

Summary

Eritrean asylum status holders in the Netherlands

A qualitative study of their flight from Eritrea and their lives in the Netherlands

Leen Sterckx
Merhawi Fessehazion

m.m.v. Bet-El Teklemariam

Original title:
Eritrese statushouders in Nederland
978 90 377 0888 2

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research
The Hague, November 2018

Summary and conclusions

Jaco Dagevos, Leen Sterckx and Merhawi Fessehazion

5.1 Qualitative study of Eritrean asylum status holders in the Netherlands

This report describes the background and life situation of Eritrean holders of asylum status who have come to live in the Netherlands in the last few years. We conducted in-depth interviews to ascertain why they had fled Eritrea, what their experiences during their flight were and what their life in the Netherlands is like. We spoke to asylum status holders themselves and to experts who are familiar with the Eritrean group either through their work or other involvement. The hope is that these two perspectives will provide greater clarity on the background to the current position of Eritrean asylum status holders. The respondents in the study were all adults; this report thus does not address the issue of unaccompanied minor refugees from Eritrea.

Box S.1 Cohort study of asylum seekers and asylum status holders

This study is part of a project involving a longitudinal cohort study of asylum seekers and asylum status holders in the Netherlands. The aim of the project is to map the position of persons who obtained residency status in the Netherlands after 1 January 2014, and to monitor them over time. The project draws on register data (Statistics Netherlands (CBS) 2017, 2018a), surveys (Dagevos et al. 2018) and qualitative research. This study of Eritreans is the first qualitative study to be published as part of this project.

Fieldwork

In-depth interviews were held with 26 Eritrean asylum status holders. In addition, 22 experts were interviewed who are familiar with the Eritrean group either through their work or other involvement.

Two interviewers of Eritrean-Dutch origin, who have lived in the Netherlands for some time, contacted the asylum status holders, conducted the interviews and transcribed and translated the resultant recordings. These two researchers – a woman and a man – each have large networks and had already built up a relationship of trust within the target group through their activities as volunteers or support workers. The female researcher approached and interviewed the women in the research group, while the male researcher targeted the male respondents. The use of experienced interviewers with an Eritrean background was necessary for the successful completion of the fieldwork. New networks were penetrated during the fieldwork in order to increase the diversity of respondents. A knowledge of the culture of the Eritrean group also proved to be indispensable for making contacts and conducting the interviews.

There was a degree of distrust in the Eritrean group – both towards other group members and towards outsiders – and it took time, flexibility and patience to persuade them to consent to an interview. In order not to jeopardise the relationship of trust during the interview, no direct questions were asked about the influence of the Eritrean government on the lives of asylum status holders, nor about traumatic experiences during their flight from Eritrea. The interviewees were given space to share experiences with us, but were not explicitly asked about them and were not questioned further if it was apparent that they did not wish to go into the subject in more depth. Both themes – the influence of the Eritrean government and traumatic experiences during the flight to the Netherlands – came up during (parts of) the interviews.

Given the challenges of carrying out research in this group – the distrust towards outsiders, the predominantly low education level and the wide sociocultural discrepancies – we cannot say with certainty, despite our best attempts to accommodate these issues, that those who were willing to speak to us are an accurate representation of the entire group of Eritrean asylum status holders who have recently arrived in the Netherlands. At the same time, we do note that our findings from the interviews with asylum status holders are confirmed by the interviews with experts, by the literature and by available statistical material, supporting our view that this study offers a good picture of the background and life situation of recently arrived Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands.

Size and composition of the Eritrean community in the Netherlands

After Syrians, Eritreans are the group who have most frequently requested asylum in the Netherlands in recent years. Between 10% and 15% of asylum applications were submitted by Eritreans between 2014 and the first half of 2017; that equates to approximately 17,000 individuals. Almost all first asylum applications by Eritreans are granted. A high proportion of Eritreans came to the Netherlands as singles, though the number of persons making a journey in connection with family reunification with an asylum seeker has risen sharply in the last few years.

The first group of Eritrean asylum seekers of any magnitude arrived in the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s and numbered around 1,500 persons. They fled during the war of independence between Eritrea and Ethiopia. These asylum seekers were in favour of Eritrean independence and often supported the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF; later the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)) and what is now the governing People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). The second wave of refugees (around 6,000 persons) arrived between 1998 and 2010 during the border conflicts between Eritrea and Ethiopia. The asylum seekers from the most recent group are fleeing the current regime, which was (originally) supported by those in the first wave of asylum seekers. Not only are there considerable differences within the Eritrean group as regards affinity with the Eritrean regime, but the recent group is also less well educated and more often from a rural background than the more established Eritrean community.

The increase in asylum requests granted means the number of Eritreans in the Netherlands is rising rapidly, although it still remains a relatively small group, with just under 15,000 Eri-

treans entered in the Dutch population registers as at 1 January 2018. In reality, however, the actual number is likely to be higher; Classification into origin groups in the Dutch population registers is based on information on the country of birth of the individual and their parents; as Eritrea only gained independence in 1993, those born before that date are registered as Ethiopian. There are lots of young people in this group – almost half are aged under 20 – and women are in the minority (40%). The growing number of persons making a journey in connection with family reunification with an asylum seeker means the number of couples and children living at home within the Eritrean group is increasing.

5.2 Life in Eritrea and reasons for fleeing

Eritrea: neither war nor peace

Eritrea has around 6 million inhabitants, divided into nine different ethnic groups, of which the Tigrinya, Tigre and Afar are the largest. Roughly half the population are Muslim; the remainder are Christian, predominantly Eritrean Orthodox. At the end of 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had registered over 400,000 Eritrean refugees, but the true figure is much higher because many do not register. Eritrea is thus losing large numbers of people, and the government has now admitted that this is having an impact on its ability to maintain services such as education.

