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To cite this article: Lucie Michaela Hrdinová & Robert Stojanov (2026) Roots and Wings of The Children Silent Odyssey: The Integration of Child and Youth Migrants in the Attica, Greece, Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 24:2, 479-494, DOI: [10.1080/15562948.2025.2529486](https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2025.2529486)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2025.2529486>



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Published online: 16 Jul 2025.



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Roots and Wings of The Children Silent Odyssey: The Integration of Child and Youth Migrants in the Attica, Greece

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ABSTRACT

Although the integration processes of migrants as such are often discussed, aspects of migration and integration of children and youth have not received much attention. This study examines the multifaceted process of integration of refugee and migrant children and youth in the Attica region of Greece. The main aim of the study is to analyze the current difficulties within the migration of children, and the means of their integration. To achieve the objective, qualitative research was conducted. The paper explains how different factors of a social, educational, and psychological nature converge in their experiences of integration. The results of the study highlight the crucial role of NGOs in facilitating non-formal education that supports children's integration, however, the government funding of NGOs' programs for immigrants is problematic. Because the majority of migrant respondents stated that they do not feel integrated at all in Greek society, the Greek government should support the integration process of migrant and refugee children and youth by providing them with better access to language learning, schooling, psychological support, and social services. We have found that other aspects, such as education, finances, or family reunification currently represent more significant factors for migrants' decision to stay or leave Greece.

KEYWORDS

International migration; integration; children and youth migrants; migration policy; non-governmental organizations; unaccompanied children

Introduction

Greece experienced a dramatic rise in migrant arrivals in 2015–2016, especially from Turkey. While the topic of migration is frequently discussed, a little focus is placed on the features of child and youth migration. That seems paradoxical, as in 2015–2016, around 30% of migrants and refugees coming to Greece were children (Buchanan & Kallinikaki, 2020).

Like adults, children migrate for safety and better opportunities, yet their migration patterns remain under-researched (Rodrigues, 2022). As a result of conflicts, persecution, poverty, and other circumstances, many children and youth are forced to leave their homelands to seek safety, protection, and better prospects.

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Roots and Wings of The Children Silent Odyssey: Roots: A metaphor for the foundational support systems that facilitate the integration of refugee and migrant children and youth. Wings: Represents the aspirations, hopes, and dreams of these children and youth. The Silent Odyssey: It implies that the journey of integration is filled with challenges and trials, much like an odyssey. The word "silent" suggests that these challenges often go unnoticed or unspoken in broader societal narratives.

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The successful integration of immigrants is an important goal of all migration policies. Kyeremeh et al. (2021) point out that a key factor in integration is creating opportunities not only for personal growth and development but also opportunities to achieve pre-migration aspirations, i.e. dreams and goals set before arrival in the host country. According to the authors, integration is a continuous adaptation process.

While the integration of adults is extensively studied within international migration research, with much of the literature focusing on economic dimensions (e.g., Foged et al., 2024; Refai et al., 2024; Schilling & Stillman, 2024), the integration of child and youth refugees remains an underexplored area. This gap in the literature is largely attributed to the sensitivity and complexity of issues surrounding their migration experiences. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap. Thus, the paper focuses on the integration of refugee and migrant children currently living in the region of Attica, Greece.

The main objective of the study is to analyze the current challenges in the migration of children and young people and the ways of their integration in Greece. To achieve this, the following research questions were set: (i) How is the integration of refugee and migrant children and youth in Greece taking place, and what is the role of local NGOs and the Greek government (public administration), (ii) How do refugee and migrant children and youth in Greece perceive their integration, and (iii) How do refugee and migrant children and youth in Greece perceive their future? A qualitative research methodology was used to answer these questions and the analysis of the collected data was carried out based on their categorization into thematic clusters formed according to the following research questions.

Migrating children are typically classified into the following groups based on whether they are traveling with their families or guardians. Accompanied children (ACs) travel with their parents, legal guardians, or other family members. While ACs still face risks during migration, they are somewhat protected and supported by the people accompanying them. In contrast, unaccompanied children (UACs) travel alone. The reasons for this can vary—they may have chosen to migrate independently, lost their parents, or been separated from their families during the migration journey. These children are often referred to as unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) and are at greater risk of exploitation, violence, and sexual abuse (Buchanan & Kallinikaki, 2020).

The concept of social integration

The concept of social integration, introduced by Emile Durkheim in the nineteenth century (Crittenden & Cohen, 2014), refers to individuals' participation in social roles and relationships (Brissette et al., 2000). Klarenbeek (2021) adds that an integrated society lacks social boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate members and emphasizes socioeconomic status over legal status.

Blau (1960) argues that social integration depends on how individuals are perceived as valuable and approachable members of the group, but it also promotes competition and social differentiation.

