The Employment Experiences of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Tourism Sector

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2023

The Employment Experiences of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in the Tourism Sector during the 2023 Season

By **SolidarityNow / www.solidaritynow.org**
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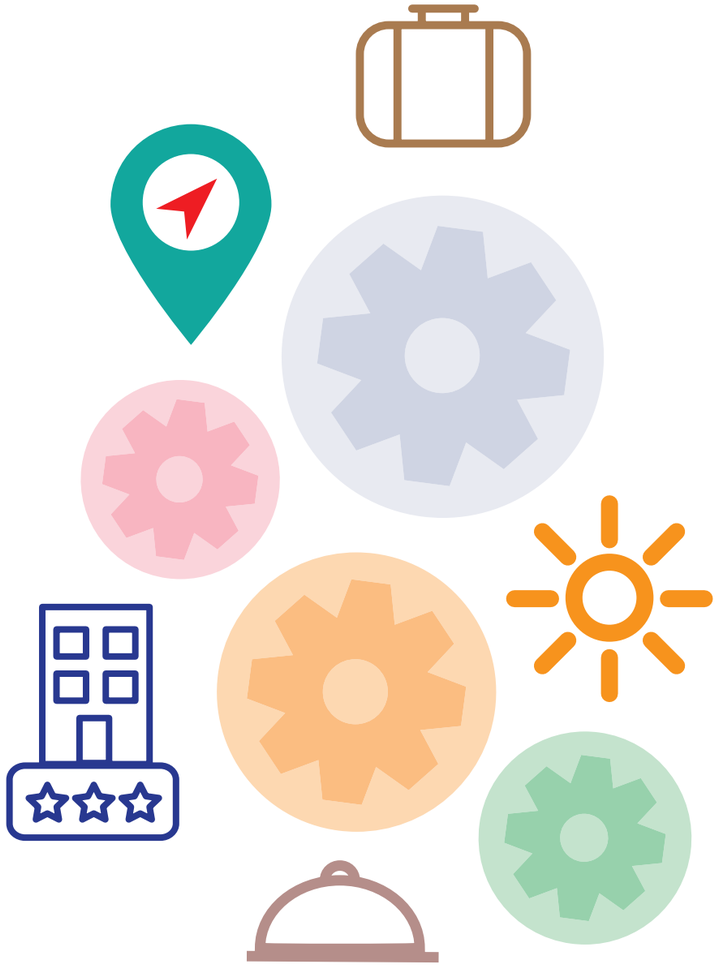


Overview

The tourism sector's contribution to the Greek economy is highly significant, particularly in terms of its impact on overall employment and the economy as a whole, both directly and indirectly. However, the availability of a workforce for this sector is limited, with labour shortages steadily increasing since the pandemic—a challenge that is evident globally. The high demand for labour in the tourism sector coincides with the fact that many migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees are seeking employment, resulting in a substantial percentage of them finding work in this sector.

In December 2023, SolidarityNow (SN) conducted a survey involving 50 refugees who worked in the tourism sector during the 2023 summer season and were supported by the organisation's Blue Refugee Center (BRC). The purpose of the survey was to assess the employment conditions for third-country nationals in this sector. The survey was carried out using close-ended questionnaires that addressed three categories of questions: a) demographic characteristics, b) basic working conditions, and c) methods of seeking employment.

The findings indicated that 94% of the respondents had an employment contract with salaries aligned with the collective labour agreement applicable to the tourism sector. The majority (74%) worked in low-skilled positions or as support staff, including roles such as cleaners, laundry workers, assistant cooks, waitstaff, cooks, and receptionists. The primary challenge faced by 50% of participants in performing their tasks was minimal to no knowledge of the Greek language. However, the results do not clearly show that this language barrier influenced their assessment of the job or their employer.

However, the results revealed violations of labour regulations. Notably, 38% of respondents reported receiving their salary, or a portion of it, in cash. Additionally, 44% stated that they worked between 2 and 6 extra hours per day, with 80% of them receiving payment for these hours. This indicates that working hours exceeded the legal limits without the provision of lawful overtime compensation. Such violations of labour rights can adversely affect individuals' living conditions, as they impact future benefits and earnings, including the off-season allowance for employees in the tourism sector.

