

**Cactus Fruit Futures: A Gender Analysis of the Gaps in Existing Literature on the
Evolution of Identity Creation within Eritrea and the Eritrean
Diaspora**

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While living in Ethiopia, I met an Eritrean man who had newly escaped from Eritrea after a five-year imprisonment. As he told me his story, he received a phone call from his younger brother who had just crossed the Eritrean border into Sudan. Both men planned to journey north and eventually cross the Mediterranean into Europe. The idea for this research project grew from a simple, Cynthia Enloe-esque question that was left unanswered after listening to this man's story: where were the women? He and his brother had escaped, but what about the family they left behind? This query then grew to incorporate questions on identity creation and enforcement as related to the Eritrean state and population. The title of this paper, *Cactus Fruit Futures*, refers to the Tigrinya word, *beles*, or cactus fruit, commonly sold in Eritrea during the summer. The symbolism is twofold. Members of the Eritrean diaspora are nicknamed *beles* since, like the fruit, they appear in Eritrea during the summer months; cactus fruit futures thus allude to the mass migration of Eritreans in search of the freedom and prosperity achieved by their counterparts in the diaspora. It also evokes the nature of the fruit itself. The thick skin of *beles* fruits is covered in hundreds of nearly invisible spines that can become painfully embedded in one's own skin when handling the fruit. The sweet flesh inside the fruit is much beloved by Eritreans, who know how to properly handle the fruit to expose its flesh. *Beles* are therefore representative of Eritrean people's struggle to find new opportunities despite widespread feelings of hopelessness associated with a lack of economic and social mobility enforced by state policies.

I would like to thank my advisor, Kimberly Theidon, whose advice and guidance have been invaluable. She is an extraordinary professor and mentor. I would also like to thank my family and friends, whose infinite support and encouragement I treasure. Finally, I would like to thank my Ethiopian family for their hospitality and support. Ykaalo, zhawey, btaemi yekenyeyey—thank you for being my teacher and friend.

Abstract

An estimated 5,000 people reportedly flee Eritrea each month in search of better lives abroad. This paper seeks to map out the political and hierarchical structure of Eritrea and its impact on the formation of identity as experienced by Eritrean society within Eritrea, en route during migration, and within the Eritrean diaspora community. Each layer of analysis is influenced by contextual explanations of gender roles and expectations. This paper is limited in its sole use of secondary sources; it does not attempt to provide original research. Rather, it aims to consolidate existing research in a way that illuminates gaps in current migration narratives and ultimately aims to create a framework which informs an analysis of identities. Who is rendered invisible in dominant Eritrean migration discourse? What erasures are made, especially concerning the importance of identity, in the pursuit of explaining the creation and maintenance of a nation-state? These questions are meant to provide a template for future research to ensure that groups and questions that may not be immediately visible or obvious will be accorded their due importance.

Introduction

Brief Overview of Eritrea's Political History

An extensive history of the evolution of the Eritrean state is not included in this paper, for which the timeline of most importance begins in the 1960s. The following summary of Eritrean history is consciously cursory and is meant solely as a frame for contextualization. Eritrea's complicated history with Ethiopia in particular deserves more detailed explanation; for the purposes of this paper, however, this history is not discussed at length. In 1890, Eritrea was proclaimed an Italian colony. In 1941 during World War II, British forces occupied Eritrea, and Britain then administered Eritrea as a United Nations (UN) trust territory until 1952, when the UN federated Eritrea with Ethiopia.¹ In 1961, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began its fight for Eritrean independence, continuing after the Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea in 1962. In the 1970s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) separated from the ELF and "established a stronghold among Eritrean war refugees by extending its mass organizations to all countries with

¹ "Eritrea profile—Timeline," BBC. 4 May 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13349395>.

a significant Eritrean exile population.”² In 1991, the EPLF beat Ethiopia’s army, replacing the Ethiopian run regime that had been in power since 1952.

In May 1991, the EPLF leader, Isaias Afwerki, declared that the EPLF would act as a provisional government, and with its 1993 referendum the provisional government declared Eritrea an independent state and joined the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations. With 1994 came the first post-liberation congress, and the EPLF transitioned into the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).³ After Eritrea’s liberation struggle, the idea of guided democracy was embraced by the EPLF leadership and most political elites, despite criticisms from former ELF leaders and civil society. The 1998-2000 border war with Eritrea displaced over half a million Eritreans, and contributed to the outflow of refugees as well as “an economic and political crisis of citizenship.”⁴ In 2001, when a group of elite PFDJ members, the G15, called for political reform, Afwerki, now President of Eritrea, arrested eleven of the fifteen as well as significant numbers of journalists. Elections were suspended, and the 1997 constitution, which discussed the political future of the state and had yet to be implemented, literally disappeared.⁵ Since then, Afwerki has controlled the political climate of Eritrea, allowing no opposition or challenge to his rule.⁶

High ranking military members rose to political power under Afwerki’s dominance, disrupting economic activities and enforcing participation within the national service, which is supposedly limited to eighteen months but in actuality is indefinite and has been equated to forced labor.⁷ National service activities include construction projects for government-owned companies and military-run cash crop farms. The government lacks regional and international allies and has used its bouts of conflict with Ethiopia to justify its lack of democratization, since it is perpetually suspended in a “no war, no peace” environment.⁸

² Nicole Hirt, “The Eritrean Diaspora and its Impact on Regime Stability: Responses to UN Sanctions,” *African Affairs*, Volume 114, Issue 454 (Nov. 2014): 115-135, <http://afraf.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2014/11/20/afraf.adu061.full>, p. 117.

³ Tekle Woldemikael, “Introduction: Post-Liberation Eritrea,” *Africa Today*, Volume 60, Issue 2 (2013): v-xix, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.60.issue-2>, p. vi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁵ Dan Connell, *Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2005, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷ Hirt, 117.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

Policies intended to modernize the state ultimately prevented economic growth and led to political instability. Wolde Teklemikael uses Schmitt and Agamben's idea of a "state of exception" in which "the sovereign exceeds the rule of law for the public good in a state of emergency" to describe Eritrea.⁹ In a state of exception, citizenship is "narrowly constructed" to include the members of the ruling elite; meanwhile, the remainder of the population is kept "at the level of bare existence."¹⁰ Woldemikael argues that Eritrea's state of emergency began with its colonization, which produced an amalgamation of "different ethnicities, histories, religions, and cultures that did not consider themselves part of a single national entity."¹¹ Citing Mahmood Mamdani's dichotomy between "citizens" and "subjects," Woldemikael explains how a hierarchy developed within the population that is reflected in the diaspora¹² and is characterized by patron-client relations.¹³ Afwerki created a hierarchy that "ranges from what may be called super citizenship for the top echelons of the government and party members, to local persons' status as subjects, with few rights and little chance of upward mobility."¹⁴ He argues that, with slight revision to Mamdani's framework due the effects of globalization and the information revolution, Eritrea's distinction between state and society parallels the reproduction of the bifurcated citizen and subject colonial social hierarchies of post-colonial African states.¹⁵ Citizenship is linked to sacrifice, and martyrs have become "a symbol of Eritrean culture."¹⁶ Full citizenship, which is reserved for party members, equates to enjoying civil, political, and economic rights, while the rest of society are subjects of the state and are not granted these rights. Citizens include former guerilla fighters, or *tegadelti*, and subjects include the masses, or *hafash*, who "were not members of the EPLF and are not members of the new party, PFDJ (i.e., civilians in Eritrea and in the diaspora)" who are often referred to as *gebar*, or taxpayers by the government.¹⁷ According to Woldemikael, the *tegadelti* "receive a higher salary, better housing, and special treatment for services and goods in all government institutions," dominating government positions despite representing a small percentage of the population. *Tegadelti* are

⁹ Woldemikael, ix.

¹⁰ Ibid, ix.

¹¹ Ibid, ix.

¹² Ibid., vi.

¹³ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁴ Ibid., xi.

¹⁵ Ibid., xi.

¹⁶ Ibid., xii.

¹⁷ Ibid., xii.

divided between the oligarchy, or *laalewot halefti* (“higher authority”), and the rest of the former soldiers considered to have sacrificed their youth for the nation. They are privileged through patron-client relations which are dependent on “loyalty, friendship, acquaintance, and future favors for service rendered.”¹⁸ Subjects are divided between the locals and diasporas, who are accorded a higher status than locals.¹⁹

With independence and the rise of Afwerki, national security and sovereignty became the top priorities of the state. The oligarchy comprises top leaders, who have sought economic progress for years without much success, and the nationalization of labor and natural resources has crippled the ability of the economy and political and social spheres to prosper. The lowest class of individual in Eritrea is composed of those who fled to avoid forced labor and conscription;²⁰ however, if these refugees, or *segre-dob* (“those who crossed the border”), later achieve prosperity elsewhere and refrain from condemning the Eritrean government, they can become respected diaspora members within Eritrea. This process takes a considerable amount of time; today’s respected diaspora members consist of those who fled in the 1970s and 1980s and have since become professionally successful. Their prosperity has greatly influenced migration aspirations. Diaspora members who do criticize the government are likely to be arrested and possibly tortured if they return.²¹ Woldemikael explains that the first “victims” of the state of exception were migrants from the Tigray region and other Ethiopians who had lived in Eritrea prior to being forced to return to Ethiopia in 1991. Other persecuted groups included Jehovah’s Witnesses, Pentecostals, and other “Christian groups and Muslim clerics who had been imprisoned for being unpatriotic.”²² Many of these people fled Eritrea, and after the 1998-2000 war, people who had been displaced and those fleeing national service joined their ranks.²³ Woldemikael’s analysis, however, excludes a discussion of gender; women and gender-nonconforming groups have also been targeted by the policies advanced by the state of exception, which enforces a strict gender binary. Additionally, a significant number of women *tegadelti* have not enjoyed the same privileges as their male counterparts, a topic which will be discussed in a succeeding section.

¹⁸ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁹ Ibid., xiii.

²⁰ Ibid., vii.

²¹ Ibid., xv.

²² Ibid., x-xi.

²³ Ibid., xi.

The diaspora community remains highly polarized concerning the nature of the Eritrean state; some express their devotion to a state developing its capacity, while others vehemently condemn abuses and lack of freedoms. Citizens living abroad are expected to pay a 2% tax on their incomes to the state, despite the UN Security Council deeming the practice unlawful and various pushback from several states; diaspora members who fail to pay the tax are threatened with fines and the prospect of losing their land and property within Eritrea.²⁴ The creation of this tax stems back to the EPLF. When fighting, it was sponsored neither by the Eastern bloc nor the West; its new government was deeply rooted in suspicion of the international community, so it emphasized self-reliance and developed the tax as a financial support mechanism. The tax was applicable to those of Eritrean origin who, although naturalized abroad, were classified as Eritrean nationals by the new government. The initial justification for the tax was the reconstruction of the country, which had been ravaged by war. Even then, payment “was a precondition of access to consular and other government services,” but Eritreans were readily willing to comply with the tax.²⁵

According to the 2016 Index of Economic Freedom, a product of The Heritage Foundation and the Wall Street Journal, Eritrea is ranked 173rd out of 186 countries in terms of its economic freedom, which is measured based on rule of law, limited government, regulatory efficiency, and open markets.²⁶ With a population of 6.5 million, Eritrea has a GDP of 7.8 billion USD with 1.7% growth, 7.2% unemployment, and foreign direct investment of 46.5 million USD.²⁷ The population is composed of the following ethnic groups: Tigrinya 55%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%, Kunama 2%, Rashaida 2%, Bilen 2%, other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera) 5%.²⁸ Within these groups, Islam and Coptic Christianity are the main religions practiced with smaller proportions of the population practicing Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.²⁹

Societal stratification is essentially frozen, with no opportunities for advancement save diaspora. The government’s assertion of total power and intolerance has created a climate of fear

²⁴ Ibid., xvii.

²⁵ Ibid., xvii.

²⁶ “2016 Index of Economic Freedom: Eritrea,” *The Heritage Foundation*, 2016, <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/eritrea>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ “The Worldfact Book: Eritrea,” *CIA*, 2016, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/er.html>.

²⁹ Ibid.

and oppression. Mass surveillance is enforced by both the government and citizens themselves, creating distrust amongst neighbors and communities. According to a June 2015 United Nations report, major human rights abuses perpetrated by the Eritrean government and military include: arbitrary arrests and detentions; torture, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings; violations of various freedoms, including those of expression, association and assembly, religion and belief, and movement.³⁰ These rights violations, combined with the government's support of insurgency and terrorist groups (Al Shabab in Somalia), led to UN Resolution 1907. Imposed on Eritrea in 2009, the resolution included "an arms embargo, the freezing of foreign assets, and a travel ban on ruling elite."³¹ In 2011, the UN imposed additional sanctions on Eritrea for ignoring the initial sanctions and continuing to support armed groups in Somalia and elsewhere in the Horn of Africa.³²

Contextualizing Eritrean Migration

While current and detailed disaggregated data is not readily available, data concerning the total number of migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean during the first nine months of 2016 shows that over 300,000 people have attempted the journey.³³ Within the first nine months of 2015, 520,000 registered sea arrivals were recorded; in 2014 the total number of arrivals by sea was 216,054.³⁴ 68% of all Mediterranean arrivals are comprised of Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Nigerians, and Eritreans. While the arrivals in Greece tend to be from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran, the people arriving in Italy are mainly from African nations. Eritreans make up 12% of those arriving in Italy.³⁵ In the first seven months of 2016, 11,564 Eritreans arrived in Italy. Within the same timeframe, European Union (EU) countries, Italy included, fielded 17,810 asylum applications from Eritreans, and 2,692 migrants were

³⁰ "Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea," *United Nations Human*

Rights, June 2015, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/ColEritrea/Pages/ReportColEritrea.aspx>.

³¹ Hirt, 120.

³² Woldemikael, viii.

³³ Jonathan Clayton, "Over 300,000 refugees and migrants cross Med so far in 2016," *UNHCR*, 20 Sept. 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/9/57e12c564/300000-refugees-migrants-cross-med-far-2016.html>.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

reported to have died at sea while trying to cross from Libya to Italy.³⁶ Over 90% of Eritrean asylum seekers are granted asylum in the EU.³⁷

Eritrea has hemorrhaged refugees since the conflict in the 1960s. To escape the authoritarian government under Afwerki, evade or escape forced conscription, and/or find economic opportunities, an estimated 5,000 people flee Eritrea per month.³⁸ The majority escape via Sudan or Ethiopia, and many attempt to make it to Europe through the Sahara, then through Libya and the Mediterranean, the deadliest migrant route in the world. Within the first eight months of 2015 alone, over 30,000 Eritreans attempted to traverse the Mediterranean from Libya into Italy, making Eritreans the primary group using this route.³⁹

It is estimated that 9% (400,000 people) of the Eritrean population have left Eritrea, a number which does not reflect the number of people who died or were stranded en route.⁴⁰ The number of Eritreans seeking asylum in Europe quadrupled from 2011 to 2015, leaving Eritreans at the crux of EU debates concerning who should be granted refugee status. To put this debate and the shifting attitudes towards African migration into context, one only needs to look to the United Kingdom: in 2015, the UK reduced the number of accepted Eritrean asylum seekers from 77% to 29%.⁴¹ This is especially worrying as “[r]elative to its population, Eritrea has the biggest group of refugees who are unaccompanied minors,”⁴² and these minors are the largest group seeking asylum in the UK.⁴³

2014 data, though outdated, shows that in the month of October alone, 78 unaccompanied Eritrean minors fled to Ethiopia (raising the total number of unaccompanied Eritrean minors in Ethiopia to 1,591) and 90% of the Eritreans who arrived in Ethiopia that month were between 18 and 24 years old. In 2014, there were over 216,000 Eritreans in Ethiopia and Sudan; lack of funding in refugee camps means that there is a lack of secondary and post-secondary education

³⁶Zachary Laub, “Authoritarianism in Eritrea and the Migrant Crisis,” *Council on Foreign*

Relations, 16 Sept. 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/eritrea/authoritarianism-eritrea-migrant-crisis/p37239>.

³⁷ Laub.

³⁸ Nell Frizzell, “Should Europe pay to stop refugees fleeing oppressive Eritrea?” *The Guardian*, 28 April 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/28/eu-plan-to-pay-millions-to-eritrea>.

³⁹ Max Bearak, “Massacre report offers glimpse of just how bad things are in Eritrea,” *The Washington Post*, 13 April 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/13/a-ghastly-massacre-in-eritrea-is-a-reminder-of-why-so-many-are-fleeing/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Frizzell.

and vocational training and job opportunities. This dearth of services and opportunity in Eritrea's neighboring countries makes the dangerous voyage across the Mediterranean more appealing.⁴⁴ In 2015, Eritrean nationals applied for asylum primarily in Germany (10,990), Switzerland (9,965), the Netherlands (7,455), and Sweden (7,230).⁴⁵ It is not yet evident what effect Brexit, the presidency of Donald Trump, and the rise of anti-immigration rhetoric in political parties across Europe will have on the future of migration routes. Woldemikael characterizes Eritrea's refugee crisis as a "stealth revolution," or *selahta maabel*, stating that "young people leaving the country will prevent the state from reproducing itself in the future."⁴⁶ Political change, however, remains to be seen.

This paper is organized into five main sections, which attempt to structure existing research on Eritrean nationalism, gender roles, state oppression, and migration as they relate to Eritrean identity in an effort to better understand Eritreans' complex relationship with the Eritrean state and the Eritrean diaspora community. The first section of this paper discusses how the participation of women *tegadelti* in the EPLF reshaped gender norms and expectations and how, once Eritrea gained independence, spheres of women's liberation retracted. The second section describes how national service has destroyed livelihoods and local economies; it also details coping mechanisms and subversive actions adopted by Eritreans and how these behaviors are gendered. The third section explains the evolution of the Warsai-Yikaelo Development Campaign and the reformation of Eritrea's educational system, both of which contributed to the expansion of national duty via indefinite national service and created push factors towards migration. The fourth section discusses migration routes and discusses acculturation concerns, specifically for unaccompanied minors and young children. The fifth and final section looks at the Eritrean diaspora and generational shifts in identity.

⁴⁴ "Number of Eritreans seeking asylum in Europe soars over figures for last year," UNHCR. 14 Nov. 2014, <http://www.unhcr.org/546606286.html>.

⁴⁵ Laub.

⁴⁶ Woldemikael, xi.

Mythos and Modernity: The Creation and Performance of Eritrean Identity as it relates to Women *Tegadelti*

Although nuanced academic research is lacking concerning Eritrean identity both within and outside of the state of Eritrea, this chapter seeks to analyze available research and narratives on Eritrean identity while framing the construction of identity through an intersectional lens. It is meant to provide a foundational understanding of the gendered implications of Eritrea's liberation and to set the stage for a comparison of identity creation and expression between people living in Eritrea and Eritrean migrants.

