

Learning from refugees and social workers in northern Greece and southern Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The ethical aspect of this study

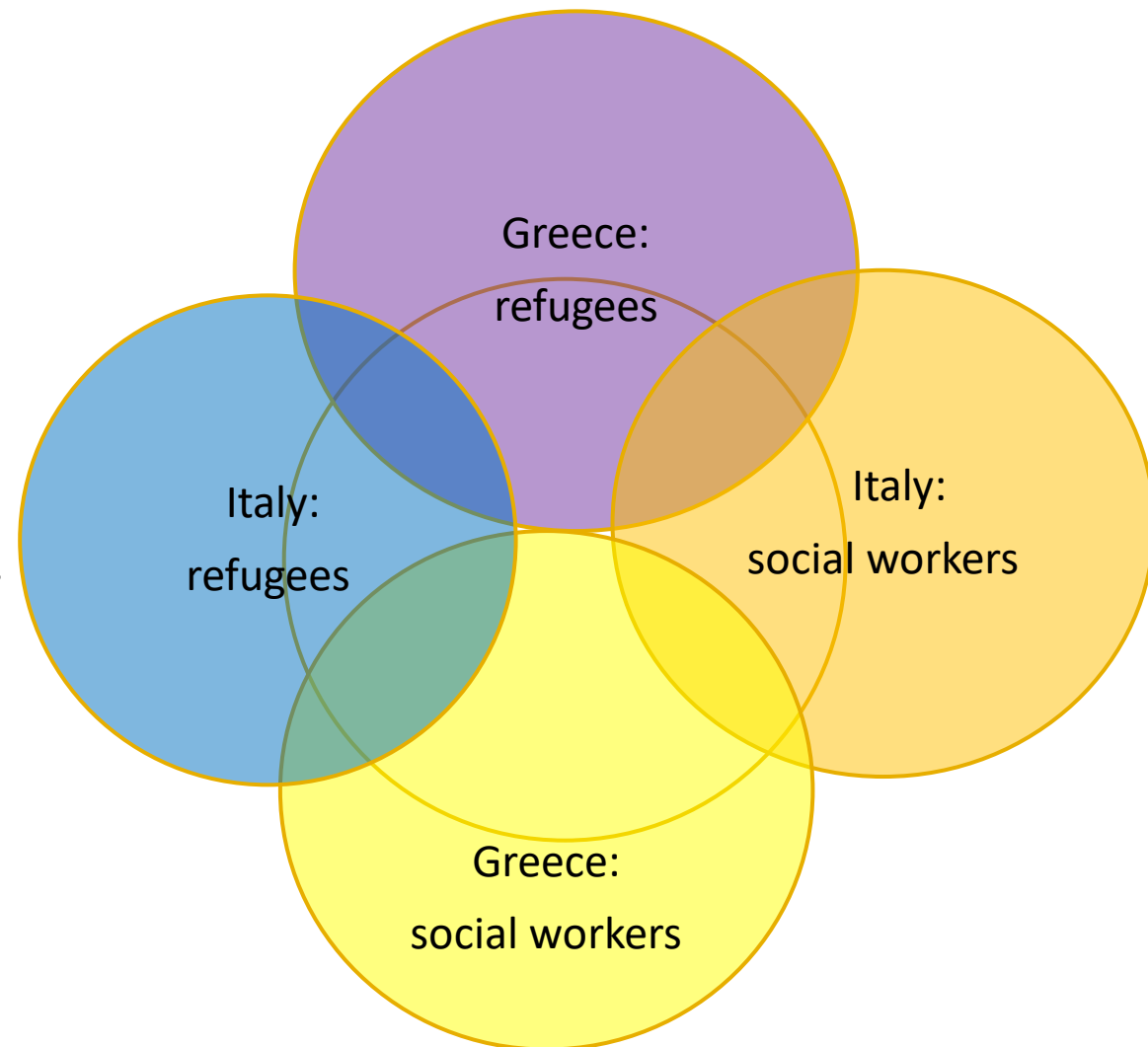
- We have undertaken this study in part due to the range of unsatisfactory responses that many European governments are currently adopting toward asylum seekers.
- These responses range from indifference to punity by most governments, and the majority of their citizens (Crawley, 2021).
- Lack of sufficient research which focuses on asylum seekers and not only on social workers.
- This research is a symbolic small step towards demonstrating that we, as social workers and researchers, care about the AS and about their social workers.

