Journal of International Migration and Integration (2022) 23:1235–1255
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-021-00883-5

Hope Springs Eternal: Exploring the Early Settlement Experiences of Highly Educated Eritrean Refugees in the UK

Samson Maekele Tsegay[1]

Accepted: 24 August 2021/ Published online: 2 September 2021

Abstract

Millions of people around the world have been forced to flee their homes for socio-economic and political reasons. This paper explores the early settlement experiences of highly educated Eritrean refugees in the UK. It is a phenomenological study informed by narrative interviews with 24 Eritrean refugees who gained a university degree in Eritrea, before migrating to the UK. The participants of this study are what Bauman (1996) calls 'vagabonds' who mainly left their country due to the lengthy national service, human rights abuses and/or the political situation of the country. They chose the UK, as their final destination, for its democratic principles and English language. Furthermore, they hoped to receive asylum and start their lives anew within a very short time. Hence, they were happy to reach the UK following a long, costly and risky route. However, contrary to their hope and expectations, some of the circumstances they find exposed them to humiliation, powerlessness, uncertainty, and other difficult conditions. Despite they did not face any overt discrimination, many felt humiliated for seeking asylum. In addition, delays in asylum decisions, cultural differences and the loneliness and exclusion they faced in the UK made them vulnerable. This further led to anxiety, psychological distress and integration paradox. The findings indicate that asylum seekers have less control over their life and future until their asylum application is accepted. This study contributes to a better understanding of refugees' experiences from their stories.

Keywords Migration · Integration · Refugee · Higher education · Eritrea

Hope Springs Eternal is a phrase from the poem 'An Essay on Man, 1734' by Alexander Pope. It indicates that people always hope for the best, even in the face of adversity.

✉ Samson Maekele Tsegay
samex221@gmail.com

[1] School of Education and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University, Young Street, Cambridge CB1 1PT, UK

Introduction

Globally, migration in general and that of highly educated individuals, in particular, have grown constantly for decades (United Nations, 2017). A significant number of those are 'refugees' who experienced war, persecution and extreme economic hardships in their home countries (Akokpari, 2000; Sirkeci, 2005; UNHCR, 2018). The 1951 Geneva Convention highlights that a refugee is:

> A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him— or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2011, p. 3)

People flee to save their lives and to avoid political oppression and economic hardships usually prevalent during times of war and political turmoil. Nonetheless, refugees and asylum seekers, in particular, are among the most powerless and marginalised people in the world, including, perhaps especially, those in economically developed Western countries (Langmead, 2016; Stewart, 2005). Moreover, the world is not hospitable to forced migrants or, in Bauman's terms, the 'Vagabonds' (Bauman, 1996, 1998). They often face xenophobia and other violations of human rights from the settled population (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012; Misago, 2016). Hence, they experience socio-emotional and mental distress due to their new environments and negative perceptions from the host population (Vinokur, 2006; Zembylas, 2012).

This study explores the experiences of Eritrean refugees in the UK. However, it is important to note that once asylum seekers are granted refugee status, they receive at least the same rights and support as any other legal immigrants such as economic migrants in the UK (Murray, 2016). They are allowed to work, study and have the benefit of many other rights (Home Office, 2014). In such cases, many of the issues that refugees and economic migrants face intersect. In particular, this study focuses on highly educated refugees as they have certain advantages over unskilled ones (Tsegay, 2020, 2021). They can benefit both their country of origin through remittances and participation in business and scientific networks (Appleton et al., 2006; Vinokur, 2006; Zembylas, 2012; see also Docquier & Rapoport, 2008) and their new country through their hard-won employment, innovation and payment of taxes (Beine et al., 2011; Docquier & Rapoport, 2008). Furthermore, highly educated refugees can draw on their skills to face the challenges encountered during the process of migration and sociocultural integration in the host country (Bradaţan and Kulcsár 2014; Fokkema & De Haas, 2011; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). Education plays a vital role in framing immigrants' experiences and life course in their host country (Bradaţan and Kulcsár 2014; Dustmann & Glitz, 2011; Torres, 1998). The study by Tsegay (2016) also indicates that Eritrean higher education institutions equip their students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be responsible global citizens. In

addition, knowledge of the language of their new country aids the socio-cultural integration of migrants (De Araujo, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In this case, the UK is an English-speaking country, while English is the medium of instruction from junior secondary school onwards in Eritrea (Asfaha, 2009).