It is important to note that a gender pay gap was observed between women and men. Specifically, 56% of women earned a monthly salary of €801-€1,001, while 68% of men earned more than €1,001. This finding aligns with official data, highlighting a persistent disparity in pay between genders.

Regarding work conditions and employer behaviour, it was strongly highlighted that key reasons for leaving their jobs included inadequate working conditions, low pay, and incidents of verbal abuse.

1 Introduction

SolidarityNow (SN) is a non-profit organization, established in 2013 to address the needs and uphold the rights of the most vulnerable and socially marginalized groups, without discrimination. The organisation's vision is "to improve people's lives and empower them to create a just and inclusive society".

The vision is realised through four key priorities which are (a) inclusive education, (b) catalysing livelihoods, (c) social protection & cohesion, and (d) access to justice. In this context, in order to achieve the second programmatic priority, through the two Solidarity Centers operated by the organisation in Athens and Thessaloniki, SN provides employment counselling, empowerment and labour market integration services.

In Thessaloniki, SN has been operating the Blue Refugee Center (BRC) since 2016. The BRC serves as a support hub and reference point for refugees and asylum seekers in the Thessaloniki area. At the BRC, SN offers comprehensive employment services designed to support and empower individuals living in socially excluded situations, with the goal of enhancing their professional and social integration.

In collaboration with and funded by UNHCR, SN's «BRC Livelihoods» programme supported 461 individuals from March to December 2023, with 25% of them securing employment. During the summer of 2023, the majority of these individuals (64 people) found jobs in the tourism sector, across various locations on the islands and mainland Greece.

2 Context

Tourism is a crucial sector for the economy, playing a catalytic role in GDP and employment. In 2023, the direct contribution of tourism to the Greek economy reached €28.5 billion, which represents 13% of the country's GDP—the highest share for the sector to date. This is a notable increase from 2022, when the sector's contribution was €23.9 billion, or 11.6% of GDP[1]. When considering the indirect impact through economic multipliers, tourism's contribution rises to approximately 30%. According to available data, tourism remains predominantly export-oriented, with 82.7% of receipts derived from inbound tourism. Additionally, in the third quarter of 2023, the sector directly contributed to a 40% reduction in unemployment. In 2021, the total number of individuals employed in the «Accommodation and Food Service Sector» was 2,732,159. Of these, 702,029 (26%) were engaged specifically in the tourism industry.

In recent years, the tourism sector has experienced significant labour shortages. According to a nationwide study conducted by INSETE[2], during the peak of the 2022 summer season, there was a recorded shortage of 60,225 positions out of 262,981 total positions in hotel organisational structures. This represents a shortage rate of 23%, meaning that more than 1 in 5 positions remained unfilled. The shortage rate was consistent across nearly all departments, ranging from 21% to 24%. Although the number of positions increased in 2022 compared to the peak summer season of 2021, the shortage rate remained unchanged.[3]

In terms of numbers, the largest shortages were for:

Housekeeping staff: 7,360 vacancies, accounting for 12% of the total shortages and 18% of the posts available for this specialty.
Waiters: 5,164 vacancies, representing 9% of the total shortages and 22% of the posts allocated for this role.
Waiters' assistants: 3,883 vacancies, or 6% of the total shortages and 21% of the posts provided for this role.
Receptionists: 3,460 vacancies, which is 6% of the total shortages and 17% of the posts designated for this role.

Following these, there were shortages of:

Baristas/barmen-barwomen: 2,729 vacancies, or 5% of the total shortages and 24% of the posts available.
Dishwashers: 2,866 vacancies, also 5% of the total shortages and 24% of the posts available.
Technical support staff: 2,054 vacancies, or 3% of the total shortages and 21% of the posts designated for this role.

Comparing the shortage rates between 2021 and 2022, the shortage rate in 5-star hotels decreased from 17% in 2021 to 15% in 2022. However, in all other categories, the shortage rates increased, with the most notable rises occurring in the 1-star and 2-star categories.
Of the total jobs envisioned under the organisational structures, 27% are in hotels located in the South Aegean region, followed by Crete (20%), the Ionian Islands (12%), and Central Macedonia (10%). All other regions account for less than 10% of the total. In terms of shortages, 24% (14,346 vacancies) were recorded in the South Aegean region, 18% (10,808 vacancies) in Crete, 10% (5,891 vacancies) in Central Macedonia, and 14% (8,378 vacancies) in the Ionian Islands.

