

# Asylum Seekers in Israel: Challenges to Social Work

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## Abstract

The challenges facing social workers in addressing the migration crisis are myriad and complex. Against this background, the current article presents a case study on the response of Israeli social work to the asylum seekers, which allows us to identify gaps between the social work profession's global agenda and its implementation. The article examines how recent immigration policies have impacted Israeli social workers' responses to these challenges. Following a brief description of Israel's policies for controlling and limiting the entrance of asylum seekers to the country, the article offers insights into social workers' involvement in some of the main social services that aim to assist asylum seekers in Israel. Insights are also offered into the response of Israeli social workers to the community of asylum seekers, which focuses on individual needs and on urgent needs. Several explanations for these emphases was offers, noting that they may reflect a more general gap between repeated statements about the significance of human rights for the social work profession on the one hand and the professional reality on the other. Finally, several strategies for social work in the community of asylum seekers and in society as a whole are recommended.

**Keywords:** Asylum seekers, international social work, migration crisis, social work policy

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## Introduction

In recent years, immigration and forced migration have become global issues at the top of the public and political agenda in developed countries (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup, 2008). The integration of asylum seekers requires the involvement of professionals in fields such as law, education and therapy, both internationally and locally. The social work profession can be expected to be at the forefront of helping asylum seekers who suffer social, emotional and adjustment problems as a result of human rights abuse. Social workers could have played a central role in responding to the complex needs of immigrants from different groups, such as migrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers: as advocates of social policy changes, working to promote equality, justice and solidarity; as professional employees in governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and as catalysts for change from within and outside the profession in international organisations (IFSW, 2014). However, the extent to which the social work profession has risen to current challenges associated with the growing migration of asylum seekers is debatable at best (see, in the UK context, Lyons, 2017).

The current article examines the governmental and non-governmental social work services available in Israel to asylum seekers. In so doing, it can shed light on the ability of the social work profession to meet challenges such as the global migration crisis, which are both myriad and complex (Zaviršek, 2017). The article also examines the extent to which these interventions reflect a tendency in social work to ‘sit outside’ sites of power and to limit interventions to actions that do not impact policy.

## Asylum seekers in Israel—general

The only way to cross from Africa to Asia or Europe by land is through Israel. This has allowed asylum seekers, the vast majority of whom arrive from Eritrea and Sudan, to cross the Sinai desert and enter Israel. As a result, Israel has become a destination country for thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers, who are willing to take a long and risky journey (Hochman, 2015). The number of asylum seekers who have sought refuge in Israel has increased rapidly, with 5,000 entering in 2007 and more than 17,000 in 2011. Following the completion of a fence on the Egyptian border in 2013, the number of asylum seekers entering Israel has declined significantly and not a single asylum seeker has entered Israel in 2018. Currently, more than 90 per cent of asylum seekers in Israel are from Eritrea or Sudan. However, Eritrean or Sudanese asylum seekers make up less than half a per cent of the population in Israel—a small number compared even to the total number of foreign workers in Israel (more than 40,000 asylum seekers and more than

80,000 migrant workers, according to Israel's official data) (Population and Immigration Authority, 2018).

As part of its broader policy and intentions, Israel has signed and ratified the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees ('the UN Refugee Convention') and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. However, Israel, like other industrialised countries (Becerra, 2016), has responded to the influx of refugees with a range of exclusionary and at times contradictory policies, which aim to control and limit entrance to its territory (Paz, 2011).

The significant number of asylum seekers into Israel—a first in Israel's history—has met with significant resistance from Israeli politicians. Israeli ministers have publicly referred to asylum seekers as a 'demographic threat' in the last decade, threatening the Jewish majority in Israel, rather than a phenomenon whose roots are global.

In 2011, the Israeli government decided to act decisively against asylum seekers in the country, who were called 'infiltrators' according to the Israeli Anti-Infiltration law. The term 'infiltrators' associates asylum seekers with the anti-infiltration law passed in the 1950s to fight terrorists and disassociates asylum seekers from their unique position as holders of special rights (Hochman, 2015). Referring to asylum seekers as 'infiltrators' thus associated them with actual historical events that threatened the security of the state of Israel and its citizens (Yaron *et al.*, 2013).

