

# Annual Report 2023



Irida Women's Center



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## A Greeting Letter from Chloe Kousoula, our Founder and CEO

Dear Friends and Supporters of Irida Women's Center,

Throughout 2023, our world continued to endure long-term and escalating conflicts, economic instability, and the devastating impact of climate change.

These crises have placed an ever-growing number of people in precarious situations, forcing many into uncertainty and poverty. The mechanisms that once mitigated these issues -such as peace treaties and accountability for violations of international law- seem to have weakened, leading to profound negative consequences.

Amid these complex challenges, women and girls are disproportionately affected.

Their safety, freedom and rights are increasingly at risk. During turbulent times, they face heightened vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and abuse. Alarming, the number of women and girls living in conflict-affected areas has doubled since 2017, and 1 in 10 women worldwide lives in extreme poverty.

Greece ranks 73rd out of 146 countries in gender equality. Within the European Union, Greece stands at the 24th place with a score of 58 out of 100 in 2023, indicating that substantial progress is still needed. While Greece's gender equality score has seen a notable increase of 4.6 points since 2020 -the fastest rate of progress in the EU- there is much work ahead. We acknowledge and applaud every positive development but remain aware of the significant challenges and immense shortcomings.

Additionally in Greece, more than 1 in 4 women is at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

4 in 10 women experience physical, psychological, or sexual gender-based violence at least once in their adulthood. The situation becomes even more complex for women with a refugee and migrant background.

Throughout 2023, Irida remained in the frontline protecting, empowering, and supporting hundreds of women and their children regardless of nationality, ethnicity, and legal status residing in Northern Greece. Our provisions and services were shaped by a holistic approach, supporting vulnerable women to access the fundamental rights and resources they are entitled to yet deprived of, due to their gender. Through our two interlinked programs, the Protection Program and the Livelihood Program, our members are supported with casework, legal assistance with court representation, psychological and psychosocial support, skill-building, and employability services. We work to eliminate the barriers that hinder women's overall well-being while empowering them to make informed decisions and regain ownership of their lives.

However, the positive impact we worked hard to achieve would not have been possible without the profound support and extraordinary generosity of our donors and the firm determination and commitment of our partners and supporters.

Your belief in our mission have empowered us to meet the growing needs of our community in a changing and unpredictable time. Through your contribution, we respond, effectively, despite the complex international and national contexts we navigate. Together, we are building a foundation for future generations where gender equality will be a reality.

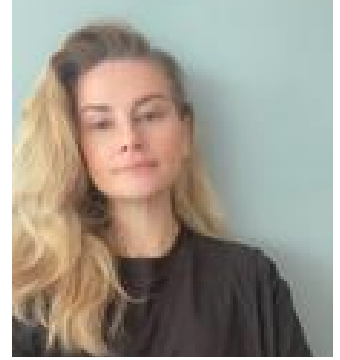
The dedication of our partners and supporters has enabled us to mobilize both tangible and intangible resources, resulting in meaningful change and maximizing the quality of our response.

Our annual report has one primary goal, to assess our impact and ensure that every woman is empowered and supported.

We are profoundly grateful for your continued support of our vision and mission. Your contributions, in all forms, inspire us daily and fuel our efforts to build a society that embodies Irida's values of resilience, accountability, respect, and community-driven solutions to every challenge.

With heartfelt gratitude,

Chloe Kousoula



Welcome to the Irida Women's Center Annual Report for 2023.

2023 was the introductory year of the implementation of our Strategic Plan for 2023-2025. Guided by our vision to leave no woman behind while availing our 8-year hands-on experience and expertise in the field of women's support, we designed this triennial Strategic Plan to protect, empower, and support the most socially and economically vulnerable women in the most impactful way possible. Responding to a constantly changing local and national context and considering the multiple crises globally, we set 3 core priorities to shape our work.

### **Protection**

Our goal is to strengthen women's capacity. We aim to help socially and economically vulnerable women build self-awareness and ownership and access the resources they are entitled to while claiming and upholding their fundamental social rights.

### **Economic Empowerment**

Our goal is to empower women to gain the skills and confidence they need to pursue opportunities for employment and income generation. To accomplish this goal, we focused our efforts on supporting women to build their personalized career paths and navigate the Greek labor market, gain income-generating skills, and build confidence and self-leadership to enter the job market.

### **Organizational Development**

Our goal is to ensure and strengthen organizational sustainability and growth. Specifically, we intend to secure the financial viability of the organization, strengthen its institutional structure, and enhance its operational efficiency.

