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

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The Fragmentation of Families: Eritrean Women in Exile in Uganda

Eyob Ghilazghy, Sacha Kuilman & Lena Reim

I have 3 kids. Now I don't know where they are. I don't know if they are still suffering under the regime or if they have left, or if they have died in the Sahara. Not knowing where my kids are really kills me.

(Interview, Anon., Africa Monitors, Uganda, 2015)

Especially for single mothers it is very difficult, no one can protect them [...].

(Interview, Anon., Africa Monitors, Uganda, 2015)

Introduction

Women's voices are largely neglected in the narrative of the Eritrean mass exodus, as their voices rarely travel as far as those of Eritrean men (Van Reisen, 2016). Their lack of physical strength, particular vulnerability to abduction and abuse (particularly sexual abuse), and child care responsibilities often prevent Eritrean women from continuing their forced migration journey's as far as Eritrean men. The result is gendered experiences of displacement and a neglect of women's different experiences in the literature.

Without minimising the plight of Eritrean men, this chapter zooms in on the specific experiences of female Eritrean refugees in order to create a better understanding of the ways in which they are affected by forced migration and displacement. The foundation of this chapter is provided by qualitative research conducted by Africa Monitors in 2015 and 2016 among 27 Eritrean women asylum

seekers and refugees²⁹ living in Uganda.³⁰ These women were interviewed about their decision to flee their home country to Uganda and their experiences along the way, current challenges, and future plans.³¹

In order to contextualise the experiences of these women, this chapter draws on interviews and personal communications with another Eritrean woman, human rights activists and researchers, reports by Africa Monitors (2016) and the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) (2013), as well as the personal expertise of one of the authors of this chapter, Eyob Ghilazghy, who is head of Africa Monitors and a member of the Eritrean refugee community in Uganda.

It was not possible to interview Eritrean refugee women in all countries in the region or even in all countries of displacement. Further research should be conducted in other countries to expand our knowledge of the particular challenges of Eritrean women in different locations of displacement. That being said, the research

²⁹ For the purpose of this study, ‘asylum seekers’ refers to those who have submitted an application for refugee status and ‘refugees’ are those who have had their applications for asylum granted. However, the term ‘refugees’ is also used generically to refer to women in both categories, acknowledging that a person “does not become a refugee because of recognition, but is recognized because he [or she] is a refugee” (UNHCR, 2011, para. 28).

³⁰ The qualitative survey was conducted by a team led by Eyob Ghilazghy in September, November and December 2015 and January 2016. The Eritrean women interviewed were aged 25–60 and living as asylum seekers or refugees in Kampala (N=13) and the refugee settlement of Nakivale (N=14) in Uganda. Sampling was done based on personal knowledge of those willing to be interviewed and using the snowball technique. Most of the interviewees in Kampala city were asylum seekers, however, some women with refugee status were included to compare the conditions of refugees and asylum seekers. The organisation and analysis of the resulting data was conducted by the head of Africa Monitors, Eyob Ghilazghy, and his intern, Sacha Kuilman. A copy of the survey questionnaire is available on request with lead author (email:eyobtg2002@gmail.com).

³¹ To ensure the security of our sources, information has been anonymised where necessary. Interviews have also been edited for readability. Names, dates, and interview transcripts are held by the authors.

conducted in Uganda provides an impression of common experiences of Eritrean refugee women.

During the interviews, Eritrean women reported facing many problems. In Eritrea, they suffered due to the mandatory and indefinite national service and from sexual abuse, imprisonment, torture, religious persecution and economic hardship. Due to the strict emigration policy in Eritrea (and the surrounding countries), most of the women interviewed crossed borders illegally and were forced to entrust themselves into the hands of smugglers. As irregular migrants, they risked encountering security forces or human traffickers on their long and dangerous journeys. Once in exile, most women interviewed were forced to reside in refugee camps and cities where provisions and support are limited and where there is little oversight, again making them more vulnerable to abuse than their male counterparts. In every situation, the risk of sexual violence was great.

The interviews reveal how the Eritrean mass exodus has resulted in the fragmentation of families and eroded traditional support networks, highlighting the particular effects that this has had for Eritrean women in exile. Most of the women fleeing Eritrea leave alone or in the company of their children and must, therefore, take on new roles as sole protectors, breadwinners and caretakers. Their husbands (and male family members) have often already left Eritrea; many have been killed, imprisoned or disappeared in Eritrea or along their migration journeys. In these situations, the women are particularly vulnerable to (sexual) abuse, mistreatment and economic hardship. They face great stress, worry and hopelessness, rooted in their separation from family members and the challenges they face in providing for themselves and their children. In this regard, it must also be understood that many Eritrean women become pregnant at a very young age, often so that they are exempt from national service or due to rape. Young women and girls, sometimes still children themselves and often severely traumatised, are thus forced to master the combined challenges of motherhood, forced migration and a life in exile all on their own (Stop Slavery Campaign, 2016).

This chapter follows women's journeys from Eritrea, across the border and into exile in Uganda. It will also discuss their hopes and plans for the future.

Conditions in Eritrea and reasons for flight

This section presents the findings of the research on the reasons why the Eritrean women refugees interviewed chose to leave Eritrea.

The political situation in general

The general political situation in Eritrea, in which grave human rights violations are a daily reality and deprivation of basic freedoms persists, motivates many to view flight as the only way to find safety. Although the specific reasons for fleeing Eritrea given by the women interviewed in Uganda varied, at the core they are all related to the survival and safety of the women and their families. One of the women interviewed described the general fear and desperation of civilians in the country:

[I left] [b]ecause of the general situation in Eritrea; there is no freedom of speech or freedom of religion and national service is unlimited. There are no human rights. [...] No one can speak out; if they do they will disappear. Everybody in Eritrea is scared of getting hurt. [...] you are not secure there. You don't trust anyone. Nothing was good at that time. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)³²

Another woman's explanation of why she fled the country highlights the political persecution that Eritreans face in their home country. When she refused to take part in a political course organised by the National Union of Eritrean Women, aimed at teaching her how to propagate the aims and achievements of the The Peoples

³² To ensure that interviewees remain anonymous, dates, names (even pseudonyms) have been removed from the interview citations), leaving one generic citation.

Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), she faced severe repercussions:

[...] They detained me in a prison [...]. I was kept in a [metal] container with a number of prisoners with no light or sanitation and not enough food. I was accused of being a member of opposition groups, although I had no idea about them. I was asked why I oppose the policy of the government [and] who is backing me to do so [and they demanded] that I give them the list of names of protesters, accept the accusations and give an apology. I was harassed and intimidated by the 'investigators' and mistreated by the prison guards. Finally, after four months, I was released with a strict warning to respect the laws of the government, [and] to [accept their accusations]. [A]fter I was released the situation became worse. I was suspected of being a spy and the police [...] used to come to my home at night to search [...] for documents. On top of this, my movement was limited and I was always under heavy monitoring. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

These women's experiences reveal the lack of freedom in all areas of life that prevail in Eritrea and the fear of persecution for real or perceived dissidence.

Mandatory national service

Mandatory indefinite national service is one of the main problems Eritreans face within their home country. All Eritrean children are expected to do their last year of high school at the Sawa Military Training Centre. Afterwards, they may be forced to remain in national service for decades. National service is especially challenging for women, as they commonly experience extreme sexual exploitation by their male military superiors. The Eritrean Law Society reports on the severity of this problem with regard to the lack of agency of the abused women:

One of the most pervasive problems in Eritrea is the issue of sexual violence that is committed with impunity by military commanders. [...] In the context of the government's sweeping militarization agenda, many women conscripts have been

victimised by sexual violence committed with impunity by army commanders. The problem is complicated by the total breakdown of the rule of law. In Eritrea, the whims and actions of military commanders are above the law. This means, access to justice with regard to sexual violence is unthinkable. The victims of this form [of] injustice are estimated in thousands. (Mekonnen, 2015, p. 3)

While many women flee the country to avoid national service, another common practice is to get married or pregnant, as this allows them to leave national service. As one informant explains:

Women often get married or pregnant out of necessity to be able to leave national service, rather than because they want to get married to that specific person or because they had plans to have a child at that particular stage in their lives. (Anon., personal communication, with Reim, Skype, 19 January 2017)

In some instances, families even ensure that their daughters are married by the age of 17 in order to avoid military training and national service (Van Reisen, personal communication, with Reim, Skype, 13 December 2016). Similarly, some mothers advise their daughters to become pregnant outside of marriage, despite the fact that this is strongly frowned upon in Eritrea and leads to serious repercussions (such as becoming ineligible for marriage) (*Ibid.*). The result of this trend is that some women get married and pregnant at a young age. When these young women choose to flee their country, they must master the combined challenges of motherhood and forced migration, which makes them particularly vulnerable to various risks.

