

# A SYSTEMIC ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON REFUGEES, MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN CYPRUS:

## Part I - An Overview

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### CORE FINDINGS

Using a transdisciplinary systems-thinking approach, this timeline-based overview documents the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social, economic, cultural and personal lives of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in Cyprus, since March 2020.

To date, the pandemic has resulted in a perceptible deterioration in the quality of life of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers, with a discernible impact on personal freedoms, livelihoods and economic security, mental health and general wellbeing, and personal development.

A gendered impact of the pandemic is also noted, with women having to take on additional household burdens and child rearing responsibilities.

### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARC	Alien Registration Certificate
CCy	Caritas Cyprus
CyRC	Cyprus Refugee Council
DCN	Dignity Centre Nicosia
EU	European Union
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RMA	Refugees, Migrants and Asylum Seekers
RoC	Republic of Cyprus
TRNC	Turkish Republic of North Cyprus
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VOIS	Voices of International Students in Cyprus

### I. METHODOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

This is the first installation of a three-part research project that seeks to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers (RMAs) in the Republic of Cyprus (RoC).<sup>1</sup> Using a transdisciplinary systems-thinking approach, this study seeks to document the effects the pandemic has had on the social, economic, cultural and personal lives of RMAs in the RoC, and to offer practical and effective recommendations based on these findings.

Part I of the project offers a timeline-based overview of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on RMAs since March 2020. Part II is based on a detailed multi-city survey and interviews with RMAs, offering first-person experiences and insight into the magnitude of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals, while Part III consists of a white paper on potential solutions to ameliorate these impacts.

Part I is based on secondary research conducted via publicly available academic, news, and social media sources, and was informed by interviews with case workers at humanitarian organizations, experts in the migration field, RMAs, and others on the ground. In addition to a discussion of major events, Part I provides a summary of the legal decrees relevant to RMAs issued by the government, presents the findings of a brief Gender Analysis in which the gendered impact of the pandemic is highlighted, and offers a short commentary on the situation in the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of North Cyprus ("TRNC"). The use of the term does not imply recognition of the "TRNC" or its administrative bodies.

<sup>1</sup> Note on the use of the term RMAs in this paper: We use an intentionally broad term to cover the entire gamut of migrants in both the RoC and "TRNC", including recognized refugees, migrant workers and students and asylum seekers, from outside both of the European Union (EU) (in the case of the RoC) and of Turkey (in the case of the "TRNC").

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## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While the COVID-19 pandemic has brought significant challenges to nearly every country in the world, there is overwhelming evidence that the impact on minorities and those marginalised, including RMAs and the countries that host them, is compounded.<sup>2</sup> Cyprus is no exception in this regard.

Since March 2020, when the pandemic began, RMAs in the country have had limited access to official information on the COVID-19 pandemic and, as a result, have suffered disproportionately during the lockdown period which severely restricted their movement. To date, the pandemic has resulted in a perceptible deterioration in the quality of life of RMAs, with a discernible impact on personal freedoms, livelihoods and economic security, mental health and general wellbeing, and personal development, despite the best efforts of civil society organisations. In addition, many RMAs continue to remain on the margins of Cypriot society, experiencing long delays in migration procedures and claims, with limited legal recourse. A gendered impact of the pandemic is noted, with women RMAs having to shoulder the burden of additional household and childcare responsibilities during the lockdown. Finally, while there is limited information about the impact on RMAs in the “TRNC”, the effects of the pandemic were more acute when compared to those in the RoC, given the dire economic situation in the “TRNC”.

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## III. INTRODUCTION

As of 9 October 2020, the Ministry of Health’s records indicate that there have been 1,951 cases of COVID-19 and 32 deaths, since the RoC’s first documented case on 9 March 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the RoC, like many other countries in Europe and around the world, has introduced emergency measures to contain the spread of the virus. Measures have included restrictions on the freedom of movement, social distancing requirements and limits on gatherings, as well as the closure of public spaces and certain businesses, government institutions, and facilities. The situation remains fluid, and the measures continue to respond to the evolving epidemiological situation.

These actions have had personal, public, economic and social implications on the human rights and living conditions of RMAs. Primarily, these have included arbitrary detention at overcrowded facilities in poor conditions, the loss of personal freedoms, the loss of jobs and livelihoods, restrictions in access to healthcare and adverse mental health impacts, delays in social welfare payments, a lack of access to technology, education and personal development opportunities, as well as delays in asylum and migration procedures and limited access to the legal and judicial systems.

Beginning with a brief timeline of events, this study addresses the following factors impacting RMAs in the RoC during the COVID-19 pandemic: access to information; the impacts of restrictions on movement; access to healthcare; access to asylum processes and legal services; labour, economic, and financial impacts; access to social services and personal development implications.

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2 “Locked Down And Left Behind: The Impact Of COVID-19 On Refugees’ Economic Inclusion”. 2020. Refugees International. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2020/7/6/locked-down-and-left-behind-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-refugees-economic-inclusion>

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3 Press & Information Office, “Ministry of Health announcement about the new COVID-19 cases,” PIO (PIO, October 9, 2020), <https://www.pio.gov.cy/en/press-releases-article.html?id=16165>.