Standing by our 3 core priorities, we initiated the implementation of our 2 major Programs, the Protection Program and the Livelihood Program, working passionately and with dedication to complete the first, yet fundamental steps by focusing on socially and economically vulnerable individuals identifying themselves as women –Greek, refugee, and migrant- above the age of 18, living at risk of poverty, gender-based violence, and social exclusion. We focus our efforts on helping them become active members of society and achieve their goals. Our services are designed to provide resources and guidance for learning, informed decision-making, and personal and professional growth. We protect, empower, and support all women, alleviating their vulnerabilities and helping them enhance their skills, become agents of change, and fully engage with their communities.





## A Glance of 2023

610

Women reached as registered community members

227

Children supported in our Child's Safe Space Project.

41

Different Countries represented

***"I would have never thought that I could get into the sea. Even the idea would terrify me. But, now, I did it and I am very proud of myself. I really liked it and enjoyed the sense of the water. Irida helped me to overcome one of my greatest fears and I am thankful for that."***  
***S. is a 19-year-old woman from Afghanistan.***

S., a young woman from Afghanistan, was an asylum-seeker in the process of relocation to Canada. She was registered with Irida in January 2023 and was a very active young community member, always willing to give back to the community. This feedback was given after our annual visit to the beach in the context of our open psychosocial support sessions. She was very hesitant to join the rest of the women to the beach and get into the sea, but eventually, she was courageous enough to overcome her fear and try swimming.

***"Thank you for what you did! My nephew is like a son to me and remaining united with him is the most important thing for my family!"***  
***R., a 25-year-old woman from Afghanistan.***

R. is a woman from Afghanistan - a single mother of a child and a guardian of her minor nephew -who is her sister's child. R. had a complex asylum case; the Legal Expert prepared her for her asylum interview with a positive outcome for her and her child. Additionally, the Legal Expert prepared her to go through an asylum interview on behalf of her minor nephew as his guardian. The interview went very well, and the results were successful. Moving forward, the Legal Expert supported R. and her family in issuing their travel document in order to be able to travel and reunite with her sister who lives abroad.

***"The primary reason I started coming to Irida Women's Center was to access free 1:1 psychological support. The psychologist - who is excellent at her work- suggested I join in other learning and recreational activities, like English courses or sewing classes. The 1:1 sessions and all the other activities boosted my morale and I felt a great change in my mental. I also met new friends. Finally, I feel that something good is happening to me after all the sad incidents that stigmatized me."***  
***M. is a 45-year-old woman from Greece.***

M. is a Greek citizen who experienced multiple physical and emotionally challenging situations in her life. She registered with the Center to access 1:1 psychological support, however, after the suggestion of the Psychologist, she started attending further activities and services, discovering how much she benefits from the holistic approach of our organization and the Irida community.

## The Protection Program

The Protection Program is the integral first step in our efforts to accomplish our vision of a world where no woman is left behind. Through individualized protection services, we ensure that all women are supported and empowered to pursue personal and professional growth and determine the course of their lives.

In 2023, Irida Women's Center emphasized casework and social services, helping women alleviate their anxiety over day-to-day necessities mitigating their primary needs, and navigating the Greek system by connecting them with public authorities, public services, and medical actors to access resources and provisions they were entitled to.

Responding to our women's growing needs and intending to help them build personal resilience and self-confidence, we introduced individualized psychological support services. This support combined with our regular psychosocial support services allowed us to work hand-in-hand with the women to overcome their challenges and build their resilience and growth. In parallel, throughout the year, "Arts, Tea, and Community, a peer-to-peer psychosocial support activity initiated by women community members facilitating the activity sessions. During the sessions, the women establish bonds and connections using art to share common experiences and support each other.

Additionally, we continued to cover a major gap in legal assistance and court representation, remaining the sole actor in Northern Greece providing comprehensive legal assistance and court representation for women in Asylum, Migration, Civil, and Criminal Law. Throughout 2023, we recorded a growing number of requests for child custody support. Within the second half of 2023, we accepted multiple referrals for child custody support from 9 different refugee camp facilities including Alexandria, Diavata, Ioannina, Kavala, Lagadikia, Nea Kavala, Sintiki, Vagiochori, and Veroia.



# The Protection Program in Numbers

January 2023 - December 2023

## Social Services

583

women received social services

220

women received general counseling with the Social Worker

132

women received support with medical care and medication

72

women were provided with non-food items

184

women received orientation, mediation, and general information

3

women were provided with safe housing

## Legal Aid and Court Representation

140

women received legal assistance.

285

other direct beneficiaries who are first-degree relatives of our members.

668

legal appointments were held.

43

cases represented at the court.

