



Transactional Sex and Health Repercussions in Forced Displacement: A Multi-Country Study

Greece Country Report



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Abbreviations

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ESTIA	Emergency Support To Integration and Accommodation
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
HELIOS	Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection
IDI	In Depth Interview
KII	Key Informant Interview
LAG	Local Advisory Group
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex and Queer
MH	Mental Health
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RIC	Reception & Identification Center
SEA	Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities, Gender Expressions & Sex Characteristics
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
TS	Transactional Sex

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Executive Summary

The present report is the result of a research project entitled “Transactional Sex and Health Repercussions in Forced Displacement”, which took place between December 2020 and October 2023. The research aimed to examine why, when and how refugees across sexual orientation and gender identities engage in survival strategies (including transactional sex) and the impact on their sexual and reproductive health and mental health. Data were collected in Greece (Athens) through ethnographic observation, interviews and focus group discussions. A law and policy analysis identified structural factors that facilitate TS and impact refugees’ SRH/MH.

The report identifies structural variables that constitute motivational factors for people’s strategic choices, including designing survival strategies (e.g. transactional sex). A significant increase in the structural challenges refugees face has led to their precarisation in all aspects of everyday life (e.g. accommodation, livelihoods, access to services and rights, protection, integration). In order to cope with the challenges, refugees adopt a variety of strategies, some of which can have harmful consequences, including risks for their mental and SRH. Apart from TS, which is further explored, the research recorded various survival strategies, either collective or individual, which are presented in the report and illustrate the refugees’ resourcefulness.

Despite the many examples and insights that participants offered, pointing to a high prevalence of transactional sex being used as a strategy, it is unsafe to assume how common the practices are or draw any conclusions following gender, nationality or legal status, as the sample and the perceptions of participants are unavoidably biased. However, according to inputs by key informants, it seems that there is an increase in the number of those resorting to the strategy or at least a change in the identified patterns. Perceptions of transactional sexual relations, gender norms, and cultural factors unavoidably influenced our participants’ narratives, particularly when their accounts are second-hand. TS was often referred to by refugee participants as “prostitution”, particularly when it was employed by women. However, other participants did not necessarily perceive transactional encounters for monetary benefits as sex work but merely as a temporary strategy. Some shared nuanced insights discussing the possible overlap between transactional sex for money, sex work, sexual exploitation, as well as how GBV, including harassment might often coexist with transactional sex practices. Those narratives illuminate the complexity behind engaging in similar practices and varying perceptions and conceptualizations of participants. They also point out to the continuum of experiences, which vary and are constantly under negotiation. Adopting an intersectionality lens, the report attempts to delve into the refugees’ complicated realities, which, especially for those who engage in TS, includes them navigating through and negotiating issues of agency, coercion, pleasure, violence, consent, power hierarchies and privilege. For those deploying their body as a resource – often as a last solution- experiences of exploitation, violence, marginalization and stigmatization can arise and may cause severe Mental/ SRH implications, as the report illustrated.

A more thorough research is needed specifically on survival strategies of refugees with diverse SOGIESC. Moreover, it would be interesting to conduct a research on the perceptions of social services including social workers, psychologists, interpreters regarding TS, endeavoring to investigate the extent of acceptance or stereotypes and judgmental attitudes of the field professionals. Furthermore, a dedicated research on social media and online apps, their content and how they are used by refugees for transactional sex/ sex work would enlighten our knowledge on the use of new spaces and technologies. Last but not least, a research using surveys in various clinics and health services on the connection of SRH and sex work/transactional sex would enrich the data and thus facilitate the design of targeted health interventions.

1. Introduction

Greece constitutes one of the main countries of arrival and transit for refugees¹ crossing to Europe. The increased numbers of refugees since 2015 led to a complete re-organization of the country's migration policies and asylum legislation. The impact of the EU-Turkey Statement² and the establishment of “hotspots” in Aegean islands, two major milestones in the so called refugee crisis, have been well-documented (Spathopoulou & Carastathis, 2020) (Åberg, 2022) (Dittmer & Lorenz, 2021) (Schack & Witcher, 2021). The overall securitization and restrictive amendments of asylum legislation, the reduced access to international protection, including well-documented push-backs, have raised considerable concerns (GCR, 2023; ECRE, 2023). The significant structural challenges that refugees face lead to their well-documented precarisation in all aspects of everyday life (e.g., accommodation, livelihoods, access to services and rights, protection, integration)³. Refugees adopt a variety of coping strategies, some of which can increase their risks for their sexual and reproductive and mental ill-health.

This report presents part of the findings of a multi-country research project, “Transactional Sex and Health Repercussions in Forced Displacement”, focusing on data collected from refugees, asylum seekers and other forcibly displaced people in Athens between September 2021 and September 2022⁴. The overall aim of the research was to understand survival strategies in forced displacement, including gendered drivers, patterns and health repercussions of transactional sex, adopting an intersectional lens⁵. The research further examined the sexual and reproductive health and mental health implications. Data were collected through ethnographic observation, interviews and focus group discussions. A law and policy analysis identified the gender aspects in structural factors that facilitate TS and impact refugees' SRH/MH.

Based on initial formative research by the Principal Investigator that highlighted the diversity of transactional sexual practices in forced displacement and humanitarian context, in order to generate nuanced data of the complexities, the working definition of transactional sex (TS) used in the research was *adults engaging in sexual activities, with the implicit or explicit exchange for material or non-material benefits, such as money, gifts, goods, services and favours or other needs. Our initial formative research and other previous studies supported the assumption that people who engage in TS often do not identify as sex workers and may engage in TS as a single or repeated encounter, or even engagements that are constructed as a longer-term relationship*. They may or may not recognize/disclose that they engage in such sexual encounters or relations with the intention of accessing material or non-material benefits. Our working definition of TS implied agency, yet recognizing that the possibility of exploitation in the context of forced displacement, where choices are limited.

Adopting a feminist intersectional lens, the research strived to capture refugees' complex realities and the differential experiences on the basis of intersecting identities, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnicity, and for those engaging in transactional sexual practices, negotiating power

¹ The term is used in its broader socio-political sense including all different “categorisations” of the so called mixed migration flows of the response system (e.g. asylum seekers, beneficiaries of international protection, undocumented migrants, rejected asylum seekers etc).

² EU- Turkey Statement, 18 March 2016, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

³ Indicatively, <https://eu.rescue.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/IRC%20housing%20report%20Greece%20-%20English.pdf> & <https://www.gcr.gr/en/news/press-releases-announcements/item/1850-ngos-raise-alarm-at-growing-hunger-amongst-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-greece>

⁴ The Consortium consisted of Geneva Graduate Institute (Lead Coordinator, Switzerland), Centre de Recherches Sociologiques et Politiques de Paris, Université Paris 8 (France) and KMOP Social Action and Innovation Center (Greece) and was funded by SNIS.

⁵ The definition of Crenshaw on intersectionality is well-known. It is important for the research to underline that participants' experiences are unique and the conditions that marginalize them are not the simple “addition” of the challenges they face due to their different identities, but each one of them adds an additional layer of oppression.

and consent. For them experiences of exploitation, violence, marginalization and stigmatization can arise and may cause mental/ SR health implications.

2. Research Methodology

Data were collected from September 2021 to September 2022. A Local Advisory Group (LAG) with stakeholders was established early in the project and provided advice throughout the project.⁶

Data collection

The research team consisted of one female and one male researcher, giving the opportunity to participants to choose the preferred gender. The following data collection methods have been used⁷:

a. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

18 persons from 14 entities/ institutions have participated including service providers (mental health experts, Sexual and Reproductive Health experts, social workers in shelters, social workers in Community Centers, psychologists), experts from International Organisations, Community Representatives, and Public servants.

b. In-depth interviews (IDIs)

Participants were recruited using a variety of methods: through partners, leaflets, deployed field monitors/ cultural mediators, outreach in places where refugees gather, as well as through snowball sampling. Given the sensitivity of the topic, researchers did not engage with getting possible participants' contact details, but instead interested participants were encouraged to contact the research team phone in case they needed more information or were interested in participating. 39 in-depth interviews were conducted (17 cis women, 14 cis men and 8 people with diverse SOGIESC. In terms of language, 21 out of the 39 were Farsi speaking, 5 Arabic speakers, 10 French speakers and 3 were speaking English or other languages.

The age of participants ranged from 20 to 56 years old with the majority belonging in the 25-35 age group. Regarding their legal status, 10 out of 39 were undocumented, 11 were asylum seekers and 18 were beneficiaries of international protection or other status. Finally, 22 out of 39 were single, 10 married with/without children and 7 single-headed households.

c. Focus group discussions (FGDs)

1 FGD was organized with the participation of 7 cis Francophone women from various African countries. One of them was divorced and the rest of them were single. Average age was 37 years old. Most of them had children (1-2) and two of them had none. They have been living in Greece from 2,5 to 6 years. Finally, 4 of them had a refugee status and 3 of them were undocumented.

d. Participant observation

Two researchers/ field monitors speaking Farsi/Dari and Arabic (one female and one male) conducted participant observation for two weeks in a camp managed by Greek Authorities, in various NGOs/ service providers in the urban center of Athens as well as in public spaces (e.g. parks, squares, neighborhoods).

⁶ LAG consisted of Praksis, Melissa Network, Velos Youth, MdM Greece, Positive Voice, Orlando LGBT+, IRC, Community of Congo Brazzaville, and Nigerians in Diaspora Association (NIDO).

⁷ A detailed breakdown of participants is included in the Annex of the report.

Field notes were taken into consideration during analysis and researchers had the chance to share informative leaflets with potential participants, which helped in the recruitment process. Indeed, apart from recruitment, the most important contribution of the participant observation was the fact that key concepts and analytical terms have been tested and methodological tools and approaches to potential participants were informed and improved.

Ethics

The anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants were of paramount importance and detailed procedures were outlined in the research protocol. A data management plan outlined the details of data management, including compliance with ethical and regulatory requirements. The research protocol and data management plan obtained ethical approval from Geneva Graduate Institute's Institutional Review Board as well as KMOP's Ethical Committee.

Reflections-Limitations

Findings reflect the time period and location (urban Athens) in which they were collected/ analysed. Although questions about the journey gave insights regarding border areas, still we consider that a research there could generate different findings. Data are rich regarding survival strategies; however the findings we present are not an exhaustive list of strategies. Moreover, we sought to have inputs from LGBTIQ+ refugees, recognizing the unique experiences, the additional layers of challenges and potentially different strategies they employ. However -as with other participants- we acknowledge the multitude of experiences of persons with diverse SOGIESC and despite the meaningful insights of our participants, an in depth exploration was outside the scope of this study and more extended research on queer persons is needed⁸. Lastly, the research focuses on survival practices of adults and further research focusing on underage refugees is needed.

COVID-19 had a severe impact on our ability to conduct the research. Recruitment and interviews were significantly delayed, as it was important to conduct interviews with refugees in person, due to the sensitivity of the topic and for inclusiveness/ privacy reasons. Further, police operations in the city center, push-backs, increased securitization and a documented onward movement of refugees decreased the number of potential participants. Recruitment was also challenging due to research fatigue. Thus, despite efforts to recruit participants from diverse backgrounds and profiles, certain communities were proven hard to reach. Language barriers were overcome through trained interpreters; nevertheless, adding a second layer of interpretation risks increasing subjectivity.

It is important to highlight that the realities of refugees are too complex to be presented in a 40-page document and thus the team could not avoid proceeding with a "simplified" but equally important for policy reasons categorisation of TS patterns from a SOGIESC perspective in 3.3.1 to a structural challenge-based categorisation in 3.3.2. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reiterate our problematisation around stratifications⁹ and taxonomies, which do not pay justice to the complicated interconnection between drivers (not a single variable ever) and the multiple identities of people on the move, which dictate an intersectional approach. Moreover, as our aim was to remain true/authentic with the participants' narratives, the report attempts a rigorous and complex balance exercise between an interpretation of participants' life as full of choices,

⁸ Especially, should we consider that the LGBTIQ+ community represents a very diverse mix of people, identities and experiences, whose including in the umbrella term of "LGBTIQ+" should not be used to conceal such differences or to lead to "homogenized" approaches.

⁹ It was often the case that people did not fit in the western categorisation of LGBTIQ+ and did not self-identify with such terms.

agency and sawiness on one hand and an interpretation of their life as full of destitution, which focuses on weaknesses, lack of alternatives and depicts refugees as dependent and passive followers of their reality.

Unavoidably, their narratives are also shaped by their understanding of who is doing the research (Greek and privileged researchers outside of their communities either LGBTIQ+ or refugee communities) and thus it is not unusual to assume that their narration reflects the wider dynamics of the response system where they found themselves constantly negotiating what a refugee identity should entail. Being outsiders and not part of those communities ourselves, is a further limitation, which was partly addressed by discussing findings with key stakeholders and the LAG. Moreover, despite the fact that the research team, both researchers and interpreters, have embraced a non-judgmental approach on TS, it could be argued that the stigma and social marginalization that is common for refugees to experience while engaging in TS, has influenced the way they have presented their stories.

3. Main Findings

3.1 Survival strategies

3.1.1 Leaving Greece

Participants identified traveling to other EU countries as a main survival strategy refugees employ. Due to lack of large-scale and systematic relocation programmes or other opportunities to leave Greece regularly, the majority of participants described they were considering or had already decided/ tried to leave Greece on their own (i.e. irregularly). Accommodation, integration and documentation-related challenges were commonly mentioned as drivers. In many cases, those were recognized refugees who felt that despite the international protection status they could not build a life –or even survive– in Greece. A woman from Afghanistan shared why she and her husband have decided to leave:

“I would love to stay in Greece because it has a good climate, it's not as expensive as other countries in Europe but the problem is Greece doesn't offer help and doesn't support refugees but if it could and if it would give us some help, nobody would leave Greece. As soon as they get asylum, they are kicked out of their homes, their money is cut off and what are they supposed to do? The person who has no money, no house, no language, what should he do to live?”¹⁰

According to participants, the overall migration management, including lack of integration and support, instability and uncertainty, creates perceptions that refugees are unwelcome and influences decision for onward movement, as refugees believe that they would be provided with more support in other EU countries. For parents, leaving Greece is a means to secure opportunities and education for their children. An Afghan participant shared how inability to generate income and provide for his family is a driver for onward movement:

“Since I haven't been given the opportunity to learn the language, I don't think it will be easy for me to find a job. I have the impression that the government sees foreigners with the eye they are all about getting out of here, they don't see them with the eye to keep them. [...] I can tell you that white work without language is not possible. Necessarily those who want to work, they go to the black market. And how long can you stay in a black work? And from the point where you don't want to or you don't think about it, you are pushed by your thinking towards leaving.”¹¹

¹⁰ IDI-3, Interview notes in possession of the authors

¹¹ IDI-25, Interview notes in possession of the authors

For asylum seekers and undocumented persons, traveling is linked with fears that upon a negative decision they might face detention and deportation. For them, traveling irregularly is the only option, which can expose them to risks they previously experienced in the journey towards Europe. Moreover, traveling through irregular routes requires securing large amounts of money. Strategies employed for securing it - such as engaging in TS, which will be discussed further in this report- are often associated with several risks. Still, despite risks and consequences, some will do anything to leave; their determination can only point to the insurmountable challenges they face in Greece.

