

“Things Are Not Well”:

Learning from the Lived Experiences of Social Workers Engaged with Refugee Populations in Greece¹

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Abstract

The global refugee crisis persists while Greece continues its struggle to manage hundreds of thousands of refugees. Geographically proximate to the Middle East and Africa and a member of the European Union, Greece is a primary entry point for refugees. In the context of longstanding economic and political strife, this article explores the experiences of social workers engaged with refugees in Greece to capture current practices at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Herein, social work roles are examined, as well as the perceived impact of their work, coping strategies, and recommendations for education and training in refugee social work. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this study includes content analysis of qualitative data gathered through empirically based structured interviews, alongside descriptive data analysis of Likert-type items. Key themes emerged, highlighting systemic issues, disparities in refugee treatment based on nationality, and optimal training approaches for future practitioners. Quantitative analysis reveals, with minimal variability, that social workers from this sample feel they are performing with somewhat to significant effectiveness with their refugee clients. Overall, the study underscores significant systemic challenges in Greece's response to refugees. However, it also recognizes the resilience of refugee populations and the dedication of numerous individuals and organizations in providing essential services and support.

Key Words:

Refugees, social work, Greece, resettlement, migration

1 Introduction

Since 2015, approximately 2 million refugees (roughly the population of Paris) have arrived in or passed through Greece, even as the country faced an economic depression that left 36% of Greeks in economic distress (Economou et al., 2016; Baban et al., 2017;

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Cavounidis, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). As an EU member, Greece represents a hub of complex dynamics; while much of its population supports refugee resettlement, the country has also seen a rise in divisive politics, partly in response to economic instability. In this setting, social workers play a critical role, providing support to refugees despite extreme challenges and limited resources. This article explores their experiences to identify current practices for intervention and self-care and guide future training for social workers in Greece. It builds on earlier research conducted in Germany (Hagues et al., 2019) and Lebanon (Cecil et al, 2021). Herein, the term refugee is used broadly to include both refugees and asylum seekers, regardless of formal status. While legal distinctions are discussed later, refugee refers to anyone forced to flee their country of origin due to safety concerns (United Nations General Assembly, 1967).

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Social Work Profession in Greece

Social work in Greece is a government recognized and regulated profession with a long, though somewhat discontinuous, development (Plantazis, 2007). Social work developed along with social services and professional education in the post-World War II decades, though it was severely disrupted, along with many civil institutions, during the Regime of Colonels (1967-1974) (Antoniou et al., 2017). Social work's roots are in philanthropy, church and voluntary initiatives, but emerged with professional recognition in the late 1900s. Professional status is primarily through a four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree at public higher-education institutions (National Registry of Qualifications [EOPPEP], n.d.). The Hellenic Association of Social Workers (SKLE, n.d.) dates back to 1955 and provides a formalized professional infrastructure by issuing commencement and confirmation of legal practice (Law 4488/2017).

Going into the economic crisis (~2008) that preceded and endured through the refugee crisis, social need rose sharply while state welfare capacity and staffing stability weakened (Carastathis et al., 2018). Public-sector social workers found their practice conditions dramatically reshaped, generating professional strain. The 2015-2016 refugee emergency layered a new and complex workload onto an already stressed system (Teloni, et al., 2023).

2.2 Understanding Greece's History in relation to Refugees

To understand Greece's response to the refugee crisis, one must examine its migration history and key socio-cultural and political events going back to post-World War II when Greece had a small economy and limited infrastructure (Kandylaki, 2020). During the right-wing military Greek junta (aka, Regime of the Colonels) (1967-1974), Greek emigrants fled to the United States, Australia, and Germany (Conispoloatis, 2007). When democracy was restored, approximately 625,000 repatriates, mainly from Germany and Eastern Europe, returned to Greece. Greece received migrants in the 1980s, but after the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, more than a million repatriates returned from Eastern Europe (Kandylaki, 2020).

