



Isha L'Isha – Haifa Feminist Center

COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women without status in Israel

This paper is submitted to you by Isha L'Isha's Women Without Status project

In Israel, during Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a substantial increase of violence against women. Since the beginning of 2020, 11 women have been murdered, 7 of them have been murdered during Covid-19 (Between March and today). In comparison, in the whole of 2019, 20 women have been murdered. Social services departments in Israel are reporting an increase of 760% in the amount of complaints they receive about domestic violence against women and children. Helplines run by the government and civil society organizations also report a substantial increase in the amount of calls they receive.

Since 2018 Isha L'Isha has offered support to women without permanent legal status (WWPLS) in Israel, who are very vulnerable and at high risk for domestic violence. WWPLS includes trafficking victims and survivors, asylum seekers, women who are married or in a relationship with an Israeli citizen or resident, as well as undocumented workers. These women come from various communities, including: Eastern European, Palestinian, African and Asian communities.

Already before the crisis, WWPLS in Israel lived in very challenging conditions. They lack access to public health services, protective and welfare services, employment rights, and civil rights. Many of these women depend on male partners for their temporary status or livelihood, resulting in an increased risk of sexual and domestic violence. When facing violence or life-threatening situations, they are often afraid to seek assistance due to fear of being deported or of being separated from their children and families. In addition, many of the women have



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language barriers that make it difficult to deal with bureaucratic processes and seek help.

According to Israeli law and regulations, the legal status of foreign women that are spouses to Israeli citizens, is dependent on the continuity of the relationship, for a duration of 4-7 years. Afterwards they are supposed to be given permanent independent status. In any case the relationship stops before the woman gets permanent status, the woman will lose her legal temporary status, lose her rights and get a deportation order, even if she has Israeli children. Also, it is important to note that Palestinian women are dependent on the continuity of the relationship endlessly, without the option of ever getting independent status.

In addition, many WWPLS are dependent on men for financial reasons. Many of the women are single mothers that are not entitled to social benefits or support from the government such as state allowances or unemployment fees. They work in low-income jobs and informal employment, including: housekeeping, cleaning staff, care workers, informal employees, etc.

In case of domestic violence, the woman has the option of filing a request for independent status. This is a long and painful process that takes years and the chances of getting an independent status are slim and are still dependent on the Israeli man's will to have a relationship with the mutual children. Even women who receive a positive response to this request (which is a small percentage of women) do not get permanent status. Also, they are not guaranteed social benefits and might even get the status of a tourist for years. They are left in a permanent state of temporary status at best.

Under the current crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation has significantly deteriorated for WWPLS, who were already an extremely vulnerable group.

These women are the first ones to lose their jobs during the crisis. Their income was dismal before the crisis and they do not have any kind of savings to bridge



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the current situation or to leave their abusive spouse and support themselves and their children. Many families are already on the brink of severe poverty. Also, with losing their jobs, the women lose their health insurance and have trouble meeting the payments for their children's health insurance. Unfortunately, abusive men understand the women's vulnerability and use it against them, threatening the women that if they will tell the authorities about the violence they experience, they will be deported and separated from their children.

The women that find the strength to report the violence have a very hard time accessing the services available for civilians in this situation. The helplines are not as accessible as they are for citizens, specifically government lines, which are not accessible in all languages. The women, more often than not, are not fluent in the Hebrew language, nor are they exposed to advertisement about those lines, specifically in their native tongue. Also, they are afraid to seek government assistance, whether through the helplines, police or courts due to lack of awareness of their rights, which are not made accessible enough in different languages and due to lack of trust in law enforcement and governmental agencies and fear of deportation. They are also afraid of asking for some benefits, such as food baskets, because they are worried that their data will be misused for other purposes. Some have also had experienced traumatic interactions with Israeli immigration authorities, police, or governmental institutions.

The shelters for battered women were open during Covid-19 but were running at full capacity. Some of the women who did not have a permanent status in Israel, such as asylum seekers, were under the threat of having to leave the shelter's transition apartment because of lack of vacancy. There were some alternative initiatives through civil society organizations, such as an emergency shelter specific for the purpose of quarantine pre-entering the other shelters and a civil initiative that enabled women to get shelter in vacant apartments. Unfortunately, even the shelters provide only temporary protection for WWPLS. As mentioned,

118 Arlozorov St. Haifa 33276, Tel: 972-4-865-0977, 972-4-866-0951 Fax: 972-4-864-1072

E-mail: isha@isha.org.il, Web Site: www.isha.org.il



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their chances of getting independent status and rights from the state are slim and take years to access, making the shelter's rehabilitation process not efficient for them as it's pendant on too many unstable variables.

At all times, women without permanent legal status are at great risk of exploitation, violence and abuse. The current crisis has magnified already existing inequalities and injustices, and has put these women in a horrible and impossible situation.

Isha L'Isha – Haifa feminist center

Isha L'Isha – Haifa feminist center, established in 1983, is the oldest grassroots feminist organization in Israel and one of the leading voices of women's rights in the country. The center is based in Haifa, however, many of our projects focus on implementing system-wide solutions to problems faced by women. As a result, Isha L'Isha has a national influence, reaching target audiences throughout the country. Isha L'Isha's mission is to advance the status and rights of women and girls and to promote peace, security and socio-economic justice from a feminist perspective through education, research, dissemination of knowledge and public events.

The Women Without Status project

The Women Without Status Project assists women with temporary or no legal status and advocates to change laws and promote policies that advance their rights and well-being.

The women we support include trafficking victims and survivors, asylum seekers, women who are married or in a relationship with an Israeli citizen or resident, as



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well as undocumented workers. These women come from various communities, including: Eastern European, Palestinian, African and Asian communities. Their life stories and backgrounds are very diverse and unique. What is common is that all of these women, regardless of their singular story, face significant personal and legal challenges, including lack of access to public health services, lack of protective and welfare services, lack of employment rights, and lack of civil rights.

Our aim is to affect the legal and social status of these women and to help individual Women without Status in Israel to feel safer, stronger, and empowered.

Isha L'Isha counts with an extensive network of state officials, civil society organizations, professionals, lawyers, and volunteers that offer support to the women that reach out to us. Through a Forum of civil society organizations and state officials, we work closely with individuals and institutions to advance the well-being and safety of women and their families. In addition, we organize events for professionals (health care and medical service providers, social workers, and lawyers, among other) and the public to raise awareness about the many challenges that women without status face and how we can support them.

Contact information:

Ayala Olier, Project Coordinator, isha.wws@gmail.com, +972-50-2471911