[1] INSETE, The contribution of Tourism to the national economy for 2023 https://shorturl.at/WDk0S
[2] INSETE, Employment and personnel shortages of Greek hotels during the high summer season of 2022, https://shorturl.at/gsjFy
[3] INSETE, Employment and personnel shortages of Greek hotels during the high summer season of 2021, https://insete.gr/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/22-03_Apasxolhsh_Eleipseis_ED.pdf

2.1 Legal framework - Access to the labour market

Regarding access to the labour market for third-country nationals, the procedures and conditions vary depending on whether their work is long-term (at least one year) or temporary (seasonal), the sector of employment, and whether it involves intra-company transfer or highly qualified individuals. For long-term employment (in any sector) or seasonal work in the agriculture sector, the position must be included in a joint ministerial decision, issued every two years. This decision specifies the number and types of third-country nationals who are permitted to enter the country for employment purposes.

Third country nationals entering Greece for employment must possess one of the following documents:

A	B	Γ
A visa with work permit.	A residence permit with right to work.	A certificate of filing an application for a residence permit with the right to work.

Access to work is also granted to third-country nationals who have been issued a certificate of deferred removal or a certificate of non-refoulement for humanitarian reasons by the competent police authority. This certificate is valid as long as the individual holds a valid work permit. Holders of this work permit are allowed to work only in the agricultural sector, the domestic work sector, and the manufacturing sector. They are permitted to work throughout the country, with the exception of certain border areas.

Applicants for international protection are granted the right to access the labour market effectively after sixty (60) days have passed since the completion of their application process and the receipt of the relevant legal documents. This right is contingent upon no first-instance decision being made by the competent authority within that period, provided the delay is not attributable to the applicant.

As long as individuals hold an «international protection applicant card» or an «asylum seeker card,» they have the right to access paid employment or provide services or work for the duration of the card's validity. However, this right to access the labour market is automatically revoked if a non-suspensive refusal decision is issued, meaning the applicants no longer have the right to stay in the country.

Applicants are required to inform the competent Reception Authority each time they start a new job or undertake a fixed-term employment contract. They must do so by submitting a certificate of commencement of work, a copy of the contract, a notice of recruitment to the Public Employment Service (DYPA), or a notice of recruitment to ERGANI.

3 Methodology

Given the challenges that refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants encounter in accessing the labour market, SolidarityNow conducted a field study to examine the working conditions of this population in the tourism sector. The survey involved interviews with 50 individuals who had benefited from the Employment Service in Thessaloniki and worked in the tourism sector during the summer season. The goal of SolidarityNow through this survey was to gather structured and systematic feedback on the experiences of those served by its programmes.

To achieve this, a short questionnaire with close-ended questions was developed, categorized into the following three areas:

1. Demographic characteristics of the participants
2. Working conditions of employment during the 2023 tourist season
3. Means of searching for employment

The interviews were conducted between October and December 2023, both over the phone and in person, by SolidarityNow's Employment officers, with interpreters assisting when necessary. Data was collected using an online form and later analysed using a statistical program (SPSS). This approach allowed for the identification of potential correlations between variables while ensuring the reliability and accuracy of the results.

The sample is representative, with a 95% confidence interval and a margin of error of 6.6%. The results of this survey provide a snapshot of the current situation, offering insights into the experiences of third-country nationals employed in the tourism sector.

The data collected from research initiatives contribute to a) more effective support for the beneficiaries, b) the optimal design of future programmes and c) appropriate advocacy actions towards the relevant actors.

4 Study limitations

The limitations of the survey primarily concern the availability of official data on the tourism industry at the time of the survey. Addressing these limitations would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the employment of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees in the tourism sector, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the results.

