

December 4, 2019 11:01PM EST

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Greece: Camp Conditions Endanger Women, Girls

Asylum Seekers Lack Safe Access to Food, Water, Health Care



December 4, 2019 | Video

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(Athens) – Women and girls face relentless insecurity in **Greece’s** overcrowded Moria “hotspot” for asylum seekers and migrants on Lesbos island, Human Rights Watch said today, releasing a **video**



that shows the dire conditions. The Greek government should take immediate action to ensure safe, humane conditions for women and girls in line with their international human rights obligations and standards for humanitarian emergencies.

As of December 2, 2019, the Moria Reception and Identification Center was holding nearly 16,800 people in a facility with capacity for fewer than 3,000. Overcrowding has led authorities, as well as some asylum seekers and migrants themselves, to erect shelters outside Moria's fenced boundaries, first in the adjacent area called the Olive Grove and now in a second olive grove, which has no water and sanitation facilities. In all areas, women and girls, including those traveling alone, are living alongside unrelated men and boys, often in tents without secure closures.

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“Just going to the bathroom feels too risky for women and girls in Moria,” said **Hillary Margolis**, senior women's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Their lives are defined by fear, and that won't change unless the Greek government addresses the pervasive dangers they face.”

During research on Lesbos in October, Human Rights Watch found women and girls in and around Moria lack safe access to essential resources and services including shelter, food, water and sanitation, and medical care. Interviews with 32 women and 7 girls, as well as 7 representatives of aid agencies working on Lesbos, revealed a threatening environment, with few protections from sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Women and girls said they avoid leaving their shelters or using the toilets, bathing, or waiting in food distribution lines due to fear. Parents said they do not allow their daughters to go out unaccompanied, including to attend school. “I don't go out [of the tent] alone,” said Naima, 12, who lives in the Olive Grove with her mother and 14-year-old sister. “The men and boys looking at me, I don't like it.... [If I need the toilet at night], I have to wait all night – I have no choice.”



Women with disabilities face additional barriers because the toilets and showers are far from their shelters over rough terrain or are not adaptable for people with disabilities. Aid workers handling cases of sexual and gender-based violence said protection systems are virtually nonexistent, exposing women and girls to high risk that has increased with overcrowding.



A high-level Greek official said during a call with Human Rights Watch that maintaining adequate conditions in the camps is impossible, especially following recent large numbers of arrivals, because Greece is hosting asylum seekers and migrants well beyond the facilities' capacity. He noted the pressure on Greece and lack of support from other European Union countries. “Greece cannot be the gatekeeper of Europe, as it is being asked to be by the EU, and also be expected to respect human rights fully,” he said.



Conditions in Moria violate Greece's obligations to migrants and asylum seekers under international law and fall far below standards of treatment developed for humanitarian emergencies around the world, Human Rights Watch said.



With the intent of facilitating speedy processing and return to Turkey under the **EU-Turkey deal**, Greece has adopted a “**containment policy**” that traps people in under-resourced camps on the Aegean islands while awaiting the outcome of their asylum claims or return, which can take months or even years. Combined with a lack of government-supported services, this creates an inordinate burden for aid agencies, which provide almost all camp services, interviewees said.

The government’s move in July to stop issuing social security numbers to asylum seekers exacerbates the situation, obstructing their access to public health services except in emergencies. Aid agency representatives said overwhelming demand means they sometimes have to turn away all but the most extreme cases for medical care and gender-based violence support. “Organizations just can’t respond anymore to the increased needs,” said one service provider. “People are being pushed to make horrifying decisions.”

Under Greek law, the authorities should identify “vulnerable” people, including pregnant women and new mothers, survivors of sexual and other serious violence, single parents with children under 18, and people with disabilities, and refer them to appropriate support services and accommodation. This may include housing in apartments outside of Moria.

