

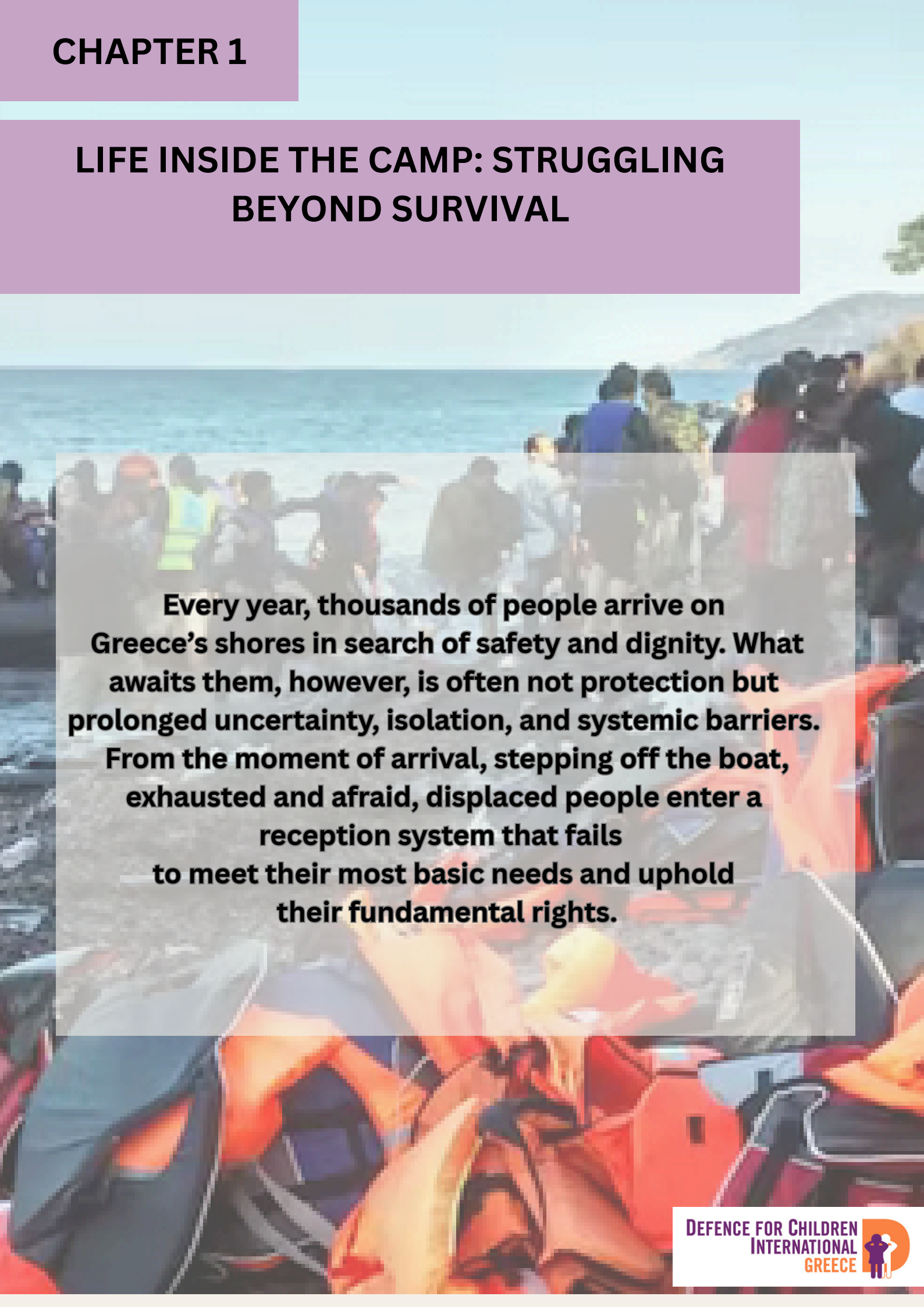
A close-up, slightly out-of-focus photograph of a young child's face, focusing on the right eye and forehead. The child has dark skin and dark hair. The background is blurred, showing indistinct shapes and colors.

CAN YOU SEE US?

Stories from the margins of Asylum in Greece

CHAPTER 1

LIFE INSIDE THE CAMP: STRUGGLING BEYOND SURVIVAL



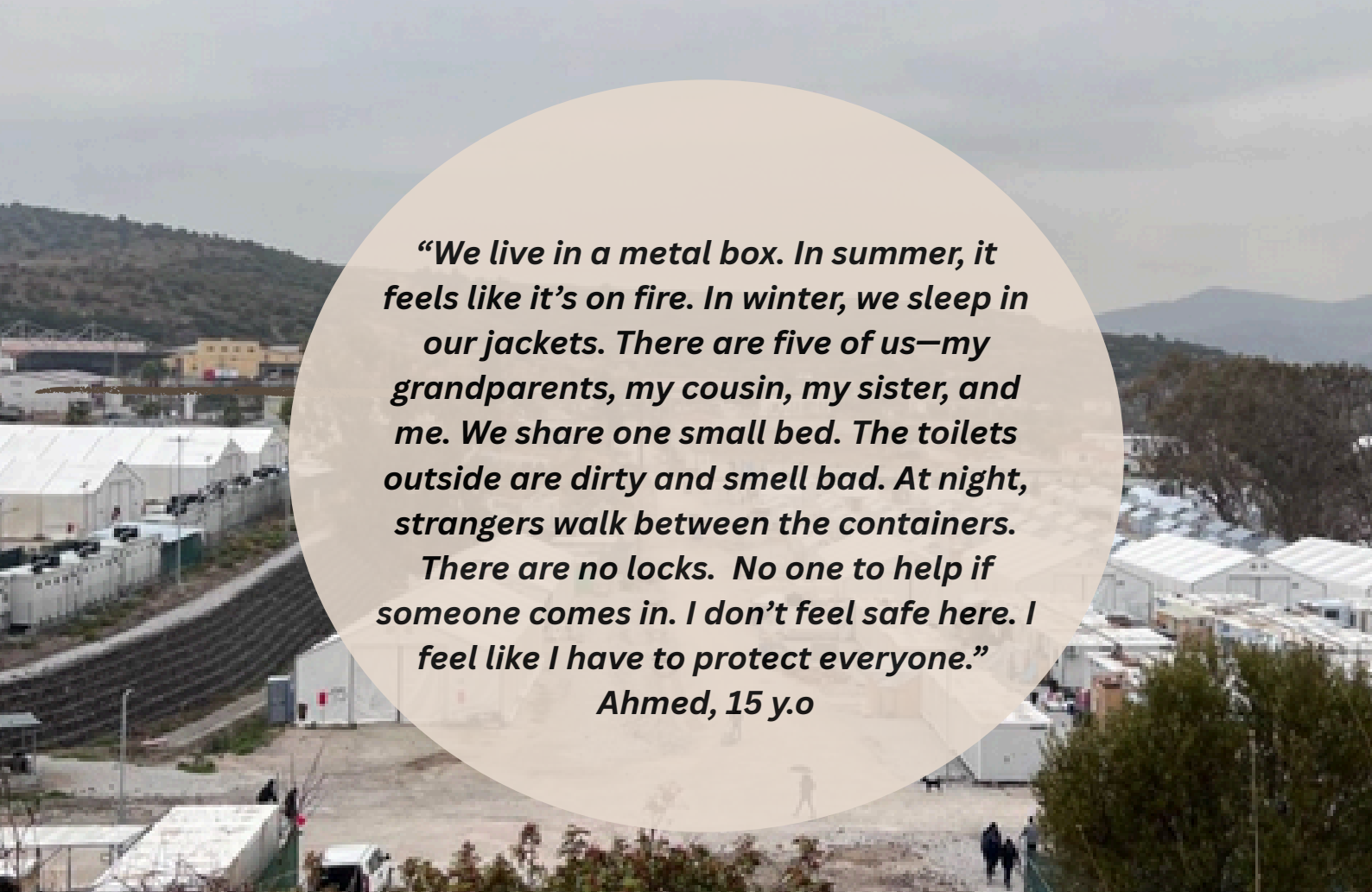
Every year, thousands of people arrive on Greece's shores in search of safety and dignity. What awaits them, however, is often not protection but prolonged uncertainty, isolation, and systemic barriers. From the moment of arrival, stepping off the boat, exhausted and afraid, displaced people enter a reception system that fails to meet their most basic needs and uphold their fundamental rights.