#### IV. A TIMELINE OF SELECTED EVENTS THAT HAVE IMPACTED RMAS IN THE ROC<sup>4</sup>

Dates	Event
9 March 2020	First cases documented in the RoC
11 March 2020	Government issues first restrictions and bans large public gatherings
15 March 2020	Government imposes international flight ban with exceptions; checkpoints are only open to Turkish and Greek Cypriots and legal residents of the RoC; private and public education institutions suspend operations
16 March 2020	Government orders postponement of scheduled surgeries and prohibits hospitalization of non-urgent cases; cancellation of doctor appointments
23 March 2020	Government orders first movement restrictions; mandates the use of an SMS request to leave home and closes several businesses across different sectors
31 March 2020	Government institutes lockdown and an overnight curfew, closes all businesses except those providing essential services, increases fine for non-compliance, limits movement to once per day and orders greater enforcement of rules
8 April 2020	Government issues lockdown decree under the Quarantine Act until 30 April 2020
15 April 2020	Government begins to pay out special benefits under a financial support programme, including the payment of some wages
23 April 2020	Government introduces additional support measures for employees
4 to 20 May 2020	Government orders the first phase of easing lockdown restrictions and allows for certain businesses and sectors to reopen, including construction, retail, healthcare, education and tourism. In addition, it allows three movements per day and shortens night-time curfew by one hour.
7 May 2020	Government announces second economic recovery package
21 May to 4 June 2020	Government orders the second phase of easing lockdown restrictions and allows outdoor catering and beauty service businesses, museums and libraries to reopen. Personal movements are no longer limited, the night curfew is removed, and gathering of up to ten people is allowed. Beach access and religious services are also permitted.
5 to June 24 2020	Government removes most restrictions in a third phase of easing. Some restrictions remain on large gatherings and indoor events. All sectors and businesses are now open.
June 2020 onwards	Government lifts international flight ban and reopens checkpoints with the "TRNC", subject to COVID-19 testing regulations; changes limits on gatherings as needed and announces localised lockdowns, based on the epidemiological situation

#### V. ACCESS TO COVID-19-RELATED INFORMATION

Access to clear, comprehensible and actionable information for RMAs on the COVID-19 pandemic was limited in the early months of the pandemic, given the rapidly evolving epidemiological situation and the often-haphazard nature of official messaging in languages that many RMAs were unfamiliar with. This resulted in a situation where RMAs were often unaware of mandates and health advisories and had limited understanding of the severity and nature of the disease.<sup>5</sup>

Following the president's televised speech on 13 March 2020 and the initial government decrees, a number of additional health advisories and decrees were issued in the subsequent months. The advisories offered further information on the disease, its symptoms and what to do in the case of a possible infection. At the outset, official COVID-19 information was limited to television channels and government websites that were not user-friendly and required RMAs to navigate complicated menus and actively search for information,<sup>6</sup> a cumbersome process. An asylum seeker interviewed stated that they relied on social media and WhatsApp forwards from friends abroad in the initial stages of the pandemic, as they struggled to utilise government sources effectively.<sup>7</sup>

Language barriers have ensured that the dedicated COVID-19 informational hot lines setup for the pandemic have been of

4 This is a selected list of COVID-19-related government decrees and restrictions issued taken from <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/press2.html>, <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/diat.html>, and <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/press.html>

5 Phileneews, "Refugees without proper access to information and healthcare," Phileleftheros (Phileleftheros, March 27, 2020), <https://www.phileneews.com/koinonia/eidiseis/article/905372/choris-anaggai-a-enimerosi-kai-perithalpsi-metanastes>.

6 This continues to be the case on the Press and Information Office Government Coronavirus website - <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/infola.html>.

7 Interview with an asylum seeker conducted in August 2020

limited use for most RMAs so far. There have been documented cases of RMAs calling the hotlines and being unable to communicate with telephone operators.<sup>8</sup> In addition, RMAs interviewed suggested that they had struggled to follow instructions and were unable to understand critical information that was initially presented in Greek, English or the Turkish languages in the beginning of the pandemic.

This has been partly ameliorated by the work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Office in Cyprus, the Cyprus Refugee Council (CyRC),<sup>9</sup> KISA,<sup>10</sup> Caritas Cyprus (CCy) and the Dignity Centre Nicosia (DCN). These and other organizations filled the gap by providing additional translations of advisories, warnings, information posters and mandates, publishing these on their websites, and sharing them on social media, as well as via SMS, WhatsApp, Viber and other messaging platforms.

Improvements have been made in the past months, including a more effective government approach to communication, with information available in multiple languages and informational posters shared in community settings.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, experts and case workers interviewed suggested that an information gap continues to exist and it will make the situation difficult for RMAs should the pandemic situation worsen or restrictions return in the near future.

## VI. THE IMPACT OF MOVEMENT RESTRICTIONS AND THE LOCKDOWN

### Context

On 15 March 2020, the RoC prohibited most flight operations. A week later, on 23 March 2020, the government mandated a prohibition on all unnecessary movements outside of the home (from 31 March 2020 onwards, movement outside the home was limited to once a day), closing all parks, markets, places of worship and most service businesses. Exceptions were made for work, essential public services, doctor's appointments, caring for family, physical exercise, as well as funerals, weddings, christenings and other gatherings not exceeding ten people. In cases of exception, two metres of social distancing, as well as limiting the number of people in certain areas, were required.