Yet, even when women are released from national service to focus on child care, they continue to be affected by national service through their children and husbands. Some women in Uganda report having fled to spare their children from participation in the national service programme. Furthermore, in several cases, it was the woman's husband who had fled national service. In these instances, the women reported leaving because they wanted to be reunited with their husband, because they could not provide for themselves, or

because the government was persecuting them for their husband's flight. This last reason was also mentioned in relation to the flight of other family members. Persecution on behalf family members appears to be common state practice in Eritrea.

Persecution on behalf of family members

The Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda commonly reported that they were imprisoned and persecuted because their husband or another family member had evaded national service, fled the country, or disappeared. One woman reported:

... One day [...] while my mother was in the village, two soldiers came to my home to ask about my father. I told them that my father was doing national service and was not with us. They told me that my father was not doing national service anymore. Then they took me to jail. [...] When my mother came back and found out that I was in jail, [...] she requested them to keep her in jail instead of me. They told her no and that they would not let me go unless she found my father and handed him over to them. That was one of the main reasons why I left Eritrea. [...] [In the prison] they slapped me and asked: "Where is your father?" But I did not know. They kept beating me, and one day they were beating me so hard that I fainted. [...] I was 16 and a student at the time. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Imprisonment and mistreatment of women and family members

Arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and mistreatment are common practices of the Eritrean regime. Many women mentioned that they or their family members had been imprisoned; in several cases women said that they did not know the reason for the imprisonment or that they or their family members had been imprisoned on false charges. One woman, interviewed by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), expressed the helplessness that Eritreans feel when facing imprisonment:

In Eritrea the authorities don't need to file charges to arrest you or to keep you in prison. That is the way the system works and no one complains in public; you can't rely on someone in the outside world to take up your case. Some of the prisoners didn't even know why they were in jail. (SIHA, 2013, p. 26)

Imprisonment commonly goes hand-in-hand with severe mistreatment and horrendous living conditions. About her imprisonment, one woman reported: “they started to beat me badly and I was about to die. Then they handed me over to my parents in law. [...] The doctor told me that I couldn't get pregnant anymore because of the damage they did to my womb” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Religious persecution

Nine of the women interviewed in Uganda explained that they left Eritrea (among other reasons) due to religious persecution or lack of religious freedom, which had resulted in them or their family members being followed, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed. All of them followed a religion that was not accepted by the Eritrean government; the majority were members of the Pentecostal Church and one was a Jehovah's Witness. The following interview excerpt illustrates some of the problems that followers of a prohibited religion face in Eritrea.

[I left] [b]ecause of my religion. I was suffering a lot and they took me to jail twice because I was a member of the Pentecostal Church. I was just a member, but they still took me to prison. The leader of the church has been in jail [for several years] [...]. [When I was first taken to jail], I had a baby and I found someone who could look after the baby while I was in jail. The second time [...] I was held in a metal container. I was held in this prison for one year [...]. They found me on my way back from nightly prayers with my bible and they took me to jail. When they released me, I was forced to sign a document saying that I would not follow my religion anymore. When I was released [...] I decided to flee Eritrea [...]. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Similarly, another woman explained:

In Eritrea this new religion [Pentecostal] is banned. That is why I left. [...] We were praying in our homes and maybe somebody reported us that we were praying, they [the security forces] took us to prison and I spent three months in prison. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Migration journeys

This section presents the findings of the research on the risks faced by Eritrean women refugees during their migration journey to Uganda.

Travelling without a husband

Journeys across Eritrea's border and through the East African region are full of severe risks, especially for women without male company. Eritrean women living in exile in Uganda, had to cross two transit countries before reaching their current home. The Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda commonly travelled to the Eritrean border, crossed from there into Sudan, then into South Sudan and, eventually, into Uganda.

One woman narrated her protracted journey to Uganda as follows:

I travelled from Keren to the Sudanese border by car, then to the Hafir Reception Centre, then to Shagarab refugee camp in Sudan. I stayed in Shagarab, where there is a great risk of kidnapping for ransom, for three weeks. I then travelled to Khartoum illegally – I walked to the river, crossed the river by boat, and then arrived in Khartoum by car. I stayed in Khartoum for three months. I applied for asylum in Shagarab, but did not complete the process. [...] I paid for the smuggling to Khartoum through my fiancée. I travelled to Kampala via Juba by bus, which my fiancée organised for me. The whole journey from Eritrea to Uganda took me four

months and three weeks. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Among the 27 Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda, only 6 managed to leave Eritrea legally or semi-legally, for instance, by bribing Eritrean officials to grant an exit visa. All other women left Eritrea illegally, thereby subjecting themselves to tremendous risks. Many had to take dangerous routes, risking interception and detention, abduction, rape, being taken hostage by human traffickers, and being shot (due to the Eritrean government's 'shoot to kill' policy at the border). One woman's narration of her journey refers to some of these risks:

[My children and I] had so many problems! We were hiding under the car. We lost our way. We ended up on some mountains. It was a dangerous journey. We were lost. [...] Finally, we reached Tesseney. [...] [W]e spent the night and one day there and, when it was dark, we continued. From there we travelled to Khartoum. On the road from Kassala to Khartoum the journey was dangerous. Getting away from Kassala was difficult. It was at night and we had to run. We threw our belongings, such as clothes, in the water [because we could not carry them anymore]. I faced so many problems. Another woman, whom I didn't know, lost her son on the way – he died. He fell from the vehicle. While protecting my twin children, I also fell down and I was hit on the head. I was hurt on my head and back. I still have pain in my back. We did not bury the child who died. We just left his body and continued because they [the smugglers] would not stop. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

When exploring their journeys, it is essential to consider that many women flee only with their children. Among the 27 Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda, only 6 had fled with their husband. Some of the women's husbands had already left the country without them, were unable to leave due to national service, were imprisoned, had disappeared, or had died; other women were unmarried or divorced. Without a husband, the women were particularly vulnerable to abuse, while also being solely responsible for the safety

of their children. Of the 27 women interviewed, 14 travelled together with 1–5 children and 9 of these 14 travelled without their husband. One of the unaccompanied woman interviewed was pregnant at the time she fled.

Risks associated with smugglers

The fact that many women must rely on the help of smugglers comes with additional risks. First, several women reported that smugglers demanded more and more money, above the originally agreed price, as the journey went on. One woman narrated:

[...In] one village [...] they [the smugglers] locked us in a room and told us that we have to pay 20 pounds each. They said, 'if you don't pay we won't let you out'. So, I paid 20 pounds and they released me. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

This experience is confirmed by the stories of other women who reported being at risk of being left behind if they could not pay the additional fees demanded by the smugglers.

Several women described the horrendous conditions in which they and their children were transported by the smugglers. Their narrations reveal the complete control that the smugglers have over the women and children. One woman reported:

On the way, I had no food and no water. I asked the smugglers to help me with some food but they only gave me bad milk. [...] [From Shagarab refugee camp to Khartoum] we only got one jerry can, which is 20 litres of water. That is what we were given and we had to share it with around 15 people. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Another woman, travelling with her three children, relayed the following:

In one place called Hajer, they [the smugglers] took me [and others] to a house and locked [...us] in a room. I don't know where they went and I had no water. I had

a small bag with a biscuit and a small bottle of water. Many people were hungry at that time. We stayed there from 12 in the afternoon to 5 o'clock [in the morning]. They locked me [and my children] there and took the key so we could not get out, there was no light, we were not allowed to talk or cry. They came back at 5 o'clock in the morning the next day and let us out. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Among the 27 Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda, 2 reported sexual abuse, or attempted sexual abuse, by the smugglers. While one woman was protected from the smugglers' advances by two Eritrean boys who happened to be travelling in the same truck, another one was not so fortunate:

In Sudan, when I saw the conditions, I used the lorry. The drivers were smugglers. [...] it was really bad being in the hands of smugglers. And when you are in a place, like a forest, they can try to rape you and if you resist they will kill you. Many things happened to me, but in our culture if something happens to you, you don't talk to anybody about it. [...] horrible things have happened to me. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

It is important to understand that, in Eritrean culture, women do not usually talk about instances of (sexual) violence. For every woman who reported such violence, we cannot know how many remained silent. That the number of women experiencing rape along their journeys is great, is confirmed by multiple other sources. An unpublished report commissioned by Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA) explains:

[During their migration journeys] women are asked for sexual favours in exchange for safety. [...] The only times that women are safe from rape threats of smugglers and traffickers is when somehow the band of people crossing with them won't give them up. But in other cases, women have been raped by people who were crossing the border with them. [...]