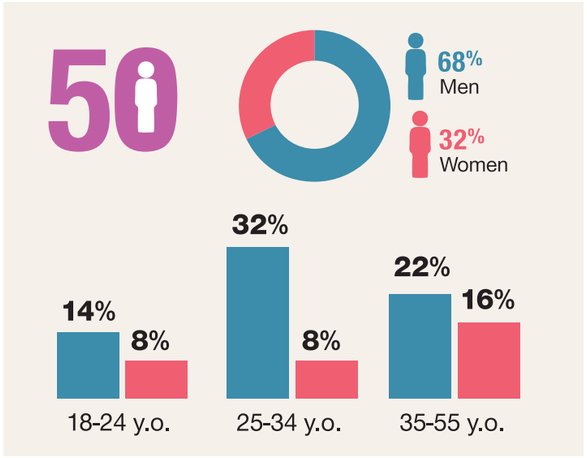
Specifically, the limitations were:

- Insufficient up-to-date statistics on the percentage of migrants and refugees employed in the tourism sector.
- Inadequate data on the rates of labour shortages for the 2023 summer season.
- Challenges in identifying individuals to complete the survey.
- Difficulty in verifying unreported or under-reported labour.
- Lack of comparative studies for broader context.
- Small sample size.

5

The working conditions of migrant workers in the tourism sector

5.1 Demographic



A total of 50 people employed in the tourism sector during the summer season of 2023 participated in the study. Of the total respondents, 32% (16 people) were women and 68% (34 people) were men, which is representative in terms of the gender of the population served at the BRC. The majority of participants were aged between 25 and 55 years old, while 22% were young people aged between 18 and 24. 70% of participants were beneficiaries of international protection and 30% were asylum seekers. 80% come from sub-Saharan African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Eritrea and Somalia, while 3% of participants come from Afghanistan, Iran and Palestine respectively.

5.2 Standard working conditions

Of the respondents, 46% indicated that this was not their first experience working in the tourism sector in Greece. The majority (74%) were employed in low-skilled positions, such as cleaners, kitchen staff (dishwashers), assistant cooks, and pool cleaners, while the remaining 26% worked in support roles, including waiters, cooks, and receptionists.

Most participants (60%) were employed by large companies. Specifically, 38% worked in enterprises with 50-199 employees, and 22% were employed by companies with more than 200 employees. Additionally, 64% of the participants worked for more than five months in the regions of Central Macedonia, Thrace, and the Aegean Islands.

Under-declared work refers to the illegal practice where employers pay employees two different wages: (a) a legally declared wage for tax, social security, and labor law purposes, and (b) an additional undeclared wage received “under the table” or in an “envelope.” Another variation of under-declared work in Greece occurs when companies employ individuals on, for example, a 4-hour contract but require them to work for 7-8 hours.

Undeclared work refers to work that has not been reported to the state for tax, social security, and/or labor law purposes. This includes employees who are unregistered and work without a formal contract, as well as individuals working informally for a company, household, or as family members, private teachers, or manual laborers.

A total of 94% of the workers worked legally with a signed employment contract, of which 60% had monthly earnings of more than €1,001. For 88% of the respondents, the tasks carried out corresponded to the original agreements. In three (3) cases, workers decided not to sign an employment contract. A pay gap was identified between women and men: 56% of women earned between €801 and €1,000, while 68% of men earned more than €1,001. This observation aligns with official data[4] indicating a gender pay gap, with women generally earning less than men in EU countries (13% gender pay gap). Greece ranks 25th out of 27 countries in terms of pay equality, showing a slight improvement of one position since 2010.

The method used for salary payments varied among participants: 62% received their salaries via bank deposit, while 38% reported receiving money from their employer through means other than bank deposit. Given that 94% of participants had a formal employment contract, this suggests that the payments made through non-bank methods were likely associated with **undeclared work**[5], including potential future benefits such as bonuses, which could also have a macroeconomic impact by reducing the size of the welfare state.[6]

The size of the **undeclared economy** is estimated to be equivalent to about 25% of GDP in Greece. The relatively high level of self-employment and the large share of small and medium sized enterprises play a catalytic role in its size.

In particular, micro enterprises having between one (1) and nine (9) employees represent 96% of all enterprises in Greece, employing 55% of the workforce (compared to less than 30% in the EU-28).[7] However, in the case of this survey 60% of the participants worked in enterprises with more than 200 employees. In the current survey no participants mentioned being involved in undeclared work, hence it was not possible to identify their specific characteristics.

Of the respondents, 70% reported taking between two (2) and four (4) days off per month, while 12% took more than five (5) days off per month. Nearly half (44%) indicated that they worked between two (2) and six (6) extra hours per day, of which only 80% were compensated. It was not possible to ascertain whether these additional hours exceeded the statutory work limits.