The new rules required people to send an SMS to the government to obtain permission to leave their home for the above listed reasons only. People were required to send an SMS to 8998 (from RoC phone numbers only) indicating their reason

for leaving home, their ID number and their post code. Then, they would automatically receive a reply from the government, confirming or denying their request. Movement outside the home was severely restricted and controlled by the police and other government officers who checked IDs and the validity of the SMS permissions across the RoC.

Many RMAs were simply unable to navigate the complicated messaging rules, which were issued initially only in Greek and English.<sup>12</sup> This led to situations where RMAs moved around in breach of the rules and subsequently were fined, given the confusing instructions, lack of information in languages other than Greek and English, and on occasions when the 8998 number wasn't operational.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, the instructions themselves were perceived as unclear and changing often, leaving many confused and resulting in a majority of requests being rejected.<sup>14</sup>

### The Situation in Urban Areas

The restrictions on movement brought about many complications for RMAs living in urban areas. Many struggled to access essential services, get to work and generally navigate through daily life. Under the SMS mandate, many non-English speaking RMAs struggled to send an SMS for approval, forcing them into the difficult position of needing to leave for essential items but fearing arrest or fines from the police if caught without such approval.<sup>15</sup>

One asylum seeker living in Nicosia described how his flatmate, who only speaks French, was unable to navigate the SMS request system in English or Greek to secure permission to visit the bank. While on his way, he was stopped by the police and fined 300 EUR, a fine he struggled to pay.<sup>16</sup>

Local organizations, including the DCN and CyRC, also stated that RMAs reported multiple accounts of being fined for unwittingly violating the SMS mandate.<sup>17</sup> Some were fined for using the incorrect reason for the applied exception, while others were fined for remaining outside of their houses for longer periods than allowed. This was particularly unfair given that the SMS permission was granted for an "appropriate amount of time", leaving it to the discretion of the controlling officers to determine how long is appropriate.

8 Josephine Koumettou, "No Access to Healthcare, Language Barriers for Asylum Seekers amid Crisis" (In-Cyprus, April 2, 2020), <https://in-cyprus.philenews.com/no-access-to-healthcare-language-barriers-for-asylum-seekers-amid-crisis/>.

9 The CyRC's work in this regard particularly stands out. They were the first to set up a dedicated web page for the COVID-19 pandemic - <https://cyrefugeecouncil.org/coronavirus-covid-19-information> - and have consistently shared information and updates in multiple languages since mid-March 2020.

10 KISA's translated COVID-19 guidelines are available here: <https://kisa.org.cy/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-movement-guidelines-Fr.pdf>

11 "Press and Information Office Information / Guidelines," COVID-19 Press and Information Office (Press and Information Office of Cyprus, 2020), <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/infola.html>.

12 The CyRC was quick to provide an in-house translation of the SMS procedure in Arabic, French and Somali the same day the measure took effect, filling the gap on the authorities' side who only issued instructions in Greek and English at the time. The UNHCR was the first to share officially translated instructions from the government for the SMS procedure in multiple languages, on 7 April 2020, a full fortnight after the initial restrictions were put in place.

13 Staff Reporter, "Coronavirus: SMS Service Operational Again," Cyprus Mail (Cyprus Mail, March 25, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-sms-service-operational-again/>.

14 Jonathan Shkurko, "Coronavirus: SMS Requests for Movement up by 33 per Cent, Most Rejected," Cyprus Mail (Cyprus Mail, April 1, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/04/01/coronavirus-sms-requests-for-movement-up-by-33-per-cent-most-rejected/>.

15 Interviews with case workers and staff at humanitarian/migrant organizations conducted in July and August 2020

16 Interviews with asylum seekers conducted in July and August 2020

17 Interviews with case workers and staff at humanitarian/migrant organizations conducted in July and August 2020

Additionally, humanitarian workers in Nicosia noted that on multiple occasions during the lockdown, police rounded up RMAs living on the street, as well as those sheltered in churches and mosques in the old town, and moved them by buses into the Pournara/Kokkinotrimithia Emergency Reception Centre (Pournara Camp).<sup>18</sup> This occurred despite many RMAs being officially registered at addresses in the walled city. The government justified this move on health grounds, claiming that the RMAs were living in cramped, unsanitary conditions conducive for the spread of COVID-19.

### Reception and Detention Centres

The mandate issued on 8 April 2020 further prohibited anyone from entering or leaving reception or detention centres, with the exception of new arrivals. Specific permission from the Ministry of Interior was required to allow humanitarian or medical aid into the centres, as well as for residents to travel to and from work. Prior to the pandemic, the centres already faced overcrowding, which made social distancing nearly impossible.

