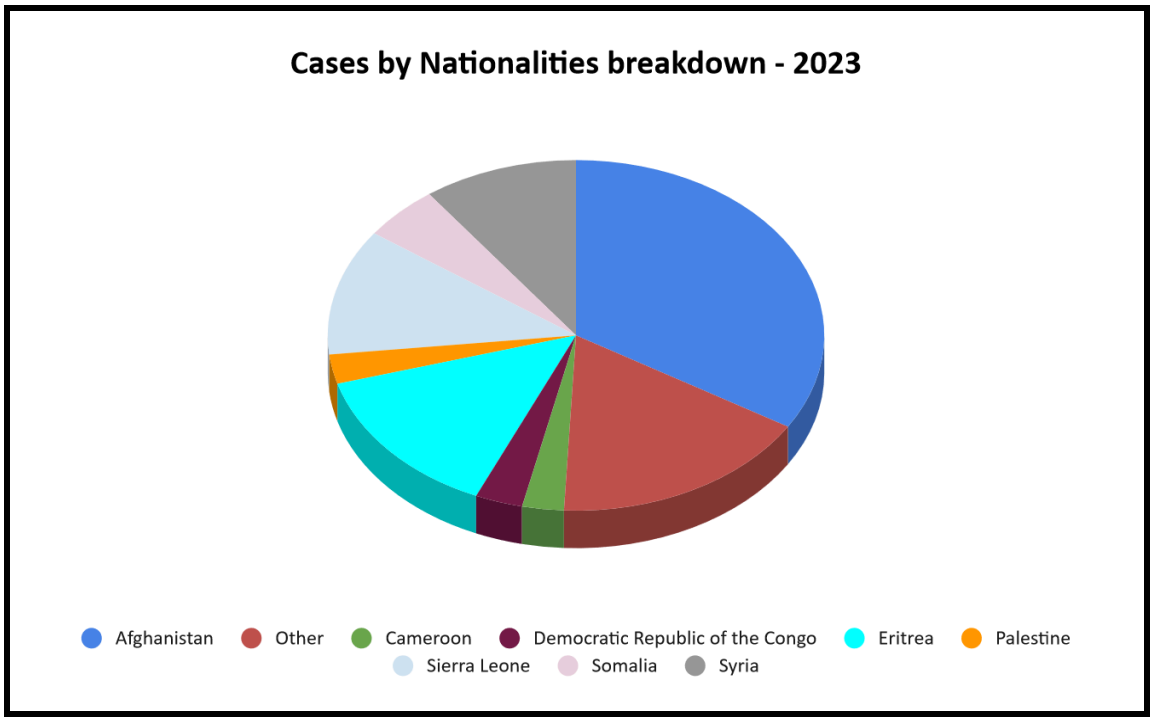
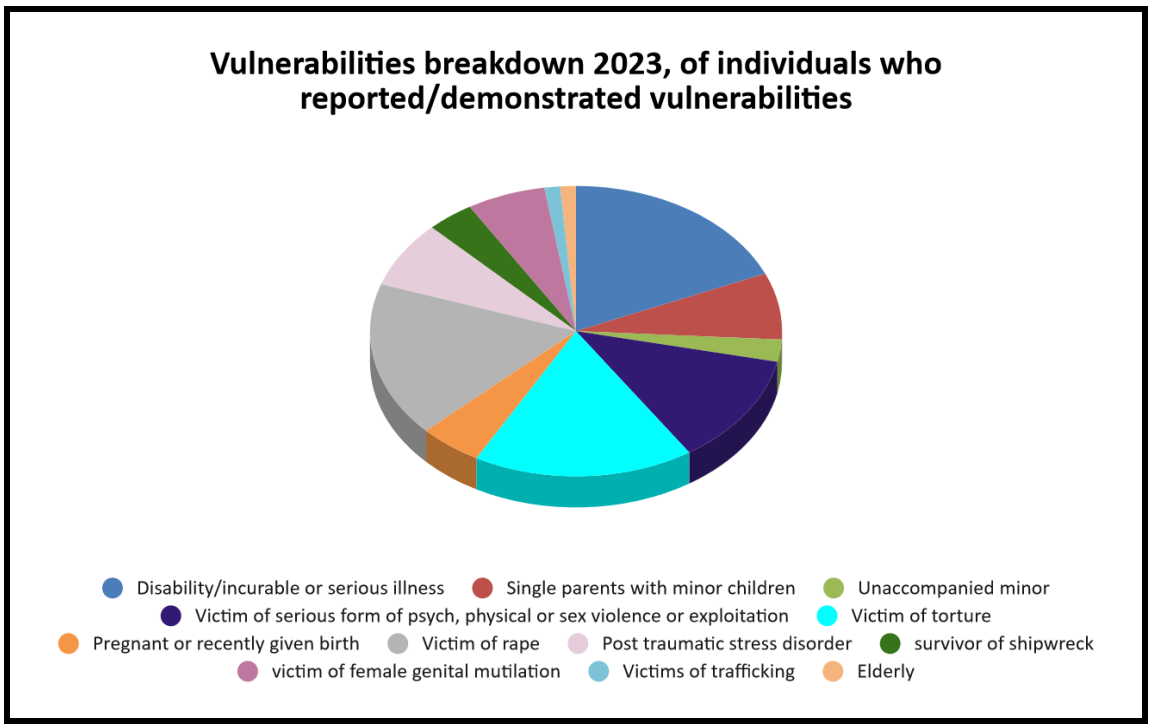
Legal Centre Lesvos 2023 Annual Report