Immigration means the movement of people from one society to another. Integration refers to the development of immigrants' identities and the subsequent behavioral processes of reconciliation between immigrants and social groups in host countries (Burnazoglu, 2021). Integration is a central concept in migration studies, but it is also a frequently discussed concept in the media and policy debates. Schinkel (2018) criticizes the classical notion of integration for promoting rigid boundaries between immigrants and natives, while Klarenbeek (2021) argues that blurring these boundaries does not eliminate inequalities.

Integration is a dynamic, two-way process that involves both migrants and host societies (Gisselquist, 2021). Ager and Strang (2008) identify four key indicators of integration: employment, education, housing, and health. Donato and Ferris (2020) highlight that integration varies at different spatial and contextual scales.

The prevailing view in political debates is that the more integrated a migrant is, the more beneficial he or she is to society economically, culturally, and socially. Thus, in many EU Member States, immigrants are increasingly required to integrate to become successful members of a 'community of equals' and avoid problematic status hierarchies among citizens (de Waal, 2020). According to the author, these demands thus imply a status hierarchy between citizens who naturally belong to this community and those who belong conditionally and should therefore be rejected.

Migration of children and youth

Consistent influxes of UACs to Europe in recent years have prompted efforts to standardize governmental responses (Allsopp & Chase, 2019). In the case of Greece, progressively more UACs are arriving, with the majority of them coming from Afghanistan. During 2014 and 2015, the number of unaccompanied minor asylum applications in the EU nearly quadrupled, reaching over 96,000 (Allsopp & Chase, 2019). International treaties, guidelines, as well as EU-level resources and best practices, such as the Life Project planning framework, all try to harmonize policy for UACs. "Best interests and durable solutions" are frequently used in discussions concerning UACs at the European level, however, there are discrepancies between national policies and practices in the EU Member States (Allsopp & Chase, 2019).

In 2022, almost 5,000 children came to Greece by land and sea. The number of UASCs has seen a threefold increase from 2021.

Age disputes

As the procedures for adults and children differ significantly, it is essential to determine the age of the asylum seeker. The assessment of age can have a major impact on their future, as children have additional rights under national and international law, such as access to social, educational, and health services (UNICEF, 1989). Problems in accurately determining age are highlighted by Gower (2011), who points to discrepancies between declared and documented age, often caused by the use of falsified documents or the absence of any identification.

The role of social workers who assess age is therefore very important, as mistaking a minor child for an adult can not only deprive the child of basic rights but can also make them vulnerable to violence and abuse (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Kenny & Loughry, 2018). The age assessment consists of three steps. First, physical appearance and body metrics are examined. If the person's age cannot be accurately determined by examination, a psychosocial assessment (assessment of psychological development, etc.) is carried out. If the person's age cannot be determined based on these procedures, he or she undergoes a final medical assessment, which may include an X-ray of the left wrist, X-ray of the teeth, or other medical examinations (ECRE, 2022; GCFR, 2024). Despite questionable reliability, these practices persist among Greek authorities (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018). Mishori (2019) criticizes medical methods, arguing that the data rely on population samples that do not reflect diversity of race, ethnicity, nutritional status, and socioeconomic background. Additionally, Brouwer (2020) highlights the relationship between post-traumatic stress disorder and premature aging while arguing that medical age assessment should only be used as a last resort when all non-medical methods of age assessment have been exhausted. Following this, Kapadia et al. (2020) examine the ethical implications and health consequences of radiation exposure for administrative purposes.

This complexity extends to the assessment process in reception centers, where decisions may be based less on physical appearance or documented age and more on the decisions of individuals, as Mishra et al. (2020) illustrate through the experiences of minors in Moria refugee camp¹.

Vulnerability

The increased risk of various types of exploitation, abuse, and trafficking poses a significant challenge for refugee and migrant children and youth, especially during humanitarian crises (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018; Freccero et al., 2017). As a result, refugee and migrant children can be exposed to severe physical, sexual, and psychological harm, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation, and abuse (Giannopoulou et al., 2024).

The dangerous journeys that migrants undertake, often involving the crossing of multiple countries and treacherous seas, further exacerbate their vulnerability. Longer journeys increase the likelihood of trafficking and exploitation (Freccero et al., 2017; Fritzhand & Miloshevska, 2018). These children often suffer trauma as a result of displacement and violence, which has significant impacts on their mental health, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Giannopoulou et al., 2024). The constant state of fear and insecurity exacerbates their mental health problems, making it difficult for them to recover even after achieving relative safety (Freccero et al., 2017). For example, Schumacher et al. (2024), in their study of 575 refugee children in a refugee clinic in Germany, point out that almost half of them met the criteria for depression, often together with PTSD, and highlight the strong associations between depression, age, gender, trauma exposure, and PTSD.

