

## Refugees in Israel

*"I'm not afraid that my life will end. I'm afraid it will never begin"*

*(A', a refugee assisted by ASSAF)*

May 2024

For almost two decades, approximately 32,000 refugees from Africa have been living in Israel. Most of them are Eritreans and Sudanese, with a minority of them coming from the Congo and the Tigray region in Ethiopia. During the last two years, a new group of refugees arrived in Israel – Ukrainian refugees. While most of the Ukrainians who entered Israel since the beginning of the war in Ukraine already left for other countries, approximately 10,000 remained, with an additional 20,000 who entered Israel before the war started.

These communities urgently fled their homelands, leaving their families and possessions behind, fleeing brutal military rule, wars, genocide, rape, robbery, and murder. Some of them had also been victims of human trafficking and [torture camps in the Sinai Peninsula](#). For years they have been coping daily with the traumatic aftereffects of the life circumstances from which they escaped, while also battling for survival in Israel. Asylum seekers and refugees live in Israel legally, under group protection against deportation to their countries of origin, but hardly any of them are recognized by the State as refugees and they are not entitled to social security benefits, state health insurance or most welfare services.

### African refugees and their children

#### Status

For almost two decades of legal residence in Israel under a government policy of “non-deportation”, this community is left in a temporary status without rights, unlike other countries which have functioning asylum systems. Even in 2024, the [asylum applications debacle](#) continues. This failure, and the deliberate policy behind it, are reflected not only in the delay in examining the applications over many years, but in the appallingly low recognition percentages (0.06%) compared to other Western countries (Eritreans 90% and Sudanese 60%). Furthermore, following a legal proceeding regarding the duration of the examination process of asylum applications of Eritrean citizens, in March 2023, the Deputy Legal Adviser to the Government and the Deputy State Attorney [approached](#) the Minister of Interior and recommended granting social rights to refugees in view of the pace of processing asylum applications.

The Government Ministries do not deny, and even admit, that the refugees from Africa are in limbo: on the one hand, their asylum requests are not examined, and on the other hand, the protection given to them is protection against expulsion and nothing more. This limbo is also imposed on the children of the refugees, and even on those of them who were born in Israel. In any other civilized country, [the refugee children would have been naturalized long ago](#).

In the absence of resident status, the policy towards them is made up of patchwork, requiring ad hoc solutions from Government Ministries, local authorities, and other bodies. This conduct causes damage, confusion, and waste in all aspects: health, welfare, social security, education, and employment. This damage accumulates exponentially, and today, after almost 17 years of living without official status and rights, the economic, physical, and mental condition of many refugees and their children is extremely severe.

## Health

Refugees in Israel have no access to public health services, except in case of emergencies when they can receive treatment in hospital emergency rooms. After treatment in the emergency room, they are released to their homes without further treatment, rehabilitation, follow-up, or medication. At the same time, they accumulate debts to the hospitals for the treatments given to them in emergency situations. Private health insurance policies, which are conditional on work ability and employment, are not a viable solution since they provide only partial coverage and are interrupted with termination of work. Refugees in high vulnerability situations, such as: patients with chronic diseases, those with disabilities, dealing with mental health needs, the elderly, and others who cannot work in the physical jobs available for refugees, suffer even more from this gap between needs and available services. Women also suffer from the lack of access to appropriate women's health services, including pregnancy monitoring and even adequate services for at-risk pregnancies.

Without entitlement to public healthcare, refugees' access to health services is extremely limited and consists only of 3 public clinics located in Tel-Aviv and nearby (Holon) - one ("Bikur Rofe") which mainly provides front-line health services, another ("Yachad") which provides psychiatric care (and constantly holds a waiting list of patients who have been referred to the clinic and are unable to receive treatment) and a third one ("Derech") which opened recently and provides psychiatric care for only the acute cases of torture survivors from the Sinai peninsula. The 3 clinics provide limited services and are insufficient in providing the refugees' medical needs, let alone - the needs of those who live in Israel's periphery and those with chronic or severe illnesses.

Approximately two years ago, the former Minister of Health announced that he intended to initiate a health insurance program for adults who are not subject to expulsion, but until today such a program has not yet been enacted.

## Social security

The refugees from Africa are not entitled to almost all social security benefits and allowances nor to almost all community welfare services. In recent years, following the 2014 State Comptroller's report and a petition submitted to the High Court by ASSAF, there are now limited possibilities of placement in out-of-home settings for three groups of refugees in emergency health situations: women victims of domestic violence, people with disabilities, and homeless persons. The disadvantages of out-of-home placements, which have negative effects on rehabilitation processes and on the autonomy of the participants, and which in most cases are almost never applied to refugees due to various deterrents, are clear and well-known. The prevailing approach in the Western world is to close these frameworks and move to services within the community.