A young boy with dark hair and a white face mask stands in the center of the frame. He is wearing a dark red and black striped sweater over a light blue shirt, light blue trousers, and dark brown boots. He is holding a small blue bag. The background shows a refugee camp with several large, tan-colored tents. A large blue plastic water container is visible in the background. The ground is dirt and wet. The sky is blue with some clouds.

“The camp is in the middle of nowhere. At night, it feels like anything could happen — and no one would hear us.”

“We have been here for six months. In winter, the camp flooded and we were freezing. Our children were shivering all night. Now it is summer and we don’t even have a small fan. The heat is unbearable. 40 degrees.”

“They registered me as an adult, 19 years old, but I was only 15. So I had to live in a container with adult men I didn’t know. I was scared every night.”

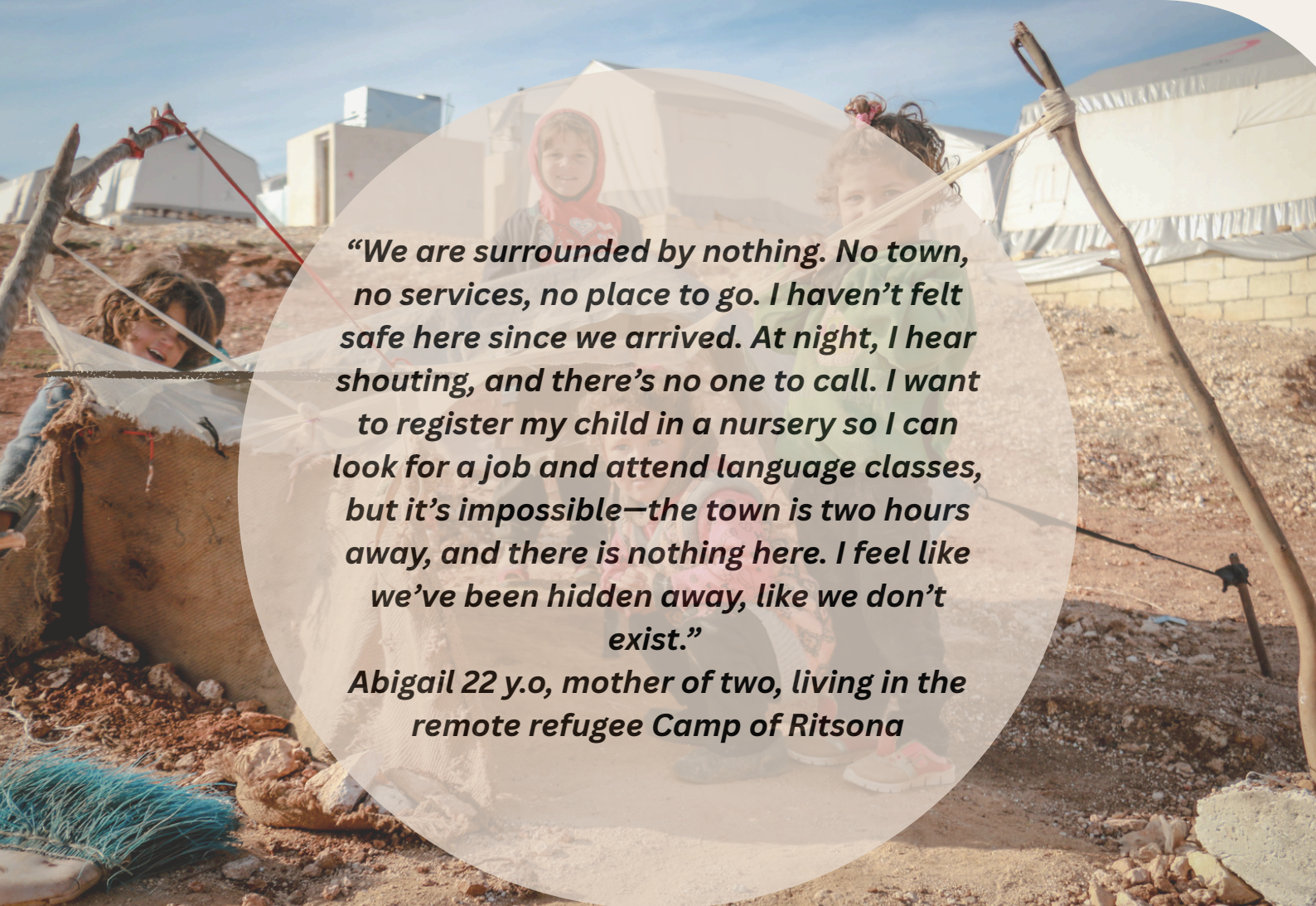


“We live in a metal box. In summer, it feels like it’s on fire. In winter, we sleep in our jackets. There are five of us—my grandparents, my cousin, my sister, and me. We share one small bed. The toilets outside are dirty and smell bad. At night, strangers walk between the containers. There are no locks. No one to help if someone comes in. I don’t feel safe here. I feel like I have to protect everyone.”