Mishra et al. (2020) illustrate the harrowing experiences of young migrants, such as one man who expressed fear of his boat sinking due to overcrowding during his journey from Afghanistan to Greece, after a treacherous crossing of the Iranian mountains and experiences of homelessness and child labor. Moreover, this phenomenon is difficult to describe and hard to recognize, which often causes it to go unreported, leaving its victims exposed, unrecognized, and vulnerable. Traumatized individuals, especially those who have experienced sexual abuse and exploitation, may have difficulty managing emotions and relationships and resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms such as aggression, substance abuse, depression, and suicidal behavior (Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018).

Greek immigration policies and practices

After the fall of the communist regimes, immigration from the former Yugoslavia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union increased in Greece. In the early 2000s, labor demand attracted additional migrants from Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East for positions in sectors such as construction, tourism, and agriculture (Anagnostou et al., 2016).

The economic crisis of 2009 exacerbated the problems of migrants, as it disproportionately affected migrant workers' employment opportunities and led to a significant increase in poverty rates among migrant households (OECD, 2016).

In 2008-2014, border security and asylum reform were political priorities (Dimitriadi, 2022). The Greek authorities have successively adopted several legislative measures, such as Law 3838/2010 and the 2014 Immigration and Social Integration Law (ISIC), which initially led to the intention to promote the social integration of third-country nationals (TCNs), but eventually in 2019 the government extended the length of stay required for refugees to be naturalized to seven years and introduced a mandatory written citizenship exam before an oral interview. Digidiki and Bhabha (2018) report that Greece has seen a weakening of asylum procedures and international protection standards as the country has been unable to deploy the resources needed to adequately address the huge influx of refugees and migrants, while in 2015 it faced the largest financial crisis in its modern history. As a result of this twin crisis, asylum policy and child protection systems are now overstretched, underfunded, and therefore ineffective.

According to Barn et al. (2021), the Greek administration has adopted a strong anti-immigration stance, including new strategic objectives, especially intensive border security and deterrence of newcomers, and increased border surveillance and security following the Evros incident in

February 2020 (during which thousands of migrants were encouraged to attempt to cross the Greek land border from Turkey) and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 (Dimitriadi, 2022). Greece is also in breach of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (and other treaties to which Greece has committed itself through its EU membership) by introducing a pushback deeming Turkey a safe country for asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia and Syria (ECRE, 2023).

Immigration procedures and integration in Greece

After reception and identification upon arrival, refugees and migrants are divided into three groups: (i) non-asylum seekers; (ii) asylum seekers; (iii) unaccompanied minors, and other vulnerable groups. Non-asylum seekers are sent by the Greek police for repatriation (mandatory or voluntary) and, if they cannot return to their country, for further administrative procedures. Unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups (persons with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, victims of trafficking, persons who have experienced psychological, physical, or sexual violence, and others) are directed to certain entities that offer social support and accommodation (MMA, 2020a).

In 2015, the European Commission introduced the so-called “hotspot approach”. Its purpose was to support Italy and Greece in meeting EU commitments by streamlining migrant identification, registration, asylum procedures, relocation, and return operations (GCFR, 2022).

In line with the ‘hotspot’ approach, the entry and exit policy for asylum seekers in Greece reflects the broader restrictive procedures governing the country's immigration system. Mainland camps (such as Malakasa and Ritsona) are enclosed by fences and walls and have controlled entry and exit systems, including X-ray gates and turnstiles, while some other camps lack such infrastructure (Panayotatos, 2022; RSA, 2024). Entry and exit policies vary from camp to camp. As Chouzouraki (2024) and Panayotatos (2022) point out, in some camps, if the exit is allowed, the process involves rigorous identity and fingerprint checks, which reinforces an institution-like atmosphere and thus increases the stress of residents. The authors also highlight differences in access to services in different facilities, including security measures, reflecting wider inconsistencies in the Greek reception system.

Greece presented its first national strategy for the integration of third-country nationals in 2013 and updated it in 2021 to focus specifically on asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection (European Commission, 2023). This new strategy replaced the previous strategy from 2019, which focused primarily on third-country nationals. The new national strategy is specifically tailored to the needs of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection and is harmonized with Greece's current legislative framework. It aims to promote the inclusion of these groups by encouraging the active participation of public institutions and the wider society in creating an inclusive environment that promotes equality and protects their

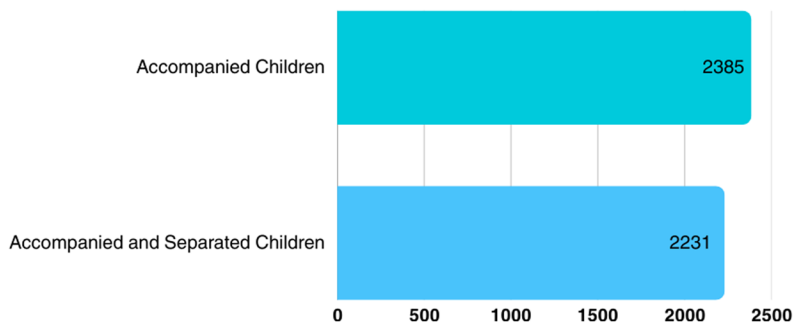


Figure 1. Numbers of Arrivals Accompanied, Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Greece in 2022. Source: UNHCR, UNICEF, & IOM (2023).

