

Our Impact Report

STEPPING STONE PROJECT



A holistic approach that provides displaced children and their mothers—survivors of violence and displacement—with the support they mostly need to heal, grow, and reclaim the lives they were denied.



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STEPPING STONE PROJECT

A Pathway to Healing and Integration

In 2025, as the needs of displaced mothers and their children in Athens continued to grow in scale and urgency, the **Stepping Stone Project** remained a vital lifeline. Developed in close consultation with the families we serve, the project responds directly to the complex challenges faced by accompanied children and their mothers—the vast majority of whom are survivors of violence, exploitation, and displacement.

ALL THE WAY FROM SHADOW TO VISIBILITY

IN THE SHADOW



STEPPING STONE
PROJECT



PROTECTED,
AUTONOMOUS AND
EMPOWERED



Everyone deserves a place to *feel safe and thrive*

In 2025, **the Stepping Stone Project** continued to offer something rare in the lives of displaced mothers and their children: a space that feels safe, steady, and warm. In a city where many families live in overcrowded rooms, shared basements, or unstable housing, this space became a sanctuary – a place where daily pressures soften and healing starts to feel possible.

For children, entering the space is often like stepping into a small fairytale. They arrive from environments marked by noise, fear, and constant uncertainty, yet as soon as they cross the threshold their faces change. Surrounded by bright colours, gentle routines, stories, music, and play, they begin to rediscover what every child deserves: that the world can be kind, that learning can be joyful, and that they truly belong somewhere. For their mothers, the space holds a different kind of strength. Here, they are not rushed or judged, but welcomed with understanding and respect. They can finally sit, breathe, and focus – knowing that their children are safe, happy, and just a few steps away.

This integrated model removed one of the most severe barriers refugee women face: the impossibility of focusing on legal, psychological, or vocational recovery while also caring for their children in unsafe conditions. *For them, this space became the first real doorway out of survival mode and into the possibility of a different future.*

To experience moments from the Stepping Stone Project, you can view a short selection here:

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DSFgv96DMMn/?igsh=MW5odW02dGlydmt1NQ>



STEPPING STONE PROJECT



These parallel interventions, towards the mothers and children created a circle of protection around each family: children grew stronger and more confident, while their mothers found the strength, knowledge, and support needed to rebuild their futures. What unfolded was not just progress – it was transformation.

In Their Own Words:

***‘I feel like I’m being seen and heard for the first time’
Anneta, 28, Sierra Leone***

***“Here my child smiles again. That alone gives me the courage to
keep going.”
– Mother from Uganda***

***‘I didn’t know where to start. Now everything is falling into place
for me and my child.’
Aminata, 21, Democratic Republic of Congo***