Human Rights Watch interviewed women and girls who meet current vulnerability criteria but said they had not been screened for vulnerability or identified as vulnerable after weeks or even months, including survivors of gender-based violence, pregnant women, new mothers, women with disabilities, and women alone with children under 18. Since late 2018, staff resignations and shortages at the government agency conducting vulnerability screenings in Moria have led to **lengthy delays** in identification of vulnerable individuals, and resulting delays in any additional support.



The Greek government should urgently improve security and living conditions for women and girls in Moria, ensuring safe access to secure shelter, food, adequate water and sanitation, and specialized medical care. The government should identify and assist vulnerable asylum seekers and migrants on Greek islands, including survivors of gender-based violence, women alone with children under 18, pregnant women, new mothers, and people with disabilities. It should prioritize awareness-raising about existing services and availability of trained female interpreters.



Other EU countries should share responsibility for accepting asylum seekers and migrants, processing their asylum applications, and facilitating family reunification.



“Women and girls who have come to Greece seeking safety are finding the exact opposite at Moria, and the situation is only getting worse,” Margolis said. “The Greek government has a duty to make sure women and girls don’t have to hide in tents all day out of fear.”



For more information on risks for women and girl asylum seekers on Lesbos, please see below.

Additional Information, Accounts by Women and Girls

All names have been changed to protect privacy and security.

On November 20, 2019, Greek authorities **announced plans** to relocate 20,000 asylum seekers to the mainland by early 2020 from five Greek islands currently hosting almost 40,000 asylum seekers and migrants, a positive move. However, the government also plans to turn reception centers for identification, processing, and deportation, including Moria, into detention centers.

Rather than establishing blanket detention of asylum seekers and migrants in closed facilities, Greek authorities should ensure humane living conditions in open camps, in line with international and EU standards for reception, protection, security, health, and sanitation. In the meantime, they should urgently adopt measures to secure basic rights, services, and safety for women and girls in Moria and other island hotspots.

A new law that will take effect on January 1 reduces protections for vulnerable groups. They can be subject to accelerated border procedures, and some – such as people diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder – will no longer qualify as “vulnerable.”

Beginning in October 2018, a shortage of doctors, psychologists, and social workers from the Health Ministry agency in Moria tasked with conducting vulnerability screenings resulted in severe delays, incomplete screenings, or, at times, a stoppage of screenings altogether. Aid workers supporting vulnerable people at Moria said that this has caused a months-long backlogs in vulnerability screenings.

Insecurity



Inhumane and unsafe conditions at Moria have worsened since a December 2017 Human Rights Watch report on dangerous conditions for women and girls **at Moria** and in migrant reception and detention facilities on the **Greece-Turkey border**. Aid workers in Moria describe the current situation as an “emergency.”



Women and girls said that a lack of functional locks and privacy in toilets, bathing facilities, and shelters, as well as poor lighting, frequent outbreaks of violence, and lack of police assistance for security incidents create heightened risks. Faruza, 46, from Afghanistan, lives in a tent in the Olive Grove and said she worries about her daughters, ages 12 and 14. “We don’t have a door [on our tent] – anyone can open it,” she said. “I do not sleep at night. I just sit in the entrance.”



Heba, 27, from Syria, was sleeping in a tent in the second olive grove with her children ages 6 months to 6 years: “Inside [the camp] it would be safer because here you’re in the jungle and far from everything.... To go to the bathroom we have to go all the way around the main gate and inside. For sure I don’t feel safe.”



“There is no law here,” said Susana, 25, from Afghanistan, who is eight months pregnant and living in a tent in the Olive Grove with her husband and two other families. “You see the security, you see the police, but they don’t care. After something really serious happens – if someone dies – they come, but otherwise they don’t do anything. And there is nowhere you can go to report anything.”

Women with disabilities may face additional risks, especially if they lack access to necessary assistive devices. Samiya, 40, from Syria, who has a physical disability, said her leg brace broke en route to Greece, further limiting her mobility and increasing her vulnerability in Moria: “Every night there is fighting, I hear people running.... I can’t sleep because I’m afraid that if something happens people will run away, but I can’t run away – how can I?”