A discussion of the evolution of identities during Eritrea's war for liberation precedes an explanation of post-liberation identities within Eritrea. Existing research details the ways in which Eritrea's liberation struggle challenged traditional gender norms, expanding spheres of acceptable behavior for both men and women; additionally, it explains how these spheres were constricted post-liberation, despite a pervasive cultural enshrinement of women fighters. This research is extremely helpful in determining Eritreans' changing interpretations of heteronormative gender roles as dictated by nationalist sentiment and needs. Most of the existing research was published in the late 1990s and early 2000s; it fails to map the evolution and/or the stagnation of gender expectations and expressions as performed by current generations in Eritrea. Additional research discusses Eritrean identity as a construct, but fails to identify the differing perspectives and struggles of different generations and groups. By posing critical questions concerning gender, culture, ethnicity, and religion, this paper seeks to address current research gaps.

Brief Historical Context

A detailed discussion of Eritrean identity as related to Eritrea's history with Ethiopia, Italy, and England is excluded from this paper for the purpose of relevance. Essential historical developments, which were mentioned in the Introduction, include Italy's creation of Eritrea as a colony in 1890, the occupation of Eritrea by British forces in 1941, the United Nation's decision to make Eritrea a federal component of Ethiopia in 1952, the creation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in 1958 and the beginning of Eritrea's struggle for independence, Ethiopia's annexation of Eritrea in 1962, the fracturing of the ELF to create the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1970, and Eritrea's successful vote for independence in 1993.⁴⁷ The important

⁴⁷ "Eritrea profile-Timeline."

takeaway from this ostensible laundry list of dates is that Eritrea's history of foreign rule impacted the national psyche and created a national Eritrean consciousness that continues to define Eritrea's political and social institutions.⁴⁸

Despite Ethiopian attempts to frame the Eritrean struggle as anathema to the West by labelling it as communist, then the product of Islamic fundamentalism, and finally the result of a Christian conspiracy to destabilize the Horn of Africa, Eritrea's history of colonization eventually helped legitimize its thirty-year struggle with Ethiopia for independence.⁴⁹ With the advent of the EPLF in the 1970s, Christians and Muslims banded together to reject the previous generation's "politics of religion and ethnicity" in favor of tolerance and freedom.⁵⁰ The EPLF promoted Marxist-Leninist ideals, a planned economy, civil rights for women, and the development of Eritrea via education, health, and national identity. The promotion of nationalism and a distinct Eritrean identity mobilized distinct social groups, who were previously divided by partisan politics.

Women contributed to the liberation movement from its inception, with the ELF relegating women to supportive tasks. In 1973, after the EPLF had become the face of the liberation movement, three women sought to join the rebels as fighters. They were welcomed, and women began to be actively recruited into the ranks of the EPLF. Initial women recruits were often educated, originating from urban centers; they mobilized rural and urban recruits of diverse ethnicities and ages.⁵¹

The EPLF stipulated equal pay and access to all occupations for women; the "patriarchal family system was to be discarded," prostitution was made illegal,⁵² and despite the Eritrean tradition of arranged marriages, both men and women freedom fighters were allowed to choose their spouses. The EPLF also forbade early marriage and female genital cutting among its ranks.⁵³ Almost one-ninth of the delegates to the EPLF congress in 1977 were women, and

⁴⁸ Erich Frankland and Tammy Noble, "A case of national liberation with feminist undertones: The secession of Eritrea," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 7:3 (1996), 401-424, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/09592319608423154>, 412.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 413.

⁵¹ Victoria Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and Development in Eritrea," *Northeast African Studies* 8 (3): 129-54, 2001, <http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~vbernal/bio/Bernal-Warriors.pdf>, p. 133.

⁵² Frankland and Noble, 414.

⁵³ Daniel Mekonnen and Mirjam van Reisen, "The Role of Women in Post-Conflict Transformation in the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of Eritrea," in *The Role of Women in Promoting Peace and Development*, ed. Niklas Svensson,

women constituted approximately 30% of the EPLF, including 15% of fighters.⁵⁴ By 1984, the EPLF had gained control over 85% of Eritrea, and its use of rural liberation centers attracted young urban individuals, including women, to the cause. The creation of a national identity was paramount to the EPLF's strategy of recruitment, and to garner support and create an Eritrean ethos, People's Assemblies were created, for which women and peasants could serve as local representatives. Additionally, the EPLF fractured with the traditional agricultural system by enabling women to own land.⁵⁵ One EPLF slogan, "overthrow Ethiopian rule and transform traditional Eritrean society," reflected their linking of women's emancipation and political participation to Eritrean independence.⁵⁶

Soviet aid to the EPLF was reduced in 1985, and in 1986-1987, the organization abandoned its communist agenda, demanding the democratization of Ethiopia and Eritrean independence.⁵⁷ At this point in time, the nationalist agenda was widely accepted by Eritreans, who fully embraced EPLF promises of progress and societal transformation. With the overwhelming vote for independence in 1993, the EPLF transitioned to become Eritrea's ruling political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ).

Nationalism and "Equality Through Equal Participation"

Political scientists Erich Frankland and Tammy Noble state that "the existence of a nation entails the conscious recognition by a group of people of a sense of belonging to a community on the basis of a perceived shared culture, language, history, race, religion, or political experience" and that "nationalism can encourage change as well as individual or group advancement [and] curtail 'progress' and impede socio-economic development."⁵⁸ Similarly, feminism can "promote women's advancement and hence societal advancement, but can also hinder such 'progress' and impede women's advances" if the status quo is reinforced by the political climate.⁵⁹ When nationalist movements seek to overturn established power structures and modify existing institutions, they frequently incorporate women's issues into their agendas to develop a

Proceedings of the 10th Annual Conference on the Horn of Africa, Sweden, Sept. 23-24 2011.

<http://sirclund.se/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Conf2011.pdf#page=55>, 58.

⁵⁴ Frankland and Noble, 414.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 415.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 415.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 416.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 402.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 405.

larger base of support; however, insistence on traditional identities often undermines women's agency as previous patterns of power and dominance are reinforced, albeit under new leadership.⁶⁰ Women's issues are subsumed by nationalist priorities, and women typically engage in nationalist movements while in "subordinate or supportive," rather than leadership, roles.⁶¹ Ultimately, patriarchal structures and institutions are left in place.

Frankland and Noble suggest that Eritrea differs from the typical model of nationalist movements within developing countries due to the extent of participation by women fighters, who were not excluded from combat.⁶² Women within the EPLF served in the same capacity as men, save for the top leadership positions. Traditional women's roles continued to be challenged through touring cultural shows; infused with EPLF ideology, these performances featured women engaged in traditional activities of production and subsistence who were also elevated as symbols of liberation through their involvement with the military, health care, and EPLF administration.⁶³ Victoria Bernal, a cultural anthropologist and professor at UC Irvine, writes that "the image of a khaki-clad woman warrior brandishing a rifle became emblematic of the nationalist movement. The woman fighter seemed to signify Eritreans' determination to fight on to the last man, and beyond him, to the last woman."⁶⁴ Women's participation was also indicative of the grassroots nature of the EPLF, and the "woman fighter with her characteristic unisex dress and unkempt hairstyle, moreover, personified an image of progress, a rupture with the past, and liberation from oppressive traditions."⁶⁵ This revolutionary break with tradition instilled EPLF members with a new sense of identity and worth. They were, above all, Eritrean and equal.

Everyone serving in the EPLF was called *tegadelti*, or fighter, a name which was not restricted to those directly involved in combat.⁶⁶ EPLF fighters lived communally in mixed units, and men and women performed the same tasks. Interestingly, Bernal's interviews reveal that "the majority of women fighters were, in fact, assigned to combat duty because they lacked

⁶⁰ Ibid., 406.

⁶¹ Ibid., 406.

⁶² Ibid., 408.

⁶³ Ibid., 416.

⁶⁴ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives," 133.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 133.

specialized skills that could contribute significantly to support activities.”⁶⁷ The EPLF stressed women’s equality through participation in socially productive labor and political activities, as evidenced by their slogan, “Equality through Equal Participation.” Women were trained as drivers, doctors, mechanics, and carpenters, while men participated in tasks such as food preparation that had been traditionally deemed women’s work.⁶⁸ While most domestic tasks were collectively shared among men and women fighters, certain tasks, such as making the food staple, injera, and carrying water, were also assigned as punishments. Bernal notes that this emphasized the “devalued status of traditional women’s work” as well as “the triumph of the public over the domestic and the masculine over the feminine.”⁶⁹

EPLF policy on sexual relations reaffirms its heteronormative interpretation of gender. Originally, the EPLF enforced celibacy among its members; sex with civilians was prohibited, and, once women joined, sex between fighters was forbidden. Proving unrealistic, the policy was altered in 1977 with the introduction of a marriage law “based on a view of marriage as the partnership of a man and a woman who are each free individuals exercising choice.”⁷⁰ Fighters were given easy access to contraceptives and encouraged to engage in premarital sex; for a society that condemned nonvirgin brides, this policy was revolutionary. Although the EPLF “recognized the marital relationships and families formed in the field, it accorded them little social status in practice;” one’s commitment to the EPLF eclipsed all other relationships.⁷¹ Spouses within the EPLF were typically given separate work details. While Bernal adds that women were allotted a period of six months to spend with their infants after childbirth, she does not elaborate on how pregnant fighters spent their time. After this period, children were raised communally; initially, the children were “all raised in one institution along with orphans;” however, this impeded their development, and children were later raised collectively by their parents’ units, provided that they were not at the front.⁷² To whom the primary responsibility of care fell within these units is not addressed.

Although gender equality as advanced by the EPLF was ostensibly beneficial and empowering for women, EPLF notions of gender equality were the product of Marxist ideals,

⁶⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁷¹ Ibid., 135.

⁷² Ibid., 136.

and they were created and enforced by the male leadership. Women's changing roles were one piece of the EPLF's cultural revolution, which countered traditional practices and the vestiges of colonial rule, all of which it labeled as "backward," "reactionary," and "feudal."⁷³ Furthermore, women's participation was practical: it strengthened the EPLF's fighting force. The EPLF slogan, "No Liberation Without Women's Participation," clearly shows the prioritization of national liberation over any type of women's liberation. In 1979, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was created. NUEW "simply implemented programs that came from the top;" it did not distinguish itself from the EPLF as having priorities separate from nationalism. Since seniority determined advancement into positions of authority, women, who had joined the ranks if not the cause of the EPLF later than their male counterparts, were at a disadvantage.⁷⁴

Equality was fostered through "the erasure of the feminine."⁷⁵ One ex-fighter interviewed by Bernal claimed, "I never knew myself as a woman. I thought of myself as a man. I faced the same problems as men."⁷⁶ Bernal troubles the question of what this approach meant for women fighters; when women fighters are seen as male equivalents, she asks "what issues of gender relations were not so much transformed by EPLF's cultural revolution as repressed and rendered invisible?"⁷⁷

There is no detailed discussion of or disaggregated data on the ethnicity, language, class, religion, educational background, marital status, or family composition of EPLF members, which leads to several questions. Who exactly could commit their lives to the cause? Certainly people who were caretakers of children, the elderly, or the disabled as well as people who were the primary providers of livelihoods for their families would have different motivations and responsibilities than unattached youths. What incentives for recruitment existed, and how did they differ based on gender, ethnicity, class, and religion? Were men socially pressured into joining and accepting their roles as protectors and fighters? Were women driven to participate in order to escape restrictive gender norms? Likewise, no research discusses how and why specific men and women were chosen to perform certain tasks within the EPLF. What informal hierarchies existed within the group? What discrimination or abuse occurred and to whom, and

⁷³ Ibid., 134.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 135.

how was it dealt with? Was there any space within which people of non-binary genders could exist? Who did not join the cause? What were their motivations and how did they interact with EPLF members? Who and what was made invisible in the promotion of nationalism? What coping mechanisms and protection strategies were used by the most vulnerable? Without additional research it is impossible to fully understand the experiences of EPLF members and other members of Eritrean society.

Post-Liberation

Despite the EPLF's attempts to restructure societal roles and hierarchies, women were "underpaid and overworked, discouraged from divorce (the alternative being prostitution), and excluded from land ownership and education."⁷⁸ Opposition to the EPLF stemmed from their progressive policies towards women and land, not the organization's nationalism or military commitment to secession.⁷⁹ Gender equality is not achieved in a matter of years. In a society with proverbs that include, "Where is the gain if one marries a woman to give birth to a woman," and "Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with brains,"⁸⁰ the advancement of women's rights is bound to meet resistance. Because women were reimagined as men and the family was replaced by the unit and the organization, the EPLF had no need to reorganize itself to incorporate women.⁸¹ It is therefore understandable that, post-liberation, the spheres in which women could act shrank.

Once Eritrea gained its independence, women were concerned that they would be relegated to traditional gender roles, despite their service as fighters, local military-political leaders, saboteurs, defensive organizers, physicians, civil administrators, farmers, etc. during the fight for liberation. The EPLF attempted to assuage these fears, tasking NUEW with helping women reintegrate into civilian life. At the end of the conflict, 35% of EPLF fighters were women and 20% of the EPLF overall were women. Female veterans were promised educational opportunities and housing and employment aid.⁸² Post-independence, 51,000 ex-fighters, including 12,000 women, were demobilized out of 100,000 total ex-fighters. Provided with the equivalent of just under \$2,000 USD, ex-fighters were expected to reintegrate fully into society.

⁷⁸ Frankland and Noble, 415.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 415.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 415.

⁸¹ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives," 136.

⁸² Frankland and Noble, 418.

Many of the women ex-fighters had left their homes and families as teenagers to join the liberation movement.⁸³ Their return after so many years was like a shock felt throughout society; women who had learned to reject traditional notions of womanhood were now painted as whores and deviants and expected to reinvent themselves as dutiful mothers,⁸⁴ despite exaltation of myth building around women ex-fighters within the national discourse.

Dissociation from their fighter status meant that women ex-fighters were perceived, once more, as women. Their reintegration into a society that held stagnant gender expectations created unique problems. The EPLF was “far more than a military organization; it was an incipient state.”⁸⁵ EPLF fighters were volunteers; the EPLF provided them with subsistence, free education, and healthcare, but they received no monetary compensation for their service.⁸⁶ The organization maintained schools, hospitals, small factories, and repair shops, produced its own soap, artificial limbs, medical supplies, pharmaceuticals, rubber sandals, and sanitary napkins.⁸⁷ Services were extended to liberated populations. Ex-fighters who were used to having services provided for them were now responsible to provide for themselves and their families without any knowledge of how to do so.

Much has been written on women’s participation in liberation struggles and the subsequent dissolution of promises of equality; however a feminist analysis, according to Bernal, demands an investigation of the “mechanisms of power involved and the relationships among constructions of gender, citizenship, and societal transformations.”⁸⁸ Bernal argues that the EPLF “created a kind of gender equality by eliminating the domestic sphere and feminine identity.”⁸⁹ After liberation, the shift from nationalism to capitalist development transformed “the construction of gendered citizens.”⁹⁰ The EPLF/PFDJ leadership transitioned from rebel group to Eritrea’s official government and in so doing, traded some of its ideologies for traditional values. The concept of the family was reaffirmed as “the natural and fundamental unit of society” by the Eritrean constitution; despite the constitution’s declaration that husbands and wives “shall have

⁸³ Mekonnen and van Reisen, 63.

⁸⁴ Laura Sjoberg, *Mothers, Monsters, and Whores: Women’s Violence in Global Politics*, Zed Books, 2007.

⁸⁵ Victoria Bernal, “From Warriors to Wives,” 129.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 143.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 131.

equal rights and duties as to all family affairs,” this is not true in practice. As focus shifted from social transformation to economic development, women were essentially forgotten.⁹¹

Many women ex-fighters (the research unfortunately fails to specify the exact number), even those who originally came from rural areas, sought to settle in urban areas. One of Bernal’s informants explains the rationale as follows, “we have our own culture within the EPLF. After that it would not be possible to go back and be obedient in the village.”⁹² Approximately 30,000 women had to be reintegrated into society.

Some women became a part of Eritrea’s conventional army, and fought in the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia. Their status as women fighters, however, did not equate to the status of EPLF women fighters, because the EPLF constituted a proto-nation and a revolutionary society in its own right.⁹³

Women’s main roles were now as wives and mothers; the days of collective childrearing were behind them, and women had to balance their roles as caregivers with the need and/or desire to work. The EPLF was devoid of elders, so there was no insistence on reinforcement of tradition and kin group hierarchies. Reintegration into society meant that men were expected to assume authority within their families and eschew domestic work, while women were expected to become subservient to their elders and male relatives.⁹⁴ Class differences also regained prominence; some women were able to partially escape from domestic work by using extended family or domestic servants, but other women have been forsaken by their families and live in poverty.⁹⁵ The lives of civilian women were disrupted with the return of fighters. Many of these women had assumed traditionally male roles in the absence of their husbands and male relatives; their time managing households, property, and businesses ended once the men returned and reassumed control.⁹⁶

As ex-fighters became civilians, they sought to reconnect with their families as well as create their own families. Women discovered that the qualities which made them valuable soldiers, “stigmatized them as wives and as potential wives.”⁹⁷ From 1995-1996, the prevailing

⁹¹ Ibid., 140.

⁹² Ibid., 131.

⁹³ Ibid., 133.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 139.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 140.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 137.

discourse on women ex-fighters centered around their marriages and divorces; fighter husbands divorced large numbers of women fighters only to remarry civilians.⁹⁸ Reportedly over half of the demobilized freedom fighters are divorced.⁹⁹ Bernal's research attributes this trend partially to the influence of pressures exerted by fighters' families. Marriages across ethnicities and class, with nonvirgins, with women who had spent their childbearing years as fighters and were now unable to conceive due to age or health concerns, and with women considered to be other (neither women nor men) were derided by families.¹⁰⁰ With a return to peace, marriage was once again exalted by society and constrained by tradition; the function of the EPLF providing shelter, material goods, food, and protection was replaced by the importance of marriage for a woman's social and economic wellbeing.¹⁰¹ Eritrean society emphasizes children, and a woman's value within society is often gauged by her status as a mother.¹⁰² Eritrean society blames women for infertility problems.¹⁰³ There is no available research on infertility as it relates to ex-fighters, but it would be interesting to assess the impact of infertility on marriages and families. Mental health assessments of ex-fighters would also provide insight into their experiences of transitioning back into society. Did/do ex-fighters exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder? How would this affect their lives and personal relationships? How are the experiences of ex-fighters conveyed to their children and young relatives? How have their narratives shaped the beliefs and identities of younger generations?

