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Refugee ‘crisis’ and social services in Greece: Social workers’ profile and working conditions

For Special Issue on Human rights, social justice and social work research

Authors

Teloni, Dimitra-Dora, Department of Social Work, University of West Attica, Athens, Greece, dteloni@uniwa.gr

Dedotsi, Sofia Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK
sofia.dedotsi@northumbria.ac.uk

Telonis, Aristeidis, G. Department of Human Genetics, Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami, FL, USA, axt5207@med.miami.edu

Correspondence details/Correspondent author: Teloni Dimitra – Dora,
tel.00306937120500 dteloni@uniwa.gr

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Abstract

Since 2015, social workers are in the ‘front-line’ (Jones, 2001) of the so-called refugee ‘crisis’, facing a series of difficulties in helping effectively their users through a context of austerity, anti-immigration policies, racism and under-resourced social services. Whilst Greece is one of the ‘entrance’ countries in Europe, to the best of our knowledge, there is no current research in social work practice with refugees. This study was a self-funded, quantitative research project carried out from June to August 2018. The main research questions explored the professionals’ profile and working conditions, the social work practice with refugees and the connection between social work and the anti-racist movement. This paper will critically discuss part of the findings in relation to: (1) the profile of front-line professionals, (2) the organisations’ profile and (3) their working conditions. The findings identify a series of challenges and difficulties for front-line professionals in order to respond to the refugee population’s urgent and uncovered needs. Placing the findings within the wider neoliberal context of repressive European policies, this paper argues that both refugees and professionals are directly affected by the politics of welfare as well as anti-immigration policies. These policies systematically violate human rights, rendering the role of social work crucial in the struggle for social justice.

Keywords: refugee crisis; social work Greece; working conditions

1 Introduction

1.1 Anti-immigration policy in times of crisis

Between 2015 and 2016, more than 1,000,000 migrants arrived in Greece (UNCHR, 2018), fleeing war and prosecution. However, migration to Europe is not a new phenomenon and it has always been dealt with anti-immigration policies. Initiatives for a Common European Asylum System (CEAS) in the 1990s recognised and protected asylum seekers' rights under the Geneva Convention of 1951, but recent European policies are mainly driven by 'securitarianism', excessive border control and exclusionary processes (Samers, 2004; Vitus & Lidén, 2010). Migrants and refugees have been facing militarised European borders, massive deportation and scoop operations by Eurodac and Frontex, which are legitimised by provisions in the Schengen Accords and the Dublin Convention and Regulation (Schuster, 2011). By the same token, the Greek state implements *ad hoc* laws that lack long-term inclusive policies (Triandafyllidou, 2009, 2014).

In response to the increasing refugee fluxes, Europe closed the Balkan borders in 2016 and agreed a deal with Turkey, which enforced the acceleration of the deportation process of asylum seekers to Turkey. Refugees follow dangerous sea-routes, resulting in over 13,000 people dying or missing in the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR, 2018); this rising death toll further indicates the European migration policy failure, its structural violence and repression of vulnerable populations (Karageorgiou, 2016; Khiabany, 2016).

Those who survive their journey face further challenges. In Greece, refugees are detained in severe overcrowded hotspots, have shortages of basic shelter, live under unhealthy conditions and are subjected to sexual harassment, while they have limited access to information and endure the consequences of mismanagement of asylum

procedures (Medecins Sans Frontiers 2016; Human Rights Watch 2018). Access to asylum process involves long delays – up to 12 months until full registration. Dividing practices among different nationalities (other than Syrian) cause further delays, leading to entrapment and frustration (Kourachanis, 2018). In October 2019, the newly formed right-wing government, despite significant criticism of major rights violations, passed an asylum law. More specifically, the term ‘refugee’ is substituted by the term ‘economic migrants’, asylum interviews are now conducted by police and army staff instead of asylum services, asylum seekers have no access to free legal counseling to appeal rejected applications and they can be detained until re-evaluation or deportation, which may take more than 18 months. If the application is approved, refugees will then have only four months to find accommodation without proper and adequate integration policies. In July 2019, access to healthcare was further diminished, forcing people to pay privately or rely on NGOs. Consequently, children could not be properly immunised and, by extension, could not enroll in schools – generating further obstacles in accessing education (Amnesty International, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2018). These anti-immigration policies, however, need to be considered in a wider socio-economical context.