According to the collective agreement for hotel employees effective from January 1, 2023, the basic gross monthly salary for employees in the tourism sector starts at €825.89 for Category D positions (which include cleaning roles) and €911.34 for Category A positions (such as receptionists, concierges, and bedroom supervisors). Salaries may vary based on factors such as the number of rooms in the hotel and the qualifications and marital status of the employee.

Employees in the tourism sector are eligible for various allowances, including tourist employment allowances, seniority bonuses, family allowances, and food allowances. Standard working hours are set at 40 hours per week on a five-day schedule, with employees allowed to work up to one extra hour per day. Any additional hours must be compensated, provided that the average number of working hours per week, calculated over a maximum period of eight weeks, does not exceed 40 hours.

According to the survey data, over 36% of participants significantly exceeded the working hours stipulated in their contracts. This, coupled with the fact that some employees received their wages in cash, suggests violations of labour legislation. The investigation did not reveal whether there were breaches regarding the duration of employment. However, the data on overtime hours indicates that such overtime or overwork was either unpaid or paid in cash. This practice likely allows employers to reduce or avoid payment of social security and tax contributions.

[4] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2022/country
[5] https://www.hli.gov.gr/ergasiakes-scheseis/adiloti-ergasia/charaktiristika-kai-antimetopisi/
[6] Triantafyllidou A. et al (2020): “Migrants with irregular status in Europe. Evolving Conceptual Policy Challenges”. Springer Open, IMISCOE Research Series p. 149
[7] ibid

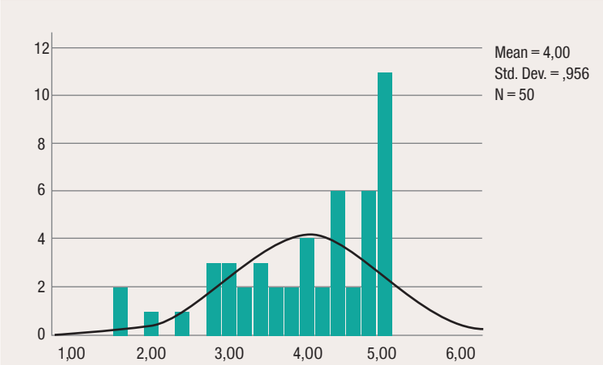
The survey did not assess the reported salaries, or the total monthly overtime as specified in the employees' contracts. Such an analysis is essential to draw specific conclusions about the standard terms and conditions outlined in the single contract for employees in the tourism sector.

Lastly, a question was raised about the possibility of receiving a seasonal allowance, and 54% of the participants indicated that they were unaware of their entitlement to such an allowance after completing their work in the tourism sector. Seasonal employees in tourism professions are eligible for a seasonal allowance under certain conditions, primarily based on their length of service in the industry in previous years. Therefore, at least 46% of those who reported having prior experience in the sector would benefit from this information.5.3 Overview of working conditions

5.3 Accommodation, Food and working behaviour

Participants were asked about the basic benefits and the behaviour of their employers and colleagues during their employment. On a five-point Likert scale,[8] participants indicated their level of agreement (ranging from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree) regarding the quality of accommodation, food, and the behaviour of employers and colleagues. They reported three instances where individuals resigned due to inadequate working conditions, low pay, and/or verbal abuse. The remaining participants completed their work through the end of the tourist season.

Most participants rated living conditions, food and the behaviour of employers and colleagues as adequate to good, with an average rating of 4.00. 32% percent indicated they would not want to work for the same employer again, while 52% percent accepted an offer to renew their contract. The survey did not explore the reasons behind the decision not to return to the same employer. Additionally, only two individuals were promoted to higher positions with increased earnings.



In a previous survey carried out by SolidarityNow involving 184 migrant women[9] in Greece, only 42% expressed trust that employers respect their diversity. Despite this, they generally viewed the Greek labour market as potentially safe for them but remained sceptical of labour market representatives. The survey also revealed that employers often hire migrant women for various reasons without stringent requirements for knowledge, experience, or skills, sometimes highlighting the greater resilience of women at work[8]. This positive attitude towards hiring refugees is corroborated by a recent IOM Greece survey on the employment of the refugee population[10].