Program of National Service

One of the most informative and recent analyses of the evolution of Eritrean identity during and after the liberation struggle can be found in the work of scholars Daniel Mekonnen and Mirjam van Reisen. They propose that Eritrea's liberation struggle created gender roles predicated upon "a military liberation structure, with an administrative structure of governance that has not fundamentally changed since the end of military liberation struggle."¹⁰⁴ Eritrea is governed under martial rule by a one-party system, and all citizens are expected to comply with compulsory military service. Mekonnen and van Reisen note that military institutions often

⁹⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁹⁹ Mekonnen and van Reisen, 63.

¹⁰⁰ Bernal, "From Warriors to Wives," 137.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 138.

¹⁰² Ibid., 141.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 141.

¹⁰⁴ Mekonnen and van Reisen, 56.

enforce certain masculinities and femininities, and while they can also “allow for new directives of gender-roles,” these can create social tensions post-conflict if they are “not matched by supporting conceptions of masculinity and femininity.”¹⁰⁵

After Eritrea’s 1998 border conflict with Ethiopia, the country has remained in a perpetual state of no peace, no war; the government has used this environment to justify its National Military Service Program, which perpetuates the indefinite forced conscription of both men and women. Mekonnen and van Reisen argue that women “bear the brunt of the crisis disproportionately” because they are “particularly subject to (sexual) violence and vulnerability, and take care of children, sick, disabled and elderly people.”¹⁰⁶ They assert that “the restrictive prescription of gender-roles victimizes the society at large and the negative consequences are lived by victims as well as those resorting to violence and aggression.”¹⁰⁷ Cautioning against implying attribution, they state, “Women can play traditional auxiliary roles in provoking violence and expressing gender identities related to a situation of violence, cheering on their men.”¹⁰⁸ While their use of the word “provoke” is problematic in that it implies guilt, their reasoning reflects that of RW Connell and James Messerschmidt.

Hegemonic masculinity perpetuates men’s dominance over women in ways that can be toxic, such as physical and mental abuse, and in ways that potentially “serve the interests and desires of women,” such as providing their families with a wage and acting as fathers.¹⁰⁹ Masculinity can thus be understood as “a way that men position themselves through discursive practices;” it is possible to perform hegemonic masculinity as it suits specific circumstances and reject it within others.¹¹⁰ It is also essential to realize that structures of masculine domination must be cultivated and maintained;¹¹¹ women as well as men are complicit in this.

Mekonnen and van Reisen describe Eritrea’s political culture as “hegemonic-monolithic;” it reveres the nation and its leadership above all, resulting in its negligence towards individual freedoms.¹¹² National advancement subsumed issues of gender equality, and, post-

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁹ RW Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005), p. 841.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 841.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 844.

¹¹² Mekonnen and van Reisen, 59.

conflict, the “overall struggle for personal liberation in individual lives” subsumed women’s issues.¹¹³ Since 1991, the language of the Eritrean government via official documents and pronouncements has favored the advancement of gender equality. The 1997 Constitution, for example, affirmed its commitment to equality; this Constitution has never been implemented, and provisions for women are unenforceable in Eritrean courts.¹¹⁴ Despite the existence of a quota system to guarantee women’s participation in parliament and regional assemblies, power is consolidated in the presidency. Five military operational commands, led by male army generals accountable directly to President Afwerki, divide the country.¹¹⁵ Afwerki’s control of the country has overthrown principles of the rule of law and legitimate political institutions.¹¹⁶

Connell and Messerschmidt argue that “masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men;” nevertheless, these models “express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires...[and] contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole.”¹¹⁷ The performance of Eritrean manhood is rewarded so long as it is submissive to the state and culturally acceptable: masculine identities that challenge Eritrean power hierarchies are punished by the state, just as masculine identities that are considered too feminine or identities that do not conform to the gender binary are punished within society (and potentially subject to homophobic laws).

Concerning national service, which will be discussed at length in the next section, Eritrean law compels every adult to complete eighteen months of national service including six months of training at Sawa Military Training Camp. Although women who were newly married or mothers were originally exempted from service, the law was altered in 1995 to withdraw their exemption. The same year, the age limit of forty years of age was extended to fifty years of age; some reports document that in practice authorities have been known to allow women to stop their service around the age of thirty.¹¹⁸ Although Mekonnen and van Reisen do not ascribe a reasoning to this practice, it is an important question that should be further researched. One might assume that this occasional leniency towards women is due to the reliance of the state on their reproductive capacities. A potential theory explaining this phenomenon is that the Eritrean

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁷ Connell and Messerschmidt, 838.

¹¹⁸ Mekonnen and van Reisen, 64.

state wants to bolster its population due to the high rate of out migration. Until further research is conducted, this theory will remain unsubstantiated. Information should be gathered to ascertain whether childbirth is incentivized and if/how it is expected and celebrated within society.

Not all women serve shortened periods of service, however. Hundreds of thousands of men and women have been forced to serve for over a decade without receiving a formal salary. Mekonnen and van Riesen detail accounts of torture and cruelty that occur within national service. Army commanders have total authority over conscripts, and informants claim that amputation and “other forms of permanent bodily injury” are common forms of punishment. Reports of sexual abuse, rape, and torture highlight the vulnerability of women conscripts; the Eritrean government has admitted that these incidences are underreported as it is not culturally accepted for women to publicly report sexual violence.¹¹⁹ This leaves the question of the frequency of sexual abuse of men unanswered, as it is rendered invisible by homophobia.

Groups Most at Risk

Despite the government’s insistence on national identity, Eritreans maintain strong ties to their religious and ethnic identities. A country of three official languages, Tigrinya, Arabic, and English, Eritrea is home to nine recognized ethnic groups.¹²⁰ Several of these groups are linked ethnically and culturally to populations in both Ethiopia and Sudan. Eritrea’s geography is often cited as a natural divider of populations; Tigrinya-speaking Coptic Christians have traditionally lived in the highlands, and Muslim nomadic pastoralists of various ethnic groups, as well as Kunama and Bilen agriculturalists (who are usually non-Coptic Christians) live in the lowlands.¹²¹ Tigrinya culture and politics dominate the state, and Kunama and Afar populations have reported that they are marginalized and discriminated against within society. The Kunama have been repeatedly accused of supporting Ethiopia, and the Eritrean government is accused of land expropriation. Eritrean society widely perceives them as “uncivilized and inferior.” Details concerning the persecution of the Afar are anecdotal; however, it is believed that they face “specific ethnic and cultural persecution.”¹²² Land reform policies, which “[reinforce] traditional patterns of discrimination and marginalization,” and national service requirements, which

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹²⁰ “Rapid fragility and migration assessment for Eritrea,” *GSDRC, University of Birmingham*, Feb. 2016, p. 9.

¹²¹ Ibid, 9-10.

¹²² Ibid., 10.

prioritize the state over religious, familial, and community bonds,¹²³ both privilege the elite and challenge traditional livelihoods.

Religious freedom within Eritrea is limited to Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and Lutherans of the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. People of other faiths, especially Jehovah's witnesses and members of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, face discrimination and harassment and, at the state level, torture and imprisonment.¹²⁴

In Eritrea, "unnatural carnal offences," meaning same-sex sexual activity is illegal under article 600 of Section II of Eritrea's 1960 penal code and punishable by imprisonment of up to three years.¹²⁵ In practice, however, those accused of being gay or lesbian (the concept of non-binary gender is widely ignored) have faced much longer sentences, abuse, and death. Unconfirmed reports describe the targeting of gender non-conforming individuals through periodic roundups.¹²⁶

The vulnerability of these groups is briefly described in several reports under headings concerning rights violations. The reality of their lives within Eritrea is largely unknown; how these groups of people create safe spaces, foster networks of support, and mitigate opportunities to be targeted is unknown. Who are their allies within Eritrean society? Do the majority of Eritreans subscribe to their subjugation or do they passively allow it to protect their own interests? What percentage of these groups have left Eritrea or received support from the diaspora? Do their identities strengthen their claims to asylum once they leave?

Conclusion

This section detailed gender identities entirely constructed and enforced by patriarchal and heteronormative societal expectations; while all identities are constructed and performed and influenced by society, not all societies police gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion in the same way. It is important to acknowledge that Eritrean society is not monolithic: there exist multiple ethnicities, languages, and religions. This paper has focused primarily on gender equality as it pertains to women, specifically women ex-fighters and younger generations of Eritrean women and girls. The experiences of women are contextualized by the experiences and

¹²³ Ibid., 10.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹²⁵ Richard Ammon, "Gay Life in Eritrea," Global Gayz, Feb. 2012, <http://www.globalgayz.com/gay-life-in-eritrea/>

¹²⁶ Ibid.

privilege of Eritrean men. This privilege becomes a burden, however, when it dictates acceptable male behavior in a way that suppresses individual identity.

Identity creation was used as a tool by the state and society to reinforce hierarchies of power under the guise of progress. Loyalty to an Eritrean nationalist *Zeitgeist* facilitated the current environment of oppression and consolidation of power by Afwerki. After years of placing the needs of the state above individual and group needs, Eritreans perpetuated a system of domination in which restrictions and abuses are justified by foreign threats and the promise of equality, however disingenuous.

While this analysis focused on identity largely as a creation imposed on people of various groups, research needs to be conducted to explain how Eritreans create self-identity. Little information is available on how Eritreans self-identify within Eritrea since the government exerts control over all media and there is no free speech. Individuals risk imprisonment, disappearance, and death by publicly criticizing the government, and marginalized individuals in particular may have to adjust their public image and suppress their identity to avoid harassment or punishment.

The importance of identity is eloquently explained by Kimberle Crenshaw, who argues that identity politics serve as “a source of strength, community, and intellectual development” for groups at the margins.¹²⁷ Although identity categories, such as gender and ethnicity, “are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination” and can be used to exclude and marginalize, they can also become a “source of social empowerment and reconstruction.”¹²⁸ Crenshaw’s major critique of identity politics is the erasure or conflation of intragroup differences. She therefore promotes the contextualization of identity politics within intersectional analysis.¹²⁹

Categories matter; they create meaning and have consequences. Certainly, they reflect privilege and power, and, if claimed, they reflect agency, even of marginalized groups.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul. 1991): 1241-1299, p. 1242.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1242.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1242-1243.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1297.

Eritrean Livelihoods, Coping Mechanisms, and Subversion

The previous section discussed the gendered implications of national liberation in the immediate aftermath of independence; this section will describe how nationalism has negatively impacted livelihoods and local economies over time, and it will analyze coping mechanisms and individual testimonies that highlight fractured social and familial relationships. The oppressive regime in Eritrea has led to a mass migration of Eritreans into Ethiopia and Sudan, with the hope of reaching Europe, the Middle East, and North America, all in search of a better life and financial stability. The majority of those who leave are draft dodgers, determined to escape Eritrea's notorious national service. They seek a future for themselves and their families, whom they cannot support if they remain in Eritrea. Leaving the country is extremely risky, but if successful, often equates to survival for the escapee and their families. After an explanation of the evolution of indefinite national service, this section looks at the individual struggles faced by men and women alike, their coping strategies, and the effects the national service and oppressive political atmosphere could have on the future of Eritrean society and government. Women are identified as essential to Eritrea's successful future, if only empowered. Due to a lack of extensive research on the topic, the sources used in this section are all secondary, including the research and analysis of Eritrean scholars and the personal narratives of Eritrean refugees.

Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign

In the summer of 2001, a spontaneous armed revolt at Sawa military training camp was brutally put down by the government. This incident is believed to have influenced the creation of a program to purportedly educate recruits and instill them with national pride.¹³¹ In 2002, two years after Eritrea's war with Ethiopia ended, the Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign (WYDC) was instituted in Eritrea. *Warsai*, means 'inheriter' or 'follower' and *yikealo*, a term used to denote the generation of fighters, means a wise elder; the name is apropos given that the campaign was promoted as a passing on of the older generation's values of duty and honor. Under this program, Eritrean youth are required to serve in the national service for eighteen

¹³¹ Magnus Treiber, "Dreaming of a Good Life—Young Urban Refugees from Eritrea between Refusal of Politics and Political Asylum," In *Cultures of Migration: African Perspectives*, edited by Hans Peter Hahn and Georg Klute, 239-260, Global Book Marketing: London, 2007, p. 241.

months; however, in practice the service is indefinite.¹³² This program, which initially held widespread support, stems from the 1991 Proclamation for obligatory national service, in which everyone, men and women alike, aged eighteen to forty, was expected to undergo six months of military training and another twelve of development and reconstruction projects. In 1998, before the beginning of the war, those who completed their service were remobilized, and since that time, excluding some selective releases from service, especially of women, there has been no comprehensive demobilization effort.¹³³

The objectives of national service, as stated in Chapter II, Article 5 of Proclamation No. 82/1995 include entrusting and preserving “the courage [and] resoluteness of the heroic episodes shown by our people in the past thirty years to younger generations, whose lives should be “characterised by love of work [and] discipline.” These future generations need to be “ready to participate and serve in the reconstruction of the nation,” as the national service aims to “foster national unity among our people by eliminating sub-national feelings.”¹³⁴ Afwerki has claimed that the national service promotes economic development and unifies Eritreans; it is meant to create *hadish hibreteseb mimsrat*, or a new society. The indefinite nature of WYDC is justified by the government with claims that another war with Ethiopia is inevitable.¹³⁵

The national service has interfered with pastoral production and subsistence farming, for which men traditionally clear and plow the fields. Since men are unavailable to do this work, women and the elderly are forced to do it, but food insecurity has led to an influx of people into cities.¹³⁶ The command economy, with severe restrictions on the private sector and foreign investment, is struggling.¹³⁷ In 2011-2012 (the latest available data), Eritrea’s GDP had a growth rate of 9%. Resulting from the mining sector, specifically gold, this was a marked increase from 2010, when it was 2.2%; however, Eritrea remains one of the least developed countries in the world, and has a 0.351 on the Human Development Index, which is extremely low, especially

¹³² Nicole Hirt and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammed, “‘Dreams Don’t Come True in Eritrea:’ Anomie and Family Disintegration due to the Structural Militarization of Society,” German Institute of Global and Area Studies, January 2010, https://giga.hamburg/en/system/files/publications/wp119_hirt.pdf, p.5-6.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³⁴ Gaim Kibreab, “The national service/Warsai-Yikealo Development Campaign and forced migration in post-independence Eritrea,” *Journal of East African Studies* Vol. 7, Issue 4 (2013): 630-649, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17531055.2013.843965>, p. 634.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 635-636.

¹³⁶ Hirt and Mohammed, 29.

¹³⁷ Hirt and Mohammed, 29.

considering that in the 1990s Eritrea had better indicators than its neighbors.¹³⁸ With chronic fiscal debts, Eritrea had an average deficit of 12.6% of the GDP in 2010-2012 with a high public debt burden.¹³⁹ Additionally, military spending eclipses spending on infrastructure and social services,¹⁴⁰ despite two thirds of the population living below the poverty line (according to the last household survey and Participatory Poverty Assessment in 2003).¹⁴¹ 65% of the population live in rural areas, and 80% of the population derive their livelihoods from subsistence agriculture. Over two thirds of the population are engaged in rain-fed agriculture, which is complicated by recurrent drought.¹⁴² Even when rainfall is substantial, it is estimated that only 60-70% of the population's needs are met by domestic food production. Although the general health status in Eritrea is comparable to other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and is making strides, rural populations face worse health outcomes. Women and children especially suffer from malnutrition.¹⁴³

Out of a population of 6,527,689 (as of July 2015), 40.25% are age fourteen and younger, 20.43% are 15-24 years old, 31.86% are 25-54 years old, 3.73% are 55 to 64 years old, and the remaining 3.75% are age 65 and older.¹⁴⁴ This means that approximately 60% of the population is under 25 years of age; 60% of the population has known no other way of life except that under Afwerki's rule.

Individual Testimonies

The following testimonies seek to illuminate the abstract, impersonal statement that the national service is destroying livelihoods. Although anecdotal, they emphasize how individual people are reacting to and coping with their lack of opportunity. These stories were published in a 2010 study; while it is likely that not much has changed in the past seven years, new information must be collected in order to understand what, if anything, has changed. It would also be beneficial to have updated information on the people whose stories are being presented.

¹³⁸ "Overview: Eritrea," The World Bank, 22 September 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/eritrea/overview#1>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ "Letters from Eritrea: Refugee Women Tell Their Story." *The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa*. 2013, p. 10.

¹⁴¹ "Overview: Eritrea."

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ "The World Fact Book: Eritrea."

The stories are recollected here as they were presented, but it is essential to recognize that these narratives leave many questions unanswered.

One man deserted his position in the army in order to work for a private company so that he could support his wife and two young children. When he was found and imprisoned, his wife was forced to move to another town to find work to support her children. Her husband's family, disapproving of her move, tainted her reputation. Her husband was released after a year and sent back to his military unit, but he tried to flee to Sudan; he was shot and killed by two border commandos. The wife is now alienated from her husband's family and does not make enough money as a housemaid to support her children, who will be forced to work from an early age instead of attending school.¹⁴⁵

Another man interviewed, Ali, planned to cross into Sudan because he had a sick father. His family could not afford medical care, and as the eldest son, Ali felt responsible for taking care of his family but was unable to do so. His younger brother dropped out of school and started to work so that he could take care of the family, but he was arrested soon thereafter because he was eighteen and had not signed up for national service. Ali, ashamed that he could not fulfill his cultural role as the eldest son and believing himself to be a "burden" on his family, attempted to flee to Sudan to find work. He was caught and imprisoned for a year before having to return to his unit, where he was treated poorly and regarded as a traitor by his superiors. He finally managed to escape in 2008.¹⁴⁶

Exemptions from service are given to people who are considered physically or mentally unfit; this has led to people bribing military doctors, pretending to be mentally unbalanced, and being declared HIV-positive in order to receive an exemption.¹⁴⁷ Those caught trying to escape Eritrea can be shot and/or imprisoned; jail sentences usually last a year, after which the detainee is expected to rejoin the military.¹⁴⁸ Treatment of prisoners is dehumanizing; people are often tortured, deprived of food and water, and confined in extreme conditions of discomfort. Families of escapees are frequently held accountable and expected to pay 50,000 nakfa, around 2,980 USD, to the government. If they do not pay, they can be imprisoned; however, this practice is

¹⁴⁵ Hirt and Mohammed, 18.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

rarely used today because of the large number of escapees—there is simply not enough space in prison facilities to detain such a massive number of people.¹⁴⁹

The conformity of society is even reflected in the government. Several lower level administrators are considered to be *medeskal*, or frozen. They are salaried and present at work, but no meaningful tasks are given to them. They, just like the people who have accepted their lives in the national service, feel devoid of alternatives and opportunity. Several choose not to have families, and those with families often neglect them.¹⁵⁰ The psychological effects of the militarization of the state are threatening society and family. Secondary and even elementary students decide to leave school or intentionally perform poorly, because they do not want to one day join the national service;¹⁵¹ the following section will discuss Eritrea's educational system at length.

