

Abandoned

Single Mother Asylum Seekers

Report Summary

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ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel is an independent, non-profit, Israeli human rights organization that aims to promote the human rights of asylum seekers living in Israel and to change public discourse and official Israeli policy through public advocacy work. ASSAF also offers psycho-social support programs for the direct benefit of asylum seekers living in Israel without legal status.

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Since its establishment, ASSAF provides aid to women and single mothers of the asylum seekers community. The number of women treated in the organization's advocacy and support center grew significantly in recent years. At the end of 2014 the professional team in ASSAF began documenting a worrisome trend: increasing numbers of women asylum seekers began turning to the organization to describe how they raise their children on their own in great financial distress. Most if not all of them asked for humanitarian assistance. Some have lost their spouse in the country of origin or during the journey of seeking asylum; many were abandoned and remained helpless. The mothers told of the struggle to finance the children on their own, of health issues and great mental distress as well as lacking a status in Israel. Without recognition from the authorities as single mothers and without any institutional support, women asylum seekers are left to the graces of acquaintances from the community of asylum seekers and of strangers. In some of the cases help becomes abuse. Some even turn to prostitution in order to survive.

Many of the women escaped their country with violence or persecution in the background, some have experienced long months of rape and abuse in the torture camps in the Sinai Peninsula. Upon arrival to Israel they sometimes choose marriage or partnership with a man as a means of survival in a foreign country with no status or rights. However, the family cell, meant to provide protection and security, became for many of them an additional trap of violence. In other instances, the family did not survive the enormous pressures exerted by the State of Israel upon the community of asylum seekers. In most cases, the dissolution of the family ends up with mothers left to take care of their children alone.

As of October 2015 there are 44,559 asylum seekers living in Israel, 92% of them from Eritrea and Sudan. Israel recognizes that the citizens of Sudan and Eritrea cannot be deported to their countries of origin and thus follows a *non-refoulement* policy towards those who live in its territory. Under this policy, asylum seekers receive a status of "released under restrictive conditions", which does not include basic rights such as access to adequate medical services, welfare services and formal work permits. Health services that asylum seekers are entitled to are generally limited to treatment of medical emergencies. In the Welfare Ministry there is no one responsible for treating people without a status and there had not been a clear policy that was set for this population.

The socio-economic distress among the community of asylum seekers is most visible among its own most vulnerable parts, women being among them. According to the Population and Immigration Authority in October 2014, there are over 7,000 women asylum seekers in Israel, 6,000 of whom are from Eritrea. According to data that ASSAF obtained from the authority in November 2015, 3,340 women asylum seekers are registered as mothers, but it is unknown how many of them are single parents. They are not defined as single parents according to the law of Aiding Families Headed by an Independent Parent because they are not registered as official residents of Israel and therefore the authorities lack the ability to monitor or document them. In consequence, they are shunned from any designated support of the National Insurance and welfare services, and in practice they lack any solution from the authorities in Israel.

This report, reliant mainly on 80 interviews with single mothers of the asylum seekers community who have turned to ASSAF asking for assistance, is mapping the needs and the unique life circumstances of those women, and reveals the ongoing neglect and its effect over their children's and their own lives. The single mothers who spoke to ASSAF are weakened by virtue of lacking status in Israel, of being women refugees and of being single providers for their children. Their stories reveal a world of domestic violence, life in severe economic distress and radical poverty following the dissolution of the family cell; 60% of the mothers who were interviewed experienced violence from their spouses and more than 70% of them do not receive any help from their ex-spouse. Some do not know for how long they will live out of the streets or where their next meal may come from. Moreover, 30% of the single mothers ASSAF spoke to are survivors of the torture camps in Sinai, 69% of the women interviewees suffer from medical problems and half of them treat children who face disabilities and chronic illnesses.

It may be that there is no population that better fits the definition of "in need and severely weakened" (State Comptroller Report 64c, Foreigners who cannot be deported, 2014) as much as the single mothers of the asylum seekers community and their children. Mothers who have spoken to ASSAF for this report have exposed a life of vulnerability and great distress. They suffer from utter helplessness facing a chain of hurt and abuse that begins in the country of origin, continues with the torture camps in Sinai and does not end in Israel. As severe as their hurt is, so does their helplessness and dependency become greater, bringing about more violence and more abuse.

Other than being a female minority in a male majority community, they suffer from additional circumstances that make it harder for them to survive on their own. Those who suffer from medical issues that are not treated are facing difficulties being employed and independently sustain themselves; Those who suffered torture and rape in Sinai end up facing high financial debts, emotional and physical damages and a social isolation that prevent them from functioning by themselves. As a consequence many of them are pushed into partnership and setting up a family cell as a means for survival. Some of them find themselves again to be victims of violence and exploitation. In many cases the family cell does not endure the instability and shocks of life in Israel and they remain alone with children, vulnerable even more. As difficult as their condition becomes, so do they find it harder to function as mothers and treat themselves properly or attend to their children - additional victims of this circle of horror. The ongoing institutional oblivion towards those mothers and children perpetuates their distress.

The support of the community or aid organizations cannot and must not make up for the lack of a clear systematic solution. That is even truer when it comes to mothers and children living away from the central areas in the country, without community support, with no access to the minimal services that do exist in Tel Aviv, and without the limited support that civil society organizations can offer. Therefore the authorities in Israel, and the health and welfare ministries in particular, must address this issue urgently and find the proper solutions for this population in need, as mandated by the State Comptroller as well in the aforementioned report.

The women and children that are described at length in this report cannot be deported from Israel. They are here and they are not about to disappear. A systematic solution by the Health and Welfare Ministries will prevent the deterioration into radical life threatening conditions. In order to minimize the human suffering and save the high financial costs of treating emergency situations, the relevant ministers must exert the powers granted to them by law or set up alternative mechanisms for aid and support. Such a systematic solution must include full health and welfare services, economic support, access to legal aid, and more.