Most of the informants in this study originate from rural areas of Eritrea, from the regions which border Ethiopia and Sudan. Seven respondents come from the capital Asmara and surrounding area. With a few exceptions who have been educated at one of the colleges, our respondents attained a low education level in Eritrea. For a number of reasons (poverty, opinions on the need to educate women), some – despite compulsory schooling – have received only a few years of elementary education and can only read and write in their own language. Others have also spent a few years in secondary education.

Life in Eritrea is characterised by a situation which has dragged on for many years of ‘neither at war nor at peace’ with Ethiopia. Families often lack a father because he has died, fled or is absent for long spells due to spending many years in military service.

I come from a small village in Zoba Debub. I served in the army for four years. I began my military service at the age of 17. I only went to school for eight years, but I didn't learn much. I lived with my mother, my older brother and my little sister. We grew up without a father. My father died in 2000 in the war against Ethiopia. Before he died, we didn't see much of him: as a soldier he only came to visit once a year for a week. My mother received his entire wages of 400 nakfa to look after us. It was very tough. None of us had the chance to invest in education. My mother started a small business, selling home-grown vegetables. If we didn't get much rain during the rainy season, she didn't earn anything. It was more about survival than living for all of us. My older brother and I tried to help her, but our military service meant our contribution was very limited. (man, 25 years old)

The border conflict¹ is used to legitimise the severe constraints on freedom in Eritrea, the international isolation in which Eritrea now finds itself and the compulsory public and military service for all citizens aged 17 years and older, for an indefinite period.

Young people are conscripted to go to Sawa, a military training camp where all children, boys and girls, are required to spend their eleventh and last year of secondary school, when they are aged around 16 or 17. If they left school earlier than this, they are conscripted at around that age to report to Sawa. Sawa has a fearsome reputation and young people deliberately perform badly at school so as to be kept back in the lower years for as long as possible.

The Eritrean government has destroyed this new generation. Their educational mentality, for example: when you get to the final year, you have to do military service, so people stretch out their school career for as long as possible, by underperforming, because otherwise they have to go to Sawa. In Sawa they are humiliated by the soldiers. (expert)

Military service main reason for fleeing

Military service (and the desire to avoid it) is the most frequently heard motive given by asylum status holders for fleeing Eritrea. More specifically, they cite the lack of freedom in Eritrea to choose your own education or occupation, to live where you wish, to travel freely and to live with your family, as well as the very low wages which are not sufficient to sustain a family, and the open-ended military service.

The biggest problem is military service, which is open-ended. You don't know how long you will have to serve. I have brothers who have been in military service since 1995. They're not married and don't have any children. [They] don't receive any pay. [My brother] receives a salary of 500 nakfa; what can you do with 500 nakfa? It's enough for one evening meal.

Women flee forced relationships and sexual violence in military service. Their reputation is damaged once it becomes known they have been victims of rape.

I fled for various reasons. I would describe Eritrea as a gateway to Hell. During my military service, I was sexually harassed several times. And I was raped by my superior officer. There was nowhere I could go to escape the situation. If I'd become pregnant as a result of being raped, I would definitely have committed suicide. Everyone around me knew what was happening, but I couldn't ask anyone for help. I still think about it sometimes. I'm glad it's over!

When one person flees, this not uncommonly sparks off a chain reaction among partners, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews, who flee the country to escape the reprisals that follow the flight or desertion of a family member. In a bid to halt the exodus of its citizens, the Eritrean government imposes fines on those left behind, imprisons them or forces them to perform public services in the place of the person who has fled.

The compulsory military or public service, which lasts for an indefinite period, also means a lack of economic prospects. This is even worse for men because of the strong social norm which dictates that men should provide for the family, something that is not possible without an income. This has helped create a 'migration culture' within Eritrea, with so many

people fleeing the country that migration has to some extent become a social norm: everyone leaves, and given the lack of opportunities and freedom, leaving becomes an automatic choice.

As you grow older and you aren't doing well in school, you end up being a soldier anyway, and I wasn't learning. When everyone else has left, you don't want to be the one left behind, so you decide to leave as well.

Traumatic experiences during the flight

Before Eritreans arrive in the Netherlands, most of them have endured an arduous journey. The accounts given by our respondents are often deeply affecting and shocking. It is important that these stories are told, because they help us to understand the physical and psychological baggage that Eritreans bring with them to the Netherlands.

Many Eritreans have gone before our respondents, and are a source of information regarding what can happen during the flight. All our respondents reported that they had heard stories about the risks of the flight, but that this did not put them off wanting to leave Eritrea. Women accept that they will be raped during the journey and take precautions against getting pregnant by having a contraceptive injection which offers protection for three months.

Before the journey, every woman had a contraceptive injection to ensure they didn't get pregnant for three months. It was known that women would be raped by Sudanese or Libyans, so if you didn't have the injection, there was a strong chance you would get pregnant. You can't avoid being raped, but if the journey doesn't last too long, you can at least make sure you don't get pregnant. As a woman, you know it can happen, and so you say goodbye to your life before leaving Sudan.(woman)

It is sometimes reported in the literature that parents or other family members send young people 'on ahead' to Europe so that when they arrive they can try to prepare the way for family reunification or can send money back home. We heard little evidence of this from our respondents; they had in fact left in the utmost secrecy, not telling anyone in order not to cause problems for relatives or others. There appears to be a preference for leaving in small groups, without informing anyone else. The family is however often needed to help finance the journey. This usually takes place in stages: on arrival, contact is sought with the refugee's family with a request for payment. If this is not forthcoming, the smugglers hold the refugees prisoner until they receive payment. Our purpose in this study was not to ascertain the precise costs of the journey, but it runs into the thousands of euros.