Ahmed, 15 y.o

Ahmed fled conflict in Afghanistan with his grandparents, sister and cousin. Along the way, he was separated from his sister and grandparents — a terrifying experience for a child. When he finally reached Greece with his cousin, he was relieved to be reunited with his family. But life inside the camp brought new fears. Living in a cramped metal container with no locks and no sense of safety, Ahmed shoulders a quiet burden: trying to stay strong for his loved ones while they await a decision on their asylum claim.

Ahmed’s account reflects the harsh reality of life in many refugee camps in Greece, where metal containers serve as overcrowded, poorly insulated shelters. In summer, they become unbearably hot; in winter, families sleep in jackets to stay warm. Sanitation is often inadequate, with outdoor toilets that are dirty and unsafe. What’s more concerning is the lack of security. Residents — including families and vulnerable individuals — report feeling exposed and unprotected, especially at night. Without safety, privacy, or basic infrastructure, they offer not protection, but prolonged hardship.



“We are surrounded by nothing. No town, no services, no place to go. I haven’t felt safe here since we arrived. At night, I hear shouting, and there’s no one to call. I want to register my child in a nursery so I can look for a job and attend language classes, but it’s impossible—the town is two hours away, and there is nothing here. I feel like we’ve been hidden away, like we don’t exist.”

Abigail 22 y.o, mother of two, living in the remote refugee Camp of Ritsona

Across Greece, these closed controlled facilities serve at the moment as the only housing solution for thousands of asylum seekers. They are often deliberately placed in remote areas, far from cities and communities where life happens. Isolated from society, people face daily barriers to basic services—healthcare, education, legal support, and the chance to rebuild.

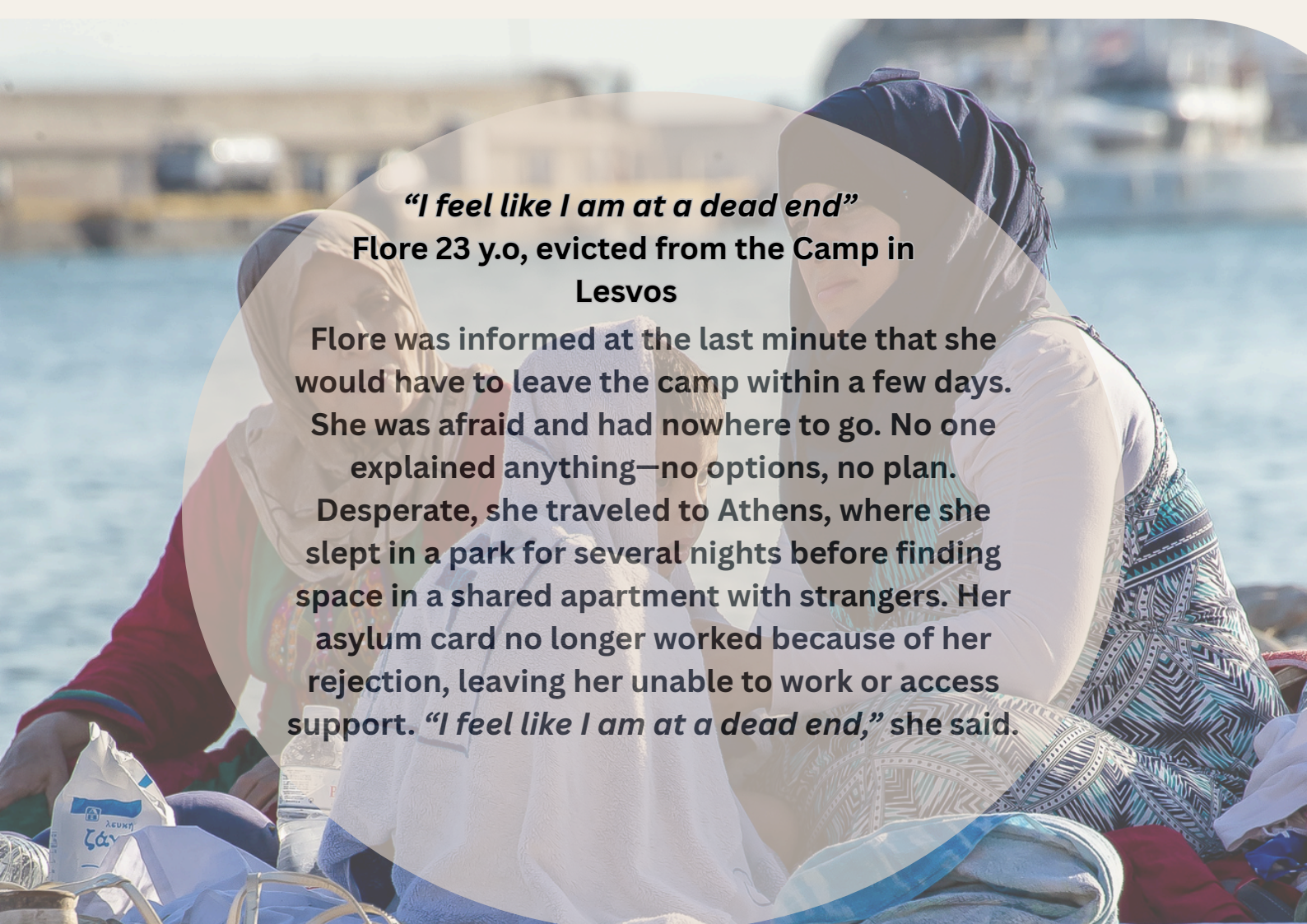
These conditions are not only degrading but also deeply isolating. Cut off from essential services and support networks, families are left vulnerable and invisible. Children are denied education and a sense of normalcy, women lack safe spaces and protection, and everyone endures the harm of prolonged exclusion.