Pillars of Greek National Strategy 2021

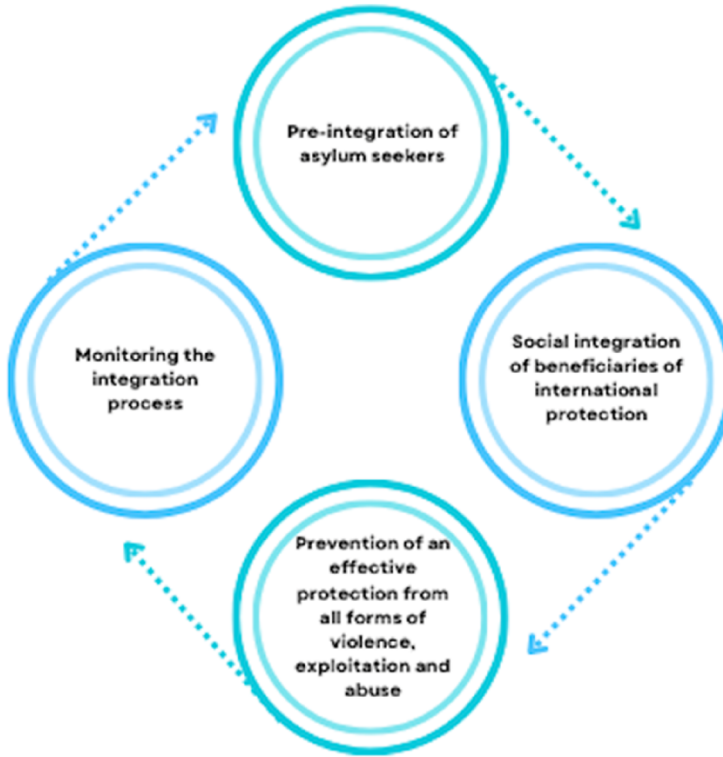


Figure 2. Four pillars of the third National Strategy for the Social Integration of Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection. Source: European Commission (2024).

rights (European Commission, 2024). Figure 2 shows the four main pillars of Greece’s Third National Strategy for Social Integration.

According to Burner and Carlsen (2022), in 2016 the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs created a plan to integrate children under the age of 15 into the national education system, which promoted the teaching of Greek to immigrants in schools and refugee camps. According to Chatzina and Mouti (2022), Greece is aware that teaching the local language in school is the first step towards the integration of migrants.

Immigration detention

The policy of child detention in Greece has raised concerns about its social and humanitarian consequences. According to UNICEF (2022), children remain children regardless of their status and should not be detained as this constitutes a violation of their rights. For example, Human Rights Watch (2019) reports the detention of 82 UACs in so-called “protective custody” held in police stations and immigration detention centers. Although the Greek government announced the abolition of this de jure practice in 2020, de facto children continue to experience detention-like conditions (as reported in Immigration Procedures and Integration in Greece). Reports indicate that children in these centers face alarming conditions, including inadequate protective services, health problems, and substandard food quality (Save the Children, 2024). The Lesvos Law Centre (2024) called for greater protection for UACs and shared the story of an unaccompanied minor who was raped and tortured in the Malakasa camp near Athens.

Detention also has a direct impact on the mental and physical health of children. Reports highlight that children imprisoned on the Greek islands suffer from symptoms of anxiety and depression, including bedwetting, aggressive behavior, and nightmares (Farmakopoulou et al., 2017; The Lancet, 2017). In a particularly disturbing case, a nine-year-old child reportedly attempted suicide, as documented by Save the Children (The Lancet, 2017). In addition, children in detention-like facilities have limited access to education, with only 15% of refugee children in Greece enrolled in formal education (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This exclusion from education further marginalizes them and hinders long-term integration.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design that builds on established methodological approaches in migration studies that emphasize migrants' lived experiences and the socio-institutional contexts that shape their realities (Refai et al., 2024). Given the complexity of the experiences of refugees and migrants, semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen as the data collection method, which is in line with best practices in migration research that prioritize flexibility, reflexivity, and agency of participants. Lamba (2023) highlights that a key advantage of semi-structured interviews is their ability to create a more comfortable interview environment, which is particularly beneficial for children who may feel shy or uncomfortable. Semi-structured interviews are now commonly used in migration studies, as shown, for example, by Barglowski (2018) in sampling in migration research, Gilsenan and Lee (2021) in case of migration from Latin America to Europe and the role of educational psychologists, Huang et al. (2024) for children migrant parents, Lamba (2023) researching migrant street children in Delhi, and Suleiman AlMakhamreh (2019) for Jordanian elderly refugees.