Women suffer the most on the journey crossing the border from Eritrea and beyond on the migration route. Many women carry protection or use contraceptive expecting the worst (Humphris, 2013). They try to lessen the effects of rape by limiting their chances of an HIV infection or pregnancy. But the fact that they ready themselves even before they begin their journeys means that the psychological damage done to women due to rape has reached all women regardless of having experienced it or not. (Gerrima, 2016)

One woman, who shared her story with SIHA, narrated the following:

I left with two of my husband's friends. We went to Tessenei [Tesseney, Eritrea], where I was handed over to a Sudanese man, an Eritrean man and two Adarob [a person from Eastern Sudan] who would take me and my daughter to Kassala. We paid them 30,000 Nakfa [ERN] [...]. We walked at night through the forests from Tessenei towards Kassala, until we reached Qulsa, a border village. The two Adarob left to find water and the Sudanese man went to bring a car, leaving me and my daughter with the Eritrean. This man raped me in the forest. I tried to fight him but he was too strong. He blindfolded me with my scarf and didn't care about the screams of my terrified daughter. After he raped me he left. An hour later the Sudanese man returned with the car to find me crying, but I couldn't tell him what had happened. (SIHA, 2013, p. 20)

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, it must be noted that smugglers may also reveal themselves as human traffickers or may at least cooperate with such. This makes reliance on smugglers an incredible dangerous undertaking. None of the Eritrean women in Uganda fell victim to human traffickers; if they had, they would likely not have been in the position to share their stories with us.

Risks associated with human traffickers

One of the most severe problems faced during Eritrean's forced migration journeys is the risk of abduction by human traffickers. Abduction for the sake of human trafficking may be facilitated by multiple actors, including alleged friends, border guards, the police,

or smugglers. This makes the risk of falling victim to human trafficking omnipresent. Many women feared travelling through Sudan and especially staying in Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan. One woman's narration illustrates this danger at several stages throughout her journey through Sudan:

After four days, there was a plan to transfer me [and my three children from the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] Reception Centre to Shagarab refugee camp], but there were armed bandits there who wanted to kidnap people so they had to cancel the trip. After eight days we finally managed. [...] In Shagarab it was not safe. [...] There were Rashaida. Many kids were kidnapped; it was not a good place to be. [...] After 10 days I left Shagarab and moved to Khartoum. [...] First, I walked towards the dam with my kids – one on my back and the others I was holding [walking on foot]. I crossed the dam by canoe, it took us 45 minutes. You have to use smugglers to get to Khartoum because it is illegal to cross that dam [it is illegal to leave the camp]. To be smuggled you have to cross the dam at night. You have to start walking from 8 pm till 11 pm until you are at the dam. [...] At midnight we reached the other side of the dam. [...] While walking to the car, the Rashaida tried to snatch my daughter away, but I managed to hold her. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

The risks that Eritrean women face if they are abducted by human traffickers, is discussed in Chapters 2, 4 and 7.

Risks associated with security forces

Another danger during forced migration journeys is that of passing police or security forces along the way. The first risk is to encounter Eritrean border guards while crossing the border. Due to the Eritrean governments' 'shoot to kill' policy, many Eritreans, including relatives of the women interviewed, have lost their lives. When asked if any border guards had passed her during her flight, one woman explained: "...if they did they would have killed me" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Once, in Sudan, the women are afraid of Sudanese and Eritrean officials, as they have heard of arrests and deportation back to

Eritrea. One woman explained: “Khartoum is not safe. At any time they can take you back to Eritrea. There are spies from our country there who will report you. They abduct you and take you back to Eritrea” (Interview, Africa Monitors, Uganda; see also Chapter 3 on deportation back to Eritrea). Another reported: “There is a lot of secrecy [...] so we fled to Juba. You cannot trust anyone in Khartoum. You don't even talk about your case; for instance, if you came illegally, you say you came by plane and that you have the exit visa” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Deportation is not the only risk from security forces. Other women mentioned rape, mistreatment, abduction, and the extortion of money. One woman’s husband explained: “I was more scared about their [my wife’s and children’s] safety and security in Sudan, because at that time it was worse there. The [Sudanese] security forces rape the women, abduct them, and arrest them” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Another woman’s experience illustrates this:

[...] A Sudanese guy wanted to take me as his wife. It was evening at nine and he wanted to take me as his wife, but they [travelling companions] refused. [...] Then, when he moved to get his gun, we ran away. The whole night we ran till the morning. [...] He was with the Sudanese police. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

These stories are further supported by Africa Monitors, which reports of the severe sexual abuse that Eritrean women living in Sudan must face at the hands of Sudanese security personnel:

Most of the aggravations confronted by the Eritrean refugees in Sudan came from Sudanese police or members of other security department to that country. Especially the sexual and physical harassments inflicted upon Eritrean women are unbearable. Most of it happens to them while returning home after attending family’s or friend’s wedding. Sudan’s police make an excuse out of the party dress they are wearing to make either financial or sexual requirements, sometime even both. (Africa Monitors, 2016)

Another Eritrean women, who sought safety in Nairobi, Kenya, explained to SIHA the powerlessness that many Eritrean refugee women feel when threatened by authorities:

The walk home from work was always very difficult for me because I would usually get stopped at least two or three times by police who demanded money simply because I'm a refugee. If you say you don't have money they tell you to call someone to bring cash. If you say you don't know anyone to pay for you they say they'll throw you in jail. Once you're in jail it's even worse, because you'll need to pay higher officials a large sum of money to get out.

Even if you have official papers to live in the country as a refugee, or with a valid passport and visa, once you are in the hands of the police, none of that will help. Passports and refugee papers get torn up by the police so no one dares show or give their papers to them. Negotiating and paying the agreed amount of money is the only way out. (SIHA, 2013, p. 32)

She further explains how the lack of trust in the police decreases her overall ability to protect herself from other risks:

Many men who have money think that they can just buy a girl. I've faced many different kinds of abuse, all of which undermined my dignity.

He [my former boss] is a man; he's physically stronger than I am so I feared that, if he got the chance, he would come and attack me again. It makes me feel very insecure around other men as well. I stay home most of the time and avoid him as much as I can. I never answer his calls or talk to him; I try to keep myself safe.

Of course I can't go to the police about this; the police are the number one enemy of the refugee population. (Ibid., p. 31)

Another woman, interviewed in Uganda, reported: “When we came to the South Sudanese border, the military found us and beat us, even the driver. Later he [the driver] paid money so we were

allowed to cross” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Corruption within the police and security forces appears to be widespread. While this enabled many of the women interviewed to bribe their way through to Uganda, the price is high and cannot always be collected in time, as illustrated by the following:

On the border between Sudan and South Sudan we crossed the Nile by boat. When we crossed the border, we were stopped by the police. The police told us that everybody has to pay USD 6,000. They said that if you cannot pay, you have to go back. We didn't have any money, so the police stopped us. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

However, the continuation of her journey gives an example of (South Sudanese) officials who were willing to help:

[An] Eritrean man led us to the immigration office. We entered the office directly, but there were only policemen and immigration staff there and they demanded more money. They [unknown] asked what they can do to enter their country, they begged. I told my story and cried, and the people at the office felt sorry for me. So I got the papers without having to pay. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Risks associated with bandits

Two women also reported that they were stopped and pressed for money by unknown bandits. One woman was detained by an unknown group until one of the other detainee's brother managed to pay for their release. She explained: “We don't know who they were, just that they stopped us and robbed us” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Life in Uganda

This section presents the findings of the research on life in Uganda for Eritrean women. Once in Uganda, the experiences of

women who settled in Kampala and those who settled in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement were found to be different in some key aspects – such as their ability to receive refugee status and their level of security – creating different experiences for the women at each location. Thus, where relevant, the following section presents the main challenges of women in Kampala and Nakivale separately.