Ethiopia and Sudan as transit countries

The first country where our respondents arrived after fleeing Eritrea was either Sudan or Ethiopia. The choice appears to depend mainly on where they lived in Eritrea. The next step after leaving Ethiopia en route to Europe was Sudan. Sudan is the starting point for the hellish journey through the Sahara desert towards Libya, before crossing the Mediterranean to Italy. Thereafter, the journey continues to Northwestern Europe, and for our

respondents to the Netherlands. To give an impression of the numbers: between March and October 2017, more than 20,000 Eritreans entered Ethiopia. Some went to Addis Ababa, others were sent to refugee camps: in January 2018 the UNHCR camps in Ethiopia contained 165,000 Eritreans. Although Ethiopia is a relatively safe country for Eritreans, they do not regard an Ethiopian refugee camp as their final destination. Their hope is to obtain a visa to enter a safe country, or else they are awaiting family reunification. Partly because of the long waiting times, Eritrean refugees choose to flee via the Mediterranean Sea.

The journey from Ethiopia to Sudan is dangerous because of the border controls and the need to cross a river, where people regularly drown.

After four months I continued towards Sudan with the help of human smugglers. During the journey, you always came across other refugees. To get from Ethiopia to Sudan, we had to cross the fast-running River Tekeze at night. We had to watch out for [Ethiopian] border guards here, too. If I hadn't had help, I would have drowned. Lots of people drown there. My friend tried to cross the same river before me and she drowned. When the current is strong, the smugglers swim away and leave you to drown. That happened to several people I know.

Eritrean refugees in Sudan do not all stay in camps; some end up in Sudanese society. Some of them quickly seek out a human smuggler so that they can continue their journey towards the Sahara desert; others live and work for a time in Sudan to earn enough to pay for the remainder of the journey. Whilst in Sudan they are at risk of being arrested as illegal immigrants or falling into the hands of criminal human traffickers.

Arduous journey through the desert

From Khartoum, the refugees' journey continues to Libya. The trek through the Sahara takes roughly two weeks. The heat is unbearable and the people smugglers are ruthless. Interviewees talked about hunger and thirst and about fellow travellers dying from exhaustion and abuse.

When you leave Ethiopia for Sudan it's not too bad. But on the journey from Sudan to Libya, people die. In the fifteen days I spent on the journey you don't eat, don't do anything, you can't do anything. And then there's the heat. If you're able to go for a pee, you drink it. I'm being totally honest with you. There are some who refuse to give you anything [laughing]. When two people are thirsty, a third person gives it to the first two, and that's how you survive. There are also people who die. They [the smugglers] only take you. They only have water for themselves.

[The journey is] tough; really, really tough. At times you're on the edge of death. It's very, very hard; people are thirsty, people are hungry. There were people who were with us, who died. There's one person I haven't forgotten; his name is Berhane. He was struggling so much, and he died from hunger. There was another man; his name was Ermias; he wanted to die. We asked them [the smugglers] to help him. 'Inshallah he will die, because we already have too many people', was their answer. There were very many people on the vehi-

cle. He didn't die, but they still threw him out of the vehicle because they said he was going to die.

The interviewed Eritreans describe the journey through the desert to the Libyan ports as the most arduous part of their flight. In Libya they often ended up in warehouses where life was not much better. Diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) and scabies are rife. The refugees remain in Libya until they can pay for their crossing and until a boat is ready to depart.

From Libya to Europe

Compared with the first part of the journey, the respondents did not say much about the journey across the Mediterranean Sea. Once they arrived on European soil, our respondents did not see Italy as an appealing final destination. Eritrean migrants who have settled there have little chance of finding work and earning a good living, and obtaining an Italian residence permit is therefore not regarded by the family they have left behind in Eritrea as a successful outcome. Our respondents consequently avoided registering as asylum seekers and travelled on to Milan as quickly as possible. Once there, they used human smugglers again for the journey further north, to destinations such as Switzerland, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. The Netherlands was chosen as a destination by some of the interviewees because of the perceived relatively flexible family reunification policy (according to information available within the refugee networks at the time). Others ended up in the Netherlands more or less by chance or even by accident, en route to another European country.

I paid them in advance so that they would take me to Switzerland. There were ten of us in our group. Everyone had a different destination. The smugglers accompanied us as far as the train to France, and then left with the money. From France, everyone went their own way. I didn't want to stay in France. I couldn't go to England, and I didn't know how I would be able to get into Switzerland. So I went with a couple of Eritreans to the Netherlands.

The smugglers in Italy had put us on the train to Germany. They told us to get out in Germany and take the train to Amsterdam. They told us that Amsterdam was the capital of Sweden. When I arrived in Amsterdam with five other people, that was when we discovered we'd ended up in the wrong country.

Without exception, Eritreans who fled via Sudan and Libya endured an arduous journey with all kinds of deprivations. It is a testament to the determination of these people, but the flight will also have left its mark on them. Those experiences are different for men and for women. In addition to violence and intimidation – which were suffered by both men and women – women are victims of sexual violence. Virtually all the asylum status holders interviewed for this study referred to the sexual violence to which women in their group were subjected. They did not speak of their own experiences; that is probably too sensitive a subject to discuss with a stranger in an interview.

5.3 The first phase of life in the Netherlands

Mixed experiences with the asylum procedure

After arriving in the Netherlands, Eritreans come into contact with various agencies, beginning with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Their experiences of the IND interview vary. Partly because the Eritreans in this study were not always in possession of official papers, they were asked several personal questions during those interviews. They often found this difficult, partly because it brought back memories of less pleasant experiences in Eritrea and during their flight. The interviews with the IND are inherently stressful because so much depends on them; the prospect of the application being rejected creates a great deal of stress.

