

THE TALENT BEHIND THE NUMBERS: INTRODUCING REFUGEES ON THE GREEK ISLANDS



Sardar Hemmat Ashrafi, a 41-year-old doctor and asylum-seeker from Afghanistan looks at an x-ray of an asylum-seeker with cancer at Lesbos reception and identification centre. © UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

UNHCR Greece

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Loghman Iranian refugee

Loghman, refugee from Iran, opened his own pastry business in Thessaloniki, Northern Greece, wanting to integrate there. He chose to name his pastry shop “Laadeh” which in Kurdish language means a place abundant in traditional homemade products.

“Opening a business has additional difficulties when you are a refugee”, says Loghman, however this is not preventing him from dreaming of spreading his sweet products and his name worldwide as part of his own family heritage.

“A business means a non-stop journey towards success”, he concludes.

You can read the rest of Loghman’s story [here](#).

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With a bag full of skills

In their search for safety, refugees have left their homes and possessions behind, pinning their hopes for the future on their skills and work-experience. Their skills are an indication of what asylum-seekers and refugees can bring to their own communities, as well as the Greek labour market.

Between April and May 2021, UNHCR collected and recorded the education level, work experience and skills of asylum-seekers and recognized refugees on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos, Leros, Rhodes and Tilos. Of those interviewed, 65% were asylum-seekers and 35% were recognised refugees. In their majority, they came from Afghanistan (45%), Syria (14%), Somalia (8%), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (7%). Of those interviewed, 56% were men, 19% women, 15% boys and 11% girls (*see p6 for methodology*).

A mix of skills and cultures

Although the findings present only a segment of the valuable potential of asylum-seekers and refugees in Greece, it is testament to the wide spectrum and diversity of their skills. Most commonly, refugees mastered skilled trades (19%), worked in manufacturing and mining (16%), agriculture and the food sector, and were engaged in business and sales (10%). Amongst them, were also doctors, lawyers, teachers, accountants, and ICT professionals.





Giving back kindness: Abdoulaye supports medical services for refugees on Lesbos.

Abdoulaye Amadou, an asylum-seeker from Cameroon, studied business management at university, earned a bachelor's degree and then opened a rice import business at his homeland. Being a native English and French speaker and adept at languages, he started volunteering as an interpreter for medical groups on Lesbos' site, where he also resided when he arrived on the island.

"The message that I want to send to policy makers is that they need to empower refugees and make them part of the solution", Abdoulaye says.

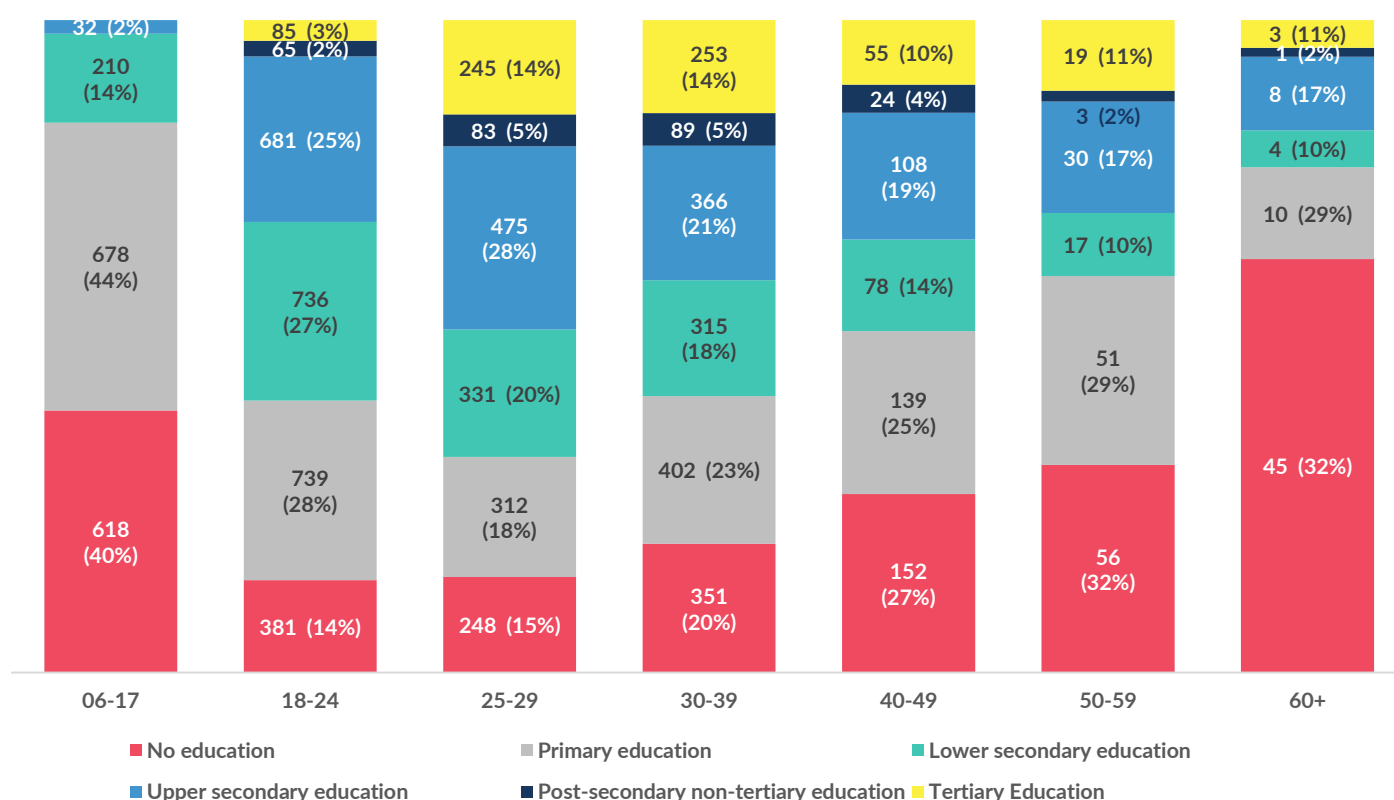
You can read the rest of Abdoulaye's story [here](#).

