

"They Shut the Door on You"

A Report about the Situation of Refugee Children and Asylum Seekers in Israel

Executive Summary - December 2023

At the end of 2023, ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, published a report mapping and describing various aspects of the situation for the children of refugees and asylum seekers¹ from Africa (mainly Eritrea) who are living throughout Israel. The data in the report is based on several sources: Freedom of Information requests submitted to 17 municipalities where most of the refugees live; questionnaires distributed among parents in the refugee community; interviews with refugee parents; and interviews with members of educational teams who work with children in this community. The report supplements and updates two previous reports published by ASSAF (in partnership with the LewinskyGarden Library) in 2019 and 2020.

A harsh picture emerges in this report. The Israeli government's long-standing policy towards refugees has left them in a state of limbo. The government acknowledges that it cannot deport them, yet denies them economic and social rights, such as social security benefits, state health insurance, and most social services. Over the years, this has led to a deterioration of their financial situation and their physical and mental health, and left them susceptible to extreme poverty, food insecurity, exploitation, and human trafficking.

There are approximately 8,200 children of African refugees in Israel. Although most of them were born in the country, like their parents, they have no official legal status. Their families struggle with all the challenges of immigration, which are exacerbated by governmental policies. Refugees have been pushed to the social and economic margins in Israel. The severe hardships they face put their children at high risk.

¹ Refugees from Africa in Israel have been called by many names: from the derogatory term "infiltrators," through "foreigners not subject to deportation" to "refugees and asylum seekers". In this report, the term "refugees" is used, reflecting the rates at which they have been recognized as refugees in other Western countries. For more information, see the report by HIAS Israel (2020): "[The Numbers Speak for Themselves: 0.06% -- Understanding Israeli Asylum Process](#)" and legal criticism that has been leveled at the dysfunctional asylum system in Israel.

Below are the main findings given in the report:

1. **Lack of data:** Israel does not keep accurate data on the number of refugee children, where they live, or their educational framework. Children of refugees do not receive an identification number at birth like Israeli's do, and each authority provides the children its own identification number. This lack of data causes the children of refugees to fall in between the cracks.
2. **Unlicensed child care/babysitters:** At least half of the infants and toddlers in this community are cared for by unlicensed "babysitters." A decade ago, the State Comptroller published a report warning that these private settings are not safe or suitable for young children, and can have severe negative consequences on their safety, proper development, and wellbeing.²
3. **Severe developmental delays:** When these children enter the state education system at the age of three, they already display emotional difficulties and developmental delays in verbal and motor skills (of up to two years). Failure to address these delays at an early age perpetuates the developmental and linguistic gaps between them and Israeli children. These exclusion and marginalization continue throughout their schooling.
4. **Educational tracking:** Given these significant developmental gaps, many children of refugees are tracked into special education, even though they do not suffer from organic disabilities, and their development potential is completely normative. The questionnaires distributed to refugee parents indicate that the percentage of this community's children in special education is 167% higher than that in the general population. Although this survey is not a representative sample, the gap between the two populations that emerges from the questionnaires is a clear warning signal. The Ministry of Education should conduct an in-depth study mapping the extent of this phenomenon and its causes.

² Israel State Comptroller, [Opinion: The Treatment of Minors Without Civil Status in Israel](#), Annual Report 63C (2013), 1843

5. **Segregation:** In the education system in several cities, especially in the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality, refugee children are segregated from Israeli children from the age of three through the 12th grade.
6. **Food insecurity:** The questionnaires distributed among refugee parents indicate that 40% to 50% of their children do not receive a meal at school. The state does not have data on the rate of food insecurity among the refugee population, but data from previous surveys has highlighted their difficult situation, leading to serious concern that thousands of children are experiencing food insecurity, yet do not receive assistance in the school system.
7. **A high-risk life in an environment fraught with racism:** Refugee children are an extremely vulnerable population. Every aspect of the reality in which they are raised is unbearably difficult. With no official status, and following the trauma of forced immigration, their families are in survival mode, facing economic distress and extreme poverty. This inevitably affects the children's emotional and mental state. They experience racism in the public sphere, and live in an environment that exposes them to delinquency, violence, drugs, pimping, and survival prostitution. All of these elements of their reality put children of refugees at risk.
8. **Lack of healthcare services:** Questionnaires distributed among refugee parents indicate that about 25% of refugee children in Israel do not have health insurance, and in Tel Aviv this figure reaches almost 40%. Most of the parents who are unable to pay for private health insurance (which is subsidized by the government at a rate considerably more expensive than that of Israeli children), have stated that they have encountered problems in receiving necessary medical care for their children. The most vulnerable children in the country lack health insurance and access to healthcare services.
9. **Painful disillusionment upon reaching adulthood:** When they reach the age of 18, children of refugees immediately lose the few rights that they received in

childhood. Their peers with Israeli citizenship begin their adult lives with various options open to them: military service and/or national service, higher education, acquiring a profession, however, these doors are closed to refugee children. Even if they manage, through hard work, to overcome the multitude of obstacles in their way, and graduate from high school with honors, they have few options for higher academic studies, acquiring a profession and employment, or doing national or military service. Their ability to create a future for themselves in Israel is severely limited.