The Profile of the Families

we supported in 2025

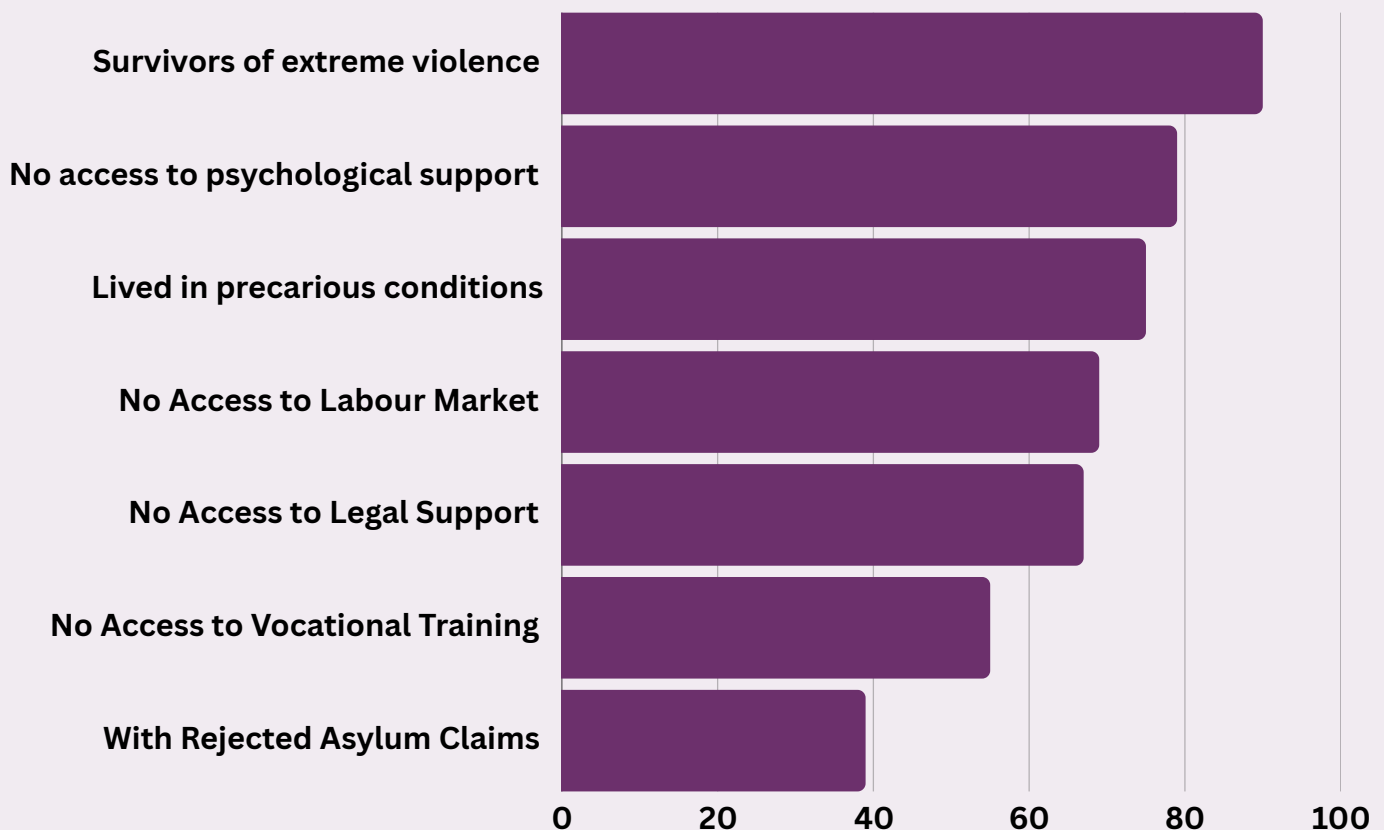
In 2025, the Stepping Stone Project supported some of the most vulnerable families living in Athens: **318 alone mothers and their young children** who had fled violence, exploitation, and life-threatening instability in their countries of origin. **Many had survived forced marriage, fgm, trafficking, conflict, or severe abuse, and all were navigating the uncertainty of asylum procedures, or precarious living conditions.**

Most mothers arrived alone with one or two young children – many of them under the age of eight – after long journeys marked by danger, loss, and exhaustion. According to our assessments, the majority had experienced multiple forms of violence, and many carried deep trauma resulting from events both before and during displacement.

Families came from a diverse range of regions, including countries like DRC, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Somalia etc reflecting the complex protection landscape in Greece.

Despite differences in origin, one reality united nearly all of them: life in Athens was unstable, unsafe, and isolating. Mothers reported living in overcrowded apartments, shared rooms, shelters, or informal arrangements with strangers, often changing spaces frequently and lacking access to basic rights, education, or services.