In January 2012, an amendment to the law was passed by the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, which allowed for the incarceration of Eritrean or Sudanese asylum seekers for periods of up to three years, without being criminally charged, in 'Holot' detention centre—a facility run by the Israeli prison service. Female asylum seekers were never incarcerated, as the Holot detention centre was not built to hold both female and male detainees, which are held separately in other detention facilities in Israel. Although the state refused work permits to asylum seekers, no law on the matter was enforced, to avoid shouldering the economic burden of thousands of unemployable people residing in the country (Paz, 2011).

Human rights organisations in Israel petitioned the Israeli High Court of Justice against the amendment, arguing it violates constitutional protection of human rights. The court accepted the petition and struck down the law, yet the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) has repeatedly promulgated laws attempting to side-step the High Court's rulings. Following these changes, asylum seekers have risked a brief period of incarceration, up to one year, with no criminal charges being brought against them in a court of law. Incarcerated asylum seekers in Israel have suffered from overcrowding, limitations on freedom of movement, shortage of translators, lack of hygienic products, limited access to legal services, lack of access to facilities monitoring and, finally, deficiencies

in quality and quantity of food (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants Report, 2016).

As the number of asylum seekers crossing into Israel reached a peak in 2011–12, Israel constructed a barrier on its border with Egypt. Since the completion of the barrier along the Israeli–Egyptian border in 2014, there have been almost no entries of asylum seekers into Israel. According to Israel’s Ministry of the Interior official data, 2,431 ‘infiltrators’ from Sudan and Eritrea have left Israel while not a single ‘infiltrator’ entered the country (Population and Immigration Authority, 2017). In a similar manner to the wall built by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which was presented by the Israeli government as a necessary security measure, the wall with Egypt aimed to ensure that ‘African infiltrators’ would not cross the border into Israel.

In conjunction with the policies on incarceration, Israel has initiated a procedure aimed at asylum seekers entitled ‘Voluntary Return’ to third countries. However, the procedure does not guarantee that asylum seekers are protected against refoulement to their country of origin or that they have access to basic services and rights as mandated by the UN convention. In 2015, the Israeli Ministry of the Interior announced that it would begin forcing ‘infiltrators’ to leave Israel to third countries. Those who refuse to leave will be indefinitely jailed under the Entry to Israel Law, which allows the detaining of a foreigner who is not cooperating with his removal from Israel (Gidron, 2014; Rozen, 2015). According to a 2017 decision by the Israeli Supreme Court (Administrative Petition 8101/15 Zegete v Ministry of the Interior), the government can send Eritrean or Sudanese asylum seekers to a third, undisclosed, country, presumably Rwanda and Uganda, which signed a bilateral agreement and in return will receive financial compensation from the Israeli government, but may not jail for more than two months anyone who refuses to go. The authorities continue to press thousands of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers to leave Israel ‘voluntarily’. The government has refused to disclose details of whether its reported agreements with Rwandan and Ugandan authorities include guarantees that asylum seekers who leave Israel ‘voluntarily’ would not be at real risk of serious human rights violations, in violation of the principle of non-refoulement (Amnesty International, 2017).

In 2017, Israel’s parliament passed a new amendment to the anti-infiltration law that requires asylum seekers to deposit 20 per cent of their salary into a fund that will become available to them only when they leave Israel. The employers of asylum seekers will be required to set aside an additional sum equal to 16 per cent of the salary of the asylum seeker and deposit them in a special account. A substantial portion of the fund will be liable for confiscation if the asylum seeker does not leave the country by the designated date. The funds at the deposit account could be claimed by asylum seekers only upon leaving Israel.

