the relationship and dynamics between the two parties will be examined.

According to a 2015 assessment by the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX)²⁷, Cyprus ranked second to last among 38 countries in terms of achieving integration of migrants. MIPEX concluded that Cyprus policies discourage long-term integration. The MIPEX evaluation states “...*Cyprus has relatively unfavourable policies on mobility in the labour market, limiting access to migrants*”. This has been the case since the first and only National Action Plan (NAP) on migrant integration that was valid for the period 2010-2012.

Due to Cyprus’ lack of an adequate strategy following the conflict in Syria, the ensuing refugee crisis, and the increasing number of refugees arriving in Cyprus, the local UNHCR Office took the initiative in 2016 to establish an Integration Task Force (ITF)²⁸. The ITF aims “*to contribute to the development of a national integration strategy, which in turn would help in the development of policy and practice in this area. The group consists of diverse stakeholders: refugee associations, government authorities, local authorities, civil society organizations, refugee community associations and business community representatives*”²⁹. This initiative is a positive one since it provides the forum for an open dialogue with all the actors involved and it could prove crucial in the future development of a national strategy and action plan.

Material reception conditions: an obstacle to intergration

*‘[M]aterial reception conditions’: means the reception conditions that include housing, food and clothing provided in kind, or as financial allowances or in vouchers, or a combination of the three, and a daily expenses allowance.*³⁰

According to the European Commission³¹, the aim of material reception conditions as adopted under the Directive³² is to ensure that asylum seekers have access to housing, food, clothing, health care, education for minors, and employment. The directive, as it stands, leaves a considerable degree of discretion to the member states to define what constitutes an adequate standard of living and how this should be achieved. Therefore, it is up to each member state to decide how they will transpose and implement the directive.

²⁷ Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) (2015). Available at <http://www.mipex.eu/cyprus>

²⁸ UNHCR Cyprus <http://www.unhcr.org/cy/integration/>

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ European Council (2003) *Council Directive 2003/9/EC of 27 January 2003 laying down minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers*. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32003L0009&from=EN>

³¹ European Commission Migration and Home Affairs website on Reception Conditions. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum/reception-conditions_en

³² Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, Laying Down standards for the reception of application for international protection. (June 2013) also known as The Reception Conditions Directive. Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033&from=EN>



In Cyprus, the Social Welfare Services (SWS), a department of the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance is the authority in charge of material reception conditions regarding asylum seekers. Examining the relevant refugee legislation, it is evident that the provisions specifying the conditions for granting assistance as well as the level of said assistance are very general. The legislation indicates that the state should ensure:

“economic support for everyday expenses and the provision of housing, food and clothing [...] in order to secure an adequate standard of living capable of ensuring the subsistence and physical and mental health”³³.

The refugee law has been amended a number of times. Prior to the 2016 amendment, the material conditions were not outlined by law. Instead they were outlined in an application form for the provision of such conditions³⁴ that was issued as a Notification by the Council of Ministers^{35&36}. With the most recent amendment to the same law³⁷, the notification and the relevant application form are no longer in effect, however the application and associated elements are still used in practice³⁸. Therefore, it remains at the discretion of the Council of Ministers to determine the level of assistance provided to asylum seekers. The following reason was provided for the decision (that such conditions are regulated by the Council of Ministers and according to the Cyprus Parliament and specifically the Home Affairs Committee):

“the proposed amendment was deemed necessary so that any increase in the allowance to meet the actual needs of asylum seekers is made by a decision of the Council of Ministers, in order to avoid the lengthy procedure for amending the regulations”³⁹.

While we recognise the good intentions in amending the legislation to speed up the process, the structure of said Council presents a serious issue when examined from a gender perspective. Specifically, the Council, as well as the Cyprus Parliament, are both male-dominated. Other than the 2008 - 2013 period, when four women held ministerial positions, today we have a just one female minister among 11. In Parliament, only 10 out of 52 MPs are female, casting serious doubts as to the extent of gender inclusivity in the decision-making. In real terms, and as we will discuss further in the report findings, while the material assistance as defined by the Council of Ministers has failed to cover the real needs of asylum seekers in general, women in particular have been let down in a significant way, for example, by not having basic needs met, such as the provision of hygiene products.

Material assistance: from theory to practice

This section will summarise the legal process to access material assistance and the practices according to the interviewees, the current legislation, as well as our desk research. It is worth noting that there was a lack of consistency in interviewee accounts, both in the viewpoints expressed but also with regards to individual

³³ Article 91A(1) Refugee Law

³⁴ The Official Gazette of the Republic of Cyprus as a Notification by the Council of Ministers by virtue of Regulation 14(3) Refugee (Asylum Seekers' Reception Conditions) Regulations 2005-2013. Published 9 July 2013

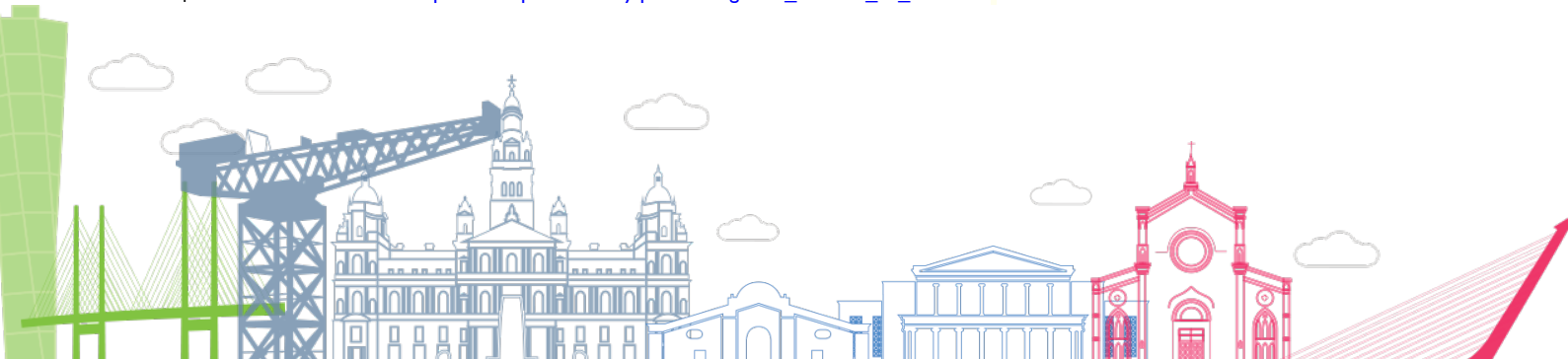
³⁵ Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, *Application for Manual Reception Conditions of Applicants for International Protection* (Αίτηση για Κάλυψη Υλικών Συνθηκών Υποδοχής Σε Αιτητές Διεθνούς Προστασίας) available at: <http://bit.ly/1Sp11tQ>

