

Asylum seekers in Israel left destitute during Covid 19 crisis

October 2020

According to the Population and Immigration Authority, there are 28,000 asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan residing in Israel. They have lived in the country for over a decade with no regular status and no access to healthcare, social security or social services open to Israeli residents, other than in extreme, life-threatening situations. Asylum seekers have been severely affected by the state of emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. Six months into the crisis, the asylum seekers community's situation is deteriorating and urgent response is necessary to prevent a humanitarian crisis.

UNEMPLOYED ASYLUM SEEKERS: NO UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS OR ACCESSIBLE SEVERANCE PAY

It is estimated that around 80% of asylum seekers in Israel are currently unemployed. Largely employed in hospitality and restaurants, many lost their income during the first lockdown in Israel, in March 2020. During the second lockdown in September 2020, thousands more asylum seekers have lost their jobs.

Unlike Israeli citizens and residents, asylum seekers are not entitled to social security benefits, including unemployment benefits - for them, unemployment (or even unpaid leave) means total destitution. Most asylum seekers in Israel are entitled to severance pay, but under Israeli law, they can only access such funds if they leave Israel permanently.

ACUTE ECONOMIC HARDSHIP: MORE HUNGER, LESS SAFETY

The crisis has affected every aspect of life for asylum seekers and their families. With no access to social benefits (including for single parents, children or people with disabilities) many are pushed into poverty. Those who have previously managed, despite Israel's draconian policies, to provide for their families now struggle to buy food or pay rent.

ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel has reported a 97% increase in requests for food and baby formula since March, compared with the same time last year. There is a growing concern that many asylum seekers will become homeless and more children will grow hungry.

MANY HAVE LOST THEIR HEALTH CARE

Asylum seekers in Israel have no right to subsidized health care, but employers are required to purchase health insurance on their behalf. Once asylum seekers lose their jobs, their insurance is no longer valid. With no insurance, they can no longer get treated in one of Israel's four state-mandated health services (Kupat Cholim). This situation, problematic as it is in and of itself, becomes dangerous during the Covid-19 crisis: Asylum seekers have no choice but to try and get treated at an emergency room, contrary to current Health Ministry regulations; those suffering acute or chronic conditions (such as cancer or heart conditions) struggle to receive the care they need; and with no healthcare, some asylum seekers in various parts of Israel may struggle to get tested for Covid-19.

WOMEN AFFECTED BY THE CRISIS

There are 5000 women asylum seekers living in Israel. Typically vulnerable and marginalized, the situation of many has deteriorated since the outbreak. Although they form around 20% of asylum seekers in Israel, ASSAF has reported that more than 50% of those who turn to the organization for help are women, with a 70% increase in requests for help from single mothers. They typically ask for food, diapers and help paying their rent.

ASSAF has also reported a 400% increase in reports of domestic violence. Women asylum seekers who are victims of domestic abuse are not entitled to support in one of the Ministry of Social Services' Violence Prevention Centers. Those who face imminent danger are offered a place for them and their children in an emergency shelter.

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, hundreds of women asylum seekers are left without prenatal care. With no insurance due to loss of jobs and in light of the crisis, the volunteer health services at TEREM clinic in south Tel Aviv have been reduced significantly. The Women's health clinic run by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel is unable to provide for all those who seek its help, including cases of high-risk pregnancies.

CHILDREN LEFT WITH NO HEALTH CARE AND WITH NO ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Children of Asylum seekers are also at imminent risk of losing their health care. Physicians for Human Rights - Israel have been approached by dozens of families who struggle with growing debt to the state-mandated health services (Kupat Cholim) and their children have been refused medical care as a result. There are an estimated 7,000 minors, children of asylum seekers in Israel, who are entitled to a special subsidized health care scheme. Many parents, however, struggle to keep up the payments since the outbreak and an increasing number of children are left with no healthcare.

Children of asylum seekers in both preschools and elementary schools lag behind their Israeli peers developmentally and academically and often suffer from behavioral and emotional issues. The closure of schools and preschools meant many children spent many hours of the day in small, crowded apartments, usually with more than one family. Many were unable to join their schools' online learning activities as they do not have adequate space for study, no computers and no internet connection. Parents were often unable to communicate properly with teaching staff due to lack of linguistic and cultural mediation services at the schools and were unable to help their children with their online learning. As a result, thousands of children of asylum seekers were excluded from studying.

DEPOSIT FUNDS DISAPPEARED AND NEVER RETURNED TO ASYLUM SEEKERS

In April 2020, the Israeli High Court of Justice ruled that the funds deducted from the wages of asylum seekers under the Deposit Law, must be paid back. Many employers, however,

had never deposited the funds in what was a process unregulated by the state. Thousands of asylum seekers have lost their hard-earned money.

VISA EXTENSION APPLICATIONS REFUSED AND ASYLUM SEEKERS UNABLE TO WORK

Thousands of asylum seekers have turned to aid organizations for help as their employers still require their services, but for bureaucratic reasons their visa extension applications have been turned down by The Population and Immigration Authority. Having no valid visas, they are unable to work. They are also unable to use their bank accounts, savings or receive their deposit funds, following the High Court of Justice ruling in April 2020. In a current bill that regulated the compensation the state offers employers for quarantine days of employees asylum seekers were excluded so that their employers will not be compensated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Food supplies, financial aid and rent aid funds must be granted urgently to families of asylum seekers that are in need. Social services should be fully accessible at least until the end of the current crisis.
- Israel must implement a subsidized healthcare scheme for all asylum seekers as a matter of urgency.
- Until such a scheme is implemented, Covid-19 testing centers must be opened and made accessible to all populations around the country, including those with no formal status or health insurance. Budgets must be allocated to treat acute patients in general and oncological patients in particular, and to provide proper healthcare for asylum seekers, including prenatal care and flu vaccinations. In addition, a solution must be constructed to cater for asylum seekers who need to maintain quarantine and cannot do so in their homes.
- A settlement must be reached with Kupat Cholim Meuhedet, to eliminate existing debt and aid parents who cannot pay for their children's health insurance due to the financial crisis.

- Centers for prevention of domestic violence must open their doors to women asylum seekers and their families, and the existing hotlines - the emergency hotline - 118 - and the quiet line - must be made accessible to asylum seekers.
- The state must initiate a mechanism that will allow the employees to receive their deposit funds back from the state directly, and for the state to bill their employers afterwards. Alternatively, at the very least, the state must provide free legal aid for asylum seekers attempting to claim the funds stolen by their employers.
- The Population and Immigration Authority must automatically extend all visas and initiate an effective system for the public - to solve system failures and remove the bureaucratic barriers that are preventing asylum seekers from retaining their positions at work and from accessing their bank accounts.
- The Ministry of Education and the local authorities must provide the children of asylum seekers who attend local schools with computers and spaces with internet connection, complying with the regulations of the Ministry of Health. The schools must provide language mediation to assist teaching staff to communicate and assist elementary school children's parents to integrate their children into the schools' online learning.

For additional information:

Adi Drori-Avraham

Head of Public Advocacy

ASSAF-Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel

+972502717238

adi@assaf.org.il