One 'coping mechanism' that has been identified is alcoholism. An example of the effects this mechanism can have on families is provided by Salma's story. Prior to joining the army in 1998, Salma's future husband had earned a living farming. He married Salma in 2002, but even when she became pregnant, he did not offer financial support. Not able to fulfill his wife's or society's expectations as a man, he began to drink heavily, despite being Muslim, and to abuse his wife. Salma and her daughter lived with relatives for a time, but her husband later had her return to living with him. She had no money for food or clothing, and so she requested a divorce under Shari'a law. Both her husband and the community initially refused; the community told her husband to cease the beatings and the drinking and made excuses for his behavior. Eventually, Salma was granted the divorce. She found work as a housemaid, but had to leave her daughter with extended family in order to work.¹⁵² National service had stripped her husband of what defined him as a 'man' in society. The community understood this, but also saw no way to remedy it. He turned to alcohol and abuse to ease what he perceived as his failing as a man. Salma's story is, unfortunately, not uncommon as men are increasingly unable to fulfill their traditional roles.

Several youths also suffer from psychological trauma. Women and girls in particular suffer the trauma induced from sexual abuse and rape experienced during their time in the

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 22.

national service. The reporting of sexual harassment and abuse is essentially non-existent because it is taboo in Eritrean culture, and everyone knows that such incidents would never be brought to court. While it is known that abuses against women and girls occur, abuses against men and boys are not discussed. Women and girls who have been assaulted and/or raped are stigmatized within their communities and even their families. Their husbands may seek to divorce them, and if they are not married, the likelihood that they will be is extremely low.¹⁵³ Women who have been abused face isolation that affects their ability to have a family or find work. Additionally, lack of a husband or children further alienates women from society, because women are expected to have families. Their value within society lies in their ability to be a mother; without this, they lack social support and acceptance. Although accurate suicide rates are unknown, due to the government's insistence on silence from the families, Nicole Hirt and Abdulkader Saleh Mohammed's report claims that the rates are relatively high. Men seem to prefer hanging or a bullet, while women tend to choose poison or self-immolation.¹⁵⁴ No existing research elaborates on the sexual violence experienced within national service, which limits understandings of Eritrean hierarchies and the bureaucracy. What is the nature of this violence and what are the motivations behind it? Current research seems to treat sexual violence against women conscripts as opportunistic, since it identifies no patterns of abuse, but this assumption may be incorrect. Since reports of sexual violence are widespread, are they indicative of a pattern of abuse that is in some way encouraged or even institutionalized? Is the violence systematic? Are certain ethnic and religious groups targeted? And, again, what about sexual violence against men? Additional questions left unanswered and unasked by current research relate to pregnancies due to sexual assault/rape. When pregnancies do occur as a result of assault, what happens to the babies? Are they aborted, abandoned, raised by their mothers? Do they grow up stigmatized? Do they have a relationship with their fathers? Are the assaulted women expected to marry the men who assaulted them? Are these women provided with any type of support? Are they stigmatized? Questions of sexual assault are often difficult to research, but this does not mean that they can be ignored.

There has also been an upsurge in the number of beggars since the start of WYDP, the majority of whom are elderly women, whose children have either died, fled, are imprisoned, or

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

are too poor to support them, and young mothers. In 2007, most mothers who begged had only one child, but now it is more likely that they have several. This suggests that they are or were married, but their husbands, whether dead, imprisoned, in the national service, or abroad, are unable to provide for them.¹⁵⁵ Children, too, can be seen begging in the streets, which is not traditionally acceptable, but emphasizes the desperation of some families.¹⁵⁶

The vast majority of those who leave Eritrea are deserters or draft dodgers, and they are predominately young, single, educated men.¹⁵⁷ The following percentages concerning why people left the national service are based on Gaim Kibreab's research: "51% said that the period was too long, 19% deserted in order to help their families, 12% were in principle opposed to the notion of [national service], 5% deserted because they quarrelled with their commanders, and the other 5% escaped from prison." Additionally, around 62% of respondents claimed that the national service had a negative effect on its participants, and 90% responded that it negatively affected families.¹⁵⁸ Some of the specific effects mentioned were:

- Farms are left unprotected and get destroyed by elephants (while very region specific, this demonstrates how farms are left susceptible)
- Without males to help, women struggle to care for livestock
- Parents feel abandoned by their children, which can lead to depression
- Parents are unable to make a living without the help of their children, which exacerbates poverty (some are reduced to begging)
- Parents have no one to take care of them when/if they are ill
- With parents and husbands absent, older generations are forced to care for grandchildren, other youths, and even the spouses of those in the national service¹⁵⁹

Most families in Eritrea live extremely close to the subsistence level, and the massive draining of youths into the military places extreme stress upon families who are accustomed to pooling resources from various income generating activities in order to survive. Those interviewed also commonly remarked that if they had not left Eritrea and gained access to financial opportunities, their families would not have been able to survive. Remittances are

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁵⁷ Kibreab, 637.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 643.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 644.

crucial to the survival of many families, and the success of diaspora members further drives people to emigrate as they see no future for themselves in Eritrea.¹⁶⁰

Direct Impacts on Women

While service is indefinite up to the age of 50, Eritrean women interviewed by the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) stated that the average length of their service is 5 years, which could be a result of widespread reports of sexual and gender based violence. Women whose families have connections to the old liberation movement or the ruling party can sometimes utilize these relationships to serve less time in the national service or pursue higher education.¹⁶¹ Many 11th grade girls drop out of school or get married in order not to serve.¹⁶² According to SIHA:

For many women, the military is a place of sexual violence and abuse, with senior officers exploiting the vulnerability of girls, in the knowledge that non-compliance could see them arrested and thrown in prison for dissent. The reluctance of conscripts to enter into such a brutal environment has served to reinforce greater threats against those who have entered and who may desert or not-comply with military service...the widespread abuse of conscripts has furthermore resulted in numerous deaths and instances of suicide as conscripts seek ways of escaping.¹⁶³

In the national service and in prison, women face a high probability of sexual abuse and rape. This probability exists within their marriages and communities as well,¹⁶⁴ as men feel emasculated by their lack of ability to provide for and protect their families. In Eritrea, women who are known victims of rape are considered shameful and deemed impure and unmarriageable. Early marriage and domestic violence are common.¹⁶⁵ SIHA interviewed several women who had escaped from Eritrea, and their stories, a few of which are described below, are extremely telling.

One woman interviewed discovered that her parents had been arrested after she left, and that they would not be released until the government had received 50,000 nakfa.¹⁶⁶ Another woman was married in 2006 to a man in the national service. In 2010 her husband escaped to

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 643.

¹⁶¹ "Letters from Eritrea: Refugee Women Tell Their Story," 10.

¹⁶² Ibid., 10.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

Ethiopia, leaving her behind with their young daughter. She spent a month in prison before paying 50,000 nakfa to be released. Her husband later contacted her through family and encouraged her to leave, too. She escaped through Sudan but was raped and became pregnant from the rape. Her husband abandoned her when he found out, later demanding a divorce, and she lost the baby to illness.¹⁶⁷ Another woman told of how her family married her off when she was in 11th grade; her husband was forced to join the military shortly after the wedding, and in the years that followed, she was unable to support herself and their children on the 500 nakfa he sent monthly. She moved back in with her family because of this, but still struggled and upon hearing of high paying jobs in Saudi Arabia, she left her mother, children, and husband (to whom she simply sent a letter explaining where she had gone) in search of a job there. Although she did find work, her employers began to withhold her salary from her, threatening her. Her husband was later able to flee Eritrea into Sudan, but he drowned in the Mediterranean while on his way to Italy.¹⁶⁸ One woman became pregnant while she was unmarried; her family rejected her, kicking her out of the house, and the father of the baby left her. She began to work in Asmara; but, afraid that she would be called to participate in the national service, she fled to Sudan, where she was kidnapped by Rashaida. Her sister, still in Eritrea, was able to collect enough money from the mosque to pay her ransom, and she was freed.¹⁶⁹ Another woman explained that after she finished school, she hid from authorities until she was able to marry. Until she had marriage papers, she could not move about freely, and hid whenever the authorities came searching for her. She later was in contact with someone about leaving Eritrea, but when this person was caught fleeing, he gave the authorities her name. The police believed that she was helping people escape, and she was imprisoned and over a period of three months sent to progressively worse prisons as she could not give the authorities any information.¹⁷⁰

Although the above paragraph may seem like a mere collection of sorrowful stories, it provides significant insight into the societal problems women currently face. Traditionally the caregivers of society, women are being stripped of their ability to care for their families and themselves. What will happen to the children of mothers who have escaped to other countries but had to leave their children behind in Eritrea? What will the lives of the children of women who

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

were raped or abused be like, whether they remain in Eritrea or are living as refugees elsewhere? How will children brought up in such an oppressive environment treat their family members, society, future spouses and children? This not only has an immediate impact on the women and their families, but it affects future generations. These testimonies also indicate, unsurprisingly, that the migration process varies between men and women. The women of these interviews who migrated alone tend to remain in places such as Sudan while men seem to continue their journeys. Why? Is this phenomenon reflective of a larger migration pattern? Is it the result of protection concerns, and if so, whose—the women themselves or their spouses and/or families? Is it a financial decision, a cultural one, a question of language barriers? How and when is the decision of where to relocate made? Do families and societal expectations exert pressure on men to make it to the EU and beyond? Are single women who seek asylum perceived differently by the diaspora and local communities than Eritrean women who migrate with families?

Coping Mechanisms and Gendered Resistance

Another striking aspect of existing research is the way in which coping mechanisms are discussed. Women are frequently explained as the objects of coping mechanisms, as the ones who are affected by them, while men are the subjects who ‘cope.’ Men drink, abuse their wives, journey on to try to reach Europe, etc. Women’s ‘coping’ mechanisms are frequently portrayed as the result of the actions of the men in their lives. When women beg, it is due to a man’s absence; when women flee, it is often at their husbands’ bidding. These are not truly coping mechanisms, however. So how do women cope? The absence of women’s agency is seen again and again in existing literature on Eritrean populations and migration.

Take, for example, David Bozzini’s fascinating piece, “The Catch-22 of Resistance: Jokes and the Political Imagination of Eritrean Conscripts,” in which Bozzini chronicles jokes used as political resistance. He asserts that “many Eritreans of an age to be conscripted do not conform to the nationalist and official rationale for extraordinary mobilization (the current stalemate of the border demarcation with Ethiopia)” and that “desertion and clandestinity [sic] in Eritrea are not a sustainable option for many of them, especially for male conscripts.”¹⁷¹ He notes that women have been more successful in evading national service and working clandestinely within Eritrea; women who do so, however, are extremely vulnerable. While overt,

¹⁷¹ David Bozzini, “The Catch-22 of Resistance: Jokes and the Political Imagination of Eritrean Conscripts,” *Africa Today*, Volume 60, Issue 2 (2013): 39-64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.60.issue-2>, p. 40.

public resistance to the government is rare, daily subversion is commonplace in the ways in which conscripts in the national service talk about the Eritrean state. According to Bozzini, “Conscripts’ political imagination consists of portraits, opinions, explanations, theories, and jokes concerning the functioning of the bureaucracy, their superiors, and their position relative to a system that they define, despise, criticize, and sometimes justify.”¹⁷²

Jokes affirm agency: they create a safe space within which alternate representations of the state and state actors can be discussed; they also allow the conscripts to distance themselves from the state, despite their vital participation as the workforce of the state.¹⁷³ The existence of jokes as a primary form of resistance, however, also emphasizes the inability of conscripts to challenge the state and “[affirms] their helplessness.”¹⁷⁴ Bozzini remarks that the state is “a network composed of a multitude of heterogeneous elements” and is “always determined by events, measures, and representations that are temporarily the object of an anthropological analysis.”¹⁷⁵ His analysis is based on information garnered from interviews conducted in 2006 with male Tigrinya conscripts, all of whom were high school or college educated, Christian, and between the ages of 21-40. He notes that the majority came from urban areas. Bozzini admits that the perspectives presented in his analysis are thus limited in scope by gender, ethnicity, age, and social status.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, his findings are representative of what is essentially an average male conscript and thus a conscript of a specific social standing. Although they might be oppressed within the overall social hierarchy of Eritrea, they occupy a privileged position within their own social group as Christian, Tigrinya men. Their acts of resistance include deliberate failures in communication, distortions of knowledge, inability to care for equipment, delays in returning from holidays, etc. The punishments reported by these conscripts for such behavior, which are at the discretion of their direct superiors, included minor pay cuts or short prison sentences. One man explained that while facing his superior after a minor act of resistance he smiled “in front of his [superior’s] stupidity” because “to act like a chicken would have only increased his power.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

Bozzini's analysis begs the question of if and how vulnerable minorities and women perform acts of subversion within Eritrea. An act such as delaying a work project could impact these groups differently and provoke abuse from superiors. Women conscripts in particular have been found to be vulnerable to sexual assault by their superiors. The jokes described are expressed among small, private groups and the acts of resistance are individual and not collective, but do women and other vulnerable groups adopt similar discourses? Additionally, would their discourses focus on the state, as do their male counterparts', or would they be of a different nature? Does the state pose the largest threat to these groups or do more intimate social circles and hierarchies threaten them more? Bozzini explains that there are certain subjects about which it is taboo to joke, including the liberation struggle and ethnic and religious matters, although jokes concerning the last two exist and "are recounted with noticeable embarrassment, often followed by a comment about the importance of national unity."¹⁷⁸ This tendency highlights another impediment in understanding Eritrean relationships, identities, and oppressions: if no one is willing to acknowledge or talk about the fissures within society demarcated by ethnicity, religion, geographical location, gender, etc. how can erasures and silences be identified?

As if the oppressive environment in Eritrea was not difficult enough on its own, an emerging body of research is analyzing how PTSD "may change the way genes express themselves and how these changes may then reprogram the development of offspring." Maternal and paternal PTSD have been seen to affect children differently, as maternal PTSD "heightens the chance that a child will incur the kind of hormonal profile that makes it harder to calm down," and paternal PTSD "exacerbates the possibility that the child's PTSD, if she gets it, will be the more serious kind that involves feeling dissociated from her memories."¹⁷⁹ Even if the parents do not have PTSD resulting from sexual abuse, rape, or torture, several of the individuals interviewed by Kibreab and SIHA discussed either their own depression and sense of hopelessness or that of their families. This can have a grave impact on future generations, and it is also possible that the trauma of previous generations, who experienced colonization and lasting periods of conflict, has contributed to the trauma of current generations.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁷⁹ Judith Schulevitz, "The Science of Suffering: Kids are inheriting their parents' trauma. Can Science stop it?" *New Republic*, 16 November 2014.

Gender Considerations Going Forward

Ostensibly, Eritrea has made an effort to promote gender equality, as it has “signed, ratified or acceded to” several international human rights treaties including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention regarding Forced or Compulsory Labour.¹⁸⁰ Moreover, the 2003 Eritrean National Education Policy was aimed at ameliorating lower enrollment levels for girls in elementary school as compared to boys, and issues such as land legislation, female genital mutilation, underage marriage, and gender-based violence have been addressed by the government (if not resolved). The National Union of Eritrean Women succeeded in garnering government approval for a National Policy in Gender in 2004, a National Gender Action Plan, and “a gender-awareness strategy of the communities and an initiative to strengthen collection of disaggregated data for effective monitoring.”¹⁸¹ However, the realities of life for women are far from promising.

Eritrea cannot continue as it is with all power belonging to one man and one party in the face of a malcontented populace, an unsustainable economy, and thousands of people seeking refuge elsewhere. However, a change in government does not equate to a truly free society with respect for rights. A change in Eritrea’s political structure seems inevitable, and regardless of how it happens, women will be in an extremely vulnerable position, but one of great opportunity. The creation of a new political system and thus social hierarchy means that women, if they are able to organize and remain persistent, will be presented with a chance to participate in the government, to become involved in policy making. With so many men absent, women have been forced to assume traditional male roles in order to survive. Why should a role in government be any different? Since Eritrea remains an extremely closed society, it is impossible to determine whether any type of women’s movement like this exists (and if it does, it would be covert regardless), but the role that women play in the restructuring of Eritrea will determine much more than whether women receive equitable rights; it could guarantee the success of the new government or ensure its failure.

¹⁸⁰ “Letters from Eritrea: Refugee Women Tell Their Story,” 3.

¹⁸¹ “Overview: Eritrea.”

Indefinite National Service and Education Reforms

All students are required to attend 12th grade at Sawa, which is reported to have extremely abusive conditions. Reports of torture and the sexual abuse of female soldiers are widespread; other complaints include harassment, boredom, forced marching, forced labor, arbitrary imprisonment in shipping containers or underground holes, suicides, suicide missions, and executions.¹⁸² The government claimed that the educational reforms of the WYDC were created to prevent “wastage,” which referred to the larger number of students who repeated grade levels, did not complete high school, or had no opportunity for higher education. The Ministry of Education asserted that the previous curriculum was too rigorous, exacerbating wastage; however, Eritreans recognized the states’ need to forcibly recruit students. Knowing that they would be sent to Sawa for 12th grade, students reportedly lost motivation and exhibited “poor behavior, chronic truancy, and poor academic performance.”¹⁸³ Upon completion of their training, youths typically work on infrastructure projects, cash-crop farms, and projects for party-owned construction firms; they receive a negligible salary of 500 nakfa per month, approximately thirty USD, which is not enough to provide for their individual needs let alone those of a family.¹⁸⁴

National service greatly disrupts society in that it inhibits traditional norms; “collective life under military discipline” is no substitute for “community-oriented living.”¹⁸⁵ Aspirations deemed normal by society, such as starting a family and providing for them, seeking higher education, and finding personally fulfilling employment, are unobtainable. Instead, extra money is obtained through illegal means and reliance upon diaspora connections.¹⁸⁶ In order to escape national service, one must either be constantly mobile to avoid authorities, have enough money to bribe officials, become a spy for the government, or leave the country. Additionally, high rates of suicide among national service participants indicate the dissolution of societal support mechanisms.¹⁸⁷ In the 1990s, emphasis was placed on the eschewal of individualism for self-

¹⁸² Treiber, 241.