The majority of Israel's asylum seekers reside in south Tel Aviv—one of the less privileged locations in central Israel. The reality of life in the five south Tel Aviv neighbourhoods, where many of the foreigners in Israel reside, is complicated and difficult. Residents of these neighbourhoods have expressed grave concern for their personal safety as a result of the 'foreigners' presence' (Kimelman, 2016). There is no doubt that the lives of the local residents have been greatly affected and their neighbourhoods changed radically. For example, the significant rise in the size of the population in south Tel Aviv resulted in a rise in the demand for apartments for rent and a housing shortage (State Comptroller, 2014). In addition, lacking citizenship or permanent status, asylum seekers find it hard to protect their human rights as workers (Mundlak, 2003; Albin, 2016).

Upon arrival in Israel, asylum seekers are required to adapt to a new social and cultural environment, to learn a new language and to provide for their livelihood. However, many of them lack an extensive supportive environment such as family members, neighbours, acquaintances, as well as anchors of permanent workplaces and permanent residences. In addition, some asylum seekers arriving through the Egyptian border have experienced serious injuries and incidents, including physical violence and sexual harassment during their journey. These negative events are a source of family and social problems, including intimate violence and street violence as well as addiction (Meir *et al.*, 2012; Slonim-Nevo *et al.*, 2015; Birger and Peled, 2017). Research has shown that migrants seeking humanitarian aid have a high prevalence of psychiatric disorders, and that severe emotional states and violence often develop (Bhugra and Becker, 2005; Chen *et al.*, 2017). However, medical treatment of foreigners in the community is partial and the Israeli National Health Insurance Act, for example, does not apply to asylum seekers. As a result, they have limited access to health services and medical care, except in emergency situations (Assaf, 2014; State Comptroller, 2014).

Israel has provided minimal protection of asylum seekers' human rights, including the right to be awarded the status of refugee, which has so far been granted to less than 1 per cent of all Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers who submitted their request—the lowest percentage among Western countries (Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, 2018). Moreover, the disconnectedness of asylum seekers from the rest of Israeli society and their difficult socio-economic status, as well as various medical problems and the adverse effects of traumas experienced in their countries of origin and on their journey to Israel, raise complex psycho-social needs (Shamai and Amir, 2016). These needs require varying degrees of treatment and intervention, which are usually offered by Israeli social services according to legal status and according to ethical and professional standards.

Because no single Israeli government agency is formally responsible for the psycho-social, economic or health status of asylum seekers, social and non-governmental associations, including voluntary physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists and social activist organisations, have attempted to provide services to this community (Shamai and Amir, 2016). The following paragraphs describe the major social work services and organisations offered to the population of asylum seekers in Israel.

## Social work and asylum seekers in Israel

Israeli social workers are involved in a variety of services related to asylum seekers, which can be described using two axes: one is the organisational framework to which the service belongs, such as government services, municipal services, partially privatised and non-profit services; and the other is the ecological framework for areas and levels of intervention (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The following section describes the most significant Israeli organisations in which social workers are involved in practice related to the asylum-seekers community.

### Governmental services

Until the year 2009, the policy of the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services was to provide social services to all residents of Israel, including those who were not citizens of Israel. In 2009, following a significant growth in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Israel and as social services were not budgeted to reflect the unexpected population growth, the ministry's policies have changed and assistance was only provided to those who have been found to be at risk. At the beginning of 2016, the ministry general manager published a procedure for the treatment of minors without status, authorising the treatment of any child who needs assistance and is in Israel (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2017, p. 73). The Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services therefore provides treatment and protection for minors and adults whose lives are in actual danger in the spirit of the international conventions signed by the state. The main groups receiving treatment are those in need of immediate protection, such as women who have experienced domestic violence, children in danger (similar to all children in Israel), victims of trafficking for prostitution and/or slavery and certain cases of people with special needs.

Services provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services include offering asylum seekers housing in centres for women and men

who are survivors of trafficking, slavery and forced labour, and attending to children at risk or in situations of immediate danger, including children without status or unaccompanied children who are staying in foster-care or boarding schools. These state-sponsored services allow limited types of intervention by social workers, which range from responding to traumatic events experienced before and after entering Israel, attending to children's educational and therapeutic solutions, to working on individual and group psycho-social rehabilitation processes.