Since the 1990s, Greece has faced significant migration pressures, especially through the Aegean Sea and Evros land borders with Türkiye. By 2001, immigrants made up 10% of the population (Kandylaki & Nagopoulos, 2021). The crisis peaked between spring 2015

and 2016, as asylum seekers fleeing the Syrian war entered the EU via Greece's Eastern Mediterranean route (Ors, 2020). By December 2016, Greece had created 20,000 reception places, including for unaccompanied minors. The 2016 EU-Turkey Statement aimed to curb irregular crossings and allowed the return of unauthorized migrants from Greek islands, reducing inflows in the months that followed (Martin, 2020). In return, the EU agreed to provide aid to Türkiye (Legislative Train Schedule, 2024). Despite these measures, the Aegean Sea route remained under heavy migratory pressure in 2017, becoming the EU's main entry point (Frontex, 2018).

Greece faced rising immigration and asylum pressures in 2018 and 2019 (Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2019). In September 2019, over 10,000 migrants arrived on the Greek islands – the highest monthly total since the March 2016 EU-Türkiye Statement – triggering renewed refugee challenges. With support from the European Commission, the UNHCR funded local and international NGOs to assist with relocation and provide independent housing for refugees (Kondilis et al., 2021). In February 2020, just before COVID-19 shutdowns, Türkiye reopened its border with Greece, prompting a surge in attempted crossings. Greece viewed this as a weaponization of migration. In response, Türkiye and human rights groups accused Greece of illegally pushing back migrants, endangering vulnerable populations and violating international law (Karamandidou & Kasperek, 2022).

2.3 Greece's Economic and Political Problems

Resettling refugees has proven difficult, complex, and costly across Europe (DeBacker et al., 2024), but Greece's capacity to do so has been especially hindered by decades of political and economic instability, further intensified by the 2008-2009 global recession. The crisis led to severe cuts in public welfare and social services and a freeze on hiring, leaving agencies short-staffed (BBC News, 2010; Carastathis et al., 2018). As a result, workers, including social workers, became overworked, underpaid, and unsupported (Teloni et al., 2023). During this period, political tensions rose, with some parties expressing strong anti-immigrant views (Stylianidis & Souliotis, 2019). Before the crisis, Greece relied on short-term planning, which led to a steep socio-economic decline (Mitsakis, 2014; Economou et al., 2016). Among EU countries, Greece experienced the most prolonged and severe recession. National wealth dropped by 40%, unemployment peaked at 27%, and over half a million young, skilled Greeks emigrated (Cavounidis, 2018; Marangudakis & Chadjipadelis, 2019).

Despite internal efforts, Greece required a €289 billion bailout from the EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Austerity measures triggered riots, deepened the debt crisis, caused a banking collapse, and halted foreign loans. Greece lost control of its account deficit and became the first OECD country to default on sovereign debt—the largest default in history (Gourinchas et al., 2017). By 2019, signs of recovery emerged, but COVID-19 reversed progress. Lockdowns forced refugees into overcrowded camps, further restricting access to healthcare and education (Gunst et al., 2019; Kondilis et al., 2021). The government, overwhelmed by the pandemic, deprioritized refugee needs. More recently, wildfires have threatened tourism and refugee camps (Fadel, 2023). Refugees arriving in Greece face a nation still recovering and struggling to meet basic needs.

2.4 Humanitarian Response in Crisis: Refugees and the Greek Welfare State

Although Greece is bound by international humanitarian obligations, its social welfare system, even with support from NGOs and grassroots services, cannot meet refugees' complex needs (Tramontanis et al., 2022). With a registered refugee population of 160,000 and an annual growth rate of 25% (MacroTrends, 2024), the asylum system faces severe backlogs. After difficult and often traumatic journeys, refugees enter harsh realities, such as the camp at Moria, where overcrowding and under-resourcing create environments that undermine human dignity as well as efforts of people like social workers attempting to help (Emmanouilidou, 2023). Many refugees wait up to two years for registration, and once recognized, hardships often worsen. Fallon (2022) argues that "destitution is almost inevitable," as poverty, homelessness, and exploitation persist. Refugees face trauma, depression, addiction, and violence; some resort to self-organized housing initiatives (Tsavdaroglou & Lalenis, 2020).