99%

success rate of resolved cases

## Psychological and Psychosocial Support

49

women had at least one individualized counseling session with the Psychologist.

180

Individualized counseling sessions with the Psychologist were held.

132

women participated in the open psychosocial support group sessions through recreational activities.

75

open psychosocial support group sessions through recreational activities were held.

## Meet Khadija

*I am Khadija. I am 70 years old. I was born in Morocco.*

*I came to Greece in 2017 and applied for asylum. But I was rejected. This was the first negative decision I received.*

*Since then, it has been 7 years and I still try to navigate the asylum system in Greece. I have applied 4 times in total. Every time, I received a second-instance negative decision. I have been living in Greece for almost a decade without documents. I am getting old with many health issues.*

*Despite the repeated rejections and my health problems, I refuse to give up, I have faith and I continue to persevere. And I could not make it without the support of Irida.*

*Irida has been a lifeline for me. I have been a community member for more than 6 years. When arrived in Thessaloniki, I was sleeping rough. I did not know where to go, or from whom to ask for help. I was told about Irida a few days later, and the first time I visited the Center I was welcomed with open arms.*

*The community center became my home. I have found a safe place to rest, eat, and drink. Since that first time, I have been coming to Irida every day. It is one of the few places where I am seen, heard, and accepted.*

*The people at Irida have supported me in so many ways. They booked me an appointment with a lawyer. When my health deteriorated and I was suffering from horrible pain in my leg, they covered the medical and medication costs, helping me relieve the pain and cope with my health problem.*

*At the same time, I participate in classes. The classes are free. I am joining in the Greek courses to improve my Greek.*

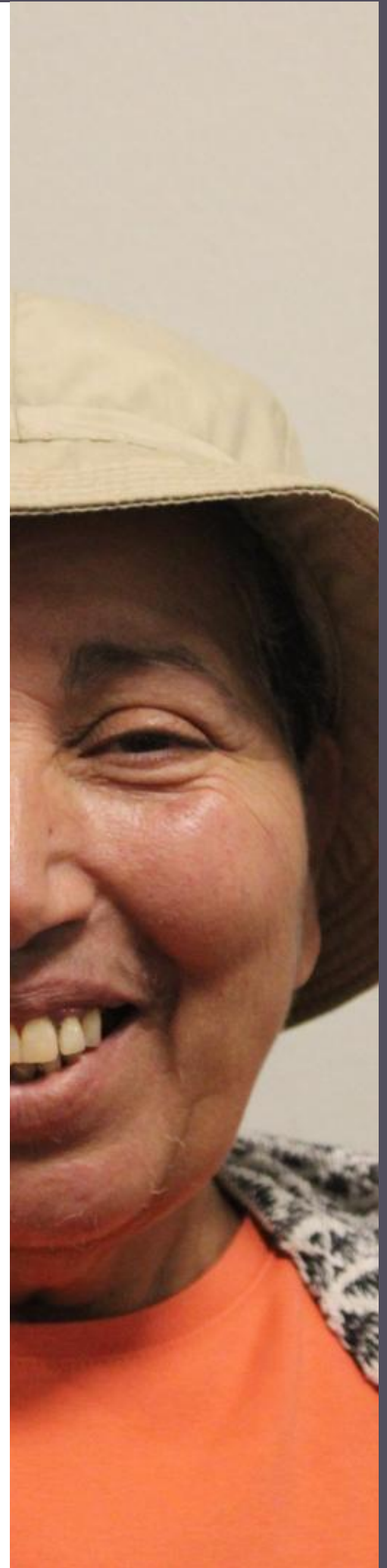
*The most precious memory from Irida is from December 2023. In October, I took part in vocational training in professional sewing to upgrade my tailoring skills. In December, after completing the training, I graduated and received my certificate in a celebration. I was incredibly happy and proud of what I had accomplished.*

*At Irida, I feel valued because I can both accomplish important things for my personal growth and enjoy simple stuff like having a hot meal at the dining table with my friends, or drinking hot tea in the winter and fresh juice in the summer.*

*Those things mean the world to me because they boost my hope for a better future.*

*I refuse to give up. I refuse to lose my faith and hope. My dream is to have documents because I long for the freedom to move beyond Thessaloniki. I love the city and this is where I want to live. But, at the same time, I feel trapped here. I want to visit other cities and places across Greece. Having the means to move freely in the country and travel makes me feel like I will be normal again.*

*Finding the Center has been like finding a family that gives me the courage I need when times feel at their worst. For any woman struggling, I can tell with certainty that at Irida you will find not only help and support, but a caring community that will understand you.*







## The Livelihood Program

Within the second semester of 2023, we launched our Livelihoods Program. Our Livelihoods Program aims to eliminate the perceptual cycle of poverty and social exclusion and empower women to obtain skills and confidence to pursue opportunities for employment and sustainable income generation. It includes skill-building and vocational training opportunities, the development of soft skills critical to navigating the labor market and building a career path, and job counseling.