³⁶ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

³⁷ Note 35(1)(δ) Refugee Law

³⁸ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

³⁹ Έκθεση της Κοινοβουλευτικής Επιτροπής Εσωτερικών για τους κανονισμούς «Οι περί Προσφύγων (Συνθήκες Υποδοχής Αιτητών) (Τροποποιητικοί Κανονισμοί του 2009. Available at http://www2.parliament.cy/parliamentgr/008_05d/008_05_2698.htm



understandings of the law.

As mentioned above, the application form for material reception conditions is still used in practice and according to interviewees it has played a role in hindering access to reception conditions. As interviewees clarified, this application for material assistance is made to the Social Welfare Services, by those who did not manage to secure accommodation at the Reception Centre, either due to personal choice or a lack of space at the centre. Nine different types of documentation⁴⁰ are required by the applicant and each member of their family. One of the documents required is the confirmation⁴¹ of submission of application for asylum that can take up to nine days to be given to asylum seekers (up to 6 days until the application is lodged⁴² and three more days until confirmation of the aforementioned⁴³). This means that asylum seekers must wait at least 9 days for material assistance and access to reception benefits. At the same time, *“in order for rent to be subsidised, the landlord is expected to submit tax details on the rented property, otherwise asylum seekers can be deprived from their right to secure housing. The obligation to secure the above documentation can impede the access of asylum seekers to material conditions”*.⁴⁴ In the meantime, the interviewees state that it is usually NGOs who assist families and individuals in need, both by providing material goods as well as advice and advocacy. This again raises questions in relation to the accountability as well as the responsibility of the state towards asylum seekers. The interviewees largely agreed that the main problem with the specific application process is the bureaucracy which entails the production of extensive documentation on the part of asylum seekers. When it comes to asylum seekers living outside of the Reception Centre, *“food and clothing are provided through vouchers. Rent allowance is payable directly to landlords and the financial allowance to cover the cost of utilities such as electricity, water and other expenses is provided by cheque to the applicants”*.

During the interviews, the participants described the legislative process through which, should an asylum seeker fail to secure accommodation at the Reception Centre, by rights, they are allowed to claim a monthly allowance to cover housing expenses such as rent and utilities. A key issue is that asylum seekers are given no governmental support in the process of securing private accommodation. As one interviewee explained:

*“Firstly, rent is paid by the state directly to the landlord and there have always been delays in payment and therefore, landlords are reluctant to rent places out to asylum seekers. Secondly, with regards to calculating the allowance given to asylum seekers, this is nowhere near a sufficient sum to cover the standard cost of housing in Cyprus.”*⁴⁵

The legislation states that material assistance should be provided in the form of financial aid (cash) or as a voucher and the amount should be in accordance to what is considered an adequate living standard by Cypriot citizens⁴⁶. At the same time, the legislation discriminates against asylum seekers by stating that they may be subject to less favourable treatment compared to Cypriot citizens. The amounts granted to the latter can secure a living standard

⁴⁰ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>. More specifically, the documents requested are “A) a rent/lease agreement although the claimant may be homeless; B) confirmation of school attendance of the dependents; C) and a confirmation from the Asylum Service that there is no availability at the reception centre to host the claimant.

⁴¹ ‘Confirmation of Submission of an Application for International Protection’.

⁴² Article 11(4)(a) Refugee Law

⁴³ Article 8(1)(b) Refugee Law

⁴⁴ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

⁴⁵ Emergency financial support is sometimes provided to asylum seekers when no accommodation is available at the Kofinou Reception centre. It usually consists of a monthly stipend of €100 for rent and €78 for food and other expenses. According to an interviewee, *“there have been cases where the emergency financial support was given towards the end of the month so they were given €20 to cover expenses for the remaining 7 days”*.

⁴⁶ Article 91B (2) (a) Refugee Law



that is higher than the one determined in the Refugee Law for asylum seekers⁴⁷. The table⁴⁸ below provides information in relation to the monthly material allowance to asylum seekers.

Number of persons	Food, clothing and footwear (in voucher)	Rent allowance	Allowance for electricity, water and minor expenses	Total amount of assistance granted
1	€ 150.00	€100.00	€70.00	€320.00
2	€225.00	€100.00	€95.00	€420.00
3	€300.00	€150.00	€130.00	€585.00
4+	€375.00	€200.00	€160.00	€735.00

The assistance provided to third country nationals with long-term residence (e.g refugees), as well as EU and Cypriot citizens, is regulated by the Minimum Guaranteed Income and the General Provisions on Social Benefits (GMI) law⁴⁹. More specifically, “the amount of guaranteed minimum monthly income for a single individual is €480, with each additional adult increasing a family's GMI by half (€240), and each additional child increasing the amount by a third (€144). Housing allowances are provided to certain recipients who are renters or who face difficulties in making their mortgage payments, with allowance amounts varying according to regional location and the size/structure of the recipient unit. Other allowances include home care (up to €400 per month), day care (up to €137 per month), residential care (€625 to €745 per month), respite care, and child care (up to of €102 per month). With certain exceptions, claimants of the GMI programme must typically be at least 28 years old, citizens or permanent residents, legal residents for at least five years, unemployed or low-income, and in possession of assets totalling less than €5,000 in movable property and less than €100,000 in immovable property”⁵⁰. Prior to this legislation, asylum seekers received the same amount as the rest of groups mentioned. In other words, asylum seekers are only eligible for rent allowance and allowance covering the housing bills as shown in the table above, while the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) law, as seen in the table below regulates the financial support for refugees⁵¹.