Refugees that are victims of violence, and refugee women in general are increasingly harmed by the "no asylum" policy towards refugees from Africa. Women refugees are also a minority among the refugee community – accounting for only about 19%. Most of them are mothers and a considerable number of them are single mothers. The majority of them work in low paid jobs, mainly in cleaning jobs. They are not entitled to maternity benefits such as income tax credits and child allowance, nor to benefits for single mothers such as alimony, income support benefits, rent assistance, and more. Many single-parent refugees and their children are in dire straits, suffer from food insecurity, and many times from extreme poverty following the breakdown of the family unit. Many of them, along with their children, share a

living space with other people, and the lack of their own safe space leaves them and their children vulnerable to harm and exploitation.

The Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that followed, and the current war in Israel prove how harmful the policy of socio-economic exclusion suffered by the refugees is. With the outbreak of the pandemic and the initiation of closures, their communities reached the [brink of a humanitarian crisis](#), which manifested itself in an increase in homelessness, extremely high rates of food insecurity, and an increase women driven to survival prostitution. Furthermore, as it appears from a [published study](#), the crisis was also reflected in the deterioration of the mental state of many of the refugees, both male and female. The brutal attack by Hamas on October 7, and the war that followed, added to the deterioration of the refugee community. Even those who have a safety net (whether economic aid from the government or thanks to the resilience of their community) have found themselves in a completely unprecedented situation due to the ongoing war. However, [populations such as refugees and asylum seekers, who were already vulnerable](#), found themselves in dire straits. Most refugees do not have access to secured shelters and safe rooms, and with the outbreak of the war and the slowdown in the economy that followed, they had to cope with the shutdown of workplaces without any support network in the form of unemployment benefits. They were also completely excluded from designated governmental economic aid programs. The war has also affected the mental health of many refugees, triggering past traumas, and once again they are in greater danger of falling into poverty, severe food insecurity, homelessness, even survival prostitution and human trafficking.

### Education

Approximately 8,200 refugee children from Africa live in Israel, most of whom were born in Israel and are of primary and pre-primary school age. The older adolescents among them experienced firsthand the escape from their country and the long and traumatic journey to Israel. Even those who do not remember the journey, or who were born in Israel, often suffer from the intergenerational transmission of the traumas of their parents' generation. In addition, the children of refugees are affected by the difficulties that their parents face as a result of the state of "limbo" in which they have been living for years, the denial of rights, and relegation to the social and economic margins of society.

Against this background, many of the refugee children enter the Israeli education system with significant pedagogical and developmental [deficiencies](#). These deficiencies are the result, among other things, of the time most children spent in unregulated preschool frameworks ("babysitters") for the first years of their lives, since there are not enough supervised and subsidized settings dedicated to this population, and private daycares are unaffordable to refugee parents. Moreover, the supervised and State-subsidized preschool daycare centers are closed to them.

Given their background of living as refugees, trauma, and severe disparities, the children of the refugees need enhanced assistance which is, for the most part, denied to them. In addition, local authorities sometimes refuse to enroll refugee children in the educational institutions within their jurisdiction or force them to study in separate settings, apart from the children of Israeli citizens.

The phenomenon of segregation is especially noticeable in the city of Tel Aviv-Yafo, where a majority of the refugee community in Israel resides. Most of the refugee children are concentrated in separate kindergartens and schools. Segregation in education is wrongful discrimination that decreases the refugee children's ability to close developmental and

educational gaps. It contributes to the sense of alienation of the children and their parents, leaves them exposed to manifestations of racism, and increases the risk of dropping out and adopting dangerous behaviors.

Despite this, the district court chose not to recognize the segregation in educational institutions in Tel Aviv and rejected a petition filed against the municipality and the Ministry of Education in this regard. An appeal to the Supreme Court has yet to be decided, but during the procedure, and as a result of it, the Ministry and the municipality announced a two-year pilot program in which 96 first-grade students per year (only a small percentage of the refugee children living in the city) will be integrated into schools in the north of the city, where children of Israeli citizens study. The pilot program is far from sufficient and raises concerns regarding the Ministry's and Municipality's commitment to its success.

The first refugee children born in Israel will soon reach the age of 18 – the age when children with Israeli citizenship start planning their future. But it is difficult for the refugee children in Israel to dream ahead. Like their older friends, who came to Israel as minors, they also have no memory or knowledge of any country other than Israel. Israeli society has a clear interest, and a legal and moral obligation, to do everything possible to repair the damage that is the result of the state of limbo in which these children have lived ever since their birth in Israel, and to give them an equal opportunity to develop and realize themselves as young men and women growing up in Israel. It must provide them a resident status with all the social and economic rights and opportunities associated with this status.