I had to wait quite a long time for my interview. I was afraid they were going to reject me because it was taking so long. I was finally interviewed after three months. I didn't find the questions difficult. All I had to do was tell them everything I'd been through. It felt like a team, with the IND official and an interpreter there. I was lucky to have a good interpreter; I've heard from others that their report frequently had to be corrected. After my interview it took a month before I was given refugee status. That was a difficult time. I was afraid I would be rejected, so I was relieved when I finally heard that I could stay here!

Some of our respondents complained about the interpreters, who were intimidating and urged the respondents not to say anything negative about the Eritrean government. Experiences such as this on the part of Eritrea asylum seekers have led to questions in the Dutch Parliament, with the result that the services of several interpreters are no longer used. All in all, a majority of the Eritreans in this study were ultimately satisfied with the way their procedure went, no doubt helped by the fact that in most cases they received a positive decision.

Boredom in reception centre, complaints about food and feeling unsafe

Whilst awaiting a decision on their asylum application, the Eritreans stay in reception centres. Many of them arrived during the peak of the influx of asylum seekers in the Netherlands. During that time some activities were not possible in some centres, such as learning the Dutch language. Because of this, and the lack of other activities to fill their day, many Eritreans in this study remember their period in reception centres as one of boredom. There are also lots of complaints about the food. During the initial period, not everyone received a living allowance, with meals being provided by the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA). Those who had suffered hunger and thirst on the journey to the Netherlands had little or no appetite for the food that was presented to them. As soon as they received a living allowance, they used it to buy food so that they could cook themselves.

Several respondents reported that they felt unsafe in the reception centres. These were mostly women reporting that they felt unsafe in the centre because of the threat of sexual violence and sexual intimidation. Other problems relating to safety in the reception centre

are connected with tensions between residents of differing origin. Boredom, living in overcrowded conditions, and uncertainty about whether their asylum request would be granted are among the factors which can cause tensions to rise. The respondents reported tensions with Syrian asylum seekers, whom they regarded as more assertive and therefore better able to push their own interests with staff.

Difficulty choosing the right language school; uncertainty about passing the integration exam in time

Many of the Eritrean respondents worry whether they will complete their civic integration duty in time. Under the present Civic Integration Act, asylum status holders must pass their integration exam within three years. To prepare for this, newcomers use private language schools. Eritrean asylum status holders find it difficult to determine which language school is most suitable for them. Some municipalities have a wide choice of schools, but it is difficult to choose on the basis of the best teaching method or most highly regarded school. Practical arguments, for example that the language school is close by or that acquaintances (who may not necessarily be better informed) are attending that school, often prove decisive. People are generally not informed about aspects such as the right to change language school mid-course. Language schools take advantage of this and have asylum status holders sign contracts which tie them to the school for an extended period. Respondents in this study were unhappy about the lack of support in choosing a language school.

No one helps you choose a suitable language school. We are all left to our own devices.

People are misled by schools and their ignorance is exploited. I know that you have the right to cancel your contract with a school after three months. Most people don't know that, and are contractually tied to the same school for two years. The money runs out before they have completed their integration programme. (man, 42 years old)

The prospect of not completing their integration programme within three years causes a good deal of stress, because the loan awarded to people on these programmes by the Education Executive Agency (DUO) has to be repaid, and failure to do so can incur a fine. The prospect of this, combined with the lack of support, means that asylum status holders tend to complete integration programmes at the lowest possible level. The lack of support, the misinformation by language providers and the inclination to complete the integration programme at the lowest level have also been observed in other research (Netherlands Court of Audit 2017; Bakker et al. 2018; Kahmann et al. 2018). The recently published government plans to overhaul the civic integration system are intended to remove these and other problems in the present system.

The fact that Eritrean asylum status holders do not yet have a good command of the Dutch language is not only due to the ineffective civic integration system; Dutch is considered a difficult language and differs markedly from Tigrinya, which is spoken by most of the Eritreans in this study. The morphology of written Dutch is also completely different, and Eritreans often have a low educational level. A further factor is the unfamiliarity with the Dutch system of knowledge transfer. In Eritrea, teaching normally takes place in a class-

room with a teacher at the front of the class, whereas in the Netherlands there is much more emphasis on self-study and students taking control of their own learning.

I have difficulties with the language, and there are two sides to that. On the one hand it's down to us, because we don't learn at home, we don't open a laptop to start learning; that's one side of it. I do some learning, but not enough. On the other hand, it's a matter of knowing about other people's lives. You learn the language by mixing with other people. The other problem is that the Eritrean and Dutch cultures are different. In the Netherlands, you're expected to do lots of things for yourself and to learn on your own; we haven't learned to do that. In Eritrea, the teacher says: 'You must have learned this and that by tomorrow and I will test you on it tomorrow', but it doesn't work like that in the Netherlands. We grew up in a country where we were told what we could and couldn't do, just like soldiers; when you're told to stand up, you stand up; and when you're told to sit down, you sit down. No one in this country tells you to do that.

The interviewed asylum status holders reported that they get more out of classroom-based teaching with lots of repetition and lots of contact hours. In addition, some of them are somewhat nervous about school and about learning the language in a school setting. They would much rather learn Dutch in practice, by combining working and learning. They would also like to have more contact with Dutch natives so that they can practise the language.