Despite these systemic failures, Greece hosts a remarkable network of support efforts, led largely by NGOs and grassroots groups (Teloni et al., 2023). Organizations such as UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Hellenic Red Cross, and the International Rescue Committee (2023) collaborate with local groups like ΑΠΣΙΣ, Caritas Hellas, and Το Χαμόγελο του Παιδιού to provide aid, legal services, healthcare, and integration support (UNHCR, 2024; Botschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Athen, 2019). Municipal efforts, including Athens' Migrant Integration Center, demonstrate localized commitment to inclusion. These initiatives reflect deep humanitarian dedication but also highlight the limits of a national system still unable to ensure consistent, long-term protection for displaced populations. It is important to note how important resilient moves (Van Acker et al., 2023), purposeful actions within refugee communities aimed at navigating uncertainty, are to the welfare of the refugee population.

This study explores how social workers navigate Greece's strained support system while serving refugees on the front lines. The goal of the study is to understand current practices at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels through better understanding social work roles, the perceived impact of the work, and coping strategies.

3 Methods

3.1 Data Collection

Extensive steps were taken to protect participants and the populations they serve. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' institution (application EXPD-PH-23-SUM-1). Informed consent procedures were carefully administered with each interview, ensuring confidentiality. Participants were also provided with researcher contact information and informed of their right to withdraw from the study in the months following participation.

This study used a convergent mixed methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010), as qualitative and quantitative data were collected in the same phase, analyzed separately, and brought together for comparison. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth, in-person interviews of social workers who work for a variety of agencies throughout Athens, Thessaloniki, and Lesbos using a semi-structured interview guide. Questions explored social workers' perceptions and experiences in the following areas:

1. "Big picture" refugee situation in Greece and evolution of refugee circumstances since 2015
2. Discrepancies between refugee-reception "types" (i.e., economic, war-torn)
3. Refugees' greatest needs
4. Recommendations for continuing education/training

Individual interviews were approximately one hour long while group interviews lasted over two hours. These were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first two authors and two graduate assistants. While most of the interviews were conducted completely in English, the third author is Greek and speaks fluent Greek, and was able to assist anytime there was a question on meaning. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to ensure confidentiality. Participants did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so because of the sensitive nature of this research, supporting data are not available. Most interviews were conducted in offices where refugees are served, however, some were conducted at cafes and one at a local university.

An ordinal-level quantitative survey reinforced qualitative findings regarding participants' perceptions of the adequacy of resources and their overall effectiveness. The following items were analyzed individually and as an aggregate.

1. Extent to which you feel you are working effectively
2. Extent to which you feel you have resources needed
3. Extent to which you feel service recipients are benefiting

3.2 Recruitment and participants

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. One author, a social work professor in Greece, leveraged professional connections to invite resettlement agency staff and former students. The study includes 28 (N=28) participants working in social work roles across a variety of programs, including NGOs, grassroots, and governmental. Six participants identified as male (n=6) and 22 identified as female (n=22). The average age was 34.36 ($\bar{x}$ =34.36) with a range of 37 (R=37, 23-60). Eighteen (n=18) had formal social work education. Nine (n=9) had post-graduate coursework or master's degrees. Ten (n=10) worked as social workers with educational backgrounds in psychology, special education, political science, and linguistics.

3.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using constant comparative method via Atlas.Ti (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Charmaz, 2014). The first two authors coded initial interviews together using both inductive/deductive methods and a consensus approach. The research instrument guided coding, which was refined into categories and common themes. After coding the first three interviews, the authors divided the remaining interviews to code individually. To strengthen validity, author 3 and 4 verified themes (Whittemore et al., 2001). Findings on social worker coping and motivation appear in a separate article (see Hagues et al, 2026). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations.

4 Findings

Qualitative themes were sorted into four categories that emerged from the data: 1) evolution of refugee circumstances since 2015, 2) discrepancies between "types" of refugees, 3) refugees' greatest needs, and 4) social workers' recommendations for preparation and training. To strengthen the validity of findings, the headings used were derived from the tone, and in some cases, the very words of participants. These headings are the overarching and sub-themes.

4.1 Qualitative Findings

4.1.1 *Evolution of Refugee Circumstances since 2015*

- *"Things are not well."* -

Participants described a Greek government that is overwhelmed and reluctant in their response to refugees. Refugees face extreme poverty, lack resources, unpredictable wait times for registration, human rights violations in camps, and misuse of resources as deterrence. Lydia explained that the government sometimes changes the document request and delays processing paperwork. Government delays undermine confidence in social workers and discourage refugees. Agnes discussed her experience with a refugee minor who needed specialty medical care that she struggled to access on his behalf.

