

Female Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Israel – Vulnerable to Exploitation, Harm, Solicitation for Prostitution and Human Trafficking

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“When a single-parent mother tells me that she could not pay the rent and therefore paid her landlord in another way, I do not ask her any further questions. I can understand her. I am not judgmental. I would have also done anything in my power to keep a roof over my children’s heads. What good would it do if I made it clear to her that her current situation is that of “prostitution” or “sexual abuse”? (T, a social worker at ASSAF)

Female Refugees from Eritrea and Sudan

There are currently 5,238 female asylum seekers living in Israel¹, most of whom are of Eritrean origin, representing 19.5% of all asylum seekers. As all other asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan, their stay in Israel for over a decade is legal and regularized under a government policy of protection and non-refoulement. The state of Israel recognizes the mortal danger awaiting these women should they be deported to their countries of origin. However, due to their past traumas, and to the fact that they are living without a permanent status, deprived of all economic rights – such as social security benefits, state health insurance, and basic social services – these are among the most vulnerable women in Israel, living on the fringes of society, suffering from extreme poverty and greatly exposed to abuse and harm. The unemployment situation, which characterized the COVID-19 pandemic period, severely harmed female asylum seekers – even more than the male population of asylum seekers. The crisis which produced severe economic distress pushed more female asylum seekers into the world of prostitution and survival sex. Moreover, the Israeli government keeps imposing harsh decrees concerning asylum seekers; Last June the Ministry of the Interior imposed a new decree, prohibiting the employment of asylum seekers in 17 cities where they live (with very few exceptions).

On July 2021, the United States Department of State published its annual report concerning the issue of human trafficking. This report ranked Israel lower than usual, regarding its fight against human-trafficking amid its borders. According to the report, the number of female asylum seekers who were forced to engage in “survival sex” has grown three times higher during

Response to a Freedom of Information request, 23.05.2022 ¹

2020, mostly due to COVID-19 pandemic crisis. These findings were brought up again [in the 2022 report](#).

The professional assessment is that more than half of all mothers belonging to the asylum seekers' community are single-parent mothers. They are devoid of any legal status or government assistance, left alone to raise their children and provide for them. Some of the female single-parent asylum seekers lost their partners while they were still in their countries of origin; others lost them much later, while they were already on their refugee journey. They have all fled from their countries and arrived in Israel, only to be left without a legal status or any basic social rights. Many of them have also experienced terrible acts of torture and rape while imprisoned in the Sinai torture camps. Many female asylum seekers chose to marry or to tie themselves in a relationship here in Israel, mostly as a means for surviving in a foreign land. However, their new family cell, which was supposed to provide them with security and protection, has turned for some of them into another trap of domestic violence. In other cases, the new families did not survive the oppression produced by government decrees against asylum-seekers. Most of these family breakups left the women destitute, totally separated from the family's father and alone to raise their children. Female single-parent asylum seekers are not entitled to the benefits enjoyed by Israeli single-parents, therefore finding themselves in grave economic distress and in extreme poverty. Many of them share a living space (which is not their own) with other people – family members, couples, other single-parent mothers or other males from the asylum seekers' community. This housing crisis and the lack of a safe space of their own left some of these mothers exposed to harm and abuse by other tenants of the apartment.

Female Refugees from the War in Ukraine

Since February 2022, Ukrainian refugees, fleeing from the horrors of war, have started arriving in Israel. According to published data ([July-August 2022](#)), there are currently 30,000 Ukrainian citizens residing in Israel, who are **not** "eligible under the Right of Return"; About 15,000 of them were residing temporarily in Israel prior to the outbreak of war, while close to 15,000 others have fled to Israel since the war erupted. Israel has granted both types of refugees a group protection of non-refoulement. An inspection carried out at the end of July 2022 by human rights organizations found that the vast majority (88%) of Ukrainian citizens residing in Israel under the policy of group protection are women, most of whom have fled from the war. 60% of

these women are not currently employed – despite their will to work².

Most of the female refugees from the war in Ukraine have been living for the last 7 months at homes of Israeli citizens, who agreed to take them in. These women are dependent on their Israeli hosts. Many of them have children, who are only now starting to be integrated into the Israeli education system. Most of these women are in need of employment, in order for them to provide for their families. However, instead of assisting them with learning Hebrew and finding a proper job suited to their abilities, the state is only piling up more difficulties – For example, it renews their temporary visas for only one month at a time; It also refuses to grant them a work permit, but only states that it would not enforce its decree, which prohibits them from working in 17 cities.

This complicated situation, where most of the Ukrainian female refugees have arrived in Israel alone, or only with their children – and are living here without a work permit and without access to basic social rights – puts them in real danger of becoming victims to abusive employment and exploitation. Reports arriving here at ASSAF indicate a shortage of food supplies among Ukrainian female refugees. We are also reported of proposals made to them, concerning illegal and offensive employment, and also of abusive treatment and increasing attempts at solicitation for prostitution and human trafficking.