Wide gap between Eritreans and government agencies: 'Everything is so different from in our country'

Eritrean asylum status holders find it difficult to connect with Dutch society. The Netherlands is a bureaucratic country with lots of rules, which are moreover communicated in Dutch and in digital format. Their lack of familiarity with virtually all aspects of a modern society such as the Netherlands, combined with the language barrier, means asylum status holders enjoy little success in contacts with Dutch government agencies. Not all, but a strikingly large number of Eritrean asylum status holders in this study have little positive to say about the social support they receive. They have difficulty making their questions and needs clear and are misunderstood. Conversely, they do not fully understand the information and help they are offered. As a consequence, they withdraw 'into their own circle', seek out other Eritrean asylum status holders who are in the same boat, or become lonely and isolated if there are no fellow-Eritreans in the neighbourhood. The failure to connect with natives creates the danger that the misunderstandings between asylum status holders and Dutch agencies will steadily increase. That view is expressed both by the asylum status holders themselves and by the interviewed experts who come into contact with this group either professionally or as volunteers.

In the eyes of the Eritreans in this study, there is a great need for professionals and volunteers who speak Tigrinya. At present, they often feel they are not taken seriously and become stressed because they have not understood what official agencies are telling them and have all kinds of questions.

Conversely, there are frustrations among official agencies and volunteers because they are aware that they are unable to get through to this group, that incorrect information is circulating and that there is a perceived passive attitude among Eritreans. Distrust of the government plays a role in this, according to professionals and volunteers. Making contact with Eritreans requires lots of patience; appointments are often not kept. The lack of assertiveness is generally ascribed to the culture of this group and to the fact that they come from a different country, with a different rhythm. It is however difficult to say to what extent the attitude of the Eritreans is genuinely due to their culture; it could also be a consequence of having lived in a dictatorship, where own initiative and assertiveness are not valued and where there is little scope to make one's own choices. The faltering contacts between asylum status holders and official agencies and volunteers is also linked to expectations on the part of the asylum status holders which professionals and officials cannot meet. In Eritrea and during the flight, the refugees became accustomed to the fact that there is always room for negotiation, but these are not usual practices among Dutch civil servants and professionals.

There appears to be a wide gulf between what asylum status holders expect of agencies and volunteers and how agencies and volunteers feel about the characteristics and behaviour of the asylum status holders. There would seem to be a deep misunderstanding here. Eritreans see their need for support not being met, while agencies feel they are dealing with a passive, stubborn group which is difficult to mobilise. This creates the risk that Eritreans will be inadequately reached by policy and will lose more and more trust, potentially prompting them to seek recourse in contacts with members of their own group, who may be no better informed than they are.

First steps towards participation

The Eritrean asylum status holders in this study came to live in the Netherlands between 2014 and 2017. With the occasional exception, they do not yet have paid employment. They are occupied with learning Dutch and with the civic integration programme, with family reunification and with looking for education/training and work. This is a picture which matches that of Syrian asylum status holders who arrived in the Netherlands during the same period (CBS 2018a; Dagevos et al. 2018).

Although currently not yet in work, all the respondents in our study would like to be in employment and earning their own money. They report that they are used to hard work, and there is thus no evidence of a lack of work ethic. For men, the norm is that they should be able to look after their family. The respondents also report that it is difficult to make ends meet from benefits. They also need money to send to their families in their country of origin and to repay debts incurred in paying for their flight.

They thus have the desire to work, but their low educational level and the language barrier act as obstacles. A further difficulty is that many occupations in the Netherlands require a specific training/educational background: to the extent that the asylum status holders have thought about a possible occupation, their thoughts often turn towards trades they know from Eritrea, such as baker, engineer, welder or hairdresser, but in the Netherlands these

generally require a senior secondary vocational qualification. This is a serious impediment, because obtaining this qualification takes a long time and is beyond the reach of some, and moreover not everyone wishes to go to school. Most of the asylum status holders in this study would like to find work in trades they were practising in Eritrea or knew from living there. Some think they can achieve this through training, while others would like to show what they can do whilst in a job and have the opportunity to develop further.

5.4 Family reunification and family relationships

Family reunification: a lengthy and stressful process

Many Eritreans come to the Netherlands without a partner and children, and this also applies for the group in our study. For many Eritreans, their first years in the Netherlands are dominated by efforts to bring over their families. One of the considerations in choosing the Netherlands as a destination country is the perceived flexibility in the family reunification procedures. In practice, many Eritreans find this more difficult than anticipated: many family reunification applications have been rejected in recent years. In most cases this is due to a lack of the necessary official documents demonstrating the family relationship and identity.

The uncertainty about whether they will see their partner and children again puts great pressure on the asylum status holders and gets in the way of other activities such as learning the Dutch language and completing the civic integration programme. Marriages break down because the partner left behind no longer has confidence that the reunification will succeed and begins to suspect that the asylum status holder has formed another relationship. The partner and children are often living in Ethiopia or Sudan and are financially dependent on the asylum status holder in the Netherlands, but the latter does not always have the financial means to maintain them there. There is deep concern among the asylum status holders about the situation of their partners and children in the refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan.

I'm happy that I am able to live a free life. I'm unhappy because I'm not given a chance to participate. First I need to get my son and husband over here to the Netherlands. I don't want to remarry another man. My husband no longer believes that I've tried everything to bring him here. He sees that others do succeed and says he no longer trusts me. My husband is living in a detention centre in Israel. I don't understand why the IND is treating us like this, unless they just don't want him to come here. Surely it can't be difficult to reunite a married couple? But the worst thing for me is that they're not willing to help my son get out of the camp in Ethiopia and give him a visa for the Netherlands. How is a ten year-old child supposed to manage on his own? I hope it will all turn out all right.

Family reunification greatly preoccupies asylum status holders. It seems as if the chapter of their flight can only be closed once their family is with them; only then can their life in the Netherlands begin.

Many worries still remain after family reunification

There is thus great relief when family reunification is successful. At the same time, this means a severe financial loss, because the asylum status holder has to pay for their dependants' journey to the Netherlands, often causing them to get into debt.