Women's Profile



The Profile of the Families

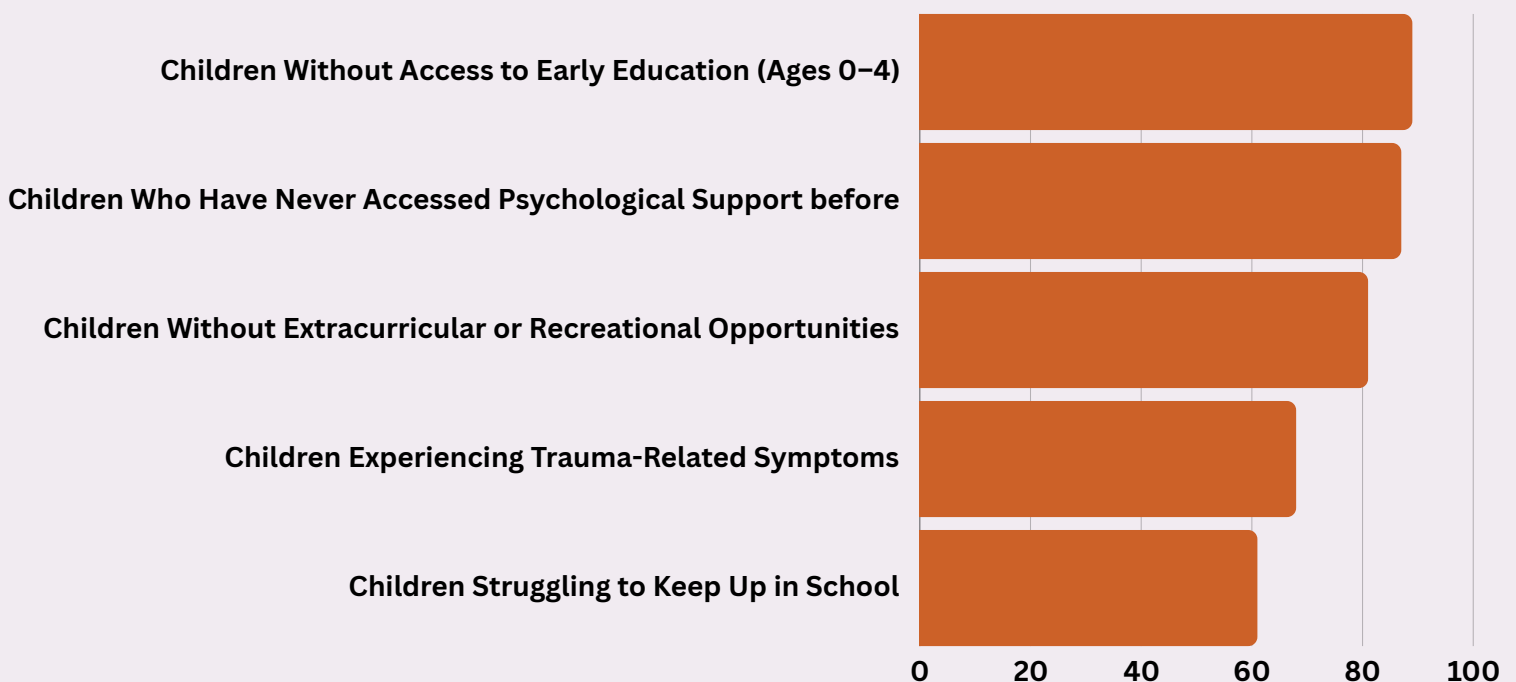
we supported in 2025

Their children, too, were deeply affected. Many struggled with emotional regulation, sleep difficulties, fear reactions, and delays in language and learning – challenges that directly aligned with the needs identified in our original program proposal. For those under the age of four, the barriers were even greater: most could not access nursery or early childhood education in Greece, where public placements are extremely limited and private nurseries unaffordable for displaced families. As a result, the vast majority of these very young children had no opportunities to interact with peers, to play safely, or to develop the social and cognitive foundations that early childhood education provides.

Older children faced a different set of obstacles. Many arrived having missed months or years of schooling due to displacement, and once enrolled, they struggled to keep up with lessons delivered in Greek, a language they could not yet understand. Their learning was often marked by frustration, gaps in basic literacy and numeracy, and a constant risk of falling further behind.

Across all age groups, most children had no access to extracurricular activities – no music lessons, no creative arts, no movement or play environments, no safe spaces to express themselves or explore their abilities.

Children's Profile



A Mother's Journey

From Silence to Stability

“My life was frozen for years,”

Aminata told us recently.

“Here, step by step, everything started to move again. And my son finally has a chance to grow.”