A medical doctor, who is a regular volunteer at the Kofinou Reception and Accommodation Centre (Kofinou Camp), stated that the conditions are severely cramped in all camps on the island.<sup>19</sup> She noted that limited resources for sanitation intensified the risk of infection not only for COVID-19, but also for other diseases. She added that the lack of washing facilities makes it more difficult for people to regularly wash their hands and keep up the necessary hygiene practices to not contract or spread the virus.

Shortly after the height of the restrictions, around the end of May 2020, there were 700 people in Pournara Camp, a number that far exceeds its capacity.<sup>20</sup> Of particular concern was the housing of unaccompanied minors within the camp, alongside adult RMAs. The UNHCR noted severe flaws in the authorities' approach and campaigned extensively in June 2020 (including through a presentation to the parliamentary human rights committee) to have the minors moved<sup>21</sup> after complaints of sexual harassment emerged.<sup>22</sup>

Additionally, stories from RMAs inside the camp revealed unsanitary conditions, including a breakout of scabies, with no ability to leave the camp and no medical aid provided.<sup>23</sup> Local

organizations, including the CyRc and KISA, advocated for the removal of immunocompromised and particularly vulnerable RMAs from the detention centre.<sup>24</sup> After pressure from organizations and asylum seekers in the Centre, the Asylum Service started allowing ten people a day to leave, with priority given to vulnerable persons and women, but only if they could present a valid address.<sup>25</sup> However, it was nearly impossible for those detained to identify accommodation, unless they were already in contact with others in the community.<sup>26</sup>

As of 28 September 2020, Pournara remains a closed facility, hosting around 265 individuals in the main camp, including 97 children and an unknown number in quarantine.<sup>27</sup> The situation in Pournara continues to be fluid, with new arrivals on boats from Lebanon and Syria to Cyprus being moved into the camp.

## VII. ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, RMAs in Cyprus faced existing systemic barriers in accessing healthcare. While access to emergency medical care for RMAs is guaranteed in national legislation, the National Health Service (GESY) which was introduced in June 2019, is only available to recognized refugees and some migrant workers.<sup>28</sup>

Others, including all asylum seekers, continue to fall under the previous health system which only allows them to seek treatment in public in-patient and out-patient departments of public hospitals, where they often face difficulties booking appointments and experience long wait times.<sup>29</sup>

### COVID-19 Testing

In general, people across the country had difficulty gaining access to COVID-19 tests. Given the disparities in access to healthcare, RMAs had almost no access to COVID-19 testing. The only exception was new arrivals, who were tested upon entry to camps. Initially, only people with symptoms or those who were found through contact tracing were able to access a COVID-19 test. Later, once private laboratories offered tests, anyone had the option of paying for a test, which initially cost 110 EUR before being reduced to a maximum of 85 EUR in the following weeks. Due to the high cost of the test and the potential need of a translator, many RMAs remained outside of the testing regime.

### Health Impacts

Access to regular health care and medical treatment for RMAs

18 "The Government's New Measures on Asylum Violate Human Rights and Endanger Public Health," KISA (KISA, April 7, 2020), <https://kisa.org.cy/the-governments-new-measures-on-asylum-violate-human-rights-and-endanger-public-health/>.

19 Interview with volunteer medical doctor conducted in August 2020

20 "Cyprus Immigration Detention Profile," Global Detention Project, May 31, 2020, <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/cyprus>.

21 "News Comment on the Discussion at the Human Rights Parliamentary Committee on the Situation at the Pournara Centre - UNHCR Cyprus," UNHCR Cyprus, June 22, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2020/06/22/news-comment-on-the-discussion-at-the-human-rights-parliamentary-committee-on-the-situation-at-the-pournara-centre/>.

22 Jonathan Shkurko, "UNHCR Official to Testify on Underage Sexual Harassment Claims at Pournara Camp," Cyprus Mail (Cyprus Mail, June 24, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/06/24/unhcr-official-to-testify-on-underage-sexual-harassment-claims-at-pournara-camp/>.

23 Catherine Bennett, "Migrants Forced to Stay in Cyprus

Camp despite Easing of Covid-19 Lockdown," The France 24 Observers(France24,May28,2020), <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200526-cyprus-migrants-camp-pournara-covid-19>.

24 CyRC on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/cyrefugeecouncil/posts/636648700233323>

25 Drousiotou, Corina. Publication. *Country Report: Cyprus*. Asylum Information Database (AIDA), European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), 2019.

26 Drousiotou, 2019.

27 Publication. *Regional Bureau for Europe Update #18 COVID-19 Emergency Response*. UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, 2020.

28 Drousiotou, 2019.

29 Drousiotou, 2019.

was further limited during the COVID-19 lockdown. Across the country, physicians and outpatient hospital departments were closed to walk-ins, with the exception of emergencies. RMAs interviewed suggested that this significantly impacted treatment for other health and chronic conditions they suffered from.