In 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos provided free **legal information and assistance to 258 cases of individuals and families in their asylum procedure,** which included: representation before the Asylum Service, Appeals Committees, and Administrative Court; conducting individual consultations and information sessions in order to provide information on legal rights and obligations under the Greek asylum procedure; preparation of legal memorandum in support of asylum claims - on both admissibility and eligibility of the claims; providing information on the content of international protection rejection decisions and advising on grounds for appeal; registration of subsequent applications for international protection; and submission of applications for family reunification for beneficiaries of international protection. In addition to the above, the Legal Centre Lesvos provided **emergency legal aid through its lawyers to recently arrived, unregistered asylum seekers, in order to ensure their access to the asylum procedure and exercise their right to seek asylum**. This support was carried out in close coordination with Greek authorities, UNHCR and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and has ensured not only access to legal assistance and the asylum procedure, but also urgently needed medical and/or psychological support.

From the people who accessed Legal Centre Lesvos' services in 2023, approximately 33.7% were nationals of Afghanistan, 14% Eritrean, 11.6% Sierra Leonean, 10.1% Syrian, 5% Somali, 3.1% nationals of Democratic Republic of Congo, 2.7% Cameroonian, 2.7% Palestinian. The rest of the people accessing Legal Centre Lesvos' services in this period were nationals of Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Cuba, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Sudan, Tajikistan, Yemen or were stateless.

Legal Centre Lesvos assisted individuals and families belonging to particular vulnerable groups including pregnant women, women who recently gave birth, unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities, people suffering from serious illnesses, survivors of torture and sexual assault, single parents with minor children, elderly, people suffering from post traumatic stress disorder and survivors of other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence or exploitation.


Cases by Nationalities breakdown - 2023
Afghanistan
Other
Cameroon
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Eritrea
Palestine
Sierra Leone
Somalia
Syria


Vulnerabilities breakdown 2023, of individuals who reported/demonstrated vulnerabilities
Disability/incurable or serious illness
Single parents with minor children
Unaccompanied minor
Victim of serious form of psych, physical or sex violence or exploitation
Victim of torture
Pregnant or recently given birth
Victim of rape
Post traumatic stress disorder
survivor of shipwreck
victim of female genital mutilation
Victims of trafficking
Elderly

1. Case Management and Legal Assistance

Throughout 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos:

- ➢ Provided direct and individual legal assistance to 258 individuals and families - reaching a total of over 600 people, including over 150 women, 200 men, and 240 children.

- ➢ Conducted 689 individual legal consultations through its legally trained volunteer caseworkers and lawyers, respectively, meeting with migrants at every stage of the asylum procedure, and providing information about migrants' rights and obligations within the Greek migration system. Amongst these consultations, 128 preparatory interviews with asylum seekers prior to their asylum interviews with authorities were conducted.