3.1.2 Collective and community-based strategies

Notwithstanding individual responses to adversity and the differences in community dynamics, community surfaced as a main coping strategy in the interviews. Whether it was official associations, friends, compatriots, refugees who have been in Greece longer or locals, social networks were identified as a source of material and emotional support.

Financial Support

Refugees from various communities often turn for financial support to friends and family, who may be in Greece, in other countries or in the country of origin. The money they borrow intends to cover an array of needs from everyday expenses to rent, medical expenses, legal costs, passport fees or may be used to fund their journey to another EU country. This strategy was particularly relevant for undocumented persons and recognized refugees. A single man, who arrived as an unaccompanied minor and spent several years in a camp before he was recognized as a refugee, shared:

"It's been six months that they have cut off my cash card, and even food is not given to me. I'm sure when my papers come in, when I go to get fingerprinted for my passport, I'm sure they'll take me out of the camp I'm in. [...] They've also cut my food completely. They tell me that you are in the group of recognized refugees, so you don't qualify for food. [...] I call my friends and people I know, whoever can send me [money]; friends in Germany and France".¹²

However, many participants noted that asking for money from relatives and friends who are not in Greece is neither an easy decision nor a survival strategy adequate on its own. This negotiation is well reflected in the words of a single mother from Iran, who strives to support her children and herself after receiving a positive asylum decision:

"...in the house I stay they have a cash card. The woman of this family works, so I can do something now and then. When I see that the euro's value has come down, [...], when I see it's worth pulling a little money from my parents so they don't get squeezed, but I don't beg here, or reach out to anyone, to have them say "you had no one to help you?". I barely manage to make a living".¹³

Information, material support and protection

Upon arrival to the islands or mainland Greece, other refugees or networks of compatriots are a source of vital information, orientation, and a first point of reference in an unknown environment, as was noted by participants of diverse ethnicities and profiles. Word of mouth was vital especially with regards to asylum procedures as information is often lacking and those who have been longer in the system can share valuable insights. A newly arrived single father from Syria shared:

"I had no place to stay and I didn't know the language to be able to ask some questions, to learn some things, because I didn't even know where I was. To figure out my location, I had to talk to a friend, to tell him to take me to a place where there are some Arabs. For example, [...] this friend called me a taxi so

¹² IDI-33, Interview notes in possession of the authors

¹³ IDI-10, Interview notes in possession of the authors

that I could go to an area where I could find an Arab to talk to him about the possibility of living together".¹⁴

Tangible support from other refugees –often compatriots– was essential for those arriving in islands, where they met substandard conditions in Reception & Identification Centers (RICs). Sharing limited resources, offering space in one's tent or taking care of minors were examples of collective strategies, while another expression of community solidarity was asking support from community leaders or compatriots who speak English. Two men from different communities who arrived in different islands highlighted aspects of this support:

"If you let me say it, I'll say Samos was a hell in 2019. The image that I had of Samos, of the European space and this place, was not that; for the first week, for the first six or seven days, I was shocked, that is, we didn't find what we expected, because we were sleeping in the streets of the camp with my children. After days, I met an old friend, whom I had met on the journey, and they had arrived earlier than us. So, I trusted, I took my children to their tent [...]"¹⁵

"I was speaking some English. People there were calling me [name] the interpreter. And when everyone had a problem with their child, they want to go to the hospital, "[name] come with me, [name] come with me". There were some interpreters, but they had specific tasks to work for their employer and after midnight, no interpreters -even before, after 5 - no one."¹⁶

Support networks -however small- were important to cope with security risks; for instance, it was noted how women were forming small groups for bathroom visits in RICs where pervasive violence has been documented (Amnesty International, 2018). Further, protection concerns and what was perceived as discriminatory treatment towards single men push some refugees to enter "agreements" to ensure protection for women and better treatment for men. Further, single mothers often manage every-day challenges by supporting each other:

"They'll assist each other with childcare, so another woman who can read or speaks better Greek can go, communicate and get more information. So, that's a way of working together to meet the challenge of getting information. Or assist each other so that a woman -and it can be different groups, of course, but we've seen it with women- can go to the doctor and doesn't bring her 3 or 4-5 children with her; so other women will assist by caring for those children".¹⁷

Housing and work

In the absence of formal support, communities are an important resource to secure accommodation and work. Through word of mouth refugees find informal housing arrangements, are introduced to compatriots who rent out places at lower prices or find a place to sleep in compatriots' apartments. This kind of support is critical for those who face homelessness, such as undocumented persons and recognized refugees who are evicted from state apartments or camps after receiving their asylum decision. A young participant from Cameroon described the challenges and the vital role of community in securing accommodation:

"When I arrived in Athens I didn't have a place [...] The first night was really disastrous and I ended up crying, because I had nowhere to stay and I stayed with a friend on a very small mattress in a very small room, we slept together on the floor in a room that was shared by five people. [...] It's not that I couldn't rent a house, but the requirements were high. You had to pay a month's rent, the security deposit and

¹⁴ IDI-1, Interview notes in possession of the authors

¹⁵ IDI-25, *ibid*

¹⁶ IDI-30, Interview notes in possession of the authors

¹⁷ KII-2, Interview notes in possession of the authors

the realtor's fee, which was also a month's rent. It was too heavy for me. [I stayed] with people who were lucky enough to rent a house -because in order to find a house that costs 350 Euros you must have 1,000 Euros in your pocket, so we try to stay with others, to sublet. And that's where it's very difficult because you don't receive UNHCR assistance anymore, you don't work, but you have to spend 1,000 Euros to rent a house. HELIOS doesn't give you anything, unless when you have already paid for the house, HELIOS reimburses the money you have spent. But where can we get the money to pay for the house in advance? That's why you may live with others in a house to be able to pay or you may borrow money from a friend and when HELIOS reimburses you, you give it back to them".¹⁸

Other participants highlighted how turning to friends and compatriots is a main strategy to find work in Greece. Despite their skills and competences, receiving support from an NGO or a peer who has been in Greece for several years is seen by some as the only way to secure legal employment. For undocumented persons, word of mouth and networks are the only way to find work in the 'black market', even though such income generation activities are often exploitative.

Community-based strategies go beyond one-way support. Collectively renting houses, sharing expenses, counting on others when one cannot contribute, while taking care of others when they are unable to support themselves, are powerful expressions of solidarity discussed by participants. In the words of a participant from Ivory Coast who has been in Greece for several years:

"The truth is that there is also a sense of solidarity in the houses, for example, if you live somewhere and you haven't found a job yet and you can't pay the rent, you don't pay it and they also help you to find a job, so that you can cover your expenses accordingly. It's done everywhere, including in France; and in Turkey; and, for example, if you find yourself with a friend who doesn't have money to pay, there will be someone who can support you for a while, help you find your way, meaning to find a job, to support you with networking".¹⁹

Besides informal networks, many refugees turn to official migrant associations, which can facilitate integration and offer connections to services or employers. In some communities, churches can perform a similar function, offering material support and opening up collective responses to challenges. Further, refugees who have been in Greece for years may act as links and share their knowledge of the system. While less common, some discussed the importance of locals for their well-being. Similarly, self-organized structures, volunteer networks and squats were an opportunity for a few participants to interact with locals, build ties with other refugees and get support.

Psychological support and health

Some participants stressed the importance of social networks for mental health, as sharing common problems, fears and sorrows can be a powerful mechanism to cope with the mental health toll of displacement. For some, disclosing to friends is a way to share a burden they feel they cannot share with mental health professionals –due to lack of access, social barriers and stigma or because they don't feel they can understand and support them. Further, communities have diverse conceptualizations of mental health and coping mechanisms as key informants and refugees noted:

"About psychology there is a need for interpretation, since when we say in [African country²⁰] that I go to a psychologist it means "I've gone crazy!". It doesn't carry the same meaning as here "I have a lot on my mind". [...] People when they have some psychological issues they go to church, they go to hair salons.

¹⁸ IDI-15, Interview notes in possession of the authors

¹⁹ IDI-31, Interview notes in possession of the authors

²⁰ In order to avoid identification of the KII, the specific African country is not mentioned

Yeah, hair salons are not only a place to get your hair done, no. It's where we talk, blah blah blah. So that's how people calm down".²¹

"You should know that there are too many people here, especially young people, who are thinking of committing suicide [...]. I help them there as much as I can as a "psychotherapist", as whatever you want to call me, if someone walks by my beauty salon and I think they have a problem or they talk to me or they take their problem out on me, they talk about it. As much as I can calm them down, as much as I can talk to them, I tell them my story, I tell them, "Guys, we're all one family, we're all from one country, we've come to a foreign country and we don't have a specific goal because we're being thrown around". So I listen to them, they listen to me, they talk to me, I talk to them".²²

Similarly, to this woman who has adopted the role of a "therapist" in the salon where she works, an Afghan participant explained how she tries to console friends who experienced GBV during the journey and struggle with sharing their stories with family or official support.

"Many friends of mine had similar experiences and a woman I knew was raped during the journey, but she told me she wouldn't tell anyone because she felt ashamed. [...] The woman was very embarrassed, of course, but she told me "now what can I say? What can I do?" If she told her husband, it would be a mess, so she had to swallow it inside. [...] she only told me and said "I will not go there to the doctor, what can I say to the doctor?" Women have a fear of being shamed. [...] If there are two women they'll discuss among themselves, because they're scared afterwards. There were many here who tried to commit suicide".²³

Avoiding doctors and the official support system was repeatedly mentioned, particularly by female participants. Many times, it was linked with lack of access, negative experiences in healthcare settings, language barriers and perceived indifference. Lack of trust leads some to turn to traditional medicine, advice from friends or unofficial "clinics". At the same time, several women interviewees from few African countries, shared their distrust, particularly in relation to SRH services, because they believed doctors provide 'bad advice', prescribe potentially dangerous medications or perform unnecessary surgeries. On a similar note, some felt that they were pressured to terminate pregnancies. Influenced by such circulating perceptions some women participants reported avoiding SRH services altogether during pregnancies. An example of a participant in a FGD follows:

"I have a very bad memory of the doctors who saw me in Moria. I was sick, I was pregnant and I had fever [...]. I went to see the doctor, he knew I was pregnant and prescribed me antibiotics [...]. When I took the first dose the first day, I almost died. I had palpitations and feeling a lot of pain. So, then another lady from Congo came [...] and she looked at it and said "no! This is impossible! I was taking this medicine for two weeks, I almost died. I am no pregnant, but you are and they are giving you this?" She told me "I want to give you an advice, you should not take any medication they give you here, you should not accept to go to the hospital to give you medicine; because the doctors here are trying to abort the babies". Not by themselves, but through the medicine they give. And until I stopped, I had palpitations all the time. And until the time I gave birth to my son there, I didn't see a gynecologist, I didn't have appointments-I always feared that if I did, they would make me abort".²⁴

As the positive aspects of collective strategies were highlighted by most participants, it comes as no surprise that people often refuse to be moved to isolated camps or areas where they have no contact with other

²¹ KII-14, Interview notes in possession of the authors

²² IDI-19, Interview notes in possession of the authors

²³ IDI-6, Interview notes in possession of the authors

²⁴ FGD-1, Focus Group Notes in possession of the authors

refugees. However, participants also noted negative impacts of trusting peers and some, particularly women, avoided close relations with compatriots. In some cases, people asked for benefits in return of support; others suffered violence from peers or confided in persons who then shared information with abusers. In other cases, advice from peers inadvertently put persons at risk or encouraged harmful behavior. Inter-community tensions and grievances from home countries, marginalization within communities, are factors discouraging some from seeking support, while others noted that overreliance on community can affect integration and feeling of independence.

3.1.3 Individual strategies

Along with collective strategies, persons adopt individual coping mechanisms, with one often complementing the other. Depending on individual profiles and circumstances, some need to employ a far wider support system and a higher resourcefulness to survive.

Turning to NGOs

Participants approached NGOs in border areas and on the mainland to cover an array of needs –from medical, housing and legal requests to material support and information. Besides, in some NGOs who focus on empowering refugees, after immediate needs are taken care of, participants interact with peers and may gradually regain a sense of safety and hope. Thus, personal agency and NGO support complement each other as strategies for survival and well-being. A key informant working with refugee women noted:

*“we have women who are active. They’re focused and they ask us what ways they can find to stand on their own feet, what else they can do. They don’t come to us just to solve a problem [...] we notice that this orientation empowers them, makes them responsible and helps them look for alternatives on their own, where they aren’t passive recipients of services. So, we’re slowly seeing that women are coming quite prepared with solutions that they’ve found”.*²⁵

Excluded from accommodation and financial support, undocumented persons and recognized refugees are more dependent on NGOs. However, legal status can affect who qualifies for support. Two participants, a Nigerian woman who at the time of the interview was undocumented and a single mother from Iran who had been granted international protection, raised similar concerns:

*“Because you can’t just go there and register and get food; they need papers. If you don’t qualify you can’t take [...] any food or anything. So, they should make it available whether you have papers or not. Because the stomach doesn’t know whether you have papers (laughs)”.*²⁶

*“I go to any NGO the first question is, “are you recognized?” my answer is “yes” and automatically “we’re sorry, there’s nothing we can do.” Organizations that give help to people and are big and can give me even a little food, tell me that they are sorry and can’t help us because I am recognized”.*²⁷

Nationality was also perceived by some to affect access due to interpretation gaps or prioritization criteria²⁸. Similarly, persons that are considered as non-vulnerable²⁹ and single (straight cis) men also face challenges in accessing official support systems due to categorizations and eligibility criteria. A single man said:

²⁵ KII-10, Interview notes in possession of the authors

²⁶ IDI-2, Interview notes in possession of the authors

²⁷ IDI-10, *ibid*

²⁸ It is beyond the scope of this report to elaborate more on the interpretation gaps on the various services (Public and non-Public) as well as to analyse the different prioritization frameworks (policy and legal) based on nationality.

²⁹ Vulnerability is a very contested term and an open-ended theoretic discussion but with concrete consequences for people. See the next section for more information around the legal definition and the practical consequences this entails.