However, not all highly educated migrants including refugees integrate into the host society. For example, Verkuyten (2016) opined that highly educated immigrants create 'integration paradox', a phenomenon where they isolate themselves from the host society as they feel relative social and economic deprivation (see also Langmead, 2016; Stewart, 2005). In contrast, Fokkema and De Haas (2011) noted that highly skilled migrants are likely to have more secular and open worldviews than those less educated and are thus able to embrace cultural differences with the established populations and encounter less isolation. In general, in addition to educational qualification, other elements such as immigration and integration policies have a significant effect on the lives of highly educated migrants in their destination countries (Gray, 2006; Schlossberg, 2011). It is also important to note that refugees are often labelled as uninvited guests or unwanted intruders by many populist governments and tabloid media (see Innes, 2015; Parker, 2015).

Overall, 'A number of critical questions concerning immigrant integration, relating to differential selection of migrants, and speed and direction of adaptation remain unanswered' (Diehl et al. 2016, p. 159). This indicates that there are still some unheard voices of migrants especially those of refugees and asylum seekers (see also CBS This Morning, 2019; Fokkema & De Haas, 2011). In her interview with CBS This Morning (2019), the 21-year-old Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai noted:

> We hear about refugees in the newspapers, on TV; and it is just in numbers; it is usually in a negative way. But we do not hear from them. We hear about them, but we do not hear what they want to say, and what their dreams and aspirations are. People do not know much about refugees and hear from them.

The question of 'why refugees leave their countries' attracts many scholarships including from host countries as they depend on such information to grant or reject asylum applications (Home Office, 2016; UNHCR, 2011). This research demonstrates that destination countries conduct their studies to ensure refugee status is given to those constructed as 'deserving' asylum seekers (for example, see Home Office, 2018). However, in most cases, such studies explore the socio-economic and political conditions of the source countries while giving little emphasis to the experiences of the refugees and asylum seekers outside of their country of origin, including in the destination country. This study analyses the socio-cultural integration experiences of refugees including their challenges and aspirations in their host country, with a focus on highly educated Eritrean refugees in the UK.

There were 507,300 Eritrean refugees in the world at the end of 2018, which accounts for about 10% of the country's population (UNHCR, 2018). Moreover, the UNHCR report indicated that many of these Eritrean refugees are highly educated youth—that is, those who completed higher education courses lasting two or more years before migrating (UNESCO, 2012). This study, therefore, explores the

experiences of highly educated Eritrean refugees during their first year of settlement in the UK. The study is guided by the research question: How do highly educated Eritrean refugees explain their early settlement experiences in the UK? Drawing on the experiences of refugees, their joys and vulnerabilities, the study contributes to a better understanding of refugees' lives in their host country. It also plays a significant role in the advancement of asylum and integration policy and practices.

Migration in Post-independence Eritrea

For many decades Eritreans have been making perilous voyages to different parts of the world. The exodus of Eritreans before independence was mainly associated with the country's historical context, particularly the annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia and the struggle for independence. Generally, before independence, there were thousands of Eritrean refugees scattered all over the world, about 450,000 of them living in Sudan (Farwell, 2001; Kibreab, 2002). Many of them saw Sudan as a temporary abode and sought to return when Eritrea gained its independence in 1991 (Kibreab, 2000). However, Eritrea is again back in the spotlight for refugees (UNHCR, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2015). The UNHCR (2008, 2009, 2013, 2015) reported that Eritrea is one of the main countries of origin for asylum seekers. In 2014 and 2015, Eritreans were one of the two major asylum-seeking nationalities in the UK (Home Office, 2015). They paid a high price financially, psychologically and physically to reach their destination, in most cases, through long, risky, expensive and illegal routes (Anderson, 2016).

Most of the Eritrean migrants fall into the category of 'refugees' (UNHCR, 2011, 2018) or what Bauman (1996) calls 'vagabonds'. Bauman (1996, 1998) proposed that people who move between countries fall into two broad groups: the 'tourists', that is, those who make travel choices or decisions; and the 'vagabonds', that is, those who are forced to leave their country due to unfavourable political, economic and human rights situation. Furthermore, Bauman explained the polarisation of societies into heroes and victims through his concepts of tourists and vagabonds, which are metaphors of the contemporary world (Bauman, 1996, 1997, 1998). The tourists are welcomed, but the world is hostile to the vagabonds. The vagabonds are often victims of xenophobic violence (Misago, 2016) and strict immigration control, including detention and even deportation (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012).