Fragmentation of family and traditional support networks

The data gathered during the research conducted in Uganda reveals that the impact of the exodus from Eritrea goes beyond emptying Eritrea of its population. The family, the very fundamental unit of society, has been broken and fragmented. While some women have been reunited with their husbands and families after fleeing Eritrea, many continue to be on their own (or only with their children), separated from their husbands and traditional support networks. A total of 17 of the 27 interviewed women live in Uganda without a husband, while 2 see their husbands only when they return from work in South Sudan. Of the 18 women who live with their children (or foster children), 12 are effectively single mothers. This forces them to take on new roles as sole protector, breadwinner, and caretaker of themselves and their children. Apart from one, all women said that they felt lonely in Uganda.

The women interviewed in Uganda told disturbing stories of separation and family break up, with some family members killed by the Eritrean government, some taken hostage, some prevented from leaving the country and others dying while attempting to escape. One woman's husband disappeared in Eritrea, while her daughter died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea; another woman's husband was killed in a prison in Eritrea, her son was killed by border guards while trying to cross the Eritrean-Ethiopian border, and her daughter disappeared in Kampala. Almost every woman interviewed had lost someone in her life.

In many cases, women and children are also left behind by their husbands and fathers and can only join them after a long time, if at all. One woman was reunited with her husband after eight years,

while another had lost her husband in the Mediterranean Sea. One woman said that she had not seen her husband since he left for Sweden via Libya. She explained that they both fled to Sudan, but that she could not follow him to Libya. “I have a daughter”, she said, “it is too dangerous to bring her to Libya” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

In some cases, women reported leaving their children behind because of the dangers and difficulties involved in smuggling children out of Eritrea. One woman explained: “Children above five are not allowed to leave Eritrea. She [her daughter] stays with my mother [...] It’s very hard [to smuggle a child out of Eritrea]. It is very hard to give your child to smugglers, especially for mothers” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

Two of the women living in Nakivale, who still had children in Eritrea, said that they did not wish for their children to join them due to the horrible conditions in which they live in exile. One of them explained: “My [three youngest] children are living with some relatives because my parents are already deceased. They would prefer to join their mother, but I don’t want them to come because I have seen what life is like here, there is no hope” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

All of the women interviewed still have some family in Eritrea and many said that they miss them and worry greatly about their safety and wellbeing. One woman shared the emotional pain that results from her separation from her children:

I have 3 kids [all above 18] [...]. I left them in Eritrea when I fled. Now I don't know where they are. I am very worried. I don't know if they are still suffering under the regime or if they have left, or if they have died in the Sahara. Not knowing where my kids are really kills me. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Most women find themselves in an entirely different situation once they flee Eritrea. They are not only coping with a new

environment, but also with the loss of loved ones and the challenges that come with living without their traditional support networks.

Access to asylum

Access to asylum can vary greatly between different countries of displacement, but also between different locations within the same country. Additionally, policies may change over time. In Uganda, the women who were interviewed in the refugee settlement of Nakivale, as well as all women who had applied for asylum before 2010, reported having very few problems with the asylum procedure. In fact, all of them had acquired refugee status within a matter of months. However, those who came after 2010 and sought to apply for refugee status within the capital city Kampala faced considerable difficulties with the process. All but three women in Kampala continue to wait for full refugee status, even though all (except for one) have been in Kampala for at least one year.³³ In fact, the three women with refugee status in Kampala were identified with extra effort and interviewed for comparison purposes. This suggests that most Eritrean women who arrived after 2010 are waiting to receive refugee status, even after living in Kampala for several years.

Obtaining refugee status entails having to reapply for asylum seeker status or renewal every three months. Of the women who do not have refugee status, at least five have had their applications rejected, often without any clear explanation or feedback. One woman reported:

I still don't have anything [refugee papers]. I have been here for three years. [...] I have applied, but they have rejected me and they keep asking me to reapply. They don't give me a full answer as to why I was rejected [...]. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

When their asylum applications are rejected, they have the right to review and appeal. If the appeal is again rejected, the only option

³³ One woman did not mention when she arrived in Kampala.

is to appeal to the high court, which is a long process and requires assistance by a lawyer. Rejection of asylum applications comes with the risk of deportation to Eritrea, where they are likely to face detention, torture and even death at the hands of the Eritrean regime.

It appears that corruption and discrimination against Eritreans negatively affects the asylum process. Several interviewees reported that they have been asked to pay bribes or 'fees' by the officers or translators working for the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), Uganda's refugee agency.³⁴ According to the women interviewed, if they are unable to pay, which is the case for many of these women, their applications are rejected or not processed. One woman reported: "They rejected me. Now they ask for money, but I don't have money [crying]. You have to pay money to go further in the process" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Another supports this claim and sees corruption as the main challenge facing Eritrean women in their pursuit of asylum status:

...I think the [Ugandan] government knows about the issue of corruption. They can do anything to stop it [the granting of asylum], especially to Eritreans. There is no one who gets it [asylum]; maybe one in thirty or forty people. So, the government knows why we are being rejected – corruption. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Similarly, another woman views these problems as specific to Eritreans:

The problem for refugees in Kampala is only for Eritreans; Eritreans experience discrimination in the asylum process and [this] needs a special solution. For instance, Somali refugees know where to get courses and they get full refugee status immediately. They don't ask them for bribes etc., but for Eritreans it is different. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

³⁴ At the time of this research, informal sources suggested that corrupt officers usually demanded about USD 300 to grant Eritrean asylum seekers refugee status. Today, the average bribe is apparently even higher.

One woman sees part of the problem with the behaviour of the Eritrean community. She explained: “...Most of our community don't get it [asylum]. Especially Eritreans, we don't speak out. If they refuse us, we keep it to ourselves, wait and try again” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

In fact, it is the opinion of the authors, that Eritreans may have particular difficulties in the asylum procedures due to their general vulnerability to corruption and exploitation by others. The reasons for this vulnerability are discussed later in this chapter in the subsection on ‘Corruption and discrimination’.

Apart from the likelihood of rejection, the time it takes for Eritrean women to be granted full refugee status is a big issue. Usually, the asylum process in Kampala takes about one year. However, many have waited several years and, while they wait, their lives are on hold as they cannot legally work and have no access to public services such as education and health care.

Security and safety

Security and safety is one of the biggest problems for Eritrean women in Uganda. Of the 13 women interviewed in Kampala, 6 mentioned safety as one of their biggest concerns and only 3 said that they felt comparatively safe in Kampala. The women interviewed in Kampala particularly feared theft and stabbing. As a result, many feared leaving their house at night. One woman reported:

The biggest challenge facing [Eritrean] women in Uganda is robbers, which makes it impossible to move around out of fear – we don't have security. [...] I fear the Ugandan population in general; there are some people who are nice, but mostly I feel threatened. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Similarly, another woman reported:

I am afraid. There are thieves; they can kill you. [...] They don't feel [mercy for] us. We even fear the boda-boda [motorcycle taxi] drivers at night. [...] They don't care

about us. We prefer to stay where we are inside at night. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Another woman had a mixed assessment of the security situation in Kampala:

[...] [Kampala is] good, it is peaceful. It is better than Khartoum and my home country. At least here you can talk, walk, and live freely. [...] But it is Africa. There are thieves; if they see you are a foreigner, they think you have money. I had a boda [motorcycle] accident and they also stole money from me, so it is not safe here. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Two women reported that theft sometimes goes hand-in-hand with rape. One explained: “sometimes the thieves rape you, even in front of the children” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). The other woman reported: “There are a lot of thieves and problems. Even at home you cannot sleep well at night, the thieves sometimes come and take things and rape” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016).

The lack of security and safety that many of the women experience could have a connection with the low level of acceptance that Eritrean women feel in Uganda. When asked if they feel accepted by the Ugandan population, most of them reported that they do not at all or that they only feel accepted by part of the population.

Although most felt accepted in Nakivale, only three said they felt safe and two said they felt safe only because they took the necessary precautions, such as rarely leaving the house. Four of them mentioned lack of safety as one of the main challenges for them (and Eritrean women in general). One woman explained:

Safety is a big issue; that is why we keep a dog. We live close to the road and it is frequented by thieves. [...] Even the police cannot help you. They do not respond to a call for help. There are only a few of them [police personnel], three or four for the whole camp. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Indeed, theft, rape and burglary appear common in Nakivale. When asked whether she would like to add anything, one woman specifically felt the need to talk about the struggle of women: “We have been here a long time and the real victims are the women.”