*“As long as you’re a single man, no one gives a fuck about your mental health; no one gives a fuck about your health, about your journey. You have to be disabled, so that people will believe that you are in pain. Other than that, no –you are a single man, man up, motherfucker! [laughter] There is no NGO treating single men in justice”.*³⁰

Navigating the system and non-conforming

Several key informants perceived that refugees often strategize, trying to adapt to asylum system and NGO eligibility criteria to gain access to services or benefits³¹. Those criteria are primarily linked to “vulnerability” categories, and perceptions around those may influence refugees’ strategies. The legal framework introduced in 2016 designated specific “vulnerable” groups of asylum seekers for whom special guarantees were foreseen in relation to reception conditions and examination of their asylum application. Being recognized as “vulnerable” was the only way to leave the island (lifting the geographical restriction³²) and in some cases was closely linked to international protection. Even though the framework has since been amended, key informants highlighted refugees’ strategic attempts to meet the eligibility criteria to access necessary services; in some cases those attempts even involved strategically using one’s own body to qualify as vulnerable. While such strategies and practices had extremely harmful consequences for persons and families, the fact that they were at times perceived as better than prolonged entrapment in island RICs can indicate the inconceivable challenges refugees faced there.

*“So they are trying to adapt and do whatever crazy thing the system asks them to do. So, if they need to be vulnerable, like in the past for example having PTSD was considered vulnerability, so they would all pay doctors to get a document, and I am not saying this in a judgmental way. I understand, I would do the same in their place. The system is problematic; the system is forcing them to do this. I mean it was even more concerning for me a few years ago, because there was a geographical restriction, but if you were vulnerable, you could be transferred to the mainland. [...] So, everybody was trying to show they were vulnerable to transfer. One of the vulnerability categories was being pregnant, so women would become pregnant even if they were single women, to be able to move to the mainland, then the state understood that they were doing this, so they started moving them after three months had passed, because they were coming to Athens then and having an abortion. So, to punish them again, like keep a child for life, because you tried to abuse the system. This is what was happening. So, the people are trying to do whatever they are asked to do, even though this is harming them”.*³³

As this key informant noted, fitting in the legally assigned categories may result in -real or perceived- benefits in the asylum or reception process. As a result, in some cases asylum seekers who address NGOs may attempt to overstress any existing health issues, often in hopes of receiving a certificate testifying to a medical condition or sexual violence. Similarly, some aspire that they might gain access to services and accommodation, as the whole support system revolves around vulnerability, reinforcing similar strategies. It is worth noting that key informants who discussed this were not judgmental towards such attempts, but perceived them as inevitable responses to the system, while some noted that often such strategies may not be conscious. Further, some key informants referred to the consequences of projecting one’s vulnerability

³⁰ *IDI-36*, Interview notes in possession of the authors

³¹ The strategy of adapting to system requirements was commonly mentioned by key informants, but no refugee participants; on the contrary, some refugees discussed how they avoided evoking “weaknesses” as a way to benefit from them.

³² Following the EU-Turkey Joint Statement, a mobility restriction is imposed to populations arriving in Eastern Aegean islands, prohibiting their movement to mainland Greece until the completion of the asylum procedures.

³³ *KII-4*, Interview notes in possession of the authors

and focusing on weaknesses³⁴ or noted how refugees may develop (wrong) perceptions about the system's expectations, and accordingly decide what information they will share with service providers. One professional said:

*"Unfortunately, the system cultivates manipulative reflexes in all the participants [...], because going through too many agencies that know they're going to be prioritized based on vulnerability you start unconsciously cultivating your vulnerability, projecting it more. And I think that's a social construction because of civil society, I mean we've created it in people [...]. We're trying to stop it here [not cultivating and reproducing such reflexes]".*³⁵

Overtime refugees have employed other strategies to overcome the geographical restriction, which not only remains in place but also has become a generalized policy tool. As participants discussed, over the years persons trapped in the Greek islands exercise mobility to escape inhumane living conditions, protection risks and pervasive violence. Those who decide to travel to the mainland irregularly, however, are met with a punitive response. Notably violating the restriction can end in rejection of asylum applications without examination. The punitive approach can extend to those who are forced to escape due to violence in the islands after the state has failed to protect them, as highlighted by a key informant:

*"We also have people, who try to not follow this procedure that the state would like them to follow and they are punished of course because of it. So, they are leaving the island with the geographic restriction, and again, we had many GBV survivors on the islands who left because they were afraid that GBV will happen to them again, and they are not protected at all. And they don't even allow them to stay in the mainland."*³⁶

Individual strategies to cope with accommodation precarity and generate small income

With regards to accommodation, the interviews reflected what is becoming highly visible in Athens: a growing number of homeless refugees, looking for any kind of housing or finding themselves returning after years to camps where they irregularly set up tents, as described by a key informant:

*"they may have spent some years in [camp name] and they feel more familiar and they have nothing else, so they return; others who may be going through a second wave of being homeless as they did when they first came. Or they may end up back in those group homes that you pay for by the head and which are thus quite unsafe environments for both mothers and single women. Those are stages I think a person goes through when they first come, before they get their first paper, before they get into ESTIA, so that's how I see it, it's like going backwards".*³⁷

"In Athens we have no house, no money and no job. Now we've been given a house by [NGO], we begged them a lot to give us this house and we have until March 18th to vacate it. [...] We probably have to go back to camp. [...] And in the camp we've been told that "because you're not allowed to be in the camp, to register, if you want and you have no place to stay you can come and put up a tent, we can't give you a container and we can't help you; that is if you need to take you to the doctor, to give services that we give to others, you are on your own because you'll be illegal here." [...] It's too hard I don't sleep at night because of that thought. It's very hard when you come out of a hell to think about going back in, it's hard

³⁴Although it is beyond the scope of this report, it is important to underline that the particular response system also generates/produces a specific type of "refugee", a refugee who is "forced" to showcase his/her/their "vulnerabilities" instead of their strengths, skills and competences.

³⁵ KII-8, Interview notes in possession of the authors

³⁶ KII-4, *ibid*

³⁷ KII-8, *ibid*

*because imagine there's not even a wall to put your back to rest from time to time because you're in the tent.*³⁸

The intersection of legal challenges and accommodation precarity is well-reflected in the account of this Afghan participant, who lives in Athens with her husband and children. For single mothers, the challenges are immense, once they are outside the official support system. Some of them, particularly those facing intersecting challenges, such as lack of legal status, may face impossible choices or may be found at risk of experiencing violence, exploitation or other types of harm.

Securing employment is dependent on legal status and opportunities are extremely limited, especially for those who do not speak the language. Thus, many are forced to find small jobs to earn their daily food or work in the informal market, despite exploitative conditions and risks, especially for women. Working in the agricultural sector, construction, tailoring, but also collecting cardboards and recycling paper from garbage bins were mentioned as income-generating activities. Those who cannot find small jobs may earn basic income from re-selling things they find in the garbage or get from NGOs. An Afghan participant shared:

*"From different organizations, they used to provide some dry meal for the babies and different kinds of help, food, rice and this kind of things –and some clothes. I used to take them to the market and sell them. [...] For example, whenever I used to receive, for example, two macaronia [pasta] I used to sell one and keep one for us [...] Now, my new husband, whom I know around one year now, he makes more or less around 10, 15 Euros and we survive with that money. [...] Without him it would be very difficult. It would be very difficult for me with two babies, go and sell different things, you know, in the street and with the police also".*³⁹

Self-reliance, agency and mindset

In all the above strategies the importance of agency and of being proactive emerged. Several participants emphasized that they seek support from various sources, combining different strategies and utilizing all available resources. Developing one's skills, learning the language, gaining experience and learning how the system works so that they are not exploited or reliant on third-party support was also mentioned as a strategy. Investing time in education, interacting with locals and trying to integrate were long-term mechanisms also based on personal agency. In the words of one man from Afghanistan who has been in Greece for years:

*"Any strategy that is collective -being with your community- doesn't give you the opportunity to become a person that the government or the system needs. Because, if I'm gonna be always with people from my country, interacting with them, hanging out with them or doing everything with them; I'm not going to understand Greek culture. I'm not going to learn the language fast, I'm not going to understand how Greece works. So, that's my strategy. That I was with my people and then at the same time I was interacting with a lot of foreigners, and especially Greeks".*⁴⁰

Finding employment was also closely linked to individual efforts. Social networks and NGO employability projects were also used as additional strategies. However, as there is lack of information around opportunities, it is usually well-connected, educated refugees with language skills that can benefit from those, as illustrated by one participant:

"The Greek state should help us find work and should be able to see our skills, to direct us [...]. That way we would avoid being at the mercy of others all the time. I was lucky to be able to participate in this event

³⁸ IDI-4, Interview notes in possession of the authors

³⁹ IDI-17, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁴⁰ IDI-39, Interview notes in possession of the authors

with companies, they come, you give them your CV, they try to find you a job -but how many other people know that? So again, they need to make the information available to everyone. [...] Because even to have access to an organization here in Athens, you have to be referred -why should you be referred? We are all refugees. They should tell you that "from then until then they have this program run by organizations and companies, go there" they should give this information to all the people, because there are only some people who know about it, and some have never heard of it. And you know -there are really some people who are happy and have access to a lot of things and there are some people who have nothing. For example, I go and search and run around, I have access, but there are mothers with children who don't have the ability to go out and go to organizations. I would really like the information to be accessible to everyone -that would be great for all people."⁴¹

Not everyone can demonstrate the proactiveness or mobility necessary to cope with challenges. People who are alone, younger persons, persons with mental health issues, GBV survivors, families with many children, persons with disabilities, those institutionalized by living in camps for years and unaware of how to reach support outside the camp setting, may have less resources and opportunities to employ multiple strategies. In those cases, inability to find support may stretch already depleted emotional resources. One undocumented single mother from DRC shared:

"I'm always walking around, looking here and there, doing what I can to see if I can find someone to help me with the papers. I keep walking around, asking, but I haven't found anything to help me yet. [...] I went one day with the children to the Asylum Service, I said, help me, I have three children, help me if you can. They turned me away. They didn't tell me anything, they just kicked me out. [...] I'm so tired, I don't know what to do".⁴²

Throughout the interviews emotional strength surfaced as a valuable resource. For some, faith was a strategy to deal with challenges, to have patience and hope for the future. Maintaining a positive mindset and not dwelling on past or traumatic experiences were also mentioned by some as beneficial; however, for others surviving means they must become cynical, as a man who remains undocumented years after arriving explained:

"But these past two and a half years that I'm living here is like a swamp, it's only put me in, draw me in. For example, if I want to explain it, it's like a circle. You start from here, one year is going to pass and you are going to have some changes in your life, another year is going to pass and yeah maybe the income that you have is gonna get more, it's a better life, maybe you can rent a house, find clothes [...] But even if you get successful, when it comes to the fourth year, you start again from zero. Because you are in the circle, it's not going to end ever. But for some people good stuff happens [...] if they turn to some kind insensitive or unemotional person or some kind of robot, yeah they might get successful. You have to lose your conscience if you want to get like that and abuse everyone, turn to some kind of piece of shit".⁴³

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Strategies directly affecting well-being, non-legal activities

To cope with challenges some adopt mechanisms that may have direct consequences on their health and wellbeing. Drug use was an example of such responses, often adopted to cope with past trauma and lack of support in Greece. Fear of detention may lead some to remain undocumented, while one participant shared how others may sell their organs to get money to irregularly travel out of Greece. Those with less support and fewer skills might engage in illegal activities, such as selling drugs or stealing. In other cases, people try

⁴¹ IDI-15, *ibid*

⁴² IDI-21, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁴³ IDI-9, Interview notes in possession of the authors

to secure a living by taking advantage of others; for instance, by acting as mediators between employers and potential employees or as middle(women) for refugees in need for accommodation –e.g. by renting containers or spots in camps.

“When I got there someone told me “there are no houses here, give me 50 Euros and I’ll give you a place to sleep”. I said “I don’t have any money and I had been told that there was accommodation to sleep in, why are you asking me to pay?” and he told me “dear, everyone here pays otherwise you’ll have to sleep down there, so you need to give me 50 Euros, it’s for a price. But since you’re a black sister, give me 20 Euros”. I told him “I don’t have any money brother, I’m sorry. I’m really sleepy, I’m tired, you need to find me a place to get some sleep”; he said, “no, there’s no place, you need to pay.”⁴⁴

Lack of support and gaps in reception allow such exploitation and erode trust towards the system, also increasing risks. For this single woman, repeated attempts to get support upon arrival were unsuccessful; her pressing need for money to secure a spot in the camp contributed to her victimization by a trafficking ring that lured her with false work promises.

3.1.4 Specific considerations about refugees with diverse SOGIESC

Refugees with diverse SOGIESC face additional layers of challenges, discrimination and risks, and are often met with disbelief from authorities and service providers, as well as with violence and rejection by other refugees. Most participants identifying as LGBTIQ+ valued NGO support and several described how they actively looked for organizations or volunteer groups to get safe housing, information, to feel safe and accepted. A trans participant shared:

“By the time I came to Athens with this Cameroonian friend, it was very, very difficult. He had other friends and they were saying, “What are you? you’re a faggot”, because I liked to put on make-up, I liked to put braids in my hair, to do things like that and I even got to the point of thinking about killing myself, I was starting to feel completely crazy. At one point, a lawyer told me to go to [NGO] and there, thanks to those people I was able to kind of pull myself together. At first it was all very, very difficult for me, I was almost not talking and now, after all this time, I have managed to be so happy, so strong, so able to do things”.⁴⁵

A main challenge identified was insecurity in camps and lack of safe accommodation for persons with diverse SOGIESC. Participants residing in camps often turned to NGOs for protection or decided/ were forced to move to avoid security risks. Those living in urban settings discussed not going out much, changing houses to cope with security issues or pressured service providers to move them to other shelters. Exercising mobility as a strategy was also discussed in the context of leaving Greece or refusing to be moved by authorities in faraway locations. Persistent insecurity leads to lack of trust towards the support system, as refugees are often met with disbelief either with regards to their safety or with regards to their SOGIESC. Such disbelief comes from authorities, but also from within networks of support, reinforcing a mutual lack of trust. As a result, participants discussed how LGBTIQ+ refugees are often hesitant and need time to build trust with service providers. As many come from a life of violence, persecution and marginalization, they tend to keep to themselves and build small communities for protection reasons. In the journey, in island camps but also when they move around Athens, some tend to hide their SOGIESC or be careful about their outfits, trying to avoid attention or threats by conforming to gender expectations; this was particularly evident in the narratives of trans and lesbian women:

⁴⁴ IDI-14, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁴⁵ IDI-22, Interview notes in possession of the authors

"Back then I generally wore a lot more skirts and dresses and other things and people threatened me, so I kind of toned it down a little bit, I toned down my outfit a little bit, [laughs], I wear blouses, I wear some men's clothes so I don't get picked on".⁴⁶

Participants were often careful about who they shared their sexual orientation with to avoid harassment or discrimination. Depending on country of origin and particular community some might avoid compatriots altogether, while many remain distant from straight people as a protective mechanism. A gay man shared:

"I have not given any right to some people to be able to say anything to me, while the rest of the people who know me and what my thinking is and the orientation that I have, they have studied, they are open-minded people, they understand a lot of things and not once in a million has it happened that they have looked at me with a look or said something that can make me sad".⁴⁷

Thus, in some cases participants felt safer with locals than with community members. In any case, relying on one's self, being strong and proactive was highlighted as a mechanism when trying to navigate through multiple challenges. Fighting back and not being scared were attitudes that were valued by some participants who find in Greece and within their communities an opportunity to express, adopt a self who is strong, proud, a role model and a source of courage to others.