1.2 Social work in the neoliberal context

The so-called refugee ‘crisis’ in 2015 is depicted as an unpredictable, extreme situation, requiring urgent measures and policies. It is often ignored that similar ‘crises’ have also occurred in the past, such as the ones after 2000, as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the public discourse, the term refugee ‘crisis’ has connotations of danger, where refugees are presented as a threat to the ‘security’ of Europe (Teloni, 2020, Khiabany, 2016, Kourachanis, 2019, Triandafyllidou, 2018), thus, legitimising hostile policies, closing borders and promoting push-backs and FRONTEX operations. In other

words, EU was able to confine the ‘unwanted’ in the south through anti-immigration policies by funding projects for the ‘protection’ of refugees in countries such as Greece (Teloni, 2020).

When the refugee ‘crisis’ arrived in Greece, the country was already burdened by the severe implications of the financial crisis of 2009. In response to the financial crisis, Troika (International Monetary Fund, European Commission, European Central Bank) imposed strict austerity measures with tremendous consequences for Greece as it was used as a pretext for the rapid implementation of neoliberal policies. Papatheodorou claims (2018, p.53) that it took “only four years” from the implementation of austerity measures for the poverty rate to reach 48%. However, the recrudescence of living conditions can also be attributed to an already weakened social protection system (ibid). The welfare state was never fully developed in Greece and public social services were improperly and insufficiently cultivated. Since the 1990s’, the private sector promoted neoliberalism; by the 2000s, it had expanded to interact with the public sector within a neoliberal context. At the same time, public social services were systematically degraded and NGOs were promoted as an alternative (Ioakimidis & Teloni, 2013).

This neoliberal trajectory of the state’s gradually retreated from welfare to privatisation, deregulation and contraction of social services, social work and working conditions through NGOs (Harris, 2014; Jones, 2001; Robinson, 2013; 2014; Robinson & Masocha, 2017). Neoliberalism and privatisation of social care and services have bureaucratized and managerialized the profession beyond Greece (Ferguson, 2008; Ferguson, Ioakimidis and Lavalette, 2018; Lavalette, 2011). The work has been intensified, on a global scale, while working hours and caseloads have increased, with low pay and lack of organisational support in all welfare services (British Association of Social Workers and Social Workers Union, 2018; Eurofound, 2014; Tham & Meagher,

2009). Under the prism of a cost-led and target culture, empowering working conditions and organisational support seem expendable items, pushing the role of the social worker to an impossible mission (Sundqvist et al., 2015). Jones (1983) highlighted the ‘proletarianisation’ of social workers in local authorities in the UK, while Ferguson & Lavalette (2004) connected the concept of alienation in social work with the loss of control for social workers and the powerlessness of the users. Harris (2019:141) suggested that “*neoliberalism has resulted not only in the tightening of ideological control but also the imposition of technical control over the social work labour process, displacing the parochial professional culture with a workplace culture of control*”. By the same token, Lavalette argued (2019, p.3) that “*austerity and welfare transformation [...] have made life far more difficult for social work service users, reduced the scope for practitioners to intervene in meaningful ways to support vulnerable people, embedded market forms of delivery onto the ‘social work business’.*”

When the financial crisis hit Greece in 2009, the population and social welfare were already in a vulnerable position. Initially, at the peak of the refugee ‘crisis’, there was a massive response by the solidarity movement (i.e. inhabitants of small villages, antiracist activists and so forth), who rescued and supported refugees. However, this was followed by a gradual sprout of NGO-led projects in an effort to manage the ‘crisis’ in East Aegean islands and Idomeni in northern Greece (Maniatis, 2018). Overall, the state allowed (directly or indirectly) the involvement of NGOs regarding the implementation of social policy and the creation of a new branch of ‘migration professionals’; such as, lawyers, social workers, translators and psychologists (Maniatis, 2018, p.909).