⁴⁷ Article 9IB(2)(b) Refugee Law

⁴⁸ Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, *Application for Manual Reception Conditions of Applicants for International Protection* (Αίτηση για Κάλυψη Υλικών Συνθηκών Υποδοχής Σε Αιτητές Διεθνούς Προστασίας). Available at: <http://bit.ly/1Sp11tQ>.

⁴⁹ The Minimum Guaranteed Income and the General Provisions on Social Benefits Law of 2014 (109(I)/2014)

⁵⁰ Koutsampelas, C.(2016) Cyprus Economic Policy Review, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 3-26.

⁵¹ Spaneas, S., Cochiliou, D., Zachariades, A., Neocleous, G. and Apostolou, M. (2018) “*The Living Conditions of Asylum-seekers in Cyprus*”. [online] University of Nicosia. Available at: <https://www.unic.ac.cy/unhcr-issues-a-new-report-on-the-living-conditions-of-asylum-seekers-in-cyprus/>.



Family members of applicant/beneficiary	Maximum Subsidised Rent		
	<u>Nicosia/Limassol</u>	<u>Larnaca</u>	<u>Paphos</u>
	<u>/Ammochostos</u> <u>(€2.80/m²)</u>	<u>(€2.45/m²)</u>	<u>(€1.75/m²)</u>
Single or couple without children	154€	134,75€	96,25€
Couple with 1 child or 2 underage children	224€	196€	140€
Single-parent with a child	224€	196€	140€
Couple with 1 minor and 1 adult child	280€	245€	175€
Couple with 3 underage children	280€	245€	175€

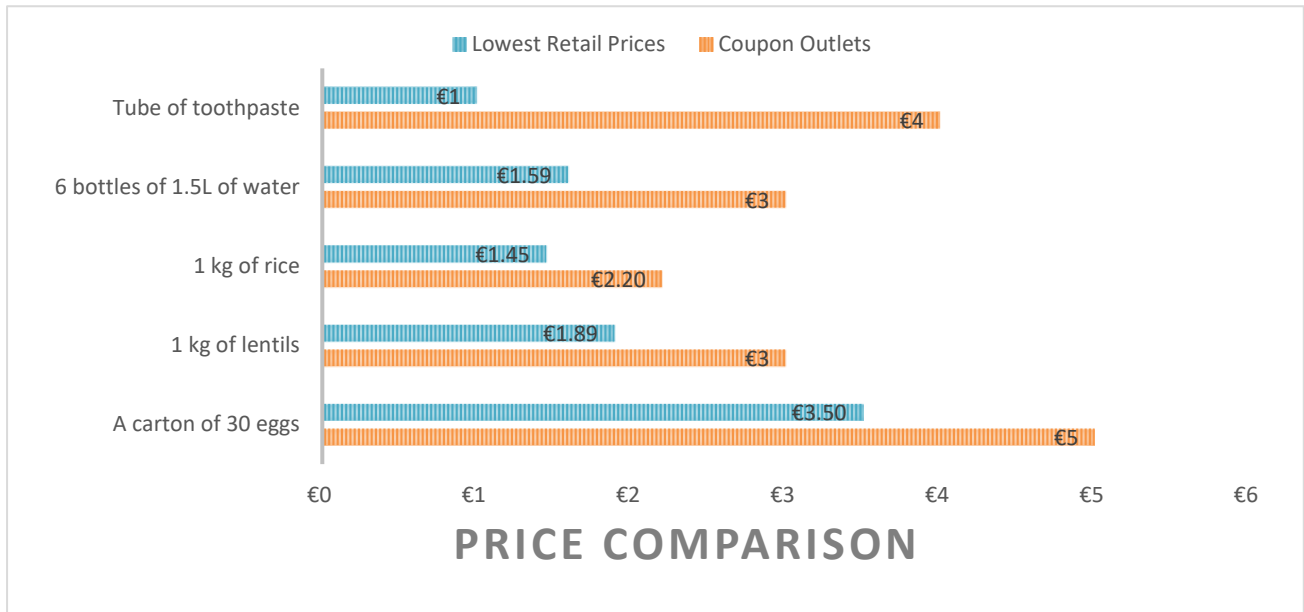
Other than rent allowance, the GMI covers further living expenses, which correspond to €480 for the applicant, €240 for the husband/wife and each dependent family member over the age of 14, as well as €144 for each dependent family member under the age of 14. In contrast to GMI beneficiaries who receive cash for daily expenses, asylum seekers receive coupons⁵². These coupons can be redeemed in specific stores that have signed an agreement with the Social Welfare Services. This decision, that assistance for food and clothing will be granted in the form of coupons as opposed of cash, which can only be redeemed in certain stores (supermarkets, grocery stores, clothes and shoe shops) was made in 2013, by the Council of Ministers⁵³. Interviewees noted, “The shops where the asylum seeker can redeem coupons are usually located a long way from the Reception Centre and tend to be more expensive than local supermarkets”. It was not a surprise when the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) report on Cyprus⁵⁴ emphasised its concern that: “the payment in kind system introduced for asylum seekers may be causing undue hardship and requires evaluating and amending”.

⁵² Ministerial Decision, 2013.

⁵³ The criteria for the 23 retailers that signed on to the programme are addressed to SMEs in order to stimulate their development.