"I want to be an example to others, because the fact that I can now speak in front of others and give them courage, I learned it here, I didn't know that before in [home country]. Here I learned that I can dress up, behave as I want and do what I want and stand up for myself on my own. I want to share that, to show that to others, to give them the courage and show them that you can stand up for yourself. I learnt it in Greece and that's one of the reasons why I left." [laughs]⁴⁸

3.2 Transactional Sex Strategies

During our interviews, participants commonly described practices that fall under the wider term of transactional sex, as described in the Introduction. The findings reveal a variety of practices, including sexual relations for monetary exchanges as well as for benefits, food, accommodation or safety. The pattern was equally varying, ranging from one-time sexual encounters to longer-term transactional arrangements or relationships. Refugees and key informants highlighted how persons across gender identities and sexual orientations engage in transactional relations under different circumstances and for a variety of reasons. The findings show some rough patterns⁴⁹, shaped by intersection of age, gender, SOGIESC, race, ethnicity, and legal status. The following sections present the patterns and aim to showcase drivers, risks and consequences, while attempting to explore elements of agency and choice vs exploitation and coercion or their dialectical interplay in those practices.

3.2.1 Transactional sexual encounters for monetary benefits

The most common type of transactional sex emerging from the interviews was selling sex to cover basic needs in Greece. Examples brought up by refugee participants most commonly referred to women –often single– while there were varying, often conflicting perceptions with regards to men engaging in the practice, which could be associated with gender norms, perceptions of masculinity, and potentially limited disclosure in some communities. While some refugees thought men do not often engage in selling sex practices, others considered it very common among young men. Similarly, key informants had different perceptions about prevalence and disclosure across genders.

⁴⁶ IDI-22, *ibid*

⁴⁷ IDI-16, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁴⁸ IDI-22, *ibid*

⁴⁹ For the limitations, see the section on Research methodology.

*Women in all their diversity*⁵⁰

Several participants, across genders, mentioned hearing about or witnessing women exchanging sex for money. Such examples were most openly shared by interviewees from African states⁵¹, which might be linked to cultural and religious factors affecting disclosure. Drivers for women who engage in transactional sex for monetary benefits were various, and participants primarily associated the practice with survival reasons. For instance, in Greek islands, inability to cover basic needs due to lack of state support, in combination with the appalling living conditions, were identified as drivers for women selling sex. Participants' stories usually concerned younger girls and single women who were perceived more vulnerable to propositions by refugee men. Key informants working in islands associated the practices to lack of financial support and work opportunities, leaving women with no alternatives:

"In fact, they have no choice. The state has not given them any choice. I remember the African woman telling me: "Find any other job for me and I will stop. The 90 Euros you give me is not enough; I can't live, because I am a single woman and I have to feed six or seven people in [home country], either my children or my relatives". We didn't know what to say, we just listened to them, because their argument was very strong. Did anyone offer a job opportunity to this woman? No. That's why she'll do whatever will bring her more money which, to be honest, was not much. We heard once that the women who had chosen this line of work around Moria were paid between 5 and 10 Euros".⁵²

In absence of other opportunities, indirect propositions and soliciting in islands were brought up by key informants as a facilitating factor, influencing some women's decision to engage in transactional sex. Similarly, in Athens, women participants from African states⁵³ identified Plateia Amerikis and Omonia as places where pervasive soliciting by men who want to buy sex is taking place. Women participants identified these men as primarily older Greeks, but also refugees, and they perceived them as taking advantage of women's lack of livelihoods.

"A: It's very common here, especially if you go to Plateia Amerikis all those parks they know black women go to. They know you don't have any money, so they come there, they give you those propositions; "money for sex", they know you don't have [money]. You accept, you have no choice. You will go with them, because you're hungry. [...] And also in Omonia; there's a place there, you see the black ladies, the white ladies, who don't have money, they go there to sell their body for money because they need to feed themselves and their babies.

B: That is different! Because it's their choice!

A: No, I don't think it's a choice. Some of them do this because they have children back home and they have no meals to feed them.

B: I think that some do it by choice and some of them do it because of obligation. But you can also choose to do different things, instead of that; instead of selling your body.

⁵⁰ Apart from those that explicitly or implicitly self-identified, participants were not asked about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Thus, the term "women in all their diversity" was selected to represent all female participants to avoid speculation from the research team's side.

⁵¹ In no way there is any attempt to generalize the findings from a very small and specific sample. For a more thorough discussion on the limitations of the research, see the Research methodology section.

⁵² *KII- 3*, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁵³ It is important to acknowledge that migration policies as a whole but also and more importantly the everyday economies of the refugees are racialised. In that sense, this is not a stigmatising reference but an important highlighting of the racialization of those practices.

C: Well, there are some who are obligated, because here it's difficult to find work. So when they do something like that, maybe it's their opportunity to get food –for you or the children. There are also boys who do that (A: Yes, I know!) in order to have something to eat.⁵⁴

The vivid discussion between women from various African states during a focus group further points to the varying perceptions about whether having sex for money is a choice and highlights motivations behind women's engagement. Main drivers were overall lack of support, structural accommodation-related challenges leading to homelessness, lack of work and income-generating alternatives. To cope with structural challenges, which may lead to acute survival concerns, women may sell sex to secure food, clothes, provide for their children or pay for passport fees⁵⁵. Women who face cross-cutting survival challenges were perceived as more likely to employ the practice as other strategies might be less available; for instance, family profile and legal status were important factors in the stories shared by participants of diverse genders, communities and backgrounds.

Men in all their diversity⁵⁶

Participants discussed similar practices among refugee men, highlighting in particular the interplay between having sex for monetary benefits and sexual orientation. Transactional sex practices for monetary benefits among men often concerned same-sex interactions, either between gay men or most commonly between men who identified as straight but engaged in transactional sex with other men (MSM). There were also a few reports of men engaging in one-off or more long-term sexual relations with Greek women in exchange for money.

"For example, when you walk around and you see some boys doing the same thing, the black boys. It's not because they want to do that, because they never- they were not born like that. But if they are selling their body to another man, it's because they need money. They're hungry; they don't have any means of livelihood."⁵⁷

"men who have sex with men, who are not necessarily gay though [...], they may actually have sex for money for various reasons [...] and they may not connect it to anything else, [...] a lot of them may be completely homophobic, so to speak."⁵⁸

Men selling sex as a strategy are often youth or underage boys, as previous research on sexual exploitation of minors in Athens has shown (Digidiki and Bhabha, 2017). Despite the fact that the present research focuses on adults, some participants shared interesting input about the practice among unaccompanied children and youth. One refugee man working with youth said:

"There is a phrase that I learned, "παππού"-that's grandpa- refers to these old people because when I was working in [camp name] we were giving pocket money to the minors [...]. Some of these minors were not even interested in getting this 15-euro pocket money, because what they were telling me was "okay, I have a παππού. He gives me money. He's gonna suck my dick and he's gonna give me 50 euro. I don't need this 15 euro." Are you kidding me? And I saw with my eyes; one day that I was getting off work, in front of the camp, maybe a hundred meters away from the entrance a car came and this minor got inside and after 15 minutes he came back".⁵⁹

⁵⁴ FGD-1, *ibid*

⁵⁵ Refugees need to pay State fees to apply for a passport (approx. 100 euros)

⁵⁶ See note number 47

⁵⁷ FGD-1, *ibid*

⁵⁸ KII 15-16-17, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁵⁹ IDI-39, *ibid*

Participants from Iran and Afghanistan in particular discussed examples of young men below the age of thirty who have sex with men in exchange for money or other benefits. Those were commonly encountered in specific areas of the city center, such as around Pedion tou Areos and Victoria square, where some participants described them as widespread. An Iranian man shared:

*“what I know and have seen with my own eyes is this: kids around 20 years old, who may go to old men here, and unfortunately this has become a trend, they go to old men. They've put the money that is for their “gaming” aside, they don't touch it and for their daily money they go with old men, go in the morning, return at night with their pocket full of money [...] and many-many kids do it and it has become very popular”.*⁶⁰

Those buying sex are elderly locals, and less commonly male refugees, who openly and in some cases were reported aggressively soliciting men in public spaces, such as squares, parks and buses. Straight and gay participants shared how they had been proposed by older Greeks to have sex for money.

*“I was once in Pedion tou Areos and I was just sitting by myself there and there was this guy, maybe around 40 years old with his dog- and Pedion tou Areos is full of this kind of people. [...] he looked at me, started a conversation and at some point, he dropped me the phrase [asking for sex]. I was like “what is happening?” “No! Don't worry! I'll give you money!” I was like, “I don't need your money; you got the wrong person” [...] This experience that I have, all these stories, these are not desires, [...] he doesn't want to do this, he just needs the money. He's like “someone is going to give me a blowjob and I'm gonna get the money. Okay, so what?” but that's not how these things should be”.*⁶¹

Some male participants, particularly gay and trans men, also referred to Omonoia as a spot for men selling sex to other men, Greek and tourists.

*“a certain place, like in Omonoia next to [store name], where there are gay men looking for a person. [...] Pakistanis, Afghans most of them, they sit there to get money so they can survive and they do whatever the other person wants. [...] The people who go there are all straight and, most of them, because they are foreigners and they want money, they're in dire financial need, it's the easiest and the most certain way”.*⁶²

A trans man explained how the prices in the specific spot range between 10-20 Euros and intercourse may take place indoors or in public spaces. His narrative highlights systemic drivers facilitating involvement in transactional sex for refugees with diverse SOGIESC.

*“And here in Greece, the only way that you can live, you have to sell your body. There is no work and once you get the acceptance [international protection] the government kicks you out from the place. You have no place, you have no work, so...How you can buy the hormone therapy/medication? And how much money you need to implant the penis? [...] So, go to Omonoia and see how all the LGBT community is having sex to live”.*⁶³

Further, participants from Iran and Afghanistan mentioned certain bars around Victoria where refugee men have sex with other men for money. One study participant described how he was solicited by a tourist he met in such a bar, while another man, who self-identified as straight, had first-hand experience of systematically selling sex as a survival strategy in one of those bars. As he explained, his usual “clients” are gay and trans men and prices start from 20 Euros.

⁶⁰ IDI-8, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁶¹ IDI-39, *ibid*

⁶² IDI-16, *ibid*

⁶³ IDI-35, Interview notes in possession of the authors

"Another job I had recently – I am sorry- is to sell my body as some kind of sex slave to the guys in some bars, [bar name] or something like this. The situation when you don't have money and your stomach starts to make sounds and you feel weak, you have to do something like this, sell your body to gay people to achieve the money, so you don't starve to death".⁶⁴

"So, people were coming there, young men -Arab, Persian, from any nationality- and there are old people, rich people that go to these places and want to have sexual interaction with these people and they give money".⁶⁵

One Iranian participant, though, highlighted that those meeting points are not currently as popular as they used to be. He and other men noted how online arrangements through dating apps have become a new strategy for men who want to engage in transactional sex for money, mainly with other men. Gay participants offered insights about online arrangements usually with Greeks or tourists. Such apps give an opportunity to arrange prices and agree on details of the encounter, providing a much more anonymous and non-stigmatizing alternative.

"In there they can find people and talk to them, who say, "I take 100 euros, I'll come and do what you want" or the equivalent. There are various applications. Instead of him going to [bar name] sitting there and having the whole world watch him, through his mobile phone he finds what he wants. He goes, fills his need, does his business, comes back without anyone knowing, without anyone seeing him and without anyone knowing what the other person is doing".⁶⁶

Notwithstanding the circumstances and places where refugee men engage in transactional sex, main drivers included lack of overall support, financial assistance, accommodation, and in many cases lack of documents rendering them unable to make a living or cover food and daily expenses. Other participants believed that persons engage in sex for money to feed a drug habit or purchase more "luxurious" items. Similar to women, undocumented and recognized men seem to have fewer alternatives and are more likely to engage in such practices. A man from Iran said:

"That money is not something to set aside, that money only covers their daily necessities so they can move, eat, for what they want so they don't have the stress of where to live and what to do the next day. I think that -here especially- it's not in the character of Iranians to make these moves; it's the circumstances who bring them to that. I think if they were in their own country, they'd never do such an act, here they do it because they are trapped. Don't imagine that it's something that is like a business, it's not something you can call business, it's something you have to call survival, so that they can eat, so that they can sleep".⁶⁷

Specific considerations regarding refugees with diverse SOGIESC

While the above section also included insights of participants with diverse SOGIESC, they experienced specific concerns worth highlighting. Refugees with diverse SOGIESC face additional challenges, that reduce their livelihood options, including lack of safe accommodation, as well as discrimination and rejection, which sometimes may render engagement in sex for money as one of the few survival strategies available to them.

A key informant working with refugees with diverse SOGIESC shared:

"it's maybe due to housing or not enough housing, it's difficult. And, you know, being LGBTQI maybe you go to look for a job and they say you're not qualified because you are who you are- you are being rejected.

⁶⁴ IDI-9, *ibid*

⁶⁵ IDI-39, *ibid*

⁶⁶ IDI-16, *ibid*

⁶⁷ IDI-12, Interview notes in possession of the authors

So you are maybe bound to do sex work, because you need food to eat, you need a place to stay. You also need- maybe to put on dresses, like, to buy basic necessities, so, it's very difficult".⁶⁸

Particular vulnerabilities and cumulative challenges that trans refugees face were highlighted as factors influencing involvement in selling sex for monetary benefits. A trans woman discussing the strategy perceived it as reinforcing an existing lack of respect, while another participant felt he had no other option but to engage in transactional sex in order to secure money for his transition.

"They're just under misery; those things push people to sell their bodies. There is no human with healthy mental health that can sell the body for something. [...] if there is an alternative, they wouldn't do it. As a person who wants to be trans now, there is no possibility to do all these surgeries in the public hospital, so I had to do it. What can I do? I will sell my body".⁶⁹

3.2.2 Transactional relationships and sexual encounters for other benefits

Another type of transactional sex that was commonly mentioned was sexual relationships not for money, but in exchange for necessities, such as food and shelter. Further, long-term relationships in exchange for benefits, protection or support were also commonly reported by participants.