"We have one boy that was having a kidney problem. Both kidneys [didn't] work at all.... that first how as a ministry you put [this] boy, that he's so vulnerable and needs medical care and medical treatment...how you put him in a shelter that... doesn't have doctor?"

Sophia also discussed the lack of services available due to government negligence. She reported,

"[t]he situation is difficult. Most programs have closed here. We have many programs; the one that is for refugees and asylum seekers have closed and all the people in the camps, and now all the staff left the camps...no social workers, no psychologists, no educators."

Additionally, negligence was evidenced by statements like this from Lydia, "in this term, the government decided to leave aside the most vulnerable cases." Lino agreed that the government intentionally made it difficult for refugees to survive in Greece.

"There is a camp in the center of Greece...There were many hundred people there. In one night, the sixth of September, they were spread to different camps...They are imprisoned because they are migrants...The Greek state is not racist against foreigners, but against anyone who is in need."

Because of negative experiences so many refugees seem to be having in Greece, they do not have hope for their future if they stay in Greece.

Maria and Iris explained that for years, social workers and psychologists had helped refugees find apartments but currently, refugees are "being forced to go back to camps." Another explained,

"Well...things are not well, in terms of government and in terms of how they work with refugees. We have a lot of violations of human rights here in Greece, and the government knows about it."

Anastasia shared that there had been job opportunities for refugees but many of them were now closed,

"so people were kicked out or transferred to different camps, so this has caused like a lot of different changes...I wouldn't say that they are going in the right direction to be honest, [they are experiencing] a lot of oppression from the state."

Thea put it bluntly. "It's bad. That's one word for the system. 'Bad.'"

- Refugees bear the brunt of system failures. -

Participants explained that refugees suffered the consequences of system failures. For example, many who needed immediate medical treatment could not get it either because they lacked rights or because treatment was not available or accessible. Katherine detailed, "We have seen many changes in the system, for example, even if population is increasing, NGOs are closing...There are no medical doctors, which is bad..."

While refugees should have rights due to them having international recognition, they are still limited due to lack of certain forms of identification. This frustrated social workers, as there is no way for refugees to go back and get certificates from their home country. Penelope detailed,

"...there are recognized refugees—the ones who are beneficiaries of the national protection, by law, it means that they have the same rights as Greek population. But when they go to register for food support in the municipality system, they [are asked] to provide a family certificate. How will a refugee get a family certificate? He is a refugee. He can't get it. So they automatically exclude him."

One social worker who worked with refugees in job training and employment explained that previously, refugees were able to legally work, but that the government changed the law a few years ago, making it virtually impossible for people to provide for their families. Thea described,

"[Previously] asylum seekers could get a job legally. Since they get their papers the asylum seeker card, ID. In 2019 it changed and they must be here six months or more to get a job. I don't know why they did that, but it makes things very, very, very, very difficult. Of course you can understand, [they end up in the black market]."

Participants detailed a situation that made it nearly impossible for refugees to survive. They expressed discouragement because they had seen the system improve, only to see it get worse.

- Lack of citizenship rights = Human rights violations. -

Participants described human rights violations in Greece, especially among refugees lacking citizenship rights. Demi explained the plight of those trying to enter Greece.

"...You know that the proof is that the stories of the people that pass from there, they are very cruel...I remember a story of a guy, from Pakistan, was caught [by] the Greek police they took away their shoes and their phones, their money, everything. They beat them, and then they sent them back with a small boat to Türkiye..."

Katherine described treatment of refugees and asylum seekers this way.

"I think that it's worse than how they treat all the other vulnerable people...it's bad. We can see it in the services inside the camp, in the behavior of the people working in the services, not all of them of course. We can see it in the instructions that the police follow...in the measures that are being given. For example, now people [who's asylum claim is rejected] are not allowed to take food."

Once seen as an asylum seeker, refugees have access to services that meet basic needs while their status is being considered. Damian described conditions for those who come to Greece and are not legally recognized since they have not applied.

