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# Human Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea

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# Eritrean Unaccompanied Minors in Human Trafficking

*Mirjam van Reisen & Taha Al-Qasim*

*I was just doing what the other people were doing.*  
(Interview Estefanos with B, Skype, 19 October 2012)

### Introduction

The large number of unaccompanied minors among the refugees characterises the human trafficking crisis from Eritrea. The exploitative character of the trafficking of unaccompanied minors is directly associated with their vulnerability. This chapter examines how unaccompanied minors are exploited as they are separated from their parents, adult siblings or carers during their migration journeys.

It is shocking to see very young children, as young as four or five years old, crossing the border in the company of siblings who are only a few years older (Zeeman, 2016). The fragmentation of families in Eritrea combined with the push to drive youth out of the country (Chapter 3) has caused a dramatic exodus of unaccompanied minors. The ongoing recruitment of young people into indefinite national service is cause for deep desperation and parents see no future for their children within the country.

The situation is summed up by a recent report by Africa Monitors (2016) entitled ‘*Eritrean unaccompanied minors and human trafficking*’, which states that:

*Children, as young as 8, have been reported to have crossed the border to Ethiopia from the southernmost parts of Eritrea. This has been happening since the early 00’s*

*but started turning into a major phenomenon after 2007 when droughts hit the southern region's farmers. The economy was failing, most basic supplies were scarce. In some towns like Mendefera, water, if available at all cost as much as 2 USD for a barrel before the summer of 2007. Before 2009 the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights] was arranging the return of young minors to their parents from the camps. Those children usually crossed the border from the last villages near the border with Ethiopia. Those children who expressed willingness to return back to their homes were sent back within few months but many chose to remain. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

As early as 2013 concerns were expressed about the conditions leading to the large number of Eritrean unaccompanied minors among refugees (Women's Refugee Commission, 2013). There has been a rapid and steady increase in unaccompanied minors from Eritrea arriving in Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan (Vice, 2015). A recent report by the EU's Frontex identifies the main route used by unaccompanied minors to Europe as from Ethiopia and Sudan, through Libya and the Mediterranean Sea to Italy (Frontex, 2010). According to figures provided by the UN Special Rapporteur, Eritrean children constitute the largest group of unaccompanied children arriving in Italy. In 2014, 3,394 unaccompanied Eritrean children arrived in Italy out of a total of 13,026 unaccompanied children and, in 2015, 3,092 unaccompanied Eritrean children arrived in Italy out of a total of 12,360 (UNHCR, 2016). There is a possibility that these numbers are underestimated as many unaccompanied children might not be registered (Anon., personal communication, Van Reisen, Skype, 22 January 2017).

The research carried out for this chapter focuses on the extent to which unaccompanied minors became involved in practices of human trafficking for ransom during their migration journeys. This chapter will first address the circumstances driving young Eritrean refugees and unaccompanied minors to leave their country. Following this, the particular experiences of unaccompanied minors in human trafficking for ransom are identified. Finally, the trauma and psychosocial needs of unaccompanied minors are identified.

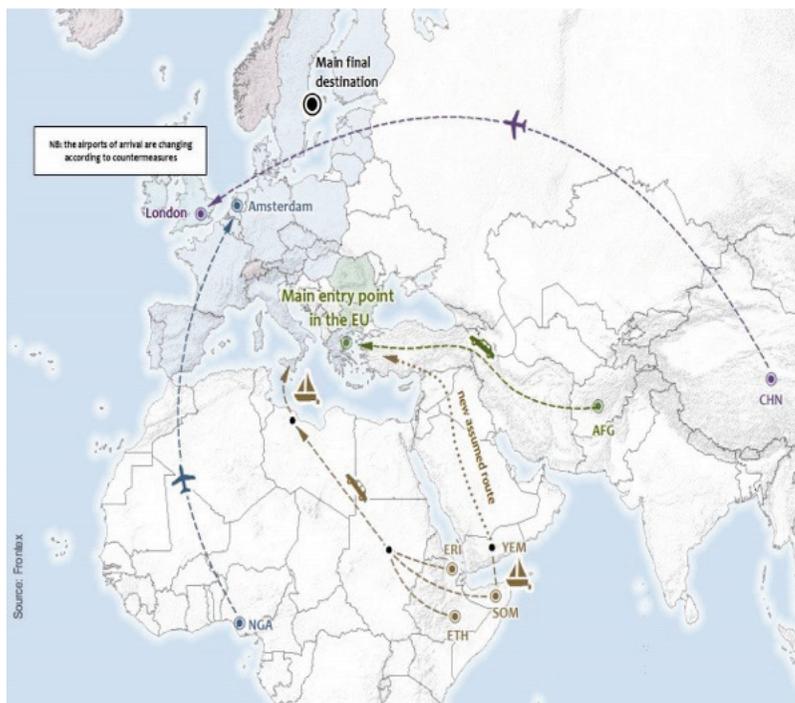


Figure 5.1. Map of routes taken by unaccompanied minors to Europe (Source: Frontex, 2010)

An earlier version of the research carried out for this chapter was published in a report and some parts are reprinted here (Van Reisen, 2016). The research is based on interviews conducted between 2011 and 2016 in the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Israel, and Libya, as well as in refugee camps on the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with unaccompanied minors aged from 15 to 17 years and their guardians aged from 27 to 29 years.<sup>27</sup> The research was undertaken with the aim of understanding the experiences of unaccompanied minors from Eritrea on their migration journeys, with a particular focus on smuggling and trafficking experiences. It uses a phenomenological

<sup>27</sup> The research was guided by the legal standard of the 'best interests of the child'. The code of conduct involving minors and the principle of 'do no harm' were also applied. Particular attention was paid to the principle of mutual consent and understanding.

approach, in which rapport and trust were created to facilitate the interviews (Angrosino & Rosenberg 2011; Kakuru & Paradaza 2007).