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Education: a long-term investment

The majority of asylum-seekers and refugees interviewed had acquired some level of formal education outside Greece (78%). 660 men and women interviewed had University education (8%).

Ensuring access to education, particularly higher education, can be life-changing for asylum-seekers and refugees. It enables them to become more employable, it strengthens their resilience to economic hardship, and most importantly it is a right that helps them build their future and restore a sense of normality in their lives.



Bringing refugees' potential to the fore

A win-win for both refugee and host communities

The skills and work-experience of refugees represent significant economic potential for receiving countries. Employment enables refugees' self-reliance, while also helping them forge new social relationships in their host society. However, for this to be fully realized, well-coordinated efforts are required in the host societies by a range of actors and entities.

UNHCR supports the Government implement its national strategy on integration by providing data on the educational and skills background of refugees to guide policy decisions and Government support. UNHCR furthermore monitors integration levels and protection risks faced by refugees including gender-based violence. This helps further the impact of the support provided and accompanies the communities in addressing their challenges.

Towards a more inclusive and equal society, UNHCR in Greece:

- identifies practical obstacles in administration and legislation and proposes solutions
- empowers refugees to help themselves and their communities
- works with Municipalities to cross-fertilize good practices
- supports pilot integration projects with potential for big impact
- engages with media and the public to overcome stereotypes and see the refugees for who they really are
- engages the corporate world and the private sector in including refugees into the labour market.



"I want to stand on my two feet, work and support my family. I want to stay in Greece, but I have to find a job. I also have dreams for the future", Safar notes.

For twenty-five years, Safar Saado, 45-years-old, had his own small tailor's shop in Zakho, northern Iraq, near the border with Turkey.

Now he lives in Trikala, Central Greece, with his wife and five children, two of which attend the public school.

When the pandemic hit, we started contributing both to the refugee and local community by sewing [protective masks](#).

"Helping people makes our heart feel full" says Safar.

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Sara Beheshte, a 25-year-old Afghan refugee, is a community psychosocial worker [at EPAPSY helpline](#). After three years in the country, she is fluent in Greek.

© UNHCR/Christos Tolis



Petros Damkalis (left), a local carpenter, helps Syrian musician Zeno Amar, to create new instruments for him and his family.
©UNHCR/Yorgos Kyvernitis

About the data

Between April and May 2021, UNHCR collected and recorded the education level, work experience and skills of 8,554 asylum-seekers and recognized refugees on the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Kos, Leros, Rhodes and Tilos where the majority of the refugee population on the Greek Aegean islands lives. The data was recorded according to the individuals' declaration and not on the basis of official documentation certifying the educational background and/or skills. More specifically, the exercise collected data on a) education acquired by adults and children older than six years old in their country of origin or former residence, transit or third country, including Greece; and b) work experience and skills gained from official or unofficial employment, formal education, vocational training in their country of origin or former residence, transit or third country, including Greece.

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