Thus, the response to the growing number of asylum seekers varies and reflects, to a significant extent, two aspects: first, the number of asylum seekers in any locality and, second, the willingness of local authorities to allocate funds and human resources to resolve the problem. In addition, many of the state services are lacking due to inadequate policies and regulations. For example, official regulations determine that these victims are eligible for one year of rehabilitation in shelters. Due to their collective protected status under international law, after their year of rehabilitation ends, these victims cannot be deported back to their home countries and, still, they remain in Israel without a valid work authorisation or access to health-care services (Assaf, 2014).

A key junction at which social workers are meeting asylum seekers is the Israeli prisons system. Social workers working in Israel detention facilities are placed in an unenviable position, as the most basic rights of asylum seekers are violated by the very act of holding them in such facilities. The ethical dilemmas faced by social workers in such facilities are stressful and have yet to be explored in detail.

The following section will briefly address Israeli local services, civil services and NGOs that are involved in serving the asylum-seeker community.

## Specialised municipal services

### Mesila—aid and information centre for migrant workers and refugees' service

One of the salient examples of municipal social services working for the community of asylum seekers is Mesila. Founded in 1999 by the Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality in order to provide social services to migrant workers living in the southern neighbourhoods of Tel Aviv, Mesila is funded by the municipality as well as by external donations. Mesila's social workers aim to provide solutions for the unique needs of the asylum-seekers community, while simultaneously using existing solutions within the framework of the Tel Aviv-Yafo municipality.

Mesila offers a wide range of services including assistance in health-related issues, education, civil status, housing, education, health and



more. Since its inception, Mesila has handled 3,000 inquiries: 50 per cent of them about children, 33 per cent on health issues, 27 per cent on welfare issues, mainly violence between spouses. Less than 10 per cent of the appeals dealt with emergency issues: battered women and abandoned children (Liran, 2016).

The social workers at Mesila operate mainly as case managers, mediating between the community of asylum seekers and utilisation of resources provided by civil society and by government agencies. Mesila benefits from a unique position, being part of the welfare services provided by the municipality, while at the same time working in a manner similar to that of an NGO, promoting policy and human rights issues, which is unusual for a welfare organisation in Israel.

Lecturers in the field of social work were involved in providing Mesila with an opportunity to initiate a new activity. In 2013, Mesila began training care-givers from the community of asylum seekers, who were in charge of toddlers in unregulated day-care centres operating in south Tel Aviv. The funding for this new activity was raised through a charity event organised by lecturers at the Sapir College School of Social Work with assistance by students who volunteered at the event. Mesila was later able to secure additional funding, allowing social workers to deal with another basic need of the community of asylum seekers. However, a study conducted at a later date showed that the conditions in these day-care centres still put thousands of babies and toddlers at risk (Mayer and Slone, 2016).

## Civil society and NGOs

Most of the social workers involved in caring for asylum seekers in Israel are employed by NGOs. The following are the main two organisations in which social workers are involved in intervening for asylum-seeker service users in an attempt to meet their basic needs and address their human rights concerns. For the purposes of this article, we have chosen to briefly describe the activities of social workers in the organisations in which social workers are most active.

### Assaf—aid organisation for refugees and asylum seekers in Israel

Assaf was founded in 2007 in order to aid refugees and asylum seekers in Israel. In the absence of systemic solutions, hospital professionals—doctors, nurses and social workers—turn to Assaf, hoping the organisation can provide follow-up care, rehabilitation, and financial and social support (Assaf, 2014). The programme, which offers vital services and social case management to asylum seekers, is operated by a social



worker accompanied by volunteers from the advocacy and support centre and by social work students. The target of the plan is to alleviate the plight of asylum seekers who have experienced trauma, mourning and loss, and to bolster their resilience and ability to tackle their problems. Assaf's psycho-social aid is based on a holistic outlook that covers various diverse aspects of the lives of asylum seekers: social, emotional, community-based and humanitarian. The range of services includes ongoing full intervention by a social worker, personal accompaniment of families, individual accompaniment and guidance, individual support for HIV-positive individuals, an advocacy and support centre, legal information and reference, contact with support bodies and intervention with the authorities as well as referral to relevant support schemes in Assaf.