## **Reasons for fleeing Eritrea**

Many researchers and scholars have identified the main reason why minors are fleeing Eritrea as the national service programme, which is mandatory and indefinite for Eritreans. In 2012, Mekonnen & Van Reisen reported on the forceful recruitment of children into national service. They also reported that female conscripts were used as sexual objects and forced to perform sexual services for military commanders:

*Children are being recruited for military service forcefully. As regards the twenty-second round of the NMSP [National Military Service Programme], which concluded in June 2009, official government sources indicate that the majority of participants in this round were born in the post-independence era, which would mean that all such recruits were underage children at the time of conscription. Witnesses report that in several instances girls have been obliged to perform sexual services for military commanders; if they become pregnant, these girls are dispelled from military service with no option but to undertake the dangerous journey to leave the country illegally without any means of support. (Mekonnen & Van Reisen, 2012, p. 334)*

The testimony of Mussie Hadgu, former aid worker in Eritrea, elucidates this point further:

*In my own battalion there were 17 children (17 of out 500 participants); if we take 17 as average number per battalion, this means in 10 battalions (each battalion has on average of 500 people), there were about 170 children in total between the age of 11–14 out of about 5,000 prisoners. To mention some from those who were in my battalion: Meron (11 years), Semere (11), Huruy (14), Osman (14), Dejen (14) all from Tesseney; Abdurehim (12) from Aligeder; Mahmud (14) from Akurdet; Hassen (12) from Keren; John (11) from Asmara. John was captured with his 8 year-old brother attempting to cross over to Sudan when the guide his*

*mother had arranged was captured. He, his brother and his mother were jailed for about 3 months after which his mother and his younger brother were released while he was taken to We'a [a prison in Eritrea]. (Hagdu, 2009, pp. 29–30)*

The testimony of Hadgu is consistent with the issues raised by Mekonnen and Van Reisen (2012). Hadgu, adds:

*In the case of women, some women have been jailed with their children because they could not get people to take responsibility for, and look after, their children. These children, I had seen, were between 3–5 years old, but there could be others younger than this age range [...]. There are also girls below the age of 18. Those women who came first to the camp have stayed in the camp for more than one and half years without being assigned to any unit/department or ministry and it is not known how long they will stay in the camp in a frustrating, depressing and humiliating condition. (Hagdu, 2009, p. 29)*

The primary reasons cited by many unaccompanied minors for fleeing Eritrea are: the knowledge that their father, elder brothers or sisters were in national service indefinitely; their personal experiences serving in the military; and problems with security officials. This is evident from interviews with 16-year-old C and 15-year-old S. C left Eritrea when he was 16. He left elementary school with three other friends as he did not want to do military training. As a punishment, he was sent to prison for one and half months. Upon his release from prison, he escaped from Eritrea because he was afraid of the government. He fled to Ethiopia, in the company of another friend, without knowing where he would go, only that he wanted to leave Eritrea. After two days, C and his friend arrived in Ethiopia. C is currently residing in Belgium (Interview, Heisterkamp with C, face-to-face, 30 August 2015).

Similarly, 15-year-old S reported that he left Eritrea in 2008 at the age of 12 with his paternal uncle. His uncle died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea and he was left behind in Libya. When asked about his family background and his life situation in Eritrea, S reported that his mother was in Eritrea and his father was killed

during the Ethiopian-Eritrean War in 2001 (Interview, Estefanos with S, March 2011).

O, who is now 17-years old, came to the Netherlands through Sudan and Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea. O left Eritrea when he was 15-years old. At that time his father was in prison. Here is an excerpt from the transcript of the interview with O:

*O: You see, my father is in prison. We do not know where he is.*

*TA: Really, how did he disappear?*

*O: He is in prison, but we do not know where he is imprisoned.*

*TA: How long has he been in prison?*

*O: Since around, 2013*

*TA: Uh ha. Did they just come and take him with no reason?*

*O: No, he was in national service and his colleague and friend told my mother about what happen. He quietly told my mother that they took him. And my mother asked where he was imprisoned. He was stationed in Zoba Gash Barka. My mother went there and asked about his whereabouts. They told her that he was not held there. Then my mother asked where he is. They told her again, he is not here and we do not know where he is.*

*TA: It is okay, A. May God help him to get released. Just pray for him.*

*O: We lost hope now. We prayed. We cried [choking voice]. You see with regard to my father now, I am losing hope. I became zero and zero.*

(Interview, Al-Qasim with O, phone, 9 December 2016)

The UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Eritrea, Sheila Keetharuth, presented a report on Eritrean unaccompanied minors as refugees in 2016. She reported the following in relation to the reasons why minors leave Eritrea:

*The exposure of Eritrean children to violence and arbitrary arrest both as witnesses and victims was among the top compelling reasons Eritrean unaccompanied children cited for leaving the country. Several among the unaccompanied children highlighted experiences in which they witnessed violence against a family member or friend, thereby creating fear that the same fate could befall them. Some of the unaccompanied children experienced violence first-hand, including arbitrary detention after the*

*'giffas' [conscription round-ups] or for inquiring about relatives who were detained, or because they were suspected of wanting to flee the country. Fear that this could happen again was expressed as a reason for leaving. One female interviewee was suspected of planning to leave the country, as a number of her friends had already left. She was not planning to do so, as her mother was mentally disabled. She was put in detention for three days, an experience which traumatised her to a degree that she eventually left the country, only to be injured at the border when shot at during flight. (UNHRC, 2016)*

Keetharuth points out that the large number of people fleeing Eritrea and leaving relatives behind in national service, military service, or in one of the many prisons or detention facilities has effectively orphaned many Eritrean children in a practical sense, as they are separated from their parents and adult caretakers and may not know their whereabouts. The indefinite national service in Eritrea affects children very seriously. Keetharuth expressed concern for the vulnerable position of Eritrean children, especially children of “national service evaders and deserters, who face detention and enforced disappearance” (UNHRC, 2016), effectively leaving children orphaned or semi-orphaned.

Keetharuth also pointed to “the allegations of forced underage recruitment, including through the frequent practice of round-ups called ‘giffa’, despite the legal minimum age for recruitment being set at 18”:

*Some of the unaccompanied children said that if they were caught without identity documents such as their student cards, they would risk being rounded up and conscripted during ‘giffas’ or raids. One of the unaccompanied children said he was caught in a ‘giffa’ after he had gone to the market to buy food for his family. He was detained together with other boys who were even younger than him and his parents were not allowed to see him while he was in detention. He was sent from prison to military training until he fled the country. Another unaccompanied child noted how his brother was forced into military conscription and he feared the same would happen to him due to his poor performance in school and the mere fact that*

*he looked older than his age. Witnessing this spurred him to leave the country [...].*  
(UNHRC, 2016)

These roundups are experienced as a threat by Eritrean minors (UNHRC, 2015, 2016).

This issue was also discussed by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:

*After Grade 11 children were sent to 'SAWA' which was a military training camp according to many reliable reports. There were several thousand children under the age of 18 in SAWA. The Government stated that SAWA had been a military training camp but was today an ordinary school – could the delegation provide information on that transition? Children often fled Eritrea and claimed asylum in other countries because of the fear of conscription and the fear of being sent to SAWA which they believed was a military training camp.* (UNHRC, 2015)

During one of the research-visits to camps in northern Ethiopia in 2016, staff in one of the camps explained that 700 unaccompanied children had arrived in the camp to date and that a large group of around 50 children arrived that very day (Zeeman, 2016). It was also clear that despite the relatively safe environment established for children in the camps, officials had little confidence that they could keep all of the children out of the hands of the traffickers. They said that, from experience, a good number of the children would continue on their hazardous journey to Sudan and Ethiopia, a trip that cannot be made without the involvement of the trafficking networks. In interviews carried out in the refugee camps in Ethiopia in April 2016, it was found that many unaccompanied minors (often at very young ages) cross the border in search of relatives who have already fled the country hoping to be able to join them (Interviews, Van Reisen with various refugees, in Hitsats refugee camp, face-to-face, April 2016).

The ongoing national service and military training affects the situation of minors in several ways. Firstly, the recruitment of minors in forced labour and indefinite conscription, as well as their

detention, may be a direct cause for minors to flee Eritrea on their own due to lack of other options.

The breakup of the family because of indefinite military service has been identified as a major factor in the mass exodus of unaccompanied children from Eritrea, as explained in the report by Africa Monitors (2016):

*When the government wouldn't let the fathers of the school age children of the early 2000s take care of their families, it was in effect deciding the fates of the children. Tens of thousands of young fathers had died during the war, leaving the women to raise their children alone. The economic policies of the government made the situation worse for the poorest part of the society. And this was happening before there was time to address even the issues that originated before 1991. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

The ongoing indefinite national service policy continues to be a major factor in the disintegration of families and leaves minors without parents or carers to look after them, causing them to flee the country often in search of relatives abroad.

### **The exploitation and extortion of unaccompanied minors in human trafficking**

When unaccompanied minors from Eritrea cross the border, they are extremely vulnerable. Many will try to reach relatives in other places of the world. Those who arrive in the refugee camps on the Ethiopian border are placed in special care facilities. However, there are also many children who arrive in the camps with adults, but remain behind on their own and without any support (Interviews Van Reisen with V, face-to-face, April 2016 and 19 January 2017).