To address accommodation precarity and inability to cover basic needs

Both in islands and in Athens, participants discussed how young men facing acute survival issues may have sex with elderly local men in exchange for a warm shower, a bed to sleep in, or just a pack of cigarettes. A young man remembered the dire situation at the island of his arrival:

"we live on the street, we're like in the camp, and then from the camp they moved us to a Rubb Hall, a big tent, it was like 50 people inside. People were looking for small things to survive, like a packet of cigarettes or some food. Some locals were really aware about this condition. Regardless of their awareness, they were exploiting those conditions to fulfill their sexual needs. So, some people were offering like a hot bath, one packet of cigarettes or if you want to stay for a night to relax or at least sleep in a bed. [...] Most of the people in the camp, they know that those people offer this for this. They were in the square and most of them were homosexual. They were targeting the men, especially in the square, where you can see that there is a man sitting alone for a long time; they were targeting him, reaching him. People, they were doing it to get a benefit. You can see the sad effect in their eyes, even when they're making fun of it or trying to say it's something passing".⁷⁰

In some cases, those benefits are the primary driver and instead of selling sex to different persons, some engage in long-term interactions with the elderly men, moving in with them in exchange for sex. Participants from Iran offered several examples of young straight men that enter transactional relationships which may last for years to secure shelter, food and support. A woman from Iran said:

"boys here go and stay with a gentleman who is usually older, he is a grandfather that is. He pays their expenses, their food and after a while, pays for more, for much bigger things. There is an agreement, he says, "stay with me this long, after this long wherever you want to go I pay for it and you go".⁷¹

Similarly, participants from different communities discussed cases of women who engage in intimate relationships for material benefits. Those were often single mothers and women who are undocumented

⁶⁸ KII-13, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁶⁹ IDI-35, *ibid*

⁷⁰ IDI-30, *ibid*

⁷¹ IDI-19, *ibid*

and may be engaging in short or long-term relationships with Greeks or other refugees, while many times they accept a proposition to exchange sex for shelter.

"I didn't have a place to live or something to eat. I didn't have anything, I had lost everything. So, someone proposed that I go work in a house of a family. For me it was very fortunate – I didn't have a house, I didn't have anywhere to go, nothing, I was eating from the ground. I arrive there, I find two young men and their grandmother. In the beginning I started working without problems. And then he [one of the men] told me "in order to stay here, you are going to date me", the eldest one proposed that. "You either accept or you leave the job". As I was there, how can I leave? I have nowhere to go, I haven't even worked a whole month – what could I do? I was obliged to accept. So, at first you accept. And this person everyday when he was coming back from work, he had another job: to satisfy himself with me. After a while the young brother did the same. This is when I left. Because I didn't have anywhere to go, I didn't have a house, and you go to live in a house with [nationals from home country] –you explain your situation, but them as well will try to benefit from that. "If you want to stay at my place, you will go out with me, you will be with me."⁷²

"I was living with someone in Pirea and there was a woman who came with one of her children and my friend who invited her [...] was saying "I am going to help her, I am going to do everything for her, she is desperate, she wants to go, I am going to help her with money, all the things, I am going to bring her here to live" [...]. I found out that he was going to ask her for sex, so "I am going to keep you safe but let me use you for sex". [...] women here usually do this. They have no other choice. [...] It's just to survive, do anything so you will survive."⁷³

Despite their diverse profile – the first participant being a woman from DRC and the second a man from Iran, both those accounts highlight participants' perceptions that in such cases men -both locals and refugees- commonly exploit a woman's vulnerability or need to survive.

To address lack of legal status

Besides accommodation, document-related benefits were mentioned as a motivation for women entering transactional relationships. One young participant described how being alone, homeless and undocumented influenced her decision to enter –what turned out to be an abusive- relationship with another refugee, believing his promises that she would benefit from his legal status.

"I explained to him "I have issues in my country from which I left. Would you like to help me leave Greece, go to another country and for me to return that money with which you helped me when I have it?" He rejected my request [...] he told me "I've been here for many years and I have all my papers sorted. If you marry me you will automatically get papers as well." And so I was forced to accept his offer, to marry this man- to be in a civil partnership with him in order to have my papers sorted. [...] Before accepting to stay with this man I was living in the streets for four days, my friends had left [...]. And he told me that he had papers. Then I found out that he had received a second rejection, he was not even a recognized refugee; he had no papers. But I had already signed the civil partnership."⁷⁴

Some participants understood that for both men and women, relationships with locals or marriage was a way to secure –apart from safety and support- legal documents. Some believed that particularly men engage in such exchanges where they either form relationships or give money to regularize their status. One Iranian man noted:

⁷² FGD-1, *ibid*

⁷³ IDI-9, *ibid*

⁷⁴ IDI-20, Interview notes in possession of the authors

*"[T]here is no such thing as love. The only reason that relationship starts is because they want to have some kind of insurance for themselves, money or support from the partner and the easier way to get in their hands a passport or an ID. [...] So usually, they get married for passport or ID...or a roof above their head, a warm bed."*⁷⁵

However, other participants stressed that transactional formal partnerships are not widespread due to legal challenges, and some mentioned marriages between refugees and locals happening out of genuine feelings. Notably, some participants were judgmental of the practice and others linked it with a prevailing idea that in Europe such behaviors are legitimized.

To address lack of safety, employment and protection

For single mothers, gaps in support, lack of employment and livelihood opportunities as well as lack of childcare, were identified as potential drivers to enter long-term intimate relationships. Notably, such relationships may not be negatively perceived by communities, in contrast with sex selling practices. A single mother from Afghanistan discussed how she was unable to generate income, despite being a recognized refugee. Meeting a new husband who she now depends on for support was implied as a strategy. Drivers behind relationships are not always clear-cut and at least some women do not perceive them as coercive or unwanted. Notably, such relations and the conceptualizations around them may dynamically evolve as the circumstances change. An example offered by a key informant is illustrative:

*"I have a woman in mind who was with a man and got her first job. And she tells me -she had learned a little Greek, and excuse the expression- "as soon as I get my first paycheck, I'm going to write him at my balls" [leave him]. The whole time I knew her and she was in the relationship she hadn't complained; it was, so to speak, a normal relationship. Yet you understand at that time that it was not a consensual relationship, it was a relationship of necessity."*⁷⁶

In other cases, serious protection concerns might constitute drivers for women who enter relationships in exchange for safety. This may be particularly relevant for single women who upon arrival face increased risks to experience GBV⁷⁷. A key informant noted:

*"I'm alone in the camp, I was raped once, so that it doesn't happen again I'm going to make up with this guy so that I can stay in the same tent with him so that I feel safe and I can be his wife because in the community it's not very normal to be alone". [...] Uh, and you make a choice from what's in front of you. I think it's a common mechanism".*⁷⁸

3.2.3 Transactional relationships and sexual encounters to facilitate movement

Besides transactional sex practices associated with survival concerns in Greece, participants commonly shared stories of refugees engaging in transactional sex in order to be able to continue their journey. Those reports commonly concerned women and refugees with diverse SOGIESC, who engaged in transactional sex to arrive to Greece as well as to travel from Greece to other countries. They included selling sex for money to fund the journey or exchanging sex with refugees, smugglers or any other person who could directly facilitate their movement. One key informant shared an example about a lesbian woman who sold sex to men and women in Turkey:

⁷⁵ IDI-9, *ibid*

⁷⁶ KII-8, *ibid*

⁷⁷ For more on violence and GBV, see the next sections 3.3 and 3.4

⁷⁸ KII-8, *ibid*

*"But this lady had no one to help her. So, she needed to look for money; through that means to smuggle herself to Europe. [...] she was, like, "I need this money". So, she had to sell her body to get money, to pay for these small boats to send her to Greece".*⁷⁹

Key informants shared insights about women having sex with smugglers during or even prior to the migration journey, framing the interactions as pushing the limits of consent or as cases of exploitation. Similarly, refugee participants shared stories of women exchanging sex to travel to Greece; different patterns can be seen in the examples shared by a Syrian and an Iranian man:

*"I want to give you an example of a girl who tried to cross the border and come here from Evros. She got in the car with a man who told her: "bare your head." -because she was wearing a headscarf this meant "we will have sex". Then I spoke to her on the phone and asked her to tell me exactly what happened. I said: "how did you do that?" She replied that she had to, because she would have to pay 6,000 euros to be able to get this far."*⁸⁰

*"They told me that there was a woman, she was pregnant, they put her in the freezer of a ship like this, she didn't have any money to pay the person working there or the person who hid her. Instead of payment they somehow had an agreement; she allowed them to have sex with her. Yeah... not just one or two persons, maybe ten or 15 something like this -every person on the ship that knew about this. [...] After that, when everyone used her -I'm sorry for using this word - they came to some kind of arrangement or agreement that "ok take her to Greece, we're done with her", something like this."*⁸¹

Desire for onward movement from Greece to other countries can be a driver commonly for women and refugees with diverse SOGIESC who may engage in sex for money to fund the journey. A trans man shared:

*"Even if there is someone who wants to leave Greece, they should go and get fucked, then they can go. For the ticket. For travel. No one is staying in Greece. Everyone is leaving."*⁸²

One of the commonly mentioned types, particularly brought up by participants from Arab and Farsi/Dari speaking countries, was women exchanging sex or entering short-term relationships with smugglers who could facilitate their movement from Greece to another EU country.

*"Now I've heard that there are a lot of smugglers who recommend to women who are a bit beautiful and thin that if they stay with them for a while they'll be able to take them to other countries by plane. So they're staying with them for a while —obviously for the flight and not for anything else".*⁸³

*"After the two rejections I wanted to "smuggle myself" [find irregular ways to move] out of the island. The smuggler told me that he wants 8500 Euros to go from Athens to Germany for [me and my daughter]. [...] Then I told him that I don't have that much money and he said "okay, it's fine you can pay it by one night" and I didn't know what one night means. Then he said "you come, we have like a drink together and then we do it." And then I blocked him and I told him "this is your mentality, this is your level of thinking, I'm not like this".*⁸⁴

According to those women participants, the strategy is often employed by single women, often young and commonly single mothers. However, refugee women who are in Greece with their husbands may also resort

⁷⁹ KII-13, *ibid*

⁸⁰ IDI-1, *ibid*

⁸¹ IDI-9, *ibid*

⁸² IDI-35, *ibid*

⁸³ IDI-10, *ibid*

⁸⁴ IDI-26, Interview notes in possession of the authors

to the practice as they cannot afford the high costs that smugglers request to smuggle them or their families abroad. One Iranian participant shared her insights on that:

*"I can tell you that a new thing is that they find a couple, the woman must be beautiful and young, they send the man first, the woman stays behind. For six months she has to be with the smuggler who sent the man. After six months, he has done everything he wanted, he sends her for free too. The man doesn't know and he calls from where he is and says, "What happened to my wife, why don't you send her?" And the wife and the smuggler say: "he drove me to the airport, they caught me, they sent me away"; [...] every ten days, [...] they go like this for five or six months and then he sends her."*⁸⁵

3.2.4 Beyond survival (?): other gendered survival practices⁸⁶

Some participants also shared stories of refugee men who engage in sexual relationships with wealthy middle age Greek women often referred to as "sugar mommies"- in exchange for money, housing and meeting other needs. Some of the men-participants distinguished these from other forms of transactional sex as they were not perceived to be motivated by acute survival concerns.

*"There are a lot of sugar mommies around [laughs]. Yeah. I have some people I know that they're in this situation, they're involved with a woman, a Greek woman -not just Greek, but there are Greeks also- or Italian or American that are here, they live here for a long time and they're maybe forty-fifty years old and they have a-[hesitates] a boy [young man] which they're -they get from what they want and they're giving what the boy wants; accommodation, money. One of the boys [young men] actually rents a house here in Athens with the money of the sugar mommy. And I always see him when he's not working, with brand clothes, good shoes, good looking, he goes to [the] gym, he's a kick-boxer, and has established a really good life here."*⁸⁷

*"Like, I kind of did it as well but it was a different thing. Like, I needed a place to stay and I didn't have a place to stay. So, I was sleeping with this woman who was offering me a place to stay. She was like super caring, she was super kind, she treated me really good. Yeah, but I needed to sleep with her -I didn't have any erotic feelings for her, it was just like homework I should do, just like rent. Yeah, and then it became something like more than... And also, there is some rich woman, who was like filthy rich, a lot of money -she was offering me money and this, I took some money from her, I needed it, I didn't have work and then it was a sexual thing. She wanted something... like a sugar mommy thing [laughs] [...] And I was thinking that she wants me as a son, you know like, because she is alone, [...] she married, divorced, but didn't have children - and...didn't want that. Anyway. Then we started like, going out more and more. Then she, like... we did it and this stuff, and then I couldn't, like there was zero attraction. And then I got a job, so I stopped. But we still, like, once in a while... she texts me. And if I need money, I can just, like, call her."*⁸⁸

As the participant describes, those relationships can often be perceived as caring in addition to many benefits. In all cases the material comforts and financial security were returned with sexual interactions, despite lack of sexual attraction. Further, participants discussed how engaging in such relationships may be irrelevant to a persons' love life, pointing to the strategic use of the relationship and the persons' way of

⁸⁵ IDI-19, *ibid*

⁸⁶ The fact that only stories from refugee men are included in this section is based on the research's findings. Although straight cis refugee men are more privileged compared to refugee women due to patriarchy, in no way this section attempts to argue that refugee men are more able to express their agency and negotiate the terms of their engagement beyond survival. For more information on the limitations of the research, see the research methodology.

⁸⁷ IDI-39, *ibid*

⁸⁸ IDI-36 *ibid*

existing outside the practice, while maintaining a sense of agency. In some cases, it was also irrelevant with perceptions of oneself. Issues of self-worth, self-stigma, and ethics seem to be under constant negotiation.

"I could go and have sex with anyone at the bar; I could just go and pick anyone at the bar or anyone can pick me up and go and do it. It's not about this, it's about why I am doing that and how I perceive it. [...] For me, if someone told me that they would renew my papers if I slept with someone-[whistles] Now! Tell me where, when! [quietly laughs] I don't mind! It's not like I don't see myself as valuable, it's not about my limits and my boundaries. It's just that I am smart enough to choose my battles. Fight what I can fight and escape what I can't fight. [...]."⁸⁹

Being conscious about one's actions and not stigmatizing or judging them as immoral or demeaning does not mean that participants framed such relationships as a standalone practice or a decision that one would be happy to make under any circumstances. Instead, it was an expression of "being smart"; of adapting to situations of limited options and structural challenges. Relationships were not romanticized nor denounced, even though women's privilege, stemming from race and class, was perceived as exercising power over a person.