The impact of the pandemic

- The Covid-19 pandemic has changed a number of taken for granted assumptions about what a normal life, and a normal professional life, are for most of us.
- For the asylum seekers the decision to leave their families and their home country must have been a once in a lifetime decision
- Living with the consequences of this decision in the context of the pandemic was an unexpected setback for them, as well as for their social workers.

Aims

1. Identify intersecting themes for refugees and social workers.
2. Compare themes between countries
3. Consider implications for social work practice learning and education
4. Invite comparative reflections on themes from conference participants



We have selected Northern Greece and Southern Italy as the sites of our study because of the high number of AS residing there.

We would like to thank our Greek and Italian colleagues and their participatory organisations, as well as our UK colleagues, who contributed willingly to this study.

We would also like to thank the interviewed social workers and asylum seekers for their readiness to make an invaluable contribution to this study.

We will move now to look at the key findings of the study.

We hope that all of us will learn from the findings of this unique project as to what is already functioning well, and as to what needs to be improved in our varied contributions to this humanitarian crisis.

Rate of migration

- Greece: 2015: 856,723 ; 2019: 59,726
- Italy: 2015: 153,842; 2019: 11,471
- A high proportion of young men and unaccompanied children.
- 2022: 50,000 remain in Greece who are unable to move to other European countries
- 2022: 500,000 remain in Italy, mostly wishing to stay there.

Methodological issues I

- We have opted for a comparative qualitative methodology, which has some quantitative components (e.g. demographic data on each group), and follows a case study approach.
- We have done so as the issues we have been particularly interested require opportunities for the participants to express their views, given the lack of published views of the two key groups we were interested in (see Charmaz (2000) and Crenshaw (1989))
- Quantitative research would not have helped in doing so; though demographic data was collected.

Methods I

- The main data collection was made by interviewing 40 social workers and 30 asylum seekers in North Greece and South Italy.
- We have constructed the interviews schedules jointly, and the same schedules were used in each site, translated to either Greek or Italian from English. A very small number of interviews are in French (1) and in English (1) as the asylum seekers preferred to be interviewed in these languages.

- The Italian branch of SW without Borders carried out the Italian interviews. They are hosting our website (<https://www.assistentsocialisenzafrontiere.it/>)
- The Greek interviews were carried out by a senior researcher.
- All recorded interviews were translated into English, and thematic analysis of each country set was analysed by at least two of us before sharing the data with the whole group.
- To ensure confidentiality only a first name appears in our transcripts
- Each site had an advisory group consisting of senior social workers and representatives of local AS associations, who looked at the interview schedules and the data analysis.

Locations and population

- We could not interview in the camps, as these are closed to anyone from the outside, including social workers. The two governments do not publish statistics on the pandemic among this population.
- Estimates (Hayward et al, 2021, Kondolis 2021) of Covid-19 suggest a much higher rate for AS than in the non-migrant local population.
- In Greece we interviewed adult asylum seekers who already had the right to stay in the country on a temporary basis, living in the mainland.
- Italian reception centres are located in the countryside.
- Greek accommodation was provided by voluntary organisations in flats in small towns.

- **Schedules**
- **A. Interview Schedule: Social workers with asylum seekers**
- 1. demographic information: first name, age, education, gender.
- 2. employment: setting, duration, role,
- 3. impact of the pandemic on one's work; balancing work and private lives.
- 4. social worker's view of impact of the pandemic on the lives of the asylum seekers
- 5. supervision and support in the working place
- 6. social worker's view of how their work is perceived by the asylum seekers
- **B. Interview schedule: Asylum seekers**
- 1. demographic information: first name, age, country of origin, education, gender, personal status, religion
- 2. details of arrival – when, with whom, living conditions, status
- 3. current occupation (if any), and other activities (e.g. hobby) (if any)
- 4. future aims concerning settling down: wish to stay in the current country, wish to move to another country and with whom, stage in the bureaucratic process of migration
- 5. impact of the pandemic on the person and his/her living conditions and activities
- 6. degree of satisfaction from social workers' contributions