## Unitaf

Partially funded by the Ministry of Welfare, Unitaf is an organisation managed by social workers whose goal is to create appropriate educational frameworks for asylum seekers' pre-school children. Unitaf's day-care centres and afterschool programmes provide an all-inclusive social environment in addition to care-giving and, thus, essentially constitute a central, vital factor in the lives of the children and their families. As members of the asylum-seekers community, most of Unitaf's children come from families with a complex profile and, accordingly, the therapeutic perspective involves the child and family as a whole. The families whose children are educated at Unitaf receive comprehensive psycho-social treatment relating to ongoing issues such as assistance in access to services, health insurance and medical diagnostic services, as well as in emergency situations.

## Discussion

The current article presents a case study on the response of Israeli social work to the community of asylum seekers, which allows us to identify gaps between the social work profession's global agenda and its implementation. Social work's global agenda is based on a consensus that social workers should play an important role in providing for the needs of oppressed and vulnerable populations, including migrants and asylum seekers (Becerra, 2016). However, the rapid growth of the asylum-seekers community presents a multidimensional challenge to social workers worldwide, including social workers in Israel, who operate under adverse social conditions in a hostile social climate and are subject to problematic governmental policies (Robinson, 2014; Tartakovsky and Walsh, 2016; Mapp and Gatenio-Gabel, 2017). As street-level

bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), the activities of social workers are inevitably shaped by existing political views regarding the nature of what constitutes a 'good citizen': this is manifested, for example, by studies that have observed European social workers working with immigrants (van der Haar, 2015). In a similar manner, the Israeli social work profession's response to the arrival of asylum seekers has reflected prevalent views regarding that community in Israeli society. Israeli social workers working with the community of asylum seekers operate in a hostile climate: Israeli society regards asylum seekers as illegal migrant workers or, worse, as dangerous criminals, leading to isolated events of violence against that community (Duman, 2015; Shinar Levanon, 2018).

Although the number of asylum seekers entering Israel grew rapidly since 2007, and despite new needs for social work interventions, Israeli social work schools offered few courses focusing on asylum seekers (Tartakovsky and Walsh, 2016). The lack of preparation may reflect the fact that implementation of the human rights approach to social work and policy practice in Israel was still in its infancy, and it was limited in scope (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2008; Nuttman-Shwartz and Ranz, 2017; Weiss-Gal *et al.*, 2018). This also reflects a more general gap between repeated statements about the significance of human rights for the social work profession on the one hand and the professional reality on the other, in which the actual scope of social workers who implement policy practice and advocacy is limited (Kwong-Kam, 2012; Hawkins and Knox, 2014).

Given Israel's hostile legislation, policies and social response towards asylum seekers, Israeli social workers' interventions tend to reflect a classic, traditional needs-based paradigm. Moreover, although the ideological approach of Israeli social workers places a dual focus on the individual and society, the social dimension is marginal and the person-in-environment approach is hardly evident in practice (Weiss-Gal, 2008).

In addition, the professional response of Israeli social work to the community of asylum seekers is manifested in another trait common to Israeli social work: a focus on urgent needs. Even though this is justified given the urgent needs of many asylum seekers, as more urgent needs are met, social work should develop a more inclusive professional model that reflects, for example, the need to attend to the trauma endured by almost all asylum seekers as a result of their forced migration (Nakash *et al.*, 2015).

The needs-based approach of Israeli social workers also reflects their professional tendency to ignore social, political and economic factors that are crucial to the pre- and post-immigration experiences of asylum seekers (Marlowe, 2010). Additionally, the fact that many, if not most, of Israel's social workers involved in working with the community of asylum seekers are employed directly either by the government or by specialised municipal services may also explain the limited, needs-based, focus of their activities. In that connection, a recent study revealed that the organisational context in which Israeli social workers operate is a

significant factor influencing their level of willingness to engage in policy practice (Weiss-Gal *et al.*, 2018). The adoption of a traditional needs-based paradigm and caring for urgent needs is not enough to secure the basic human rights of asylum seekers. Although establishment of a caring relationship between social workers and asylum seekers is crucial, a critical ethic of care acknowledges the necessity for political change, which must include actions aimed at promoting human rights and social justice for asylum seekers (Briskman, 2009; Nipperess, 2017).