The in-depth report into unaccompanied minors in Ethiopian and Sudanese refugee camps in Kassala by the Women's Refugee Commission identified some of the challenges that these children face:

*A significant number of Eritrean refugees, no matter their age, do not remain in the refugee camps but cross into Sudan or live outside the camps in Ethiopia. Some of those who stay in the camps seem to do so only as a last resort and a consequence of the ongoing economic stresses affecting their families. Various protection concerns were raised by the [unaccompanied children] living in the camps, including but not limited to: a real threat of kidnapping and forced abductions in Sudan; potential refoulement by the Sudanese government; and potential forced conscription by an Eritrean opposition movement in northern Ethiopia. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2013)*

Special Rapporteur Keetharuth finds that “a large number of people leaving the country, including unaccompanied children, face the risk of being trafficked, smuggled, or abducted” (UNHRC, 2016). Keetharuth expressed concern that these children need special protection:

*...it is important to ensure protection in the treatment of unaccompanied children, as they face greater risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, military recruitment, child labour and detention. It has been brought to my attention that some States have failed to provide adequate protection as some children continue to be exposed to various human rights violations while in refugee camps or along migration routes. (UNHRC, 2016)*

She added that some fall into the hands of smugglers and traffickers:

*In leaving Eritrea, the unaccompanied children are subjected to an array of protection risks, starting right during the clandestine border crossing. In doing so, they become vulnerable to other violations including trafficking, abduction for ransom, sexual violence, torture and other cruel and inhuman treatment, among other numerous dangers. They shared with me some of their experiences in travelling from Eritrea in the hands of smugglers and traffickers in the different territories, though this was not the focus of my investigations. (UNHRC, 2016)*

A 16-year-old minor called R left his village in southern Eritrea for Ethiopia where he stayed in a refugee camp. Eventually, he decided to go to Sudan and then on to Libya. With the help of traffickers, he arranged to cross to Sudan. While en route, the traffickers demanded more money. Fortunately, the whole convoy was caught by Sudanese security forces. R was temporarily detained before being sent on to Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan. During the interview, R spoke of his fears during the ordeal:

*What I would have done if they sold me to another smuggler? From where would I get the money? I did not have anyone to pay for my release. My father is in prison in Eritrea, and my mother has small children. We have nothing. (Interview, Al-Qasim with R, face-to-face, 15 October 2015)*

The minors experience uncertainty, insecurity, and violence and express this reality with brutal honesty:

*At exactly 6:31, I reached the outskirts of Kassala and when I saw the radar with a red-light on it, I was completely exhausted and wanted to sit and rest for some time, but I was taken away by sleep. When I woke up I saw a man wearing a jallabyah and he spoke to me in Tigrinya. The person asked: "You came from Eritrea, right?" And, added: "What can I do for you?" Since I do not know exactly the place, I asked back: "Where is Kassala?" He replied, " I am also going to Kassala, come with me."*

*When we reached Kassala, I didn't have any money at all. The person invited me for a meal, he said, I will invite you for ful [meal] and he takes me to his house. Then, he asked me to wait for him until he comes back. After, 10 minutes he came back with two Rashaidas and a pick up car.*

*The person said if you go with them, they will reward you for your work. I was so happy and took the opportunity. They drove to a secluded area and stopped. They asked me to remove my clothes. I tried to ask why, but the person who was friendly before suddenly changed. I begged and pleaded for him to leave me, but the person said if you do not do what they say they will kill you here.*

*As I was told, I wore the jallabyah and the other clothes they provided me. Inside the car I was sitting between them. The person who banded me to them remained there. He did not go with us. After 30 minutes of the ride, they took me to one agudo [hut] where they beat me with sticks and bottom of a Kalashnikov on my head and all over my body. Then they took me to different locations and mixed me with other Eritreans and Ethiopians captives. In the house they took me there were 2 people from Asmara and its surroundings and 3 girls. In that place, there were 18 people. All in all, 18 in one house and 10 in the house where I was staying – 28 people in total. (Written testimony, W, 10 February 2012)*

Unaccompanied minors who are trafficked and who do not have access to financial resources are forced to repay their debt in several ways. Their lack of protection makes unaccompanied and separated minors vulnerable to abuse and extortion, especially if they do not receive any support from family members living abroad or from other support networks. Some are forced to beg for ransoms from relatives or family members whom they call by mobile phone (see also Chapters 2 and 7). In the *‘Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond’*, Van Reisen *et al.* (2014) identified a number of ways that children from the camps in Ethiopia are lured into trafficking through ‘no-fee deals’. The following modus operandi was identified:

*There are also reports of organised trips from the Ethiopian camps to the refugee in Sudan by traffickers. Children (aged 13–14) are: “being enticed [...] without paying anything and their respective families are extorted when they get there. They’re basically taken without the consent of their families.” Being presented with these observations, an interviewee from Mai Ayni camp in the Tigray region (Ethiopia) commented: “It is a bit hard. We know what’s actually going on; we know those things are being perpetuated by individuals who live in this camp or its environs with us. We’re incapable of addressing the issue ourselves even though we know everything.” (Van Reisen, 2014)*

The practice of no-fee or low-fee deals was also reported in the following account in which a 15-year-old Eritrean girl and her three

friends were lured by a smuggler to Sudan for a relatively low price. According to the girl, the smuggler knew that the girls' parents were in Europe and the girls did not realise at that time how low the payment was compared to a normal fee. The smuggler told them that they did not need to pay until they had reached Sudan and they walked for eight days. When they reached Sudan, the smuggler handed them over to kidnappers and they were sold to the Sinai where the 15-year-old girl was raped and fell pregnant. She was eventually released in the Sinai for USD 25,000, having paid other fees at various points (Van Reisen, 2014). Africa Monitors has also reported no-fee deals:

*Some of the deals traffickers bring to minors are the promise to be smuggled for free in return for bringing clients. For children who grew up seeing people leaving by the hundreds from their communities and who have come to believe that migration is the best choice they can make in the future, such deals are deals sent from heaven. Families are constantly worried that their children might try to cross the border without telling them. Most families hold family sessions for their children who go to military training to warn and convince them not to try to go to Sudan. But at their age, and with the general atmosphere of hopelessness the young students see, it is difficult to have a powerful influence on them once they go to military training or when posted to remote army units or other government agencies. In border towns near Sudan or Ethiopia those in their early teens know nothing except a culture of migration in their lives. They have grown up hearing stories about people making money from migration. As the possibility of making money becomes an important part of their plan to improve their lives and the lives of their poor families, their closeness to the migration routes, their knowledge of the localities, and their young age make them ideal agents for traffickers who need locals to help them smuggle people safely from the country. The traffickers study the possibility of making money out of each underage refugee very easily. As children, most of them are no match for the experienced traffickers who know how to make sure beforehand if the child's family can pay the demanded money. When the traffickers know the possibility of anyone paying for the children is very low they usually keep them as messengers. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

No-fee deals aim to bring the minors out of the context that they know. Once they are no longer in a place they know and are isolated from family or community who can protect them, they are forced to phone relatives to beg for ransom. If the relatives cannot be reached or are unable or unwilling to pay the ransom, the children are completely left to the abuse of the trafficking gangs, who can then force them to support their activities.

Another refugee explains how the no-fee deal works as a way of moving across the Eritrean border:

*I don't think there are any people who are forced to work with traffickers. But there are people in Eritrea who are forced by the government to pose as traffickers to bring in those who wish to cross. Those who voluntarily work with traffickers are those who cannot afford to pay to cross between borders. They bring people to cross hence they pay less or nothing. (P, personal communication, with Van Reisen and Klara Smits, email, 14 June 2016)*

Asked about the way in which the traffickers operate, the same refugee explained the following:

*Traffickers and mediators keep in touch with their families either by phone or through the Internet. They risk their family's life in Eritrea if they are identified so they work with the utmost secrecy and by using codes. The mediator exchanges code names and numbers with the traffickers and in turn passes it to their clients. It is with these codes that the traffickers and the people to be smuggled meet. (P, personal communication, with Van Reisen and Klara Smits, email, 14 June 2016)*

The minors face the same situation as the refugees in general, which is a collaboration between the trafficking organisations and the officials. The unaccompanied minors are especially vulnerable in such situations, as illustrated in the following interview:

*KS: I see, so you believe that the smugglers made a deal with the police, so that they could loot you?*

*Q: Absolutely. This is what I personally observed, but from similar incidents that happened to others, it is a pattern that is clear to everybody. The authorities and smugglers and traffickers collaborate and coordinate their activities.*

*In many instances, the traffickers or smugglers will work using the custody of the police and demand ransom for the release. This happened to my niece in 2008. She and more than 20 girls were abducted by some Sudanese while travelling to Sudan [inside Sudanese territory], then they were demanding about 20,000 nakfa [about 8 USD] in that. (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016)*

Unaccompanied minors who travel without financial support will need to negotiate an alternative way out of such circumstances. They may be forced to work for the traffickers for some time to pay the 'debt' incurred. This can be classified as forced labour or slavery as it is involuntary, unpaid and forced. Alternatively, or in addition, they may be forced to beg relatives to send money for their release. The involuntary character is explained in the following example, which refers to girls being subject to sexual violence as part of the practice of extortion, force and torture:

*KS: Were your niece and the other girls mistreated while in the custody of the police in Sudan?*

*Q: They made her to communicate with my brother who was in Khartoum, every time she called him to beg money, she was crying but the problem is that the women they do not tell if something embarrassing has happened. (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016)*

The prices charged by the trafficking organisations are subject to negotiation, but also subject to change. It is, therefore, difficult for refugees to plan their journey and they do not know what challenges they may face:

*KS: Can you negotiate about the amount you pay? And do people end up having to pay more when they reach their destination?*

*Q: You can negotiate, but it is common to demand money more than you initially agreed to, and if you refuse they hold you hostage and torture you. (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016)*

*As refugees who cannot pay additional fees are taken hostage they become subject to further exploitation, including being asked to collaborate within the routines of the trafficking organisation (Interview, Klara Smits with Q, Skype, 8 June 2016).*

Minors who cannot make payments may be forced to carry out activities to support the work of the human trafficking organisation. These most vulnerable children are forcibly recruited for activities that support the human trafficking networks. Africa Monitors reports that children are an easy target to bring into trafficking networks and describes the practice as follows:

*Some minors, desperate to make easy money, and manipulated into it, join the trafficking and smuggling networks. Although the children do not have the capacity to become traffickers themselves, they are used as smugglers in border areas and as brokers in towns and other communities. Some children from mostly very poor families are also recruited by smugglers or traffickers at a young age because there is no other way for the trafficking networks to reach high school students. The fear around migration from Eritrea makes information about traffickers very hard to access, which means that traffickers have to prioritize their major targets and have agents representing them in those parts of society. For most traffickers having representatives/brokers in high schools, military training centers, colleges, churches and other places where young people are found is a business strategy. The easiest to recruit are teenagers who come from very poor families or those who have already developed habits like drinking and smoking for which they cannot ask their parents for money. Children and young teenagers do not make an obvious target for security agents trying to catch independent traffickers. They are ideal for smuggling clients in high security border areas. They can transport clients and money without raising any suspicion and can work for years without getting caught. (Africa Monitors, 2016)*

The integration of unaccompanied minors in the human trafficking organisations is illustrated by their integration into human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. Based on in-depth interviews with minors and documentary film analysis, it appears that traffickers lured unaccompanied minors from Eritrea to work as translators and torturers in the Sinai torture houses.