"If you don't do an application for asylum, you don't have any right. You don't have rights to health, to facilities, to services, you know, food, to find you a place to stay, legal support, social support, mental support. They're trying to make it very strict about this. If you're an asylum seeker, you have access to everything until your asylum application is assessed."

Even when granted citizenship rights, they are, in many ways, worse off than when they were recognized asylum seekers. They have citizen's rights, but without language proficiency, recognized credentials (making it incredibly difficult to gain employment), housing, and security for their families. Anastasia detailed,

"It's like on your own now, because you have the same rights as Greek citizens...it's weird because I cannot choose which option is best, to be recognized with limited services, asylum seeker with maybe more...services provided, but still like weird situation you don't know what is going to happen...I think the legal status is really tricky."

Participants were alarmed about long-term harm from human rights violations and what they perceive as the government's negligent and sometimes harsh stance toward refugees.

- *Refugees do not see a bright future in Greece.* -

Many refugees do not see Greece as a viable resettlement location. Maria stated, "For people who come in Greece these days, they don't have opportunities. They don't see a bright future in front of them." Agnes talked about how refugees prefer to go to countries with a more predictable and organized system.

"...they go to Germany because Germany is 1-2-3-4-5, finish. You know what you have to do, where you have to go, to whom you have to speak. It's very specific, very organized, very clear structure. How it works, they feel safe..."

Whereas in Greece, Agnes continued,

"Even the refugees don't want to be here; they want to pass [through]. Many refugees like and love Greece, but [for] the majority it's hard; the law, the papers, they need to wait a lot of years...But I believe for many refugees, the European dream, Greece is the first step. To get asylum and paper and then go to Deutschland, France, Spain, Sweden..."

Ultimately, they are aware they may receive more reliable and proactive resettlement in other countries.

4.1.2 Discrepancies Between Reception of "Types" of Refugees

There are indications that some refugees are prioritized differently based on their countries of origin. There is also disagreement about whether some migrants should be considered refugees. For example, Pakistanis are viewed as economic migrants rather than as refugees because their country is not war-torn. Participants had much to say about differences in how refugees are treated, including fear of strangers, blatant racism, and prioritizing certain refugee groups over others.

- *"We are afraid of the stranger."* -

Participants talked about Greeks being leery of welcoming refugees because they fear people who are different. Daphne described this trend in this way,

"In Europe and also in America, things are becoming more strict. There is an Italian philosophy that say that we close the borders, we don't like our different things, we are afraid, we are afraid of the stranger, of other religion..."

Daphne continued,

"Yeah, it's visible in their routine, their appearance, so it's very difficult for a Greek person to digest it, because we are also used to the religious system....if you ask someone 60 plus, they will tell you something different...for my generation it's easy to understand the differences but also, I hear from people who are not so open minded even if they are young that they are feeling threatened by this."

This fear can turn to blatant racism, as discussed below.

- *Blatant racism and favoring some over others.* -

Blatant racism was reported by several participants. Lydia shared that some of the African refugees complained that they were being discriminated against.

"I had many times a complaint from African people that they could not find accommodation because of their color...very often...I heard many times that they had difficulty in renting house, due to their color, openly."

Lydia also described shock at blatant racism within the medical community,

"I had a case that a woman would come visit me, and she told me...I visited another organization, and the doctor told me okay, you don't have any problem, leave, leave. The translator refused to translate for this doctor because...he was rude with this woman, and she came to me, and she started to cry... A doctor, a doctor! Why in the world?"

Not all refugees experienced such racism. Numerous participants observed discrepancies between refugee groups in terms of how they are welcomed, treated, and which resources are extended to them. The Ukrainian war led to a rapid global response, including Greece. So, in 2022, social workers in Greece saw Ukrainian refugees rise to the top of the priority list. Daphne shared,

"It's very interesting because you know, if we compare the Ukrainian people with the Pakistanis, imagine that the Ukrainian refugees, in one week, they had their legal papers. And that's taking a year or two years for others."

But there were discrepancies even before the Ukrainian war. Tessa stated,

"...it depends on the countries that they are from...there's some countries that they're more violent and they feel more scared like somebody from Nigeria for example, or from Algeria, Morocco, for example...dangerous. But migrants from Pakistan have it the worst, because I think that the wars are not so famous. There is also always the assumption that they are "money refugees", they come here to work, they send all their money back to the country...there is still mentality that the Syrians are refugees because they did have war, Afghanistan because they did have a civil war."