The study is based on interviews with refugee and migrant children and youth and with professionals from NGOs working with them. The research was conducted in two phases: September to December 2021 and July to September 2022 in the Attica region of Greece. Ethical standards of research were followed during the interviews, including the principles of child protection, ensuring informed consent, and protecting the welfare of participants. Regarding the interviews, two sets of questions were prepared - one set of questions for migrants and the other set of questions consisted of questions for professionals (social workers, psychologists, volunteers) from NGOs working with refugee and migrant children.

This study is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 respondents (six children and youth, and nine experts - social workers). Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, a widely used recruitment strategy in migration research to reach hard-to-reach populations (Barglowski, 2018; Noy, 2008). Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings, including a library, shelter, home, and online. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. All the respondents were informed about the aim of the interviews and assured that their data were anonymized. The only personal data recorded included gender, age (for children and young people), nationality, education and occupation (for adults). Following recent discussions on the naming conventions of respondents in qualitative research, the rationale for the choice of pseudonyms is explicitly stated in the interests of transparency. Ensuring that

Table 1. Structure of refugee and migrant respondents based on gender, country of origin, age, and education.

Pseudonym	Gender	Country of origin	Age	Education
Abas	M	Afghanistan	19	High school
Bashira	F	Afghanistan	19	Elementary school
Chakir	M	Syria	14	Elementary school
Duaa	F	Palestine	14	Elementary school
Enas	M	Egypt	18	Elementary school
Fadi	M	Syria	17	Elementary school

Table 2. Structure of expert respondents based on gender, country of origin, education, and occupation.

Code	Gender	Country of origin	Education	Occupation
Aspasia	F	Greece	University degree	Education officer
Bernardo	M	Italy	University degree	Education officer
Charoula	F	Greece	University degree	Community officer
Daniela	F	Italy	University degree	Social worker
Evangelia	F	Greece	University degree	Former social worker
Fatma	F	Iran	University degree	Former social worker
Giorgos	M	Greece	University degree	Educator in a shelter
Hannah	F	England	University degree	Project officer
Irini	F	Greece	University degree	Project officer

pseudonyms (highlighted in latin) are consistent with participants' cultural backgrounds helps to avoid bias while adhering to research ethical standards (Wang et al., 2024). For details see Table 1 (Refugees and Migrants) and Table 2 (Experts).

The refugee and migrant respondents had participated in various programs to help integrate refugee and migrant children. These respondents were from Afghanistan, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine and lived with their families in different types of households or shelters because they were unaccompanied. Parents/legal guardians/carers specifically wished that children were not asked questions that might make them feel uncomfortable. Due to the ethical aspects of working with vulnerable populations, interviews in the shelter were conducted under the supervision of a psychologist to alleviate any potential stress. As these interviews have a higher narrative value, most of the interviewees were professionals working with refugees and migrants in different roles.

The interviews were categorized into separate clusters and analyzed to answer the research questions in order. Thus, the data are analyzed into the following clusters: Migration—The Beginning and the Journey; Integration, Education and Schooling; The Role of the Greek Government and NGOs in the Integration; Future. For the purposes study—the “line-by-line” method was used.

In addition, all direct quotes from respondents are reported verbatim, including grammatical errors, to maintain the authenticity of their statements and to capture the exact words of the respondents.

Results

To distinguish expert respondents from refugee and migrant respondents, expert participants have an “(E)” appended to their pseudonyms.

Migration - the beginning and the journey

All of the migrant respondents agreed that the process of their migration was complicated from the very beginning because they could not participate in the decision-making process due to their age or gender. *Bashira* specifically highlighted that women are not allowed to make decisions on such important matters. Most interviewees explained that their families had to sell all or a large part of their property before the trip could begin. She also added that her mother was told to sell all their furniture to raise money to pay the smuggler.

Migrants are aware of the sacrifices they must make in exchange for a better life in Europe. *Abas* pointed to the material losses, with his family having sold all their family valuables.

Chakir stressed how much he misses his family because he was sent to Europe alone due to a lack of funds. He explained that he traveled from Afghanistan to Iran with his parents and younger siblings. From Iran to Turkey, however, he had to travel alone with a smuggler and a group of other migrants. In Turkey, he met his aunt and another smuggler led them to the coast where the smuggler let them and other people go alone on an old boat to Lesbos. After

a few months on Lesbos, he was transferred to one of the shelters in Athens. He pointed out that despite the island's short distance from the mainland, the journey from Turkey to Lesbos was more dangerous than the entire journey overland from Afghanistan to Turkey.