For children, the impact is especially severe. With no structured early childhood care and disrupted schooling, even basic needs like nutrition and safety are unreliable. These are not places where children can grow, but where isolation and distress quietly take hold.



CAMP EVICTIONS AND HOMELESSNESS

Recent directives from Greece's Ministry of Migration and Asylum have led to widespread camp evictions, mandating both recognized refugees and rejected asylum seekers to vacate often without any alternative accommodation arrangements. This sudden displacement risks pushing families into homelessness, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, health crises, and trauma



“I feel like I am at a dead end”

**Flore 23 y.o, evicted from the Camp in
Lesvos**

Flore was informed at the last minute that she would have to leave the camp within a few days. She was afraid and had nowhere to go. No one explained anything—no options, no plan.

Desperate, she traveled to Athens, where she slept in a park for several nights before finding space in a shared apartment with strangers. Her asylum card no longer worked because of her rejection, leaving her unable to work or access support. ***“I feel like I am at a dead end,”*** she said.

Entire communities are uprooted overnight, forced to leave with whatever they can carry, and offered no clear path forward. For the most vulnerable—pregnant women, mothers with young children, adults, and people with chronic illnesses or disabilities—these moments are not only disruptive but profoundly traumatic. These evictions happen without transitional plans, shelter alternatives, or any psychosocial support. Children end up sleeping in parks, abandoned buildings, or overcrowded apartments. Each cycle of instability further erodes any fragile sense of safety and belonging.

Our latest Joint Statement details the wave of camp evictions in Greece, their devastating impact, and our call to end these practices and ensure safe, dignified housing for all.



“They told me I had to leave. I begged and told them that I am don’t have anywhere to go. I have no family here, no money, and no one to help with my baby. They did not listen to me”

Safa, a 22-year-old woman

Safa, from Afghanistan, arrived in Greece with her infant daughter after fleeing forced marriage and escalating violence in her hometown. For some months, she was staying in a camp on the mainland while her asylum case was being processed. She had no legal counsel and struggled to understand the process, but clung to hope that she and her child would be protected. When her claim was rejected, she filed an appeal — hoping for a second chance. But some weeks later, she was handed an eviction notice, followed by a second rejection on her application.

A dangerous legal gray zone that leaves many asylum seekers caught in limbo: while they may still have the right to pursue their claims through new applications (subsequent), they are denied access to housing, financial support, and often legal aid during this critical period. For women with children and survivors of gender-based violence, this policy creates extreme vulnerability, exposing them to risks of homelessness, exploitation, and trafficking.

Compounding this, the lack of accessible legal information and interpretation during the asylum process means many do not fully understand why their claims were rejected or how to challenge the decisions. In Safa’s case, she faced rejection without adequate legal representation, and her eviction ignored both her right to file a subsequent application and the well-being of her infant daughter—highlighting a system that too often overlooks the most vulnerable.

ASYLUM PROCEDURES AND LEGAL HURDLES

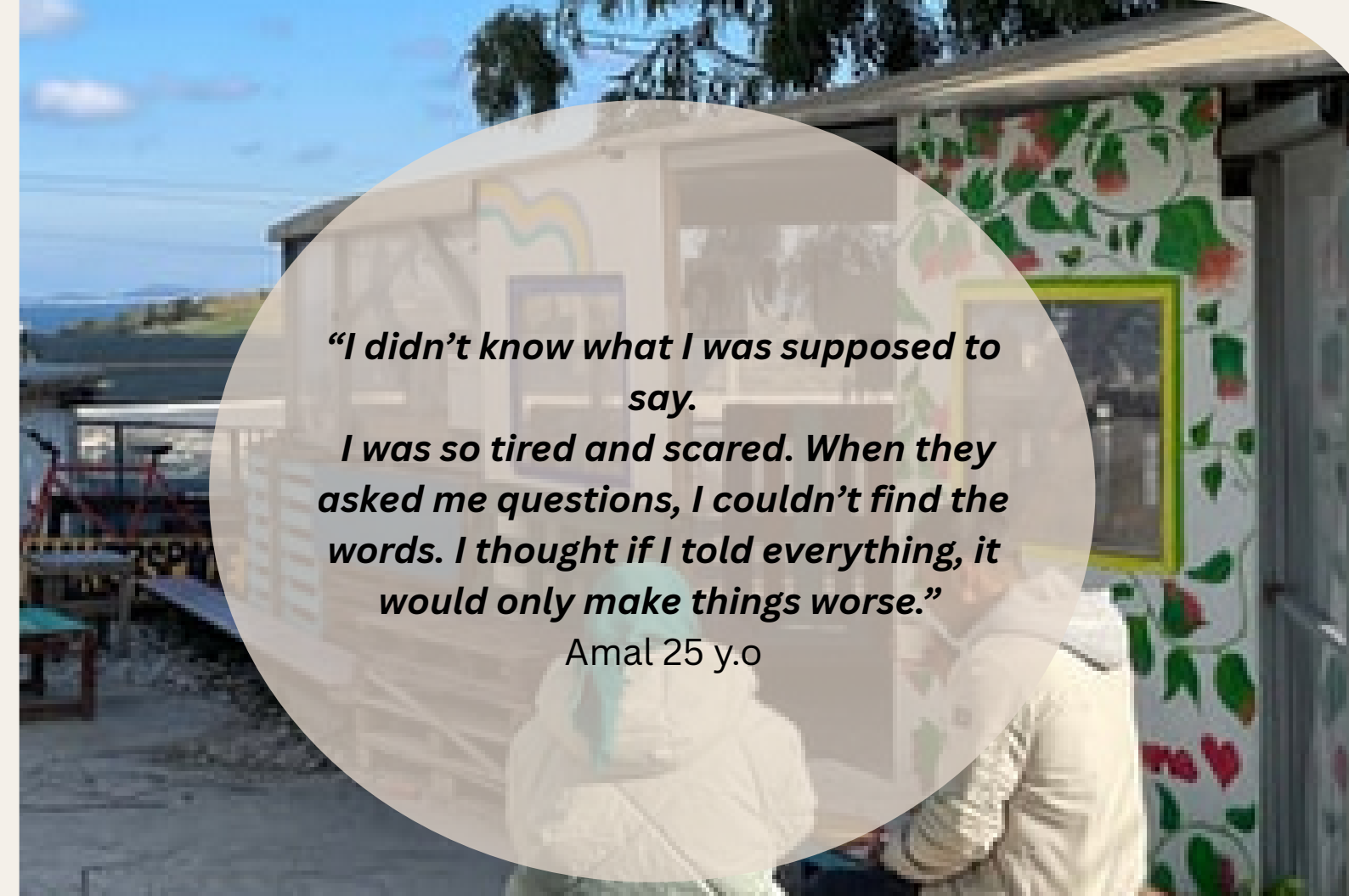
Asylum Procedures and Legal Hurdles
Access to asylum on the Greek mainland has become increasingly difficult. Under the practice currently being followed, people without travel documents who wish to seek asylum are required to approach a police station to express their intention to apply for international protection. Because of their irregular entry/ stay, DCI Greece has observed cases in which applicants are then held in police custody, including families with children, sometimes overnight. Following the involvement of the competent prosecutor, they are transferred to the Malakasa Reception and Identification Centre (RIC), in case they are in Attica Region, where registration and asylum procedures are completed.