Social workers in Greece, even prior to the financial crisis in 2009, were in a rather difficult position, as they were overworked by heavy bureaucratic structures, without support, supervision and training (Papadaki, 2005; Teloni, 2011). During the financial

crisis, Karagkounis (2017, p.651) argues that “*scarce resources and staff shortages have put social workers under extreme pressure and have limited their ability to respond to increased social needs*”. Likewise, Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou (2019) revealed that social workers in the mental health sector experience precarious conditions in both professional and personal life, such as poverty, housing insecurity and surviving through debt. Similar poor working conditions and lack of organisational support for professionals (including social workers) engaging with refugees has been reported in other countries, including European ones. We make use of the description of working condition as “poor” based on previous studies (for example by the British Association of Social Workers and Social Workers Union, 2018). Cropley (2002) recorded seminar discussions with 70 community workers in Germany, highlighting ‘unattractive’ working conditions of low pay, work overtime and limited promotion opportunities as well as an increased need for further training and support to professionals. In the UK, a mixed-methods study with 12 staff members of a refugee centre by Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani (2011), revealed heavy workload due to large caseloads, while supervision is described as infrequent and lacking a supportive focus. Similarly, poor working conditions and infringement of labour rights were identified in a comparative research in the UK and Australia, using semi-structured interviews with 30 practitioners (70% social workers) working in NGOs with refugees (Robinson 2013; 2014). Low pay, short-term contracts with no access to pension or other benefits, work intensification and lack of career structure were contributing to the professionals’ beleaguerment. Organisational support was inconsistent with limited or no access to supervision in the UK, and overall lack of training, attributed to a managerialist cost-led decision making. Wirth et al. (2019) further reviewed how working conditions of social workers with refugees (and homeless) include heavy workloads and caseloads as well as increasing demands for supervision and training. Within this context of financial

and refugee 'crisis' in Greece and the subsequent poor working conditions of social workers and diminished social services, we have designed this research to further illuminate some aspects of these issues.

As a concluding remark, to the best of our knowledge, there is no research on social workers working with refugees and their working conditions in Greece; particularly, during the time of the refugee 'crisis'.

2 Research Methodology

2.1 Aim and hypotheses

Our research explores the profile and working conditions of social workers, using a quantitative methodology through questionnaires. Our conceptualisation of what constitutes working conditions was based on the definition provided by the European Observatory of Working Life

(<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/industrial-relations-dictionary/working-conditions>) as well as the definition by the International Labour Organisation: “*Working conditions are at the core of paid work and employment relationships. Generally speaking, working conditions cover a broad range of topics and issues, from working time (hours of work, rest periods, and work schedules) to remuneration, as well as the physical conditions and mental demands that exist in the workplace.*” (<https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/working-conditions/lang--en/index.htm>).

Eurofound and International Labour Organisation (2019. p.5) describe that “*working conditions surveys can address a wide array of issues within the workplace, depending on their scope*”. We also took into account the Greek context of labour relations during the period of the economic crisis.

Our operational definition of working conditions referred to the profile of the professionals (age, sex), organisational factors, type of contract, work hours, number of cases per week, role and duties, social insurance, supervision, in-service training and sources of satisfaction. One of the questions referred to the salary with regard to needs coverage. The interpretation of the term ‘needs’ was not specified nor defined in the questionnaire but referred to the totality of the needs as subjectively perceived by the professionals.

Our hypotheses were formulated by a number of factors: first, the lack of research in this field in Greece; second, the overall neoliberal context concerning social welfare, labour relations and immigration policy; third, the violation of the human rights of the refugees; fourth, the limited access of refugees to welfare as a mechanism of immigration control (Wroe, Larkin & Maglajlic, 2019:17), which results in “the creation of a population of excluded and destitute people” through the procedure of “prohibiting access to employment, health care, education and housing” (Robinson, 2014, p.1604). Finally, the variety of specialists that work with refugees lack the adequate knowledge and training to meet the complex problems that occur in the field. This last factor concerns the social workers’ profile. We took into consideration Maniatis’ (2018, p.709) argument about the creation of a new branch of “migration professionals” in the refugee ‘crisis’ (see Introduction) in combination with the research findings by Kourachanis (2018, p.1163) that highlighted that “a large part of the workforce [in the hotspots in Greek islands], mainly from NGOs, lacks appropriate experience and training on issues pertinent to the refugee crisis”.

In the context of hostile policies against refugees and neoliberalism in Greece, social services provided to refugees are scarce, while social workers themselves struggle with poor working conditions (e.g. work overtime, no supervision). In the beginning of

the refugee ‘crisis’ of 2015 surge, we hypothesised that the overall response of the state, NGOs and the EU would take a similar trajectory and would deal with the refugee ‘crisis’ with a neoliberal approach and also hinder social workers core profession (social change social justice).