When Aminata* arrived at the Stepping Stone Project in early 2025, she had already faced two asylum rejections. For years, she had been unable to tell anyone – including the authorities – that she was a survivor of trafficking and severe exploitation. Her silence had left her unprotected, unseen, and trapped in a legal system that could not recognise her vulnerability. Her four-year-old son had never attended kindergarten and showed signs of distress, isolation, and developmental delay after growing up in overcrowded, unstable living conditions.

At Stepping Stone, Aminata finally found the safety and time she needed to speak. While her son settled into the early-learning room, she met with our legal team for trauma-informed consultations. Over several carefully paced sessions, she was able to disclose her trafficking experiences for the first time. With this information, the legal team prepared a thorough submission, reconstructing her story and gathering the evidence necessary to formally reopen her asylum case. As a result, Aminata received new asylum cards and valid documentation, giving her lawful residence and, for the first time in the last two years, **freeing her from the constant fear of detention or deportation.**

Alongside this, Aminata received psychological support to help her manage trauma-related symptoms and regain emotional stability. Our team also assisted her in navigating the bureaucratic process of registering her son in public kindergarten, ensuring he could finally access early education while continuing to participate in Stepping Stone's targeted afternoon activities, where he has since shown remarkable progress in language, play, and confidence.

As Aminata's sense of stability grew, she enrolled in our Greek language learning and employability sessions offered at the centre. Step by step, she began preparing for the future she once believed was out of reach. In November 2025, she secured a stable job at a hotel in Athens, her first formal employment since arriving in Europe.

A Glimpse Into Mothers' Journeys

At the heart of Stepping Stone are the women and children who walk through our doors each day. To offer a deeper sense of their experiences, we have included **a small storybook with reflections from our Stepping Stone graduates**. Their voices illuminate the realities of displacement, the courage they draw upon, and the transformative impact of having a safe space in which to heal, learn, and rebuild.

[You may read the storybook here.](https://www.defenceforchildrengreece.org/_files/ugd/936582_f8e93af9e3a44e05b9b13eb5aff81399.pdf)

https://www.defenceforchildrengreece.org/_files/ugd/936582_f8e93af9e3a44e05b9b13eb5aff81399.pdf



EVERY CHILD
*deserves a chance to learn and
grow*



Specialized Educational Activities

In 2025, Stepping Stone with your support provided structured early learning sessions tailored to children who had missed foundational developmental milestones due to displacement.

Activities focused on pre-literacy, early numeracy, and Greek language exposure, using age-appropriate methods to build vocabulary, attention, and basic problem-solving skills.

For children under four – most of whom could not access nursery placements – these sessions created their only consistent learning environment, enabling them to practise social interaction, follow simple routines, and develop the cognitive foundations necessary for successful entry into kindergarten or primary school.



EVERY CHILD

to heal, find peace and joy

Supporting the Mental Health of Displaced Children

Therapeutic and psychosocial support was integrated into daily activities through creative arts, guided play, and trauma-sensitive interaction. Many children showed signs of emotional dysregulation, anxiety, or withdrawal upon arrival. Through **drawing, storytelling, imaginative play, and sensory activities**, they gained safe ways to express fear, process difficult emotions, and build emotional resilience. Psychologists and educators monitored behavioral changes closely and adapted activities to support each child's emotional needs, ensuring early intervention for those without prior access to psychological care. Over time, children demonstrated calmer behaviour, increased confidence, and improved capacity to engage with peers.

Music and movement sessions **provided a vital channel for expression, rhythm, coordination, emotional release and body awareness** – especially for children affected by trauma who may struggle with verbal communication. These shared activities also strengthened group cohesion, helping children feel connected, included, and confident within the group environment.

At several points during the year, our **group was joined by a small group of Greek children who regularly attend sessions with our dance-movement educator**. This created meaningful opportunities for interaction in a safe, structured setting. Through shared movement and creative exploration, children engaged naturally across cultural and linguistic differences, discovering common rhythms and ways to connect.

Alongside these activities, daily free or structured play allowed children to explore, imagine, and build social skills in a safe, supervised environment. For many families living in cramped or unstable conditions, **Stepping Stone offered the only space where children could interact with peers, could move freely, develop creativity, and experience joy without fear**. Children were given a renewed sense of belonging – supporting them **reclaim the most natural and necessary part of their childhood**.