⁵⁴ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2016) *ECRI Report on Cyprus*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-report-on-cyprus/16808b563b> [Accessed 8 Sep. 2018].





Source: Caritas (<http://caritascyprus.org/a-refugee-food-coupon-fiasco/>)

According to a 2018 report co-authored by the University of Nicosia and UNHCR Cyprus⁵⁵, several administrative difficulties have been identified in the choice of providing coupons, as listed below:

- Beneficiaries lack the option to shop in the best value shops and markets;
- beneficiaries may not spend their budget efficiently because the relevant shops cannot provide them with change, while at times the amount in vouchers might not stretch to cover their minimum needs;
- The limited number of shops create barriers to asylum-seekers in accessing foods complying to their culture and/or religious beliefs;
- Shops are often at a distance from their accommodation, requiring the undue hardship of covering long distances by foot (public transportation runs on a limited network on the island);
- Beneficiaries may experience social exclusion – they can feel embarrassed and ‘lesser-than’ when they present cashiers with vouchers whilst others in the queue have money.
- Beneficiaries may feel discrimination, as the state does not allow them to spend their money at their own discretion;

⁵⁵ Spaneas, S., Cochiliou, D., Zachariades, A., Neocleous, G. and Apostolou, M. (2018). “*The Living Conditions of Asylum-seekers in Cyprus*”. University of Nicosia. Available at: <https://www.unic.ac.cy/unhcr-issues-a-new-report-on-the-living-conditions-of-asylum-seekers-in-cyprus>.

- Delays in receiving vouchers are an extremely common occurrence; the vouchers also expire at the end of each calendar month, so recipients are unable to regularly buy fresh produce or save vouchers for the following month;
- There is an absence of a person-centred approach for vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly or the disabled, as they receive no additional assistance to help them meet their additional costs and needs (e.g. special diets)⁵⁶.

Asylum seekers, in addition to being directly discriminated against by the voucher scheme described above, are also excluded from receiving other benefits, such as⁵⁷:

- **Grants / benefits from the Ministry of Finance:** including child benefits, which are proportional to the number of children in the household, student grants given to nationals who secure a position in university. Other benefits include the single parent benefit, or the birth benefit given to single mothers if they are not eligible for a similar benefit from the Social Insurance office.
- **Grants / benefits from the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance (Department for Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities),** including benefits aimed to help disabled persons, such as special allowance for visual impairment, mobility allowance, financial assistance schemes for the provision of technical means, instruments and other aids and care allowance schemes for paraplegic/quadruplegic persons.

One justification provided to the above is that “asylum seekers, at least for the first six months, do not contribute to the state fund in order to receive such benefits”. However, if we are to motivate asylum seekers to integrate in the local society, the Cyprus government should reconsider its policies. The discussion should thus be geared towards a holistic, human-centred integration process that starts as soon as the asylum seeker enters the country.

Accommodation policy and local governance

The Reception Centre

The first choice for asylum seekers regarding accommodation is the Reception Centre in Kofinou⁵⁸. Although by law Social Welfare Services are responsible for the reception conditions of asylum seekers, the Reception Centre is managed by the Asylum Service, although this should not be the case, as shelters or accommodation centres are under the responsibility of the Welfare Services. Regardless, the Social Welfare Department will first try to secure housing for an asylum seeker at the Reception Centre. As we will discuss, the interviewees confirmed that the Reception Centre is usually full, requiring asylum seekers to find private accommodation.

The Kofinou Reception Centre⁵⁹, which opened its doors in January 2004 following an instruction of the European

⁵⁶ Ibid.

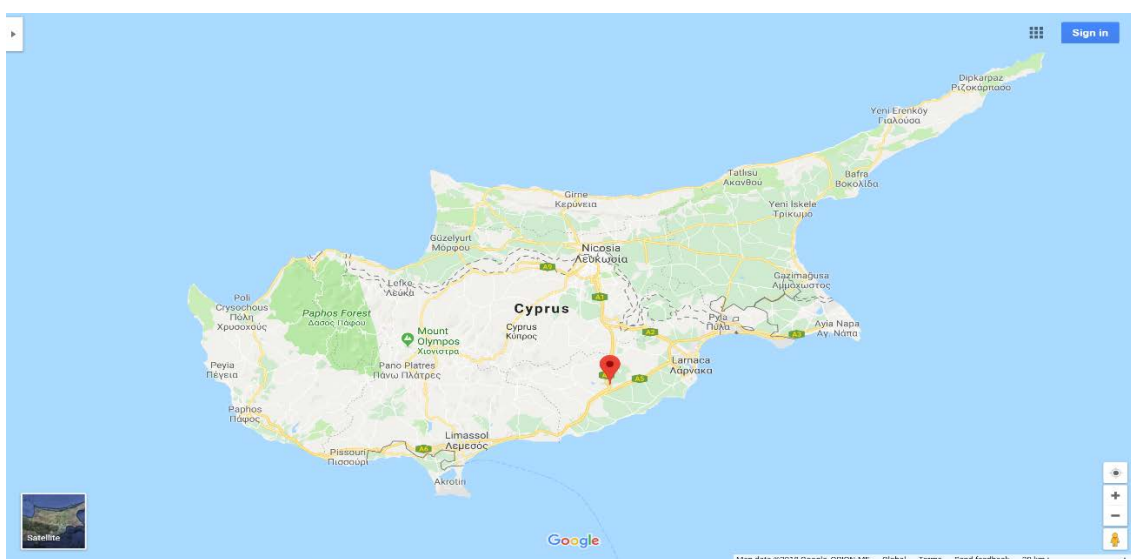
⁵⁷ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

⁵⁸ According to Article 91Δ (1) of the Refugee Law, the authority which coordinates and supervises the operation and management of reception and accommodation centres is the Asylum Service.

