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Asylum Seekers who are Victims of Domestic Violence:

The next murder is around the corner

It's hard to be a refugee. It's much harder being a women refugee. All the hardship experienced by a refugee is increased a thousand fold when you're a woman. Woman refugees are more vulnerable to rape and violence, and much easier to exploit and silence" (A, Eritrean woman asylum seekers)

In the absence of appropriate solutions and without access to social services (except in the most extreme cases), many women asylum seekers in Israel find themselves utterly helpless in the face of perpetual threat of domestic violence. Their plight should be included under any comprehensive, national-level plan for eradicating the scourge.

The asylum-seeking population in Israel numbers approximately 45,000 persons. They are not granted an official status or even basic rights, and experience harrowing socio-economic conditions, while being subjected to constant threats of incarceration and mounting pressure to leave the country. The repercussions of the community's neglect are evident primarily among its most vulnerable groups, and in particular - women. They have fled persecution or war in their countries of origin, and many have survived torture camps in the Sinai Peninsula (where they had been subjected to rape and brutal abuse), only to end up in Israel, without any rights, benefits or status. Additionally, these women find themselves part of a marginalized and male-dominated community.

The permanent stress and mental anxiety occasioned both by past traumas and the current reality in Israel, in tandem with migration-induced changes to the family hierarchy and structure, the interaction with the absorbing population and significant cultural gaps – all combine to trigger serious conflicts within the familial cell. **In the course of 80 interviews conducted recently by ASSAF, it emerged that 48 women, 60 percent, have experienced domestic violence.** The problem of marital abuse within the community is also manifested by the data collated by the Knesset Research and Information Centre (Violence Directed at Women – 2013 Data), stating that 71 women had been murdered by their partners in Israel between 2009-2013, of whom 17 percent were foreign nationals.

To date, the relevant authorities have refused to address this grave phenomenon. Many women asylum seekers – while sustaining daily abuse by their partners - are denied any support by the welfare authorities, and are therefore left exposed to exacerbated injuries. The only form of protection available to them today, albeit partial and limited, are the emergency shelters for battered women. Only those who are deemed to be under "immediate danger" are admitted - on a temporary basis.

Women have no other option but to keep silent and not to complain. In reality, their access to shelters is limited. Most of them lack sufficient information about their due legal rights, and many are not even aware of the fact that domestic violence constitutes a criminal offence that entitles them to protection. They are usually hesitant to approach the police, who are perceived as a threat. Should they nonetheless proceed to do so, they risk incurring internal criticism within their community.

Many women choose not to turn to the police for survival reasons: should their violent partners be incarcerated they might find themselves completely alone, often with children, yet ineligible for state authority support (e.g. social benefits such as assistance with rent for single-parent families or financial grants upon leaving the shelters). The few who dare to approach the police often report that the stations offer no interpreters and they find it extremely difficult to communicate the danger awaiting them at home. Some women told about a dismissive attitude from police officers, others told that police officers avoided taking any action.

The treatment afforded by shelters is insufficient. The women are not covered by any health insurance during their stay in the shelters, which makes it difficult to provide holistic treatment for their various needs. Additionally,

linguistic and intercultural gaps hinder optimal support. Once discharged from the shelters, in absence of any social services or support from welfare, they soon find themselves subjected once again to the same dangerous reality as before. The State Comptroller summarized the situation as follows (s'64c, May 2014):

Israeli women are entitled to a full array of services and a wide spectrum of solutions and the most difficult cases are admitted into shelters. In contrast, foreign women are only eligible for the solution given to the most severe cases – referral to the shelter. Moreover, the usual process of treatment in the shelter, which includes coaching, support and counselling aiming at an independent post-shelter existence, that is based on the exploration of future possibilities available to each individual woman – is not offered to foreign victims. In an attempt to set up an independent existence away from the cycle of violence, a foreign woman is not entitled to any assistance with rent upon exiting the shelter and trying to find accommodation, unlike her Israeli peers. She is not eligible for long-term group therapy, nor is she provided with the full array of services (including coaching and mental counselling, rehabilitation and family treatment) offered to Israeli victims. Often she finds herself ineligible for medical treatment, since she is not covered by state insurance. In the absence of all the above, the usual rehabilitation process (including that of the shelter protection period) does not take place in cases of foreign women victims.

The official neglect and disregard for the plight of women victims of domestic violence in the asylum-seeking community, only serves to perpetuate their exploitation, abuse and even murder by their partners.

The solution is obvious: the treatment provided for women asylum seekers should be made the same as the treatment provided to Israeli women, and they should be included in any nation-wide initiative for combatting domestic violence across the country.

1. Women victims of domestic violence should be made eligible for continuous treatment that is unconditional and irrespective of any existence of "life endangering circumstances." They should be allowed immediate access to shelters offering risk evaluation, protection, counselling and assistance, interference in emergency situations, treatment of victims, perpetrators and children exposed to violence, and more.
2. Full medical services should be provided to women victims in shelters, and to give a continuous support and treatment also after their discharge (including financial grants in accordance with the Social Welfare Act).
3. The relevant authorities and treating institutions (e.g. police, social services, shelters etc.) should make their services culturally and linguistically accessible.
4. The Single-Parent Family Act, the Social Welfare Act and the Alimony Act should all be extended to the asylum-seeking community (in the form of rent grants, social worker counselling etc.), to guarantee an ample safety net for the economic survival of victims who wish to separate from their abusive partners.