Sexual Harassment, Gender-Based Violence, and Lack of Protection

Many asylum seekers and migrants have experienced sexual or other violence in their countries of origin or en route to Greece. Representatives of agencies assisting victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Moria said incidents in the camp have increased with the growing population.

Under Greek rules governing reception sites, women traveling alone should be housed in separate, fenced-in sections within Moria. Human Rights Watch found single women living outside the sections, including in both olive groves. Multiple women said they were told the protected section was full and could not accommodate them until other women left. Data collected by an agency responsible for housing in Moria showed 361 single women housed in the dedicated sections and an additional 256 in tents outside the sections as of November 28.

 Unaccompanied girls should also be housed in separate, secure sections. In Moria, a “safe zone” holds both unaccompanied boys under 14 and girls under 18. Human Rights Watch interviewed sisters ages 16 and 17 living in the safe zone who said boys and girls have separate toilets and  showers but neither they nor the shelters have functioning locks.

 “When I was alone, I went to the bathroom and a boy came and wanted to open the door and come in,” said Salma, 16, from Afghanistan. “I made a noise to show I was inside, but he continued.” The sisters said they usually feel safe in the section because they are together. “But I don’t know about the girls living alone,” said Afri, 17. A forthcoming report from Human Rights Watch details  conditions for unaccompanied children living in Moria.

 Human Rights Watch interviewed five women traveling alone who had been sleeping in the open without shelter inside Moria for up to nine nights, including two pregnant women and two with serious health conditions. They said they were told they could not receive tents because they should be housed in the section for women alone. Other women, some with children under 18, said they had spent up to several nights sleeping outside without shelter upon arrival in Moria. The two  unaccompanied sisters said they slept in the open for one night before getting housing. A  government representative denied that people including women and unaccompanied children are not given tents.

Single women living in tents amid shelters housing unrelated single men and families said they felt especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence. Zainab, 20, from Afghanistan, lives alone inside Moria with her 2-year-old son. She said a single man in a nearby tent regularly approaches her shelter: “One time he came and said, ‘You have to sleep with me.’ I said no. He tried to choke me. When he did this, I tried to scream. He pushed me and said, ‘You have to tell me I love you, I want you.’ I said, ‘Okay, okay, I want you.’ Then I ran out.... I thought if I changed my tent maybe another place [in Moria] would be even worse. But now I’m afraid because I don’t know what will happen.”

Even women living in the designated section said they felt unsafe because people housed elsewhere – including men – can enter the section and adolescent boys occupy sections immediately adjacent. They said they experience sexual harassment whenever they leave the section. Mina, 21, from Afghanistan, said authorities are unresponsive if she reports harassment or violence: “Last month, around 11 p.m. when I went to go back inside [the section], a man came and touched my body. I told the police, but they laughed at me and said, ‘You have to go inside and go to sleep.’”

Interviewees said there is an absence of systems to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, and that authorities often dismiss survivors who try to report problems or deter them from filing complaints, even in rape cases. Even if police do arrest a perpetrator, aid workers said, he would typically be released the next day and placed back in the camp pending a court case. They said that a dearth of safe housing options, such as secure shelters, makes it impossible to provide adequate protection for victims of domestic or other gender-based violence. “There are cases of rape where the victim has to go back to the camp, the same place where the perpetrator is living,” said one service provider.

“There is a huge fear of retaliation,” said another aid agency representative, which contributes to underreporting of cases.



International guidelines call for **gender-based violence risk mitigation** from the onset of crisis response, including through separate, secure accommodation for unaccompanied women and children. Authorities should also identify and monitor high-risk areas in displacement sites and implement responsive security measures.



Water and Sanitation



All of the women and girls Human Rights Watch interviewed said toilets and showers in Moria are unsafe, unsanitary, unhygienic, and inaccessible to people with disabilities, which Human Rights Watch researchers observed firsthand. Although some toilets are separated by gender, signage is unclear and in practice usage is mixed. Some women said they have to bathe in the same stall with the toilet, and that gaps in walls and doors may allow others to see inside.