⁵⁹The Asylum Service also established a temporary reception centre in the Kokkinotrimithia region, for persons who are likely to need international protection



Council⁶⁰ remains the only one on the island. The centre is located in a remote area near Kofinou village (Larnaca District) and operates under the provisions of Law 38(1) (1997) regarding Adult Centres: “a centre that provides care, protection, employment, entertainment, food and other services to more than 5 persons that are over the age of 18, at any time in the duration of the day”⁶¹. It is worth noting here that, while it is meant for adults only, a number of families with young children are also housed at the centre. The Reception Centre is isolated and in a rural area, and asylum seekers must use bus routes either directly to the city of Larnaca or indirectly to other cities, including the capital, Nicosia, where most services are provided⁶². The centre was initially designed as a place of temporary residence until more suitable and long-term accommodation could be found. Specifically, until 2017, asylum seekers were allowed to stay for three months at most, but after a ministerial decision⁶³, this was increased to six months. Interviewees gave a different view, asserting that “in practice most asylum seekers, even recognised refugees in some cases (which according to the refugee law are not allowed to stay there), are forced to stay longer due to the circumstances” as private housing is difficult to secure.



Location of Kofinou Reception Centre

As of 2014, given the new reality of the mass influx of asylum seekers in Cyprus, the centre expanded its capacity to 350 people. Currently there are 5,263 asylum seekers in Cyprus, which means that beyond the 265 people hosted in Kofinou and the 130 unaccompanied children residing in special shelters, the vast majority of applicants live outside of the centre, dispersed throughout the island. However, although there are basic records regarding asylum seekers engaged in employment, there are no statistics available as to where asylum seekers live and under which conditions, whether they are depending on social welfare benefits and other crucial data.

The centre is currently composed of 20 rectangular prefabricated units grouped into two main areas, one for families and one for individuals. The latter group of units is gender-segregated. We should note that after a recent

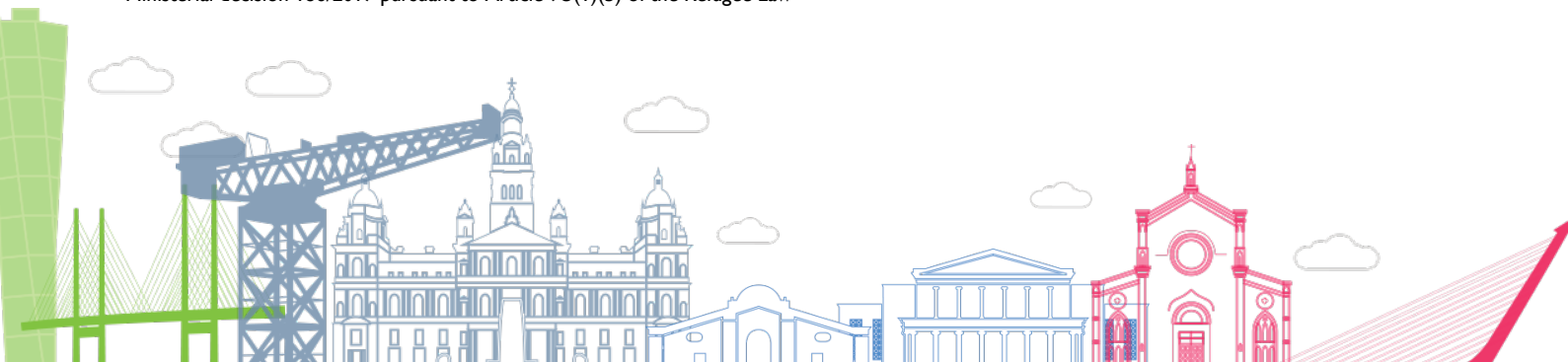
in cases of mass influx. This was done with the help of EU funding.

⁶⁰ Spaneas, S. & Cochliou, D. (2013) 'Asylum Reception Centre in Cyprus: Setting the Bases for a contemporary organizational structure', European Scientific Journal 2013, edition vol.9, N. 29.

⁶¹ Ο περί Κέντρων Ενηλίκων Νόμος του 1997

⁶² Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

⁶³ Ministerial decision 186/2017 pursuant to Article 90(1)(b) of the Refugee Law



policy change by the Asylum Service, the centre no longer accepts single male asylum seekers but only families. The reason for no longer accepting single male asylum seekers was based on an incident in February 2018 when, “a group of volunteers working in Kofinou called on the authorities to address the appalling conditions in the centre that have become a health risk for residents, and requested assistance from the public to secure private accommodation for families with children suffering from health conditions. A few days later, Eritrean refugees who had arrived in Cyprus through relocation and were living in Kofinou set fire to the offices of the centre in an act of demonstration for the termination of their benefits, which would have enabled them secure accommodation out of Kofinou. The Ministry of Interior emphasised that the reasons for these acts were unrelated to living conditions, but NGOs have cited this event “as an indication for an overall reassessment of reception policy in Cyprus”⁶⁴. The fact that single male asylum seekers⁶⁵ are no longer accepted at the reception centre creates other problems such as homelessness (see chapter on Private Housing and Homelessness). The family units are two rooms that have two bunker beds each (total four beds per room) connected by a small hall and a private bathroom (one shower, a toilet and a sink). The areas where single male and females are placed have two communal washrooms (lavatories and baths). It is important to note that these amenities are placed in close proximity to one another, which shows a lack of awareness and consideration with regards to potential issues of sexual harassment or assault. There are also eight common spaces, four cooking units (with four stoves each) one study room, a library/conference room, a recreational activity room (for children), a clinic and a playground with a sheltered kiosk with picnic tables⁶⁶.

The above description of the centre including the amenities provided at the centre abide by the Reception Conditions Directive as transposed under the national legislation. It should be noted that in accordance to the legislation, the centre also provides two daily meals (by catering services), and supplies for breakfast⁶⁷. Free transportation by bus to and from the main cities, as well as the services of a social worker, a psychologist and an interpreter⁶⁸ are also provided. Asylum seekers at the centre participate in recreational activities organised by NGOs and are provided assistance to secure a medical card for free access hospitals and transfer to hospitals in case of an emergency⁶⁹. In the case of children, they can attend school near the centre.