Due to limited access to hospitals and medical centres, the only option for RMAs was to call health centres and doctors on the phone. Over the phone, the language barrier became even more complex and often required the intervention of a local organization to translate the call.<sup>30</sup> Some RMAs found the process of making an appointment and finding an organization or a translator too onerous, so they ignored medical issues or delayed seeking medical care.<sup>31</sup>

According to a study from the University of Cyprus' Department of Psychology, one in four adults in Cyprus experienced medium to high levels of stress during the lockdown, with 67 percent of respondents saying their quality of life had changed significantly.<sup>32</sup> Interviews with local humanitarian organizations and RMAs suggested similar experiences in migrant and refugee communities with many citing increased anxiety associated with the loss of livelihoods, delays in receiving social benefits and other challenges endemic to the situation.<sup>33</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) addressed these issues by providing counselling and psychosocial support through group counselling and other indirect methods, including community building, skills development and education.

However, after the outbreak, many RMAs were left without this support. An asylum seeker who was regularly seeing a counsellor prior to the pandemic, stated that they had been unable to schedule an appointment since March 2020.<sup>34</sup> To combat the rise in mental health issues and the decrease in access to services, the CyRC utilized online video conferencing and social media to help continue counselling services online, spread awareness about mental health issues, and provide tips and guidance to deal with COVID-19 related stress and anxiety.<sup>35</sup>

## VIII. IMPACT ON ASYLUM AND MIGRATION PROCEDURES

In the RoC, the asylum process is a single procedure where both refugee status and subsidiary protection status are examined via application to the Asylum Service of the Ministry of

the Interior, and later sent to the Aliens and Immigration Unit at the Department of the Police in the city in which the applicant resides.<sup>36</sup> For those in temporary detention, applications are received within the camp centres.<sup>37</sup>

From March 2020 to June 2020, with most government offices functioning with skeletal staff and often closed to the public, RMAs had no access to migration offices, lawyers or the asylum process. During this period, new arrivals could not lodge their applications for asylum in cities and were instead transferred to the Pournara Camp and held there (See Section VI). Asylum applications, for which interviews had already been conducted, continued to be processed. National and appellate courts continued to receive legal aid applications and appeals, while all other proceedings, with the exception of urgent cases, were suspended.<sup>38</sup>

While official government offices remained closed to asylum applications, organizations were able to provide emergency legal services and to advocate on behalf of asylees to the government when dealing with such exigencies.<sup>39</sup> CyRC, along with other local legal aid groups, also provided legal support to RMAs in the community, as well as those detained, by utilizing Zoom, WhatsApp and other online communication platforms.

An asylum seeker interviewed, who had lost their Alien Registration Certificate (ARC) in March 2020, was unable to get a replacement ARC until late May 2020 and was initially confined to their house before deciding to use a photocopy as an ad-hoc proof of ID.<sup>40</sup> While the situation has improved since the early summer, as of September 2020, the temporary closures have only added to the waiting time, compounding the hardship of many asylum seekers. Some have waited years for a decision. On average, asylum decisions currently take between 36 and 60 months.<sup>41</sup>

Additionally, as part of a long-awaited overhaul of the asylum system, the government managed to push through a piece of key legislation in early September 2020, which reduces the appeal time for asylum seekers from 75 days to 15 days, once a decision on their case has been made. While it is hard to draw conclusions from the timing of this legislation, and whether the government used the pandemic as cover, the move has been criticized by various sources as affecting due process and potentially leading to other legal complications.<sup>42</sup>

30 Interviews with case workers and staff at humanitarian/migrant organizations conducted in July and August 2020

31 Interviews with case workers and staff at humanitarian/migrant organizations conducted in July and August 2020

32 Evie Andreou, "Coronavirus: One in Four Had Increased Stress during Lockdown," Cyprus Mail (Cyprus Mail, September 29, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/09/29/coronavirus-one-in-four-had-increased-stress-during-lockdown/>.

33 Interviews with case workers and staff at humanitarian/migrant organizations and asylum seekers conducted in July and August 2020

34 Interview with an asylum seeker conducted in August 2020

35 CyRC on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/cyrefugeecouncil/posts/638391926725667>

36 Drousiotou, 2019.

37 Drousiotou, 2019.

38 Drousiotou, 2019.

39 CyRC on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/cyrefugeecouncil/posts/627678584463668>

40 Interview with asylum seeker conducted in August 2020

41 CyRC, "Asylum Information Database" (European Council on Refugees and Exiles), accessed September 29, 2020, <https://www.asylumineurope.org/reports/country/cyprus/regular-procedure>.

42 Elias Hazou, "Crucial Asylum Reform Dismissed as a 'Damp Squib'," Cyprus Mail (Cyprus Mail, September 13, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/09/13/crucial-asylum-reform-dismissed-as-a-damp-squib/>.

## IX. LABOUR, ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL IMPACTS

The negative economic impact of COVID-19 on RMAs continues to be significant due to the loss of jobs and livelihoods, and difficulties re-entering the labour market following the lockdown.

RMAs interviewed in Nicosia and Paphos reported loss of jobs due to the long-term closure of many establishments that employed RMAs in the tourism, catering and accommodation sectors.<sup>43</sup> Prior to the pandemic, many RMAs were already dealing with tenuous financial situations and had difficulties finding and maintaining employment due to their limited access to the labour market, lack of skills or education, and the lack of social capital and networks. While some RMAs lost jobs, others working in essential services, including supermarkets and the health sector, maintained employment but often in difficult conditions. Some who continued working, especially in supermarkets, had difficulty maintaining social distancing guidelines.