"It's good for the person who's receiving all these because you don't need the money obviously when you're giving it away like this, but obviously you're taking advantage of a vulnerable person who's in survival mode. [...] But if you really- deeply think about it, this is not the desire of this person. It's like "ah, okay. I'm just sleeping with her but I'm living a really good life here. She gives me money. She gives me accommodation. She's paying me 300 euros every month for the rent; and another thousand euros for my clothes and food". But if you ask this person "would you do the same thing if the government, if the system was providing you with the services that you needed, would you be staying in this relationship?" I cannot call it a relationship either. Because he's also with other girls; he's not with this woman only. "I'm just with her because she loves to sleep with a young boy [young man] and I'm receiving what I want. And if I stop this, I can't have all this." He's a casanova. He has like other three girlfriends that are his age. He doesn't feel exploited because he's young- like, he's eighteen or nineteen years old, [...] I don't believe he's understanding enough and probably it's gonna be a point when he's gonna understand everything a little bit later in his life."⁹⁰

According to participants, in those cases feelings of being exploited may be moderated by the opportunity to negotiate the terms of the engagement, acknowledging one's motives and perceiving the exchange as a mutually beneficial relationship, over which they maintain some control.

3.3 Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA)

Many transactional sex practices discussed by participants also included elements of exploitation and/or harm. Among those, there were cases of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), in which state officials or other persons in positions of power solicited sex in exchange for documents or with promises of facilitating onward movement out of Greece. A key informant shared:

"[W]e even have a report recently from one island about a police officer who is requesting sex from women in exchange of helping them with their asylum, and we had heard about this before from this island, but now we had a woman who actually, because he asked for her number and he was sending

⁸⁹ IDI-36, *ibid*

⁹⁰ IDI-39, *ibid*

some indecent pictures to her phone, so we actually have proof let's say. By the way, she is not alone, she is with her husband. Imagine if she was alone".⁹¹

Similarly, refugee participants shared stories of abuse both in mainland and in border areas of Greece. One participant explained how a police officer serving in an important service in Athens systematically abuses his power, having sex with refugee women – often upon agreement with their husbands - in exchange of facilitating issuance of passports. Another refugee shared a SEA incident involving state officials at Evros border:

"I personally crossed over on my first attempt, but of those who were there, the worst thing that stuck with me was that they were trying to cross the Turkish border, both men and women and actually the Greek police [...]stripped them, made them take off their clothes, in front of their families, in front of their husbands, in front of unknown men, took their mobile phones and money and drove them away to the Turkish side of the border[...]. One shouldn't look at just what the smugglers and the outlaws do, one should also look at the legal ones [Authorities], because sometimes the legal ones behave much worse than you think. Look, there were five women, they were arrested by the police and one by one they were frisked. But one policeman was not very nice, he took one, the pretty one of the group; put her in the room to search her. This "search" took two hours, now you understand, I think. [...] This group of six women, after the two hours that the policeman spent with the girl –they were taking care of them in their own way, with food, refreshments, etc. They took them to a bus stop to buy them a ticket, and because there was no bus, they had to wait until morning. They brought them back, took this woman with them again, gave her food and water to give to her friends and in the morning they took them back to the buses, the police themselves bought them a ticket to Athens".⁹²

Instances of SEA were also discussed by some in relation to NGO staff. According to key informants such incidents are often hard to identify or respond to as not all organizations have robust and safe reporting mechanisms in place. For instance, one participant who was trying to find a way to leave irregularly shared how she was approached by an interpreter who manipulated her trying to convince her to have intimate relations in exchange for a fake passport. About motivations of women who accept similar propositions she said:

"My opinion is that any woman that finds herself in such an environment, like the one we are at right now, if they have already received a rejection- [...] - if a woman has lived in the streets and is also alone and has no help or support from anyone or anywhere, she will very easily accept any offer of help because she has nowhere to stay, or sleep, she has no food to eat. So, she sees this kind of offer as a huge help and will say to herself "look, put all the bad things aside and start looking at the good ones so that you survive, there is no other way".⁹³

"Women who under other circumstances might not choose to be with a man, [...] a woman alone can fall in love or convince herself that she's fallen in love with a professional in the sector, because we've seen that too. Because she thinks that will prioritize her case, and she may be right. Who will fall in love with the interpreter because she thinks he will get her an appointment with the lawyer faster, which are code violations, but now I want to say that they exist. Clearly."⁹⁴

Others had to sleep with people in positions of power or chose to engage in sexual relations with people who could open up job opportunities. Such instances can range from clear-cut SEA incidents to more

⁹¹ KII-4, *ibid*

⁹² IDI-16, *ibid*

⁹³ IDI-20, *ibid*

⁹⁴ KII-8, *ibid*

complex relationships, where power, agency, consent, attraction, pleasure and benefits are intertwined. Those included men entering relationships with local women or international female volunteers for a better place to stay, better food, for sex or in some cases out of genuine feelings. Often those relationships are far from black and white, and are illustrative of power imbalance, intertwined with gender aspects and often violence.

"We had men doing that, but the perception of most people is that they're not vulnerable exactly; they're trying to abuse a situation or take advantage of a woman. And it's actually very interesting that we had a case of a staff in a state actor [...] and she got into a relationship with a refugee man, who was clearly exploiting the relationship and also posted videos of them having sex online. So, I mean she was really experiencing GBV, but, because she was working for an actor, we consider this sexual exploitation also from her part. It's complicated, like she was the victim and perpetrator at same time if you can say something like this."⁹⁵

3.4 Risks and consequences of transactional sex / relationships

Transactional encounters and relationships can have multifaceted consequences, including increased sexual and reproductive health risks and mental health implications. In some cases, transactional sex can lead or is intertwined with violence, including GBV. Social and community consequences can also be significant and may exacerbate hesitance to seek support. As some participants noted, persons engaging in transactional sex may sometimes assume risks associated with the practice, while others may be unaware or ignore risks due to lack of survival alternatives.

"I guess also in that situation, where there's a lot of desperation, there's also a conscious-unconscious ignorance of danger. That is, they're forced, or somehow put in the back of their mind that "this can happen to me".⁹⁶

SRH risks

Participants across sexual orientations and gender identities reported pregnancies, STIs and HIV among the main implications of transactional sex -especially for those who have many partners and those engaging in the practice for a prolonged period of time. Several participants noted that condoms are often not used during transactional encounters, increasing SRH-related risks. Limited awareness about safe sex and health risks of unprotected intercourse was also highlighted. Other participants noted that condom use depends on the persons buying sex; refugees may not insist to it if they have a pressing need for money or may be offered more for unprotected intercourse. Cultural factors and lack of free access to condoms were also noted as reasons for unprotected sex.

"When it comes to the condoms and everything, I would say that is something that we really need help. To educate a lot of LGBTQI people, especially the migrants' community, never to be desperate because when you're desperate you expose yourself to diseases; most of them I believe have STDs and this is due to their rapid "we're having sex without protection". And maybe due to their desperation "I need this money, and I'm not giving a penny or a dime or a euro or 4 euros to go get a good condom for myself to put on".⁹⁷

Additionally, women in particular may have less power to negotiate safe sex practices, both when they sell sex to multiple partners and when they find themselves in transactional intimate relationships. One

⁹⁵ KII-4, *ibid*

⁹⁶ KII-7, Interview notes in possession of the authors

⁹⁷ KII-13, *ibid*

participant explained how she tried to strategize in order to avoid an unwanted pregnancy while in a long-term transactional relationship.

“When I was with this person, he would say to me “in our culture it’s not in our nature to use condoms, in our culture everything happens naturally and you should bear children” and I replied to him that “in this condition that I’m in I cannot raise a child too”. I had a friend that would go to a doctor and take some medicine for herself but she would give it to me so that I don’t get pregnant.”⁹⁸

A male participant who sells sex claimed he has never encountered a client who did not want to use a condom; however, for him testing for STIs was more challenging due to his irregular legal status and lack of information about SRH services. Testing was, overall, both an issue of awareness and access to the services, and participants noted varying degrees of information about available services and varying attitudes towards screening. Overall, participants from African states as well as participants who self-identified as LGBTIQ+ appeared to be more aware about health implications and self-protecting measures. Some refugee participants and key informants discussed the importance of sexual awareness/ education classes. A gay man from an African state shared:

“I think what we need to do for these people is to give them just that kind of advice on how to protect their body, give them an education on sex, especially for those who are forced to have sex to exchange some things. We can’t help all the people who do it, but we can give them advice, we can give them sessions on sex education, [...] to talk about sexual intercourse, how to maintain your body, your skin, your sensitive areas and what positions to avoid, so that you don’t have some problems with your health and to avoid problems later on in general.”⁹⁹

However, key informants noted how such interventions need to be consistent, slowly implemented and take into account cultural aspects in order to be effective and not be interpreted as imposing western mentalities, while they need to recognize that sometimes refugees simply have other priorities. One refugee man shared his perceptions on awareness raising initiatives:

“Honestly, there are some NGOs who are specialized in this and are trying to do it, but this is a really sensitive side for eastern culture[s]. Mainly, the information that I got was by working with another NGO that was spreading this information. [...] It exists but it’s not available, not fully available. And it’s also about priorities. If someone has two rejections, they won’t go attend some sexual education sessions. They would be more worried about other stuff.”¹⁰⁰

Despite some awareness raising campaigns implemented by NGOs, lack of prevention and widespread screening opportunities were highlighted. Notably some participants discussed positive experiences from the healthcare system and stressed the importance of trusting doctors to strengthen screening and access to healthcare. On the other hand, insensitive and stigmatizing attitudes particularly within the public system or misinterpretation of NGO protocols can have an impact; key informants stressed how lack of cultural awareness, lack of interpretation or inadequate explanation of medical procedures may discourage persons from getting support or result in re-traumatizing them. HIV-related stigma within some communities may also discourage persons from health screenings. A woman shared her experience and perceptions around SRH screenings:

“when we get sick and we go to the hospital, there should be blood tests to see if the person has HIV. Unfortunately, that’s something that is very rarely done. When I went to [NGO] I asked them to do an HIV

⁹⁸ IDI-20, *ibid*

⁹⁹ IDI-23, *ibid*

¹⁰⁰ IDI-30, *ibid*

*test and it seemed strange to them. They asked me: "why do you want to get an HIV test?" I replied: "to have control over my body". And they said to me: "are you sure?" Their reaction seemed strange to me. When I go to doctors, I ask them to do the test and they treat me like this, they scare me. It goes without saying that I won't visit them again. From that moment on, I understood that most people were afraid to take the HIV test because they have misinterpreted it. When someone goes to the hospital, when they get sick, it's an opportunity to perform a test to see if they have HIV. And when someone is HIV-positive, doctors can promote their access to HIV treatment."*¹⁰¹

Systemic barriers, including lengthy waiting times, were highlighted also with regards to regular monitoring and treatment after the identification of SRH-related needs. For instance, participants discussed how access to testing and treatment is linked to legal status, particularly for healthcare provision in the public sector. NGOs strive to cover the gap and strategize around access barriers, which affect refugees in general and those engaging in transactional sex in particular. On that note, key informants highlighted particular barriers for women, who also face gendered SRH concerns, such as (termination of) pregnancies, emergency contraception and gynecological injuries which need medical attention that cannot be provided at the primary healthcare level offered by NGOs.

Violence and exploitation

Many participants highlighted links between transactional sex practices and increased risks of GBV or other types of violence, which can lead to previously discussed SRH implications. Rape and sexual assaults were often mentioned, commonly by women and participants of diverse SOGIESC. Further, survivors –particularly when undocumented- often do not report due to lack of trust or fear of police, while those who do reach out to authorities may be disappointed by the system response.

*"There's a major risk to their physical integrity and health. I imagine that many people will try to take advantage of a difficult situation that someone is in; there's a risk of sexual violence, rape, as well as taking advantage of them, and maybe not getting money owed to them or getting kicked out. A lot of people use intimidation and the authority or power that they might have over people who are afraid - who have no papers, they can't go anywhere, they can't go to the police to report something and fear that they'll be deported or imprisoned too."*¹⁰²

As participants highlighted, power imbalance and intimidation can be important factors limiting a person's control over a transactional sexual interaction. Even though refugees may often perceive transactional relations as "forced" choices as discussed in the previous chapter, there is still room for negotiation over what they agree to engage into. Thus, participants noted that even though someone may willingly engage in sex to cover a need, the actual interaction might exceed the person's consent and violate their rights. Such violence can include recording a person against their will or non-consensual condom removing¹⁰³. A gay man and a young straight woman offered different examples of violence experienced during transactional sex practices:

"When someone pays another person to have sex then they agree that this sexual act will take place. But if the one who pays then asks the other person to do something they don't want to do, then we are talking about forced prostitution. For example, someone may ask you to have sex and you go to their house and they have a camera and they start filming. That's him exploiting you, it's not just prostitution, he's exploiting you and what you're doing at that moment. Or you might meet someone and go to his house to have sex and all of a sudden you realize there's a third guy and instead of two there's three of you

¹⁰¹ IDI-5, Interview notes in possession of the authors

¹⁰² KII-7, *ibid*

¹⁰³ The non-consensual condom removing during a sexual intercourse is commonly known as "stealthing".

and even though you don't want to, you do it because you need the money he's going to give you, and that's kind of coercive.”¹⁰⁴

“I have a friend, she also has a little girl and she was hosted by an organization and they were kicked out. She went to find a house, she was told, “you have to pay 600 euros and then pay the rent every month” and where will she find it? She asked around here, around there, she found some boys who said “let's go to a place like a night bar, to do this job so you can live your child”. She goes there and they started playing with her, they raped her, they did what they wanted to do to her and in the end they didn't even give her the money.”¹⁰⁵

NGO intervention can increase access to services and mitigate consequences of violence. However, while opportunities for support may exist, less privileged persons may find themselves unable to access or unaware of how to navigate the system. For example, lack of rights awareness, isolation and communication barriers can exacerbate physical and mental health consequences. Further, systemic challenges and legislative approaches increase risks for persons selling sex -especially for those with an irregular status or persons who sell sex outside the regulated sex work framework.

“Current legislation forbids to work on sex outside, somewhere it is not declared. That creates fragility which it's something we see on the field. It has happened to see beaten or abused people or in general all this teasing to trans people we have met, police arbitrariness [...].”¹⁰⁶

As sex work is subject to strict preconditions and those selling sex outside houses are criminalized, a large number of persons is pushed to sell sex irregularly and are, thus, exposed to violence, abuse, racist behaviors and exploitation. They also face legal and financial consequences, such as fines. As a result, even refugees who intended to use transactional sex as a short-term strategy may find themselves trapped in the practice out of need to also pay for such fines. Interestingly, gender norms and stereotypes play an important role on who is affected by those consequences:

“...cops are so uneducated and so uncomfortable with their homophobia that they can't conceive they'd open a conversation with a young boy about a sex visit. So they get out of the fines. I mean, a boy who will do survival sex the good thing is that whenever they feel like it, they leave. [...] it's nowhere close to the equivalent survival sex in women. There, she'll be out for a while, in the first week she's already picked up three fines and then says, “now, I pay what I came in to do or do I pay the fine to get the fines out of the way and then pay what I have to do?” While she's thinking about it, she is fined three more times [...]”.¹⁰⁷

Further, even though transactional sex practices do not necessarily entail elements of coercion or violence when performed by adults, they can often increase vulnerability to exploitation or trafficking networks. For key informants the boundaries between selling sex for survival reasons and being in exploitative or abusive contexts were not always clearly visible and several discussed the potentially thin lines separating what can be considered as a “conscious” strategy from an exploitative situation, particularly with regards to women. Moreover, some highlighted how victimization can lead to further abuse or exploitation in the future.

