

Article

Experiences of refugees: Understanding challenges of Eritrean refugees, Alemwach site, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Ethiopia has progressive refugee policies and proclamation, particularly the “out of camp policy,” that allows Eritrean refugees to live outside of designated refugee camps. However, the implementation of these policies has been problematic, leading Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia to face significant barriers. The purpose of this research was to understand the specific difficulties faced by Eritrean refugees in the Alemwach site, Ethiopia. An ecological system and human rights framework were used to understand the challenges. A qualitative case study design was employed to explore the challenges. The study employed a purposive snowball sampling technique to select 10 participants. In-depth interviews, observations, and documents were used for data collection. The analysis of this data identified six themes that capture the complex and multifaceted challenges experienced by Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia: ongoing psychosocial challenges due to forced displacement; freedom of movement; the right to work; relationship with the host communities; security and crime; and document restoration and vital life events registration. Effective strategies must be developed to mitigate these challenges and align policy implementation with the realities of refugee experiences. The findings have implications for social work, psychology, and law.

Keywords

Alemwach, challenges, Eritrea, refugees

Résumé

L'Éthiopie a des politiques et une déclaration progressistes en matière de réfugiées et réfugiés, notamment la « politique hors camp », qui permet aux réfugiées érythréennes et réfugiés érythréens de vivre en dehors des camps désignés. Cependant, la mise en œuvre de ces politiques s'est avérée problématique, exposant les réfugiées érythréennes et réfugiés érythréens en Éthiopie à des difficultés importantes. L'objectif de cette recherche était de comprendre les difficultés spécifiques rencontrées par les réfugiées érythréennes et réfugiés érythréens sur le site d'Alemwach, en Éthiopie. Une étude de cas qualitative a été utilisée pour explorer ces enjeux.

L'étude a utilisé une technique d'échantillonnage en boule de neige raisonnée pour sélectionner 10 participantes et participants. Des entrevues approfondies, des observations et des documents ont été utilisés pour la collecte de données. L'analyse de ces données a identifié six thèmes qui illustrent les défis complexes et multiformes rencontrés par les réfugiées érythréennes et réfugiés érythréens en Éthiopie : les difficultés psychosociales persistantes liées aux déplacements forcés; la liberté de mouvement; le droit au travail; les relations avec les communautés d'accueil; la sécurité et la criminalité; et la restauration des documents et l'enregistrement des faits d'état civil. Des stratégies efficaces doivent être élaborées pour atténuer ces difficultés et aligner la mise en œuvre des politiques sur la réalité des réfugiées et réfugiés. Les résultats ont des retombées pour le travail social, la psychologie et le droit.

Mots-clés

Alemwach, défis, Érythrée, réfugiées et réfugiés

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Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that by the end of 2023, a record 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced globally, with 43.4 million being refugees (UNHCR, 2022). Ethiopia hosts a large number of refugees from neighboring countries and as of June 2017, it hosted refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Yemen, and the Great Lakes region (UNHCR, 2022). Eritrean refugees have been arriving in Ethiopia since the Ethio-Eritrean war (1998-2000). Approximately 200,000 Eritrean refugees are now residing in six camps, four in Tigray and two in the Afar region (Agence France-Press, 2021; Nigussie & Gedamu, 2023). The conflicts between the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Ethiopian Federal Government have created serious challenges for Eritrean refugees in the Tigray region. Eritrean refugees have faced "reprisal attacks, extrajudicial killings, sexual and gender-based violence, kidnappings, arbitrary detention, and the looting of refugee camps and property" (Gender-based Violence Office, 2023; United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2022, p. 15-16). There have also been reports of Eritrean refugees being "forcefully returned, detained, punished, and recruited by the same military forces they had fled from in Eritrea" (UNGA, 2022, p. 15-16). Satellite imagery revealed extensive damage to two refugee camps (Anna, 2021), raising serious concerns about violations of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which obligate states to ensure the protection, safety, and adequate living conditions of refugees, including access to basic services, documentation, and freedom from forced return, in accordance with UNHCR standards (UNHCR, 2025). Despite Ethiopia's progressive refugee frameworks such as Out-of-Camp Policy (OCP), the deteriorating security

conditions have compromised basic rights and protections of Eritrean refugees (Miller, 2022). This paper examines the specific challenges currently faced by Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site, focusing on key issues such as ongoing psychosocial challenges due to forced displacement; freedom of movement; the right to work; relationship with the host communities; security and crime; and document restoration and vital life events registration.