Guidelines on prevention of gender-based violence in displacement settings call for hygienic, gender-separated toilets and bathing facilities with working locks, adequate lighting, and privacy. The Sphere Standards, a set of principles and minimum humanitarian standards developed by humanitarians, call for safe and equal access to water and sanitation facilities, including private bathing areas for women.

Women and girls said they take extreme measures to avoid using toilets after dark. “I stop drinking tea after 6 p.m. so that I don’t have to go to the bathroom at night,” said Zubaida, from Afghanistan, who lives in the Olive Grove. “I’m afraid to go alone because I see lots of men here. They can do whatever they want. They use drugs and alcohol. I’m afraid someone will rape me.”

“One of the biggest problems is we have to go inside the toilet to take a shower,” said Faruza, alone with her 12- and 14-year-old daughters in the Olive Grove. “There is just a tube [for the shower]. There’s a lock inside but we don’t feel safe. If one daughter goes to the shower, the other daughter and I stand outside to protect her.”

Women with disabilities face additional challenges in accessing bathrooms. Samiya said that her leg brace broke en route to Greece, further limiting her mobility. “It is too difficult to go to the bathroom; two people have to go with me,” she said. “Most of the time I don’t drink water so that I don’t have to go to the bathroom.”

Samiya said her assigned tent was far from the bathrooms, but personnel in the camp refused her request to move closer. “Since I arrived [11 days ago] I haven’t had a shower because it is too far away,” she said. “I moved to share a tent with relatives because it is closer to the toilet, but it is still too far.... At night sometimes when I need to go to the toilet my sister and brother help me, but most of the time I go in the tent in a plastic jug.” Human Rights Watch saw firsthand that the walk to the toilets from both Samiya’s original tent and from the tent she shared with relatives required navigating steep and unstable terrain over rocky dirt paths

Pregnant Women and New Mothers

The government is failing to meet basic needs of pregnant women and new mothers, who said they do not receive adequate food or medical care. Human Rights Watch interviewed six pregnant women and one woman who became pregnant and gave birth while in Moria.

Women said they had not accessed comprehensive prenatal care, even for high-risk pregnancies.

Fatima, 28, a mother of four from Afghanistan and nine months pregnant, said a heart problem put her in intensive care following her previous child’s birth. “I’ve had pain from the day I came here, in my back and belly – sometimes it is so painful I cannot eat,” she said, noting that she did not access specialized care despite telling personnel at Moria about the pain and her medical history.

Pregnant women said they lacked information about what would happen when it was time to give birth or whom to contact for help, and that a dearth of interpreters prevented them from communicating with medical workers at Moria. Health service providers said they offer basic prenatal and postnatal care, but that limited capacity and resources mean they cannot provide full monitoring for pregnant women each trimester. The Greek government should ensure access to comprehensive prenatal and postnatal care for all women, including migrants and asylum seekers.

International humanitarian standards call for prioritization of pregnant and breastfeeding women for access to food and cash assistance and additional bedding, clothing, and nutrition to meet their needs. Women in Moria said no such measures are taken. “They give you nothing different because you’re pregnant,” said Laila, 35, from Afghanistan and eight months pregnant. “When waiting in the [food] line, I have a problem – pain in my belly, I get dizzy. Sometimes I try to sit down in the line, but it isn’t really possible and no one helps me.... Sometimes I feel like maybe I will die – like I will lose the baby, or the baby will lose me.”

“When I was six months pregnant [in July], it was really hot and I felt I would lose the baby,” said Zarifa, who had a 10-day-old baby and had been in Moria for 11 months. “I went again to [people she believed were humanitarian agency workers in the camp] and said I couldn’t handle it. They said, ‘You are not really a seriously vulnerable case.’ We never got an apartment [outside Moria] – we applied months ago, but we are still here.”