¹⁰⁴ IDI-23, *ibid*

¹⁰⁵ IDI-21, *ibid*

¹⁰⁶ KII-15-16-17, *ibid*

¹⁰⁷ KII-15-16-17, *ibid*

*“These women can be sucked much more easily into a trafficking network. Someone may come to sell them protection. Many times you saw that there may have been 3-4 women always accompanied by a man. It’s much easier to get trapped in the network”.*¹⁰⁸

A final point with regards to risk of experiencing violence in the context of transactional sex concerns women who may enter relationships in exchange for benefits. In those circumstances women may experience multiple types of GBV, but find themselves trapped in the relationship. A woman who entered such a relationship described the multifaceted aspects of violence:

*“This guy when we were in the camp he wouldn’t let me leave the container in which we were living. A friend of his was always tailing me, as if he had put him on duty to watch only me. If I’d go out to get some fresh air- there he was watching me. Was I going to pee? Even there-he was outside waiting for me. And I was locked in this container, I couldn’t go out, I had no right to go out- he wouldn’t let me. After a while he found a house, he rented it and we moved to this house, he put me inside and locked me again; [...] Look, this guy really messed me, even when we would be eating, even if we were with friends, he would always tell me that “we don’t eat [country name] food”- [country] culture, beliefs, whatever was [country] we had to stay away from it, and he was trying to put me down constantly in front of his friends, his people. [...] What I can tell you about the first two months that I was staying with him is that I was sleeping on the floor with my jacket on. I didn’t want to sleep beside him at all, I didn’t want to sleep with him; I didn’t want to have anything to do with him [...]. After two months when I really got tired, I had to; after making a lot of noise and practically yelling, even the people living next door heard us [...]. The very next morning the wife of the person next door visited me and told me “hey, look -I understand the situation you’re in; I understand very well. I can see you’re one of us, but you’re forced into this situation, you’re here because of the circumstances. So, endure it till you get your papers sorted or till something changes, and then leave. It’s not something you can change on your own.”*¹⁰⁹

As her narrative highlights, challenges IPV survivors face when trying to leave an abusive relationship can be exacerbated in cases where refugee women have entered a relationship to secure survival or a highly-valued benefit. While this participant eventually got out of the situation, others may continue to endure abuse, particularly when they have children. A single mother shared:

*“I also want to tell you this; there are times when a woman has dated a man here to support her children. She’s getting beaten by the man, [...] but since she’s supporting her kids and giving them food and there’s a roof above their heads, she’s never going to talk. Sitting down, getting beaten, breaking her character against the people and society, swearing at her in front of the people, yelling at her, while the one who can, has the right to demand her rights, doesn’t do it because she fears for her children’s future.”*¹¹⁰

Some may be hesitant to reach out to official support systems in fear that disclosing the transactional nature of a relationship might affect how they are viewed or believing that NGOs will intervene inappropriately. Such lack of trust can impact willingness to report violence or get support; however, even when women disclose, they can face insecurity or retaliation as sometimes response mechanisms are lacking and a perpetrator’s reach may be wide -e.g. in SEA cases.

Mental health risks and substance use

Notwithstanding that every person conceptualizes differently their involvement in transactional sex, participants from diverse communities and key informants discussed the potentially serious mental health

¹⁰⁸ KII-3, *ibid*

¹⁰⁹ IDI-20, *ibid*

¹¹⁰ IDI-10, *ibid*

implications associated with the practices. Stress, sadness and depression were noted as common, along with feelings of anger and aggression, and various difficulties with sleeping or eating. Other participants discussed feelings of guilt, a sense of losing one's self or becoming indifferent and cynical. A trans man noted:

"He [a refugee who engages in TS] will be dead inside. No feelings. No mercy. Everything inside him will be changed. [...] He slept on the street, he'd been homeless, he'd been beaten, he'd been raped. What could you expect from someone who has been through all this? He wouldn't care about anything. This is my opinion."¹¹¹

Participants shared concerns that mental health risks may not be perceived as such while persons engage in the practice but may emerge later and have a long-standing effect on well-being. Particular concerns were raised with regards to the mental health of young persons who engage in transactional practices. For instance, an Iranian man noted:

"For example, one of my close friends, when he came here he didn't have any money so he had to do the thing I am doing right now. He found someone, actually as some kind of boyfriend or something, to be a couple, to be partner with him and the first month, I remember he was telling me that when he started this thing he was crying because he had a lot of psychological pressure, because of that. And he is really young; he is 20-22, something like this."¹¹²

Further, alcohol or drug use was noted by some participants as a potentially harmful mechanism to cope with challenges in Greece, but also with the very practices of transactional sex. Substance use reinforced mental health concerns, affecting their well-being overall. A key informant shared:

"There are people now going to drugs, maybe into alcohol, maybe you see them, like, having sex with two or three men at once, maybe let me just get something to get myself high... And doing that you destroy your system, your health is now damaged [...] I know a lot of people that have been alcoholic due to this, so it damaged their health. They don't think straight anymore. Sometimes they keep, like [pause] thinking maybe suicide is the best option."¹¹³

In some cases, transactional sex was brought up in terms of trauma and was linked to self-harming thoughts or actions, while mental health implications may be exacerbated for those who also face SRH consequences. Engaging in transactional sex, when perceived as a "forced" choice, may add to past trauma and be a trigger, destabilizing a person's mental health - for instance, in cases of GBV survivors. A psychologist offered an insightful account of the impact that selling sex had on one of her clients, a gay man from DRC, who survived rape in one island.

"the rape awakened the whole part of the past and the trauma. Furthermore, he had symptoms that were monitored by a psychiatrist. [...] During his treatment, while he seemed to be slowly stabilising, he began to fear, telling me: "Why is this happening to me now? I just got over it; I just want a better future. [...] I'm afraid now that I will be forced to do what I did back in Turkey, which OK, I did it in Congo, in Congo I lived on the streets all the time, but I did it in Turkey and now here? You know I'm not well, I don't feel safe" and at the same time, he referred to the expression of his identity. I mean, he didn't feel comfortable being the way he wanted to be. [...] What can I tell you about his mental health? I described his emotional state -there was short-term stability and empowerment, but then there was guilt on his part in the end. The first thing he said was: "OK, I did this in Turkey to survive" and he said it as if he had

¹¹¹ IDI-35, *ibid*

¹¹² IDI-9, *ibid*

¹¹³ KII-13, *ibid*

full self-awareness and drive. When he said: "I sleep with men here and I get paid to survive", I asked him how he felt. He replied to me: "I don't feel good, I feel bad for myself, why am I still doing...what am I doing? I'm doing the same thing, I'll never get away from this...I'm going to die here, I'm in a worse situation." As soon as he left, he told me: "if I stayed any longer in [island], I would suffer, I would die, I would kill myself."¹¹⁴

In this context, refugees engaging in transactional sex may have increased needs for mental health support or medication. Participants noted different patterns and challenges with regards to seeking psychological support. While some may be forthcoming about the survival practice and directly ask for support, others may be hesitant to share until they feel safe. Perceptions around the benefits of mental health support were also varying among participants; while some felt it can help mitigate potential consequences of the practice or disengage from it, others believed it was not beneficial.

"I think it's a very irrelevant issue [...] because their problem is not psychological, their problem is clearly money. You can't go to a psychologist and ask for money."¹¹⁵

Despite increased need and availability of mental health support, lack of access to long-term psychiatric monitoring posed a barrier for care among those with more intense mental health issues – in general and with regards to transactional sex. On a final note, several participants highlighted the potentially detrimental effect of selling sex on a person when their sexuality is being forced. While sexual pleasure can be part of the experience of transactional sex, there are cases where a person may be involved in intercourse despite their sexual orientation. Key informants shared examples about lesbian women sleeping with men and straight men having sex with other men:

"because people might say it's a choice but at that moment she's into women, but she's now forced to do it with men because she needs money. [...] And on the way she got pregnant and right up to now the father of her child is nowhere to be found. So, you see the kind of trauma that they put themselves into".¹¹⁶

"talking about the mental health consequences, one of the things that we've seen, especially in boys [young men], where they feel they have no choice but to practice survival sex –that is to be sexually exploited and abused- is then issues about their own sexuality, what it means. Does it mean that they're gay? So, it creates issues about their own sexuality as well."¹¹⁷

Participants discussed how such interactions may traumatize a person, create self-doubt or uncertainty around their sexuality and potentially destabilize one's mental health. Besides, anger and wider impact on the way that a person interacts and perceives the community and system can also surface in those cases. A refugee participant who works with refugees said:

"I have only [one] exception out of all these people that do this kind of relationship with παππούς [older men] that found out his sexual orientation. He was not interested in women and he became a gay man, he liked it. And he understood [his sexual orientation] during this process. Still not the best way to find out, but he did [...]. But all the others, I don't know what is gonna happen in the near or the long future to them. Because- if it's something from desire you're gonna blame yourself: "Okay, I did it and I wanted it and that's okay". You can't blame any other person because that's what you wanted, it was your desire, it was your choice. But if it's out of need you're gonna blame anyone- you're gonna blame the asylum,

¹¹⁴ KII-1, *ibid*

¹¹⁵ IDI-12, *ibid*

¹¹⁶ KII-13, *ibid*

¹¹⁷ KII-2, *ibid*

*you're gonna blame Greek society, you're gonna blame Greek people, you're gonna blame the Greek government because they didn't give you the opportunities in order for you to feel stable, not to need the money to go to that place. But this person needs to maybe double or triple the money that he gained from this procedure to pay for a psychologist or a psychiatrist to find his psychological balance.*¹¹⁸

Social/ community consequences and “normalization”

Attitudes towards those who engage in transactional sex are influenced by gender and cultural norms, religion, as well as wider and personal perspectives, ethical systems and beliefs. As such, transactional sex practices may have serious consequences at the social, community and relational level. Many study participants recognized systemic drivers behind the practices and were not judgmental towards those who resort to them regardless of their gender. A gay man noted:

*“But the people who do this, we shouldn't judge them, we should advise them, we should give them more protection, more opportunities, because you cannot tell someone who needs that 10 euros not to take it, you can just somehow educate them that, in order to get that 10 euros, you have to be a little more careful about the people you sleep with.”*¹¹⁹

However, other participants held negative perceptions about persons who engage in transactional sex practices, particularly for monetary benefits, viewing them as indecent or weak. Women were more likely to receive judgmental attitudes when they sell sex; to the contrary participants seemed to be more understanding towards those engaging in long-term partnerships for benefits. Similarly, men selling sex were not discussed in terms of “prostitution” as was often done for women. Women from Afghanistan and Iran may face heightened shame and stigma, according to what participants from those communities noted:

*“The way they think is ancient; old way of thinking. Do not expect from them to think like you “this is sex for something or she has to do it to survive”. They are going to embarrass her, humiliate her, point finger, sorry – “she is a bitch”.”*¹²⁰

*“Usually in Afghanistan this is a huge thing and even if they do they are not going to tell other people. For example, even if I myself reach that point and do that for sure I'm not going to tell anyone. You know they have hope, they still want to live their life and they don't want to somehow let other people have a bad talk about them. It is very shameful and maybe they have to do it. Someday they want to get married and if everyone finds out, they cannot get married anymore.”*¹²¹

Thus, persons who engage in transactional sex may face stigma, community rejection and marginalization, which is why some do not openly discuss their involvement. Stigma and shame can be significant barriers in accessing timely support and may impact a person's well-being, health and protection from violence. Community stigma can also be closely linked to self-stigma and internalized feelings of shame. How one perceives and interprets their actions can have an effect mitigating or exacerbating social consequences and mental health risks. However, even though one may not conceptualize their involvement negatively, concerns were raised about how those perceptions may change and affect a person over time. A man who had engaged in TS shared:

“The stigma comes from them first. They will shame themselves. [...] And this kind of self-stigma is worse than social stigma. Like for me I don't care, I can go tell my mother about...I can go and tell everyone, I can go in the street and say “hey, I did this”, okay. I won't care, because for me it's not something I have

¹¹⁸ IDI-39, *ibid*

¹¹⁹ IDI-23, *ibid*

¹²⁰ IDI-9, *ibid*

¹²¹ IDI-11, Interview notes in possession of the authors

*to be proud of, but it's not something to be ashamed of. I'm smart I think. I could get money, I could have fun".*¹²²

Interestingly, some participants from Iran and Afghanistan described how transactional sex practices between men have been to a large extent normalized as a survival means, particularly among young men self-identifying as straight, and are openly discussed. One man shared:

*"In my opinion, it's something that I cannot swallow, [...] it does not fit in my mind, but from what I see they are quite the opposite, they tell me "it's no big deal!" and things like that."*¹²³

A "normalization" of transactional sex was also highlighted by some key informants who linked the practice to long-term lack of options. Besides, participants noted that even if someone is engaging in transactional sex as a temporary strategy in Greece, the practice may become a way to deal with challenges or as some refugee participants noted, a "habit". Still, mental health or social consequences may surface in the long term, as highlighted by a key informant:

*"there's a sense of normalcy. Because it's the only way I know, that I have to have sex to get a hundred euros in order to find a place to put down a payment so that my kid has a home. That may become my new normal if then I have to do it again and again. [...] Though I'm normalizing that I'm having sex with someone so that I can feed my family, on the other hand that might make me angry at the situation I'm in, that might make me embarrassed and feel guilty and ashamed and that could affect how I then deal with other things, I could become depressed and isolate myself, I can worry about my community finding out, that may affect how I deal with my children, because if I'm depressed and I'm isolating myself and I'm having problems eating or sleeping, then I'm not gonna be the kind of parent that I otherwise would be. So, there are all these other consequences that can flow from it that aren't tangible and that we don't know about, but that can flow from that initial decision, that choice".*¹²⁴

3.5 Forced practice or choice?

In this final sub-chapter of the report, it is important to reflect on the continuum of the experiences of the people who engage in TS. Is it a forced practice or a choice? To what extent this is a "false" dichotomy, since a dynamic interplay and constant negotiation is undergoing? Notwithstanding the circumstances and types of transactional sex, perceptions about drivers, choice and agency emerged in all the above narratives, pointing to the varying perspectives of participants and to the wide spectrum under which transactional sex practices fall. Several participants highlighted systemic drivers, including lack of accommodation, financial assistance, employment, overall support and safety, behind engagement in transactional sexual relations or encounters.