[8] A Likert scale, or rating system, is a measurement method used in research to evaluate attitudes, opinions and perceptions https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/likert-scale/

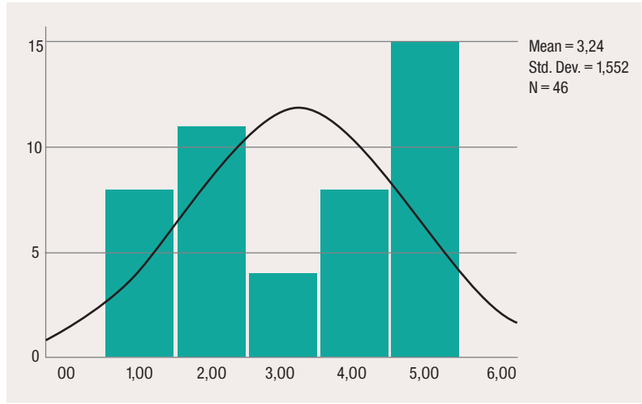
[9] The reality of employment for migrant women in Greece: An Empirical study, 2023: Author: SolidarityNow, p.20 https://www.solidaritynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Reality-of-Employment-for-Migrant-Women-in-Greece.pdf

[10] Mobility and employment of refugee populations in the Greek region, 2022, Apostolos Kapsalis https://greece.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1086/files/documents/MOBILITY%20AND%20EMPLOYMENT_EN_online.pdf

5.4 Communicating in Greek: A challenge for working in the tourism industry

Half of the respondents reported difficulties in communicating in Greek. Sarsour (2022) argues that "Language is a symbol of identity. It is through language that we learn to perceive and understand society and the environment."[11]

In a previous SolidarityNow survey involving 184 migrant women, 95% indicated that knowledge of the Greek language is crucial for their integration into the labour market and expressed a need for institutional support to learn it. Conversely, employers who participated in the same survey (15) reported that they often require minimal to no skills, including Greek language proficiency, when hiring unskilled workers.[12] The challenges in communicating and understanding Greek place refugees and migrants in a more vulnerable position, impacting their access to employment and overall social integration. As Sarsour (2022) notes "Language proficiency is considered a key issue for integration, while the host society is seen as a kind of guarantee for successful integration. Usually migrants are willing to learn the language of the host society if the courses are tailored to their needs, for example a woman caring for her children at home may not feel the need to learn the language and may not have any opportunity because she is at home for her children, but this changes when the children go to kindergarten or school ,as then they can attend the courses effectively. Unfortunately, the process in many countries is carried out with standardized courses with almost no diversity and discrimination." Therefore, we can conclude that **effective language learning strategies should be directly aligned with the specific needs of individuals.**



5.5 Methods of finding employment

According to the participants' responses, the most common method for finding employment was through a supportive network of friends and relatives (52%). A smaller percentage found jobs through previous work with the same employer (8%), while fewer found employment through human resource companies or recruitment agencies (6%). Only 2% of respondents secured jobs at job fairs. Additionally, 26% of the respondents did not provide an answer.

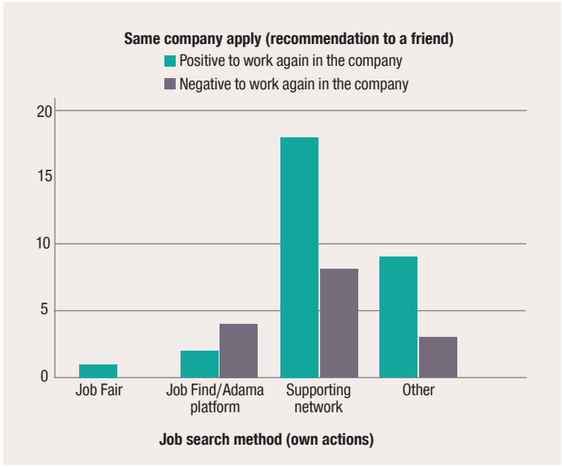
The most common method for finding a job was identified as being through a supportive network of friends and relatives (52%). A smaller proportion reported finding employment through previous work

[11] Sarsour, O. (2022) The Role of Language in the Social Integration of Arab Immigrants and Refugees in the EU. Open Journal of Social Sciences, 10, 92-99. doi: 10.4236/jss.2022.107008.