Literature review

Ethiopia hosts 1,051,022 refugees, making it the third-largest refugee-hosting country in Africa after Uganda and Sudan (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024). Among these, 159,000 are Eritrean refugees, who initially resided in Hitsats, Shimelba, Mai Aini, and Adi Harush camps of Tigray and Afar Regions in Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2022). Due to the ongoing conflict in the Tigray Region, 22,000 refugees relocated to the Amhara Region, particularly to the Alemwach site (UNHCR, 2023). The Alemwach refugee site was established in June 2021 in the Chila kebele, Dabat Woreda, North Gondar Zone, Amhara region, which is three kilometers from the town of Dabat. The total area coverage of Alemwach site is 91 hectares of land donated by the Dabat Woreda authorities for settling Eritrean refugees relocated from Tigray region. The site has a maximum capacity of 20,000 refugees, but 22,000 Eritrean refugees have been currently living in the site as well as in the host town (Salazar, 2023). UNHCR has adopted an integrated area-based approach, in which refugees and host communities share essential services such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), education, and health, rather than building new facilities (UNHCR, 2023). This strategy focuses on strengthening the capacity of existing infrastructure and services, ensuring they can meet the needs of both populations. By doing so, UNHCR aims to enhance social cohesion and promote peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities (UNHCR, 2023).

Severe and ongoing human rights violations in Eritrea have made life increasingly difficult, forcing thousands to flee the country for safety and security (Salazar, 2023). These violations include “increased mandatory militarization of national service, prolonged and arbitrary detention of Eritreans, the continued closure of civic space,” recruitment of child soldiers, and kidnapping and forced mobilization of Eritrean refugees to fight in the conflict (UNGA, 2022, p. 15-16). As a member state of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, as well as the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU), Ethiopia has adopted the Refugee Proclamation No.409/2004 (UNHCR, 2015). This proclamation outlines the clear procedures for applying for asylum and prohibits the government from refusing entry or refugee status to asylum seekers (Refugee Proclamation No. 409, 2004). The Ethiopian government adopted a new Refugee Proclamation No. 1110/2019, which recognizes refugees as assets and partners in development rather than liabilities, while also benefiting host communities. However, Ethiopia enforced a strict “encampment policy” that prevented all refugees in the country from living and moving outside designated camps despite OCP being adopted for Eritrean refugees (Asabu, 2019; Watlo & Assefa, 2019). An OCP is a policy that allows Eritrean refugees to live outside of designated refugee camps (Erkihun, 2017). While many Eritrean refugees live in major cities like Addis

Ababa (Asabu, 2019), Ethiopian refugee law hinders their access to human rights protections such as freedom of movement and the right to work (Mubanga, 2017; UNHCR, 2023). Although Ethiopia has legal frameworks to manage refugee issues in line with international laws, these laws still limit Eritrean refugees' access to essential rights (Mubanga, 2017; Watol & Assefa, 2019).

Gebrehiwet et al. (2021) reported that Eritrean refugees at the May-Ayni camp had notable impacts on host communities, including increased incidents of violence, crime, and non-normative sexual behavior. Similarly, Berhe et al. (2021) identified high levels of depression among Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia, findings that were further corroborated by Melese et al. (2024), who documented psychological challenges such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among Eritrean refugees in Dabat. While these studies contribute valuable insights into the mental health and social impacts associated with refugee displacement, there remains a lack of research that comprehensively examines the broader, multi-dimensional challenges currently experienced by Eritrean refugees, particularly in the context of ongoing conflict and displacement. There is a need to contextualize these challenges beyond psychological effects and to examine how issues such as restricted freedom of movement, limited access to employment, lack of vital registration services, strained relationships with host communities, and safety concerns shape refugees' daily lives.