Therefore, our initial hypotheses were: first, the working conditions of social workers are poor; second, the projects for refugees receive limited funding by the Greek state; instead, they mainly receive their funding by EU, as a result of neoliberalism and the limited funding of public social services with regard to EU’s repressive immigration policy and control on its borders; finally, the profile of social workers in the field has limited training and overall experience.

In addition, we examine the issue of vulnerability as an obvious fact and we attempted to expose how it is manifested in the specific population and research, particularly, the interaction between social workers and refugees. The term ‘vulnerable’ is not used to distinguish a specific portion of refugees that may be more susceptible than others nor does it intend to place refugees in a ‘passive victim role’. Instead, we argue that all refugees are vulnerable and entitled to care and support, given that the perception of refugees and asylum seekers “as [either] victims or threats has a direct bearing on their access to support, safety and services” (Robinson, 2014:1604).

2.2 Sampling strategy and research ethics

The study was carried out in Greece during the summer of 2018. In order to define the population of the research, we cross-checked information and lists of services retrieved from different sources. More specifically, NGOs referred in the official website of the

Ministry of Migration Policy¹ (https://mko.yypes.gr/home_in_mitroo_report, accessed 17/11/2017); NGOs' website information, e.g. the UN(<https://www.unhcr.org/gr/genikes-plirofories/ellada.html>, accessed 15/11/2017) and the Greek Council for Refugees (<https://www.gcr.gr/index.php/el/action/gcr-projects>, accessed 17/11/2017); lists in websites for information for migrants and refugees, such as <https://www.refugee.info/greece/services/> (accessed 17/11/2017) and lists of local and regional services held by colleagues working with refugees.

The cross-checking of information was imperative for the validation of our method of research. During the refugee 'crisis', the information on the involvement of different sectors and services (i.e. third sector, semi-private and public sector as well as international services) was fragmented and incomplete. For example, some organisations carried out short-term projects (3 months) without being officially registered. Our validated lists revealed considerable inconsistencies among the sources, showing the uncoordinated nature of responses to the refugee 'crisis' by the EU and/or the Greek state. Although we reached more than 100 social workers, we are not entirely aware whether the sample is fully representative of the number and types of services involved in the 'crisis'.

We used snowball sampling, where we initially sampled participants we were acquainted with and then they identified other participants (Hendricks & Blanken, 1992;

¹ Following criticism on the lack of information on NGOs involvement, the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy initiated in early 2017 the registration of all NGOs dealing with international protection, migration and social integration issues. At the time of our research design, there were 48 registered NGOs with the National Register of Greek and Foreign NGOs. Currently, there are around 70 registered NGOs. Access to the complete list of the above mentioned NGOs was obtained through informal discussions with colleagues at the early stages of the research.

Robson, 2002). Given the absence of official registration data of social workers and social services²—although, an important limiting factor (i.e. Dedotsi, Young, & Broadhurst, 2016; Papadaki, 2005; Teloni, 2011)—this sampling strategy was deemed more adequate for the purpose of the study. Moreover, the services involved with refugees are spread out throughout the country, involving not only different projects in different locations but also short-term employed professionals, who could not be identified.

A self-completed, anonymous electronic questionnaire was available online through Survey Monkey from June until September 2018, containing 52 questions in Greek. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers and piloted with 8 informants before data collection. Their feedback contributed to its final structure and content.

The final research sample was comprised of 137 complete responses. The professionals who participated had first to consent and give permission for the use of their data. Furthermore, the anonymity was fully guaranteed due to absence of any IP tracking control mechanism or any private ‘cookies’ stored in the users’ devices or any sign up/registration process to access the questionnaire webpage.

2.3 Statistical methods and analysis

Out of a total of 158 responses, 21 were incomplete and were thus excluded. We analysed the 137 complete responses and statistical significance was evaluated in R version 3.4.3.

²Social workers currently in Greece need to register with the Greek Professional Association of Social Workers (SKLE) (Law 4488/2017) in order to practice. However, at the time of the research, this legal framework had just been introduced and the period offered for this registration was completed long after this research.

We employed Hypergeometric or chi-squared test and the statistical threshold was set at a P value of 0.05. We rounded numbers to the closer integer as our sample size is not sufficient to allow for more significant figures.