Eritrean refugees, like many others, leave their country primarily as a result of conflict, human rights abuses and political instability. The Ethio-Ethiopian border war (1998–2000) and the two decades (2000–2018) 'no war, no peace' situation caused the erosion of the rule of law in Eritrea. In 2001, the Eritrean government imprisoned high government officials and journalists and froze the constitution which had been ratified in 1997 (Patterson, 2016; Reid, 2009). The political situation of Eritrea, especially the absence of the rule of law, caused for violation of human rights including religious persecution and imprisonment of individuals without due process. The Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea stated that Eritreans are being ruled by fear, but not by law (Human Rights Council, 2015,

2016). Accordingly, many are compelled to leave their job and family and migrate to different parts of the world, including the UK.

Moreover, the prolonged national service is one of the main reasons for the migration of highly skilled Eritreans (Kibreab, 2009). The duration of national service negatively affected their professional and economic development. According to the national service proclamation, both women and men between 18 and 40 years are required to take six months of military training and serve for twelve months in the military or civil services of the country (Government of Eritrea, 1995). However, for the past two decades, the national service has been extended indefinitely and is conducted in a manner inconsistent with international law (Home Human Rights Council, 2015; Kibreab, 2009; Office, 2018). This made many members of the national service stay for more than two decades in the army. Those who were assigned to serve in the civil services were also forced to give up their dream and work in their assigned place with a salary that did not cover their basic needs. Hence, they saw migration as a means to free themselves from the never-ending national service and pursue their dream (Arapiles, 2015; Kibreab, 2013; Müller, 2009).

Most of my participants explained similar stories regarding the causes of their migration. The specific reasons for leaving the country might differ, but they all agree that they migrated because their socio-economic development was hindered and their safety was jeopardised and not guaranteed by the law. However, it is important to note that Eritreans have some knowledge about the socio-economic and political conditions of different countries, particularly European countries. In addition to the knowledge acquired through formal education, the processes of globalisation in general and the internet and television networks, in particular, help people to know more about other countries than before (Stanojoska & Blagoce, 2012). Hence, many refugees are aware of the lifestyle and freedom they could get in some countries, especially developed Western countries. They feel that their safety would be guaranteed and their economic status would improve once they reach their destination (Martin & Zürcher, 2008). These pull factors have a significant effect on the Eritreans refugees. They trigger for the long, costly and risky route with a plan to a particular destination country.

Methodology

This study explores the early settlement experiences of highly educated Eritrean refugees in the UK. The study is qualitative with a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of the refugees from their stories (Wiersma & Jurs, 2004). Qualitative research seeks to explore and understand how individuals interpret their social environment (Astalin, 2013; Bryman, 2008; Creswell, 2013). Considering the purpose of this study, qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach helps to examine and understand the circumstances of the participants in relation to their context (McNabb, 2008). Moreover, the phenomenological approach is used to develop a composite description and discussion of the participants' experiences by identifying their common features (Creswell, 2013; Hammond et al., 1991). The following sections discuss the sample and methods of data collection and analysis.

Sample and Sampling Methods

Although there is no exact census, there are more than 40,000 Eritrean refugees and British Eritreans in the UK (see Cockcroft, 2008; Home Office, 2019; UNHCR, 2018). Since 2008, about 20,500 Eritreans applied for asylum in the country (Home Office, 2019). It is difficult to explore the condition of each migrant due to time, resources and other limitations. Hence, through purposive and snowball sampling methods, 24 participants were selected for this study. The participants were identified based on three main criteria: their Eritrean origin, having migrated to the UK and holding a bachelor's degree from Eritrea. In addition, other features such as gender, marital status and years of residence in the UK were considered to ensure the maximum diversity concerning these criteria.

The first point raises the question of deciding whether someone is an Eritrean in origin or not. Here, the argument is that, at some point, the participants were living in Eritrea holding an Eritrean nationality. Some of them might have since acquired British citizenship. People with refugee status can apply for UK citizenship after living for at least six years in the country (Murray, 2016). However, it is important to note that this might not mean that they stop identifying as migrants (refugees in this case) or Eritreans. This connects to the second point which deals with who is a migrant. Koser (2016) argued that some issues such as the time when a person stops being a migrant are still undecided.

In this study, I focused on selecting any highly educated Eritrean refugees in the UK, who arrived in the country within the past decade. UNESCO (2012) stated that highly educated individuals are those who have completed higher education of two or more years. For this study, I focused on refugees who obtained a bachelor's degree from Eritrean higher education institutions. Besides, the educational qualification obtained before migration confirms that they had been living in Eritrea for some time. Moreover, those refugees who lived in the UK for at least two years were considered because they can have significant experience within two years of stay in their host country.