ASYLUM PROCEDURES AND LEGAL HURDLES

This creates a serious protection concern: people seeking asylum experience deprivation of liberty, including children, as part of the practical route to accessing the procedure.

Once in Reception and Identification Centres, short procedural timeframes, complex procedures and limited access to

individualised legal assistance create further barriers, particularly for applicants with heightened vulnerabilities. These barriers can directly affect a person's ability to understand the procedure, disclose experiences of persecution, trafficking or violence, and present the elements essential to their protection claim. The individual stories that follow illustrate how procedural barriers can translate into real consequences for people seeking safety.



“I didn’t know what I was supposed to say.

I was so tired and scared. When they asked me questions, I couldn’t find the words. I thought if I told everything, it would only make things worse.”

Amal 25 y.o

When Amal arrived alone in Greece with her two young children, she was given only two weeks before her asylum interview. She received no information about the purpose of the interview, what documents were required, or how to prepare herself. Still recovering from the journey and in a state of emotional and physical exhaustion, she struggled to understand what was expected of her.

During the interview, Amal felt too afraid to speak openly about the individuals who had abused her in her country of origin and the people that trafficked her to Turkey. She was concerned that disclosing these details could somehow endanger her or her family if the information were to circulate beyond the authorities. Lacking legal guidance and support, she was unable to present the full extent of her experiences. Several months later, she received a rejection decision.

LEGAL PROCEDURES

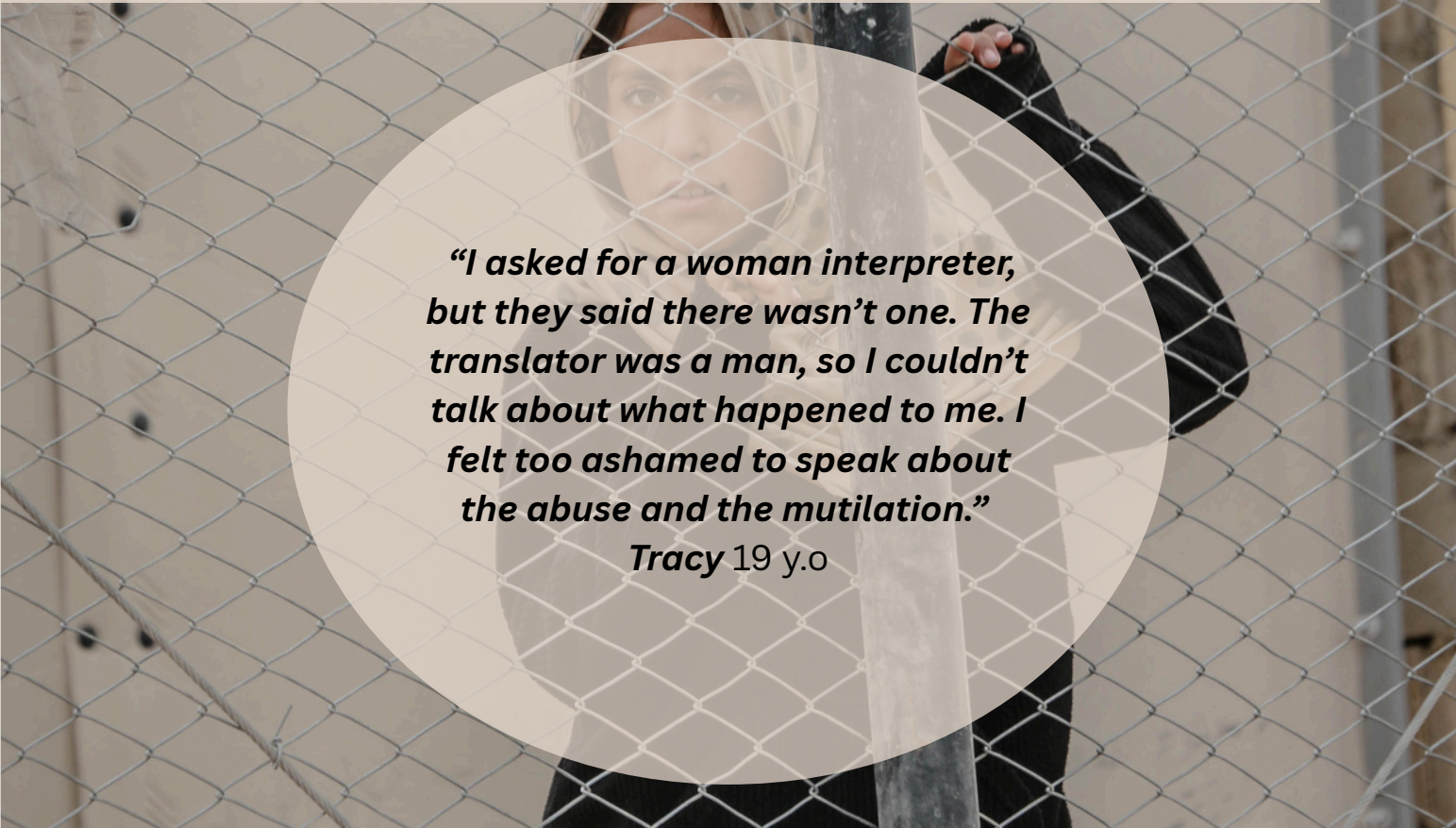
“I was so scared I would say the wrong thing and be sent back. The interview felt more like an interrogation, and I was so confused about the dates and details that I was worried they wouldn’t believe me.”

Rashid, 18 y.o

The asylum process in Greece is often characterized by accelerated timelines and a lack of procedural safeguards. In most instances, applicants have very limited time between the registration of their claim and their substantive interview, with sudden scheduling changes further contributing to confusion and distress.