Regarding the personnel working at the centre, a recent report⁷⁰ notes that while the Asylum Service operates and finances the centre, the daily management is carried out by the Local Council of Volunteerism of Kofinou (SKE), along with social workers. Interviewees confirmed that the SKE staff are not trained on a regular basis on asylum-related issues, let alone gender issues, and they are not provided with any kind of support (e.g. psychological support to avoid burnout), which ultimately adversely affects both the staff and asylum seekers. Another issue is the lack of interpreters. Currently, several Arabic speaking interpreters visit the centre on a daily basis. At the same time, a newly appointed French interpreter visits the Centre on a weekly basis, but according to the UNHCR representation in Cyprus⁷¹ this is not sufficient to meet asylum seekers’ needs. According to interviewees the risk of miscommunication with the staff exacerbates the sense of isolation felt by the asylum seekers, as well as depriving them of the right to access information regarding their process, or to address other basic needs.

⁶⁴ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Inspected upon visiting the Kofinou Centre on 17 May 2018

⁶⁷ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018) *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.

⁶⁸ Spaneas, S., Cochiliou, D., Zachariades, A., Neocleous, G. and Apostolou, M. (2018) “*The Living Conditions of Asylum-seekers in Cyprus*”. University of Nicosia. Available at: <https://www.unic.ac.cy/unhcr-issues-a-new-report-on-the-living-conditions-of-asylum-seekers-in-cyprus>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid



Although efforts are made by the Asylum Service to manage the centre as smoothly as possible, problems persist that hinder the provision of an adequate standard of living for asylum seekers. The level of their dissatisfaction was made evident in the report published by the University of Nicosia⁷², in which more than 500 asylum seekers were interviewed. The participants emphasised their dissatisfaction regarding the infrastructure of the centre as well as the lack of hygiene⁷³. The table⁷⁴ below showcases the asylum seekers' level of satisfaction with various aspects of life at the centre.

Table 10: Elements at the Kofinou Reception Centre

	Answers in %				
	1	2	3	4	5
Buildings	8.0	5.0	20.0	17.0	50.0
Room size and comfort	8.2	12.2	14.3	21.4	43.9
Hygiene/sanitation	6.0	6.0	15.0	21.0	52.0
Food	6.9	8.9	25.7	20.8	37.6
Kitchen facilities	8.1	11.1	13.1	24.2	43.4
Geographical location	9.1	5.1	26.3	24.2	35.4
Professional support	9.3	8.2	15.5	17.5	49.5
Child-friendly environment	11.2	8.2	19.4	27.6	33.7
Personal safety/security	12.2	13.3	28.6	18.4	27.6
Recreational/sport activities	15.2	11.1	16.2	25.3	32.3
Relations with other residents	18.4	30.6	23.5	12.2	15.3
Participation in decision-making	11.2	9.2	9.2	21.4	49.0

Note. The scale that participants employed to answer the questions was the following: 1 = extremely good, 2 = Very Good, 3 = averagely, 4 =Not good, 5 = Not good at all

Other issues that surfaced is the fact that their allowance, which is usually provided with a delay of up to two or three months, is not sufficient to cover basics such as baby-care products, toiletries, clothes, underwear, or school supplies⁷⁵. Asylum seekers end up relying on the irregular and informal support of NGOs or charities to meet these needs, which raises questions as to the extent that the Asylum Service has considered the specific needs of women and children. When it comes to recreational and social activities, they are organised sporadically throughout the year by NGOs or volunteers; the government, on the other hand, does not organise such events in a systematic manner and also does not provide any funding⁷⁶ outside the framework of their approved projects. Keeping this, as well as the gender aspect in mind when discussing the integration process of asylum seekers and refugees, we can estimate the exacerbating effect on the sense of isolation felt by the aforementioned group.

The European Directive contains gender-specific provisions which have been transposed into national law, for example the obligation to take “*appropriate measures to prevent assault and gender-based violence, including sexual assault and harassment, within the premises and accommodation centres*”⁷⁷; the reality, according to interviewees, falls short of these obligations. Interviewees noted that there are no adequate screening and risk assessment procedures

⁷² Spaneas, S., Cochiliou, D., Zachariades, A., Neocleous, G. and Apostolou, M. (2018). “*The Living Conditions of Asylum-seekers in Cyprus*”. University of Nicosia. Available at: <https://www.unic.ac.cy/unhcr-issues-a-new-report-on-the-living-conditions-of-asylum-seekers-in-cyprus/>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ UNHCR, Cyprus (2018) ‘Reception Conditions for Asylum Seekers in the Republic of Cyprus’.

⁷⁷ Cyprus Refugee Law, Article 91Δ (7) (β)



“which can help identify and support vulnerable individuals according to their needs”. As a result, victims of violence or women that have been trafficked are housed at the Reception Centre together with the rest of the asylum seekers. Our research looked into who takes the initiative in reporting instances of abuse. Interviewees confirmed that, “only upon the request of the Asylum Service and/or the Cyprus Refugee Council psychosocial support team do the Social Welfare Services, as guardians, intervene in cases of alleged abuse (usually related to children)”. According to the UNCHR, concerns remain “over the response time, the efficiency and the consistency of interventions”⁷⁸.

Unsurprisingly, there were also strong hints regarding sexual abuse and trafficked individuals at the Centre. In every European setting where asylum seekers look for shelter, traffickers become a real threat. Euractiv recently reported⁷⁹: “Human traffickers are capitalising on widespread chaos at migrant reception centres across southern Europe to transport their victims undetected”. While the researchers entered the Kofinou Reception Centre with permission from the Asylum Service, no one checked on them upon arrival or departure, which raises doubts as to the level of security granted to the potentially vulnerable residents.