[12] The reality of employment for migrant women in Greece: An Empirical study, 2023: Author: SolidarityNow, p.20, p.26 https://www.solidaritynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/The-Reality-of-Employment-for-Migrant-Women-in-Greece.pdf

with the same employer (8%), while an even smaller percentage secured jobs via human resource companies or recruitment agencies (6%). Only 2% of respondents found jobs at job fairs. Additionally, 26% of respondents did not provide a response.

The findings reveal that securing a job through relatives and friends, does not guarantee job satisfaction or lead to a preference for working with the same employer again ($x^2(3, N=3.952) = 0.267$). Additionally, the location of employment does not influence the employee's positive or negative opinion of the job ($x^2(4, N=6.601) = 0.168$).



Furthermore, communication difficulties in Greek did not correlate with the employee's desire for the job ($t(98) = 0.760$, $p = 0.452$). This suggests that challenges with language management and comprehension are not a primary factor in job choice.

It is important to note that the study did not thoroughly examine the impact of language proficiency on job conditions. Consequently, the research did not assess whether the level of language skills affects an employee's evaluation of their employer or the overall job experience.

6

Recommendations for Policies, Programmes and Future Research

Whilst there is a significant number of migrants and refugees in low-skilled jobs, underlying challenges persist that require coordinated efforts and collaboration among stakeholders. A kay challenge that policymakers should address is the design of policies that promote workers' rights in an inclusive manner, considering the specific characteristics of the labour market.

Here are the policy proposals from SolidarityNow (SN):

- **Information and Awareness-Raising Programmes:** Implement initiatives to inform and educate both workers and employers about the rights of vulnerable populations, particularly migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, to ensure their protection and fair treatment.
- **Recognition of Competences and Skills:** Develop policies to officially recognize and validate the skills and qualifications of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants, including those from the most vulnerable groups, to enhance their employability.
- **Competence and Skills Enhancement Programmes:** Create programmes designed to improve the skills and competencies of individuals in alignment with the requirements of the Greek labour market, ensuring that they are equipped to meet current job demands.
- **Labour Market-Oriented Greek Language Training:** Establish Greek language courses tailored to the needs of the labour market, incorporating cultural and industry-specific elements to better prepare migrants and refugees for employment.
- **Training and Awareness for Employers:** Develop policies and programmes to educate businesses and labour market actors about inclusive practices, focusing on the principles of inclusion and their practical applications in the workplace.

Based on the findings, future research could focus on the following areas:

- **The Impact of Language Proficiency on Labour Integration:** Investigate how language skills influence the employment outcomes and overall labour market integration of migrants and refugees and identify effective language training methods that align with job market needs.
- **Labour Rights and Undeclared Work:** Examine the significance of understanding labour rights and the prevalence of undeclared work among migrants and refugees, assessing how these factors affect their job security, earning potential, and working conditions.
- **Effectiveness of SolidarityNow's Employment Service:** Evaluate the impact of SolidarityNow's Employment Service on the successful entry and integration of migrants into the labour market, identifying strengths and areas for improvement in their support mechanisms.

