



Failing Refugee Children: The Broken Protection System in Greece



Born Displaced, Raised in Limbo

Across Greece, refugee children are growing up in conditions that no child should ever experience.

Born into displacement or arriving at a young age, these children face daily realities shaped by instability, exclusion, and trauma. Alongside their mothers—many of them young women between 18 and 22 years old, and survivors of extreme gender-based violence and persecution—they are forced to navigate life in a system that consistently fails to recognize their rights, protect their well-being, or support their development.

Despite their vulnerability, refugee children remain largely invisible within Greece's refugee response. They are treated not as individuals with rights, but as extensions of their parents' status —leaving them underserved, unprotected, and forgotten.



Forced Returns to an Insufficient System



The situation is expected to deteriorate further with the implementation of the **EU Asylum Pact**. Under this new framework, recognized refugees will be required to remain in their first country of arrival, without the possibility of relocating elsewhere in the EU.

Since late 2024, several EU Member States have already begun deporting recognized refugees—including many women with young children—back to Greece.

These children and their mothers are being returned to a national system that is unequipped to support them. **Greece currently offers no integration strategy, no coordinated state services, and no sustainable pathways toward stability or inclusion.** Instead of protection and opportunity, these families face renewed insecurity, homelessness, exploitation and systemic neglect.

Without urgent intervention, the number of vulnerable children left stranded in Greece will surge, worsening existing humanitarian challenges and deepening the cycle of exclusion and trauma.



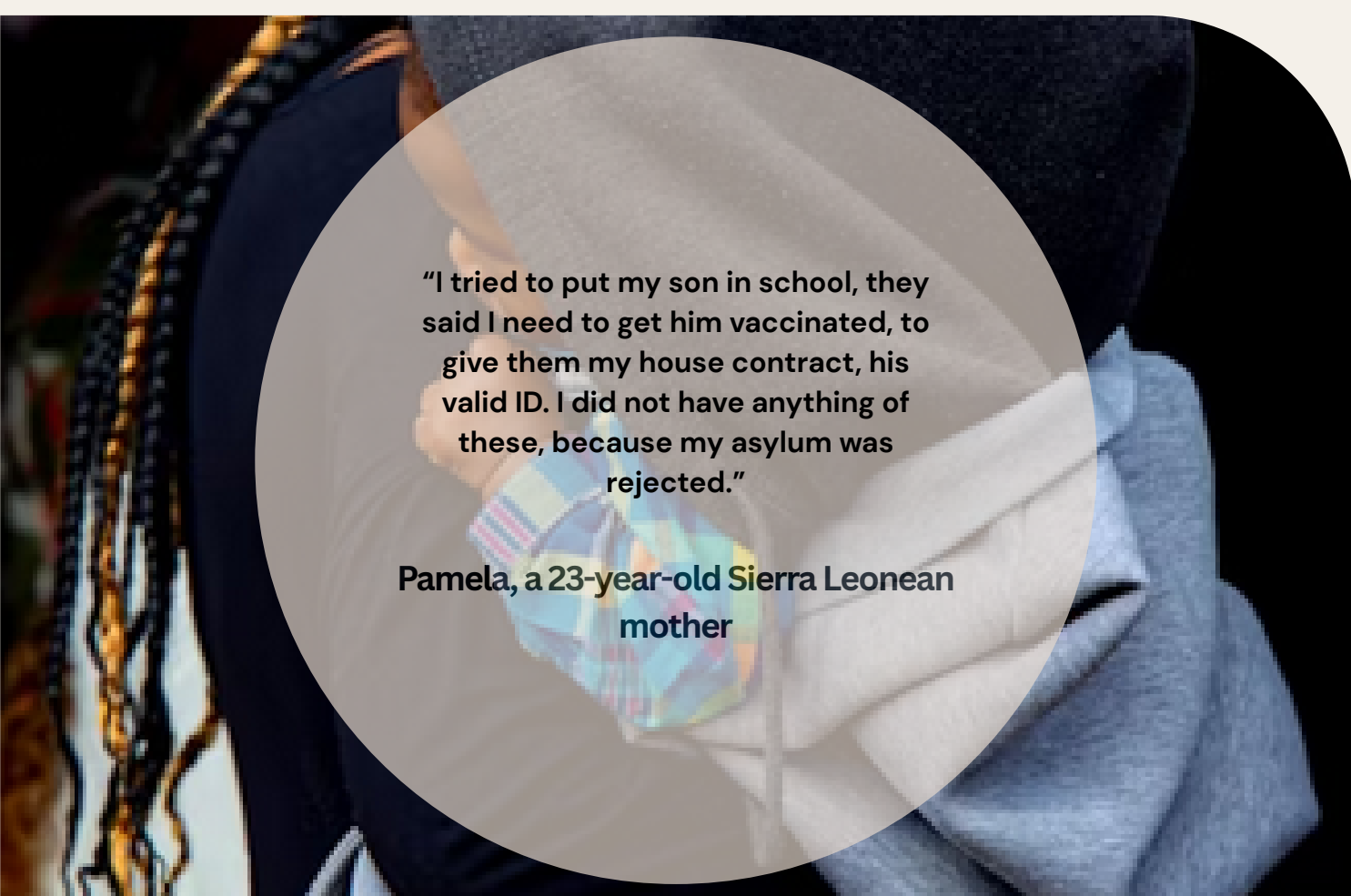
Invisible and unprotected

The Greek system lacks even the most basic child-centered infrastructure to support refugee families. **Early childhood education is almost entirely inaccessible, for children under four.** Psychosocial and medical care for minors is fragmented, leaving children without vital developmental and emotional support.