Despite the growing population of Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site, there is limited research on the specific challenges they face, with most information coming from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or government reports. While the government and NGO reports offer valuable insights, they often lack the depth, nuance, and contextual understanding needed to fully capture the lived realities of Eritrean refugees in Alemwach site. The NGO and government reports do not capture the lived experiences of displacement and integration that are associated with the psychosocial challenges of the Eritrean refugees. Exploring these experiences is crucial not only for academic inquiry but also for informing responsive policy and program development that reflect the actual needs and aspirations of Eritrean refugee populations. For the purpose of this study, the participants comprised Eritrean refugees who were originally residing in the Tigray region but were forced to relocate to the Alemwach site in the Amhara region due to the ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia. These individuals were classified as refugees because they fled Eritrea to escape severe human rights violations and threats to their safety under the regime. Thus, this qualitative case study seeks to explore and understand the unique challenges encountered by Eritrean refugees in Alemwach, Ethiopia, guided by the central research question: What challenges do Eritrean refugees encounter in the context of Alemwach site?

Theoretical framework

To explore the challenges experienced by Eritrean refugees in Alemwach, Ethiopia, we employed the theoretical underpinnings of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory and a human rights framework. The ecological system theory is a multidisciplinary approach used to

understand the complex interplay between individuals and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Through ecological system theory, we examined how communities, NGOs, and government organizations (GOs) influence refugees' experiences and their relationships with host communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1983). The microsystem includes refugees' immediate environments such as their interactions with family members, peers, and host community members, which directly affect their psychosocial well-being and sense of belonging. The mesosystem involves the interconnections between these settings, such as the relationship between refugees and service providers such as NGOs and local health or education systems. The exosystem encompasses broader institutions that indirectly influence refugees' lives, such as employment regulations, access to legal documentation, and administrative decisions made by NGOs and GOs. The macrosystem reflects the overarching legal, cultural, and policy frameworks, including the OCP, which shape refugees' rights to work, move freely, and access protection. Lastly, the chronosystem captures the influence of temporal changes, such as the onset of armed conflict, on the evolving vulnerabilities and displacement experiences of Eritrean refugees. Meanwhile, the human rights framework guided our understanding of challenges related to fundamental rights, such as the freedom of movement and the right to work. This framework helped us assess how violations of these rights impact refugees' daily experiences and well-being. By integrating these frameworks, we aimed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues Eritrean refugees face.

Research methods

The study employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by Eritrean refugees. Using a case study approach, throughout the research process, the first author was responsible for data collection using multiple procedures, including interviews, observations, and documents, while the second author prepared theoretical framework, literature review and participated in the analysis stage in consultation with the first author (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). The multi-method strategy was adopted for its capacity to capture the complexity of the case, illuminate the processes and meanings underlying participants' experiences, and situate these within their specific social and contextual realities (Maxwell, 2012).

The study sample consisted of Eritrean refugees residing in the Amhara region, specifically at the Alemwach site, who had relocated from the Tigray region due to the war. Participants were included if they were Eritrean citizens with confirmed refugee status, had lived at the Alemwach site or in host communities for over a year, and could speak and read Tigrigna or Amharic. Data collection occurred in Dabat and at the Alemwach site in Ethiopia between July and August 2023.

Purposive snowball sampling was used to select participants. The first two participants were reached at Refugee Central Committee (RCC) and Refugee and Returnee Services (RRS). These participants were chosen for their key roles. The principal investigator, who worked as a protection officer for over a year at the Alemwach site and Dabat, informed the participants

about the study. The remaining eight participants were recruited through referrals. Of the ten participants, six identified as men and four as women, with ages ranging from 22 to 41 years. Five participants resided at the Alemwach site, three lived in rented accommodations within host communities, and two were affiliated with the RCC and the RRS. The first author reached data saturation after doing face to face interview with 10 participants, which is when participant recruitment ended. Among the 10 participants, one participant who was fluent in both Amharic and Tigrigna assisted with the translations and was asked to sign an agreement to preserve confidential information. The participant volunteered to provide translation services as the first author was acquainted with the participant in the role of protection officer.

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Gondar, Institutional Review Board (IRB), and informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. To minimize ambiguity, the first author verbally explained the nature of the study, risks, potential benefits as well as participants' right to respond to questions as they wished. Participants were also informed that all identifying information would be anonymized, and confidentiality would be strictly maintained throughout the research process. As such, the researchers used pseudonyms in the transcripts for analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions such as, "how do you exercise freedom of movement in accordance to the rules and regulations of the site, what challenges did you face?", with additional prompts. Given the choice between Tigrigna and Amharic, six participants were interviewed in Amharic and four in Tigrigna. Each interview lasted an average of 40 to 50 minutes.