I had to take on debts to bring my family over. I'm now paying them off. I'm also still paying off the debts for my own journey. I've borrowed from lots of different people from my country. I wouldn't have been able to bring my family over without financial help. The local authority lends us money to furnish our homes; it could also lend us the money to pay for our families to fly over. Not everyone is lucky enough to be able to borrow off other people. It means we've all had a difficult start in the Netherlands. Everyone whose application for family reunification is granted goes through a financial crisis. Because we borrow from each other, almost everyone in our community is affected financially. It's a chain reaction.

Apart from the financial worries, family life does not always appear to run entirely smoothly after reunification. The experts consulted in this study referred to the high divorce rate within the group. There is also a link between traumas and the often lengthy period that partners have lived apart and become alienated from each other. Many women have been victims of sexual violence during their flight from Eritrea, or have sought protection against sexual violence from another man. A failed or drawn-out family reunification procedure also undermines partners' trust in each other. These experiences place a burden on marriages which sometimes did not have a solid basis from the start, for example because the partners married at a very young age, were entered into arranged marriages or have barely lived together as a couple because of the compulsory military service. Tensions within the family can also translate into domestic violence; many of the experts consulted referred to this, though no hard data are available.

5.5 Health

Given all that the Eritrean asylum status holders have been through during their flight to the Netherlands, it is not surprising that there are concerns about the mental and physical health of this group (and of other refugees). Life in the Netherlands is also stressful. It is known that asylum migrants often struggle with mental health problems (Health Council of the Netherlands 2016; Uiters & Wijga 2018), and several of the experts we consulted pointed out that this also applies for Eritrean asylum status holders. Quantitative research would be needed to obtain an accurate picture of the extent of these mental health problems.

We noted from the interviews that there is a wide gap between Eritrean asylum status holders and the care system. There are sometimes financial reasons for this, with people stopping or not beginning treatment because of the costs. Communication problems also play a role: language is a key stumbling block when trying to explain symptoms, and information does not always come across.

I think to myself: I've written it down simply, but then there's a concept or a word which was difficult. And Tigrinya simply doesn't have words for lots of those topics. So people then express themselves in much simpler terms such as: I'm sleeping badly. I've got a headache. My head is full. Things like that. Or: I feel weak. I've got no strength. (expert, medical practitioner)

GP's can call on the services of an interpreter during the first six months of a patient registering with the practice, but after that period the asylum status holder has to take along their own interpreter. But even with an interpreter present, it will be difficult to discuss complex and sensitive medical situations.

Cultural differences can also be a source of communication noise. That may for example be due to the way in which complaints are articulated, but can also lie in the expectations about the treatment; Eritreans often expect a doctor to prescribe medicines such as antibiotics, whereas Dutch doctors are reticent in doing so. As a result, Eritrean asylum status holders feel that they are not being taken seriously.

Based on this study we are not able to determine whether there is evidence of underuse of care by Eritrean asylum status holders. We do know from research among Syrians that they have no trouble finding their way to the GP, for example, but make little use of care directed specifically towards their mental health situation (CBS 2018a; Uiters & Wijga 2018).

5.6 Social and cultural relations within the Eritrean group

Prominent place for religion

The majority of Eritrean asylum status holders in the Netherlands, and also those in this study, follow the Eritrean Orthodox religion. Religion plays an important role in the lives of newcomers. Experts interviewed for this study believe that Eritreans who have been in the Netherlands for a short period practise their religion more intensively than people in Eritrea itself. They go to church often, even if this means travelling to Eritrean Orthodox services which are organised at various locations throughout the Netherlands. The Internet is also an important source of religious experience for Eritrean asylum status holders. Small groups study Bible texts and share ideas about religion in informal 'living-room churches'. We often saw images of Jesus and prayer texts in people's homes.

The fact that religion occupies such a prominent place in the lives of new Eritrean asylum status holders cannot be seen in isolation from their flight from Eritrea and events during their initial time in the Netherlands. Church-based religion firstly offers a moral anchor point, providing a solid basis in a new and confusing world with all manner of different rules. Interviewed experts also pointed out that many Eritreans have experienced things during their flight which go against the norms with which they grew up, causing them to become alienated from themselves, as it were. The Church offers a safe haven in times of confusion and pain. The Church is also a connection with Eritrea, a place to meet people who share the same language and culture. It is also a source of information, where practical help is asked for and given.

It is difficult to say to what extent the Church and the importance of religion inhibits or promotes the desire of Eritrean asylum status holders to participate in Dutch society. In a sense, the Church and religion offer the most accessible form of support in coming to terms with traumas, though we cannot say on the basis of this study how effective this support is. At the same time, the norms and values preached in the churches are conservative, especially as regards male-female relationships and sexual and marital morality. Another concern is the power held by priests, who have a high status in the community and can abuse their position. According to several of the experts interviewed for this study, there are indications that the Eritrean government exerts influence over who is appointed as a priest. The Eritrean asylum status holders in this study took a neutral stance on this subject and reported that they had not been approached by members of the PFDJ. They say they go to the church because of their faith. The experts advocated closely monitoring the religious behaviour of Eritrean asylum status holders and the practices within churches.

Trust in own small circle

The social contacts of the Eritrean asylum status holders are mainly with members of their own origin group. It is not that they do not want contact with others, but the language barrier and the perceived aloofness of Dutch natives mean these contacts are limited. Eritrea has a strong group culture, and the transition to the individualist culture in the Netherlands is considerable. Eritrean newcomers to the Netherlands appear to only trust other Eritrean refugees, particularly friends whom they already knew or with whom they fled Eritrea together. They have also got to know other Eritreans in the reception centres, who have become part of their small, trusted circle. Eritreans are not used to living alone, which they find a daunting prospect. After placement from the reception centre, existing groups are sometimes split up, creating the risk that it will be difficult for individuals to survive without their trusted and familiar group of contacts.