¹⁸³ Jennifer Riggan, “Avoiding Wastage by Making Soldiers: Technologies of the State and the Imagination of the Educated Nation,” In *BioPolitics, Militarism, and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by David O’Kane and Tricia Redeker Hepner, 72-91, Berghahan Books, 2009, pp. 72-73.

¹⁸⁴ Hirt and Mohammed, 6.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

sacrifice; a sense of duty to one's family and community was replaced with loyalty to the Liberation Front. While this was possible during the conflict when membership in the Front was voluntary and Eritrean society was united in its goal of liberation, the demand for self-sacrifice is unsustainable. Members of the national service have familial obligations¹⁸⁸ and cannot live in a perpetual state of stagnation with a uniform identity. They are, after all, individual people with ethnic, regional, and religious ties.¹⁸⁹

In order to evade national service, Eritrean youths employ a variety of methods. Many refuse to register for military service at the age of eighteen or, if they do join, they do not report back to their positions after taking their annual holiday leave. These individuals must then abscond from security agents and avoid regular military roundups.¹⁹⁰ Some students are selected to continue their education at the university level, as well, but they are the lucky few.¹⁹¹ Since women over the age of 27, married women, and women with children are usually exempt from the service (this does not mean that exemptions are always respected), female students often marry early and get pregnant (whether married or not) in order not to serve. Others purposefully fail their 11th grade exams so that they cannot advance to the 12th grade.¹⁹² Once the government realized this was happening, they quickly made it almost impossible to fail. These avoidance strategies are policed by military intelligence officers, who have pervaded society. *Giffa*, military roundups where people's papers are inspected and private homes are searched, occur regularly, especially in the weeks leading up to Independence Day.¹⁹³

Education in Eritrea

In 1991, after gaining independence, Eritrea promised to universalize primary education and improve its national literacy rate.¹⁹⁴ At this time, 84% of its existing 190 schools were in serious disrepair after decades of war. The location of schools was also unevenly distributed with the number of secondary schools in the highlands significantly higher than in the lowlands. As of

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹¹ Ravinder Rena, "Gender inequality in secondary and higher education of Eritrea – issues and perspectives," *International Journal of Education Economics and Development*, 1.1 (2009), <http://ahero.uwc.ac.za/index.php?module=cshe&action=downloadfile &fileid=54008271312247165425512>, p. 6.

¹⁹² Hirt and Mohammed, 17.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹⁴ Rena, 1.

2009, 1,100 schools existed in the country. Tertiary institutes, many of which were created in 2004-2005, include the Eritrea Institute of Technology in Mai Nafhi, the College of Nursing and Health Technology and Orotto Medical School in Asmara, the College of Marine Sciences and Engineering in Massawa, the College of Agriculture in Hamalmalo, and the College of Business and Economics in Hal hale. Asmara University boasts academic programs in forty-three departments and created a post-graduate program in 2009.¹⁹⁵

Despite Eritrea's 2003 Educational Reform Policy, which declared that education is a fundamental right, gender disparities exist at all educational levels, with more males enrolled than females at the national level.¹⁹⁶ It is estimated that only 50% of children ages six to eleven attend elementary school (first to fifth grade), around 40% of children ages twelve to fourteen attend sixth to eighth grade, and about 25% of adolescents ages fifteen to eighteen attend ninth to twelfth grade.¹⁹⁷ The following percentages estimate the number of male and female students enrolled in the given educational levels as reported by Eritrea's Ministry of Education: 52.6% male and 47.4% female in nursery and kindergartens, 55.7% male and 44.3% female in elementary schools, 60% male and 40% female in middle schools, 66.6% male and 33% female in secondary schools, and 84.6% male and 15.4% female in vocational and technical schools.¹⁹⁸ Statistics provided by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) do not match those provided by the Ministry. UNICEF statistics for the period between 2008-2012 show pre-primary school gross enrollment at 15.2% for males and 14.7% for females; primary school gross enrollment at 51% for males and 42.1% for females and net enrollment at 39.6% for males and 34.2% for females; secondary school net enrollment at 31.7% for males and 25.4% for females.¹⁹⁹ Since Eritrea is extremely closed off and data collection within the country is impossible to verify, accurate numbers are unknown. Both sets of data, however, point to gender disparities.

Between 1991 and 2003, the student population increased by approximately 250%, but the gap between male and female students increased from 4% to 33%. A 2002 demographic and

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹⁹ "Statistics: Eritrea," *UNESCO*, 24 Dec. 2013, 3 Oct. 2016, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/eritrea_statistics.html.

health survey reported that 52% of women and 39% of men are illiterate.²⁰⁰ UNICEF data from 2008-2012 indicates that Eritreans between the ages of 15-24 have literacy rates of 92.6% for males and 87.7% for females.²⁰¹ From 1991 to 2005, female enrollment in primary through secondary schools dropped in relation to male enrollment.²⁰² 38% of girls reportedly leave school due to marriage and 10% stay home to care for siblings and complete domestic tasks.²⁰³

Impediments to education for both males and females, though they may affect these groups differently, include significant distances between students' homes and school, poverty, lack of parental interest, and nomadic or pastoral lifestyles. Moreover, a lack of sanitation and clean water facilities at school²⁰⁴ can pose problems for menstruating girls.

Reports of Parental and School Abuse

Studies within Eritrea concerning violence in the home and at school are not available. It is therefore necessary to look at data that is not specific to the Eritrean experience to help contextualize the problem. A Norwegian study details the reported abuse of thirty-four unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs), six of whom were Eritrean, by caregivers and teachers in their countries of origin. These URMs arrived in Norway before the age of fifteen, and only four were girls (their countries of origin were not specified). They were all between the ages of thirteen and nineteen at the time of the interview and had been living in Norway between one and four years.²⁰⁵ The results showed that eight (all boys) of the URMs reported experiencing violence both at home and at school, twelve reported violence only at home (two girls), and fourteen reported violence only at school (two girls).²⁰⁶ There was variation concerning the perpetrators' identities, the "seriousness and pervasiveness" of the violence, the youths' feelings towards the perpetrators, and the youths' comprehension of the reasoning behind the violence.²⁰⁷ The majority of the perpetrators at home were the children's fathers or men who were father figures; five of the perpetrators were women, four of whom were the children's mothers. The

²⁰⁰ Rena, 5.

²⁰¹ "Statistics: Eritrea."

²⁰² Rena, 5.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰⁵ Enyor M. Skårdalsmo Bjørgo and Tine K. Jensen, "Unaccompanied refugee minors' early life narratives of physical abuse from caregivers and teachers in their home countries," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 48 (2015): 148-159, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0145213415002719>, p. 150.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

URMs expressed fear, pain, anger, humiliation, and powerlessness due to violence within the home, and about half of them regarded the perpetrator of the violence with some level of ambivalence. Two of them reported positive feelings towards the perpetrators, their mothers. The URMs attributed the violence to their selves, their own behavior, the perpetrator, the situation, or systemic factors.²⁰⁸

Violence in the schools was reported by twenty-two of the URMs; several of them reported quotidian beatings carried out by their teachers and school administrators.²⁰⁹ Feelings of anger, humiliation, and helplessness were reported; fear was also reported and described as restricting learning potential. Over half of the URMs experienced ambivalence concerning their teachers and going to school; some expressed positive feelings toward school, and some also explained that their teachers were nice if they obeyed them. Almost half had nothing positive to say about their teachers or their schools. Several URMs also explained that violence in schools was common, considered normal, and frequently viewed as a teaching technique. URMs attributed their teachers' violence to the same categories as they did home violence, save to their selves.²¹⁰ Most of the URMs experienced pervasive violence against themselves, other family members, and their peers. Many who attended school reported learning very little due to fear.²¹¹ Research on corporal punishment shows that effected children often develop adjustment problems and high anxiety and aggression levels.²¹²

As emphasized in this section, the educational and livelihoods opportunities within Eritrea are extremely limited by the state and cultural practices of punishment. Although education is supposed to be available to all, young girls and women are not represented in the educational system to the same extent as their male peers, and the WYDC fosters an environment in which poor academic performance is perpetuated. Students are not motivated to learn, and teachers are expected to produce high turnover rates from grade to grade. This is not to say that every Eritrean student receives a poor education; without further research, the overall efficacy of the Eritrean educational system cannot be quantified or qualified. Instead, the stressful and

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 153.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 157.

coercive nature of the educational system, as reported by Eritreans, affects the mental state of Eritrean youths and contributes to high levels of migration.

Eritrea is characterized by journalist Jonas Berhe as being in “a state of permanent defence;” Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki maintains a military state.²¹³ Referencing Michel Foucault, Jennifer Riggan observes that schools “through the regulation of space, time, and body” facilitate surveillance and observation.²¹⁴ Sawa created a mechanism through which students could be named and tracked by the government; failure to comply with a national service obligation precludes youth from applying for specific services and jobs.²¹⁵ Young adults are kept “in a state of delayed adolescence for an unpredictable period of time, no matter whether they are assigned to the army or to civil bureaucracy, or even whether they become deserters” because “[v]ocational training and continuing academic education, economic independence or the founding of a family all remain dreams.”²¹⁶ Magnus Treiber argues that Eritreans exercise their agency via subversion, desertion, and migration, despite the threat of harsh punishment and execution.²¹⁷ The state of extended adolescence relates to Alcinda Honwana’s concept of waithood, which she defines as “a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood, in which young people’s access to adulthood is delayed or denied.”²¹⁸ Without the ability to protest freely or challenge the current political and social order, these individuals seek opportunities outside of the formal economy and outside of Eritrea. In fact, migration narratives and discussions of social hierarchies, which privilege the diaspora, have shaped Eritrean identity in terms of individual aspirations and individual perceptions of nationalist responsibilities.

A Re-imagining of National Duty

Jennifer Riggan’s research on debates among Eritrean 11th grade students concerning national duty provides valuable insight into the ways in which Eritreans conceptualize emigration as a national duty. Conducted in 2003, her research is reflective of Eritrea’s new educational policy which situated education within the framework of military service and

²¹³ Treiber, 242.

²¹⁴ Riggan, “Avoiding Wastage by Making Soldiers,” 74.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

²¹⁶ Treiber, 243.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

²¹⁸ Alcinda Honwana, “Waithood and Youth Protests in Africa,” International Institute Lugard Lecture, 2003, p.1.

students' realization that "the state was radically altering their life trajectory."²¹⁹ These students had this debate knowing that the following school year would be spent at the Sawa military training facility. Riggan notes, "Educational processes often enable educated people to imagine themselves as endowed with privilege and occupying an exceptional place in society...policies introduced in 2003 were intent on integrating educated citizens into the broader mass of militarized citizens, creating a disconnect."²²⁰ Moreover, students overwhelmingly presented education as a method of developing the nation; from where this education comes and whom it benefits, however, were debated.²²¹ Interestingly, "No one refuted the assertion that education in Eritrea was poor, but many argued against the idea that knowledge from another country could successfully develop Eritrea."²²²

When asked the question, "Is it better to emigrate from your country or stay in your country?" Eritrean students provided a range of answers using a vocabulary of sacrifice and responsibility to defend their arguments.²²³ Some of the students' answers are included below; each bullet point represents the ideas of one student unless otherwise noted:

- "life without country is too difficult;" "the word migration means spoiling culture and religion" (to which Riggan notes that "A few students nodded and quietly called out, "Yes!" while "Other students shook their heads..."²²⁴
- Migration provides a "new life" and enables them to "get a good job"²²⁵
- "When your country has harsh conditions and when leaders are oppressing their people, what does it mean to have a country? If you live in the US for three to five years you become a citizen and then you can do what you want." (to which Riggan notes "half the class cheered"²²⁶
- In response to one student saying he would like receive his education abroad and then return to Eritrea to help develop it, another student responded by saying that Eritrea could be like Europe tomorrow and "If many of the young people leave, who is going to develop the country?"²²⁷ To which another student responded, "You can't develop your country by staying because you will be ignorant if you stay here. There is no education here."²²⁸

²¹⁹ Jennifer Riggan, "Imagining Emigration: Debating National Duty in Eritrean Classrooms," *Africa Today*, Volume 60, Issue 2 (2013): 85-106, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.60.issue-2>, p. 96.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

²²² *Ibid.*, 100.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 98.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

- Referring to economic conditions in America, one student said, “If you leave who will feed you? It’s better to stay home than to be hungry.”²²⁹
- “When we go abroad, we’re going to get something. Lack of food is the first problem that makes people go away. If you go there, people will help you; here, no one helps you... There you can earn a little money and have a peaceful mind.” This student said that he could earn money as a “sweeper” abroad and then acquire skills and get a find better employment. Another student responded to this by saying, “In America, they will feed you but won’t give you skills to develop your country: they will only take your labor.”²³⁰
- “If people in this country think only of their stomach, there will be no development. If everyone leaves, what will the next generations do? I think it is better to live here.”²³¹
- “It’s not about stomach: it’s about knowledge.”²³²
- “Are people in developed countries going to other countries to learn? No! They get their knowledge from their own country, and then come to exploit developing countries.”²³³

While Riggan provides some analysis of each of these responses, what is important to note here is the emphasis placed on culture and betrayal, which align with students’ repetition of national rhetoric, and choice and opportunity, which are used in students’ reframing of national duty. The discourse was also framed within the context of what was best for the nation and what was best for the individual and whether the two could be reconciled; both leaving and staying can be seen as sacrifice when framed accordingly, as both include hardships.²³⁴ Riggan observed that throughout the fifty-minute class, “the atmosphere in the classroom became increasingly raucous,” as students realized that their teacher did not expect them to behave “with the usual order and discipline in this particular class.”²³⁵ Students “heckled each other... stood up and walked around the classroom... spoke in increasingly loud voices, interrupting and mocking, a deviation from the ordered silence that pervaded most classes.”²³⁶ The creation of a “playful public sphere, which departed from both the government-dominated public voice in Eritrea and the diasporic public spheres in which modalities of being Eritrean tend to become polarized,” enabled students to grapple with prevailing narratives and reimagine them.²³⁷ Riggan frames the reworking of the definition of national duty within the context of Eritrea’s “policy of graduated citizenship,” in which Eritreans living in Eritrea are required to participate in national service

²²⁹ Ibid., 99.

²³⁰ Ibid., 99.

²³¹ Ibid., 100.

²³² Ibid., 100.

²³³ Ibid., 100.

²³⁴ Ibid., 99.

²³⁵ Ibid., 86.

²³⁶ Ibid., 86

²³⁷ Ibid., 98.

indefinitely “before being granted full citizenships rights” while the Eritrean diaspora are “exempt from national service and enjoy the full benefit of citizenship.”²³⁸ Riggan asserts that policies of graduated citizenship “produced desires to migrate, not only to escape repressive conditions, but to serve the nation and, indeed, to be Eritrean in a different way.”²³⁹ Encouraged by “state-produced narratives of nationalism that cast members of the diaspora as model citizens,”²⁴⁰ students created new characterizations of national duty. As educated members of society, Riggan argues that these students already perceived themselves as “a distinct type of citizen”²⁴¹ “who should have the right to travel and advance.”²⁴² However, while Eritreans living in Eritrea have voiced frustration with the indefinite national service, lack of employment alternatives and opportunities, and governance structures, diaspora members are accorded travel privileges²⁴³ and often treat Eritrea as a vacation destination.

Riggan explains that the financial support of the diaspora during the border war was “regularly reported on Eritrean television, portraying the members of the diaspora as ideal citizens willing to make sacrifices for their country;” their sacrifices “were publicly depicted as being more significant.”²⁴⁴ While media stories often revered members of the diaspora made famous, especially athletes and musicians, and elevated them to become symbols of “a transnational nationalism,” these stories also provided Eritreans living in Eritrea with examples of “lifestyle[s] that could not be attained and a set of choices that could not be made without leaving the country.”²⁴⁵ Students acknowledged this tension in the debate: when one student mentioned that the diaspora has financially supported Eritrea, other students remarked that the sacrifice of one’s life (whether as a martyr in the war or as a citizen dedicated to national service was unspecified; most likely the student meant both) was more significant than contributions of money.²⁴⁶ The Eritrean state has thus created a national identity of sacrifice that can be contrived of very differently by the Eritrean people. With their arguments saturated in nationalism,

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

students justified leaving Eritrea as a means of later supporting the state or as a result of the failure of the state to provide for them. Other students insisted that development must originate from within Eritrea.²⁴⁷ Both discourses leave intact students' loyalty to Eritrea; they acknowledge the pitfalls of the state and hope to ameliorate its future in some way.

Unfortunately, Riggan does not consistently identify whether the students whose quotes she includes are young men or women. There is no discussion of the students' ethnic or socio-economic groups, either. Individuals will always have varying perspectives, but it would be helpful to know if specific groups were more likely to support or reject migration as an act of nationalism. What creates the divides in student opinion, and how would a similar debate sound now, in 2017? Would more students be in favor of migration? How are student opinions dependent on their relationships? For example, are students whose parents inhabit a higher social standing more or less likely to support migration? Additionally, who can realistically consider migrating? How are considerations different for groups of varying identities?

Another important characteristic of these debates is that they were conducted in English. While Riggan argues that this facilitates freedom of discussion, the use of English should be questioned. Although students are expected to achieve a level of fluency in English by the time they reach high school, it should not be assumed that this is the case. Who, then, in the classroom was unable to participate fully in this debate due to their inability to communicate fully? How was the discussion then limited in its clarity and depth? Students obviously provided thoughtful and passionate contributions to the discussion, but a certain level of educational and social success must be assumed for these students.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

Eritrean Migration: Challenges of Movement and Acculturation

Eritrean Migration Routes

In Eritrea, a no exit and shoot to kill policy exist to deter anyone from crossing its borders. Legally, citizens less than sixty years of age are not allowed to leave Eritrea;²⁴⁸ in practice, most Eritreans are forced to participate in indefinite national service, limiting their movements and entrapping their family members if they try to flee. Smugglers have become vital resources for evading militarized border areas and enabling movement out of Eritrea. Asylum seekers thus break national, regional, and international border laws in an attempt to seek asylum.²⁴⁹

While some Eritreans remain in Ethiopia or Sudan after crossing the border, typically in camps with poor conditions, most travel onwards toward Europe and beyond in the hope of finding security, safety, and improved livelihood opportunities. Ethiopia currently hosts approximately 131,660 Eritreans, most of whom do not want to stay in camps but instead would like to continue on or settle in Ethiopian cities. 125,530 Eritrean refugees were hosted by Sudan as of 2015; many of them have been there for more than thirty years. An influx of refugees since 2006 has exacerbated trafficking for ransom.²⁵⁰ Eritrean government officials and military personnel have themselves been accused of complicity with trafficking activities, selling Eritreans to Rishaida in Sudan.²⁵¹

From 2006 to 2012, Eritreans primarily traveled from Sudan to Egypt and then on to Israel. Israel's renewal of its anti-filtration law and the establishment of a fence along its border with Egypt in 2012, along with Egypt's shoot to kill policy at its borders, however, have deterred African migrant flows in the area and redirected them to Libya.²⁵² The fence, equipped with advanced surveillance systems, covers the 240 kilometer Israeli-Egyptian border, and its impact on illegal immigration has been swift and thorough. In the first half of 2012, a reported 9,570 Africans illegally entered Israel; in the first half of 2013, this number was down to 34, and by the

²⁴⁸ Bahlbi Malk, "Human Trafficking and Human Smuggling to and from Eastern Sudan: Intended and Unintended Consequences of States' Policies," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (March 2016): 215-225, <http://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/ajis/article/view/8969/8661>, p. 216.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁵⁰ Mogos Brhane, "Understanding why Eritreans go to Europe," *Forced Migration Review*, January 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1762664637/fulltextPDF/5E560D9251B44BC5PQ/1?accountid=14434>.