Even though the Livelihood Program did not officially begin until the second half of 2023, we are proud of accomplishing some critical milestones in a short timeframe, paving the path, and setting solid foundations for reaching a step closer to our core priority of women's Economic Empowerment. Particularly:

- We set 3-month cycles of skill-building activities inclusive of English and Greek Language and Digital Literacy Courses while introducing the first preparatory class for the Examination for the Certificate of Competency in English. 24 women participated in the preparatory classes, with 18 joining the exams and 6 passing the examination with flying colors.
- We launched the first vocational training with a certification nationally recognized. In partnership with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Lifelong Learning Center, we facilitated a vocational training of 16 courses on Fashion Design. 13 women out of the 15 participants graduated from the training, becoming certified tailors.
- We welcomed to the team the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Livelihood Officer expanding our Program by introducing employability services including 1:1 job counseling and job readiness group training to facilitate the women's access to the local workforce based on their skills, experience, and aspirations.

# The Livelihoods Program in Numbers

July 2023 - December 2023

## Skill-Building Activities in hours

957

Women participated

68



## Job Counseling Sessions

89

Women attended

50



## Vocational Training

1

Women attended

15



## Workplace Soft Skills Workshops

5

Women participated

44





## Meet Asmahan

*I am Asmahan\*. I am 32 years old. I am the mother of a 3-year-old boy named Abdul\*.*

*The Taliban authorities took control of Afghanistan following the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021. That day completely altered my family's life, because that day I was forced to escape my country along with my baby boy.*

*I was happy in Afghanistan. My life was good. I was a teacher and an assistant to a professor of political sociology working in the university. And when I got married and had my son, I decided to devote myself to my family.*

*When the Taliban regime took power, I was told I should flee the country as soon as possible because I was in danger of being married to an American citizen - my husband is American - and my son has American citizenship.*

*My way out came with a relocation project that brought me to Greece. When I arrived in Greece my son was about 1 year old; he turned 3 this year. The first months were extremely scary for me. I was all by myself with a little child speaking no English or Greek or being in a position to go out and navigate this new city. And because I am Muslim, I was also very worried about how locals would see and accept me.*

*The biggest challenge I was called to cope with in Greece was going out alone. I was rarely going out alone -without a family member- in Afghanistan. Now I had to move around in Thessaloniki, a completely unknown place, with my son, without being able to communicate with people in the streets and ask for help. Once, I had to go from the airport to my house -which is very far from the city center. I could not find my way and it was very frustrating; I still remember how alone and helpless I felt at that moment.*

*Then I was told about Irida, a place for women where I would receive support and learn English. I come almost every day; to attend my English classes or join other activities, like painting or cooking, and meet with my new friends who I met at Irida.*

*Additionally, my son loves to come here and play with other children. This is good for me because I am a single mother here without any help, and I sometimes need to have some private space to recharge to be a good mother.*

*Irida made me proud of myself. When I registered I did not speak English at all. But now I speak and I can go to the supermarket or the doctor, for a walk and ask for help. I am going to participate in English classes until the day I leave because I want to be able to find a good job when we go to the USA.*

*Today, 2 years and 8 months later, I am still waiting for our relocation; it is a very long process that can be quite emotionally draining from time to time. My husband and his family are there. It is very challenging for my son to grow up without his father, for my husband who cannot be with us, and for me because I am alone waiting for something that I do not know when it will finally happen.*

*Life has not been easy for me. My only blessing is my family. That is why I look forward to going to the USA. I am craving to find a good job and learn how to drive a car. I used to take driving lessons in Afghanistan but I did not manage to have the exams. I hope that one day they will give me a VISA.*

*Until then, I find hope in Irida, my teacher, the English class, and my friends.*

*\* Names have been changed to maintain their anonymity for safety reasons.*





## The Child's Safe Space Project

In parallel with the 2 major Programs, harmonized with the organization's core priorities, a Child's Safe Space and an early childhood development project is available in our center.

The Child's Friendly Space is an integral component for the impactful implementation of our programming, bringing double-added value to our mission by working as a supporting childcare mechanism for mothers allowing them to fully engage in our programming and focus on their personal and professional growth, pursuing a safer, improved, and more sustainable livelihood for them and their children.