Children's Progress in 2025

The children's progress in 2025 was both visible and meaningful. With daily access to structured learning, therapeutic play, and predictable routines, children became **more emotionally regulated, more able to respect boundaries, and increasingly focused during activities.** Their interactions with peers grew warmer and more confident, and educators observed a **clear shift toward greater sociability and joy.**

Many mothers shared that their children were **“counting the days until the next session,”** a sign of genuine attachment to the space and the sense of safety it provides. **Improved emotional expression and measured energy release during play also contributed to better sleep patterns at home** – a key indicator of stabilisation for children who had experienced prolonged stress.

Key Outcomes

90% of children facing barriers to formal education successfully enrolled or re-enrolled in kindergarten or primary school.

- **80% became more sociable and expressive, engaging more confidently in creative activities, free play, and interactions with peers.**
- **75% demonstrated measurable progress in language development and communication, enabling smoother transitions into formal learning environments.**
- **70% showed significant improvement in emotional regulation, ability to respect limits, sustained attention, and group participation.**

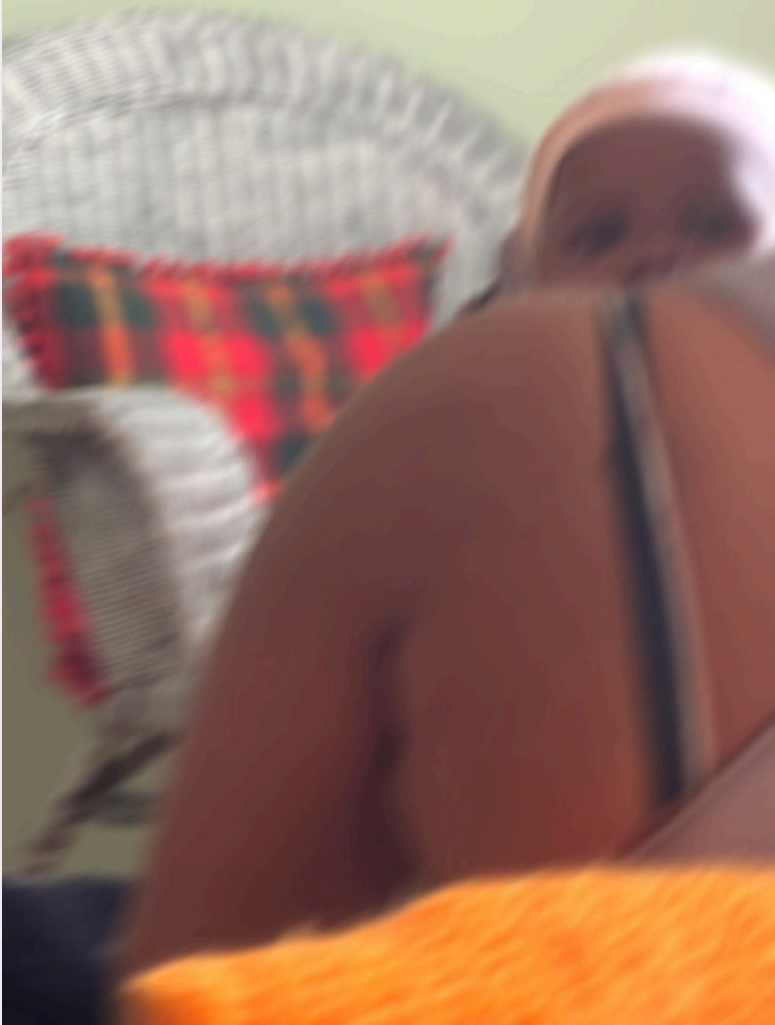
A majority of parents reported better sleep patterns and calmer behaviour at home, reflecting improved emotional stability and energy regulation.

EVERY MOTHER

*deserves support
to rebuild her life*

In 2025, the Stepping Stone Project delivered the full range of services outlined in our original proposal, offering mothers an integrated, trauma-informed programme that combined legal support, psychological care, empowerment, language learning, and skills development. Sessions were provided on a rotating basis throughout the month and adjusted flexibly to the realities of the women's lives, ensuring steady participation even among those facing instability or crisis.