The collected data were first transcribed from Tigrigna and Amharic into English and then analysed after transcription. Back translation process was utilized, wherein the interview was translated into English and then re-translated into the original language to ensure there was no loss of meaning in the translation. Furthermore, individuals with expertise in Amharic and Tigrigna languages were consulted to provide feedback on the accuracy of the translated material.

The first author conducted site observations in Dabat, Gondar, and Debark. It was observed that a number of refugees were detained and their freedom of movement was violated. This extended engagement allowed the researchers to gain firsthand insights into the daily experiences and challenges faced by participants, complementing the data obtained from interviews and document analysis. With permission, the first author took notes during the observations, and had access to documents such as coordination meeting reports, minutes, notes, policies, and proclamations in their capacity as a protection officer. The documents were selected and analyzed based on their relevance to the research objectives, the target population, and the type of qualitative data the documents provided. Additional documents, including published articles, books, proclamations, and reports related to Eritrean refugees, were also reviewed to enrich the data.

Data obtained from interviews, observations, and documents were narrated, codes and themes were organized in a master codebook, and thematic analysis was employed (Creswell,

2012). Through the data collection and analysis process, various sub-themes emerged, which were then grouped into major themes aligned with the study's main objectives (Creswell, 2012).

Results of the study

Six themes emerged from the data that highlight the challenges of Eritrean refugees living in the Alemwach site: ongoing psychosocial challenges due to forced displacement; freedom of movement; the right to work; relationship with the host communities; security and crime; and document restoration and vital life events registration. Each theme is discussed below, accompanied by interview excerpts.

Ongoing psychosocial challenges due to forced displacement

Participants' arrival at the Alemwach site was supported by organizations such as International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR, and the Ethiopian Government, while some traveled by foot independently. Throughout their journey to the Alemwach site, many refugees encountered significant challenges during their journey, including sexual violence from militant groups. For example, one participant who arrived on foot shared their experience:

I came here on foot with family, and faced numerous challenges, including attacks by militant groups. Tragically, two of my daughters were raped. After four days of dangerous travel through forests and deserts, we eventually reached Debark city. Then we were taken to a government security station and relocated to the Alemwach site where we were provided communal tents. However, the traumatic experiences of this journey and sexual attack by militants have resulted in significant stress for the entire family... (Refugee in Alemwach site, August 13, 2023)

Another participant, in the host community, also recounted worrying experiences of being assaulted by militant groups. She described feelings of hopelessness, stress, and a lack of confidence in authorities following the violence. Upon arriving at a safe location, she discovered she was pregnant and reported her situation to UNHCR and RRS, who responded quickly by reaching out to their health team. However, the participant noted that the facilities were inadequate for proper follow-up care, especially considering the emotional challenges typically faced by pregnant individuals. Documents from a psychosocial protection officer corroborated the participant's experiences, and highlighted numerous cases, some severe, such as pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, necessitating ongoing care (Report presented for coordination meeting, August 26, 2023).

Freedom of movement

Despite a positive reception of the government's decision to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention to adopt an out-of-camp policy allowing refugees to live outside designated settlements, there

were difficulties moving beyond Dabat due to security issues at checkpoints. Some Eritrean refugees managed to rent housing in Dabat but faced numerous obstacles when attempting to travel further. Few participants reported being able to move freely between the site and Dabat without any challenges; however, moving to other areas, like Debark, required a permission letter, and it was not as straightforward. One participant mentioned during their interview:

On one occasion, despite having a permission letter to go to Gondar, security and local officials stopped me at a checkpoint. I was detained for three hours and imprisoned for five days before I were released with the assistance of the RRS and UNHCR. (Translator at Alemwach site, July 5, 2023)

Eritrean refugees recognized the strict regulations governing travel outside of Dabat, which are enforced by the RRS and local government in line with national refugee laws. Refugees are required to obtain necessary documents, such as a permission or a referral letter from the RRS. Freedom of movement is primarily limited to areas around Dabat. To corroborate this, one participant shared their experience of “obtaining a permission letter to refer a medical case to Gondar Hospital, incurring a transportation cost of 2,000 Ethiopian Birr (ETB) compared to the 70 ETB charged for Ethiopians” (Refugee in the Alemwach site, July 5, 2023). The same participant added:

Upon reaching a checkpoint, security personnel refused to accept my permission letter and refugee status card, which lead to temporary detention for half a day before being transferred to the detention center in Dabat. (Refugee in Alemwach site, July 5, 2023).