²⁵¹ Malk, 219.

²⁵² Brhane.

end of 2013, it was nearly zero.²⁵³ It is probable that these reported numbers do not accurately reflect the number of Eritreans still able to illegally enter Israel due to bribes and sheer luck; regardless, the fence has had a massive impact on African migration. The following paragraphs explain the process of traveling from Sudan to Israel in order to portray smuggling and trafficking networks.

Although the terms smuggling and trafficking are often conflated, each has a distinct legal definition. The 2000 *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air* defines smuggling of migrants as “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or permanent resident.”²⁵⁴ The 2000 *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children* defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons” using threats, force, or “other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation,” which includes “sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.”²⁵⁵ It is possible for people to be both smuggled and trafficked during the same journey, maybe even by the same person or group. While this paper does not separately analyze the smuggling and trafficking of Eritrean migrants, it is necessary to understand the distinction between the two.

The Rishaida tribe in East Sudan, Sudanese and Egyptian authorities, Bedouins in Egypt, and Eritrean collaborators compose the network of smugglers and traffickers along the Sinai

²⁵³ Tanja Müller, “Universal Rights versus Exclusionary Politics: Aspirations and Despair among Eritrean Refugees in Tel Aviv,” *Africa Spectrum*, Volume 50, Issue 3 (2015): 3-27, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Tanja_Mueller2/publication/280316839_Universal_rights_vs_exclusionary_politics_Aspirations_and_despair_among_Eritrean_refugees_in_Tel_Aviv/links/566c0bb708ae430ab4fd0a71.pdf, p. 6.

²⁵⁴ United Nations General Assembly, Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Article 3, 2000, https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/2011/04/som-indonesia/convention_smug_eng.pdf.

²⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Article 3, 2000, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>.

route to Israel.²⁵⁶ With a distance of 3,000 kilometers from Kassala to North Sinai, extensive knowledge of the desert is necessary in order to make the journey. Smugglers are either contacted by Eritreans prior to their escape from Eritrea or once they have crossed into Ethiopia or Sudan. While the travel conditions are demanding and can be treacherous, not all smugglers are traffickers, and many Eritreans make it to Israel after paying an agreed upon sum. Others, however, are not as fortunate; they are extorted en route to Israel or abducted from Sudan and forced to travel to Sinai. Both of these groups are ransomed and often abused, tortured, and/or raped.²⁵⁷ Some are able to escape or pay lower fees than initially demanded, but smuggling fees and trafficking ransoms have increased annually. According to a 2013 study published by the Feinstein International Center, as of 2012, the average smuggling fee in Sinai was 2,442 USD, the average ransom demanded by smugglers who later demanded additional fees en route was 19,780 USD, and the average ransom demanded by kidnappers was 30,334 USD.²⁵⁸ Time spent in the Sinai ranged from one day to a whole year, with 83 days being the average.²⁵⁹ This study explains that the “higher and more often the ransoms paid, the more the price of kidnapping increases” and rising profits lead to market growth. Quelling the thriving ransom market is a difficult task since, realistically, relatives will not stop paying ransoms to free their family members.²⁶⁰

In East Sudan, kidnapping has become a type of livelihood for local groups, especially the Rishaida. While looking for refugee camps along the border of Eritrea and Sudan, recently escaped Eritreans are easy targets for kidnappers. Sudanese authorities, police, and army members facilitate the process by selling people who have been kidnapped to traffickers or by taking bribes from kidnappers. Eritreans are transported to Kassala and later often sold to Bedouin smugglers and traffickers, but the relationship between the Rishaida and Bedouin is not well understood.²⁶¹ With each exchange from one group to the next, prices increase.²⁶² People

²⁵⁶ Karen Jacobsen, Sara Robinson, and Laurie Ljinders, “Ransom, Collaborators, Corruption: Sinai Trafficking and Transnational Networks,” *Feinstein International Center*, August 2013, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/159803939/Ransom-Collaborators-Corruption-Sinai-Trafficking-and-Transnational-Networks#fullscreen>, p. 3.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 10.

with relatives from the United States, Europe, or Israel are assigned higher ransom prices and tend to be treated worse than their counterparts.²⁶³ According to the Feinstein study:

In both Sudan and Sinai, the money is not transferred directly to the location where the individual is being held. Instead, families and relatives collect the money and then transfer it or physically hand it over to the collaborators working with the traffickers in a variety of urban centers including Cairo, Tel Aviv, Beersheba, and various places in Saudi Arabia.²⁶⁴

En route, Eritreans are transported via pick-up truck, boat, lorry, bus, car, and water-tankers. Overcrowding and accidents lead to regular injuries and fatalities. Once in Egypt, Egyptian authorities receive bribes to look the other way as smugglers and traffickers transport migrants. Along the Egyptian-Israeli border, Egyptians have a shoot to kill policy; smugglers often bribe these guards not to shoot. Not all Egyptian authorities take bribes, however, and those who escape from traffickers, are caught by Egyptian authorities, or caught at the border can be detained for months in prison or police stations before being deported to Ethiopia or Eritrea.²⁶⁵ Eritreans are sometimes also complicit in trafficking schemes; several receive money for their efforts, which may include finding and selling newly escaped Eritreans to the Rishaida, while others are forced to translate for or beat their fellow Eritreans so as not to be killed or severely injured themselves.²⁶⁶ Eritrean intermediaries are heavily involved in the ransom process, as well. In various countries across the world, Eritreans collect ransom money or contact the families of those being trafficked; some are forced to retrieve ransom money “from other families as a precondition for the release of their own relative in Sinai.”²⁶⁷

Although Israel is no longer a feasible destination for African migrants, the smuggling and trafficking of asylum seekers and refugees to and from East Sudan continues to increase.²⁶⁸ Government restrictions imposed in an effort to stem outward and inward refugee flows only work to benefit smuggling and trafficking activities. By making it harder for migrants to exit and enter various countries, the smugglers are in high demand and traffickers are able to extort more people who are desperate to cross the Eritrean-Sudanese border, the Sahara, Sinai, and Mediterranean.²⁶⁹ The system of human smuggling and trafficking from Sudan to Libya is

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁶⁸ Malk, 216.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 216.

similar to that from Sudan to Israel. Libyans, Egyptians, Somalis, and Tunisians participate in an extensive trafficking network. Once in Libya, smugglers and traffickers rely on the lack of security forces and proximity of Zuwara and Garabulli to the Italian coast to transport migrants across the sea. Migrants wait in shelters anywhere from a handful of days to several years in order to obtain a place on one of the boats attempting the voyage across the Mediterranean, which is made dangerous by the overcrowding of poorly maintained boats often captained by inexperienced people.²⁷⁰ Political and humanitarian debates concerning what actions should be taken to mitigate the high death levels of those attempting this journey and the use of the Mediterranean for illegal migration have been highly publicized.

The use of such dangerous routes and the increase in human smuggling and trafficking can be ascribed to both the oppressive Eritrean government and the unwelcoming reception of refugees in countries of first asylum, which perpetuate environments of fear, insecurity, and disorder, and the migration policies in destination countries, which are also prohibitive.²⁷¹ These policies have created conditions in which smugglers are essential and traffickers inevitable.²⁷²

Both smuggling and trafficking have been demonized by international media and, sometimes, have been falsely considered to be root causes of Europe's migration problems; they are, in fact, byproducts of oppressive regimes, untenable livelihoods opportunities, and unfavorable migration policies in Eritrea and its neighboring states. EU efforts to militarize borders and provide financial assistance to oppressive states have led to a "more lucrative and sophisticated" system of smuggling and trafficking as service costs have risen, effectively "undermining states' ability and rights to control who crosses their borders and/or who remains in their territories."²⁷³

The distinctions between smugglers and traffickers are often unclear; European states seeking to criminalize all illegal migration facilitators negatively impact asylum seekers who are dependent upon their help. Conflated definitions overlook the fact that smuggling networks involve a multitude of people, including family members, friends, even entire communities.

²⁷⁰ Matthew Opas and David McMurray, "Under the Gaze of the State: ICT Use and State Surveillance of Eritrean Refugees in Italy," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, Volume 34 (2015): 105-125, <http://rsq.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2015/10/30/rsq.hdv013.full.pdf+html>, p. 9.

²⁷¹ Malk, 216.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 216.

Some smugglers are not paid; they may be relatives or community members bent on aiding vulnerable groups. Criminalization of smugglers has led to charges being brought against fishermen, boat captains, and others involved in transporting migrants, even in cases of rescue attempts, making sea transport more dangerous for asylum seekers. In practice, most smugglers and traffickers have been able to operate with impunity,²⁷⁴ but as the risks associated with smuggling increase, smugglers may turn to trafficking in order to justify their risk-taking through increased profits.²⁷⁵ Therefore, states first create a need for smugglers and then perpetuate and exacerbate the insecurity of migrants. There is no easy solution to this problem; states will always have migration policies and restrictions. With the massive influx of refugees and migrants into Europe, however, these policies and restrictions need to be reimaged in a way that privileges the humanity and dignity of asylum seekers and those that help them.

Characterization of the Eritrean Regime

As abuses and lack of livelihoods opportunities continue in Eritrea, migrant flows will not cease. Eritrea is often overlooked in the international sphere and ignored by Western media.²⁷⁶ Several researchers and journalists cite the difficulty of attaining first-hand information on the realities of life in Eritrea due to the government's closed-off nature and restrictive policies on foreigners.²⁷⁷ Emigration is seen as a "path to freedom and wealth" due to the presence of the well-off diaspora community.²⁷⁸ The Co-Director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester, Tanja Müller, disagrees with the pervasive characterization of Eritrea in the media, calling it "one-dimensional" and distortive of "Eritrean reality on the ground."²⁷⁹ She agrees that it is difficult to contest existing constraints on political and religious freedoms and rights as well as economic opportunity due to compulsory national service; however, she is critical of the "frozen image of the 'siege state' that Eritrea has moved

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 216.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 217.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 219.

²⁷⁷ Stevis, Matina and Joe Parkinson. "Thousands flee isolated Eritrea to escape life of conscription and poverty." *The Wall Street Journal*. 2 Feb. 2016. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eritreans-flee-conscription-and-poverty-adding-to-the-migrant-crisis-in-europe-1445391364#:qev1T9otEgdoFA>.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Tanja Müller, "Death in the Mediterranean and the representation of Eritrea: looking beyond manufactured narratives of oppression," *aspiration&revolution* (blog), 31 May 2015, <https://tanjarmueller.wordpress.com/2015/05/31/death-in-the-mediterranean-and-the-representation-of-eritrea-looking-beyond-manufactured-narratives-of-oppression/>.

beyond.”²⁸⁰ Müller argues that the narratives of Eritrean refugees provide conflicting information; the image of Eritrea as an entirely closed off, oppressive state is hegemonic and manipulative, and that refugees often co-opt the stories of abused peers in order to navigate migration and asylum policy. The fact that most Eritreans have close friends or relatives in the diaspora further motivates migration. She states that people “are dying because there are no legal routes into Europe, neither for asylum seekers nor for those who seek work and/or a better life.”²⁸¹ The “‘remarkably presentist [sic] approach’...that not only denies Eritrean politics a temporal character and historical trajectory, but also focuses exclusively on the issue of human rights as the single overarching reality”²⁸² does nothing to resolve the current outflow of migrants. Eritrean migration “is more usefully analysed within wider frameworks of globalisation and the ‘aspiration to belong.’”²⁸³ Müller welcomes EU engagement with Eritrea, believing that the state has been sidelined by Western governments for too long and vilified by ill-informed and biased policy makers both abroad and in the Horn.²⁸⁴ Furthermore, she asserts that isolation of Eritrea does not help the Eritrean people or government to improve conditions within the state.²⁸⁵ Müller’s argument emphasizes the premise throughout this paper: current research on Eritrea is incomplete and privileges specific narratives over others. The Eritrean state and people are not monolithic. The purpose of this paper is to highlight vulnerable and marginalized groups and to analyze Eritrean identity, but it is essential to understand that not every Eritrean experiences life under the current regime in the same way and that identities are fluid. People can and do live in Eritrea, start families in Eritrea, love, and hope, and dream in Eritrea. If Eritrean migration is, as Müller asserts, the byproduct of a need to ‘belong,’ how should conversations about migration be structured differently? How can a framework of belonging be incorporated into the Eritrean story without undermining the very real narratives of migration due to abuse? Furthermore, while it is easy to criticize the Eritrean state, it is much more difficult to engage with it. Although a reimagining of migration is outside the scope of this

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Tanja Müller, “Representing Eritrea: geopolitics and narratives of oppression,” *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 43, No. 150 (March 2016): 658-667, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03056244.2015.1111201>, p. 659.

²⁸³ Ibid., 660.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 663.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 663.

paper, the research presented here can contribute to discussions of inclusion and of framework creation. This section was meant to provide a summary of Eritrean migration routes and struggles, but it did not discuss the gendered dimensions of migration: people en route from Eritrea to Sudan, Egypt, Libya, the EU, and elsewhere are highly vulnerable to abuse. Perceptions of individual strength, innocence, and threat are all highly gendered and how certain actors perceive individual migrants at different stages of their journey can either hinder or harm them; for example, a young woman traveling alone (as in without family or a support system) may be seen as an easy target for traffickers and may be targeted by various abusers en route, but upon reaching a refugee camp or interacting with representatives of EU countries, her perceived (and genuine) vulnerability will likely mean that she is seen to be an innocent victim deserving of asylum. A thirty-year-old man making the same journey alone, however, may be less likely to be abused en route (or not), but may be deemed a threat in an EU state (or not) simply due to his age and gender. This paper will not analyze the forms of abuse experienced by migrants en route, because there is a plethora of existing literature on this topic. What is vital to keep in mind is how experiences of trauma prior to, during, and after migration have significant impacts on self-identity and behavior and can greatly influence relationships and have epigenetic consequences. What happens to populations bonded by trauma? Furthermore, how are individual migration narratives shaped after resettlement and how do diaspora communities envision their migration stories?

Contextualizing the Migration of Children and Adolescents

During a visit to one of Ethiopia's refugee camps, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, was told by Eritrean refugees "that their mostly young population would not fall prey to smugglers and human traffickers if, after fleeing from their homes, they found more reasons beyond simple security to stay in the refugee settlements in Ethiopia."²⁸⁶ They stressed the importance of education and the promise of a "productive life elsewhere," telling Grandi that "[b]etter schooling, more vocational training, and the promise of resettlement would stop...refugees...from attempting these dangerous journeys" to Europe.²⁸⁷ Ethiopia provides

²⁸⁶ Kisut Gebre Egziabher, "Do Not Risk Your Lives, Grandi Tells Eritrean Refugees," *UNHCR*, 2 Feb. 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/2/56b3251917/risk-lives-grandi-tells-eritrean-refugees.html>.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

refuge for 734,000 people, around 155,000 of whom are Eritrean. Many Eritreans explain that they fled their home country due to fear.²⁸⁸ As previously discussed, army commanders and leaders at Sawa military training camp have been accused of the sexual abuse, rape, torture, and cruel punishment of their charges. These claims, in combination with the negligible stipend provided to conscripts, are often cited as catalysts for escape. Fear of the authoritarian government, which perpetuates a social environment of oppression via imprisonment, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings,²⁸⁹ has also influenced people's desire to flee.²⁹⁰ Elsa Chyrum, director of the UK-based Human-Rights Concern-Eritrea, states, "Many children are brought up without their fathers because their fathers are tied up in conscription for life... The whole family unit is completely broken. You see all the unaccompanied children leaving because they don't want to have a miserable life..."²⁹¹

In four refugee camps in northern Ethiopia alone, nearly 75% of their 38,000 inhabitants are under twenty-five years of age with several children and teenagers. Often frustrated by their living conditions and inability to continue their education, these youths seek better opportunities in Europe. Another interesting development within the six refugee camps in Ethiopia that host Eritreans consists of the 82,000 people now unaccounted for, who were once registered in the camps. While it is believed that some may have traveled to other parts of Ethiopia in an effort to assimilate into society, it is likely that many have left the country to attempt the journey to Europe.²⁹² The following paragraphs discuss how the mental development of children and adolescents can affect their decisions to engage in risky behavior. It is important to understand that youths may conceptualize the dangers associated with migration differently than adults; additionally, youths who have migrated may acculturate and engage with host communities differently than adults. Variations among youth behavior will exist; the following paragraphs include a discussion of unaccompanied minors and a case study of acculturation. While this

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ "World Report 2015: Eritrea," *Human Rights Watch*, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/worldreport/2015/country-chapters/eritrea>.

²⁹⁰ Mark Anderson, Patrick Kingsley, and Sam Jones, "Escaping Eritrea: 'If I die at sea, it's not a problem-at least I won't be tortured,'" *The Guardian*, 21 April 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/apr/21/escaping-eritrea-migrant-if-i-die-at-sea-at-least-i-wont-be-tortured>.

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² "Number of Eritreans seeking asylum in Europe soars over figures for last year."

discussion digresses in tone from the rest of this analysis, it is meant to expand this paper's analysis of vulnerability and identity.

Adolescent Brain Development

When Eritrean adults choose to leave Eritrea and cross the Mediterranean, it is assumed that these adults have weighed the risks and benefits of their decision. Children and adolescents, however, do not make decisions with the same level of understanding of risks as adults. Adolescents are more likely to take risks to achieve rewards, endangering their safety. Adolescents are also not completely matured socially and emotionally, which can exacerbate the difficulties they face both in Eritrea, in transit out of the country, and in host countries.