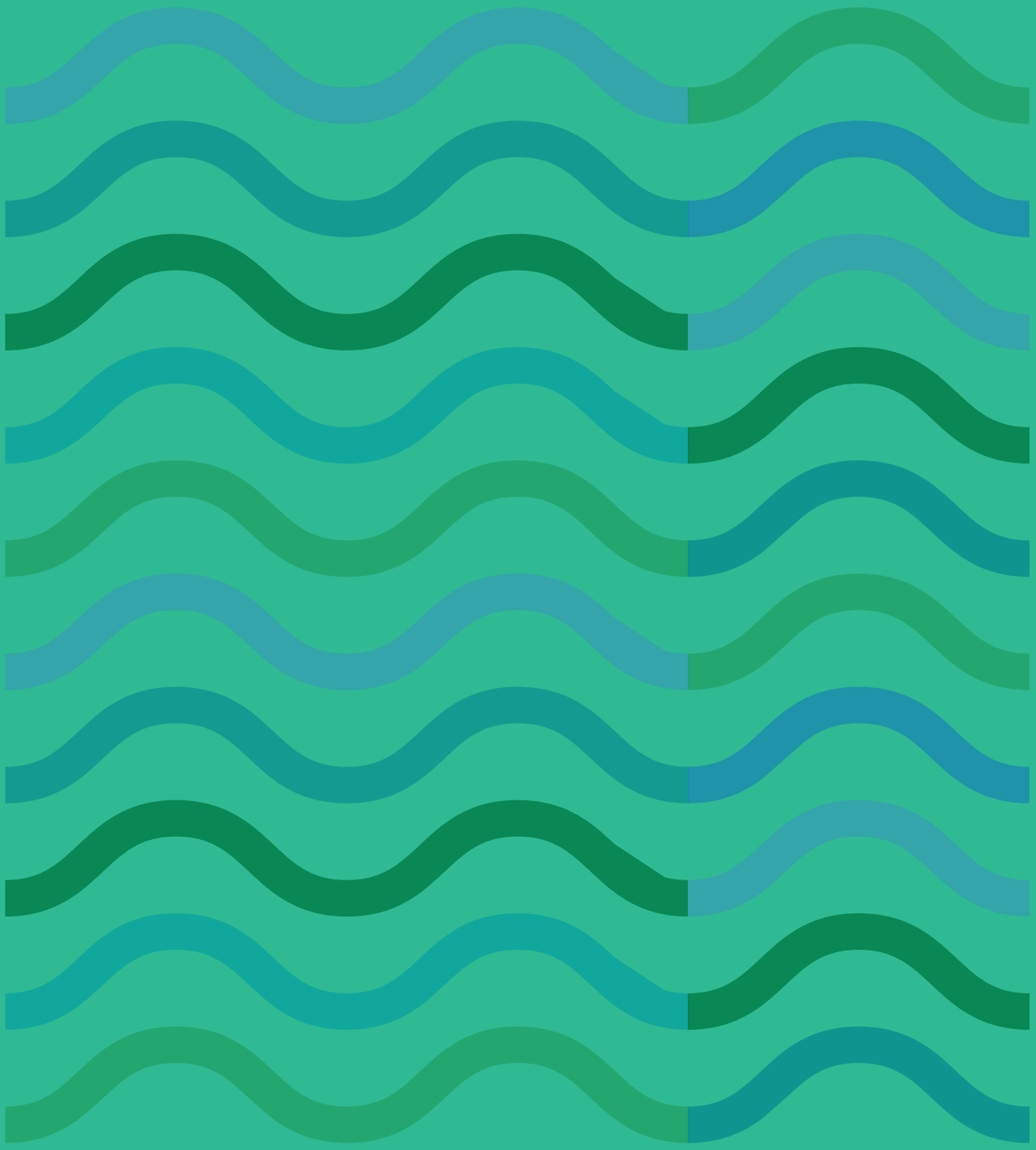
7

Discussion

The overview indicates that the tourism sector is a key area where refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants find employment, predominantly in low-skilled jobs. Most of these individuals secure employment through their networks of friends and relatives. The data shows that while many workers are employed with formal contracts, about one-third report working overtime beyond the limits set by collective agreements, often receiving this additional work in cash. Despite generally satisfactory living and working conditions, communication challenges due to limited Greek language skills remain a significant issue. Future research should explore the role of work in facilitating Greek language learning.

The data also highlight that refugees and migrants are successfully integrated into tourism jobs when they have access to the labor market and their living conditions in Greece support mobility for work. There is considerable potential for improvement in their employment conditions to ensure full legal compliance and in their preparedness through information and empowerment. This confirms the need for support to enhance working conditions and labor integration for refugees.
SolidarityNow addresses these needs by integrating them into its strategic objectives and providing job counseling through its Solidarity Centers. The core aim of SolidarityNow's Employment Service is to achieve work integration that allows individuals to attain their desired level of autonomy and self-sufficiency. This is achieved through personalized support, including information, cross-cultural counseling, and empowerment from experienced Employment Advisors who address the specific needs of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

At SolidarityNow, we believe that overcoming difficulties is possible through responsibility, initiative, and proactivity. This belief drives our efforts to empower individuals through support from Labor Counsellors and other staff, ultimately aiming for faster autonomy.



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