Private housing vs homelessness

When it comes to private housing, there are several problems that both asylum seekers and refugees face, namely availability and affordability. According to one interviewee,

“...no new housing has been constructed since 2011, due to the economic crisis. Property owners have been exploiting this fact and have sharply increased their rates over the past couple of years. Specifically, the current market rate to rent a studio is around €400-€500 per month, depending on the city, while a two-bedroom apartment can go for around €600”.

Considering that asylum seekers’ rent allowance for single persons and couples is set to €100, and for families of three or four and above, the allowance is €150 and €200 respectively, the discrepancy between rent allowance and going rates is significant.

The current procedure is that government-provided assistance is directly paid to property owners. However, in practice and as one interviewee explained, “The payment can be sent to property owners with a two- to three-month delay and remains inconsistent”. Another interviewee explained, “apart from the extremely high rents there is also the issue of landlords’ reluctance to rent flats/houses to asylum seekers and/or refugees due to the delays in payment by the government”.

It not surprising, therefore, that property owners tend to refuse to take on asylum seeking tenants. Recently, “58 landlords and estate agents were contacted to secure accommodation for an asylum seeking family of four. Only three were prepared to rent their properties, but only at amounts that exceeded the rent allowance.”⁸⁰

Interviewees also explained that even when asylum seekers are able to secure private housing, the standard of living tends to be poor. Examples include: “there have been cases where no water or electricity was available in the apartment

⁷⁸ UNHCR, 2018 “Reception Conditions of Asylum Seekers in the Republic of Cyprus”, p. 8.

⁷⁹ Euractiv.com. (2018) *Human traffickers capitalise on ‘chaos’ at Europe’s migrant hotspots*. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/human-traffickers-capitalise-on-chaos-at-europes-migrant-hotspots/>.

⁸⁰ Bouli, H. (2018). *NGOs: Increasing number of asylum seekers in Cyprus without shelter*. *Incyprus.com*. Available at: <https://in-cyprus.com/news/local/ngos-increasing-number-of-asylum-seekers-in-cyprus-without-shelter/>.



or where several people are forced to live in a one-bedroom apartment to be able to afford the rent”. As a result, “many asylum seekers become homeless, sleep in tents, churches and on sofas in other people’s houses”. Another interviewee informed us that “...what basically happens is that asylum seekers either become homeless, which is the case for the majority, or are forced to rent apartments in large groups.”

Homelessness is an issue of increasing severity for asylum seekers in Cyprus, as the Reception Centre is currently full and private housing is simply unaffordable on the current rent allowance⁸¹. Families with young children, and even the disabled are forced into dire circumstances, such as sleeping in public spaces (churches, parks) or being temporarily housed in small overcrowded flats by relatives, friends or strangers. Sufficient hygiene facilities or specialised spaces for disabled persons are rarely available⁸². According to UNHCR Cyprus⁸³, this situation has been aggravated by the fact that single asylum seekers are no longer admitted at Kofinou “which even when operating at full capacity only houses less than 5 per cent of the asylum-seekers in the country”. These conditions are in direct violation of asylum seekers’ human rights, including the right to an adequate living standard. It’s also in contravention of the provisions of Article 21(1) of the Refugee Law. According to one interviewee “families are exploited financially, while there have been several cases where women are asked to sell their bodies to sleep on a sofa”⁸⁴. Rather than being proactive, the state has created conditions that are pushing women into prostitution or making them vulnerable to being trafficked, while at the same time existing victims of trafficking are in danger of being re-trafficked due to the financially and socially disadvantaged positions in which they are placed.



Photo by in-cyprus.com (2018)

⁸¹ See table on page 16.

⁸² UNHCR statement. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/cy/2018/04/23/homelessness-becoming-increasing-issue-asylum-seekers-cyprus/>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Cyprus Mail (2018) ‘Housing the main issue for asylum-seekers in Cyprus, study shows’. Available at: <https://cyprus-mail.com/2018/05/24/housing-the-main-issue-for-asylum-seekers-in-cyprus-study-shows/>.



Conclusion: material reception conditions & the process of integration in education and employment

It's clear that reception conditions in Cyprus are in dire need of reform. The state has a legal and social obligation towards migrants living and working in the country; regardless of their status, the state must protect them. At the same time, we recognise that asylum seekers and refugees also have obligations towards the state. In order for parties on both sides of the issue to be able to fulfil their obligations, a workable framework must be in place. In our research, we identified and discussed a number of systematic gaps that act as obstacles to full integration.

Implementation of policies and strategies should be decentralised and more power and funding should be provided to local authorities. Local authorities have implemented a number of projects related to the smooth integration of asylum seekers. At the moment, local authorities are working within the limited framework and priority actions provided by the state: *"if the state issues a call for proposal for language courses, local authorities have to follow that line"*, an interviewee explained. NGOs retain a slightly higher level of flexibility compared to local authorities, as they implement actions according to calls but have access to more sources of funding.

Another issue standing in the way of the integration of asylum seekers and refugees is employment conditions. Asylum seekers are allowed to search and find employment six months after the date of submitting their asylum application. Their employment opportunities are restricted to specific categories: agriculture, animal husbandry, fishery, manufacturing, waste management, wholesale trade, repairs, as well as food delivery, cleaning, distributing flyers and ads. Interviewees confirmed that if an asylum seeker declines a job offer in the abovementioned sectors, welfare assistance is cut off. Most on the island would argue that, when in need, one should accept any job regardless of whether it fits their level of expertise or educational background. However, it is sometimes not possible to take advantage of job offers, especially when we consider those who have, for example, young families, and must rely on the proximity of their child's school while also dealing with a limited transportation system.

