

Welfare Services to Asylum Seekers and Refugees – An Overview, December 2018

According to data of the Population, Immigration and Border Authority (PIBA), Israel is home to 34,370 asylum seekers from Africa, most of them from Eritrea and Sudan. Israel applies a policy of non-removal with regards to them, since they would face persecution if they are returned to their countries of origin, thus granting them a temporary stay permit [2(A)5 visa] that they must renew every few months. **This stay permit does not grant its holders any social benefits and as a result, asylum seekers cannot access welfare services.**

In recent years, the government established inter-ministerial committees and working groups, drafted plans and vowed before Knesset committees and the High Court of Justice to expand services. However, in practice, it has been over a decade since asylum seekers began arriving in Israel in large numbers, and government's policy of kicking the can down the road is endangering human lives. This situation must change immediately.

Changes to the policies of the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Social Services: In May 2014, the Israeli state comptroller published [a scathing report](#) detailing a series of severe failings in the conduct of State authorities, including government ministries, vis-à-vis asylum seekers in Israel. The report focused on **the absence of policies addressing the needs of particularly vulnerable groups: survivors of the torture camps in Sinai, women who endured gender-based violence, the chronically ill, people with disabilities, and the homeless.**

In March 2017, the executive director of the Ministry of Social Affairs presented a [proposal for policies](#) addressing the needs of vulnerable asylum seekers both in community-based treatment and in out-of-home placement, in a sum totaling NIS 40 million (\$11.25 million). However, in the last quarter of 2017, the Ministry of Finance allocated **only [NIS 10 million](#) (\$2.81 million) for a partial implementation of the proposed policy. A year has passed since, and the \$2.81 million that have been transferred are not being spent, i.e. the community is not receiving the services it is ought to receive.** The Ministry of Social Affairs reported recently that in 2018, only 20 asylum seekers were placed in protective settings outside of the home, although according to a [report](#) presented by the Ministry to the Labor and Welfare Committee of the Knesset (May 15, 2018), the \$2.81 million should have covered about 100 cases requiring out-of-home placements. **What happened to the rest of the funds?**

The Ministry of Social Affairs intervenes only in cases of emergency: The partial \$2.81 million budget is used to address only cases of emergency through out-of-home placement, as described in the [letter of the minister of labor, social affairs and social services](#) from May 2018. **This is an illogical policy: why wait for milder cases to escalate to emergencies, and only then provide care?** Intervening earlier may reduce the need to provide emergency care, thus reducing costs, or at the very least, utilizing the available funds to assist a larger number of beneficiaries.

The Ministry's policies fail to address the needs of victims of domestic violence: Israel is home to about 7,000 female asylum seekers, some of whom are subjected to domestic violence. According to the current policy of the Ministry of Social Affairs, they are provided with assistance only in emergencies and when facing immediate danger, by placing them in shelters for battered women.

These women and their children urgently require preventative community-based treatment and support. The professional staff at the Ministry of Social Affairs described it well in a policy paper: “the current expertise in the field proves that providing services of support and guidance in the community may reduce the need to take drastic steps such as placing the victimized woman in a shelter, with all the repercussions entailed in taking such a step (policy proposal document, p. 4).

In women's shelters, asylum seekers also do not receive they assistance they need: Sharon Melamed, the Director of Social Services at the Tel Aviv Municipality [put it well](#): “When a woman from the foreign community comes and reports about violence to us... we accompany her to the Police to file a complaint, we offer her [placement in] a shelter for battered women. But what happens when she reaches the shelter for battered women? Inside the shelter, there are no rehabilitation services and plans for her, and usually no one there speaks her language. There is no one to mediate and translate to her and the staff at the shelter, and I cannot offer her any rehabilitation program in the shelter. They are not offering her support through housing, they are not offering support through employment, they are not offering mental health treatment for her and for the children who witnessed the violence, all of which is necessary for rehabilitation. So she is in the shelter, and returns to the community after a few days, to the same abusive partner, because her economic reality does not provide her with any other alternatives...” (Radio Interview on Kan Bet network, November 28, 2018).

Despite the allocation of NIS 2.5 million (\$710,000) to support domestic violence victims [and NIS 1 million (\$280,000) for translation], as far as we know, shelters have not yet received the necessary budgets to make those rehabilitation services available to women and children staying in the shelters, particularly translation services and medical insurance.

The policies of the Ministry of Social Affairs make it nearly impossible for female domestic violence victims to escape the cycle of violence and to allow safety for them and for their children.

Officials on the ground are unaware of the policy change and refuse to provide services to asylum

seekers: Based on inquiries of human rights organization with the professional welfare staff in the field, mainly social workers, it appears that they are completely unaware of the policy change. As far as we know, the Ministry of Social Affairs has not published a procedure regulating the expansion of services in order to inform the local authorities about it. This leaves asylum seekers without information about their rights, and essentially ensures that the weakest and least informed among them are unable to access the services to which they qualify. **The Ministry of Social Affairs should immediately publish the aforementioned procedure and ensure that it reaches all relevant professionals in the field.**

The full budget should be allocated and programs should be implemented on the ground: Not only are the NIS ten million transferred to the Ministry of Social Affairs largely going unspent, but they are also only a quarter of the required budget, according to the Ministry of Social Affairs itself, to properly address the needs of asylum seekers. As stated in [the follow-up report](#) of the State Comptroller on the subject, in May 2018: “The fact that the State Comptroller’s recommendations are not implemented (...) and that their basic needs are not satisfied, does not only undermine the fundamental moral duty of the state to provide the basic needs of the foreigners themselves, but it harms the citizens of the state - especially in areas where many foreigners live" (pp. 154-155).

The time has come, over a decade since large numbers of asylum seekers began arriving in Israel, for the State to formulate a proper welfare policy concerning them. Such a policy is not only a legal and moral obligation, but will also facilitate their settlement across the country, their optimal integration into society, and will reduce the stress and the distress in the neighborhoods where they reside.