As mentioned, the challenges faced by Israeli social workers are far from unique. Many developed countries also use instruments of control to deter and punish asylum seekers, and population at large in those countries has become increasingly hostile towards refugees and asylum seekers (Nipperess, 2017). Although social workers are trained to work with inter-group social conflicts, hostility towards asylum seekers should be acknowledged and dealt with by the state, in order to allow social workers to contribute to a gradual change in attitudes among communities in particular and society as a whole (Lyons, 2017). Israeli social workers who are involved with the community of asylum seekers should acknowledge the perils of a traditional professional approach to social work that emphasises the distance between the professional (the self) and the client (the other), thus exacerbating the discrimination and oppression that clients have already experienced (Beresford, 2013; Chambon, 2013; Oliver, 2013; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017).

Working with a marginalised group such as asylum seekers can also have adverse consequences for social workers, leading to the marginalisation of social work as a profession. For example, Robinson (2014) noted that social workers in Australia and the UK were marginalised within health- and social-care services. They were subject to restricted funding, which can diminish opportunities for research, training and development. However, educators, researchers and practitioners in the field of social work who are actively engaged with asylum seekers and refugee communities can play a key role in identifying appropriate models of support. To do so, and in order to overcome the risks of recreating negative opinions and growing social gaps, which arise in Israel as well as in other developed countries, the social work profession will need to develop a critical view of the policy context and the social discourses that shape the experience of asylum seekers (Drolet *et al.*, 2018). At the meso level, community development work will need to create welcoming, safe and inclusive neighbourhoods and communities, where local residents and immigrants and refugees can co-create a sense of belonging and connection. This will require social workers to engage in open dialogue, to show cultural curiosity and sensitivity and to build relationships. It will also be necessary to devote attention to formal and informal community and cultural power structures, with emphasis on

promoting resilience among immigrant and refugee communities and recognising the social capital that they bring (Westoby, 2008).

Social work practitioners need to encourage self-determination and empowerment for service users (Trevithick, 2012), allowing them to adopt a cross-cultural contextual engagement that reflects both individual trauma and international human rights (Nelson *et al.*, 2014). However, the need to promote human rights among asylum seekers should reflect the complex and contested framework that contains multiple tensions and contradictions (Ife, 2008; Nipperess and Briskman, 2009). The focus on both trauma and human rights stems from the need to allow asylum seekers to gradually improve their legal, social and personal conditions (Hernández and García-Moreno, 2014).

In order to allow social workers to develop a critical approach to working with communities of asylum seekers, the repertoire of bottom-up social work practices should be reflected in training programmes for social work students and trainees. Anti-discrimination policies and adoption of the good-practices experience should be central to training of social workers as a significant investment in the future sustainability of practice with ethnic clients (Barberis and Boccagni, 2014). Israel social work schools should play a key role in this process, following the example set by the Australian heads of schools of social work, who have established the People's Inquiry in order to bear witness to events in Australian immigration detention facilities (ACHSSW, 2006). According to Briskman (2009), the role undertaken by the Australian social work academic leadership is one that social workers can take to heart when facing the day-to-day grind of the workplace (p. 297).

To conclude, today, most, if not all, current social work activities related to asylum seekers are aimed solely at that community. Although social workers can be expected to bear witness to the traumatic experiences of asylum seekers, they should also aim to encourage asylum seekers to be heard in society as a whole, as well as in the community where they seek asylum, in the local host communities and in communities consisting of both asylum seekers and local residents. In doing so, social workers should also be sensitive to individuals who feel that their world is vanishing due to increased migration (Healy, 2017; Završek, 2017). In addition, there is a need to develop programmes aimed at breaking the social barriers between local citizens and the community of asylum seekers in an attempt to minimise social gaps and animosity. Such ongoing efforts may change the hostile policy and promote social justice as well as a human-rights-based policy.

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