The issue of employment thus ties back to housing. One research participant provided an instance where a woman *"...was sleeping in a community space (provided by the church) with 10 men and she was reluctant to bathe due to her fear of sexual harassment or assault"*. How can women secure employment when their housing needs are not being met, when they do not have the bare minimum of protection from the state? Instead of motivating asylum seekers to enter the workforce by providing safe, workable solutions, the state puts asylum seekers in a position where they feel constantly threatened to have their meagre support network taken away. If the asylum seeker does not comply with the narrow and inflexible framework of employment opportunities, they are deemed *"wilfully unemployed"* and the SWS terminate their material support. According to the provision for material reception conditions,

*"When the applicant twice refuses an offer of employment in sectors and at times where employment is permitted for reasons which are not considered objectively acceptable/justified. In the event the applicant or any other member of his family may work but refuse to do so, he shall be struck off the register of the Public Employment Service and as a consequence lose any assistance he may be entitled to on the grounds of his status."*⁸⁵

Reports⁸⁶ indicate that, in practice, justifications are not taken into account should an asylum seeker refuse a job.

⁸⁵ The Application for Material Reception Conditions of Applicants for International Protection, available at [http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/sws/sws.nsf/All/FD2054BF3487DA4FC2257BBB0018E8EE/\\$file/form%20SWS.178.pdf](http://www.mlsi.gov.cy/mlsi/sws/sws.nsf/All/FD2054BF3487DA4FC2257BBB0018E8EE/$file/form%20SWS.178.pdf)

⁸⁶ Droushiotou, C. and Mathioudakis, M. (2018). *Asylum Information Database. Country Report. Cyprus*. Available at: <https://docplayer.net/51068177-Asylum-information-database-country-report-cyprus.html>.



Reasons may include an inability to commute to the particular work location, (lack of transportation or means to pay for transportation), or the inability of a single mother to secure childcare (lack of childcare budget). According to the law, only single mothers of children below the age of two may be granted an exception from job-seeking. When material assistance is terminated, the asylum seeker can re-apply after six months; in the meantime, asylum seekers can undoubtedly become further excluded and isolated from the society to which they are meant to be contributing.

While some limited vocational training schemes have been made available to asylum seekers, these are not tailored to enable the targeted population to participate. Keeping in mind that asylum seekers are already under significant pressure to secure employment in a restricted range of sectors, while also having to take care of finding and retaining accommodation, trainings must be made attractive and accessible. In practice, trainings are available on Sundays or late afternoons, which makes it difficult for them to participate. Childcare facilities are not widely available: Nicosia is currently the sole municipality to offer an arrangement. Asylum seekers and refugees living outside Nicosia city centre thus have no child support, which makes it more difficult for them to be productive, not only in seeking and carrying out work to support themselves, but also in taking advantage of the vocational training on offer.

Here, it is worth putting the topic into its wider national context. Childcare in Cyprus, regardless of population sector, has traditionally been considered very much a private issue, not one where the state is expected to intervene or provide support. Cypriot parents generally rely on stay-at-home mums, or, in the case of working mums, grandparents or (usually migrant) domestic workers or private crèches / nurseries to take care of young children. An organised public framework of support is very much lacking, and in the private sector, corporate employers consider themselves highly progressive by offering minor allowances such as semi-flexible working hours so that parents can clock off slightly earlier to pick up their children. Given this state of affairs, and considering our aforementioned note that, in practice, it is accepted in Cyprus that asylum seekers and refugees should be provided a lesser standard of living than Cypriot nationals, it is unsurprising that no public support system has been put in place to ease childcare conditions for the former. Simply put, if Cypriots receive little help from the state in childcare, then asylum seekers cannot hope for 'better' or more privileged treatment, regardless of the fact that they are one of the more vulnerable groups in Cyprus, being the most in need of gainful employment, and least likely to have family members able to fill in the childcare gap, both functionally and financially.

The state doubtlessly needs to improve upon the services it provides to people who live and work in Cyprus, including but not limited to the needs of the most vulnerable groups. What we are encouraging here is a holistic approach to assist people in integrating into society regardless of their gender and socio-economic or ethnic background. It is about providing solutions to people in order to settle into their new communities. It is about urban regeneration through diversity and deploying different skills in order to secure a vibrant community and make the economy stronger.

In this context, we have put together a number of proposals to provide direction in integrating asylum seekers and refugees into Cyprus society:

- Decentralising power and putting it in the hands of local authorities to design and implement social policies on asylum seekers and refugees.



- Conducting public consultations for the design of a national strategy and a national action plan on the integration of third country nationals. Such consultations should include public authorities, local authorities, NGOs and third country nationals of both genders.
- Incorporating gender mainstreaming across strategies and policies. The experiences and therefore the needs of women differ from those of men. These should be taken into account when designing and implementing policies.
- Social Welfare Services should be flexible and offer immediate, on the ground support to newly arrived asylum seekers. Such support should not only include material assistance but also safe housing outside the Reception Centre, as needed.
- Social Welfare Services should act as the intermediary in assisting asylum seekers and refugees secure housing after leaving the Reception Centre.
- The Asylum Service should reconsider the sustainability of the Kofinou Reception Centre. A centre created as a temporary residence is being used for long term housing. On top of this unsuitable use of the building, evidence has shown that it does not adequately ensure the protection of the mental and physical health of its residents.
- The Asylum Service should gather sex-disaggregated and other data in relation to the asylum seekers, including their skills, the state of their health, and their educational background.
- The European Fund Unit should re-strategise the use of available funds. Funding priorities should be designed based on consultations with NGOs, public authorities and refugee populations.
- The European Fund Unit needs to address the gender dimension in their priorities;
- Provision of childcare support for everyone residing in the country with special measures to vulnerable groups.
- Creating a system which matches skills to employment sectors and lifting the restriction of employment sectors for asylum seekers.
- Creating a housing system for asylum seekers and refugees. Housing is key to the integration of migrants and asylum seekers. Currently there are no plans or long-term vision and strategy to integrate asylum seekers and refugees who will be staying in Cyprus.



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