Participants noted that movement is relatively easier for those who can afford to pay for security personnel, often through brokers, which can expedite travel arrangements. For example, one participant shared:

On one occasion, when I traveled to Gondar for family and medical reasons despite having proper documentation, they initially halted me at a checkpoint. It was only through a driver’s negotiation and a payment of 3,000 ETB that they allowed me to proceed. Many others moved using this path to reach cities like Addis Ababa, Bahir Dar, and Gondar face similar challenges. The familiarity between drivers and security personnel often facilitates smoother travel for those who can pay in advance, while those unable to do so encounter significant obstacles, even when adhering to legal procedures. (Refugee in the Alemwach site, July 6, 2023)

A participant from the protection officer's working in Alemwach site expressed that although Ethiopia has progressive refugee laws, refugees face significant barriers, particularly at checkpoints when attempting to travel from their designated areas:

The office's main role is to ensure effective implementation of these laws and provide guidance to refugees, many of whom regularly submit petitions and complaints about their travel difficulties. Despite discussions aimed at facilitating movement for those who follow proper procedures, security personnel at checkpoints often deny access, citing local government jurisdiction. This situation is reviewed collaboratively with various stakeholders, but ultimately depends on the discretion of security officials. (Protection Officer, RRS at Alemwach site, July 8, 2023)

Additionally, a participant from RCC highlighted that traveling outside the host town remains a major issue for refugees. To address this, RCC, RRS, and other entities have coordinated transportation for refugees needing to travel for health or resettlement purposes, particularly to locations like Gondar and Debarke. However, many refugees prefer to move to larger cities like Addis Ababa, "out of their reported cases which complicates transportation efforts, as local partnerships provide vehicles while emphasizing the need for security to avoid conflicts between refugees and the host community" (RCC member at Alemwach site, July 10, 2023).

Findings from the observations revealed that security personnel at checkpoints were hindering refugees from exercising their freedom of movement. For instance, during visits to the Dabat and Waken detention centers, as well as checkpoints between Dabat, Gondar, and Debarke, the first author observed several refugees being detained despite possessing official permission letters from the appropriate authorities. In some cases, refugees with valid permission documents were turned away or detained without justification. These were observed on multiple occasions.

The right to work

Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site are involved in various work activities through agreements with the government and NGOs. However, many are only provided with incentives and not a full salary. Participants believed that the right to work is effectively realized through agreements between the government and NGOs in a given area, in contrast to challenges faced in private businesses:

I find that the right to work is applicable but depends on specific skills, such as proficiency in Amharic, Tigrinya, or English. Without these skills, employment opportunities are limited, as NGOs typically hire based on the skill sets available. Thus, the application of the right to work often hinges on the agreements established by decision-makers. (Refugee at Alemwach site, July 13, 2023)

It was observed that refugees engage in private businesses, such as mini shops, grocery stores, filmmaking, and operating *Gulet Gebeya* (shops outside of tents). Participants mention facing problems of theft and threats for unlawful payments from the host communities and security personnel. Refugees have criticized site authorities for not providing clear procedures to manage these issues effectively. One participant shared their experience as:

There is no established procedure for exercising the right to work at the Alemwach site. After obtaining a work permit, I opened a Digital Satellite Television show house and initially experienced success, earning 7,000 to 10,000 ETB monthly for about six months. However, I had to pay 2,000 ETB each month to ensure cooperation with the security personnel overseeing the area, which includes local community members and special forces. (Refugee at the Alemwach site, July 12, 2023)

A refugee at the Alemwach site shared their experience of running a mini shop on-site, where they faced threats from local community members who wanted to shut down their business. The participant mentioned that they were looted, and despite reporting the incident to security, there was no response. The participant mentions that since the incident, “I have been search[ing] for another job and experiencing significant financial difficulties in supporting my family.”