3 Results

3.1 Social workers' profile

For anonymity, the questionnaire did not collect information that could lead to identification, i.e. nationality, name of structure/NGO or whether it is operating under Greek or international law. The questionnaire was in Greek, so responders were Greek or were well versed in Greek. Through personal experience and through communication with colleagues, we know that non-Greeks were working in the field during the period we conducted the study.

The vast majority of responders (80%) were women; 52% were between the ages 22-30 and 39% between 31-39. Overall, 51% of the respondents had 0-3 years of work experience as social workers, 30% had 4-9 years and 19% had over 10 years. The majority of responders (46%) worked for at least 1-2 years in their current position, while 22% worked with a short-term contract and 9% worked 3-4 years.

We specifically asked if they had worked with refugees before being employed in their current position and, if yes, what was the type of the organisation. Combined with the overall working experience and the time employed in the current position, the data allowed us to qualitatively (and not quantitatively, e.g. with a time threshold of five years ago) identify differences of the work position that the responders were at the time of the research (referred as 'current') and distinguish it from any previous positions (referred as 'past'). We found that the majority of social workers were currently employed in services

for Legal and Social Support (31%), in Housing (30%) as well as in Child Protection (26%).

Insert Figure 1 here.

As visualised with the thick lines connecting the respective bullets in Figure 1A as well as the respective asterisks, these responses were frequently co-selected in a statistically significant level ($P\text{-value} < 0.05$; Hypergeometric test). We counted 42 respondents (31%) that had not worked with refugees in the past, followed by Legal and Social Support social services (22%). Interestingly, the responses regarding Camps (20%) and Hot-Spots (12%) were also frequent regarding the respondents' work in the past; from a statistical perspective, these responses (Camps and Hot-Spots) were frequently co-selected (Figure 1B) ($P\text{-value} < 0.05$; Hypergeometric test). Comparing the past and current distributions, we note a shift from Camps and Hot-Spots to other types of Housing, Legal and Social Support and Health Services (Figure 1C).

We hypothesised that the majority of front-line professionals are with limited experience (see Methodology section). We cross-checked their overall work experience with their experience working in their current employer and their age range and found two categories of professionals. 106 respondents (77%) had worked in the past with refugees; however, 80% of those had up to 3 years overall work experience. There were also 29 respondents (21%), 70% of whom were between 22-30 years old, that had not worked in the past with refugees. 10% of responders had no previous work experience, therefore, no experience working with refugees and migrants. Based on these data, these professionals seemed to be new or with limited experience in working with refugees and migrants.

Regarding their education, 74% of respondents are Technological Educational Institutes (TEI) graduates and 25% are University (AEI) graduates, while 40% hold a

postgraduate (masters) degree. Specifically, 32 out of the 102 TEI graduates (31%) and 23 out of the 35 AEI graduates (66%) have a masters degree; interestingly, a statistically significant difference ($P\text{-value} < 0.05$; Chi-squared test).

3.2 Organisations' profile

In order to capture the organisations' profile, respondents were asked about the type of organisation, funding resources, geographical location and characteristics of the refugee population. 87% were employed in migratory services at the time, while 13% also had previous experience. Geographically, the vast majority (58%) of the organisations were located in Central Greece, whilst 10% of organisations were at the 'borders' such as the islands of Aegean Sea and 10% in the Prefecture of Macedonia.

The majority of organisations (46%) were funded by European projects, 12% by sponsors, 5% by public sector funds and 1% by the Church of Greece. There was also 26% who identified 'multiple' funding resources. Analysing these data further, (see VENN diagram of Figure 2 below) we observed that overall 70% of the organisations were funded by resources that include European funds. 26% were funded by resources that include sponsors, 53% of which received funding from both European resources and sponsors, while 13% of our sample received public funding.

Insert Figure 2 here.

We observed that the organisations funded by the public sector were not subsidised by sponsors; although not statistically significant ($P\text{-value} > 0.05$; Hypergeometric test), there is a trend that when co-funding occurs, it is subsidised by European funds. European funds were mostly directed to organisations related to refugee's accommodation, child protection as well as legal and social support. The public

sector and sponsors fund similar types of organisations but not the same organisations *per se*.