Food and Cash Assistance

Many women, including pregnant women and single mothers, said they spend hours in food distribution lines only to be told there is no food left. Seven women said they faced waits of seven to eight months for **cash assistance**, leaving them without any financial resources and unable to buy food or goods they do not receive through distributions. Human Rights Watch saw multiple asylum seekers’ cash assistance appointment slips with dates in June 2020 – meaning they could not receive cash assistance until after that date. Representatives of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) said they reinforced staff capacity in late October 2019 to respond to needs. They said everyone who was in Moria at that time and eligible for cash assistance will have now been enrolled. All of those who are eligible for cash assistance and who arrived since then should be enrolled within the next six weeks.

“It is very difficult to get food,” said Faruza. “Most of the time [after waiting in line] they say the food is finished. If we don’t get food, we don’t eat.... The appointment for our cash assistance card is in June 2020. In the meantime, I don’t know what to do because we don’t have any money at all.”

Fatima, a mother of four and nine months pregnant, said: “We don’t have money. I don’t know what I will do for the children. They told us that to get the cash [assistance] card it is eight months waiting.... For me, I don’t eat a couple of times and it’s okay, but for the kids it’s really hard.”

Zarifa said she lacked supplies for her 10-day-old baby or resources to purchase them: “They supposedly give you [diapers] but you have to wait all night in line [for morning distribution]. They give 15 Pampers for every kid for a week. It’s nothing. You have to beg other organizations to give you some or you have to buy them yourself.”

Menstrual Hygiene Management

Women said they do not receive sufficient supplies to manage menstrual hygiene and delays in cash assistance leave them unable to purchase sanitary products. The Sphere standards call for provision of “**appropriate materials for menstrual hygiene**” to women and girls of menstruating age, and means to launder or dispose of them discreetly.

“[Managing] my period is one of the most difficult things – they don’t give us the supplies we need,” said Faruza. “For two of us, they give us four [sanitary pads]. It’s nothing.”

Kamila, 30, from Afghanistan, said an inability to communicate with personnel in the camp compounds the problem. “When I get my period, I bleed so much,” she said. “They just give us pads, but it is so few.... I didn’t tell anyone because I can’t speak the language and they don’t have a translator.”

Mental Health

Women and girls, some with pre-existing mental health conditions, said they worry about their mental health and the lack of psychosocial support in Moria.



Zarifa said she feels depressed and sought help from a doctor at Moria: “He said you have to go to the city for a private or public psychologist. A private one is 80 or 100 euro a visit. It is impossible. After some time, I gave up.”



Some women said they were unable to get medications for anxiety or depression they had taken regularly before arriving in Greece. “I had depression before,” said Zubaida. “I used [medication] but here when I went to get it, they said no.... Since I came here, I cannot cry, I am not talking with my husband or children. All day I just sit here.”



“My mental health situation is getting worse and worse here,” said Faruza, who said she had been taking medication for two months for depression. “I didn’t go to anyone [here] – there is no place to go, no one to talk to.... The doctor [at Moria] didn’t give me medicine. He said they don’t have any more.”



Faruza’s daughters, alone in Moria with their mother, worry about her mental health. “My mother’s medicine is finishing, and I’m afraid that the only person who makes us feel a bit safe here will no longer feel okay,” said Naima, 12.