New arrivals typically receive minimal information about their rights and obligations, the purpose of the asylum interview, or the types of documentation and evidence required to support their claims. There is no systematic process for identifying survivors of torture, trafficking, or other forms of severe violence, despite the critical importance of this information for assessing protection needs.

LEGAL PROCEDURES



“I asked for a woman interpreter, but they said there wasn’t one. The translator was a man, so I couldn’t talk about what happened to me. I felt too ashamed to speak about the abuse and the mutilation.”

Tracy 19 y.o

The absence of accessible, high-quality interpretation services and the lack of free state-funded legal assistance at first instance leave applicants to navigate highly complex procedures unassisted. Many individuals are reluctant to disclose experiences of persecution or abuse, either due to fear that sharing such information could place them or their families at further risk, or because they do not understand that these details are essential to their application.

These deficiencies contribute to a high incidence of negative decisions, often issued without applicants having had a meaningful opportunity to present their case. This was the experience of Amal, who arrived in Greece with her two young children. Without adequate information or legal support, she was unable to explain the threats and exploitation she had suffered. Her initial application was rejected, leaving her feeling isolated and unheard. Only after securing legal assistance was she able to reopen her case and begin to substantiate her need for international protection.

Family Separations in Greece

“I came back from the hospital and my children were gone. No one informed me, what happened to them. I was looking them for more than a year.”

Preuve arrived in Greece with her three young children after fleeing violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Reaching Greece felt like a chance to begin again. They were placed in a state-run shelter, and for a brief moment, Preuve believed they were safe. Following a short hospitalization Preuve returned to discover after a year of searching them that her children had been taken by social services and placed in the child protection system. She received no clear explanation, no timely notice, and no legal support.

Across Greece, refugee mothers often face the risk of losing their children due to homelessness, poverty, or just due to brief hospitalizations for medical needs. Temporary decisions by prosecutors, intended to protect children, often become permanent when mothers lack access to legal advocacy and support. When a single parent experiences for instance a medical emergency, child protection services can intervene swiftly – but there are no clear procedures to ensure reunification once the crisis passes. For migrant families, this often leads to long-term separation with little to no follow-up or support.

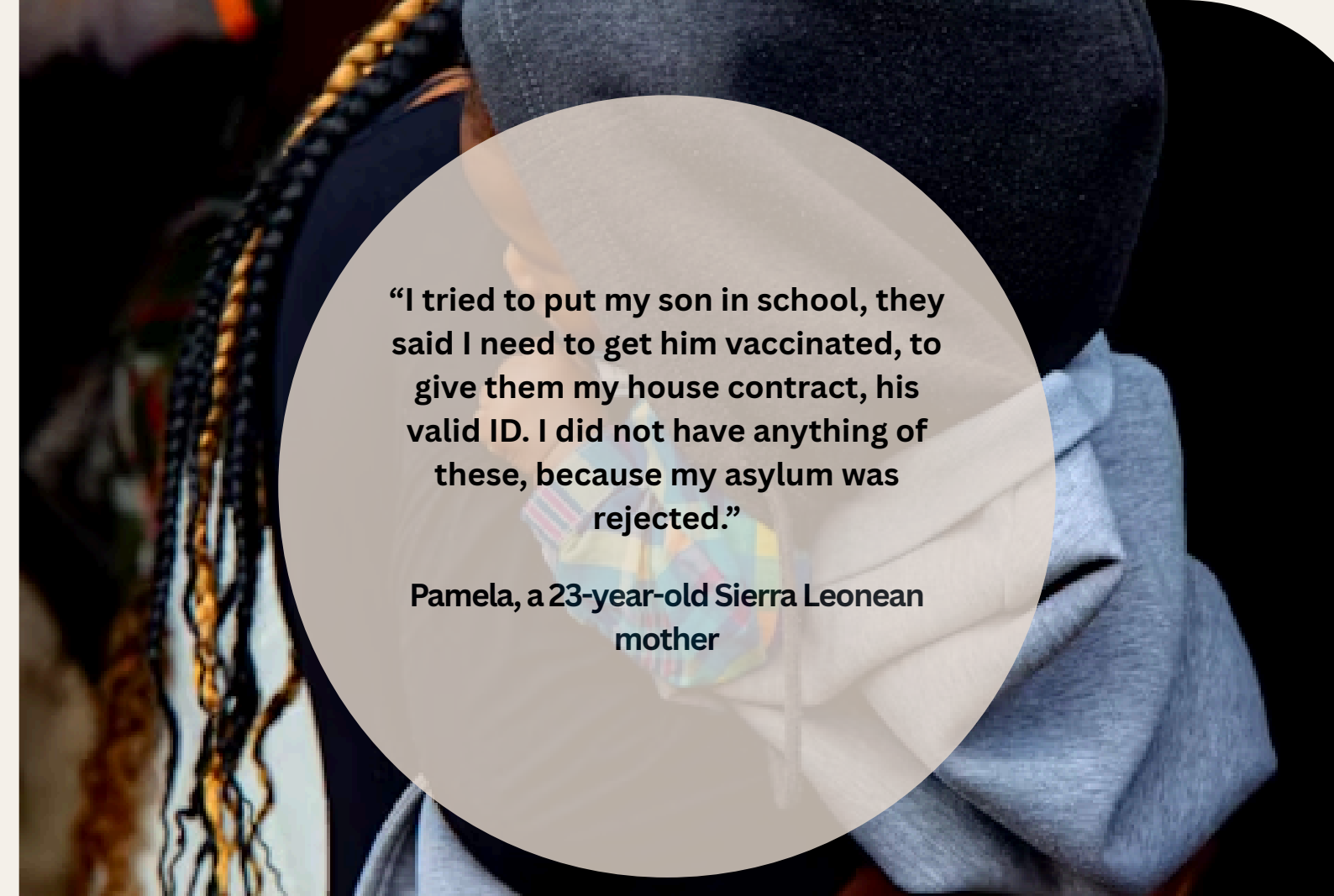
Language barriers compound the harm. Parents frequently receive no interpretation or written notice explaining what’s happening, where their children are taken, or how they can appeal the separation. Reuniting with their children then becomes a legal battle many parents are unequipped to fight, especially given the severe shortage of legal aid, making reunification nearly impossible without outside intervention. Legally, the gaps are glaring. Greek child protection law (L. 2447/1996) allows for state intervention but doesn’t set specific safeguards for asylum-seeking or refugee families. Meanwhile, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – which obliges Greece to keep families together unless separation serves the child’s best interest – is often bypassed in practice.