From the interviews, it is evident that single mothers face the most severe challenges. It is difficult for them to work and take care of their children at the same time, and they are more prone to attacks. One single mother shared her personal experience:

Security is a big problem for me; once somebody came and raped me here in my house. I don't even know who it was. [...]. I had not yet built the fence so they just came in and raped me. [...] I don't feel safe here. Especially for single mothers it is very difficult, no one can protect them and they might get raped like I did. [...] The only solution is resettlement. I cannot see how to improve the security here. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

The general fear emanating from the risk of theft and rape causes some women to isolate themselves and their children. One woman explained: “Most of the time I stay at home, I am scared of getting raped [...] it is really insecure for women” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Evidently, fear of leaving the house constrains these women’s possibilities of participating in the community and taking care of themselves and their children.

Another big problem mentioned in this regard is the safety of daughters. The secondary school for children in Nakivale settlement is located far from the Eritrean community. Several women mentioned that they are too scared to send their daughters to secondary school, because of the likelihood of them being attacked and raped. Two of the women said that their daughters had been attacked by men when they were alone on the street. Both were traumatised by the incident. One of the girls left the camp to live with relatives in Kampala. The other girl remained in the camp because her mother cannot afford to leave. However, due to stigmatisation

and bullying following the assault, she has stopped going to school and remains at home as much as possible.

Some of the women, also expressed fear of the presence of different and foreign communities within Nakivale. One woman explained:

I don't feel safe. I am living with people from different communities: Ethiopians, Congolese, and Somalis. We don't know their behaviour and we don't know what they do. Our fence is not a fence; it is just grass and trees. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Livelihoods

While the possibility of finding work is one of the advantages of living in urban areas, few of the women interviewed in Kampala were able to do so. Those without refugee status are particularly disadvantaged as they are not allowed to work. Yet, those in Kampala with refugee status also reported difficulties finding work. Only three of the women in Kampala had jobs or were in-and-out of jobs. Only one of those had refugee status and, thus, could work legally. One woman explained:

Even if you have a work permit it is difficult to get a job because there is high unemployment. You have to compete with the locals for a job, but they always have an advantage. So, if you can make your own business or if you know people who can help you then it is easier [...]. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Some women explained that they could not start working because they cannot afford childcare. Of the three women who worked, none were living with their children. The interviews indicate a cyclical problem that prevents women refugees from finding stable jobs: the women are unable to earn money through official jobs because they do not have refugee status and they do not receive refugee status because they cannot afford to pay the bribes because they do not work. Even if the women are granted refugee status and could find a

job, despite the high unemployment rate, they may still be prevented from taking the job, because they cannot afford to pay for childcare.

In the refugee camps, women have even fewer opportunities to generate income. Finding work is one of their main challenges. Although the women all have refugee status and are legally allowed to work, there are very few – if any – jobs available in Nakivale, as it is a refugee settlement. Three of the women said they had their own small shop or bakery and two mentioned that they or their children earn some money by doing chores (such as washing clothes and fetching water) for other refugees.

Due to the limited job opportunities in both Kampala and Nakivale, Eritrean women living in exile in Uganda are usually dependent on financial assistance from others. Most women relied on remittances from their husbands or family or friends abroad. However, a few reported having been assisted by individuals or families in Uganda. Some women, especially in the settlement, had no source of income at all, but relied entirely on the provisions provided by UNHCR. When asked why the women in Nakivale live in the settlement rather than Kampala, all women interviewed replied that they did not have the financial means to live in Kampala. In Kampala, they would have to pay for food, rent, education, and basic medical services, while in Nakivale these things are at least (in theory) provided. Despite some sources of income, most women reported struggling financially, which increased their stress and decreased their quality of life. Due to their lack of economic opportunities, many view their current situation as only temporary and do not believe that they can build a life in Uganda.

Access to goods and public services

In Kampala, many of the women struggle to pay for house rent, medical expenses, and school fees for their children. A particular problem for Eritreans living in Uganda is the fact that only those with refugee status can access free public services, such as primary education and health care, thereby excluding the majority of Eritrean women interviewed in Kampala. This creates great sorrow among the

women who cannot sufficiently provide for their children. One woman's narration of her life in Kampala illustrates some of the most pressing issues that the refugee women face:

I need to help my daughter but how can I live here? I cannot do anything here, and I need assistance. But I don't have any assistance here. It is very difficult for me to stay here; I don't want to stay here. [...] Sometimes the landlord is making it difficult, asking for more money or adding to rent, wanting to get a three-month advance. It is very expensive to live here. Especially the house rent is very difficult for me to pay. Medical expenses, school fees, rent, and food are all expensive. My daughter started school this year, after being two years at home because I could not afford the school fees. Now I found some Eritreans in Uganda who pay her school fees. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Lack of finances to send their children to school seems to be a common problem among Eritrean women in Uganda. One woman explained: “[S]ometimes I get money and then I send my kids to school, but if I don’t get money I keep them at home. I cannot pay continuously. I sometimes pay for one term and then have to stop [crying]” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Even those who do have refugee status lack access to adequate public services. While those with refugee status have the same rights and entitlements as Ugandans to free primary education and health care, these services are of such poor quality that even Ugandans choose to be treated at private health care facilities and send their children to private schools. Moreover, refugees can only visit selected facilities, leading to limited accessibility. Refugees often endure long waiting periods and have problems reaching the facilities, as Kampala has virtually no functioning public transportation system. Additionally, many Eritrean women were not aware that there are free services for those with minimal income.

The women and their children in the refugee settlement should all be provided with education, health care, housing, basic necessities and food. However, the interviewees reported many challenges. In particular, many complained that the monthly food supplies provided

by UNHCR last only two weeks. After that, the camp inhabitants have to get food for themselves. One woman explained: "... One person gets 6 kg of maize, 0.45 litres of oil a month [...] it's not enough. There is no special food for kids, no meat, etc. My biggest problem in Nakivale is food. Especially for [the] kids" (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Another problem is housing. When a refugee arrives in Nakivale, they receive supplies from UNHCR, such as pots and pans, wood, blankets, and other common household items. However, apart from providing a plastic sheet that can be used for temporary shelter, the building of a shelter is left solely to the refugee. This requires them to raise funds – a minimum of 1 million Ugandan shillings (USD 277). While some women were able to build a shelter with the assistance of family and friends or move into one that was vacated by someone else, others continue to wait for their own shelter. In some instances, women are allowed to share a shelter with another family or group of refugees.

Most of the women interviewed complained about the quality of, and access to, health care in the refugee settlement. They also said that Eritreans were discriminated against in the hospital. Some of the women specifically mentioned health care as one of the main challenges they face in Nakivale. The hospital is not able to handle the number of refugees who need help and it is not unusual to have to wait in line a whole day before a doctor is available. In many cases, the hospital does not have the relevant medication, forcing refugees to buy it from a pharmacy or abstain from taking any. Although private clinics and hospitals exist, they are not free and many cannot afford their services. This being said, some women also spoke positively about the health care services and had specifically moved to Nakivale to be provided with medication that they could not afford in Kampala.

Concerning education, there appear to be two main issues. The first is the poor quality of education provided. One woman reported: "Even when I was in Eritrea we didn't get basic education. And now with this very poor education, it is becoming difficult for my daughter

to follow [...]” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). One woman’s son explained:

You cannot have a future studying here in Nakivale. If you know something from back home or if you get money and are able to leave Nakivale to learn [somewhere else], then it is okay, but if you stay here, you cannot learn anything. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

The second issue, already mentioned above, is the high risk that girls in the settlement face on the long walk to and from secondary school.

Community support

Most women in Kampala found community support only within the Eritrean diaspora community, and many said that they felt discriminated against and were not accepted by the Ugandan population. One woman explained, “You don't feel confident, you don't live confidently, you feel like a refugee [...] some of the people like us, but most of the people don't like us” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). The main support system for Eritrean refugees comes from the Eritrean community in Kampala. All of the women interviewed in Kampala said that they know, and are in contact with, other Eritreans in the city. Their religion, and especially their churches, play an important role in their lives. Although the church itself does not assist them directly, most of the women mentioned that they go to church to pray and for emotional support. Everyone said that they felt lonely and have suffered from stress and worries. Even though many reported that they would like to receive therapy or professional counselling, they cannot afford such services. Instead, they receive emotional support, encouragement, and informal counselling from the Eritrean community and their local church.