Additionally, it is a safe and secure space providing children with a supportive, caring, and specially designed environment.

We mainly focus our efforts on children aged from 1 to 6 years because children of this age group are more likely to stay out of the scope of compulsory education and be excluded from learning development, and integration initiatives.

We enhance the children's physical and psychosocial well-being through the Child's Friendly Space where we work hand-in-hand with the mother to cultivate a sense of safety, security, and acceptance and develop opportunities for the children to play, learn, and explore the world, be active, and receive stimulation and support from the pedagogist, their mothers, and their peers to grow, bloom, and thrive.

The early childhood development activities include healthy snacks, fundamental movement skills, music activities, creative art, reading, playing, educational activities, and cultural activities.

*January 2023 - December 2023*



227

children accessed  
the Child's Safe  
Space



157

mothers  
benefited from  
the Child's Safe  
Space



## Financial Review

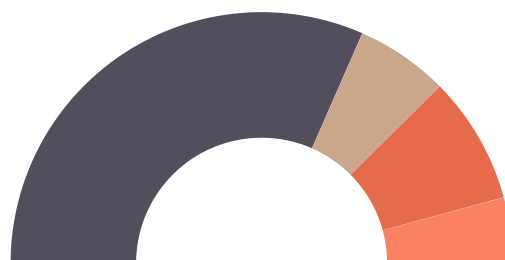


### INCOME SOURCES



- Foundations (94.53%)
- Institutional (4.72%)
- Private Donors (0.74%)

### EXPENSES ALLOCATION



- Programs (63.17%)
- Operations (11.95%)
- Managment (16.44%)
- Fundraising (8.44%)

\*  
The difference of 122,083 € concerns costs for 2024.

## Rising Above 2023

*1,500 women to be reached and supported by the end of 2025*

Unique Women Reached in 2023.

41%

In 2023, we embarked on the first year of our Strategic Plan with the vision of leaving no woman behind and 3 defined core priorities of social protection, economic empowerment, and organizational development. By accomplishing our strategic priorities, our initial goal was to reach and support 1,000 unique women by the end of 2025.

Over 2023, we exceeded expectations, reaching and providing services to 610 women, each benefitting from tailored support to meet their unique needs.

Inspired by this remarkable progress, we are raising our aspirations for the next years. As we move into 2024, we are proud to announce our revised commitment: reaching 1,500 unique women by the end of 2025.

We are confident that by steadfastly pursuing our strategic priorities, we will achieve this ambitious goal and empower women to pursue opportunities for personal and professional growth, taking ownership and transforming their lives.

Simultaneously, our 3 core priorities will remain at the forefront of our efforts. Protection, Economic Empowerment, and Organizational Development are the driving forces propelling our organization forward.





## Acknowledgements

Looking back on 2023, we are profoundly grateful to our donors and supporters.

The past year was stigmatized by multiple humanitarian crises and unspoken tragedies. Your dedicated compassion, kindness, and solidarity were - and continue to be - an extraordinary privilege. Your unwavering support and generosity have been fundamental to our mission, enabling Irida Women's Center to protect, empower, and support hundreds of socially and economically vulnerable women in Northern Greece.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude, as our work would not have been possible without you. Through our joint forces, we pave the path for a world where no woman is left behind.

We would like to thank our major donors for 2023 in an alphabetical order, including but not limited to:

- AMNA
- CHOOSE LOVE
- GLOBAL GIVING
- HUMANITY NOW
- INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE HELLAS
- KING BEDAUIN FOUNDATION
- L'OREAL FUND FOR WOMEN
- LATTER DAYS SAINT CHARITY
- MEDITERRANEAN WOMEN'S FUND
- SOLIDARITEE
- UCB COMMUNITY HEALTH FUND
- US EMBASSY OF ATHENS
- WORLD ORT

We wholeheartedly thank everyone who supported and donated to Irida Women's Center. Your invaluable contributions have been vital to implementing our mission, to empower all women to pursue opportunities for personal and professional growth.

We extend our gratitude to our partner organizations who collaborated with us in our efforts to more effectively support our community, contributing to building more gender-inclusive communities. A special shoutout to the incredible interns and volunteers. Your skills, dedication, and passion enriched Irida and empowered our community.

Additionally, we acknowledge the outstanding work of our personnel who played a crucial role in our achievements. Their agility enabled Irida to navigate a challenging year successfully while continuing to make a positive impact on women's lives.

We remain committed to working tirelessly and passionately to provide the most vulnerable women and their children with tailored, targeted, and timely solutions and services in order to meet their unique needs.