Enas also described a similar migration experience (from Syria to Greece). He first went with his father to Damascus. In Damascus, his father found a smuggler, paid him about 2,000 euros, and sent him on a dangerous journey unaccompanied. He explained that they (he and other migrants) stayed in Turkey for two weeks. *"One night they came and told us to hurry, pack our things and go and they took us in a big car to another city and we went to the beach... It was an old boat, for maybe six people but we were around 20 there. And the little baby crying and the mother crying, I was so scared. And there we arrived at Samos Island and some people helped us there. From Samos after some months, I got to Athens, to this shelter."*

Of all the migrants interviewed, only *Bashira* and *Duaa* migrated with their families. The rest of the respondents came alone, unaccompanied. *Bashira* said that even though she was traveling with her family, she still felt fear, mainly because of the behavior of the smuggler: *"In Turkey, the smuggler found a flat for us to stay in, and then we didn't see him for a long time, because he wanted more money. I don't know where my parents got the money, but we met the smuggler again and he brought us to a boat with other people and they brought us to Lesbos. There we were in a refugee camp."* After six months in Lesbos, the entire family was transferred to the Eleonas refugee camp².

Giorgos (E), who worked in a shelter for unaccompanied children in Athens, shared the story of a young woman who was living in the shelter at the time. He briefly explained her journey from Syria to Greece, which she experienced together with her two younger brothers: *"At one point, she was raped, and when she arrived in the shelter, you could already tell she was pregnant."* He pointed out that when she arrived at one of the refugee camps on one of the islands, she was asked the same question as *Enas* - whether she wanted to be treated as a minor or an adult. Although she did not have a birth certificate and believed she was over 18 at the time, she stated that she was a minor because she was told that this would allow her to access more support.

Integration, education, and schooling

The majority of migrant respondents said that they were unable to attend school due to their lack of knowledge of the Greek language. Many respondents explained the distress of not being able to attend school. Some stated that they could not speak Greek because they did not attend Greek classes for various reasons. Respondents *Chakir* and *Enas* were not offered any opportunity to attend Greek language classes. *Bashira*, on the other hand, explained that she chose to attend English classes because she thought it would be better for her future as she had shown reluctance to stay in Greece.

Experts perceived education as problematic, pointing to the lack of educational programs, making it difficult to enroll children in schools later. *Bernardo (E)* pointed out that the number of families, and therefore children, is much higher than the capacity of the educational programs offered. He also pointed out that another problem is that children living in the suburbs (especially in refugee camps located tens of kilometers outside the center of Athens) usually cannot attend NGOs that operate mainly in the city center (Omonia, Victoria, etc.) because there is no infrastructure. Finally, *Bernardo (E)* also pointed out the endless turnover of children: *"The list of the students is never stable, because families come, and in few months, they leave to other parts of Greece or to other countries. That's why you can hardly make any progress because there are always new children coming."*

The majority of migrant respondents expressed that they do not feel integrated into Greek society at all. Some said they did not think that Greek society or NGOs had managed to integrate them successfully. *Enas* explains: *"...they keep us in houses [shelters] around Athens, and they don't care. We don't know how to speak Greek, how to work, nothing, no one cares."* *Chakir*

briefly clarified: “...if someone was helping me, maybe I would be happier. Maybe if I went to school, I would have friends. But here I wake up, and do nothing, I have one friend, who is my roommate, and sometimes we go for a walk around Exarcheia³. That’s all, I don’t know anyone here.”

Bashira complained that Greece was not helping her at all. “I can’t go to school because I don’t speak Greek. I can’t really work properly, because I’m not Greek, and also because I don’t know how to work, because I don’t have any skills. Okay, now I work a little, but for little money, I work with refugee children.” She later added that in her family (consisting of two parents and four children, including herself) she is the only one who earns at least some money.

On the other hand, Abbas and Duaa brought opposite aspects. Both of them expressed that they perceived the integration in Greece positively, and they think that this is mainly because they both managed to learn Greek in a short time and were able to attend school. Duaa zoomed in on the reality: “I have three younger siblings and even the youngest one who is five years old has managed to learn Greek. Our father pushes us to learn languages, he himself speaks five languages.” She stressed that the NGO that helped her family allowed her to attend several extra-curricular activities (art, sports, etc.) where she could meet Greek children and make friends, thus feeling more integrated.

Abas explained that his language skills (Persian, Greek, and English) enabled him to start working for an NGO as a translator and thus to start gaining work experience. “Among migrant people I know, I am the only one who was able to find a job. They don’t want to learn Greek, because they don’t want to stay here.”

Bernardo (E) argues that the most important thing is the society of the host country. “For the integration, it’s not about only how well you are trying to be integrated, how well you learn Greek, how well you’re doing your CV to find a job. It’s about also the host community, the host society, and trying to persuade the person to stay in a place that you’re not sure is the most welcoming and equal opportunities and safe environment for them.”

