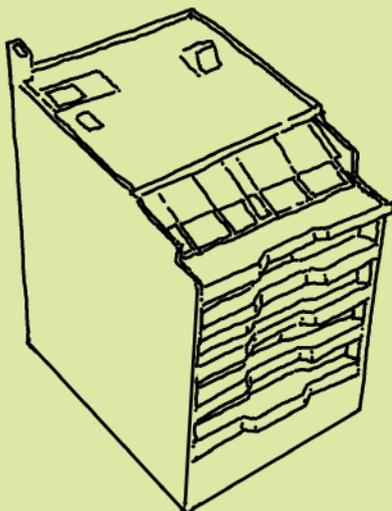


## Melissa Network

A network for migrant and refugee women  
from 2014



Feron Str. Victoria Square, 18  
104 34 Athens  
Greece

🌐 [melissanetwork.org](http://melissanetwork.org)  
📘 [Melissanetworkgreece33](https://www.facebook.com/Melissanetworkgreece33)  
📷 [melissa\\_network](https://www.instagram.com/melissa_network)  
🐦 [melissanetgr](https://twitter.com/melissanetgr)

Melissa is a network for integration and a safe space where migrant women in Athens can meet, share their experiences and find the support needed to follow their dreams. It was founded in September 2014 with the help of migrant women, and today it is made up of women from 45 different countries who now live and work in Greece.

The name “Melissa” means “honeybee”: its vision of society is not as a collection of isolated cells, but as a beehive of creativity, communication and exchange.

Through an innovative program for integration, which includes workshops, support and training, Melissa provides a platform for networking, skill building and advocacy dedicated to migrant and refugee women.

The aim of the initiative is to engage migrant and refugee women in the public sphere, because they bring with them unique skills, ideas, and stories and, if supported, can become agents of change in their own lives, their families, their communities, as well as in the society they live in.



## WHERE

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Melissa Network is located in a building on the margins of Victoria Square in downtown Athens. Their multicultural safe space is purposely nestled in the middle of a neighborhood close to a stronghold of the xenophobic, extreme, right-wing group Golden Dawn. On the walls of the buildings surrounding Melissa you can see graffiti declaring "Refugees Welcome", as well as fascist slogans and the symbol of Golden Dawn.

### LOCATION

Urban

### TYPE OF SPACE

Building

### ORIGINAL FUNCTION

Residential

### YEAR OF CONSTRUCTION

1928

### SURFACE AREA

500 sqm

### OWNERSHIP

Private

### CONCESSION

Regular rent

### CONDITION BEFORE ACTIVATION

Vacant

### COMPOSITION OF THE SPACE

1 workshop space  
8 carpentry workshop spaces  
1 media lab

## WHEN

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### TIME OF DAY USED

Morning ..... 7am - 1pm 50%  
Afternoon ... 1pm - 7pm 50%  
Evening ..... 7pm - 1am 0%  
Night ..... 1am - 7am 0%

Working days 80%

Weekend 20%

### OPENING HOURS

Monday-Friday: 9am - 6pm

Weekends: only during specific events

### AVERAGE USERS PER DAY

100-130 during working days

50-80 during weekends

## WHAT

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The Melissa Network focuses on seven branches of activities to fulfill community-building goals for integration of women and girls: literacy, psycho-social support, information and referrals, advocacy support, art and creativity, skill and capacity building.

### SURFACE IN USE

500 sqm

### THEMATIC AREAS

Activism and politics  
Culture and arts  
Design, crafts and production  
Education and training  
Sport and leisure  
Welfare  
Other: gender issues

### USER DEMOGRAPHIC

Under-represented people: women  
asylum seekers and refugees, women  
migrants

### COLLABORATIONS

Associations and collectives  
Public administrations and public  
authorities  
Other: volunteers from all over the world

**NETWORK**

National  
International

**WHO**

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Melissa Network is comprised of migrant women from over 45 countries, who live and work in Greece. The staff – mainly made up of migrants – works in collaboration with academic experts, artists, volunteers and other organizations to support the newcomers. The participation of women leaders from long-term migrant communities who were involved in Melissa’s early days is one of the strengths of the project.

**MANAGING ORGANIZATION(S)**

1. Melissa Network

**PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE MANAGEMENT**

20 women  
20–30 volunteers

**HOW**

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**NATURE OF THE INITIATIVE**

Bottom-up

**TYPE OF MANAGEMENT**

Vertical

**ECONOMIC RESOURCES**

Donations  
Public grants

**TYPE OF ACTIVITIES**

100% Free

Watch the video  
“Being A Woman”





## How did your story begin?

Everything was inspired by the awareness that the members of every community are active only within their own group, but normally do not come into contact or sympathize with other communities. We felt the need for a space where migrants could share advice, activities, talents, and their stories, for a network that would make migrant voices heard and would create a solidarity network.

When we started, in 2014, we did not have a regular space, so we would meet in squares and outdoor spaces. When we saw the building on the margins of Victoria Square we fell in love with it, and we told ourselves that it would be our headquarters, the place where we would create a space for refugee migrant women. It was an old residential building that was being rented to migrants because it was in very bad condition. So we occupied the ground floor and the first floor, we renovated and decorated it with the help of refugee women and we turned it into a safe space.

We are implementing a holistic integration program: every day we organize activities to provide support and a learning space to refugee women who have just arrived in Greece or have been abused. They can come to Melissa, meet other women, share their stories, express and cultivate their talents and skills, attend language courses, and find psychological support.

“We organize activities to provide support and a learning space to refugee women who have just arrived in Greece or have been abused. They can come to Melissa, meet other women, share their stories...”

### **Is there a practice or value that represents you and you think may be an inspiration to others?**

Melissa’s program for integration and community building among migrant women and girls is based on

a holistic approach that aims to promote equality, involvement in the program implementation, and communication with society.

In concrete terms, the program has seven branches that we call “7 pillars of activities”: a program of language literacy, with Greek lessons in several levels and, upon request, courses in English, French, and German, psychological support that includes individual counseling and sessions of group therapy, training courses on legal rights, advocacy, but also art workshops, programs for the development of their skills and abilities, and self-care and community activities.

## What is the secret ingredient that makes your story unique?

I think it’s very important to create a safe and inclusive space, and to show empathy and trust in order to create a community. If we follow this spirit, the women will surely feel involved and consequently participate openly. When they see their drawings on the wall, or when they work, they feel part of the network and the activities we carry out at Melissa.



*Interview with: Deborah Carlos-Valencia*