Structural changes in the brain occur throughout adolescence, affecting adolescents' behavior and decision-making processes over a period of years and in various stages. During pre- and early adolescence, a decrease in gray matter in the prefrontal regions of the brain contributes to improved cognitive abilities and logical reasoning.²⁹³ Changes in the density and distribution of dopamine receptors in pathways connecting to both the limbic system and the prefrontal cortex occur in early adolescence, affecting sensation-seeking behavior.²⁹⁴ Myelination ameliorates the efficiency of brain circuits, leading to an increase in white matter in the prefrontal cortex; this process continues into late adolescence and allows for higher cognitive functions, including abilities to plan ahead, make complex decisions, and consider risks and rewards.²⁹⁵ The strengthening of connections between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system affect emotional regulation and self-control.²⁹⁶

The evolution of the brain explains why adults are more capable of self-control and why adolescents are prone to “engage in acts, even risky acts, when the potential for pleasure is high.”²⁹⁷ It is also interesting to note that adolescents mature intellectually prior to maturing emotionally or socially.²⁹⁸ These realizations should inform the previous discussion of life in Eritrea and the following sections concerning young Eritrean migrants' lives within their host

²⁹³ Laurence Steinberg, “The Science of Adolescent Brain Development and Its Implications for Adolescent Rights and Responsibilities,” in *Human Rights and Adolescence*, edited by Jacqueline Bhabha, University of Pennsylvania Press: 2014, pp. 59-76, p. 63.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

countries. Childhood and adolescence are formative in one's development; the ways in which one processes their environment, sense of self, connections to others, and ambitions and desires are heavily influenced by their development and experiences of trauma. As children and adolescents seek to develop their sense of self and locate their identities in relation to society, it is vital to recognize the ongoing transformation of their social and emotional maturity. The following sections will seek to illuminate the challenges faced by young Eritreans in EU host countries, specifically as related to their mental well-being and access to education.

URMs and Psychological Distress

Developmental psychopathy literature shows that “an absent or negative parental relationship is associated with maladaptive functioning and/or vulnerability to psychopathology in children and adolescents who have been exposed to (multiple) traumatic experiences.”²⁹⁹ A 2007 article in *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* compares psychological distress among unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) and other adolescent populations. The article defines a URM as “any child under the age of 18 who is physically separated from both parents (by death or other reason) and is an asylum seeker, recognized refugee, or other displaced person.”³⁰⁰ Studies have shown that URMs report high levels of psychological distress, as do refugee children and adolescents accompanied by parents who have experienced war-related trauma. Most studies point to a positive relationship between “the number (type) of adverse life events and severity level of psychological distress;” factors including older age, parents’ poor mental health, and female gender are “negatively associated with the mental health of refugee adolescents in host countries.”³⁰¹ The study mentions that “pretrauma psychopathology has been reported as being predictive...for the development of posttraumatic stress disorder”³⁰² but it is impossible to ascribe causation to experiences pre-departure, during departure, while in reception centers, or after arriving in host nations.³⁰³ Studies concerning the mental health of young immigrants are not conclusive, but this study argues that both unaccompanied and accompanied

²⁹⁹ Tammy Bean, Ilse Derluyn, et al. “Comparing Psychological Distress, Traumatic Stress Reactions, and Experiences of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors With Experiences of Adolescents Accompanied by Parents,” *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, Vol. 195, no. 4 (2007): 288-297, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17435478>, p. 288.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 288.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 288.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 289.

immigrant adolescents “run a risk of developing (chronic) emotional problems or maladaptive behaviors,” which can create difficulties for mental health professionals faced with a multitude of cultural and language barriers.³⁰⁴

Using data from populations within the Netherlands and Belgium, the study compared native populations, URMs, and accompanied minors. The findings showed “an extraordinary high severity level of internalizing complaints and especially traumatic stress reactions among unaccompanied refugee minors in comparison with two other groups of adolescents with parental caregivers.”³⁰⁵ Gender moderately affected results regarding the internalization of emotional problems (which females were more likely to do) and externalizing behavior (which males were more likely to exhibit) for the native and accompanied minor groups, but had little effect on URM results.³⁰⁶ The report posits that the unusual levels of stress experienced by URMs may counter the “inherent protective factors associated with gender.”³⁰⁷ A correlation between increased age and increased emotional distress, traumatic stress reactions, and behavioral problems was seen only among the URM group, who also reported a higher number of average stressful life events, which “was the most robust predictor of internalizing behavior and traumatic stress reactions in the regression models,” than the other two groups.³⁰⁸ The study hypothesizes that this may be the case due to the inability of younger URMs to fully comprehend traumatic experiences due to their relative stages of brain development; an alternative explanation offered states that URMs’ separation from their parents also separates them from their parents’ anxiety, “which could exacerbate their own stress reactions.”³⁰⁹

The study admits that, due to the limitations of the research, it is not possible to ascertain whether the differences between groups stem from a lack of parental care or adverse life experiences; additionally, it does not track these youths over time to monitor their mental well-being. Psychological distress does not equate to impaired social functioning, and young migrants might prove extremely resilient. Regardless, schools, government officials, mental healthcare providers and adults working with other organizations that interact with migrant children must create supportive environments for URMs and provide them with necessary services to promote

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 289.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 295.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 295.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 296.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 295-296.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 296.

their mental health.³¹⁰ The report recommends that once basic emotional and physical stability is established, URMs should have access to “low-threshold, psychological interventions aimed at emotion regulation and improving cognitive information processing,” which includes journaling, learning relaxation techniques, stimulating self-reflection, and learning about stress reactions, depression, and anxiety.³¹¹

The combination of experiences of interpersonal violence within their origin countries and the trauma experienced en route to their host countries can create complex traumatization, which may manifest in problems of temper, lack of compliance and understanding of rules, difficulty in attention regulation and executive functioning, low self-esteem, and interpersonal difficulties.³¹² URMs may have sleep disturbances and learning difficulties (some of which may stem from a lack of learning in their countries of origin). Their experiences in host schools may be marked by failure and drop-out if services are not in place to mitigate their disadvantages.³¹³

A Case Study of Acculturation

Changes in identity can affect self-esteem and mental health, and for migrants especially, feelings of alienation and rejection can stem from a lack of social support, isolation from one’s culture, and the challenges related to finding acceptance within a host community’s culture.³¹⁴ Young migrants face acculturation; as they struggle to create and understand their own self-identity, their perception of self is shaped by the culture around them. Rejection, deculturization, and culture shock can lead to mental distress, including depression and “psychotic-like experiences.”³¹⁵ There is a lack of diverse research regarding acculturative stress on child migrants; several studies show that “early childhood relocation is linked with psychopathy.”³¹⁶ Adolescent immigrants face acculturative stress as two cultures are elided to form self-identity. Not all migrant children, however, will develop mental health problems or exhibit maladaptive

³¹⁰ Ibid., 296.

³¹¹ Ibid., 297.

³¹² Skårdalsmo Bjørgo, 158.

³¹³ Ibid., 158.

³¹⁴ Ruma Bose and Dimitrios Chartonas, “Fighting with Spirits: Migration Trauma, Acculturative Stress, and New Sibling Transition—A Clinical Case Study of an 8-Year-Old Girl with Absence Epilepsy,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, Vol. 39, Issue 4 (2015): 698-724, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11013-015-9438-7#Sec17>, p. 700.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 701.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 701.

behaviors.³¹⁷ The following paragraphs will discuss the case study of an eight-year-old Eritrean girl, given the pseudonym Fera, living in the United Kingdom. While her experiences are highly individual, they reflect broader concerns that affect a larger population of Eritrean children migrants and provide important cultural insight into Eritrean migrant families.

Fera's father left Eritrea to seek asylum in Europe when Fera was eight months old. Raised by her mother and extended family in Eritrea, Fera received nursery education for one year and had no formal education afterwards. She and her mother left Eritrea for Ethiopia in 2010, living in a refugee camp for three months where Fera "witnessed violence and was malnourished." They were released from the camp to stay with a family member, but remained socially isolated. Fera and her mother joined her father in the UK in 2011. There is no known family history of mental illness, learning disability, pervasive developmental disorder, or neurological conditions.³¹⁸ Fera and her parents are a part of the Tigrinya community in Eritrea; their first language is Tigrinya, and they are members of the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

Within a month of arriving in London, Fera started year three at a multi-ethnic, mainstream school. She struggled academically and socially, isolating herself from her peers. Her performance and behavior were believed to be due to her lack of formal education previously, her poor English skills, and the massive change in her environment. After receiving special support, her English was somewhat improved by the end of the school year, and she began to interact more with her peers. When the new school year began and Fera joined year four, she had a new teacher and learning assistant and was bullied by some of her classmates, which led to a physical confrontation. Fera told her parents that she hated the English language and school, and she began to wet the bed and exhibit extreme and disruptive behavior at school.³¹⁹ At home, she was withdrawn, with poor oral intake and interrupted sleep patterns. Her parents reported that her memory and concentration had been effected and that she "was preoccupied with people who were not a part of her life in the UK."³²⁰ Fera was given a child protection assessment by the community pediatrician, which concluded that there were no objective signs of sexual or physical abuse.³²¹

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 701.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 704.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 702.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 703.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 703.

The significant difference between Fera's home life, which was centered entirely around Eritrean culture, and her school life, which was her main contact with her host culture, were also evidenced in her parents' frustration with the school. They accused the school of not being supportive and culturally sensitive enough, as well as of not handling Fera's bullying properly.³²² They disliked what they considered to be the comparative nature of school assessments between Fera and her classmates, and they disliked the attention placed on them, and not Fera's school, during Fera's mental health assessments.³²³

In Eritrea, there is stigma around mental health issues, and there is only one psychiatric hospital in Asmara. Mental illness as perceived by Western standards is not fully understood within the Eritrean context. Community members are likely to distance themselves from the mentally ill, even if they acknowledge that an individual with mental health concerns is not at fault. Mental distress is typically attributed to spirit possession.³²⁴ Although little research exists on idioms of distress in Eritrea, it is known that within Tigrinya culture, possessions are attributed most frequently to the evil eye, Hmam Budda. Preferred interventions include consultations with elders, healers, and religious figures, which often include prayers and holy water. Studies on 'possessed' children are not well documented, but the possession of a young girl would not be considered unusual. According to Murray Last, an anthropologist and professor at University College London, "Girls can learn from their mothers, aunts, etc. how to do it by watching. The spirit enunciates the complaints the girl wants heard with a degree of authority that her own, personal voice does not carry."³²⁵

During her mental health assessments, Fera never mentioned spirits, although her parents believed she was possessed and sought help from the church.³²⁶ After several tests were conducted, Fera was diagnosed with idiopathic generalized epilepsy which, by itself, did not account for all of her emotional and behavioral troubles.³²⁷ Stress has been found to be a precipitant of epileptic seizures.³²⁸ The study postulates that the tension between her parents and

³²² *Ibid.*, 711.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 712.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 709.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 710.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 705.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 706.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 708.

the school exacerbated Fera's own stress.³²⁹ Fera was ultimately provided with a specially blessed crucifix to wear by the church. Her parents passively accepted Western medical services after a referral from social services was made, and Fera regularly takes medication and has mental health assessments.³³⁰ Fera's behavior and school performance have gradually improved, and her parents reported having no major concerns about her well-being.

It is important to note that Fera's parents were present to advocate for her and her school system did take personalized initiatives to support her. Her story emphasizes the importance of competent school and mental health faculty and services; Eritrean migrants may have access to better educational opportunities and advancement in the EU, but this access is meaningless if cultural boundaries and psychological concerns cannot be adequately addressed.

Conclusion

Little is known about the efficacy of Eritrea's educational system, but its use of corporal punishment and the Eritrean's state's draconian rule have been shown to negatively impact children and adolescents, influencing migration. While educational and livelihoods opportunities for Eritrean refugees in the EU are more extensive, systems must be in place to ensure that they can be accessed by Eritrean migrants and to mitigate issues of acculturation. For the purpose of brevity, this analysis did not include an extensive analysis of the experiences of children and adolescents as they were migrating from Eritrea to the EU, nor did it detail the experiences of young Eritreans living illegally in EU countries. Additionally, it chose to analyze seemingly universal obstacles faced by young Eritrean migrants in the EU, rather than the specific EU policies and services regarding young Eritrean migrants in key host countries. While the inclusion of such information would have undoubtedly contributed to further insight and discussion, the purpose of this paper was to highlight the structural and emotional challenges faced by young Eritreans. The relatively limited number of sources referenced is indicative of the overall lack of research on social and mental developmental concerns created by Eritrea's authoritarian rule and the experiences of young Eritrean migrants in the EU and elsewhere. If host countries and organizations that work with migrants wish to provide migrants with support and ensure their success in their host countries, it is imperative that they understand the psychological development, cultural context, and migration experiences of these children and

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 712.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 715.

adolescents. Further research must be conducted that addresses gender disparities in experiences (including a discussion of non-binary gender identities), young migrants with disabilities, young migrants fleeing due to religious or ethnic persecution by the Eritrean state, young migrants tasked with caring for a younger relative or their own child, young migrants involved in gang and/or criminal activity, and young migrants who manage to eschew formal education and/or live on the streets. Further research should also follow the same groups of migrants over time to better understand how they succeed and/or fail to adapt to life in the host countries.

Identity Creation and Enforcement among the Eritrean Diaspora

Not much literature exists concerning individual identities within the Eritrean diaspora. It seems to be assumed within Eritrean that diaspora members experience more freedoms and economic security than Eritreans in Eritrea. Although this may be accurate for long established diaspora members, the struggles of diaspora members and new migrants are not mentioned in the existing research, which focuses primarily on political divisions within the diaspora. This section provides a short overview of these political divisions before posing questions about generational and temporal differences among the diaspora.

Eritrean Diaspora: Political Identity

Diasporas have a long history of maintaining transnational networks so as to remain in contact with communities back home. Ultimately, the state's relationship with its diaspora, whether antagonistic or cooperative, defines the involvement of the diaspora in local development processes.³³¹ The Eritrean diaspora can be considered a "political and conflict-induced" diaspora, and its relationship with the Eritrean government ranges from highly supportive, to ambivalent,³³² to critical. Opposition groups focus primarily on democracy building and human rights efforts, often aimed at changing host country policies related to Eritrea; these efforts take the shape of petitions, lobbying and advocacy, and demonstration and mobilization. Collective organizing initiatives are largely dependent upon diaspora motives and personal experiences within Eritrea and within host communities. The ability of diaspora members to engage with their country of origin and the level of political will greatly influence diaspora's potential to create social transformation.³³³

In 2009, the UN imposed sanctions on Eritrea due to the government's support of groups in the Horn, such as Al-Shabaab and insurgencies against the Ethiopian government, and its failure to recognize border disputes with Djibouti.³³⁴ These sanctions led to the establishment of a UN Mission of Inquiry to investigate human rights abuses. In response to the lobbying of

³³¹ Antony Otieno Ong'ayo, "Diaspora transnational activities and home country regime conditions: obstacles to Eritrean diaspora contribution to local development in Eritrea," *Eritrea—Von der Befreiung zur Unterdrückung*, Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland: 2015, <http://www.academia.edu/11633834/Ongayo> A.O. 2015 .
Diaspora_transnational_activities_and_home_country_regime_conditions_Obstacles_to_Eritrean_diaspora_contribution_to_local_development_in_Eritrea, p. 146.

³³² *Ibid.*, 146.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 149.

³³⁴ Hirt, 115.

opposition groups within the diaspora on host governments, UN Resolution 2023 was adopted in 2011. This resolution states that the Eritrean government must cease collection of its diaspora tax. Afwerki has, however, dismissed accusations of foul play and continued to use coercive tactics to levy the tax.³³⁵

Eritrean society is defined by “long-distance” nationalism.³³⁶ Nicole Hirt, a Senior Research Fellow associated with the Institute of African Affairs in the German Institute of Global Area Studies, states that “both government supporters and opponents have instrumentalized the sanctions as symbolic capital.”³³⁷ The sanctions are not intended to weaken the Eritrean government, but in challenging the diaspora tax, they threaten the stability of the regime. Research suggests that sanctions do not drastically challenge autocratic regimes; that being said, individual rulers who “depend upon external revenues to fund their patronage networks” are exceedingly vulnerable to sanctions.³³⁸

Diasporas’ influence on their country of origin’s affairs are ambiguous. Diasporas may be united through a shared sense of culture and familiarity, but they are also divided by ideological, religious, socio-economic, ethnic, and other divergent factors. A third of all Eritrean nationals are diaspora members; therefore, Eritrean society is defined by its transnational political, economic, and symbolic ties as Eritreans abroad maintain close ties to relatives back home and to the Eritrean state. In 2004, remittances from the diaspora were the “largest single source of foreign currency inflows into the country, with the ratio of these transfers to GDP averaging 37 percent” over the previous ten years.³³⁹ Eritrean embassies have meticulously monitored the tax amounts paid by Eritreans abroad since 1991. Payment entitles Eritreans to government services such as the obtaining of marriage and birth certificates, extension of passports, ability to purchase land in Eritrea, to operate a business, and to obtain exit visas for older relatives.³⁴⁰ Eritreans abroad also send remittances to relatives and pay for family members’ smuggling fees and trafficking ransoms when necessary. Interestingly, this has not translated into political leverage. Those who support the Eritrean government:

³³⁵ *Ibid*, 120.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

often do not distinguish between Eritrea as a nation, the state of Eritrea as an institution, and the PFDJ under the leadership of Isaias as an organization that symbolizes the victorious independence struggle...disloyalty to the government [therefore] means betrayal of the nation and the people.³⁴¹

Moreover, the diaspora is divided between post-independence generations who grew up in Eritrea and younger generations born abroad. The PFDJ has leveraged youths' need to feel connected to their roots by establishing the Young PDFJ (YPDFJ), which was created in 2004 to promote nationalism among diaspora youth. It is common for those who grew up in democratic environments to experience identity crises,³⁴² and the promise of belonging is alluring.

Due to the higher status accorded to diaspora members by the government, tensions between newly arriving refugees and long established diaspora communities exist. Hirt divides the Eritrean diaspora as a whole into the following four groups: "permanent exiles, mostly ELF veterans; former PFDJ supporters who became dissidents and are now in a second exile; the large group of youth who left the country illegally and can be called the new exiles; and individuals with only loose political affiliations or no affiliation at all."³⁴³ Approximately 34 opposition parties exist in exile; youth movements such as the Arbi Harnet initiative and the Eritrean Youth Solidarity for Change oppose the Eritrean government. Interestingly, it is Christian Tigrinya who overwhelmingly support the state. Opposition groups are more heterogeneous and consequently internally mistrustful.³⁴⁴ After sanctions were placed on the Eritrean government, visible popular support wavered among the diaspora community. Hirt deduces that "there have been indirect indicators of a decline in tax flows in recent years," despite no public knowledge of Eritrea's annual budget or the amount of revenue from the diaspora tax.³⁴⁵

Technology Use as It Relates to Migration and Surveillance

Between text messaging, phone calls, social media, email, and programs like Skype, it is easier than ever before for migrants and diaspora members to regularly communicate with relatives, friends, and communities in their countries of origin.³⁴⁶ Technology's unique

³⁴¹ Ibid., 126.