The economic impact on RMAs was further exacerbated during the lockdown due to the limited access they had to banks and the banking system. Given the long lines and crowding limitations, RMAs struggled to withdraw funds from their accounts and execute rent payments due to the fact that a majority do not bank online and instead make use of services at physical bank branches.

In mid-March 2020, the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance closed its offices to the public and conducted their work solely over email and phone, causing further frustration and confusion for many RMAs who were without work and reliant on social benefits.

Many RMAs reported long delays in receiving their benefits for the months of March, April and May 2020. As of September 2020, the situation has improved. However, some RMAs interviewed stated that they continue to experience dire financial need and are still experiencing delays in receiving their social welfare and housing benefits.<sup>44</sup>

In response to the economic crisis that has accompanied the pandemic, the RoC government has released a number of aid packages, pledging millions of EUR for support schemes and financial incentives to keep businesses afloat and ensure employment.<sup>45</sup> Some RMAs in regular employment have been able to benefit from these schemes. However, most others, who work irregularly or are in temporary employment, have been unable to benefit from these programs, with employers choosing to lay them off instead.

43 Gina Agapiou, "Cyprus Service Sector, Key for Economy, Sees Drop," *Cyprus Mail* (Cyprus Mail, September 4, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/09/04/cyprus-services/>.

44 "KISA Warns for Mass Evictions and Upsurge of Homelessness of Migrants and Refugees," *KISA* (KISA, April 28, 2020), <https://kisa.org.cy/kisa-warns-for-mass-evictions-and-upsurge-of-homelessness-of-migrants-and-refugees/>.

45 "Support Measures to Address the Consequences of the Covid-19 Coronavirus as Regards Employment and Enterprises," *Press and Information Office of Cyprus*, September 3, 2020, [https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/press/3092020\\_3.pdf](https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/en/press/3092020_3.pdf).

## X. IMPACTS ON EDUCATION AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is predicted that COVID-19 will have a catastrophic impact on refugee education, which was already inaccessible for so many.<sup>46</sup> In Cyprus, the law guarantees access to primary and secondary education for children of RMAs and unaccompanied minors, and a majority enrol in the public school system.<sup>47</sup> However, the registration and dropout rates for RMAs specifically are not monitored, so it is difficult to assess how many may have fallen through the cracks due to the pandemic.

Recognised refugees with international or temporary protection status and some categories of migrants can attend State Institutes of Further Education for personal development and skills training. However, classes are only provided in Greek and Turkish, with the exception of some language courses, and are not open to asylum seekers. Asylum seekers and those who do not speak Greek or Turkish but seek skills training have to pay out-of-pocket for private education or make use of free opportunities provided by NGOs or EU-funded projects.

With the onset of COVID-19 and the closing of all but essential services, many education and training providers had to cancel in-person classes and trainings, leaving many without access to education. Since the height of the restrictions, other organizations have worked to fill this gap by moving classes online and by creating in-person learning environments with fewer students and increased social distancing protocols. Project Phoenix's transnational "Survival English" language classes, in collaboration with CCy, was a notable success in this regard.<sup>48</sup> However, a large number of RMAs have lost valuable time in their personal development journeys due to the pandemic.

## XI. GENDERED IMPACTS

For girls and women around the world, the impacts of COVID-19 have only been exacerbated by existing gender inequalities. This is even more true for RMAs, where gendered issues are prevalent in their communities.<sup>49</sup> While data on the gender of RMAs in the RoC is limited, figures from 2013 indicate that 40 percent of all asylum-seekers are women.<sup>50</sup> It can be assumed that current figures are similar.

46 "Coming Together for Refugee Education" (UNHCR, September 3, 2020), <https://www.unhcr.org/5f4f9a2b4>.

47 Drousiotou, 2019.

48 Aishwarya Sahasrabudhe, "Mumbai's Language Professionals Teach English to Refugees in Faraway Cyprus, Who Struggle with Rules, Talking to Locals - World News , Firstpost," *Firstpost*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/mumbais-language-professionals-teach-english-to-refugees-in-faraway-cyprus-who-struggle-with-rules-talking-to-locals-8341491.html>.

49 "Gender Matters: COVID-19's Outsized Impact on Displaced Women and Girls - World," *ReliefWeb* (Refugee International, May 7, 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/gender-matters-covid-19-s-outsized-impact-displaced-women-and-girls>.

50 "Statistics "(Asylum Information Database, 2013), [asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-data/aida\\_cyprus\\_first\\_report\\_statistics\\_0.pdf](https://asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-data/aida_cyprus_first_report_statistics_0.pdf).

Interviews with case workers and experts indicated that RMA women who live in households with their families face the threat of increased gender-based violence.<sup>51</sup> Lockdown measures have led to prolonged confinement in spaces with abusers, something women, regardless of their legal or immigration status, experienced across the island.<sup>52</sup> According to UN Women, domestic violence helplines in the country have registered an increase in calls by 30 per cent.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, women have faced increased pressure to take on more domestic and child-rearing responsibilities as compared to men. They also have had less access to contraception and support for sexual and reproductive health during lockdown, given the limitations to healthcare overall during this period. These added pressures and stresses have resulted in a decline in mental health for women.