Relationship with the host communities

One participant appreciated the warm welcome from local representatives and organizations, sharing that “I try to form good relationship with the younger hosts, enjoy sharing experiences about Tigray, and engage in sibling-like discussions about Asmara and other parts of Eritrea” (Refugee at the Alemwach site, July 15, 2023). In contrast to the above idea, participants expressed that initially, the relationship between hosts and refugees was positive, but it deteriorated due to threats from the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), particularly after the “Chena massacre.” This incident led to a decline in trust among the host community, who grew suspicious of the refugees and feared potential TPLF infiltrators. One participant describes their visits to town as:

I experienced mixed reactions; some locals questioned my nationality and accused me of being linked to TPLF intelligence, while others treated me warmly, recognizing the Eritrean Army’s alliance with the Ethiopian government. (Refugee at the Alemwach site, July 17, 2023)

Some refugee participants reported growing positive relationship with members from the host community. For example, one participant stated, “as our friendship grows, I engage in communal activities such as attending church, celebrating festivities together, and enjoying open

conversations, which brings me a sense of belonging and comfort reminiscent of home” (RCC member at the Alemwach site, July 18, 2023).

However, host communities express discontent toward local authorities and the RRS due to unmet agreements, leading to strained relations. This distrust is compounded by incidents of threats from locals toward refugees, complicating their living conditions, especially since the site is open and accessible to the community. In favor of the aforementioned idea, a participant shared:

One day, a group of local community members came to my tent and threatened me to leave the site. They told me that their intention was to put pressure on RRS, UNHCR, and local governments to fulfill their pledge. Until their pledge was fulfilled, they told me they would come again and threaten me to leave the site immediately. Since that time, I was frustrated to live in the site, as a result of repeated threats. Now, I started to live in the town through house rent. (Refugee at the Alemwach site, July 18, 2023)

Observations indicated that the relationship between refugees and host communities began positively, characterized by warm welcomes and shared cultural experiences. However, tensions arose due to conflicts related to the Tigray region and dissatisfaction with unmet local government promises. While the bond between Alemwach site hosts and Dabat town residents remains generally positive, it is dynamic and influenced by broader geopolitical developments in the Tigray region, Eritrea, and Ethiopia.

Security and crime

Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site feel their safety is constantly at risk, primarily due to tensions with local youth and community members who blame the government for failing to uphold agreements made prior to the site’s establishment. As a result, refugees face ongoing attacks, leading to fatalities, injuries, and the theft of their belongings. Refugees at the site have reported ongoing criminal activities, including looting, thefts, and physical assaults. Despite the delivery of aid materials by various organizations, these items are often stolen, and security personnel show little concern for the refugees’ plight. Many refugees have lost essential cooking items or shelter materials provided by the donors. “We are suffering a lot due to crimes committed by groups from the host communities” (Translator at the Alemwach site, July 19, 2023).

In areas where refugees and host community members compete for business, conflicts arise as both groups vie for involvement in local commerce such as shopping and services. This competition often leads to tensions, with host community members committing acts of crime against refugees as they seek to assert dominance. The situation is exemplified by a shop owner who travels to purchase goods in town, facing threats from local youth and security personnel at checkpoints: “to ensure my business’s safety, I paid bribes to security guards and use various

payment methods while maintaining communication with influential community figures to mitigate potential conflicts” (Refugee at the Alemwach site, July 21, 2023).

In multiple incidents, Eritrean refugees have been assaulted and injured while trying to defend their belongings. A participant highlighted an alarming rise “in crimes such as thefts, assaults, and kidnappings within and around refugee sites. The causes of these crimes range from conflicts over business interests to violent encounters during social activities” (RCC member at the Alemwach site, July 21, 2023). In response, protection teams were working with local authorities to raise awareness and prevent criminal actions, while also striving to safeguard refugees and address ongoing safety concerns (Protection officer, RRS, Alemwach site, July 16, 2023). When members of the surrounding community attempt to steal refugee materials, refugees try to defend themselves; however, the criminals often possess greater power, including firearms, and have connections with security personnel. In this case, the actions go beyond material looting, resulting in injuries and fatalities among refugees. For example, a participant shared:

One day, members of the community armed with guns came to my house and demanded to take materials delivered by various organizations. I tried to respond peacefully, but they continued to assess my tent and requested repeatedly for the materials I received from donors. They severely injured me and my family. I had applied several times for security personnel in the site but no one cares and no response has been provided yet. (Refugee at the Alemwach site, August 3, 2023)

In support of the above excerpt, another participant shared their experience: “One day, when I went to Dabat town, two community members approached and ordered me to stop. They demanded money, and when I said I didn’t have any, they hit me repeatedly and injured my leg” (Refugee at the Alemwach site, August 5, 2023). A protection officer said that the safety of Eritrean refugees is continuously under threat. Among the recorded crimes under investigation are gang violence, thefts, killings, assaults, and kidnappings. Some of these incidents stem from conflicts of interest, primarily related to business activities in the site, while others arise during moments of shared activities, such as drinking with locals. A participant mentioned that “the protection team, in collaboration with local administrators, were working to minimize criminal actions through raising awareness, preventing refugees from engaging in unlawful activities, and conducting follow-ups to negotiate resolutions with responsible authorities” (Protection officer, RRS, Alemwach site, August 7, 2023).