The State of Israel must come to its senses, and grant the children of refugees and asylum seekers who are growing up in Israel a status as residents, which will give them basic rights and a future. They are here. They are part of Israeli society. They yearn to contribute and to belong, if only given the opportunity. Helping them will help the entire society – it is one and the same. We must give these children an equal and real opportunity to realize their potential and build a future for themselves.

The State of Israel must come to its senses and give the children of refugees and asylum seekers growing up in Israel a resident status that will give them basic rights and a future. They are here. They are part of Israeli society, and they yearn to contribute to it and belong if only they are given the opportunity. The good of society and their good are one: to give the children an equal and real opportunity to realize their potential and build a future for themselves.

Given the severe disparities that exist following years of social marginalization, exclusion, neglect and segregation, the State of Israel must immediately take the following steps:

1. **Issue official 9-digit ID numbers:** Refugee children must be issued an ID number that will allow all the authorities that care for them to identify, map, and coordinate child care. The number must include 9 digits, like the identification numbers of Israeli citizens, so that it can be entered into authorities' computerized systems, enabling all relevant and necessary operations to be carried out.

2. **Open supervised and subsidized daycare centers:** These must be opened immediately, sufficient in number and distribution, to enable refugee children in the first 3 years of their lives to be accommodated in supervised settings. The unauthorized “babysitting” centers should be closed. All children living in Israel must be protected, first and foremost, regardless of their civil status. Other frameworks for day-cares should be made available, and training for teachers and caregivers in supervised day care centers should be continued and improved. In addition, community work with parents of young children needs to be expanded in cooperation with the daycare staff.
3. **Abolish segregation in educational institutions:** Segregation in educational settings is illegal. It must be completely abolished, and the refugee children should be integrated into educational frameworks with the children of Israeli citizens. At the same time, their unique needs must be addressed.
4. **Investigate the over-referral of refugee children to special education (tracking):** The high rate of children from the community referred to special education is a warning sign that requires immediate attention. The Ministry of Education should conduct an in-depth investigation and propose ways to resolve the situation.
5. **Ensure food security:** There is a need to investigate and map the extent of food insecurity among this population and provide food to every child. This is urgent, in view of the results of previous surveys and the recently distributed questionnaires, according to which approximately 40%-50% of refugee children do not receive a meal at school.
6. **Address developmental and educational gaps:** Action must be taken in educational institutions to reduce the developmental and educational gaps:

- Designate time to give extra support, especially in subjects centered on the Hebrew language.
 - Establish a regulated system of linguistic and cultural mediation between the students' parents and the educational staff.
 - Strengthen the assistance and training provided to the educational teams, including courses to help them familiarize and understand the community of refugees and asylum seekers living in Israel; provide pedagogical, methodological and didactic tools to reduce the gaps, in particular language gaps; courses on the pedagogy of children at risk, and more.
7. **Designate resources and programs to locate and assist refugee children who are at risk:** These children are exposed to severe risk. This situation requires more attention from the Ministry of Welfare and the municipal social services departments. Adequate resources should be allocated. Social workers in the field need appropriate training and the ability to offer relevant responses. Welfare services must be fully accessible to children, including giving refugee parents the benefits the state provides for children and for disabled children.
8. **Map the health status of refugee children and provide them with full access to healthcare services:** Many of these children grow up without access to healthcare services. The Ministry of Health must immediately conduct a survey of the health status of refugee children, and make efforts to provide all children with full access to healthcare services. If parents are unable to pay for health insurance, their children should not be denied access to healthcare. This is particularly crucial for single-parent families, and families with children who have special needs.
9. **Provide youth and young adults with more options and expanded horizons:** The State of Israel must give residence status to youth who grew up in Israel and live here, along with all the associated economic and social rights, to enable them to build a future here. Currently, they face significant barriers in the fields of higher education, professional training, professional licensing, and acquiring a driver's

license. These opportunities must be opened to them, so these young people can realize their potential and contribute to Israeli society.

There are solutions to the difficult problems discussed in the report. These solutions are within the reach of the relevant local authorities and government ministries concerned, and we call on them to cooperate and do the right thing - for these children and for Israeli society. Give them residence status, which will grant them basic rights and a hopeful future.