³⁴² Ibid., 127.

³⁴³ Ibid., 128.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 128.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 132.

³⁴⁶ Opas and McMurray, 4.

simulation of real time closeness and connectedness assuages the emotional difficulties associated with leaving behind one's home, family, and friends. Frequently touted as liberating and empowering, the internet facilitates communication and information sharing on a massive scale. Some governments, however, use technology to restrict the freedom of their citizens, whether by the outright denial of access to specific services including specific internet sites or by the close monitoring and policing of technology use to crack down on any form of dissent.³⁴⁷ Information dissemination is closely monitored in Eritrea. In the early 2000s, the last private newspapers in Eritrea were forced to close and several journalists were detained. Internet cafés, most of which are located in the capital of Asmara, exist, but they are surveilled by the government, and internet access is heavily controlled and censored through domain restrictions. Foreign broadcasts are blocked and internal media is controlled by the state.³⁴⁸

Restrictions on freedom of expression affect the diaspora as well as those living within Eritrea. Due to the regime's financial reliance on the diaspora, the government is acutely aware of the need to cultivate and maintain a positive image among the diaspora. It is believed that the government covertly participates in online diaspora discussions and threads, and some claim that the government has created false websites that are sympathetic to the opposition in order to identify dissenters. It is well known that the families of those who leave Eritrea are typically targeted by the government; they may be imprisoned, forced to pay fines of 50,000 nafka (around 3,330 USD), and/or stripped of their property and assets. Although the government's reach does not extend as far as the diaspora community in terms of direct punishment, those who publicly criticize the regime essentially prohibit themselves from future safe travel to Eritrea and limit state cooperation in their ability to obtain official documents.³⁴⁹ It is widely believed that phone conversations and personal messages, both online and via mobile phones, are monitored³⁵⁰ and in the case of the later potentially blocked or intercepted by the government.³⁵¹ This forces Eritreans to censor their own speech in fear of retribution, namely against their families.³⁵² Furthermore, refugees are concerned that technology surveillance makes it possible to identify individuals who have illegally left Eritrea whom the government did not realize had escaped; this

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 5-6.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 8.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 10.

³⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.

³⁵¹ Ibid., 16.

³⁵² Ibid., 12.

endangers family members back home.³⁵³ The true extent of the Eritrean government's ability to monitor its population is unknown; regardless of the truth of the above accusations, it is evident that fear of monitoring affects the ways in which Eritrean diaspora members express their opinions of the government and communicate with those who remain in Eritrea.³⁵⁴

Victoria Bernal argues that the Eritrean diaspora's online presence is "an integral part of Eritrea's national politics" since it simultaneously creates a space within which state power and opinion can circulate transnationally and civil society and dissenting points of view are made visible.³⁵⁵ The Eritrean diaspora's online presence originated in the early 1990s; today it serves as "an ambiguous and elastic space" where all matter of opinions can be voiced.³⁵⁶ Bernal discusses the prominence of three online diaspora sites, Dehai, Asmarino, and Awate, which serve as public civil society forums for Eritrea as a nation since within Eritrea civil society was given no opportunity to develop. According to Bernal, "Through the debates and dialogue among diverse interlocutors and through the vicarious participation of lurkers who are thought to include members of the government, the websites have played a role in defining Eritrean identity, mobilizing support and opposition to the government, and constructing Eritrea as a nation."³⁵⁷ The online activity of the Eritrean diaspora is intensely political it is a space in which "commitment to the Eritrean nation and a sense of responsibility for, as well as a stake in, its welfare" is discussed and debated.³⁵⁸ The Eritrean diaspora conceived of sites such as Dehai as platforms on which to communicate directly with the Eritrean government; internet access did not become available to Eritrea's general population until 2000, but government workers had access well before this time. Eritreans explained to Bernal that before 2000, suggestions made public on Dehai were incorporated into Eritrean government policy and practice.³⁵⁹ Eritreans reportedly excused government shortcomings in the first decade of independence as products of transition; "self-censorship and harsh critiques" regulated notions of what was acceptable to post and what was not.³⁶⁰ During the time of the border war with Ethiopia, alternative sites, including

³⁵³ Ibid., 18.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 20.

³⁵⁵ Victoria Bernal, "Civil Society and Cyberspace: Reflections on Dehai, Asmarino, and Awate," *Africa Today*, Volume 60, Issue 2 (2013): 21-36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/africatoday.60.issue-2>, p. 21.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 22.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 26.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 27.

Asmarino and Awate, were developed on which dissent of the Eritrean government was much more acceptable. This break from Dehai, which served as “an extension of national politics as defined by the leadership in Eritrea,”³⁶¹ created a critical public forum; these sites became accessible shortly before the general population in Eritrea gained internet access. Although diaspora members continue to be the main contributors to these sites, Eritreans in Eritrea also contribute their opinions. Bernal notes that Dehai remains a pro-government site, and a link to Dehai can be found on the PFDJ website, which shows that the government “sees the diaspora websites as part of Eritrea’s political field.”³⁶² Indeed, these sites “[provide] a conduit through which Eritreans and the Eritrean leadership can gain insights from the critical opinions and analyses expressed by Eritreans themselves.”³⁶³ Even critics of the Eritrean government “remain obsessively committed to nationalist politics” and see online sites as spheres of citizenship.³⁶⁴

The Response of the Eritrean Government to Diaspora and Western Opposition

In a 2016 European Parliament Joint Motion for a Resolution on Eritrea (2016/25999(RSP)), the majority of the aforementioned concerns, including human rights violations, lack of political, religious, and expressive freedoms, in compliance with diaspora tax restrictions, and surveillance concerns, were mentioned.³⁶⁵ Eritrea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed the resolution in an article published by *TesfaNews*, stating that the resolution “represent[s] a catalogue of all the invective peddled against Eritrea by “regime-change” elements and other detractors who have long harboured malice against the independence and sovereignty of the country.”³⁶⁶ The Ministry blames the UN, Ethiopia, EU states, and others for ignoring its requests and refusing to engage with Eritrea. The language used by the Ministry is telling; it states “The EU Parliament resolution blabbers about widespread ‘discrimination and violence against women that is pervasive in all areas of Eritrean society,’” which it notes is “too ludicrous to merit elaboration.”³⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Ministry claims that a “comprehensive

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

³⁶⁵ “Joint Motion for a Resolution: European Parliament resolution on the situation in Eritrea,” *European Parliament*, 8 March 2016, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+MOTION+P8-RC-2016-0318+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=en>.

³⁶⁶ Eritrean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “EU Parliament Resolution on Eritrea: Misinformation or Political Bias?” *TesfaNews*, 31 March 2016, <http://www.tesfanews.net/eu-parliament-resolution-eritrea-misinformation-political-bias/>.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

response to the litany of distorted facts and accusations included in the EU Parliament resolution will be pointless and too long for this statement.”³⁶⁸ Despite its affirmation that Eritrea “remains engaged in constructive dialogue with the European Union,” the Ministry continues by saying that the European Parliament “can only corrode its credibility and relevance” by “serving as a gullible mouthpiece for subversive agendas against Eritrea.”³⁶⁹ The Ministry’s cursory if clearly embittered dismissal of EU concerns is indicative of its isolationist policies and rhetoric of victimization within the Horn, which is not completely unfounded. As long as the Eritrean government receives remittances, it does not seem to be bothered by outside criticism.

The speech used by the Eritrean government however, has power in that it dictates ‘acceptable’ topics of engagement. If the diaspora and Western states want to discuss migration issues, this appears to be ok; issues related to gender based violence and human rights abuses, however, are not. This centers the dialogue on the Eritrean state: much like the phenomenon discussed in the beginning of this paper in which women’s equality was sidelined by the liberation struggle in the name of the ‘greater good,’ discussions concerning widespread human rights abuses and sexual abuse are subsumed by broader, state-centric issues. This silencing of gendered issues and abuses can shape the ways in which diaspora members define their opposition to the government. Criticism of the government may then ignore that issues related to gender and sexual abuses are not only social but inherently *political* issues. Bernal explains that politics are “fundamentally about stories: narratives make actions and policies meaningful and serve to legitimate political positions and goals—or conversely to construct them as dangerous and wrong;” on websites stories are “constructed, contested, and collectively revised.”³⁷⁰ It is therefore crucial that the narratives of women and marginalized groups are not only included on these sites but that they are not silenced or erased in the name of nation building.

Individual Identity

As evidenced above, current research has considered how the diaspora has created and maintained political identities that are both critical and supportive of the Eritrean state. The formation of individual identity and how the process of identity creation and performance differs between generations of immigrants has not been adequately studied. Diaspora members who

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Bernal, “Civil Society and Cyberspace: Reflections on Dehai, Asmarino, and Awate,” 32-33.

have achieved financial stability and are politically vocal are not new immigrants fresh from Eritrea. Thus, divisions within the diaspora community itself and the dynamics of interaction between long established diaspora members and newly arrived immigrants are worth further study. What support mechanisms does the diaspora provide for new immigrants? How are these support mechanisms politically and religiously charged? How are they gendered? Who is welcomed into the community easily and who is not? Very little literature exists on acculturation among Eritrean migrants. The experiences of Eritrean migrants will obviously vary from one host country to another and will be influenced by individual behaviors, attitudes, perceptions, life experiences, relationship with the host community, and relationship with their existing support networks, which often include the Eritrean diaspora community. In discussing the diaspora population, some of the following observations may ostensibly imply homogeneity among Eritrean migrants; readers must be careful not to ascribe the following narratives to large categories of people within the diaspora. The experiences of gay Eritreans may be similar in some ways and divergent in others; this logic applies to Eritrean Christians, Muslims, women, men, etc. There is not enough research to quantify these observations or provide valuable disaggregated data. Furthermore, it is crucial to distinguish between self-identity and perceptions of another's identity, both as an outsider with biases that reflect upon one's interpretation of another's identity and as an outsider attempting to understand how another self-identifies. It is also important to realize that identity is fluid and can and does change contextually and temporally. Migrants and their children are especially aware of the complexity of identity: they are frequently expected to adapt their identity depending on their location and social group.

Research conducted by Mary Goitom in Toronto, Canada discusses familial influences and expectations on identity performance as experienced by ten second-generation Ethiopian and Eritrean young women. Her research provides a useful overview of existing research concerning immigrants and identity, but it relies too heavily upon broad categorizations of immigrant family relationships that are not specific to the Eritrean context. It is too easy to rely upon general discussions of gendered familial expectations; the expectation that women are caretakers and are responsible for housework, as well as the idea that young women are often cautioned to maintain

and protect their, and thus their families', virtue and honor,³⁷¹ does not lend itself to a discussion of how gender expectations can change among families. Participants in the study explained how their parents influenced their socialization, choices concerning higher education (especially as related to the proximity of educational institutions to the family), and perceptions of what it means to be Eritrean. The young women were expected to marry Eritrean men when the time came, but they were not allowed to date; this contrasts with male Eritreans of a similar age within their communities whom they reported as openly having non-Eritrean girlfriends.³⁷² Goitom's research also presupposes patriarchal and heterosexual familial relationships. What about identities and relationships which break this mold?

No literature exists related to LGBTQ identity in Eritrea outside of that detailing the law; formal literature on LGBTQ identity within the Eritrean diaspora is also nonexistent. Scouring the internet for first person accounts led to an article in *The Feminist Wire* by Hel Gebreamlak. Her narrative, which carefully details her experience as the gay daughter of Eritrean immigrants living in the United States, begins:

Masculinity was the last thing I learned how to do. I wasn't one of those baby dykes who literally knew *in utero*. But besides the very awkward family photo we took relatively recently where, much to my parents' discomfort, the photographer spent the whole time referring to me as their son, there is no pictorial evidence of who I've become.³⁷³

She clarifies that her parents never rejected her; when she "came out" her mother's reaction was to "[demand]...who else knew" because family image was paramount. She writes that her mother "nitpicked about hair length, and then stayed silent some more, and then invited my girlfriend at the time over for Christmas." She describes her father's initial silence on the matter and "his quietly growing acceptance, if not of me but of circumstances" over time. Referring to him as an "immigrant dad," Gebreamlak describes a situation in which her father wore a hat he believed belonged to her; upon realizing that it belonged to Gebreamlak's sister, "he snatched it off" because it was a woman's hat.³⁷⁴ This anecdote may seem trivial, but it is saturated with

³⁷¹ Mary Goitom, "Bridging Several Worlds: The Process of Identity Development of Second-Generation Ethiopian and Eritrean Young Women in Canada," *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 4 February 2017, pp. 1-13, <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10615-017-0620-y>.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷³ Hel Gebreamlak, "Moving Images: On Queerness and Eritrean Identity," *The Feminist Wire*, 9 February 2015, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/02/moving-images-queerness-eritrean-identity/>.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

meaning. Gebreamlak can perform her identity publicly as she wishes, because she lives in the United States and not Eritrea, where homosexuality is criminalized and post-liberation women were expected to reject their EPLF-inspired masculine-fighter hair, clothes, and manner in favor of traditional Eritrean femininity. Interestingly, her mother appears to have accepted her sexual identity but not her performance of gender: she invites her daughter's girlfriend to celebrate Christmas but laments her daughter's unfeminine appearance. Gebreamlak's father accepts her appearance as masculine; his thoughts on her sexuality are not evident.

Gebreamlak, states that she does not “have a strong claim to any gender;” when she attends church or a funeral, she wears a *netela*, a traditional scarf worn by women, and sits with the women. In her neighborhood, men assume she is male; when talking to them she deepens her voice, and she believes that she surprises them “because they’ve probably never had another dude listen to them so attentively before.” She acknowledges her identity as fluid, but this statement exposes her own biases: “dude[s]” act a certain way and interact with one another in a certain way. She dresses to bind her curves, admitting that the “image of gender requires diligence and preparation.” She muses that the idea of gender as performance initially bothered her, because she understood that as meaning that “it wasn’t real, or worse yet, that I wasn’t being real.” Gebreamlak states:

Then I started to examine everything my mother taught me in her quasi third world feminist way, which I like to joke led to my “lesbianism.” (FYI, she doesn’t like that joke.) The ideals she ingrained in me before I knew what it meant to be queer: sisterhood, self-reliance, and how to be a good daughter. All of this was predicated on the idea that I was to be a standard, Eritrean, hetero girl. Although some of her values were old-fashioned, many of them were nuanced and as feminist as anything I’ve ever heard. She didn’t teach my sister and me to be subservient or that marriage was the gold metal in girlhood success. But she still taught us gender as if it were a dance lesson, where even when the choreography is the same, everyone’s body naturally moves distinctively. Sometimes you realize you’re registered for the wrong class.³⁷⁵

Gebreamlak may have learned about femininity before masculinity, but her understanding of identity has evolved, as has her family's. Additionally, she solidly reaffirms her identity as Eritrean. She created a blog, which can no longer be accessed, called QUEERITREA; it introduced her to “some cool queer Eritreans,” and made her a target for those who felt she was “blemishing the Eritrean image.” She recalls “discovering a thread on a popular Eritrean forum

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

titled “there’s an Eritrean gay girl in Seattle,” with my photo underneath and a link to the [blog] site.” In publicly claiming her identity, she became an object for others, namely Eritreans, to analyze, criticize, support, etc. Gebreamlak states, “When you’re a part of a small immigrant community, finding a respectable identity in a world that is largely apathetic or antipathetic to you, is crucial to survival.” Linking postcolonial states to gender conformity and heterosexuality, she critiques both the idea that queerness is Western and the idea that heterosexuality is performed in the same way by all men and women.³⁷⁶

Gebreamlak’s article provides a much more nuanced and personal understanding of what it means to be an immigrant and the daughter or son of immigrants, than Goitom’s piece. This indicates how important it is for researchers to utilize informal research channels and sources. Gebreamlak’s description of her mother’s feminism also challenges to a certain extent Goitom’s findings. Unfortunately, Gebreamlak does not situate her parents within the context of Eritrean liberation for her readers, nor does Goitom explain the reasons for and by which the parents of the women she interviewed emigrated from Eritrea and Ethiopia; future research must treat family histories as important, as well as follow the evolution of Eritrean identity among third generations and beyond.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to analyze existing political narratives of the Eritrean state within the context of identity creation as enforced by the Eritrean nation and developed by Eritrean individuals. Current research tends to parallel the Eritrean state discourse of one Eritrean identity; certainly, within this frame there are divisions within the population, but Eritreans ultimately prioritize their identity as Eritrean above all else. The research therefore explores identity as explained through the lens of what it means to be Eritrean. This approach is necessary, especially given the constraints in attaining access to and original research from Eritrea; however, in constructing identity first as Eritrean and then delineating it into broader categories (think women ex-combatants, students, diaspora members), it fails to locate the individual within the Eritrean context. What does it mean to be a woman within Eritrea rather than an Eritrean woman? What does it mean to be a young student desperate to understand oneself and the world and compelled to participate in national service rather than an Eritrean youth with a duty to Eritrea? What does it mean to be an individual who identifies as gender non-conforming within Eritrea and within the diaspora, rather than a “homosexual” Eritrean in violation of Eritrean law? These questions privilege the complexity of the individual over the complexity of national identity. They also privilege individual testimony and unconventional research sources in an effort to discover which stories are not being told. Answers to these questions, while individual in nature, are likely to produce a more accurate representation of larger social groups once analyzed together. Only with this knowledge can researchers understand Eritrean migration and the progression of the lives of migrants. Research on Eritrea is concerned primarily with the state and migration patterns and destinations; what about the evolution of the individual? What about the different patterns and trajectories of migration for specific groups? Who is able to migrate, why and to where? How? How are those whom they leave behind in Eritrea affected? How do they as individuals, their relationship to the state, their relationships with those left behind, and their relationships to their host countries change overtime? What about future generations? The lack of attention afforded to change overtime in existing research is especially detrimental to understanding not only the Eritrean population, but the ever popular topic of the future of the Eritrean state. With the advent of technology and improved access to it, Eritreans living in Eritrea have more access to the Eritrean diaspora than ever before. The ways in which these groups interact can greatly affect re-imaginings of Eritrea’s political and social

future. Unfortunately, this paper cannot provide answers to the aforementioned questions. It does, however, hopefully provide a critical analysis of existing research in such a way as to guide readers to conduct more comprehensive research in the future. We must ask better questions and be willing to search for their answers in new spaces.

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