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Asylum Seekers in Israel Lacking Access to Welfare Services

As of October 2013, close to 54,000 asylum seekers, most of them from Eritrea and Sudan, were living in Israel.¹ Israel provides them with so-called collective protection, yet until recently it also systematically denied them access to the refugee status determination (RSD) process. This policy has left asylum seekers in Israel without legal status and bereft of basic rights. **The policy of the Welfare Ministry denies asylum seekers access to most services offering therapy, treatment, support and rehabilitation. This policy stands in stark contradiction to the Welfare Ministry's *raison d'être*, to Israel's international commitments, and it conflicts with basic moral values. Moreover, the policy, which allows treatment only in the most extreme and dire of cases, takes a steep economic and social toll of public systems and is quite obviously non-sustainable.**

Since 2007, the non-profit ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel - has provided psychosocial assistance to asylum seekers and refugees in Israel and worked to promote their rights in the public sphere. A significant part of the NGO's work is devoted to providing direct assistance to men, women and children, including those who find themselves in difficult emotional, physical and/or social situations. Over the years, the organization's staff has been in contact with thousands of refugees all over Israel, and the organization is one of the main pillars of support for asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers confront many hardships resulting from past traumas experienced in their countries of origin and on their journey to Israel. These extreme difficulties also result from their lack of rights, their disconnectedness from the rest of Israeli society, their difficult socioeconomic status, and often various medical problems as well. In addition, their communities are disenfranchised and lack resilience, and are therefore unable to offer much in the way of strength and resources. In his report from May 2013, the State Comptroller also noted the unique features and vulnerabilities of this population.² The Welfare Ministry's policy, allowing access to welfare services only in high-risk situations, hurts the weakest of asylum seekers – children, women, victims of torture camps in Sinai, the ill, the disabled, and those suffering from psychiatric illnesses – and exposes them to the risk of deteriorating their condition to the point where urgent intervention would be required. **At ASSAF we witness the harmful consequences of the Welfare Ministry's policy toward asylum seekers every day. As long as there is no reaction from the official authorities we will continue to issue constant warnings about their difficult and worsening situation. Providing access to public welfare services is critical to ensuring that the basic rights of asylum seekers are protected and to their rehabilitation in a way that will benefit them and those around them in Israeli society.**

¹ "Data on Foreigners in Israel" (Hebrew), the Population and Immigration Authority, May 2013.

² "The population lacking official status, mostly coming from undeveloped countries, also experiences cultural crises and cannot rely on communal resilience. For these reasons, this population is liable to need welfare services at a far higher rate than Israeli society at large." From "Handling Minors Lacking Official Status in Israel" (Hebrew), Report according to Paragraph 21(a) of the Law of the State Comptroller 1958 (joint version), May 2013, p. 1645.

Minors

The State Comptroller's report from May 2013 points to the severe shortcomings in the handling of minors seeking asylum.³ We hereby call on the Welfare Minister to adopt the recommendations issued by the State Comptroller on handling minors lacking official status and to fulfill the country's basic obligations towards them.

The Chronically Ill and Disabled

The absence of health insurance and of available and ongoing healthcare and welfare services is particularly harmful to those coping with disabilities and difficult physical or mental illnesses. Lacking basic rights and access to health and welfare services and missing communal and familial support upon discharge from hospitalization, the ill and disabled often find themselves homeless, without any economic assistance, and without the most minimal support from the state's authorities. In the absence of systemic solutions, hospital professionals – doctors, nurses and social workers – turn to ASSAF, hoping the organization can come up with follow-up care, rehabilitation, and financial and social support. **The Welfare Ministry's relevant services – a rehabilitation package, housing and employment support, as well as stipends – must be made available to this needy population as well.**

Women

Women seeking asylum in Israel are particularly vulnerable. They fled their countries of origin because of war or persecution; many survived the torture camps in Sinai, where they experienced rape and other forms of brutal abuse. Now, living in Israel, they lack rights and official status as a female minority within communities dominated by men. Many of the applicants to ASSAF are women living in extreme poverty, single mothers handling complex social problems, women suffering from domestic violence, and women working as prostitutes in order to survive. The only response currently available to women – in itself limited and partial – is immediate and short-term protection in shelters for abused women.

Many women who experience domestic abuse on a daily basis are not classified as being at immediate risk. Therefore, they do not receive any sort of support or assistance from welfare authorities, and remain exposed to continuous risk of violence, without the possibility of escaping their painful situation. Just like their counterparts who have official status, abused women need intervention programs, support and ways to help end the domestic violence they suffer from.

³ "Handling Minors Lacking Official Status in Israel" (Hebrew), Report according to Paragraph 21(a) of the Law of the State Comptroller 1958 (joint version), May 2013.

Victims of Sinai Torture Camps

Victims of torture:

Human rights organizations in Israel⁴ estimate that about 7,000 victims of extreme torture in Sinai are currently living in Israel. These torture victims are not eligible for health or welfare services, and are at risk that their already precarious physical and mental conditions will further deteriorate. These victims are often in complex social situations, suffering from severe traumas, and in need of physical, mental and emotional support systems to help rebuild their lives. **The Welfare Ministry must address itself to these victims immediately in order to stop any further deterioration in their condition and prevent situations of concrete danger to their physical and mental wellbeing.**

Victims of human trafficking and slavery:

The Israel Police has recognized a few of the victims of torture camps in Sinai as victims of human trafficking and slavery. Official regulations determine that these victims are eligible for one year of rehabilitation in shelters and can access health and welfare services during that year alone. Due to their collective protection, after their year of rehabilitation ends, these victims cannot be deported back to their home countries, and they remain in Israel without a valid work authorization or access to healthcare services. **The state of Israel must allow recognized victims of human trafficking to continue holding on to their work permit and having access to healthcare services, beyond the single year of rehabilitation currently given to them.**

⁴ "Tortured in the dt, imprisoned in Israel: Asylum seekers jailed on the basis of the Law on Infiltration, June-September 2012" (Hebrysicians for Human Right and the Hotline for Migrant Workers, October 2012).