This prioritizing of refugees also meant that some refugees' needs were greater than others.

4.1.3 Refugees' Greatest Needs

When asked what refugees greatest needs were, social workers listed basic physical needs (i.e., accommodation, food, and clothing), legal needs (registration papers), and socio-emotional needs, such as psychosocial support and a warm reception from Greeks.

- Accommodation and other basic needs. -

The need for accommodation is complex and complicated. Previously there were programs that helped refugees obtain housing; more recently these programs stopped serving anyone except for unaccompanied minors. This was also complicated, because minors were eligible for housing until they aged out, then suddenly they could find themselves homeless. Social workers were helping unaccompanied minors who were getting ready to age out find jobs or obtain vocational training. Chloe explained,

"...Now we have a lot who are going to [turn] 18 and under the new law, they can stay here until 18, and one day, depending on the school year, if they [turn]18 when we still have school, they can stay until the year finishes. But if they [turn] 18 in June when it's not school season, they will have to go. This has changed, because before, we could keep them until they were 20..."

Lydia put it succinctly,

"The major need was always accommodation. And now with current flows...it still remains, because when they come to us, they may have an asylum card, or sometimes nothing, so we are at the entry level, let's say, for them. So [the greatest needs are], accommodation, food, clothes, and medical support."

- Legal papers. -

Social workers commonly responded that refugees' greatest needs were legal papers. As previously discussed, obtaining formal legal status is a long, difficult, and unpredictable process. Everything hinges on whether they receive legal papers or not. Sophia described some difficulties,

"If Greece had a better plan for integration and terms for someone who applies for asylum in Greece, there should be procedures...they didn't have options, they just had to survive. We need...to show them a way. To give them options. But that means that Greece needs to reschedule to become organized, and as a country, Greece is not so organized, even for the Greeks..."

Many essential services are tied to legal papers. Lino explained that people who had no documentation could not access mental health services. Mental health services and lack of ability to speak Greek were important needs other participants identified as well.

- Psycho/social support, language, and empathy/positive warm reception. -

Very serious psychosocial needs were described by Tessa this way,

"They're coming with a lot of psychological problems, because they've been through a lot. The stories we heard about what was going on in camps, like raping and beating and fighting and killing each other...They were putting them, people from different...religions, different countries that they have fights, like Congolese with Cameroonians, they have problems with each other. With police, they have many, many stories of violence... so that makes it worse and worse and worse so when they end up here, many of them have a lot of PTSD, of course, and they have other issues."

Others also were concerned about refugee psychosocial support needs and their inability to access those services. In addition, a language barrier made such support even harder to obtain. This is evidenced by Tessa when she described efforts to integrate children in school,

"...we have a problem with language, of course...it was much worse in the beginning but Greek schools they were not ready for this...Now it's become a bit better. They are having special classes for refugees, but not Greek schools...So again, you have to persuade them to go to a class where they speak alien..."

Beyond language, refugees need to feel like they are welcome. Voicing the importance of empathetic and warm relationships with those helping refugees, Lino said, "One need is someone to listen to them...For people [it] is enough to know that someone can say what they feel for example. Even if they know that we can do nothing."

4.1.4 Social Workers' Recommendations for Preparation and Training

Participants were asked to share what they thought best prepared them to work with refugees. Based on their responses, they were asked to give recommendations of areas that would be helpful for educators and institutions who are preparing current and future social workers to work with refugees.

- Internship and practical experience. -

Most participants highly valued their internship or other practical, hands-on experience for preparing them to work with refugees. Cora explained, "I think we need to have more practical lessons." Damian shared, "...specifically how to deal with the migrant and the refugee, only the field can educate you [on] this." Katherine shared that what truly prepared her for working with refugees was her internship – definitely not the theory that she learned in school.