For example, S, known as ‘the Kid’, left Eritrea in 2008 at the age of 12. His father had been killed in action in national military service in the 1998–2000 war (known as the Third Offensive) when S was a baby. S left with an uncle and was taken to Libya. His uncle died in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, while S was told to stay in Libya, and to follow later. When his uncle died, he was left alone and without any money. He was taken to the Sinai where he was held in captivity and tortured. He was then given a job as a translator and required to support the torture of the abductees as a cleaner. After a year working for the Bedouins he was released and dumped at the Israeli border. Up until last year he lived in Israel (Interview, Estefanos with S, Skype, 2011).

Another example is M, a 16-year-old Eritrean boy. M left Ethiopia for Libya at the beginning of 2015. Once in Libya, his family could not pay for his trip from Ethiopia to Libya and Libya to Italy. The smugglers made him work as a translator, cleaner and cook for almost a year. He was also required to make sure everyone paid the smugglers. At the end of December 2015 he was allowed to board the boat to Italy and, with the help of some friends, he travelled to Germany where he is now waiting to receive asylum (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

Estefanos also narrates the story of a 16-year-old female refugee from Eritrea, by the name of L. L is a former Sinai hostage and went through horrendous experiences in the Sinai. After her ransom of USD 40,000 was paid, she was deported to Ethiopia. In 2015, she decided to go to Libya and was kidnapped by Chadians at the border of Libya and Sudan. She told them she had no money to pay the ransom demanded, which was USD 5,500, so she had to clean and to

give sexual favours in exchange for payment. Two months later her ransom was paid for her and she was released (Estefanos, M, personal communication, with Van Reisen, phone, 22 December 2016).

These are all extremely sad narratives. The following dialogue is taken from the documentary film the ‘Sound of Torture’ (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013). It is a powerful example of the vulnerability of unaccompanied refugee minors. The documentary involves a minor known to the audience as M. When M is introduced, he is standing in a prison cell in the Sinai. Inside the prison cell, there are plastic bags hanging from the wall, presumably the possessions of the prisoners living there. M looks scared. He is being shown a photograph by investigative journalist and human rights activist, Meron Estefanos. The photograph is of Timnit, a 19-year-old girl who disappeared while crossing the border to Israel. M puts his hands on the paper and asks: “Was she with her mother?” Estefanos replies, “Alone”. Moving his head from side to side, M quietly utters, “no...no”. The following is an excerpt from Estefanos’ (ME) conversation with M and HA, a human right activist based in Egypt:

*ME: How long have you been in the Sinai?*

*M: (Sweating and closing his eyes trying to remember something) I don't know her.*

*ME: How long have you been in the Sinai?*

*M: (Looking up trying to remember) For over a year now.*

*ME: You were 12-years old when they caught you? What were you doing in Kassala?*

*M: We were caught here?*

*ME: Was anybody with you?*

*M: Some guys.*

*ME: But how did you make it from Asmara to Sudan? Who gave you the idea? You were only 12-years old.*

*M: They told me they're going to cross. What?*

*ME: Did you travel with them? Did they see you?*

*M: First we paid, and then we were kidnapped.*

*ME: How did you pay?*

*M: I did not pay.*

ME: *You did not pay?*

ME: *I just want to know why he's here.*

ME: *He has to be deported?*

HA: *He was caught by the police...Meron!*

HA: *There is a possibility to talk with the UNHCR, to give him permission to stay here.*

ME: *That's what he wants, yeah. He does not want to go to Eritrea.*

HA: *I can talk with Ambassador Muhammed Al Doyri.*

ME: *Do you have any wounds?...What is this?*

M: *They beat me.*

ME: *With what? A whip?*

HA: *Oh my God.*

(Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013)

In this film, you cannot help but notice the fear in M's eyes and his tremendous vulnerability. It seems that his eyes and his gestures are crying out for help. Estefanos' follow-up and analysis of M's situation is as follows:

*He [M] left when he was 12–13 and got kidnapped from Sudan. He did not have money and doesn't even want to call to his family. He had to work for the Bedouins burying dead bodies. That's how he paid-off his release. He's been in prison for 8 months, and he is only 14! I mean, a 14-year-old is not supposed to be in prison. His only crime is that he was kidnapped and brought to Egypt: not by choice, but by force. His family doesn't even know.* (Trabelsi, Cahlon, & Shayo, 2013)

This desperate situation in which unaccompanied minors may find themselves is fertile ground for exploitation in all sorts of ways. An Africa Monitor explains:

*I reached an understanding that many regardless of their age worked as human traffickers or assisted in human trafficking for many reasons. Some of the reasons being economic grounds. They have no remittance so they are forced to go for desperate measures.* (P, personal communication, with Van Reisen, email, 27 May 2016)

The way in which unaccompanied minors may end up carrying out activities in the context of human trafficking is a long process of increasing destitution and despair. In the following section, several life stories will be provided to illustrate the circumstances that can lead to the integration of unaccompanied minors in (at times cruel) activities associated with human trafficking.