It is difficult to say what the best option is in these situations. The familiar group is a source of emotional support and offers protection against social isolation and loneliness, but has little to offer in terms of building a life in the Netherlands. Close-knit and closed networks moreover often have the disadvantage that they tend to be conservative, with strong social control and a danger that people will become trapped in their own culture with its own norms, values and world view. A high degree of bonding is probably important in this first phase of life in the Netherlands, but there is also a need to establish relationships outside this small group of immediate contacts – something that is acknowledged by Eritrean asylum status holders themselves in this study. Their one-sided networks make it difficult to practise the Dutch language and learn about Dutch culture.

The difficulty in forming relationships outside their own group does not appear to be due to an absence of desire on the part of Eritreans for contact with Dutch natives: without exception, they say that they would like more contact. According to our respondents, the limited contacts stem from a combination of shyness, the language barrier and a lack of opportunity to meet Dutch natives. Cultural differences also appear to play a role; Eritreans find the Dutch aloof and inhospitable.

I don't have any contact with Dutch natives. I'd like to have contact so I can learn the language, but they are difficult to approach. It's easy to make contact in Eritrea. Here, it's impossible to make contact with the Dutch. I haven't dared to make any contact up to now. They just ignore us. The neighbours sometimes say hello, but beyond that it's difficult to have a conversation: which language should I speak? Perhaps they think I'm arrogant. My neighbours don't know where I come from or that I find Dutch an extremely difficult language.

On the flipside of this coin, the Dutch find Eritreans to be introvert and shy by nature, making it difficult to establish contact. All this notwithstanding, the members of our study group do have contacts with Dutch volunteers, who speak with great affection about 'my boys' or 'my group', but who are also regularly driven to distraction as the Eritreans fail to stick to appointments and always arrive late.

Difficult relationship between Eritrean newcomers and the established Eritrean community

The Eritrean newcomers differ from the established Eritrean group in the Netherlands politically, demographically and socio-economically. The contacts between the two groups appear to be limited. The newcomers also distrust the links that the established Eritreans may have with the Eritrean government. Contacts between the newcomers and the established Eritrean group could in principle serve as a 'bridgehead' between the newcomers and Dutch society and official agencies. As stated, however, these contacts appear to be infrequent; where they do exist, it is apparent how important the social capital of Dutch Eritreans is, both for Dutch official agencies and for the asylum status holders themselves. It makes all the difference if there are reliable people who have a command of both Tigrinya and the Dutch language and who know the newcomers' background, but are also familiar with Dutch society and the attendant bureaucracy.

As explained earlier, during the interviews we did not explicitly ask about the influence of the Eritrean government on the lives of the Eritrean newcomers. At best, therefore, this study affords us no more than a general picture. With the exception of a few interviewees, who were roundly critical of the present Eritrean government, the interviewed asylum status holders expressed no opinion about Eritrean politics. They stated explicitly that they did not wish to become involved, that they wished to be left alone. It did emerge from the interviews that they are aware that the Eritrean government exerts its influence via the embassy and through meetings with the established Eritrean community, but also that they try to avoid these contacts as far as possible. The experts interviewed for this study also confirmed that most Eritrean asylum status holders try to keep themselves out of Eritreans politics.

5.7 Conclusions and policy directions

This qualitative study provides a compelling picture of the background and life situation of Eritrean asylum status holders who have come to live in the Netherlands. They have under-

gone a traumatic experience, both in Eritrea and during their flight to Europe, characterised by deprivations, abuse and sexual violence. Once in the Netherlands, they first spent some time in a reception centre and were then granted a residence permit and began their lives here. This does not mean that the period of uncertainty and stress is behind them, however. In the initial phase, efforts at family reunification absorb a great deal of the time and energy of many Eritrean asylum status holders. The procedures are often lengthy, complex and accompanied by disappointments because of repeated refusals and uncertainty about what will happen to their partner and children. It is hardly surprising that Eritrean asylum status holders have to deal with mental health problems. Typical of the Eritrean asylum status holders is their almost total absence from the Dutch labour market and education system. They have also not yet passed the integration exam. This picture of their participation matches data from quantitative research (CBS 2018a).

Almost everything that is normal and usual in the Netherlands is new for Eritrean asylum status holders. Living in a country where life and services are linked to a system of bureaucratic rules, where information is provided digitally and in a complex form, and where self-reliance and assertiveness are the norm, is so unlike life in Eritrea and the prevailing opinions and views there that Eritrean asylum status holders have great difficulty in connecting with the Netherlands and Dutch institutions. This is exacerbated by the collective character of the Eritrean group, which presents itself as a closed entity which makes it difficult for policymakers and government agencies to make contact with its members. There is a yawning gulf between the Eritrean group on the one hand and policy, support workers and professionals on the other. This has now grown into a situation where opinions on both sides are negative: Eritreans feel they are insufficiently able to draw attention to their problems and receive little help, while professionals regard the Eritrean group as closed, passive, difficult to mobilise and seemingly unable to keep appointments.