- Theory is different from actual practice.-

Participants had strong opinions about use of theory. Most thought the emphasis on learning theory during their education has not been practical or useful in the field. When asked to give advice for social work educators or institutions trying to prepare students for work with refugees, Thea said her education contained "too much theory." Thea has been working in the field for 19 years but is now pursuing a master's degree in social work. She explained that the way theories are taught in her classes are not useful to the field because they do not practice them in class. Agnes agreed, "theory is very different than actual practice, I would say." Daphne, Cora, and Sebastian had a conversation about how useless the theory they learned in school feels now that they are in the field. Daphne explained, "we had a lot of lessons from the university, but there is a difference between theory and practice." Sebastian shared, "the first time [on the job, I] forgot the theory." Daphne agreed, "it's useless." Cora added, "And sometimes you have to forget the theories to do this work."

Contrary to most responses, a few participants shared that some theories they learned in school have been helpful for them. Specifically, Anastasia, shared that she would like social workers to be taught "more radical theories, please" especially anti-oppressive,

"because I am studying that right now. But yeah, I admire every kind. The critical, radical one, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive. But for now, anti-oppressive I would say...but a lot of

people don't even know they exist. And a lot of people like social workers don't know, may not use any kind of approach when they are working, like doing random things...So that's also really important to put the theory in practice and not start from doing things and then put the theory in..."

When asked to share which experiences helped best prepare him for his current role, Andreas shared,

"practice. I worked in a mental health community, working with various programs, European programs. But working with minority people, even disabled, it was important to see for example the social history, learning an assessment process, how to deal with people. Theoretical combined with practical."

- *Approach them as human beings.* -

When asked to give advice to schools of social work or others who are training people to work with migrants, Lydia shared,

"try to be aware of the cultural background, to be updated regarding the ethnicities, or their nationalities, the situation in the countries...it's not so obvious that they stay here, and for this reason, to be focused as well for their future, in their future that they imagine."

Others agreed that cultural knowledge was important and understanding the current context of what is happening in refugees' home country. Evangeline explained,

"if there was a beneficiary but I know he was coming from a country that I had never heard of before, I would seek some information to know what the situation is like there. Is it a safe environment? Have demonstrations happened? Is there insecurity? What rights are being stopped?"

Agnes added that you can also glean some of that information from clients directly. Tessa reported that to prepare for work with refugees, workers and volunteers need to learn to

"accept the differences..., because you have to be very...I don't know if the correct word is open-minded, but you need to accept that...it's totally different [here] than the way that they grew up."

Lydia shared that a basic understanding of different religions, especially Islam, should be part of the social work curriculum because for Muslim clients it influences their entire lives. She recommended learning basic language (like Arabic or Farsi), psychological first aid, emergency planning, counseling cross-culturally, and becoming aware of the cultural background including the situation going on in the countries from which refugees have fled.

Damian explained that it was helpful for him to learn about different forms of abuse, such as female genital mutilation or forced marriage that some of the women he works with have experienced. He shared that learning how to be empathetic towards people with vastly different cultures than his own has been incredibly helpful as he's worked to develop interventions.

Maria and Iris both agreed that learning how to have empathy is critical. Iris offered, "working on our [own] empathy skills in general in order to help ourselves improve" is crucial. Related, Lino has helped to create educational materials to help potential workers or volunteers develop empathy towards refugees. He advised that you must think about what it means to be a refugee – put yourself in their position. Consider,

"how was life before? They were not born refugees; they were something before becoming refugees...we aim to approach them as human beings, not as refugees. Refugees is one condition that cannot give identity to the whole existence."

Lino also shared that those who want to work with refugees must know who they are, too, to effectively work with refugees and people that are different.

4.2 Quantitative Findings

How did social workers in Greece ultimately rate their overall levels of effectiveness? Three quantitative measures serve to capture participants' perceptions of overall effectiveness of response to refugees in Greece (see Table 1).

Table 1: Likert-type questions

Likert Type Measures (1-5)	
Overall effectiveness	M = 3.74 SD = .60
Extent to which you feel you are working effectively	M = 3.96 SD = .51
Extent to which you feel you have resources needed	M = 3.39 SD = .83
Extent to which you feel service recipients are benefiting	M = 3.86 SD = .45

Likert Type Item Score Breakdown:

1 (not at all), 2 (minimally), 3 (somewhat), 4 (significantly), 5 (completely)

Participants report somewhat to significant overall effectiveness with minimal variability ($\bar{x} = 3.74$, $\sigma = .60$). With minimal variability, they reported they feel their own individual efforts are nearly significantly effective ($\bar{x} = 3.96$, $\sigma = .51$). With moderate variability, they report they somewhat have the resources needed ($\bar{x} = 3.39$, $\sigma = .83$). Participants reported, with minimal variability, that their services nearly significantly benefit recipients ($\bar{x} = 3.86$, $\sigma = .45$).