When the women in Nakivale were asked whether they felt accepted by Ugandans as well as the refugee population, only two said that they did not feel accepted. Nonetheless, it appears that there

is only a limited sense of community between Eritrean women and people of other nationalities. Two women reported receiving support from the Ethiopian community, as they share the same religious beliefs. One of the woman, underlined how difficult it is to intermingle with the other refugee groups:

As you know, our culture – we come from the Horn of Africa – is not the same as the culture here and the Congolese, Burundians etc. they are one family. They are all black and have the same culture, food, etc. – they match. But for us, we are the odd man out. We are different from others. For us it is a problem to stay here because of the language, the culture, the food – everything. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Some mentioned receiving emotional support from other Eritreans in the settlement, but they also said that most are occupied with solving their own problems. When asked about community support among the Eritrean community in the settlement, one woman responded: “No, not really. Maybe emotionally, but we are all in the same situation. We cannot help each other. [...] We have no income, but we sit, talk and share. That makes me feel a bit better” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Integration programmes: Legal support, counselling, and training

The great majority of Eritrean women interviewed for this study had not received any legal support, counselling or training from the Ugandan government or other non-profit organisations. In many cases, they were not even aware of such services. In Nakivale, where legal support is particularly necessary for those women who have not yet been granted asylum, none of the women interviewed had been approached with offers of such services. Only one woman took the personal initiative to seek legal advice. Furthermore, one woman was able to register for a tailoring course, although she had considerable difficulties:

I used to go to church and someone there advised me that there are free courses for refugees. So, I went, but the Ugandan woman working there did not help me and told me that the courses are full/ registration closed. But then a white woman helped me to get enrolled in the tailoring class. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Apart from the two women mentioned above, none of the women interviewed in Uganda took part in any integration programme. Several women were either not aware of such offers or were misinformed. Some women in Kampala knew about the training courses, but did not know how to enrol, while some women in Nakivale believed that these courses were not for Eritreans, but for other refugees. One woman in Nakivale explained:

We want to join the language courses or some other courses, but they [presumably those who organise the courses] don't allow us. The opportunities are for the other communities only, not for Eritreans. Yes, no one listens to Eritreans here. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

In fact, many courses are only offered in French or Swahili. While this caters to most refugees in the settlement, it excludes the Eritrean population. Several women also explained that they would not be able to attend any courses because they had to take care of their children. One woman explained:

I cannot do anything because of my child and baby. If I could get someone to take care of my baby I might be able to take the courses and I could do some things. If I was able to do a course in tailoring I could work from home. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

This links back to the same cyclical problem mentioned earlier that prevents many women from working in Kampala. While the free courses could help the women to improve their legal and financial situation, they are unable to attend because they cannot afford childcare.

Overall, the interviews clearly show that women are unable to attend courses that could improve their situation, due to a lack of (or wrong) information, as well as an inability to combine taking such courses with their parental responsibilities. Availability alone does not guarantee access and, thus, concerned authorities should do more to raise awareness about the services available and put in place steps and structures to make them easily accessible.

Corruption and discrimination

Corruption and discrimination are perceived to be a problem for the great majority of women and affect most aspects of their life in Uganda. The women in Kampala view this as the main reason why they cannot obtain refugee status and relate it to higher prices and greater overall insecurity. One woman reported:

They [the Ugandans] charge you extra for everything. If they sell one [something] for 2,000 Ugandan shillings they tell us it is 5,000 Ugandan shillings, especially boda-boda [motor cycle taxi] men. If they get a chance they try to get more money. They don't care about you. [...] I cannot afford to pay for the baby to go to school. In Uganda, education is not free. [It is] 350,000 Ugandan shillings per term, which is around three months – that is the price for us, but the Ugandans pay around 130,000. They charge us more wherever we go. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

In Nakivale, the women reported unfair treatment regarding the provision of goods and services as well as resettlement (which will be discussed later in this chapter in the sub-section on ‘Continuing migration journeys’, in the section on ‘Beyond Uganda’). While two women had concrete experiences with corruption, many said that corruption is increasing in Nakivale and is negatively affecting their access to goods and services. One woman reported how the house she had built was taken from her:

At that time [when she arrived], if you had money to build a house you could get land easily. At that time, there was no corruption. Now they give your plot [of

land]/ house to other people. Take, for example, my case. I took in somebody here when I was going to Kampala [...]. I allowed him to stay in my house. While I was in Kampala, this guy met the commandment and falsely claimed that he is my shareholder. They transferred the property rights to him. [...] I protested but they told me that the house is his. I had built the house with my own money. When you go to the police you have to pay [a bribe]. They will help the person who pays the most. [...] Now he has rented my house to somebody else. I tried to get it back, but with no results. He even threatened me that the police and the OPM are under his control. He threatened to kill me. I have become a victim of my good deed [crying]. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Similarly, another woman complained:

[...] Everything is corrupt. Even the people who are distributing the food, they don't give you what you are supposed to get. They might tell you: "today we don't have this", and they just take it for themselves. Even the police are highly corrupt. All this, especially this year, is becoming worse! (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

The women in Nakivale also felt that they, as Eritreans, were not listened to, especially in the hospitals. They felt that the Ugandan hospital staff favoured the Rwandese and Congolese refugees because they have a similar culture and 'colour', while they, as Eritreans, are different. "Having a lighter face, they discriminate against me", reported one woman (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). Similarly, another complained:

They don't listen to you or treat you, especially if you are Eritrean or Ethiopian. But for Congolese and Somalis and the others, they are fine, they get help. The black people they like each other, but not us Eritreans. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016)

Whether perceived or not, these problems are salient for the women interviewed. While the concrete origins of different forms of discrimination and corruption are not known, it appears that these

practices are compounded by the fact that Eritrean asylum seekers in Uganda are not organised to advocate for their rights. Instead, they tend to seek individual solutions to collective problems. Some women see their problems as related to lack of representation. One spoke of Eritreans as the ‘forgotten refugees’, another explained that no one speaks out for Eritreans (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015).

Fear, mistrust, and lack of awareness and confidence among Eritrean asylum seekers, emanating from the Eritrean government’s spying activities in Uganda and the oppression to which they have been subjected back home, are the main obstacles to collective action. On the one hand, most Eritrean asylum seekers fear that it would be bad luck to challenge the authorities of their host country by standing up for their rights. They fear that they may antagonise and irritate the Ugandan authorities, causing them to act against them, with far reaching consequences such as deportation, detention, harassment, and abuse. On the other hand, continued surveillance and pressure through the long arm of Eritrea within Uganda, creates a reluctance to act publically (see more on the activities of the long arm of Eritrea in Chapter 10).

Indeed, the continuing influence of the Eritrean government in countries such as Uganda should not be overlooked. There is substantial evidence that Eritrean government operatives are active in Uganda, creating security concerns for Eritrean refugees. These operatives install fear and manipulate Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees, thereby controlling the diaspora community. The Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea reported in 2011 how the Eritrea external security and intelligence works in the greater region of the Horn and East Africa (UNSC, 2011). The report provided detailed accounts of their activities in the region including in Uganda. Furthermore, an anonymous person who claimed to have been working with the Eritrean national security has released a series of classified information on his Facebook page, including, among other things a classified list of the Eritrean regime’s agents who spy on

Eritrean communities around the world³⁵. Among those listed, five were in Uganda.

Beyond Uganda

Continuing migration journeys

None of the women interviewed said that they want to stay in Uganda permanently, as they do not believe that they can build a sustainable future. They are not building their lives in Uganda, but merely surviving until they find a permanent solution. One woman explained:

[...] I need resettlement so that I can work and start a new life. [...] We are trying to survive; we are just praying and hoping that things will change. [...] Yes, there is no hope for a future. [...] There is no hope for work or anything here, we need resettlement. This is transition country. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Similarly, another woman explained:

I want to be resettled so that I can get a good education for my children. [...] [My biggest problem is] resettlement! I want to work so that I can provide for my children. Here you only have stress, there is nothing here. I am trying my best to do things. After all this sacrifice, I have no profit, nothing! I am just surviving. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

While the women in Nakivale hope for resettlement, most of the women in Kampala have no concrete plans. Some women in Kampala spoke of dreams of moving to countries such as Canada, Sweden and Australia, but few can hope for resettlement as they do not even have refugee status. In Nakivale, all women have either started the resettlement process or have plans to do so. However, despite the security risks that women face in the refugee settlement,

³⁵ While the Facebook page is now inactive, the information was saved and is held by the head author of this chapter.

resettlement is very difficult for Eritreans living in Nakivale³⁶. Some of the women who were interviewed have been living in Nakivale since 2008, but are still in the very first stages of being resettled. Almost all Eritrean women interviewed in Uganda said that refugees from other nationalities are resettled far more often, and six mentioned that they think this is due to discrimination against Eritreans. One woman voiced her frustration over the process in the following manner:

[We had progressed to] after the protection stage. We have asked them but they told us that our file is not there. Then we continue, open a new file again, then they tell us that the file is lost. [...] They don't care about Eritreans like they do about the other [nationalities]. After many years, only one [Eritrean] person has been resettled. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Similarly, another woman claims: “The Somalis are going by the thousands and the Congolese are the same. You see the posters: 1,000 Somalis, 900 Congolese, even Rwandese [...], but never Eritreans” (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015 & 2016). While most view corruption as the main reason why Eritreans do not have a chance of resettlement, one woman views the situation differently:

...Yes [Eritreans are resettled], but very few! They discriminate against us, but one of the reasons why so few of us are resettled is that the other communities are large. For instance, if you have 5 bags of maize and 1 bag of beans and you mix them, you get more maize than beans. It is the same with resettlement. But they also discriminate against us. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Whether real or perceived, the problems and discrimination that Eritreans face in the resettlement process leads some to view crossing the Mediterranean Sea as their only option. One woman explained

³⁶ It should be noted at this point that less than 1% of the overall refugee population under UNHCR's protection receives resettlement (UNHCR, 2017).

why she will soon try to undertake this dangerous journey, revealing the desperation and hopelessness that some women in the settlement feel:

There are almost no resettlement opportunities for Eritrean refugees. The Congolese are resettled in big numbers. I believe that there is no one who talks to the authorities about Eritreans' problems. Eritreans are ignored. We are forgotten refugees. Eritreans are perishing in Libya in the process of migrating [to Europe], because of the miserable situation. Even me, I am going to wait for the results of the resettlement for three or four months and then I am going to try my best to cross the desert to Libya and cross from there [to Europe]. This is a miserable life. I am in a stressful situation and even the kids are stressed. There is no work. The situation is desperate. Nobody gives you hope and support here. When the kids see me stressed, they ask "what happened to you". [...] I will go with these kids to cross the Mediterranean Sea. It is a do or die journey and I will do it. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

Without any realistic opportunities for work, financial problems, and poor education opportunities for their children, many of the women in Nakivale are just surviving until they are resettled. Similarly, most women in Kampala do not anticipate a future in Uganda, as they struggle to survive in a city where they can barely afford to meet their basic needs, while fearing for their safety.

Evidently, none of the women interviewed in Uganda had attempted to travel to Europe, yet this possibility came up in several interviews. While most Eritrean women seem to remain in the region, some take the decision that this incredibly risky journey is their only chance to find safety and a future. They must once again entrust themselves into the hands of smugglers, cross dangerous routes through the Saharan Desert and the Mediterranean Sea, and may fall prey to human traffickers and others who want to abuse and exploit them. In fact, many new dangers await them, some of which are explained in Chapter 4.

Returning to Eritrea

Some of the women³⁷ interviewed were asked whether they would return to Eritrea if the general situation improved, the national service problem was resolved, and their safety could be guaranteed. Although almost all said that they miss their family in Eritrea, feel homesick, and wish they could go back to Eritrea, the majority expressed deep mistrust in the government and said that they could never return. Those who were asked were not optimistic that the situation in Eritrea will improve any time soon. One woman shared:

Yes, I would go back. But I don't think that things will change and that there will be peace. The situation will not be safe for many years. I love my country. If it is safe, I will be the first one to go. I love how I was raised there. (Interview, Africa Monitors with Anon., face-to-face, 2015)

With no safe opportunity to return, nor to move on, most women are stuck in limbo in a country where many lack legal status, fear for their safety and that of their family, and have little opportunity to build sustainable lives.

Lifestory: Abrehet's journey to Uganda

This section contains a story of a woman called Abrehet.³⁸ The interview was carried out by one of the female monitors for Africa Monitors. It is copied in full here³⁹ as it describes the danger women face on their multiple journeys searching for a place of safety (Africa Monitors, 2017).

The journey from Eritrea to Ethiopia

I was born and raised near Senafe in Eritrea. I was only 17 when I first migrated in 2010. I was alone when I started my journey and half way I met a smuggler, two men and a girl. And the smuggler asked me, "Where are you heading, little girl?"

³⁷ Only the Eritrean women in Kampala were asked these questions.

³⁸ Name has been anonymised.

³⁹ The article has been edited lightly for readability.

I was terrified and didn't reply. And he asked me again. And in fear I told him, "To Tigray". He continued with his questions, "Who brought you here?", "I came alone," I answered. "Join us, then. We have to be careful and move fast. There are Eritrean patrols here," he said. We all agreed and continued our journey. We followed his footsteps in fear through ridges and valleys. Along the way the smuggler would order us to lie down, they would and I did everything the others did. The other girl was a city-girl and I noted she was very tired. She was worried that the smuggler would abandon us. I was scared, my eyes hurt from trying hard to look at his every movement lest I miss his step and lose track of him. And I was worried for her for she kept crying. Then, the smuggler said, "We are very close [to the border]." He tried to encourage us. After resting for a brief moment, we continued our journey. After threading for a long time, he said, "We have reached Mereb River. There are a lot of patrols here. We will drink water and cross quickly." After drinking some water, we continued walking. We were terrified, hungry and thirsty.

The journey was too much for me. I was tired, afraid and my mouth was dry [dehydrated]. After about thirty minutes, the smuggler was very angry and accused us of slowing down the group. And he said that they will be caught because of us. He opened his bag and took out a water-sugar solution and gave us. I thanked God for this and felt stronger. After we crossed the river, he told us, "From now on you will travel alone and it is a long way. Don't worry the Ethiopian border patrols will find you, be brave." He left us alone there. Like he said we walked alone for long. And as he said, the Ethiopian border patrols found us and took us to their station. They gave us water and food.

From their station, they sent us to Mai Ayni refugee camp. After staying at the camp for six months, I heard a rumour of a safe route to Israel through Sudan and Egypt. I started asking people around and met someone after three days. When I planned about going, I was very distressed. But I decided to go anyway and I asked him what I needed for the journey. He told me I will need clothes and some food. And I went to my quarters. He came back after a week and told me that the journey was scheduled the next day. "What time?" I asked him. "Around 6 pm," he said. And he left.

We began our journey at the scheduled time even though there was a lot of security control at the camp. We managed to slip out through security controls. Five of us headed to Addis Ababa. After reaching Addis Ababa, we continued to Humera. And we reached Humera. In Humera, they [the smugglers] locked us in a small hut and warned us about patrols that roamed the area.

After sometime a man by the name Gebrezgabbier, aged around 35, forced us to pay some money without any explanation. And we did. A few moments later, a woman came carrying food and gave us food accompanied with a smile. This made me feel good and hopeful. And she advised me to wrap my money in a plastic bag and hid it in my panties which I later understood was part of a skim to rip me of my money. And she told me to leave my clothes with her and she will send them later to me. I agreed and did as she told me.

We started travelling by the riverside of Tekeze. The sound of the river was very loud and scary. How will I cross it? It was the question that crossed my mind. The smugglers have tied twenty plastic jars to hold on to and float across the river. One of the smugglers reminded us to never to let go. And right before we went into the river they ordered us to pay. We told them we didn't have any money. One of the smugglers looked straight at me and told me to give him the money. I told him I didn't have any money. He told me I have some hidden in my panties. And I remembered the woman who brought us food at the hut, she was their associate. I was afraid they might leave me there. And the other migrants said that I should give it to them if I had any money or else they could leave me there. So I gave him all the money I had. The other migrants were very nice to me and promised to help me if I needed any money. Though I was angry and afraid, this gave me strength and hope. The two smugglers were at the two ends of the floating jars and the migrants put me in the middle to keep me safe and from drowning.

All of a sudden, a dead body and a dead donkey came floating towards us. This added to everything I went through and the sound of the river's fast movement, I cried aloud in horror. I almost drowned and would have been lost like all the others who drowned in there. But God's hands saved me and I didn't let go of the rope and the plastic jars. I could easily have been like the dead person and the dead donkey. I was unconscious when we crossed the river. They performed cardiopulmonary

resuscitation and resuscitated me. After an hour, we continued our journey and reached the Sudanese village of Hamdait.