Part I of the study was informed by six interviews, more than half of which were with women working in the field as well as RMAs. In Part II of the study, the survey will include a representative sample of women and include specific questions for women on topics relating to gender-based violence, caregiving and access to reproductive healthcare and contraception. By incorporating gender-specific questions, we hope to offer more effective recommendations for some of the specific impacts women RMAs are facing due to COVID-19.

## XII. AN OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION IN THE "TRNC"

### COVID-19 Background

The "TRNC" recorded its first case of COVID-19 on March 9 2020.<sup>54</sup> Shortly after, the Council of Ministers instituted mandates to curb the spread of the virus. The "TRNC" closed its borders to everyone except citizens and those with legal permission to reside in the country.<sup>55</sup> All arrivals were required to quarantine for 14 days and were monitored by authorities. Failure to comply with this requirement resulted in legal action.<sup>56</sup>

All civil workers in the public sector were placed on administrative leave, with the exception of police, health workers, the fire brigade, civil aviation employees and those working in public finance.<sup>57</sup> In the private sector, all businesses were closed except for those deemed essential, such as pharmacies, markets

and gas stations. The measures also included a ban on all public gatherings, including those for religious worship, unions and other associations, as well as an overnight curfew. From 24 April 2020, the government made the use of face masks in public places mandatory.

Authorities imposed strict quarantine requirements in areas with reported cases of COVID-19. In Karpasia in late March, following the first reported cases, three villages were quarantined with a full curfew and only controlled entry and exit out of the villages was allowed.<sup>58</sup> Additional measures taken by the government included the transformation of the Burhan Nalbantoglu State Hospital in Nicosia into a pandemic hospital. The government also established a COVID-19 call centre, open 24 hours a day, which serves callers in Turkish and English.

In late March 2020, a boat carrying 175 Syrian asylum seekers was turned away by the RoC, citing the COVID-19 lockdown, and eventually capsized off of the coast of northern Cyprus. "TRNC" authorities rescued the asylum seekers but kept them subsequently in indefinite detention; first under a 14-day quarantine in a sports hall and then confined to apartments under effective house arrest.<sup>59</sup>

The "TRNC" does not operate its own asylum process and the protections offered by the RoC as an EU country are unavailable to RMAs in the "TRNC".<sup>60</sup> Therefore, authorities attempted to send the asylum seekers to Turkey, which initially rejected them, citing COVID-19 concerns. In late April and early May, however, all 175 asylum seekers were successfully sent to Turkey where they now face a risk of refoulement to Syria.<sup>61</sup>

As of late September, there have been 704 reported cases of COVID-19 and four related deaths in the "TRNC".<sup>62</sup> Authorities have recently extended the quarantine requirements for those arriving in the country and reinstated the closure of bars until 1 October 2020 in response to a recent rise in cases. In total, 24 hotels are currently being used for quarantine.<sup>63</sup> Ahead of the presidential elections scheduled for mid-October 2020, there was a ban instituted on the distribution of election materials in order to prevent further spread of the virus.<sup>64</sup> With the recent arrival of a number of additional boats from Lebanon and Syria, the situation remains fluid in the "TRNC."

51 Interviews conducted in July and August 2020

52 "COVID-19: Domestic Abuse Spikes in Lockdown Divided Cyprus," Financial Mirror, May 7, 2020, <https://www.financialmirror.com/2020/05/07/covid19-domestic-abuse-spikes-in-lockdown-divided-cyprus/>.

53 "COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls," UN Women (UN Women, April 7, 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf>.

54 Nazife Sultanoglu, "Current Situation of COVID-19 in Northern Cyprus" (World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal, May 20, 2020), <http://www.emro.who.int/emhj-volume-26-2020/volume-26-issue-6/current-situation-of-covid-19-in-northern-cyprus.html>.

55 Sultanoglu, 2020.

56 Sultanoglu, 2020.

57 Sultanoglu, 2020.

58 Sultanoglu, 2020.

59 "Turkish Cypriot Authorities: Release Detained Syrian Asylum Seekers," Human Rights Watch, April 16, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/16/turkish-cypriot-authorities-release-detained-syrian-asylum-seekers>.

60 Human Rights Watch, 2020.

61 "Syrian Refugees in Cyprus Pushed Back to Turkey," EuroMed Rights, May 19, 2020, <https://euromedrights.org/publication/syrian-refugees-in-cyprus-pushed-back-to-turkey/>.

62 Staff Reporter, "Coronavirus: North Extends Compulsory Quarantine for All Air Arrivals (Updated)," Cyprus Mail (Cyprus Mail, September 21, 2020), <https://cyprus-mail.com/2020/09/21/coronavirus-north-extends-compulsory-quarantine-for-all-air-arrivals/>.