The role of the Greek government and NGOs in integration

The Greek government plays a dual role in managing migration - on the one hand, it provides some institutional support to migrants, but on the other hand, it is widely criticized for its push-back and restrictive border policy. According to respondents, the role of the Greek government depended on whether NGOs received state support. Several NGOs deliberately refuse government support to maintain their independence and avoid endorsing state policies. Bernardo (E), who works for one of the NGOs, explained: “We don’t receive any support from the government, mostly because we don’t agree with their policies.” This view was supported by Charoula (E) and Giorgos (E) who confirmed that their organization does not accept official funding due to their disagreement with the Greek government’s approach to migration. A key reason for the rejection of state aid is the Greek government’s handling of migration, particularly its involvement in the pushbacks. Bernardo (E), Charoula (E), and Giorgos (E) criticized these practices, which were widely observed along the Greek-Turkish border.

Bernardo (E) also highlighted the situation at the Evros River, stating: “There are a lot of pushbacks in the Evros River. And these people are in the middle because Turkey pushes them to go to Greece and Greece pushes them to go back to Turkey.” Charoula (E) agreed and added: “Look at the pushbacks that are happening in Samos. This is prevalent, and even though there’s overwhelming evidence for this, the Greek government hasn’t admitted anything.” However, not all NGO workers share this attitude. Aspasia (E), for example, did not take a strongly negative view of state funding for migration NGOs but rather took a more pragmatic view: “Myself, I can think whatever I want. But I think it is stupid not to take money to help the migrants. That’s what the money is for.” This view reflects a fundamental debate among NGOs - whether refusing government funding is a necessary ethical stance or an impractical limitation of the resources available to support migrants.

Unlike the Greek government, which focuses primarily on border protection, NGOs provide direct support to migrants, helping them with legal aid, education, and job integration. According to *Fatma (E)*, factors such as education, skills, financial stability, and family presence are important for migrants' ability to integrate. In particular, the presence of family is crucial, as migrants who have relatives in Greece or elsewhere in Europe face different problems than those whose families remain separated.

Many respondents also expressed concerns about financial sustainability, as most NGOs depend on private funding. Respondents *Bernardo (E)*, *Charoula (E)*, *Giorgos (E)*, *Hannah (E)*, and *Irini (E)* explained that they are all privately funded. *Irini (E)* elaborated: "At the moment we are completely funded by private donations, so it's just people donating ... but very recently [in 2022] there has been a massive drop in donations. I think because one COVID and the cost of living is rising, and so people don't have much money to donate." Another key challenge she highlighted is the shift in donor priorities towards projects supporting displaced Ukrainians. This trend has led to a redistribution of funds, often at the expense of NGOs assisting other refugee groups. Meanwhile, *Bernardo (E)* highlighted the lack of public funding for mental health and trauma support, stating: "There are not the resources to take care of traumatized people. And professional and competitive resources, psychology, psychotherapists—there's no money for that." This reflects a broader problem in the Greek refugee support system, where financial constraints limit access to important psychological and social services.

Future

Of all the respondents, only *Duaa* was in favor of staying in Greece, but she did not rule out the possibility of completing her higher education outside Greece later on. In contrast, respondents *Abas*, *Bashira*, *Chakir*, *Enas*, and *Fadi* expressed a strong reluctance to stay in Greece. *Enas* stated: "I want to leave Greece as soon as possible. I don't have anything here, and I don't do anything." *Abas*, *Chakir*, *Enas*, and *Fadi* also said their decision to leave was influenced by the fact that they already had at least one family member or acquaintance in another EU country, such as Germany or France. In particular, *Fadi* stressed that he wanted to leave Greece for Germany, where he knew several people who were also Syrian nationals and who offered to help him with legal matters, accommodation, and finding a job.

Although *Abas* found a job in Greece, he still insisted on leaving Greece to be reunited with his mother and two brothers, who were already living in Germany at the time of the interview. "I want to wait for my asylum procedure to finish, I don't want to go illegally, I don't want to lose everything I have been building." In desperate situations, many migrants choose illegal routes to speed up their transit. *Bashira* described that after she and her entire family went through the whole asylum process and still did not receive a response, they feared being subjected to a 'pushback,' which prompted them to resort to an illegal mode of transit. "So, one day, my father brought a passport of a woman, who looked like me. And he also brought a flight pass to Italy. I didn't know how much it was, but I remember all together it was some thousands of euros." She said she tried to get to the airport but was stopped by a Frontex officer. However, she was lucky that the worker only sent her back to Athens without any penalty. She points out, however, that if the same had happened at the time of the interview, she would have been sent back to Turkey.

Daniela (E) admitted that most migrants do not want to stay in Greece. She distinguishes between the reality of the refugee camps, which is worse, and the reality of life in Athens. She explained that on the one hand, the refugee camps are dirty with prison-like conditions, but on the other hand, if a child or anyone lives in a squat or a shelter, their conditions are not that much better. *Aspasia (E)* argued that if a migrant comes to a refugee camp, stays there, and then leaves, his situation can only get better because: "One can rise faster from the bottom." Although she admitted that even the reality of life in Athens is not a "dream", she concluded

that apart from Ukrainians who hope the war will end soon and want to return home, most of the families she has worked with wished to stay in Athens. She further noted that we must bear in mind that the UAC situation is a separate scenario. According to *Aspasia (E)*, UACs, given their placement in shelters, could experience a worse situation and therefore want to leave Greece.