Agency paradox

Research on refugees sometimes refers to the ‘agency paradox’ (Klaver et al. 2018): the inventiveness and determination shown by refugees during their flight appears to have disappeared on arrival in the host country and to have been replaced by a lack of initiative and action. The supposition is that the method of reception, the design of policy and life in the Netherlands, which is different in every respect from what the refugees are used to, destroys their own initiative and robs them of energy. The idea of the agency paradox is a good fit for the Eritrean group: their accounts of their flight bear testimony to determination and resilience, but once in the Netherlands these characteristics appear to have evaporated. In all probability, this cannot be seen in isolation from their experiences during their flight and the stress which the desire for family reunification and their new lives in the Netherlands bring; they first need to ‘get their feet on the ground’. However, the barriers to their participation also appear to play a role. Finding a job often requires a particular training background or a command of the Dutch language. Something similar applies for education: a person who does not have a good command of the language or has not yet completed the integration programme will have difficulty entering the system. For many

Eritreans, formal educational and language requirements effectively mean that they do not progress further. Learning the Dutch language is an enormous challenge for many Eritreans, and attaining a Dutch qualification is a lengthy process.

Policy directions

The arrival of large numbers of asylum status holders – mainly from Syria and Eritrea – in recent years has had a major impact on policy in the Netherlands. Specific policy has been developed at national and local level to promote their integration (Dagevos et al. 2018; Razenberg et al. 2018; SER 2018). This represents a break with the dominant view that the integration of migrant groups needs to be improved through general policy. Given the major integration challenge and the specific background characteristics of asylum status holders, general policy alone was no longer enough. The desire to improve the integration of refugee groups also plays a role (Engbersen et al. 2015).

Research on refugee groups who came to the Netherlands in earlier periods shows that integration is not a smooth or easy process (Bakker 2016; Bakker & Dagevos 2017; Dourleijn & Dagevos 2011; Maliepaard et al. 2017). A low labour participation rate, especially in the first years after arrival in the Netherlands, is typical. Although this improves with the length of stay in the Netherlands, the disadvantage relative to other migrant groups remains considerable. And although every origin group has its own characteristics, refugee groups have a number of characteristics in common which explain why their integration proceeds so slowly. The reasons for fleeing their home country, the journey itself and the period spent in reception centres all impact on their mental health and thus impede their participation. Difficulty learning the Dutch language, foreign qualifications which prove to have little worth in the Netherlands, the lack of functional social networks and problems with family reunification mean that many members of refugee groups flounder in the Netherlands.

Specific policy also needed for the Eritrean group

We also find these characteristics in the Eritrean group. That alone raises concerns about their integration in the years ahead. And although we did not perform a systematic comparison with other refugee groups, it is hardly controversial to suggest that the Eritrean group are in an even worse starting position than the Syrian group, for example. The present move towards *specific policy* therefore seems to be of the greatest importance in our view, as also argued based on our findings in the study of the position of Syrians who have come to live in the Netherlands in recent years (Dagevos et al. 2018). In order to boost their participation and improve their life situation, we would call among other things for greater involvement by the local authority in the integration efforts (something which appears to be on the way judging from the new government plans), and for specific attention for the mental health problems of asylum status holders. We would also advocate promoting the attainment of a Dutch qualification and devoting policy attention to the often precarious position of women. Ongoing policy initiatives to make early investments, whilst still in the

reception phase, in teaching the Dutch language and making it easier for asylum status holders to do voluntary work, may also contribute to their integration.

A great deal is already happening, therefore, and that is important given the low participation and the cluster of inhibiting factors among asylum status holders in general, and Eritreans in particular. Specifically based on this study, we would also like to see attention given to other aspects which could be useful additions to policy aimed at promoting the integration of Eritreans, and which could also be relevant for asylum status holders from other groups.

Use of cultural mediators

In this study we found that officials and volunteers involved in implementing the integration policy and providing care and support have difficulty in reaching Eritrean asylum status holders. If that is indeed the case, this implies a perception on both sides that the available help and information are not adequate. There is a yawning gulf, which needs to be bridged because without help and additional policy, attempts to increase the participation of most Eritreans are likely to fail (cf. Ferrier & Massink 2016). Persons of Eritrean origin who have lived in the Netherlands for some time could potentially play a key role in bridging the gap between Dutch institutions and the Eritrean group. ‘Cultural mediators’ speak the language, are familiar with the social and cultural relationships within the Eritrean group and know how best to approach its members. Their deployment is likely to increase the impact of policy design and implementation considerably. It will however be crucial to select the right persons from the Eritrean group to use as a cultural mediator. The political and sociocultural differences within the Eritrean community in the Netherlands are considerable, and not everyone will therefore be suitable and not everyone will be trusted. But it is worth making the attempt, for example by first experimenting with a few pilots, because without such ‘bridgeheads’, a deep mutual misunderstanding will remain.

Customised approach to participation trajectories

In this study we have seen on the one hand that Eritrean asylum status holders have difficulty learning the Dutch language and feel a degree of trepidation regarding the school environment, and on the other have a desire to work in trades with which they are familiar, but run up against formal training requirements. This calls for the setting up of workplaces which do not throw up high access barriers and which for a set period offer an opportunity to meet the prescribed language or training requirements. This would also enable those concerned to focus on the things they are good at. A more customised approach and the design of combined work-study programmes would be a means of achieving this. There appears to be no problem with work ethic: asylum status holders were accustomed to working hard in Eritrea and want to do so in the Netherlands as well.

The arrival of groups of asylum status holders in recent years has unleashed a great deal of administrative energy and, more than in the past, policy is being pursued focusing specifically on these groups. Given the disadvantaged position and background characteristics of

(Eritrean) asylum status holders, that is a good and necessary development. It would make sense over the coming period to determine the effectiveness of all these initiatives, and thus to separate the chaff from the corn. A further point here is that many initiatives are temporary, whereas this study and other research have shown that asylum status holders who have arrived in the Netherlands in recent years are still only at the start of their integration process. Policy efforts that are both targeted and effective are therefore likely to be needed for some time.

Note

- 1 Since June 2018, relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea appear to have been thawing. Ethiopia has ended the border conflict and contacts at government level have been reinstated. It is not yet clear what this will mean in practical terms for the situation within Eritrea.