Accompanied minors

The Greek system lacks basic child-centered infrastructure for refugee families. Early childhood education is nearly inaccessible for children under four, and psychosocial and medical care for minors remains fragmented, leaving many without critical developmental support.

Accompanied children are treated solely as dependents of their mothers, not as rights-holders in their own right. Services are built around adult needs, overlooking the well-being of the child.

As a result, many refugee children remain undocumented and effectively invisible — excluded from healthcare, education, and the chance to build a stable, dignified future.



“I tried to put my son in school, they said I need to get him vaccinated, to give them my house contract, his valid ID. I did not have anything of these, because my asylum was rejected.”

Pamela, a 23-year-old Sierra Leonean mother

Pamela, a 23-year-old mother from Sierra Leone, arrived in Greece two years ago with her young son. When she tried to enroll him in school, she encountered numerous obstacles, as she did not possess any of the required documents proving legal residence or identity. Without official papers, public services—including education and healthcare—were effectively out of reach. It turns procedural requirements into practical barriers, blocking children from classrooms and clinics, not through law, but through system design.

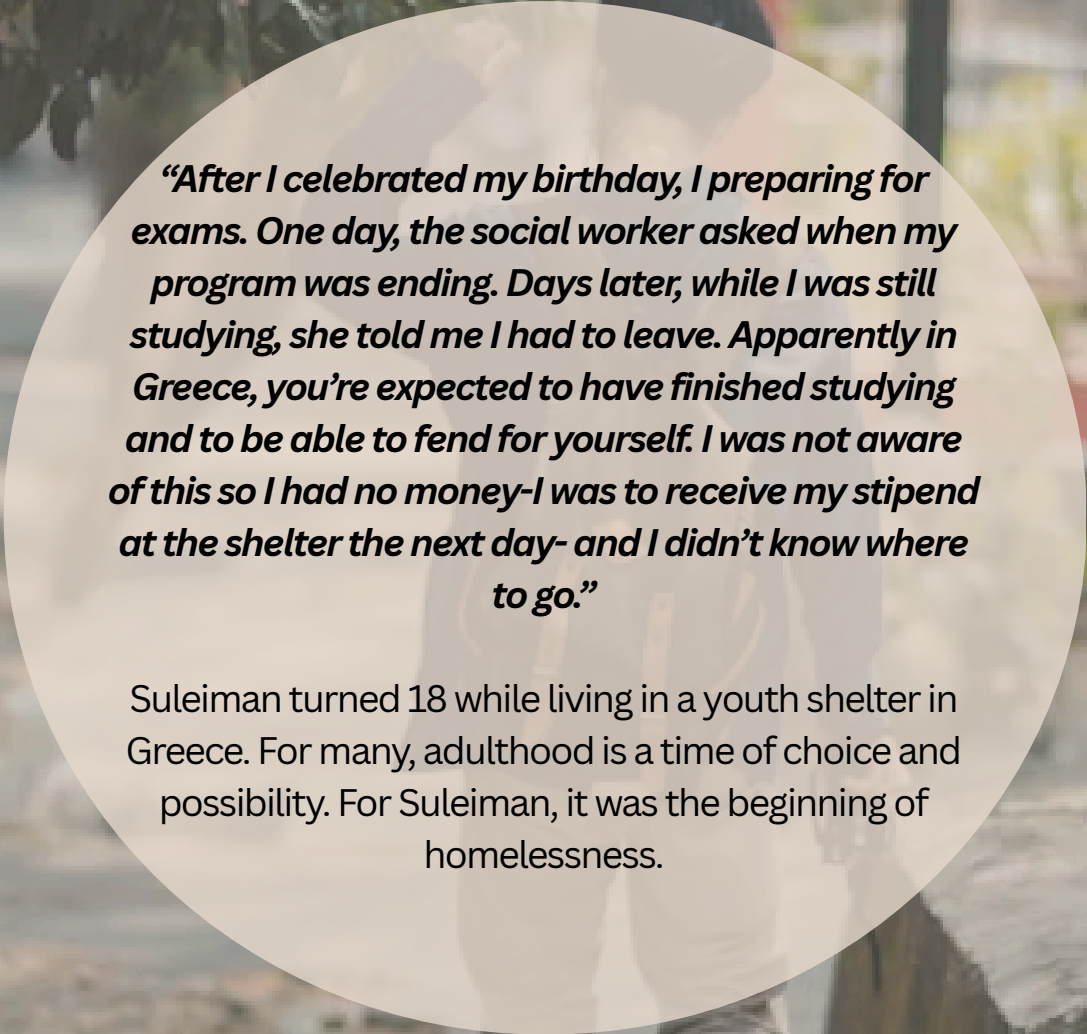
It was only with the support of legal and medical assistance provided by non-governmental organizations like DCI Greece that Pamela was able to navigate these obstacles. Legal advisors helped her prepare and submit a formal complaint to the Ombudsperson for the Rights of the Child, documenting the systemic challenges she faced. This advocacy, combined with persistent follow-up and medical documentation of her son’s needs, eventually led to a resolution, allowing her child to enroll in school and access basic services.

Until the health and education systems are fully coordinated to uphold the rights of every child, children like Pamela will remain marginalized, denied the essential protections they were promised.

INTEGRATION

After arriving in Greece and successfully navigating complex legal procedures to obtain documentation, people continue to face daily struggles securing stable housing, income, and social inclusion.

Greece's fragmented bureaucracy and constantly changing policies create barriers that prevent access to education, work, and healthcare. Without a clear national plan for integration, these individuals remain trapped in uncertainty, unable to rebuild their lives or fully participate in society.



“After I celebrated my birthday, I preparing for exams. One day, the social worker asked when my program was ending. Days later, while I was still studying, she told me I had to leave. Apparently in Greece, you’re expected to have finished studying and to be able to fend for yourself. I was not aware of this so I had no money-I was to receive my stipend at the shelter the next day- and I didn’t know where to go.”

Suleiman turned 18 while living in a youth shelter in Greece. For many, adulthood is a time of choice and possibility. For Suleiman, it was the beginning of homelessness.