5 Discussion: Implications for Educators

Emerging current practices in Greece align with similar research from Germany (Hagues et al., 2019) and Lebanon (Cecil et al., 2021), which suggests findings may be applicable to other resettlement countries. While Greece faces significant challenges in providing adequate care for refugees, social workers in both Greek and international programs are effectively supporting this population. These social workers often did not initially intend to specialize in this field but have developed a deep appreciation for their refugee clients and are fully committed to their cause. Previous research found that social workers in Greece most often see themselves in supportive and empowering roles for their clients (Teloni et al., 2023).

Participants offered valuable insights into current practices at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice. At the micro level, they emphasized the importance of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and psychotherapeutic understanding and skills. They stressed the importance of doing background research on the culture their clients had left behind (e.g., what were they fleeing? What rights have they been denied?) but also learning from clients to individualize care.

At the mezzo level, community-based services and integration are critical, with breakdowns at this level severely undermining micro-level efforts. Numerous participants

cite racist and discriminatory beliefs in the Greek population that permeate much of the Greek macro system. This is evidenced by the difficulty that refugees from the Middle East and Africa face in finding lodging and even in the ways they were treated by medical professionals. Discrimination seems rooted in fear of difference. Social workers combat this fear through educating the local Greek population and promoting a more global Greece.

At the macro level, participants attributed most failures and shortcomings to broader economic and political issues. These issues create procedural barriers that social workers can confront through re-politicization (Van Acker et al., 2024) while continuing to help refugees access their legal right to asylum, gain citizenship, obtain jobs, contribute to society, and advocate for their human rights.

Participants claimed that effective best-practice approaches require supportive and encouraging teams that prioritize self-care. Morale and a sense of accomplishment, often overlooked, are crucial factors that should be detailed alongside theory-based intervention approaches. A crucial aspect of self-care involves recognizing limitations imposed by macro-system failures. Without this understanding, social workers may internalize frustration and inadequacy when their efforts seem ineffective, worsening conditions for both refugees and the workers trying to assist them.

Participants generally agree that practical learning, such as volunteering and internships, is more effective than academic studies in preparation for social work with refugees. Previous research reinforces this finding. Teloni et al. (2023) found that only 18% of their participants utilized theory. Some participants went as far as to say theory alone was useless; however, as they gain practical experience, many develop a greater appreciation for theory-based learning. An ideal university curriculum should integrate practical learning with theoretical application. In addition, the content of some theories being taught may not be applicable to the reality in which social workers working with refugees are working. Perhaps more emphasis on theories dealing with migration or human rights are needed.

Finally, continuing education is crucial for social workers as they encounter challenges in their work and become aware of their need for advanced knowledge and skills. Many participants noted an interest in continuing education in traumatic stress, a condition they frequently encounter in their work.

6 Limitations

Limitations of this study include a small sample size, variability in social work education and practice in Greece, and potential cultural and language barriers. The qualitative component demonstrates strong credibility, supported by a well-developed structured interview guide, a relatively large qualitative sample, rigorous analysis using Atlas.ti, and a triangulated analytic approach (Patton, 2021). However, the quantitative component is limited by a small, convenience sample and reliance on basic descriptive statistics. As such, quantitative findings are intended only to provide context for the qualitative results and cannot be generalized to the broader population of social workers in Greece.

7 Conclusions

Refugees in Greece face extreme challenges, including inadequate shelter, food, and healthcare, leading to significant impairment of community and family systems (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021). Despite harsh conditions, inspiring stories emerge of Greeks, international aid workers, and refugees forming supportive and effective communities. However, continuous uncertainty, traumatic stress, and deprivation often overwhelm pro-refugee efforts, pushing refugees beyond their coping limits and leading to frustration and burnout among Greeks (Eleftherakos et al., 2018). It is in this real-life, real-time context that social workers must be continuously equipped with empirically based best practice approaches for effectiveness, efficiency, and self-care.

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