Discussion

Five out of six migrant respondents reported that their families had to sell some of their assets to pay the smugglers to be able to migrate (as a family or as individuals). Respondents were uncertain about the exact amount their families had paid. Sources on the so-called cost of living are limited and outdated. AP News (2022) reported that five people were arrested on a Greek island while attempting to smuggle 100 people from Lebanon to Italy, with each migrant expected to pay between US\$6,500 and US\$8,000.

A key issue discussed was the vulnerability of children. As one respondent noted, some minors experience sexual abuse during the migration process, which is supported by existing literature (e.g. Digidiki & Bhabha, 2018). Unfortunately, sexual violence is a common phenomenon in the “migration environment”. For example, Belanteri et al. al (2020) conducted research in Médecins Sans Frontières clinics on the island of Lesbos. They reported that 215 victims of any kind of sexual violence sought their services between September 2017 and January 2018 alone. In this context, Joyce Vom Dahl et al. (2024) highlight that refugees are highly vulnerable to HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, partly due to sexual survival and other risk factors.

Education has emerged as a major factor in integration. Although Greek policy mandates education for all children (Crul et al., 2019), gaps in implementation prevent refugee and migrant children from receiving formal education. Children can attend Greek language classes, but only informally, through NGOs or various organizations or institutions. Respondents who learned Greek and enrolled in school reported a stronger sense of belonging, which reinforces the argument that language acquisition is essential for integration (Chatzina & Mouti, 2022).

Another key issue is the role of NGOs in integration. Although NGOs provide essential services, many refuse state funding due to concerns over state migration policies, including pushbacks. A professional respondent strongly objected to these practices, which have also been criticized in international legal discussions (ECRE, 2023). However, NGOs relying solely on private donations may not be financially sustainable. NGO services are crucial as non-formal education provided by various NGOs plays a key role in the integration of children into their new society (Burner & Carlsen, 2022).

The study highlights that the majority of respondents do not see Greece as their final destination. The majority of them aspire to move to Western European countries, as confirmed by Barn et al. (2021). The decision to leave is often driven by economic instability, lack of educational opportunities, and family reunification. Buchanan and Kallinikaki (2020) report that some children are instructed by their families to head to countries such as Germany, which is considered to offer better opportunities. Two respondents identified Germany as their final destination because of family reunification and chain migration.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article examines the current challenges in the migration of children and young people and the ways of their integration in Greece. Our findings show that stateless children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, both during the journey and during the integration process. Through the provision of non-formal education and psychosocial support, NGOs are indispensable in bridging the gaps left by formal systems. However, limited funding prevents NGOs from

providing sustained assistance. The research highlights a fundamental paradox: while NGOs provide crucial support, they cannot address the deeper systemic barriers that prevent successful long-term integration.

The majority of migrant respondents expressed that they do not feel integrated into Greek society at all. They feel there is a big language barrier, little help, inability to participate in societal life without the possibility of further employment and finding a job, etc. On the other hand, two respondents who had the opportunity to learn Greek and attend school felt more integrated as a result, which allowed with the help of one NGO participation in extracurricular activities such as art, and sports, with other Greek children. From the experts' perspectives, the lack of interest of the majority society in the integration of these young immigrants is also an important observation, which also contributes to the low level of integration.

The feeling of low levels of integration largely determines our respondents' perception of their future. Migrants' decisions to stay in or leave Greece are more strongly influenced by access to formal education, stable financial prospects, and the possibility of family reunification. Despite the efforts of NGOs, the absence of an effective and well-funded government strategy significantly undermines the integration process.

This study therefore highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive government response to support migrant and refugee children. This includes improving access to language education, improving school infrastructure, and providing reliable psychological and health services. Only through the coordinated efforts of government bodies, NGOs, and wider society can Greece move towards a more inclusive and sustainable model of integration for refugee and migrant children.

In conclusion, while NGOs have shown resilience and commitment to addressing immediate needs, the future of migrant children in Greece depends on a more ambitious and structured policy framework that recognizes the long-term nature of integration. Without such reforms, Greece risks continuing to marginalize one of the most vulnerable populations within its borders.

Notes

1. The Moria refugee camp, once located on the Greek island of Lesbos, has become a symbol of the European migration crisis and is notoriously overcrowded.
2. Eleonas was a refugee camp, located in Votanikos, Athens.
3. Exarcheia is a central Athens neighborhood that offers homes to migrants and refugees squatting in abandoned buildings (Kontogianni, 2022).

Data management and ethics

The research team obtained ethical approval for conducting the survey with respondents, including children and youth under the age of 18, from the Ethics Committee of Mendel University in Brno (Resolution No. 13, dated 3 August 2021). Due to the young age of the participants and the sensitive nature of the data, only the information presented in this study is permitted for publication.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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