The responders suggested that 93% work with multiple ethnicities, of which 89% were from Syria, 74% from Afghanistan, 42% from Iraq and 31% from Pakistan. 37% of the responders work with multiple population categories, including single- or double-parent families (20%), unaccompanied minors (18%) and adults. When we cross-checked these data with the type of organisation, we observed that professionals in Camps (14%) worked with all the categories of migrant population; in Child Protection Services 24% worked only with families and 23% of the respondents worked with unaccompanied minors; in Housing 34% of the respondents worked with families and 12% with unaccompanied minors. Finally, in Legal and Social Support Services 27% worked with families and 22% with a mixed population. Expectedly, there was a statistically significant over-representation of unaccompanied minors in child protection services as well as of multiple categories of refugee population (P-value<0.05; Chi-squared test). These results were rather anticipated according to the type of organisations, providing further validity to our research.

The needs of refugees were further revealed as 93% of the responders suggested their users experience multiple problems: psychological and psychiatric problems came first at 55%, uncovered basic needs at 45%, of which a significant number pointed out both psychological/psychiatric and uncovered basic needs (18%). Absence of inclusion strategies (policies in relation to employment, housing and social integration) was identified by 39% of responders, and entrapment (inability to leave Greece because of asylum procedures) by 33%. It needs to be noted that all respondents subscribed to a combination of needs/problems and not one exclusively.

3.3 Working conditions

Regarding the participants' workload, 43% responded that they manage an average of over 12 cases per week (the maximum range option given in the questionnaire). It is not clear whether these 12+ cases are new every week. In addition, when participants were asked how many communications/visits (average) are required per case in order to meet refugees' basic needs, 65% responded more than 4 communications. It was interesting to find that 64% of the 43% that handle 12+ every week responded that they needed more than 4 communications. This means that almost 50 (if not more) communications/visits per week are part of the workload of these social workers, covering only the basic needs of their users (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here.

Regarding their working hours, 66% of the participants responded that they work 8 hours per day (full-time job), 30% work over 8 hours and/or more than 5 days per week and 3% work part-time. This result was rather unexpected as the original hypothesis was that the majority would be working over 8 hours per day taken into consideration the infringement of labour rights during the financial crisis. Yet, 30% of professionals who work over 8 hours and/or 5 days is still a considerable number.

Participants were also asked to what extent their salary covers their needs (referring to the totality of their needs as perceived by each responder). The majority (44%) responded 'enough', 26% 'little', 16% 'a lot', 7% 'very much' and 7% 'not at all'. In other words, 1/3 of the respondents subscribes to the range of 'little to not at all'. In relation to the type of the insurance they receive, the vast majority (88%) are insured in the National Institution for Healthcare provision and 11% are free-lancers.

Regarding the clarity of roles and duties' specifications as social workers, 44% responded 'enough', whilst 30% subscribed to 'little' and 'none' and 26% to 'much' and

‘very much’. This ‘clarity’ may refer to the job specification within an employment contract and/or employer’s internal policy. We also looked at the extent of undertaking irrelevant duties: 28% responded ‘much’ and ‘very much’, with the majority 31% to subscribe to ‘enough’ and 31% to ‘little’.

Yet, who decides the content of work of social workers? Responding to this question, the vast majority (74%) answered ‘multiple’, of which 56% said that there is an internal job specification; 52% that decisions are made through the interdisciplinary professional team; 44% that social workers lead on decisions along with the organisation’s higher management; 18% that social workers decide alone; 17% that the higher management decides alone; and 12% that decisions are made through legal frameworks from the national policy; 27% chose a combination of the above. We further asked participants to what extent are they involved in the decision-making and 37% responded ‘enough’, 24% ‘little’ and ‘not at all’, whilst 38% said ‘much’ and ‘very much’.

We also examined the support of social workers from the employer, such as supervision and training opportunities. The vast majority (53%) responded that they do not receive supervision, 35% receive supervision and 9% pay for private supervision themselves. Cross-checking the provision of supervision with the type of organisation, we observed a statistically significant division between the Camps and the Legal and Social Support Services (P -value <0.05 ; Chi-squared test) (Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here.

We further verified the provision of supervision with the working time and observed that 20% out of those working over 8 hours pay for private supervision, 54% had no supervision at all and only 27% received supervision. Whilst from the professionals who work 8 hours, only 8% paid for private supervision. This difference at

the percentages was marginally statistically significant (P-value=0.03; Chi-squared test) and, collectively, these data reveal challenging working conditions for these social workers in the front-line of refugee 'crisis'. What about training opportunities though? 34% of the respondents said that they receive 'rarely' and 'never' any training, 32% 'sometimes' and 24% 'often' and 'very often'.