Legal support was delivered individually, with meetings scheduled according to each woman's specific needs, the stage of her case, and the complexity of her protection situation, allowing for tailored and continuous guidance.



Trauma-Informed Legal and Protection Support

“Before, I walked on the street afraid. Now I walk with my papers and my head up.”

Mothers received **specialised, individualised legal support delivered through a trauma-informed framework**. Legal counselling covered asylum procedures, case reopenings, documentation issues, family reunification, and protection planning. **Meetings were scheduled according to each woman’s needs and the stage of her case**, ensuring that even complex or sensitive files – including cases involving trafficking or severe violence – were handled with care and precision. Many women with rejected asylum claims **secured valid documentation, reactivated rejected asylum files**, or advanced significantly in their procedures, **reducing the constant fear of detention or deportation**.



Welcome to
your
Stepping Stone
Space?

Bienvenue dans
votre
espace Stepping
Stone

Hands-On Skill Development, Digital Skills & Vocational Empowerment

“I didn’t know I could learn something new at this age, but I did.”

In 2025, Stepping Stone offered mothers a wide range of practical skill-building activities that strengthened both confidence and future employability. **Workshops in knitting, sewing, hairdressing and other peer-led creative sessions created a supportive environment where women could reconnect with their abilities, share knowledge, and regain a sense of competence** often disrupted by years of instability.

Digital-skills sessions addressed another essential gap: many mothers learned, often for the first time, how to use email, draft formal messages to authorities, upload documents, navigate online platforms, and complete administrative forms independently. During one session, a mother quietly remarked, ***“I didn’t know I could learn something new at this age – but I did.”***

As mothers gained these foundational skills, the team was able to guide them **toward formal vocational training pathways that matched their interests and potential.** Several participants enrolled in **accredited cooking classes, hospitality modules, or hotel-reception seminars offered through partner organisations** – opportunities that would have been inaccessible without the confidence and practical literacy they had acquired.

Employability Skills, Life Planning

“For years I didn’t know where my life was going. These sessions helped me set goals and believe I can reach them.”

In addition to practical workshops and digital-skills training, the programme offered a series of structured group sessions designed to strengthen mothers’ readiness for the labour market and support their long-term integration goals. These sessions introduced participants to the basics of the Greek job market – how to search for vacancies, understand job requirements, and communicate effectively with employers.

Mothers received hands-on guidance in preparing their CVs, writing professional emails, and practising job interviews, all of which increased their confidence in presenting their skills and experiences. Complementing this work, life-planning and goal-setting sessions helped women reflect on their aspirations, understand the steps needed to pursue training or employment, and recognise the importance of acquiring new skills for future stability.



Greek & English Language Courses for Integration and Communication

Language learning continued to play a central role in strengthening mothers independence and social participation. Through structured Greek and English lessons, **women built the vocabulary and communication skills needed to engage with teachers, doctors, employers, and public services.** Progress was evident not only in the classroom but in the pride mothers expressed when managing daily interactions on their own. During an informal conversation, one mother shared the moment she first spoke independently at her child's school: ***"I was nervous, but they understood me. I did it without any help"*** These small victories marked important steps toward long-term integration.

Information, Empowerment & Navigation of Daily Systems

To strengthen autonomy in everyday life, the programme delivered structured information sessions on asylum procedures, healthcare access, education enrolment, housing options, safety planning, and interactions with Greek authorities. These sessions were intentionally practical, responding to the challenges women brought forward each week.

Psycho-Therapeutic Support, Healing & Empowerment

**‘I used to feel overwhelmed every day.
Now I have tools to calm myself, and my child
feels that calm too.’**

Mothers accessed trauma-informed psychological support aimed at stabilising emotional wellbeing and strengthening their ability to cope with the effects of violence and prolonged insecurity. Individual therapy offered a safe space to address anxiety, intrusive memories, sleep difficulties, and daily stress. The programme also provided targeted parenting sessions, helping mothers understand their children’s trauma-related behaviours and develop practical strategies for emotional regulation and positive connection. Group activities complemented this work by reducing isolation and fostering trust.