Document restoration and vital event registration

Study participants expressed that having essential documents and timely registration of vital events is crucial for their resettlement and legal requirements. However, many Eritrean refugees lost their documents due to the conflict in the Tigray region and remain unable to recover them. Despite repeated requests to restore their lost documents, authorities have only indicated that the process will begin once the situation stabilizes.

Additionally, the refugees have been unable to register vital life events, such as births and marriages, since their arrival. Another participant explained that he has a newborn baby who still does not have a birth certificate due to the lack of available services (Refugee at the Alemwach site, August 29, 2023). Another participant shared:

I lost all important documents during the attack in the Tigray region and now I have no documents. I have asked RRS and UNHCR for help in restoring these documents using online services that used to be available, but have been informed that the service will start soon. (Refugee at the Alemwach site, August 26, 2023)

Discussion

This study explored the challenges faced by Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site in Ethiopia. The results revealed key issues including ongoing psychosocial challenges due to displacement; freedom of movement; the right to work; relationship with the host communities; security and crime; and document restoration and vital life events registration. Some of our findings are consistent with previous research, including incidents of violence and property crimes perpetrated by surrounding community members (Yohannes, 2021) and psychological well-being (Berhe et al., 2021; Gebrehiwet et al., 2021; Nigussie & Gedamu, 2023). Whereas some findings are against the previous report, including freedom of movement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MoFA] (2014) and UNHCR (2023)).

This study revealed that Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site experience significant psychological challenges stemming from traumatic encounters with militant groups in the Tigray region. Ongoing difficulties in their current environment further exacerbate the mental health challenges. As explained by the ecological systems theory, the experiences of Eritrean refugees are shaped by their interactions in their immediate microsystem as well as by institutions at the macro level. Previous research by Meles et al. (2024) and Berhe et al. (2021) corroborates the high prevalence of mental health concerns among Eritrean refugees, emphasizing the urgent need for more effective psychosocial support. Although implementing partners were expected to take responsibility for psychosocial services, the existing services at the site were insufficient. Therefore, additional institutional resources are needed to ensure adequate psychosocial support.

The findings revealed that Eritrean refugees at Alemwach faced significant restrictions on their freedom of movement, limiting access to medical care, attending family events, and processing resettlement opportunities. Although Ethiopia's 1951 Convention does not impose such restrictions (UNHCR, 1951), the Refugee Proclamation No. 409/2004 requires refugees to obtain permission from the responsible authorities; however, they were still unable to exercise their rights even after securing the required permission. Despite the Ethiopian government's efforts to view refugees as assets under the Refugee Proclamation Directive No. 02/2019, implementation has remained inadequate. Consistent with the present findings, Mubanga (2017) noted that such restrictions have forced refugees to rely heavily on UNHCR assistance, thereby limiting their ability to achieve self-reliance. The human rights framework, which emphasizes

the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, provides a lens to assess how the restriction of these rights affects refugees' daily experiences and overall well-being. The findings demonstrate that limitations on rights such as freedom of movement, access to work, and social participation not only undermine refugees' autonomy but also hinder their ability to achieve self-reliance and integration. This finding contrasts with reports by MoFA (2014), which noted that over 3,810 Eritrean refugees were living in Addis Ababa and other major cities outside of camps, and by UNHCR (2023), which estimated that approximately 106,448 refugees, mainly Eritreans, now reside outside of camps—indicating that a significant number of refugees live beyond the camp settings.

