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## Ever More Difficult: For Migrants reaching the Greek Island of Lesvos, conditions grow more dire by the day

Chloe Powers  
*Colby College*

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# Ever More Difficult

For migrants reaching the Greek island of Lesbos, conditions grow more dire by the day

By Chloé Powers '19

**Chloé Powers '19 is the coordinator of Moms2Moms, a grassroots project providing housing to single mothers seeking asylum, and she's involved in several other migrant solidarity initiatives, including search and rescue efforts, LGBTIQ+ migrant solidarity, and local mutual-aid projects. With the images she has taken, Powers shares her experiences from the Greek island of Lesbos.**

The people have not stopped coming.

Since the beginning of the “European Migration Crisis” in 2014-15, millions of people seeking safety and freedom have risked their lives crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. In the early days, people were able to move relatively freely from here to their destinations in Europe. This changed after the passing of the European Union (EU)-Turkey Deal of 2016. This agreement established Lesbos and Moria Refugee Camp as a “hotspot” for managing migration flows, leaving people stranded for months, if not years, while they wait for the results of their asylum applications. Ever since, Lesbos has continued to exist as a central node for migrant mobilities into Europe and as a focal point for global migration struggles.

In the last year, the situation has grown from bad to worse, with rampant overcrowding, crumbling

infrastructure, and increased hostility and violence toward migrants and those in solidarity with them at the hands of state and fascist groups. Deliberate systemic neglect and the deterioration of conditions in the camp to inhumane levels, as well as attacks on migrant boats by the Greek Coast Guard, have been justified as policies of “deterrence” to try to dissuade migrants from making the journey here.

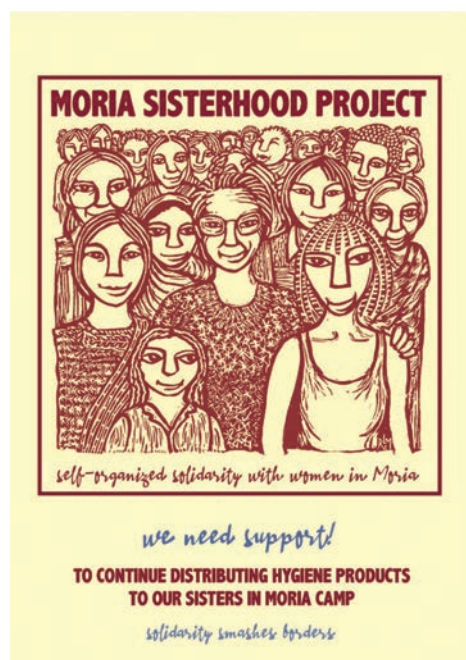
And yet, the people are still coming.

Those already on the island continue to advocate for their own rights and demand positive change. While many of the NGOs formerly present have left, self-organized initiatives within the camp by migrants and others who support them, along with transnational solidarity projects, continue to fight for freedom, dignity, and respect for all.

After a landing, abandoned life jackets and inner tubes slowly drift back out to sea. Many are left behind in the moments when the people on the boats realize they are reaching Greek shores. A sign of the migrants' relief that the dangers of the crossing are now behind them, the items are tossed from the boat several meters out from the beach. Others are discarded on the beaches, and then slowly are pulled back out by the tide. In late 2019 and early 2020, the number of migrants reaching the shores of Lesbos skyrocketed, increasing, for the first time, to levels similar to those in the early years of the crisis, when thousands made their way across the Aegean Sea. In March 2020, amid tense international negotiations over the

terms of the EU-Turkey deal, Turkey announced that it would no longer try to prevent migrants from crossing into Greece. This led to heavy clashes at the borders, as migrants streamed to the land and sea borders, and the Greek Coast Guard scrambled to try to push them back. In response, Greece effectively shut down the registration of new arrivals for a month. As applying for asylum was no longer possible, this criminalized all of those arriving in the hopes of seeking asylum. Their crime: being an illegal migrant. This was coupled with attacks on migrant boats at sea and harassment by both fascist groups and the police of search and rescue teams. The sea off the northern coast of Lesbos was declared a militarized zone, and all search and rescue efforts were suspended.

For those living in Moria Camp, the main state-run refugee camp on Lesbos, the situation has become unbearable. More than 22,000 people currently live semi-permanently in what was originally a transit camp for 3,000. The geographic space it occupies has expanded drastically in the last months and years, now stretching into the olive groves to the east and west of the formal camp. Now, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the camp has in essence been transformed into a closed detention center, where those living there cannot leave and are therefore completely dependent on the crumbling and insufficient infrastructure of the camp. The Greek- and camp-based medical infrastructure is unequipped to deal with a COVID-19 outbreak in



the camp, if it were to happen. There are only 30 medics in the camp, four of whom are doctors.

Mountains of trash accumulate next to tents and container homes. Children wind up playing in it. When it rains, the streams that run through the olive groves are filled with food scraps, plastic water bottles, used diapers, and other garbage. The infrastructure of the camp is in no way equipped for the number of people currently living there. Water only runs through the taps for a few hours a day. There are frequent power shortages and electrical fires that can, in a matter of minutes, engulf whole sections of tightly packed tents. There are not enough hygiene facilities, and the ones that exist are dirty and overflowing.

As long as there have been migrants arriving on Lesbos, there have been

self-organized and solidarity efforts working to support those in need. These have taken on many forms over the years depending on the needs—whether it be in the form of shoreline response and search and rescue efforts, action kitchens, material support distributions, self-organized assemblies, media projects, social centers, or informal housing structures. Today, several of these initiatives remain active, and new ones are being created to address the current situation, speaking to the incredible resilience of people even in incredibly precarious circumstances. Throughout all of the violence and uncertainty, resistance lives on through acts of mutual care, solidarity, and the slow work of building communities that transcend national borders, language, age, ethnicity, race, or legal status. Last week, in the women and children’s shelter in which I work, we celebrated the first birthday

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... we wake up and the human lines are starting. Endless waiting in lines is how we pass our days. For food, for our documents, for blankets ... and in the end, they tell you that ‘the food has finished, there are not enough blankets, come back tomorrow, next week, next month.’”

—A testimony from Moria, December 2019, published in “Voices of Freedom: Open Assembly of People With and Without Papers.”

of our youngest resident. The shelter functions as a collective, multicultural, and multigenerational space. Women from more than seven different countries live together, grounded in principles of anti-discrimination and feminist praxis to create environments in which women feel safe and supported and take responsibility for the space. It was beautiful to see this community of women, coming from several different countries and speaking many different languages, joining together to celebrate the youngest among them. Even in the incredibly difficult and tense situation we find ourselves in here on Lesbos, we were finding a reason to come together, to celebrate life, and to be joyful.

*To read about Powers’s earlier work on the island, visit [colby.edu/mag](http://colby.edu/mag).*