### **When minors become torturers**

The following interviews, which were carried out by Meron Estefanos, provide a deeper insight into the way in which unaccompanied minors are integrated within the human trafficking organisations. Their tasks could include translation, serving as guards, burying the dead, carrying out torture and possibly worse. Here follow four examples.

In an interview with B, a 16-year-old Eritrean boy, it is identified that he not only worked as a translator, but was also involved in severe torture practices. He was accused by 150 victims of having tortured them. They accused him of having been particularly cruel and sadistic. B was 16 years of age when he was abducted for ransom and brought to a torture camp in the Sinai. He was abandoned by his family. He was given the choice to collaborate with the traffickers or be tortured to death. In order to survive he started to translate, as he spoke good Arabic and Tigrinya.

*B: When I left Eritrea, it wasn't a premeditated decision, the Eritrean security people were looking for me, and I left the Shegerab camp within one night.*

*Estefanos: Where did you leave Shegerab to go to?*

*B: Israel, I told the trafficker that I wanted to go to Israel, and he said that he has people leaving the next day, so I left after one day.*

*Estefanos: Did you have any money to make such a deal with that trafficker; after all, aren't you expected to pay for his services?*

*B: I just was doing what other people were doing, and I couldn't go back to Eritrea, Eritrean security forces were looking for me, I didn't really have a choice, I was forced to go there.*

*Estefanos: Tell me about the route.*

*B: All in all, between 33–35 people left for the Sinai and it took us about 3 weeks to get there and there were 5 girls. When we arrived in the Sinai, we were asked to pay 3,300 dollars. I couldn't call my family, so I called a friend of my father and asked him for the sum, and he told me that he'll come up with a solution and will talk to my father. I saw people leave after they paid. There were two people, they paid and they left to Israel, but I couldn't pay for a full month, so I was beaten. I had wounds and all, and after that my family managed to pay the money, so I was let go. However, we found out that we had been sold onto another trafficker, who was asking us to pay 20,000 dollars each and we found those two who left before us held. I cried and became so hopeless then... because I know my family couldn't pay a single cent more and they didn't have anything. So, I called my father's friend and told him what happened, and he told me that he has never seen such an amount of money in his entire life, a problem exacerbated by the fact that my sister was diagnosed with cancer and she had to go to Khartoum for surgery. So when I was held there, there was this translator called R, but he wasn't required to beat us and all. We even planned on running away, and he didn't even tell on us. But that didn't work out. And after that I became the translator. I didn't hit anyone at first, I wasn't required to, just like R. So they took the group away from us and then I was left all by myself. My feet were tied, and I didn't hit anyone then. I remember then, those who were kidnapped used to ask me to translate and say that they've come here kidnapped and didn't set out to come this way from the beginning, and because of that they're unable to come up with the money for quite some time; I told the trafficker, and he said he didn't care ... (Interview Estefanos with B, 16-years old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

As B becomes increasingly more desperate when his family is not available to help him:

*B: Yeah, that day my family told me to never call them again, and I tried calling you for a change. Then I was hit because, unbeknownst to me, there was this Egyptian guy who could understand Tigrinya, and he hit me bad. He first asked*

*me what I was saying to you, and then I told him that I called some people regarding the ransom money. He called me liar, and hit me and addressed me in Tigrinya and hit me real bad. From that moment on, I lost all hope. (Interview Estefanos with B, 16-years old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

In the interview B admits to having carried out torture and rape on fellow prisoners:

*Estefanos: Is it true that you've tortured more than 150 people?*

*B: 150?*

*Estefanos: Uh huh.*

*B: Probably.*

*Estefanos: How about the accusation that you've murdered 4 people after you tortured them?*

*B: That's possible, but I didn't see anyone dying.*

*Estefanos: Dying not while in torture, but while in captivity as a result of the wounds you've inflicted.*

*B: ... That's true.*

*Estefanos: While you were working as a torturer/ abuser lots of people said different things about you. I want to ask you, have you ever raped any of the women prisoners who were held with you?*

*B: They were asking us to fornicate for entertainment, as they watched. What do you think? There was a girl called A, I was forced to do it with her, but I haven't raped anyone willingly.*

*Estefanos: I've heard that you were one of the foremost enemies she had and you used to cause her so much pain. I've heard from different others that she was a mother figure, she was helping everyone. What can you say about her?*

*B: ... She was ... she was only held with me, she couldn't pay... (Interview Estefanos with B, 16-years old when abducted, Skype, 19 October 2012)*

B, who was in Tel Aviv at the time of the interview, appears remorseful and lonely and possibly very traumatised, trying to find a place for himself:

*B.: I cry every time when I hear that those who come out of the Sinai, have formed a group and meet each other and help each other, because I can't join them thanks to my actions. But what can I do? You may give them my number so that they can call me and talk to me, I'm willing to do that.*

The conversation ends with B asking for forgiveness for his wrongdoing. The trauma experienced as a result of having been placed in a such situation of violence is extreme and the exposure of minors to such violent situations in which they are left to protect themselves is unacceptable and extremely worrying.