#### Economic and bureaucratic exclusion

The reality of the lives of the refugees from Africa and their children leads them to economic hardship. Although their employment is permitted according to a “non-enforcement arrangement”, their stay visa, visa 2A5 according to the Law on Entry into Israel, does not constitute a work permit. This ongoing situation creates ambiguity and a fertile ground for their exploitation by employers, apartment owners, and others.

The 2A5 visa requires frequent renewal which can only be done at one of two bureaus – one in Eilat, and the other in Bnei Brak. The bureau's services in Bnei Brak were under a heavy load and many refugees were unable to renew their visas.

In addition to the livelihood difficulties arising from the type and duration of the visa, over the years the refugees have suffered from measures whose explicit intention is to harm them financially. The most famous of these measures is the “Deposit Law” which required employers of refugees to deduct 20% of their salary and deposit it in a special deposit account, in addition to another 16% deposited by the employer. Refugees could only access the money in the Deposit Fund when they left Israel. Four years ago the Supreme Court ruled that the requirement to deduct 20% of the refugees' salary is unconstitutional and annulled the legal provision. 4 years afterwards, many refugees have yet to receive their money. In some cases, the employers collected the money but put it in their own pockets instead of depositing it in the deposit fund, and in other cases the money was deposited in the aforementioned fund but in the absence of a bank account many refugees are unable to withdraw it. Another result of the state of limbo caused by the refugees' “non-asylum” status is the limited access of refugees to banking services and means of payment.

The refugees and their children are blocked from many occupations that require education, professional licensing, a driver's license, or even a player's card in the soccer association. In fact, life with a 2A5 visa is a bureaucratic maze with many “no entry” signs. The list of things

that cannot be done with 2A5 is endless, which significantly limits the refugees' ability to earn a living, save, or make use of their money.

Another difficulty with 2A5 visas is the lack of a unique identification number – a 9-digit number. Because the identification number of the 2A5 visas includes letters, any service that requires the entry of an Israeli ID number is locked to refugees. Online systems such as “My Visit” used by government offices, local authorities, and institutions such as health insurance funds and payment applications do not allow registration in the absence of a 9-digit number.

#### Human trafficking and survival prostitution:

According to the U.S. Department of State's [2023 Trafficking in Persons Report](#) the State of Israel was listed at “Tier 2” for the third year in a row. Further, this report indicates that the low status of refugees and asylum seekers in Israel exposes them to exploitation and survival prostitution. The report also noted that Russian, Ukrainian, and Eritrean women who are citizens of Israel are susceptible to trafficking. Further information about survivors of human trafficking and torture can be found in [ASSAF's report for 2024](#).

#### **Ukrainian refugees and their children**

When refugees from the war in Ukraine began arriving in Israel, the state provided them with basic aid, including healthcare services, food vouchers and housing assistance in extreme cases. Over time, this was reduced to only limited healthcare services, which are only budgeted for a few months at a time, and only continued at the very last minute and only following legal petitions. Further, while at first relatives and volunteers provided these refugees with clothing, food, and a roof over their heads, this too has dwindled over the past two years. Civil society cannot continue to step in for the state and provide the needed support system for refugees.

#### Status

Ukrainian refugees have not received a “special visa” or “special status”. They can only stay in Israel with short-term tourist visas, which are renewed periodically through a notice published on the Population and Immigration Authority's website. Ukrainian refugees do not possess a valid physical document attesting to the legality of their stay. On 7.2.2024, the District court [ruled](#) that the Population and Immigration authority will issue 2A5 visas to all Ukrainian citizens currently residing in Israel under group protection, like that of African refugees who have been residing in Israel with this visa for almost 20 years. On the one hand, this provides a form of documentation for Ukrainians, who have been residing in Israel legally but with no physical visa. However, this new visa comes with very few rights, as it was “invented” by the state to avoid obligations towards refugees from Sudan and Eritrea, instead of establishing a fair and efficient asylum system that would lead to individual recognition of refugees or, alternately, to regulate an official group protection policy.

#### Health

At the beginning of August 2023, the arrangement for providing healthcare services was unexpectedly terminated. This caused a sudden stop of medical treatments, risking patients' lives. After a public struggle, pressure from civil society organizations and the Embassy of

Ukraine, and the filing of a legal petition, the arrangement was extended until the end of 2023, at which point it was prolonged for another 3 months, until March 31, 2024, only after a second petition was filed, on December 31, 2023. A third petition was filed on March 27, 2024, and brought to the continuation of the healthcare services until May 15, 2024. This petition is still pending. It should be noted that until now, healthcare services were provided only for people over the age of 60. Other Ukrainian refugees only had access to healthcare services at the Terem clinics, which provide basic emergency services, not complete and ongoing healthcare. In addition, Ukrainian citizens who entered Israel before February 24, 2022, are not entitled to any medical services at all.