*"it's all because the state, the government, is cutting cash cards, kicking them out of their homes, not giving them jobs, not letting them work easily, that's why all this is happening. If they had jobs and their cash cards weren't stopped, I don't think people would choose this".*¹²⁵

¹²² IDI-36, *ibid*

¹²³ IDI-8, *ibid*

¹²⁴ KII-2, *ibid*

¹²⁵ IDI-33, *ibid*

As many understood the practices to be directly linked to survival, they did not describe it as a choice, particularly in cases where refugees had sexual encounters for monetary benefits. However, some argued that sexual pleasure factors in the motivations of some persons, particularly women.

"I think it's more about money, but it's also her sexual pleasure"¹²⁶

With regards to men having sex with men most participants perceived that sexual pleasure was not a driver -at least as long as many of those engaging in the practice were perceived as straight.

"It's not out of pleasure, it's not out of anything that you can say they're interested in or they like it, at least for those who aren't gay, it's not that they like it. They go either to make money for cigarettes, or to make money for food, or for a place to stay".¹²⁷

Taking into account hierarchies and privilege, what for some is a result of structural challenges, for others may be a choice or a decision taken when there are other options available. In that sense, gender, SOGIESC, legal status and other factors affect the margin of negotiation one has about whether to engage in the practice or in what terms.

"[T]here are people who may have some "privileges" -e.g. it's different if someone has sex with payment and is an undocumented migrant -how much can he do that consciously, in comparison with a gay man who may do it through an app and just likes to have sex and says "hey, I'll take 100 euros". It's different in terms of privilege and it gives him the option to do it more consciously. [...] It is totally different for the person who doesn't deal with the apps, to be on the street and for example doing survival sex purely... for drug use, for shelter [...]".¹²⁸

In her narrative, the key informant elaborates on the "pyramid of privileges" where, for example, being a cis woman doing survival sex on the streets is way less privileged experience than the experience of a cis man¹²⁹. Margins of negotiation and gendered aspects commonly surfaced in cases of women and men who may enter long-term relationships for non-monetary benefits, as discussed in previous sub-sections. In some cases, what was initially perceived as a coping strategy which women or men willingly employed may evolve in an abusive relationship that they cannot easily escape due to survival or other concerns. For the cases of men, pleasure, sexual exploration and sexual curiosity were also included in the initial reasons to be engaged with such practices.

The intersection of the survival strategy and GBV was highlighted by different participants who emphasized the impossible choices that refugee women face in order to survive or be protected.

"Because if you are a woman alone or a single headed family, you are at risk of being harassed, being raped in many sites or RICs, but if you have someone, ok, yes, he might abuse you a bit, but maybe that is less harm, really, I mean, I don't want to justify something, but being slapped is less harm than being raped every day, for example. So, unfortunately, they are trying to make these decisions, what is better for them at that given moment."¹³⁰

On a related note, some key informants noted the limits of choice for women who may often engage in transactional sex not as a temporary strategy employed in Greece. This was particularly relevant for refugee women from African states, who often have experienced violence in the country of origin and repeatedly

¹²⁶ IDI-8, *ibid*

¹²⁷ IDI-16, *ibid*

¹²⁸ KII-15-16-17, *ibid*

¹²⁹ It is beyond the scope of the present report to thoroughly analyse each and different experience based on each person's identities. Nevertheless it is important to ensure that an intersectional lens is always applied in the discussion.

¹³⁰ KII-4, *ibid*

victimized before and during the migration journey; learning to endure violence and exploitation because of lack of alternatives or other means of survival may lead some to normalize selling sex.

"I conducted many interviews with African women¹³¹, the majority of whom "chose" to prostitute themselves. They did the same thing in their country of origin, in Turkey, running excessive risks and generally continued to do so. I don't know what choices these women really have. These women are abused at a very young age in most cases. [...] They travelled to Turkey but a large number of them ended up becoming victims of trafficking in human beings. [...] Their resilience is awesome [...]. However, they are not given the opportunity nor the alternative, so I don't understand if it is really a choice, when somebody tries to convince them at a very young age that this is the only thing they know how to do, meaning that they can't do anything else".¹³²

As challenges persist throughout the displacement cycle, some refugees may start selling sex in Turkey in order to survive or be able to continue their journey and they may resort to it again when they arrive in Greece. However, as the phase of displacement changes perceptions about the strategy may also evolve – what is initially seen as more of a conscious choice might be perceived as forced and what was seen in Turkey as a temporary measure might look as a vicious circle when the person finally reaches their destination country. A psychologist working in Lesvos shared her insights about one of her clients:

"One incident involved a gay man, who did this as a job in Turkey to survive. In his narration, he clearly stated the following: "I did it to survive, because I had to make money to live." He came after the narration here in Greece in the first session and said: "you'll see that I'll have to do this again", and after two or three sessions he said: "You know what? I'm after all doing this again." I don't know if there's exploitation or if the persons are as empowered as in the gay person's first narrative. I was surprised when he said to me: "In Turkey, I did that for a living, somehow I had to survive, and I knowingly did that but I don't want to do it again now"."¹³³

Engagement in transactional sex practices surfaces then as a dynamic situation where motives and perceptions keep changing. This can happen overtime, but also within a transactional relationship itself. A young man involved in a relationship with a wealthy woman outlined shifting patterns in his perceptions and motivations, during his involvement with her, framing transactional relationships as falling in a gray zone in a choice-forced continuum.

"For me, if someone wants to do it, they do it. If someone is forced to do it, they think twice, try to find other solutions, but when they do it in the end, they do it out of frustration. I didn't do it because I wanted it, like –maybe I wanted to get it as experience at the beginning. You know, like, I have never been with a woman over 60, so this was one of the things. Then when I didn't like it, I didn't feel forced more than feeling that...I have to keep the bridge between me and her. Because I will need someone, I am alone here, like I am totally alone."¹³⁴

Notwithstanding gender dynamics which are always at play, it appears that individual perspectives around ethics, personal limits and red lines surface as core concepts drawing new limits away from the forced-choice nexus. Thus, at least for a few straight men, keeping their worldview intact may allow them to perceive their body merely as a resource, and often the only one available.

¹³¹ See our comment on racialized economies

¹³² *KII-3, ibid*

¹³³ *KII-1, Interview notes in possession of the authors*

¹³⁴ *IDI-36, ibid*

“But when you have nothing – nothing, literally – you don’t have money, you don’t have work, you are not integrated, you can’t build anything, you will use what you have. You have your body, you use it. I don’t support people to do that, but if you don’t care about it, do it. I don’t mind, maybe I was born a whore, if I could do it, for me I don’t mind, as long as my ethics would be the same, as long as I am not exploiting anybody, I am not harming anybody, as long as there is no harm in it, I would do anything.”¹³⁵

4. Discussion - concluding remarks

In this final chapter, we present some reflections on the findings and concluding remarks. The report offers a snapshot of the context in Greece between September 2021 and September 2022. This is the first report in Greece that presents findings on this under-explored topic and aspires to shed light on survival strategies, and the drivers and patterns of transactional sex among refugee population. The context remains fluid, dynamic and constantly changing in terms of funding, legislation and policy framework as well as stakeholders’ priorities; thus the response system remains under pressure, facing diverse and multi-faceted challenges. The decision to produce country-specific, short and concise reports, instead of long and detailed ones, addressing policy makers and key stakeholders, did not allow to illustrate the richness of the data in detail. Nevertheless, other elements of the research will be presented in academic papers, conferences and a forthcoming book.

Since the context remains very dynamic with constant changes, it was decided that the report will not include a detailed chapter on the challenges refugees face. Nevertheless, the patterns of TS presented in the findings highlight the main systemic drivers that push people to resort to TS. Main challenges refugees referred to were issues regarding legal documents, asylum system, accommodation, employment/livelihoods, reception/ integration, medical services and other everyday problems such as lack of safety, discrimination, access to education opportunities and lack of trust towards the response system.

Despite the hardships, refugees deploy a variety of survival strategies to overcome barriers and challenges. Their resourcefulness points out to collective-based and individual strategies, from leaving Greece, to turning to family, friends and community members to ask for support and protection, to share tips and information and find collective solutions on accommodation and other livelihood problems. Generating income through various means, turning to NGOs and navigating the complex eligibility framework through adapting and non-conforming were also strategies refugees deploy.

Despite the many examples and insights that participants offered, pointing to a high prevalence of transactional sex being used as a strategy, it is unsafe to assume how common the practices are or draw any conclusions following gender, nationality or legal status, as the sample and the perceptions of participants are unavoidably biased. However, according to inputs by key informants, it seems that there is an increase in the number of those resorting to the strategy or at least a change in the identified patterns. For instance, some key informants discussed how TS was much more encountered during the lockdown when employment was harder to secure or they associated the practice with recent policy developments affecting livelihood opportunities, while some others explained how usually encountered cases of minors engaging in TS in the past, have been outnumbered by other profiles which are more visible now.

Perceptions of transactional sexual relations, gender norms, and cultural factors unavoidably influenced our participants’ narratives, particularly when their accounts are second-hand. TS was often referred to by refugee participants as “prostitution”, particularly when it was employed by women. However, other

¹³⁵ IDI-36, *ibid*



participants did not necessarily perceive transactional encounters for monetary benefits as sex work but merely as a temporary strategy. Some shared nuanced insights discussing the possible overlap between transactional sex for money, sex work, sexual exploitation, as well as how GBV, including harassment might often coexist with transactional sex practices. Those narratives illuminate the complexity behind engaging in similar practices and varying perceptions and conceptualizations of participants. They also point out to the continuum of experiences, which vary and are constantly under negotiation. Adopting an intersectionality lens, the report attempted to delve into the refugees' complicated realities, which, especially for those who engage in TS, includes them navigating through and negotiating issues of agency, coercion, pleasure, violence, consent, power hierarchies and privilege. For those deploying their body as a resource, experiences of exploitation, violence, marginalization and stigmatization can arise and may cause Mental/ SRH implications, as the report illustrated.

The research findings also touch upon the double role the community can play in the control-care nexus, a key empirical contribution of various other studies. A community can be supportive and enhance care mechanisms but also can act as a disciplinary and control mechanism, especially for women and queer persons. Despite the hardships, the structural challenges and against all odds, refugees dream, formulate their strategies and invest time, energy and resources for a better future. Many shared a feeling of hope that things will improve. The "aspirations" perspective of the research aimed to untangle the imagined futures and to understand better the migration trajectories. Despite the processes of othering and exoticization in the Greek society, refugees' aspirations resemble future plans of the locals (e.g. sense of security, peace, calmness, a "normal" life, travelling for pleasure, buy a car or a house, to mention few).

Regarding future directions for research, a more thorough research is needed specifically on survival strategies of refugees with diverse SOGIESC, in which members of the communities can participate from the design of the research until its implementation, being the leaders of the process. Moreover, it would be interesting to conduct a research on the perceptions of professionals, including social workers, psychologists, interpreters in state-run and NGO services regarding transactional sex, endeavoring to investigate the extent of acceptance or stereotypes and judgmental attitudes of service providers. Furthermore, a dedicated research on social media and online apps, their content and how they are used by refugees for transactional sex/ sex work would enlighten our knowledge on the use of new spaces and technologies. Last but not least, a research using surveys in various clinics and health services on the connection of SRH and sex work/transactional sex would enrich the data and thus facilitate the design of targeted health interventions. Lastly, as far as policy interventions are concerned, the research underlines the need for specialized services, bottom up solutions where communities are engaged in a participatory way, wide communication/awareness raising campaigns and projects, which will provide tangible results and solutions to structural problems that are linked to TS.

Annex

A. IDI PARTICIPANTS

IDI	COO ¹³⁶	Gender ¹³⁷	Legal Status
IDI-1	Syria	Male	Undocumented
IDI-2	Nigeria	Female	Undocumented
IDI-3	Afghanistan	Female	Asylum seeker
IDI-4	Afghanistan	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-5	Republic of Congo	Female	Undocumented
IDI-6	Afghanistan	Female	Asylum seeker
IDI-7	Iran	Male	Undocumented
IDI-8	Iran	Male	Asylum seeker
IDI-9	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Male	Undocumented
IDI-10	Iran	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-11	Afghanistan	Female	Undocumented
IDI-12	Iran	Male	Asylum seeker
IDI-13	Turkey	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-14	Ivory Coast	Female	Asylum seeker
IDI-15	Cameroon	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-16	Iran	Male (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Asylum seeker
IDI-17	Afghanistan	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-18	Cameroon	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-19	Iran	Female	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-20	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Female	Asylum seeker
IDI-21	DRC	Female	Undocumented
IDI-22	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Female (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Asylum seeker
IDI-23	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Male (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Undocumented
IDI-24	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Male (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Asylum seeker
IDI-25	Afghanistan	Male	Asylum seeker
IDI-26	Syria	Female	Asylum seeker
IDI-27	DRC	Male (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Recognized refugee/other

¹³⁶Nationality not disclosed in cases where such disclosure could potentially facilitate the identification of a person through association with other demographics or quotes.

¹³⁷SOGIESC-related information is based on self-identification and information offered spontaneously by participants; data analysis and findings on persons with diverse SOGIESC were informed solely by information provided by those participants; a detailed breakdown based on sexual orientation/ gender identity is avoided here to safeguard anonymity and avoid oversimplification/ imposing identities.

IDI-28	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Male (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Asylum seeker
IDI-29	Afghanistan	Female (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-30	Iraq	Male	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-31	Ivory Coast	Male	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-32	Afghanistan	Male	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-33	Afghanistan	Male	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-34	Iran	Male	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-35	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Male (self-identified as person with diverse SOGIESC)	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-36	Not disclosed for anonymity reasons	Male	Recognized refugee/other
IDI-37	Afghanistan	Male	Undocumented
IDI-38	Afghanistan	Female	Undocumented
IDI-39	Afghanistan	Male	Recognized refugee/ other

B. KII PARTICIPANTS

ID	Organization / Field
KII-1	NGO (PSS)
KII-2	UN (Protection)
KII-3	State
KII-4	UN (Protection)
KII-5	NGO (Children and Youth)
KII-6	NGO (Women's Protection)
KII-7	NGO (Medical)
KII-8	NGO (Women's Protection)
KII-9	NGO (Medical)
KII-10	NGO (Women's Protection)
KII-11	State
KII-12	Migrant Community
KII-13	NGO (LGBTIQ+)
KII-14	Migrant Community
KII-15-16-17	NGO (Health)
KII-18	NGO (Shelter)

C. FGD PARTICIPANTS

ID	COO	Legal Status
FGA1	Gabon	Undocumented
FGA2	DRC	Recognized refugee
FGA3	Cameroon	Undocumented
FGA4	DRC	Recognized refugee
FGA5	Cameroon	Undocumented
FGA6	Cameroon	Recognized refugee
FGA7	Cameroon	Recognized refugee

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