Like thousands of unaccompanied minors in Greece, Suleiman was forced to leave state care the moment he turned 18. Although his asylum case was still pending, he lost his shelter, and access to child protection services — all because he was now Administratively considered an adult. Fortunately, we found Suleiman soon after his eviction. We provided temporary housing and later helped him relocate to another shelter. His case, while supported, is the exception — many other teens in his position have no documents, no job, no funds , and no one to turn to. There is no structured transition for youth aging out of care, and supported Independent Living programs are scarce, leaving young people dangerously exposed to homelessness, exploitation, and further trauma.

“When they told me I had to leave the camp after my approval, I asked the HELIOS program for help,” he explained. They said I needed a rental contract. But how can I get a contract without money to rent a house? I am trying to find job, but it may take some time..”

Ibrahim 25 y.o

At 25 years old, Ibrahim believed that being granted refugee status in Greece would mark a new beginning. Originally from Sudan, he had waited several years to finally receive international protection. But even after his status was approved, there was almost no support to help him rebuild his life.

Ibrahim's situation highlights a recurring failure in Greece's approach to integration: newly recognized refugees are expected to achieve self-sufficiency almost overnight, without any realistic support to make that possible. After receiving asylum, refugees like Ibrahim are given just 30 days to leave the camps, regardless of whether they have found a place to live or secured any source of income. While, in theory, they are allowed to work, in practice most have had no opportunity to prepare for life outside the camps, arrange accommodation, or build any financial stability.

At the same time, the HELIOS+ integration program, which offers rental subsidies and other assistance, requires beneficiaries to already have a formal housing contract. But landlords frequently demand deposits and proof of income that few refugees can provide immediately after exiting the reception system. Without stable housing, it is almost impossible to begin learning the language, seek employment, or enroll children in school. This creates a harsh cycle: people are forced out of accommodation before they have any foothold in society, then denied support precisely because they lack the stability the system demands. The result is that integration remains out of reach for many who need it most.



***“I’ve been in Greece for over six years
and still don’t have papers. Every time I
get close, they change the rules again. I
am exhausted.”***

Halida arrived in Greece as a teenager, while fleeing from conflict in Pakistan. She has lived through the collapse of the initial reception system, bounced between informal housing and temporary shelters, and navigated a legal maze that has kept her without status for nearly a decade.

Despite doing everything asked of her — providing documentation, attending interviews, and renewing expired cards — she remains undocumented. Each time she comes close to securing legal residence, a new policy, administrative delay, or eligibility change pushes her further away from protection.

Halida’s six-year wait for legal status is the result of shifting policies, chronic delays, and legal uncertainty within Greece’s asylum and migration systems. In recent years, Greek authorities have frequently amended asylum regulations and residence permit requirements —often with little notice or transitional support. Each new policy change effectively resets the process, forcing individuals who have already complied with previous procedures to start over or risk losing their limited rights.

Most recently, changes to migration procedures and the legal framework for residence permits have closed off pathways for individuals whose asylum claims have been rejected but who have lived in Greece for many years. Under earlier rules, some people in this situation could regularize their stay through migration law—obtaining a residence permit based on long-term residence, employment, or humanitarian grounds. However, these options have been significantly restricted or removed altogether, leaving many without any viable route to legal documentation. As a consequence, despite years of residence, Halida is treated administratively as if she has only just arrived. With no clear pathway to regularization and ever-changing requirements, she remains trapped in legal limbo—a revolving door of shifting rules, repeated rejections, and indefinite waiting.

NEW EU PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

The EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum introduced sweeping changes that reshape how asylum is handled at Europe's borders, particularly in frontline countries like Greece.

While framed as an effort to “streamline” procedures, the pact raises serious concerns about access to protection, legal assistance, and fundamental rights.

What Changes – Where New Gaps Are Created?



One of the most significant shifts is the **expansion of accelerated and mandatory border procedures, especially on the Greek islands**. These “special” procedures are to be completed within days, often without proper legal support, and may include **detention under the legal fiction of non-entry – meaning people physically present in Greece will legally be treated as if they haven’t entered the country at all, including families with children**.

A **new screening process**, to be completed within seven days, heightens the risk of improper vulnerability assessments if access to legal aid is not guaranteed from the start. The expansion of the Eurodac biometric database – **now including fingerprints and facial images of children as young as six** – also raises privacy and data protection concerns.

The Pact’s Crisis Regulation allows EU states to suspend key safeguards during “mass arrivals,” a condition Greece frequently faces. Meanwhile, the first-country-of-entry rule remains intact, leaving countries like Greece to shoulder disproportionate responsibility without meaningful support. **New return border procedures may also enable summary returns**, risking violations of the principle of non-refoulement – the prohibition on returning people to countries where they face harm.

Ultimately, the Pact prioritizes containment and control over protection and solidarity. Without strong safeguards and proper oversight, it threatens to deepen existing gaps, increase detention and deportation risks, and further strain systems that are already overwhelmed at Europe’s borders.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a small, vibrant red heart. The hand is positioned in the lower right, with fingers gently cupping the heart. The background consists of horizontal white wooden planks with visible grain and texture. A semi-transparent purple rectangular box is overlaid on the left and center of the image, containing white text.

The complex challenges in Greece, from bureaucratic hurdles and overcrowded camps to strict policies and fragmented services, leave many people trapped in uncertainty and exclusion. Without comprehensive support, including legal assistance, access to basic services, and coordinated integration efforts, those seeking safety cannot rebuild their lives with dignity. Immediate investment is needed to address these gaps and provide practical solutions that empower individuals and strengthen communities.

Defence for Children International – Greece is an organization that stands alongside the most vulnerable individuals, especially those who have faced the harsh realities of war, displacement, and gender-based violence.

Through our Center, we provide a safe haven for those in need: children, youth transitioning to adulthood, vulnerable girls, and young mothers who are survivors of extreme violence. Here, they find more than just support—they discover a space where dreams are nurtured, voices are amplified, and their safety is a top priority.

Our beneficiaries receive socio-legal support throughout the asylum process, psychosocial services, empowerment and therapeutic activities, and access to vital information in an environment that places their safety at the forefront.

Our team of specialists applies a comprehensive, holistic, and trauma-informed approach to ensure the protection and well-being of everyone we serve.

Our services were honored with the Global Child 10 Award from Sweden in 2020, in recognition of their high quality and impact. These achievements are a testament to the effective work carried out by DCI-Greece.

For more information about the report please contact Ms Tsekeri Nantina (CEO and Founder) at nantinatsekeri.dci@gmail.com

Defence for

Greece

Children's R

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