Key findings AS

Loss experiences during the journey to asylum

Being stuck/frozen due to the pandemic

Undiminished hope for the future

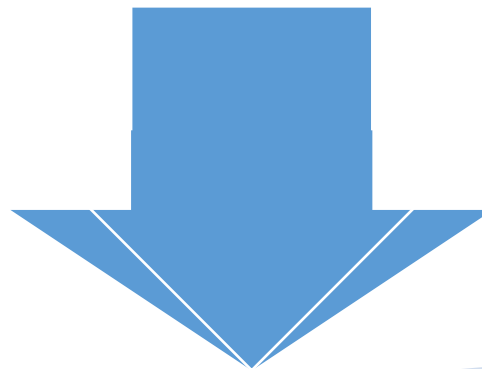
Reliance on contact with home – via mobile and
sim cards

But no one expressed the wish to return to their
home land

Appreciation of the contribution of the social
workers

Appreciation of neighbours' support (G)

Key findings SW



Everything froze..." Everything slowed down"
"So rare to achieve international protection now"
"Communication is difficult" " Trust is difficult" "social interaction is disintegrated "(masks, distance, language, rules)
"They feel stigma.... judgement"
"Group tensions between nationalities"
"Always complaints"
"Am I right for this job ?"
"Need to keep job separate at end of the day"

"Tiring"
"Disturbing"
"Sad"

"I learn to see things in a different way"

"We learn to appreciate small moments - in the kitchen, for example"

"They showed thanks in small ways"

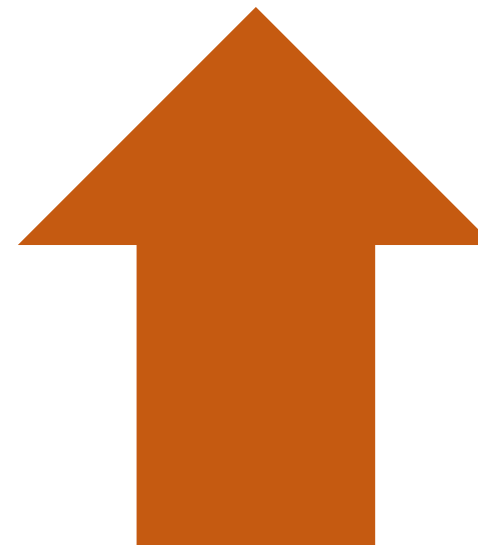
"We do everything as a team "; "I network"; "group supervision"; "daily virtual discussion"

*"Success = achieving international protection;
 learning the language;
 beginning to manage independently;
 learning to drive !"*

"A mission, not a job"

"I have the same passion, same commitment "

"Affection", " listening is fundamental" "relationship", "trust", " even hugs sometimes"



Courage and resilience

- Both the AS and the SW demonstrate courage in adversity during the pandemic.
- The AS do so by continuing to hope and by not giving up; some AS develop hobbies during the pandemic (photography)
- The SW do so by continuing face to face contact with the AS, by attempting to reduce the tension created by having to stay indoors (especially for the AS in Italy, who live in reception centres with people from different countries)

Governments and general public positions

- In both countries the governments and the general public have become more negative in their attitude towards AS.
- This is expressed in legislation, in creating physical barriers at key land crossing points, in granting temporary right to stay to fewer AS, and in removing social workers from the camps
- The exception: European attitudes towards the war in Ukraine
- This attitude is shared by most EU countries.
- UK policy too highlights this negative position.

In summary

- Our brief presentation could not do justice to the many issues raised by this study and by its implications, to issues such as:
- the power differential between AS and SW, SW and other governmental workers.
- the intersectional analysis of the AS background
- The future implications of the pandemic on AS and SW
- The securitization of migration
- But we hope it does put AS and their SW on your radar.

Website and references

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