- ➢ Referred over 40 people who use its services to alternative accommodation in Mytilene and in mainland Greece, as well as to medical, psycho-social, or other support services, working in close collaboration with organisations such as UNHCR, Caritas, MSF and IRC.

- ➢ Represented through its lawyers 65 individuals in the asylum procedure, taking on representation at all stages of the asylum procedure. Amongst these cases, lawyers took on representation of 35 individuals on appeal of a rejected asylum claim.

- ➢ Represented 15 individuals facing criminal charges or administrative detention in their criminal procedures or before administrative court.

- ➢ Provided legal representation through its lawyers to four individuals/families who were victims of crimes or surviving family members of victims of crimes in Greek civil and criminal procedures.

- ➢ Filed four complaints with the Greek ombudsperson's office, presenting evidence of procedural and human rights violations of asylum seekers by Greek authorities.

- ➢ In addition to the daily legal assistance in its offices, the Legal Centre Lesvos provided emergency legal aid to recently arrived, unregistered asylum seekers, in order to ensure their access to the asylum procedure and exercise their right to seek asylum. The Legal Centre Lesvos successfully supported over 2700 people in exercising their right to apply for asylum in Greece, avoiding their refoulement to Turkey.

2. Strategic Litigation

In 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos took on legal representation on a variety of issues in defence of migrant rights to litigate on those cases in front of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and different international institutions:

- Submission of a complaint in July 2023, against the European Commission together with the organisations de:border//migration justice collective, HIAS Greece, Equal Rights Beyond Borders, and Mobile Info Team, submitted to the European Ombudsperson. The complaint demonstrates that since at least 2018, EU funds were repeatedly allocated, mismanaged and misused by Greek authorities. Additionally, the complaint highlights how these funds are, both directly and indirectly, contributing to serious and systemic breaches of the fundamental rights of migrants at the EU's external border in Greece. Following the examination of the complaint, in November 2023 the European Ombudsperson decided to open an inquiry into the administration of Greece's EU-funded border operations.

- Submission in October 2023, of a joint contribution to the European Ombudsperson's own-initiative strategic inquiry on the role of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in the context of search and rescue (SAR) operations together with the organisations I Have Rights, and de:border // migration justice collective.

Further, the Legal Centre Lesvos also took on representation in defence of migrant rights by:

- Taking on the representation in cooperation with the Progressive Lawyers Association (ÇHD), of the family of Barış Büyüksu, a Turkish citizen who was found unconscious in a life raft off the coast of Bodrum on 22 October 2022 and later died, following what witnesses and investigators have described as torture and pushback by the Greek authorities from Kos island.

- Joining the legal defence for the nine survivors of the deadly shipwreck in June 2023 near the coast of Pylos, Greece , who had been accused of smuggling, membership in a criminal organisation, and causing the deadly shipwreck. Two of the Legal Centre Lesvos' attorneys joined a team of lawyers representing the nine accused men, taking on representation of two of the nine defendants.

- Representing one refugee in front of the Three Member Felony Appeal Court of the Northern Aegean in Mytilene, which granted him compensation following nearly three years of unjust imprisonment on smuggling charges, for which he was finally acquitted on appeal.

In 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos continued litigating cases before the ECtHR:

- In February 2023, an emergency petition for interim measures filed under Rule 39 of the Rules of the Court was granted by the ECtHR, in the case of H.M., a client of the Legal Centre Lesvos who was denied access to health care. The Court ordered both that Greece provide the applicant with adequate healthcare compatible with his state of health and to guarantee that his living conditions were compatible with Article 3 of the Convention.

- In December 2023, the ECtHR granted interim measures in a second Rule 39 petition filed by the Legal Centre Lesvos on behalf of 21 unregistered asylum seekers who had arrived on Lesvos who were at risk of refoulement to Turkey. The ECtHR granted the petition, ordering "Greek authorities to locate the applicants, not remove them from Greece, provide them with food, water and medical care and to give them access to international protection procedures." Following this, the group was finally attended to by the Greek authorities and taken to the Lesvos Reception and Identification Centre (RIC).