Respondents were asked with whom they discuss the difficulties and challenges they face in their work (multiple answers were allowed). 83% responded with colleagues; 37% with the team leader/head of department; 31% with the supervisor; 24% with friends; and 3% with their union. When respondents were asked what are the main sources of their job satisfaction, 79% responded the users' feedback, 62% the involvement/relationships with users, 51% the relationships with colleagues, 31% the perception of helping others, 20% the feedback by their manager(s), 14% the contribution to social change. Remarkably, only 1 person chose their salary as a source of job satisfaction. Evaluating their overall working conditions, 46% responded as 'good' and 'very good', 38% 'moderate' and 16% 'poor' and 'very poor'.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Our study exposes important aspects and insights on the challenges and difficulties that social workers face. Social work in Greece has been historically shaped by welfare and/or educational political choices. The fact that for decades only one university department specialised in social work education existed in Greece, explains why the majority of responders are TEI graduates. What is even more interesting is that a significant number (40%) of the respondents hold a Masters degree, possibly reflecting the more recent reforms in social work education (Dedotsi, Young & Broadhurst, 2016; Dedotsi & Young, 2019a, 2019b) and postgraduate opportunities are becoming widely available.

Social work education in Greece requires a 4-year attendance, leading to an honours degree. Initially, developed by the American College (Pierce) in 1945, social work education was transferred to higher education in 1983, and was initially based in the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss social work education in Greece in depth. However, it is important to note that historically, TEIs had limited funding and, until 2002, they were not allowed to deliver postgraduate courses. Only recently (since 2017) has social work been introduced as a University degree (AEI).

One of the main findings of this research in support of our hypotheses, was that social workers employed in refugee ‘crisis’ are young graduates and/or with limited work experience with refugees. This result reflects two wider structural factors: first, the surge of the refugee ‘crisis’ and, second, the EU’s policies concerning immigration. Specifically, the refugee ‘crisis’ has triggered repressive EU policies, in line with the anti-immigration policies of the previous decades (Teloni & Mantanika, 2015). Additionally, the unequal distribution of refugees among the EU Member States in conjunction with anti-immigration policies such as the EU-Turkey Agreement of 2016 (see Introduction), result in refugees/migrants being trapped in southern Member States such as Greece (Kasperek, 2016).

The neoliberal reform could not but contribute to the rapid development of NGOs during the refugee ‘crisis’, given the weakness of public social services. Consequently, a high demand of “migration professionals” rapidly developed (Maniatis, 2018, p.909), which was fulfilled by employees with limited experience, as this study shows. This situation refers to a crisis within a crisis, as Greece has high poverty and unemployment rates (Papatheodorou, 2018). Therefore, whilst for other European countries working with refugees may be considered an ‘attractive’ field for innovative and alternative practices

and approaches (Robinson, 2014) and/or due to personal values and interests as well as political commitment (Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani, 2011; Robinson, 2013; 2014; Wirth et al., 2019), in Greece, it may have been the only option for young graduates. Having said that, further research is needed to delineate the motivations in working with refugees in Greece.

We found the majority of the welfare services located in Central Greece. This may indicate that our study did not reach out to social workers in the hotspots of Greek islands. However, this may be justified by the political focus on funding projects in Athens and other large cities, where refugees are transferred. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority are projects funded by EU followed by sponsors possibly explained by the interest of EU policies to keep refugees in southern Member States.

Regarding the professionals' working conditions, we observed that the majority of professionals are insured through their employment in the National Institution for Healthcare Provision, avoiding high taxes imposed on freelancers. However, it remains uncertain whether their salary and working hours fully respond to their own needs. We counted 63% of the responders to not be supported through supervision. This does not only suggest poor working conditions but the lack of supervision of the majority of the young graduate professionals that deal with complex caseloads has also negative implications on the users. In the neoliberal culture that prevails, supervision in social work is considered a 'luxury' or an expendable item (Teloni, 2011; Guhan & Liebling-Kalifani 2011; Robinson 2013, 2014; Wirth et al., 2019). The absence of an empowering supervision that focuses on service users' and employees' needs, can lead to a lack of critical and political reflexivity on the professionals' role, skills and ethical dilemmas. It is noteworthy that social workers have little opportunities for training. Therefore, given

the limited support by the organisation, these professionals seem abandoned to confront the refugee 'crisis' with potential risks for both themselves and service users.