Women's Progress in 2025

Throughout 2025, mothers experienced meaningful progress in emotional wellbeing, legal protection, confidence, and daily autonomy – changes that reflect the impact targets outlined in the original proposal. With consistent psychological support, women developed healthier coping strategies, improved emotional regulation, and gained a clearer understanding of their children's trauma-related behaviours. Legal assistance translated into tangible protection outcomes, reducing fear and creating the stability needed for healing and long-term planning.

At the same time, language learning, digital-skills training, and employability support strengthened their independence, enabling mothers to navigate services, communicate with authorities, and prepare for vocational opportunities. By the end of the year, many described a renewed sense of direction, dignity, and possibility for themselves and their children.

Key Outcomes

- 87% reported increased self-confidence and a stronger sense of safety.
 - 84% enhanced their digital skills for essential daily tasks and communication.
 - 82% experienced improved emotional regulation and reduced anxiety.
 - 79% improved their ability to navigate Greek services and public systems independently.
- 75% of mothers are currently enrolled in a vocational training programme or are already employed.
- 73% strengthened their parenting skills and understanding of their children's needs.'
 - 72% of women with deportation/detention orders had their cases reopened.
 - 69% advanced in Greek communication, enabling greater daily autonomy.
 - 63% set personal goals and identified steps toward work or training.
 - 62% maintained consistent participation thanks to the rotating, flexible schedule.
 - 48% of rejected asylum cases were successfully overturned on appeal.

A Moment of Community, Expression, and Advocacy for Dignity and Inclusion

“I felt like we were part of the community, not just visitors in this country.”

On 2 December 2025, the Stepping Stone Project hosted a special gathering to **celebrate the year’s journey, a moment dedicated to honouring the courage, growth, and achievements of the mothers and children who participate in our programme.** Designed as both a celebration and an act of awareness-raising, the event offered a rare opportunity for our participants to take centre stage and share their stories, creativity, and messages in their own voices. They were not observers; they were the protagonists.

The presentation was initially envisioned for a UN platform, but due to travel constraints for the families, it was held in Athens. This shift transformed the event into something even more meaningful: instead of speaking to a distant audience, **mothers and children were able to address their own community and key stakeholders from the Ministry of Migration and the Ministry of Justice.** Their presence, their words, and their performances brought visibility to experiences too often overlooked, grounding the discussion in lived reality and lived strength.

A Moment of Community, Expression, and Advocacy for Dignity and Inclusion

“We want people to understand our struggles, but also to see how far we can go when we are supported. We need safety, opportunity, and a voice.”

The event also marked the graduation of mothers who completed the Stepping Stone cycle of activities. Standing before an audience of neighbours, partners, and policymakers, several women chose to speak about their experiences. They shared openly the challenges and struggles they have faced – the fear of navigating asylum procedures alone, the emotional weight of raising children without support, the language barriers, and the daily uncertainty that shapes life in displacement.

Many mothers also used this moment to advocate for the rights and dignity of displaced women and children, calling for **more humane procedures, better access to services, and policies that recognise the realities of single caregiving under such precarious conditions.** Their voices were received with attention and respect by the policymakers present, adding depth and purpose to the event.

Children's Performance: "Feathers" – A Choreography of Inclusion

"Seeing my child dance with others felt like opening a window. She was not apart; she was part of something."

During the event, children who attend Stepping Stone's weekly dance-movement sessions – and who wished to take part – **joined Greek children** on stage to present the **choreography "Feathers."** Inspired by the idea of a vast forest where every bird, different in colour, sound, and movement, finds its place, **the piece celebrated diversity, coexistence, and the quiet strength of being accepted as one is.**

The children moved together with confidence and joy, creating a shared language that needed no translation. For many of them, especially those who have struggled with fear, instability, or social withdrawal, performing publicly alongside their peers was a powerful experience of visibility and belonging.

Mothers watching from the audience described feeling deeply moved and proud. Several shared that it was the first time they saw their children not defined by their past or their displacement, but simply as children. **Expressive, included, and connected.**

A FEW WORDS ABOUT US

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, 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.