The study findings reveal that Eritrean refugees face significant barriers to employment, including negative community attitudes, conflicts of interest within the host context, and economic pressures. Together, these factors hinder their ability to fully exercise their rights. Despite Proclamation 02/2019 allowing refugees to work “in projects jointly designed by the government and the international community and in fields of work permitted for foreign nationals, upon obtaining the required work permit” (Refugee Proclamation, Directive No. 02/2019, p. 1), the implementation has been largely ineffective. Interpreting these findings through the lens of the ecological framework, specifically the exosystem level, highlights how institutional structures and policy decisions, including those made by NGOs and government agencies regarding employment regulations, shape the lived experiences and economic integration of refugees. Consistent to this finding, Nigussie and Gedamu (2023) reveal that Eritrean refugees face looting, threats, and additional costs associated with negotiating access to work opportunities. Other report findings also reveal that even though Ethiopia has progressive refugee laws, a lack of integration with the main ministerial stream contributes to practical challenges for Eritrean refugees (ILO, 2024). Against the present finding, studies in other parts of Ethiopia reveal that despite legal restrictions of the Refugee Proclamation of 409/2004, the country has begun to allow programs that promote greater self-reliance for refugees through partnerships with international and non-governmental organizations, aiming to reduce their dependency (Asabu, 2019). This was demonstrated by a project in the camps of Ethiopia's Somalia region camps, jointly designed and implemented by international organizations and the government (Moret et al., 2006), which coordinated the efforts of refugees and host communities in agricultural production to support local markets (UNHCR, 2015).

Within the microsystem of the ecological framework, refugees' interactions with family members, peers, and host community members are examined to understand how their immediate environments shape their experience and adaptation. The findings reveal that Eritrean refugees initially received a warm welcome from the local community, despite language differences. However, over time, the relationship became more complex, oscillating between cooperation and conflict, with occasional incidents of violence against refugees. The relationship has historical roots, as the people of Dabat and Eritrea long shared strong trade and cultural ties, with some hosts having grown up in Asmara and some refugees in Dabat, Gondar. This relationship soured after Eritrea's independence, resulting in violent confrontations primarily driven by regime

interests (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000 cited in Negussie & Gedamu, 2023). Scholars have characterized the conflict as a “family quarrel between closely related regimes in Eritrea and Ethiopia” (Abbink, 1998, p. 551) and others described the conflict as one between “brothers” (Negash & Tronvoll, 2000, cited in Negussie & Gedamu, 2023, p. 2). The present finding is consistent with a previous study conducted in the Tigray region on the same population prior to displacement, which revealed that interactions, initially smooth, had deteriorated over time (Negussie & Gedamu, 2023). It is recommended that RCC, RRS, local government officials, and community leaders take an active role in fostering positive interactions. This could be achieved through ceremonies, religious centers, and collaborative platforms that bring community members together both at the settlement site and within the host community.

Framed through the exosystem, which highlights broader institutions that indirectly shape refugees’ lives, the study’s findings reveal how the loss of essential documents and inadequate restoration services hinder refugees’ integration and resettlement processes. Access to legal documentation, such as birth and marriage certificates issued by the RRS in Ethiopia, is critical for performing necessary activities like resettlement (ILO, 2024). Despite Ethiopia’s commitments under the New York Declaration (2016), implementation has been limited due to capacity issues, lack of awareness, and disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic and related state of emergency measures (ILO, 2024). From an ecological perspective, it is the responsibility of the Ethiopian government to restore and maintain these services, balancing the provision of essential documentation with national security considerations (Ethiopian Refugee Proclamation, 2019; Yohannes, 2021).

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Eritrean refugees at the Alemwach site have been traced from their forced relocation from Tigray region to Amhara region, Alemwach site. Despite the existence of policies and refugee proclamation designed to protect and empower refugees, many of them do not translate into tangible support on the ground. Eritrean refugees faced numerous challenges including psychosocial distress, restricted freedom of movement, limited employment rights, hostile attitudes from some host communities, safety threats related to crime, and risks of sexual violence. These conditions underscore the need for urgent, coordinated, and multisectoral response. International, national, and local governments, along with stakeholders such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, must work collaboratively to address these barriers and enhance the safety, dignity, and overall quality of life for Eritrean refugees. The Ethiopian government should integrate the progressive refugee policies into key national implementing sectors to ensure effective and practical provision of services delivered at the ground. Additionally, fostering positive relationships between refugees and host communities can mitigate tensions and promote social cohesion, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches that benefit both groups. Ongoing research and adaptive policy frameworks will be critical in addressing the evolving needs of this vulnerable population.

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