Considering participants' responses about the urgent and uncovered needs of the refugees, we note three points: first, the violation of the human rights through the limited access to health and welfare; secondly, the fact that refugees are trapped in Greece due to the hostile immigration policies by EU and Member States and, thirdly, the considerable complexity of professionals' work, e.g. social workers may need more than the 50 communications per case and that is independent from the number of cases. This heavy workload could possibly indicate that the organisation cannot fully respond to the demands, with unknown long-term consequences on both social workers and refugees.

The observed lack of clarity regarding their roles and duties and the undertaking of irrelevant duties/tasks further complicate the working conditions. According to the findings, social workers are actively participating to the decision-making of their work; however, this may not always include a leading role in the organisation's interventions. Similar findings have also been reported by other researches (i.e. Teloni, 2011; Kourahanis, 2018).

We found that 46% of the respondents work in the same organisation for up to 2 years and 22% have short-term contracts. The deregulation of the labour relations has been gradually increasing from 1990's, reaching its peak during the years after the financial crisis (Kouzis, 2018). Zisimopoulos and Ekonomakis (2018) argue that the flexibility in Greek labour market started in the 1990's and was correlated with precarity (Dedousopoulos, Aranitou, Koutentakis & Maropoulou, 2013, p.18-24). Short-term contracts, part-time jobs, precarity in work, delays in payment, absence of supervision, training and support by the working environment seem to be the norm in the profession.

The main source of work satisfaction for social workers is their work with refugees. This finding is an indication of social workers' commitment to respond to their service users' needs despite poor working conditions, highlighting the strong value base of social work, even at times of crisis.

It is surprising and—to some extent—contradictory that the majority of respondents are overall satisfied with their working conditions. However, taking into account the impact of austerity in Greece, unemployment figures and neoliberal labour conditions, having a job even with lack of support may have been normalised or even considered as 'privilege' in social workers' perceptions. Further research is needed to elucidate such perceptions.

Social workers choose and/or trust to discuss the totality of difficulties and challenges in their work mainly with their colleagues. This may be explained by the absence of support by the organisation, which has led to a collegial supportive network. Informal peer support and supervision has also been recognised as valuable (Guhan & Leibling-Kalifani, 2011; Robinson, 2013; Wirth et al., 2019); however, this should not replace formal supervision as it seems to be the case. It is interesting that social workers do not discuss the difficulties that face in their work with their union.

The above data prompt us to argue that both refugees and professionals are marginalised within 'how' the refugee crisis is managed, with anti-immigration and neoliberal policies that violate human and labour rights. The austerity measures cuts in health, welfare and managerialism, which has a strongly negative impact on both social work and its users (Lavalette, 2019). Additionally, the hostile EU's policies against refugees result in the systematic violation of their rights, with lack of access in food, health, education and safety; refugees experience some of the most brutal policies of EU. This affects social professionals not only in their working environment but mainly in the

way they conduct their work with one of the most vulnerable portion of the population. The political agenda of immigration control coupled with the bureaucratisation and managerialism of the profession gradually alters social work practices. As Jones (2019) argues often state agencies and NGOs work for their own interests and work to control refugees. Wroe, Larkin & Maglajlic (2019:18) claim that “*the devastating consequences for individuals and families (and arguably for the integrity of our profession) when social workers are complicit in the use of care and welfare as instruments of immigration control*”. In this context, front-line professionals might find themselves trapped, with few or no means in effectively assisting refugees, with limited services and hostile policies against their users, while facing precarity and poor working conditions. Still, social work has an important role in defending human rights, challenging inequality, immigration control and acting politically against working oppression and a ‘culture of silence’.

If social work is committed to its core values of social change and social justice, then the pressure and bureaucratisation of the profession, the trend for short-term/superficial interventions and the content of social work practices *per se* for war-traumatised persons need to be challenged (Dedotsi, Ioakimidis & Teloni, 2019). We argue that this needs to be done not only through academic research but also through active, inclusive and reflexive political dialogue and action.

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