Legal and protection frameworks fail to recognize accompanied children as independent rights-holders. Instead, they are treated solely as dependents of their mothers, with services designed around adult needs rather than the holistic well-being of the child.

As a result, many of these children **remain undocumented**, effectively invisible to the system—**denied access to healthcare, education, and other fundamental social rights**, and deprived of the possibility 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.

Broken Systems, Broken Families:

Many of these children arrive in Greece with their young mothers who are survivors of trafficking, sexual violence, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, or torture. Despite the profound vulnerabilities of these families, **services that address their joint needs as mother and child are either non-existent or effectively inaccessible.**

This systemic failure traps mothers in an impossible situation: vital services such as therapy, legal aid, and job training are rarely available **alongside safe, accessible childcare.** Without integrated support that simultaneously addresses recovery and caregiving, mothers **face an unresolvable dilemma**—seeking help means leaving their children without adequate care, while staying with their children means forgoing the support they desperately need. As a result, children grow up without structure, stimulation, or protection—caught in limbo—while their mothers are denied the opportunity to heal and rebuild their lives.



From the breakdown of reception procedures to the trauma of mass camp evictions, these children are trapped in a cycle of instability. The absence of family-oriented shelters, trauma-informed services, and long-term integration pathways only deepens their social exclusion, emotional distress, and invisibility.

‘We arrived here with the hope that my girls would be safe... but we feel like ghosts in a city of millions.’

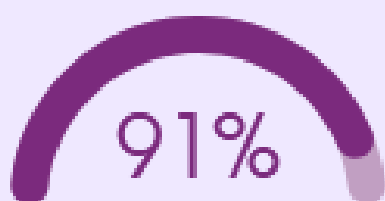
— Aziza, mother of three

The Invisible Children:

What They Face

Unlike unaccompanied minors, the accompanied children are largely invisible in policy and practice, their access to basic rights tied entirely to the status of their mothers.

Of the accompanied children who visited our Center :



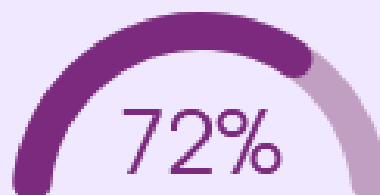
HAD SEVERE
DEVELOPMENTAL AND
EMOTIONAL ISSUES



DID NOT
GO
TO SCHOOL



LIVING ON THE STREETS OR IN
SHARED APARTMENTS WITH
STRANGERS.



DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO
DOCTOR OR A
PSYCHOLOGIST



⊘ Systemic Failures:

in Protecting Accompanied Refugee Children in Greece

These children with their mothers struggle to meet even their most basic needs—while navigating an asylum system that **lacks specialized state legal support or procedures to identify survivors of torture and gender-based violence**. Without adequate legal guidance or proper documentation of their experiences, many mothers receive negative asylum decisions and fall **into undocumented status, dragging their children into the same legal and social limbo**.

State-provided housing also fails to account for the needs of families. Accompanied children are routinely excluded from child-specific protections, and families are placed in **closed, detention-like camps**. These environments are wholly unsuitable for children's safety, development, and emotional well-being, reinforcing the cycle of trauma and marginalization.



⊘ Systemic Failures:

Life in Greece's Isolated Refugee Camps

Many refugee children in Greece live in isolated camps—often located far from urban centers, schools, healthcare, and basic services.

These camps are not designed with the developmental needs of children in mind. For those under the age of four, the situation is even more dire: they are too young to enroll in school, yet receive no structured early childhood education or stimulation.

Displaced children and their mothers **are frequently transferred from one camp to another**, sometimes with little warning, disrupting any fragile sense of stability or routine. As a result, children **face constant upheaval, with no continuity in care, support, or nutrition**. Access to appropriate food, hygiene, and safe spaces for play or learning is inconsistent at best.

These are not environments where children can grow — they are places of prolonged waiting, where developmental delays, emotional distress, and social isolation take root.



Camp Evictions & Homelessness



At the same time mass camp evictions have become lately a recurring reality for displaced families in Greece — carried out often with little or no notice. Entire communities are uprooted overnight, forced to leave with whatever they can carry, and offered no clear path forward. For the most vulnerable — mothers and their young children — these moments are not only disruptive but profoundly traumatic.