The journey from Sudan to Israel

The Sudanese border patrols caught us and took our mobile phones. Everywhere we go problems present themselves in different forms. Then we started looking for vehicles to take us to Kassala. We met smugglers and agreed after they told us what it will cost us. We drove through endless desert and for what seemed like an endless time and reached Kassala. In Kassala, they locked us in a room, threatened us and told us to pay 1,400 USD if they are to take us to Egypt. They forced us to call our families and relatives. And I called my cousin in Israel. My cousin kept asking me, "When did you come to Kassala? Who said you can go [out of the country]?". He was very angry at me but he had no other choice except to wire the money.

Everyone was remitted the amount asked above. Mohammed [...] is the name of the man who received the money. After he received some of the migrants' amount he changed his cruel face and with a smile told us that we would begin our journey soon. And added, "Those of you who haven't paid, you will stay. Don't worry, we Sudanese are your brothers. If it were the Rashaida people, they would have sold you, take your women for their wives and made you pay a lot. However, we will sell you to the Rashaida people unless you pay quickly".

I thought to myself, are we animals to be exchanged or sold? Through time the number of migrants in that room reached 17. And we were all horrified, worried and praying in our own ways. And I hated myself for everything. However, after two weeks, on July 20, 2010, we began the route to Egypt. The pickup cars we were loaded in accelerated at 180 km per hour and every one of us got sick. We were vomiting and bated ourselves for everything. When we rested, we tried to drink water but kerosene was put into the water. We couldn't drink it. We didn't have any other choice, we meant to quench our thirst but drunk so little. I later learned that one litre of kerosene was mixed with twenty litres of water. I was angry and mad at myself for that first day I left my home. Migration is horrible. I must have been cursed by my parents. These were some of the things that were coming into my mind throughout the journey.

After we drove like this for ten days we reached a border town in Egypt, Sbelaton. We all looked like walking dead people and one wouldn't wonder why. It is a life and death road. There are gangs of thieves on this route. After three days, thank God, without any incident we took a train and reached Cairo. I was very tired and needed to lie down and rest for long. For the first time in weeks I felt safe and at ease.

We stayed in Cairo for a week and in that time we were looking for the Bedouin people. I was not a registered refugee and I didn't go out for once. After a week we found a Bedouin. Our transport was a land cruiser SUV with tinted glasses. The smugglers were Egyptian Bedouin and told us our movement would be with caution. They told us we would cross the Suez Canal in a boat. I was afraid but I had no choice. There was no other way.

I boarded the boat with fear and we started off. I was frightened by the water. Anyways, we reached land after a long time. Something unexpected happened once we reached land, four gunmen were waiting there. And they kidnapped us from the Bedouin smugglers. The smugglers tried to resist but to no avail because the Bedouin had no guns. The gunmen directly took us to the Sinai. Our situation worsened, we were horrified and my day turned into a nightmare. They held us hostage and commanded us to call our families. They told us to pay a ransom of 10,000 USD.

After few days they started torturing us and it was a time of crying and wailing. There were other things I have left out that happened to me. I was very disturbed and disturbed my family and relatives as well. It was an experience that scared my soul. My family and relatives paid the ransom. And my cousin from Israel paid for my release also. What I have suffered in the Sinai, you wouldn't even do to it your enemies. There are a lot of impediments in life, but there is nothing that matches to what I was subjected to and I cannot forget the trauma even now. After the ransom was paid, we left the Sinai and our kidnappers abandoned us at the Israeli border. Then, the Israeli troops caught us.

Life in Israel

After we were caught by the Israeli troops, we were taken to Tel Aviv and were registered at the office of UNHCR. We were given a three-month residence permit

and left to visit our respective families. I was sick and bedridden for three months. I was completely broken in the Sinai. I was hospitalized, taking medication and begun to show improvement in my health. In Israel, it wasn't as I expected it to be. We had to queue up from 3 am in the morning to 5 pm in the afternoon just to renew the three-month residence permit. It was very sad.

[To the question of what sort of things had happened to her in Israel she replied:] It is a lot. Some of these have scared me deep, I can't rid of the trauma easily. One time I was ill and went to a doctor who owns a large clinic and is well respected among the Eritrean refugees. He told me that I had infection in my colons. He prescribed seven days of injection for me. But I didn't get well or show any change. My legs were weak all the time. So I went to another doctor and he told me I was not ill and just my body is dehydrated. He told me to drink a lot of water. I took his advice, drank a lot of water every day and ate my daily meals regularly. And I started to show improvement.

After six months I saw my first doctor on TV, under arrest by the Israeli police. I didn't know what he was accused of because the news was in Hebrew. And I asked one Eritrean who speaks Hebrew as I was curious to know why he was under arrest. He told me, "He is cruel. He injected 17 Eritrean women with a medicine that made them sterile." I was taken aback by his reply and became horrified. I did a fertility test and the doctor told me I cannot bear a child. I lost all hope. I got married in Israel but I didn't bear a child. If God wills it I might someday.

Journey from Israel to Rwanda

I was given laissez-passer, 3,500 US dollars [by the Israeli authorities] and boarded a plane to Rwanda. They [the Rwandese authorities] seized the laissez-passer at the airport of Kigali and drove us in a land cruiser to a hotel. The accommodation at the hotel was nice and they gave us good food. We stayed at the hotel for three days. Then they drove us for ten hours in a small car to Uganda. It was arranged by the Rwandan government and we didn't have any say in it.

In Kampala, Uganda, we were taken into a hotel. They billed us for the trip and the hotel we were staying at. After this, the people who drove us said, "Our job is finished here. You can live as you like. You can either stay in this hotel or rent a

private residence. But it is better to rent a house of your own. And to live here you need to seek for asylum and register [with the refugee authority]”.

Near the hotel, there was a police station and there was a desk for asylum seekers at the police station where we registered. And they [the police] directed us to the Office of Prime Minister (OPM) which examines cases of asylum seekers. After two weeks the OPM gave us a document that refers to us as asylum seekers which is renewed every three months. I now live renewing this document every three months and I have not been granted asylum up to now. I have rented a room and I am trying hard to lead a normal life now.

Conclusion

Eritrean women refugees are very vulnerable. They are subject to serious forms of sexual violence experienced at all stages of their displacement. During their flight, Eritrean women are at risk of being captured by security guards and abducted by human traffickers, and at risk of (sexual) abuse and mistreatment by various actors. These risks followed the Eritrean women into Sudan which motivated them to continue their journey to Uganda, despite the additional risks and costs involved. As refugees in Uganda, the women reported regularly experiencing theft and extortion, as well as extreme economic hardship. Single mothers seem to be the most vulnerable to all of these risks. This results in serious trauma, which can cause women to isolate themselves from their host communities.

The fragmentation of families and support networks exacerbates the situation of Eritrean women refugees, making them more vulnerable to abuse and forcing them to take on new roles as sole protectors, breadwinners, and caretakers. The Eritrean women in Uganda face great stress and worry, rooted in their separation from family members and their inability to care and provide for their children. This is compounded by a feeling of hopelessness about their situation. In such circumstances, the safety, health, and development opportunities of the Eritrean women refugees (and their children) are particularly at risk.

In most cases, the women's wellbeing cannot be viewed separately from the wellbeing of their children. Women often described the challenges they face and their plans only in respect to the situation of their children – their personal and individual challenges and plans were presented as secondary to their children's safety and prosperity.

In Uganda, the women generally felt safer from abduction and deportation than in other countries in the region, yet their lives continue to be on hold. They complained of vulnerability to theft and rape, as well as economic hardship. They also lack access to basic public services and programmes.

The problems experienced by Eritrean women living in exile in Uganda are often interlinked. For instance, especially in Nakivale settlement, some women reported that they and their daughters cannot engage in productive or educational activities for fear of being attacked or raped, which in turn negatively affects their current and future economic situation. Additionally, even if they would seek work or education, as primary or single care givers without the financial means to afford childcare, many Eritrean women in Kampala and Nakivale are unable to combine these activities with their parental responsibilities. The resulting economic hardship has a direct effect upon these women's access to quality services, including education for their children.

Corruption and discrimination against Eritreans is viewed as a big problem, which the women living in exile in Uganda related to many of their challenges. Some related corruption and discrimination to a lack of representation of Eritrean problems in the public sphere. Women in Kampala complained that they are not granted refugee status, while the women in Nakivale complained that Eritreans are not granted resettlement.

Overall, most of the women interviewed are in a situation of limbo, unable to return to Eritrea, unable to continue their journey safely, and unable to create a sustainable and secure life in Uganda. They continue to survive with a low level of security and on few

provisions, hoping for a day when opportunities may present themselves.

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