3. Advocacy

In 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos continued documenting and denouncing human rights violations at the Aegean Sea border, by regularly engaging with European Parliament members, human rights institutions, and the press on a range of issues related to migrants' rights and the situation in Lesvos. Additionally, throughout 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos took part in joint advocacy initiatives in order to advance migrant rights, including through participation in numerous panel discussions, presentations, and conferences. The Legal Centre Lesvos also continued to contribute to and participate in the Captain Support Network and the Greek National Commission of Human Rights established Recording Mechanism of Incidents of Informal Forced Returns and Racist Violence Recording Network.

In 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos became a member organisation of the European Association of Lawyers for Democracy & World Human Rights (ELDH). The ELDH has long endorsed and supported the work of the Legal Centre Lesvos, and we were happy to join as an organisation in order to more actively participate in ELDH's efforts to struggle for human rights and civil liberties, social and economic rights, democracy, the rights of migrants and refugees.

The Legal Centre Lesvos continues to regularly publish updates, statements, and reports on its website such as:

- The publication in January 2023 of a forensic reconstruction video and report of the October 2020 pushback in the Aegean Sea, produced by an independent forensic research team in support of the litigation brought to the ECtHR by the Legal Centre Lesvos in the case of S.A.A. and Others v Greece.

- In August 2023, in collaboration with the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research, the Legal Centre Lesvos published an extensive report, 'A Pandemic of Abuses', which documents how Greece dismantled the right to asylum and normalised the violation of migrants' rights throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Lesvos.

- During the summer of 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos started a collaboration with the Memory Center (Hafıza Merkezi). Together with Aegean Migrant Solidarity / Community Peacemaker Team, we launched a joint podcast series, "Crossing the Aegean", which delves into the 1923 Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey. The podcast series explores political, social, and economic shifts preceding and following the Population Exchange, which set the stage for the contemporary rise in xenophobic, anti-migrant, and racist sentiments.

- As a member of ELDH, between 6-10 November 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos joined an international delegation in a week-long fact-finding mission in Istanbul, Turkey. The aim of the mission was to meet and interview eight lawyers, political prisoners and to observe two court hearings. The fact-finding mission concluded that the lawyers detained and prosecuted were subjected to violation of their human rights, including arbitrary arrest and detention, non respect of fair trail principles, inhuman and degrading treatment and torture.

4. Management and Finances of Legal Centre Lesvos

The Legal Centre Lesvos is a civil non profit organisation registered in Greece. The management of the Legal Centre Lesvos is administered through a General Assembly, made up of its four unpaid Partners, one of whom is jointly designated by the Partners as the legal representative.

In 2023, the Legal Centre Lesvos employed seven individuals working in coordination, advocacy outreach and interpretation, and had independent service contracts with two Greek attorneys and one trainee lawyer. All paid Legal Centre team members are paid on an equal pay scale, meaning that all receive the same remuneration after taxes and insurance.

The Legal Centre operates with the exclusive support of individual donations and from entities that are not complicit in human rights or environmental abuses, and does not accept funds from any State, the European Union, or any EU entities. The Legal Centre Lesvos was funded in 2023 through the following entities:

Source of Funding	% of Budget	Amount
Medico International	29.14%	96,978.00 €
La Garriga Societat Civil / Fons Català de Cooperació	13.82%	46,000.00 €
Fons Menorca de Cooperación	11.66%	38,800.00 €
The Fund for Global Human Rights	8.36%	27,807.14 €
ForRefugees	3.46%	11,520.62 €
Leave No One Behind	2.40%	8,000.00 €
Aid Hoc	2.10%	7,000.00 €
Sea Watch Legal Fund	1.00%	3,311.34 €
Frontline Defenders	0.94%	3,120.00 €
Borderline Europe	0.36%	1,200.00 €
Individual/unrestricted donations	26.76%	89,053.39 €
Total Operating Expenses 2023		**332,790.49 €**

Conclusion

The actions of the Legal Centre Lesvos in this operational period demonstrate that Legal Centre Lesvos AMKE continues to work in a manner that is true to its statutory purposes. Further details of the Legal Centre Lesvos' work in 2023 can be found in our Quarterly Reports.

- January – March 2023 Newsletter
- April – September, Summer 2023 Newsletter
- October – December 2023 Newsletter