### Children and Education:

About 2,000 Ukrainian refugee children are currently living in Israel having arrived here since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. After three months of stay in Israel they are eligible to register in the public education system. Based on surveys conducted by ASSAF of Ukrainian refugee mothers, approximately 89.5% of the children have been enrolled in the Israeli education system, attending kindergartens and schools in their respective residential areas. However, it's concerning that around 10% of Ukrainian refugee children are not enrolled in any educational framework in Israel, despite the mandatory education laws. Furthermore, in many cases Ukrainian refugee children who are enrolled in Israeli schools often find themselves in classrooms without the ability to speak, read, or write Hebrew, lacking necessary language reinforcement or suitable educational support. According to the surveys we conducted, 42.1% of these children studying within the Israeli education system do not receive any assistance or additional instruction in Hebrew. This deficiency poses significant challenges on emotional, communicative, and academic fronts. It impedes their emotional well-being, their ability to connect with Israeli peers and navigate personal challenges like bullying, and hampers their academic progress.

For refugee mothers whose children are not in any educational framework, working to support their families is especially challenging. Some children who are not in any educational framework are studying with teachers in Ukraine via Zoom, although prolonged online learning has negative consequences.

### Housing shortage

When the war broke out in Ukraine, the refugees who came to Israel had to stay with Israeli residents. The state provided housing solutions only in extreme cases. Over time, many hosts could no longer offer the refugees a place to live, and the state stopped offering housing solutions, even in extreme cases. Many refugees had to look for places to rent. But renting an apartment is difficult for those with only a short-term visa. In addition, rent in Israel is extremely high, and not all refugees can afford this economic burden. Many families of Ukraine refugees must pool their small incomes to rent apartments together and live in severely crowded conditions with their children.

### Human trafficking and survival prostitution

Already at the end of 2022, we saw an increase in the number of Ukrainian refugees trapped in the terrible situations of human trafficking and survival prostitution. At that time the Tel Aviv Center for Ukrainian Refugees documented about 850 women who were engaged in survival prostitution. Not even one of them agreed to enter the State's program for protecting

and rehabilitating survivors of human trafficking, in part due to the lack of appropriate language-adapted mediation for this complex situation.

### **The current government and its plans to harm the refugee communities**

The list of active abuse measures taken against the refugees from Africa over the years with the aim of [“making their lives unbearable”](#) is long. The most famous of them, aside from the “Deposit Law,” were confinement in the “Holot” detention facility, and the attempts to deport the refugees to African countries that are not their own. After a slight lull in the attempts at abuse, the [composition of the current government and the coalition agreements](#) are full of ominous signs. The agreements included, among other things, the recycling of some measures of abuse from the past, or worse versions of them, as well as advancing a proposed Basic Law: Immigration.

Although a government bill with this name has not yet been submitted, private bills with the same name, submitted by members of the coalition, are loaded with illegal measures, according to both Israeli and international law, including the idea that a person’s entry into Israel in an undocumented manner will deprive him of any possibility of obtaining status in Israel. This is a cruel idea that no democratic country in the world has adopted. Refugee populations are driven, almost naturally, to enter countries without documentation. That is what people who are fleeing for their lives do. The proposals also include the denial of the right of immigrants, whose requests for asylum have been denied, including refugees, to appeal to Israeli courts, as well as making it possible to imprison them indefinitely. Similar to clauses from the coalition agreements, other proposals include a multitude of ways of abusing refugees that have already been expressly disqualified by the High Court in the past.

To see the whole picture, it is necessary to add to these plans a host of private bills put forward by coalition members, as well as the judicial coup attempts. In Israel, as in the rest of the world, any weakening of the gatekeepers means a real danger for vulnerable populations. Considering their precarious legal status, the fact that they are not entitled to assistance or services, their living conditions that impose upon many of them poverty and abusive employment – the refugees in Israel will be among the first to be affected by the implementation, partial or full, of the coup plans.

[ASSAF – Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel](#) is a human rights organization that provides support and assistance to refugees, driven by a deep-rooted belief in the historical and moral responsibility of Israeli society toward those seeking refuge. ASSAF has been operating since 2007 on two main levels: (1) providing psychosocial support to refugees and asylum seekers and (2) promoting their rights by raising public awareness and promoting their rights before the state authorities. Most of those who turn to ASSAF for assistance and support come from the most vulnerable groups among the refugee population: survivors of torture and trafficking, people with physical disabilities, people with mental health needs, the sick, the homeless, the elderly, people in survival sex, single-parent families, women suffering from domestic violence, teenagers, and minors at risk, and more. Notably, more than half (54%) of the applicants for assistance are women, a worrying trend given that women comprise only about 18% of the African refugee population.

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