The reality exposed in these reports is greatly alarming, especially due to other data received by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report, indicating that [Ukrainian refugees were found in 2022 to be in high risk of becoming victims of human trafficking](#). Moreover, in a report from March 2022 [the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime found that Israel was among the top five countries](#) where Ukrainian refugees were trafficked between 2017 to 2020.

Female Asylum Seekers on the Spectrum of Prostitution

Therefore, Israel is the home of several groups of female asylum seekers and refugees – Those arriving from Africa (the majority of which are from Eritrea or Sudan) and those arriving from

² The Request from 4.9.2022 was made by these organizations: HIAS; ASSAF – Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel; Physicians for Human Rights; Kav La'Oved; Hotline for Refugees and Migrants; African Refugee Development Center. The request was forwarded to the Prime Minister, to the Minister of the Interior and to the Attorney General. The organizations requested data and statistics, regarding the non-enforcement policy of the decree limiting the employment of female war refugees from Ukraine.

Ukraine. These groups, who are protected from deportation to the countries of their origin, are nevertheless devoid of any regulated status or any social security net, adjusted to their needs. Their traumatic backgrounds, accompanied by the hardships of surviving without any social or economic rights, specifically influence those most vulnerable among them. During the last years ASSAF and partner organizations are witnessing an increase in the number of female refugees who are involved in prostitution. It is important to emphasize the great difficulties that are involved in gathering reliable data and clearly mapping this sad phenomenon, mostly due to the exclusion of this population from any government services, and also to the stigmas surrounding prostitution. Some of the women find it hard to share their distress, concerning their involvement in survival sex, even with the social workers who accompany them. Moreover, as was already pointed, most of these patterns of prostitution take place in private apartments, and not in sex clubs – which make it harder to detect their victims.

Information regarding distressed female Ukrainian refugees, who find themselves living on the spectrum of prostitution, is still very scarce. However, the main patterns of prostitution among the African female refugees' community are already known to us, mostly due to research conducted by ASSAF during the organization's 15 years of activity, and also from communicating and sharing information with other human-rights organizations. Therefore, it is possible and also crucial to learn from these established patterns, in order to avoid past mistakes while treating the Ukrainian female refugees.

These are the four main patterns of prostitution:

1. Prostitution in Exchange for Housing – In recent years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing an increase in the number of vulnerable women, mostly single-parent mothers, who, in order to survive, are forced to share an apartment with several male roommates. In exchange for this housing solution, they provide the males with sex services and household chores (such as cooking, cleaning, laundry and more). Other single-parent mothers are forced to have sex with their landlord in exchange for the rent, which they are unable to pay.
2. Prostitution in “the Hamras” – The Hamras are pubs that are used as a meeting place, mainly for Eritrean, Sudanese and Ethiopian men. Most of the women who are employed in the Hamras as hostesses and waitresses are refugees from Eritrea. Many of them are single-parent mothers. Some of them provide prostitution services to men who are referred to them. These services take place at the Hamras, in discreet apartments near the Hamras, at hotels or at home. All the women

who are working at the Hamras suffer from stigmas and are considered as prostitutes by their community.

3. Prostitution at Home – We know of women who are engaged in prostitution in the apartments where they live. They do so, many times, in order to avoid the stigmas, which are connected with the prostitution taking place at the Hamras and in discreet apartments. By choosing this pattern of prostitution, they are also able to avoid contact with male pimps (those belonging to the refugees' community or those who are Israeli citizens).

4. Prostitution at Escort Clubs and in Discreet Apartments run by Israeli Pimps – We know of a small number of African women refugees who are engaged in this pattern of prostitution. It is also likely that some female Ukrainian citizens are engaged in this pattern – mostly those who are trafficked, those who are held in slavery conditions, or those who are practicing survival sex.

We call upon the Israeli government:

- **To increase state enforcement against traffickers, pimps and consumers of prostitution.**
- **To improve and elaborate its frameworks for recognition, protection and rehabilitation of victims of slavery and human trafficking.**
- **To include female refugees, who are engaged in survival sex, in any protection and rehabilitation program, which is designed for populations engaging in prostitution.**

Above all, we call upon the Israeli government to create an orderly, transparent, certain and coherent protection policy, for all those who are living in Israel according to the principle of group protection of non-refoulement. This new policy should include a package of economic and social rights – For example, an authorized work permit; access to standard health services; granting refugees social assistance, including a roof over their heads and nutrition security, for those who are in need. Without granting them these basic rights, they would remain in high risk of becoming victims of abuse, of human trafficking and of living in conditions of slavery, succumbing finally to prostitution.

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