### **The trauma of unaccompanied minors**

Trauma inflicted by the trafficking practices is hindering the functioning and growth of minors in their host countries and that most unaccompanied minors from Eritrea are preoccupied with thoughts of the need to help their family, paying the debts incurred during the trafficking (including ransoms), and being reunifying with their parents and other family members who are in Eritrea or in refugee camps in Sudan or Ethiopia.

The psychological effect of human trafficking on the lives of the minors results in sleep irregularities, detachment, and high levels of anxiety and lack of trust. The psychological and physical impact of the experiences caused by human trafficking is enormous. Guardians and carers have expressed concern over the unaccompanied minors in their care. In an interview with the guardian of 16-year-old N in Belgium, he states his concern about the impact of the torture N has experienced: “The Eritrean boys always stick together, apart from N.” The guardian went on to say: “He [N] was tortured on his way to Europe. He has psychological problems. He does not sleep at all and stares blankly at the walls all night” (Interview, Al-Qasim with Guardian of N, face-to-face, 15 October 2015).

The minors are often more concerned about the present and practical situations in Eritrea and elsewhere than their future. An interview with the guardian of 16-year-old R shared his observation

that concerns with the problems of family members in difficult situations weigh heavily on the minds of the minors. This preoccupation with the situation of relatives and feeling responsible for it and a sense of duty can impact on the priorities set by the minors:

*He [16-year-old R] was very worried about his family so didn't go to school today. I tried to explain that not going to school would create problems for him. If he misses too much school, he might not be given his allowance. R didn't understand what was happening with his family in a refugee camp in Ethiopia. (Interview, Al-Quasim with Guardian of R, 15 October 2015)*

The guardians of Eritran refugee minors expressed concern about the future of these minors, which is jeopardised by immediate concerns rather than long-term goals:

*We are facing problems with how to deal with them [unaccompanied minors from Eritrea]. They are only thinking about the short term and not focusing enough on their future. If they do not focus more on their studies, this will create more problems later on. They have a lack of trust. (Interview, Al-Qasim with Guardians of N and R, face-to-face, 15 October 2015).*

The minors have difficulty concentrating on school. Their thoughts are occupied with the problems their families face. Their parent may be living in dire poverty, or in refugee reception centres in Ethiopia or Sudan, or they may be detained in Israel. The situation of 17-year-old O illustrates this:

O: Hello, TA

TA: Hello, A. How are you?

O: I am fine but, *kurub tesbershere* [roughly translated as "I am a bit distorted"].

O: What's wrong?

O: I called S [officer from family reunion unit] many times. I am really worried about my family reunion case.

TA: Why are you worried?

O: *My family. They are in [a country in east Africa]<sup>28</sup>. They are waiting for me and they are in a bad situation, my mother and my siblings.*

TA: *I understand, but [the officer] has done everything that needs to be done. The issue is now with the immigration office and you have to wait until they send you their responses.*

O: *I also called the immigration office and they said the same. Before they used to talk to me but now they are hanging up the phone by saying, "We cannot hear you properly."*

TA: *Well, O, you cannot call the immigration office on your own. You have to do that together with your guardian or mentor? You know that right?*

O: *Yeab, but it is not easy. They are waiting for me. Also, one of my classmates, his family is here. You see, kemgele tekenea [you get jealous].*

TA: *Your time will come O.*

O: *Yeab, Amlak yemesgen entay ke kenbele [I praise God... there is nothing that can be said!]*

TA: *No worries. I know it is difficult to concentrate. Do not miss your classes and just continue what you are doing. Stay strong.*

O: *I will try. Thanks. (Interview, Al-Qasim with O, phone, 9 December 2016)*

The guardians, social workers and teachers of Eritrean refugee minors need to understand what they have been through to be able to empathise with their particular situation. It is important for them to understand the concern that these minors have for the situation of relatives in Eritrea and elsewhere and how these worries weigh on the minds of these children, even if such situations are not resolvable.

## **Conclusion**

Fear of being recruited into national service or the disappearance or imprisonment of parents or caregivers are main reasons for the flight of minors from Eritrea. On their migratory journeys, unaccompanied minors from Eritrea lack protection, which makes

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<sup>28</sup> Details removed for security reasons.

them vulnerable to abuse and extortion, especially if they do not receive any support from family members living abroad or from other support networks. Some unaccompanied minors from Eritrea fell victim to trafficking and some were tortured. Some minors were manipulated or forced into participating in torture, rape and worse.

Unaccompanied minors from Eritrea need support. Often they have difficulty concentrating on school work and other activities. They are worried about their families, particularly their parents, whom they have left behind in difficult circumstances. They feel the need to help their family and to repay the debts they incurred during their journey. They feel pressed to ensure family reunification, especially if their parents are still in Eritrea or in refugee camps in Sudan or Ethiopia. These concerns are sources of stress.

Minors rarely seek psychological help fearing stigma and ostracism from their peers, despite often having survived harrowing situations. They may have learnt to be resourceful and creative in dealing with challenging situations. The concern they show for their families demonstrates responsibility and care. Social workers, guardians and teachers may need to recognise the particular circumstances of these young people to help prepare them for a future in their new country.

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