63 Staff Reporter, 2020.

64 Staff Reporter, 2020.



## Status of RMAs

The “TRNC” is home to an estimated 90,000 - 120,000 foreign workers and students<sup>65,66</sup> who constitute the bulk of migrants there. A large proportion of these workers and students are from South Asia, West Africa and the Middle East and were unable to return once the lockdown began, as many of their home countries closed their borders. With presidential elections around the corner, politicians in the “TRNC” have used the pandemic to make foreign workers and students easy political targets. In late March 2020, Prime Minister Ersin Tatar suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic was a good excuse to “clean them out” and limit the benefits they receive from the “TRNC”.<sup>67</sup>

Many of the foreign students trapped in the “TRNC” and unable to return to their countries of origin during the lockdown were in dire need. They received support from Voices of International Students in Cyprus (VOIS) - an international student group in the “TRNC” - and other civil society actors and municipalities in the form of food aid and essential supplies.<sup>68</sup> As of May 2020, an estimated 4,000 foreign students, 5,000 former foreign students - who stayed on the island illegally - and a number of other foreign workers were dependent on aid for survival and essential supplies.<sup>69</sup>

Recent interviews suggest that the situation has improved significantly since the early summer and there have been only sporadic requests for aid and support in the past weeks.<sup>70</sup> However, large numbers of foreign students remain in limbo, with classes moving online, forcing them to wait out the changing pandemic situation. And concerns remain about their ability to survive the winter, while economic activity remains mostly stagnant in the “TRNC”,<sup>71</sup> and the economic situation in their home countries continues to deteriorate.

clothing and household items, therapy and counselling. Especially during the lockdown, these groups worked together to ensure that no RMAs went hungry across the island and those in precarious housing situations had enough warm clothing and protective gear to survive the cold spring nights.

Other NGOs, including Project Phoenix, CCy, Friendship Circle Cyprus, the DNC and various church groups, fundraised locally and internationally to stitch masks and purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) for groups at risk, and organised a number of collection and donation drives, bringing together the wider Cypriot and RMA communities.

However, despite the efforts made by civil society groups, the RoC government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic - perhaps unintentionally in some cases - has accentuated and exacerbated existing faults in the various systems that impact the lives of RMAs. Difficulties accessing government information, healthcare, legal assistance and education, as well as poor living conditions in reception centres, discrimination by authorities and financial insecurity, were all challenges RMAs faced in Cyprus before the pandemic. Now, the situation is only worse, leaving RMAs in even more vulnerable circumstances.

While it is difficult to fault the government for all the travails RMAs have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that their needs are taken into consideration going forward, especially should the situation worsen or the lockdown return. With the epidemiological situation largely under control, this research offers authorities on both sides of the island an opportunity to build policies to safeguard RMAs from experiencing a disproportionate impact, as well as address systemic flaws that have been exacerbated during the pandemic.

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## XIII. CONCLUSION

While RMAs have been largely left out of the governmental calculations since the onset of the pandemic, many civil society groups and volunteer organisations (migrant and Cypriot) have stepped up and provided aid and support, in what has been a pleasant counter-narrative to the official line. This aid has included financial support, food, shelter, donations of

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65 Mete Hatay, “COVID-19 and North Cyprus: Pandemic, Politics, and Non-Recognized Struggles,” Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2020, <https://www.prio.org/utility/DownloadFile.ashx?id=2068&type=publicationfile>.

66 Yeni Duzen, “North Cyprus News: Foreign Students Bulking up TRNC Population Numbers,” North Cyprus News | Online News for North Cyprus, April 4, 2018, <https://www.lgcnews.com/foreign-students-bulking-up-trnc-population-numbers/>.

67 “North Cyprus PM Ersin Tatar Accused of ‘Racism’ over Remarks about Foreign Workers and Students,” T-Vine (T-Vine, March 27, 2020), <http://www.t-vine.com/north-cyprus-pm-ersin-tatar-accused-of-racism-over-remarks-about-foreign-workers-and-students/>.

68 Interview with VOIS, October 2020

69 Hatay, 11, 2020.

70 Interview with VOIS, October 2020

71 FES Cyprus Newsletter. 2020. 99/August. Nicosia: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Cyprus Office, 8.

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## PROJECT PHOENIX

Project Phoenix is a young European NGO and social enterprise working to empower migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers in an urban setting, using the best of a social innovation playbook. Premised on the pillars of sustainability, economic empowerment through entrepreneurship, socio-cultural integration through professional-skills training and mentorship, we leverage our global networks and fill gaps that legacy institutions and international organisations are often unable to. We are limber, agile and use a systems-thinking, non-prescriptive approach to present feasible solutions.

Project Phoenix is currently running a pilot project in Cyprus, which has the highest rate of asylum seekers in the EU. Our programming involves an intensive fellowship program focussed on entrepreneurship and skills development, the creation of innovative partnerships with other civil-society groups like Caritas Cyprus and Zero Food Waste Cyprus, and a solutions-based research and advocacy pillar that aims to influence policy for systems change.

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## THE JUSTICE PROJECT

The Justice Project is a collective of active citizens that advocates for the rights of those living on the margins of Cypriot society. The Justice Project believes that human rights apply to all people freely and equally, and campaigns for social justice urgently and fervently. It is an all-inclusive, arms-open movement, which calls for a free society, where the oppression of women, LGBTQI+ people, ethnic minorities, immigrants and refugees is brought to an end.

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