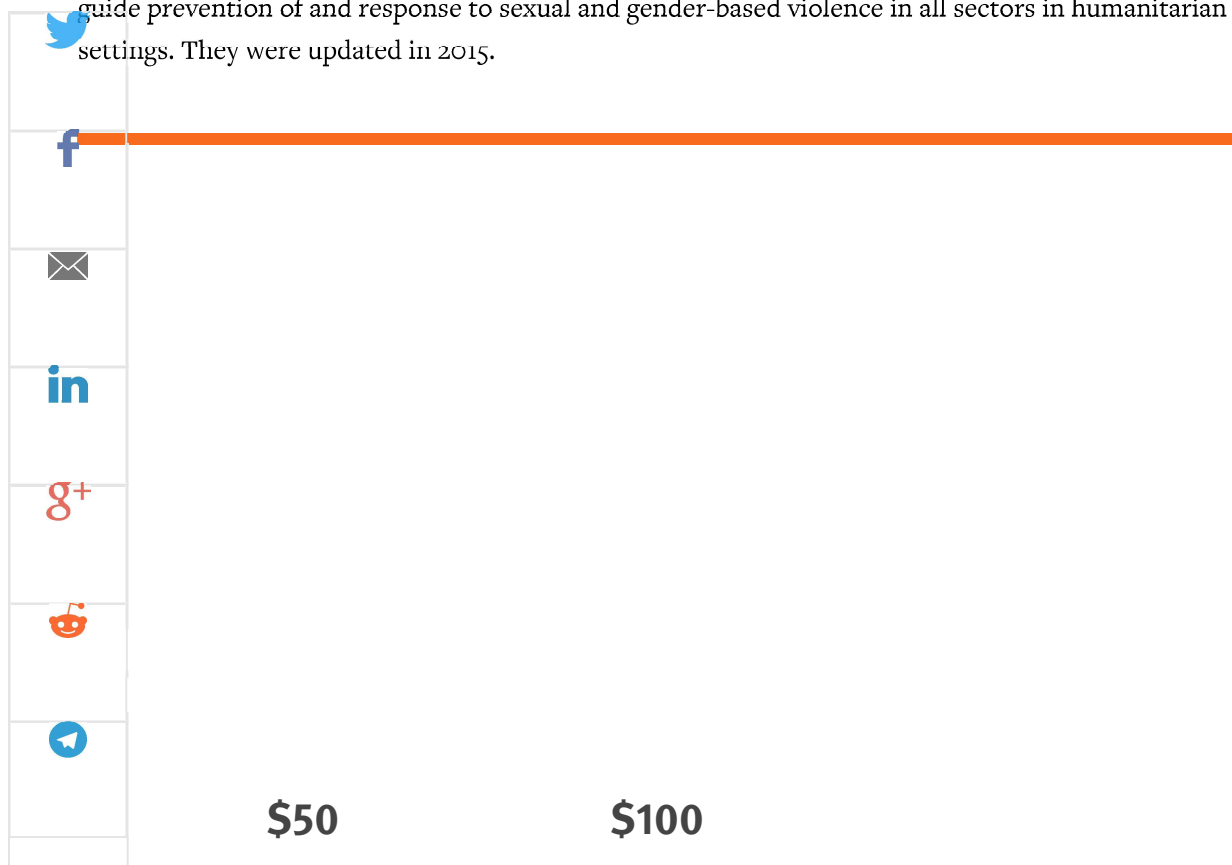
Human Rights Obligations and Humanitarian Standards

Greece is a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) which prohibits governments from subjecting asylum seekers to arbitrary detention and inhuman and degrading treatment. It requires them to provide accommodation and decent material conditions to asylum-seekers. The court has on previous occasions found that Greece has not met its obligations because it did not ensure adequate reception conditions.

The court has ruled that **severe overcrowding and inadequate sanitation conditions** violated the convention. It found the same on the basis that an **asylum seeker was forced to live in conditions of poverty**, unable to cater for basic needs and in a constant state of fear of being a victim of violence. The court has also made clear that detained asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable given their experiences when fleeing persecution, which could increase their anguish in detention.

Sphere was created in 1997 by a group of nongovernmental aid organizations and the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement to improve the quality of humanitarian responses and accountable for their actions. They developed and published the **Humanitarian Charter** and Minimum Standards, which form the **Sphere Handbook**, to inform all humanitarian action and support accountability across all sectors. The standards are a set of principles and minimum humanitarian standards in four technical areas of humanitarian response: water supply, sanitation, and hygiene promotion (WASH); food security and nutrition; shelter and settlement; and health.

The **Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines** for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action were developed by UN and humanitarian aid agencies to guide prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence in all sectors in humanitarian settings. They were updated in 2015.



Region / Country Europe/Central Asia, Greece

Topic Refugee Rights, Asylum Seekers, Women's Rights

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