These evictions come **without transitional plans, shelter alternatives, or psychosocial support**. Children are not provided with continuity of care or education — many are forced to sleep in parks or shared apartments with stange adults. Their emotional development is jeopardized by repeated cycles of instability, and their sense of safety eroded with each move.

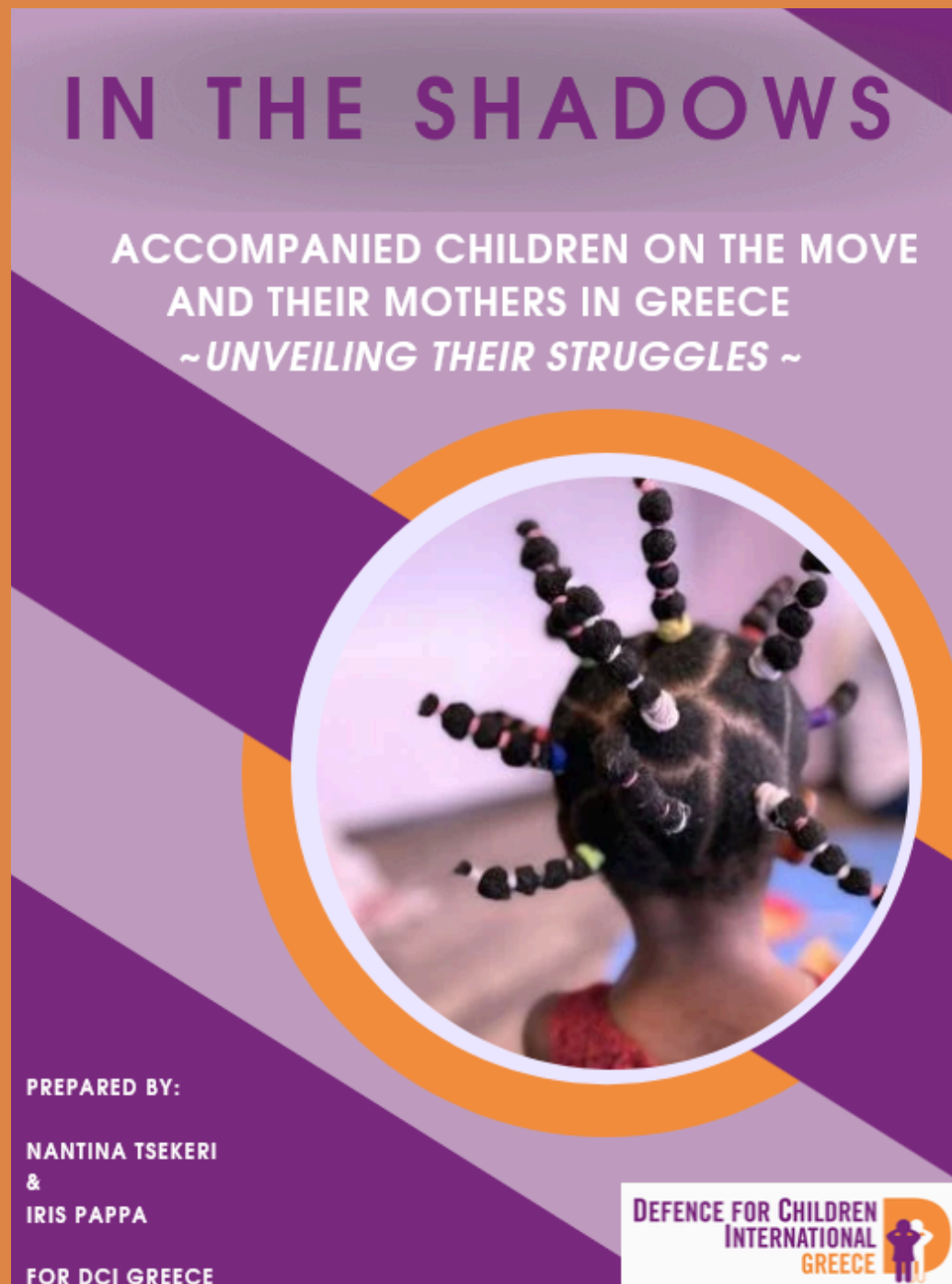
“I try not to fall asleep at night, just to protect my baby,” shared one of our young mother beneficiaries.



📎 Our latest Joint Statement explains the current wave of refugee camp evictions in Greece and their devastating impact on refugee families. It also outlines our call to end these forced evictions and ensure safe, dignified housing solutions for all.

To Learn More:

Step Into the Shadows



Our report, *In the Shadows: Accompanied Children and Mothers in Greece*, brings these urgent realities into the light — drawing from years of lived experience, frontline work, and direct testimony from mothers and children caught in the margins.

It documents a systemic neglect that strips children of their rights, mothers of their dignity, and families of their futures. Read here:

https://www.defenceforchildrengreece.org/_files/ugd/936582_5331056f97674190a87ca754c6569c10.pdf