Two-thirds of the participants were selected using purposive sampling—a non-probability sampling technique that focuses on certain characteristics of a population that are of interest to the researcher to answer the research questions (Silverman, 2013). I applied snowball sampling to recruit the rest of my participants. It is a type of purposive sampling which allows for the generation of cumulative samples from the existing participants (Wilson-Forsberg, 2015). Accordingly, I was able to get additional samples based on the recommendations of the participants acquired through purposive sampling. I used snowball sampling to find more and diverse participants, especially those who arrived in the UK recently. The provision of names by other participants helped to build a good rapport and, as Atkinson and Flint (2001) indicated, enabled me to collect sufficient and relevant data (Table 1).

Data Collection

I used narrative interviews to listen to the voices and stories of the participants in their own words and elicit rich and detailed data to understand the case under study

Table 1 Participants' profiles

No	Name of participant (pseudonym)	Sex	Age	Marital status	Years of residence in the UK at the time of interview
1	Semhar	F	30–35	M	5–7
2	Senait	F	30–35	M	5–7
3	Fanus	F	30–35	M	5–7
4	Weini	F	36–40	M	5–7
5	Marry	F	30–35	S	5–7
6	Yohana	F	30–35	S	5–7
7	Helen	F	30–35	M	8–10
8	Simret	F	30–35	M	8–10
9	Yodit	F	30–35	S	8–10
10	Haben	M	36–40	M	2–4
11	Habtay	M	36–40	M	2–4
12	Hans	M	30–35	S	2–4
13	Ermias	M	30–35	M	5–7
14	Michael	M	36–40	M	5–7
15	Issack	M	36–40	S	5–7
16	Meron	M	46–50	M	8–10
17	Neguse	M	41–45	M	8–10
18	Wolday	M	41–45	M	8–10
19	Kibrom	M	36–40	M	8–10
20	Solomon	M	36–40	M	8–10
21	Simon	M	41–45	M	8–10
22	Mehari	M	45–50	M	8–10
23	Berhane	M	36–40	M	8–10
24	Amir	M	36–40	S	8–10

(Creswell, 2013; Sarantakos, 2013). This is significant for the phenomenological approach because researchers are expected to collect data from potential participants in order to develop a composite description of the essence of the participants' experience including 'what' they experienced and 'how' they experienced it (Creswell, 2013).

Through narrative interviews, I asked open-ended questions to encourage the participants to describe their experiences as they understand them (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Sarantakos, 2013). The interview aimed to obtain information from the participants regarding their personal and socio-cultural experiences in the UK. The interviews were conducted in English, and each interview took about 30 minutes.

The study followed the ethical principles of the University of Roehampton and the British Sociological Association (BSA). Accordingly, the issues of information, comprehension and voluntariness of the participants were addressed through informed consent. The purpose of the study and its potential risks were explained to the participants, and their responses were kept confidential to protect their rights,

privacy and safety. In addition, I used pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity and protect the identity of the participants.

Data Analysis

In this study, I applied thematic analysis to offer a rich and detailed interpretation of the data by explaining the events as well as the context (Braun & Clarke, 2016). Thematic analysis is also used to systematically categorise and analyse the data from the stories of the refugees in order to seek commonalities, relationship and any other patterns that address the research question (Ayres, 2012; Sparker, 2005). In particular, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of conducting thematic analysis, which can be summarised into familiarising with the data, generating codes, creating, defining and naming themes, and writing-up (see also Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

Accordingly, after transcribing the interviews, I read the transcripts several times to familiarise myself with the data and to generate codes. I used a hybrid of inductive and deductive approaches to code and categorise the refugees' perspectives into different themes. Then, I reviewed, defined and named the themes by identifying the essence and specifics of each theme. Finally, I analysed the data with a reference to the research question and literature. The theoretical frameworks were used to interpret and theorise the data (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and analysis of the data collected through narrative interviews. As indicated below, the findings are categorised into two major themes which discuss the joy and hope as well as the vulnerability of the participants.

Joy and Hope

Bliss: 'Finally in a Democratic State'

As indicated above, Eritrean refugees pay a high price physically, financially and psychologically to reach the UK and free themselves from persecution and other human rights abuses and improve their economic situation. Therefore, they are often happy to reach their destination after, in most cases, a long and dangerous journey. They hope to start a new, decent life soon after arrival.

Similarly, my participants were happy to reach their final destination. It eased their concerns on the life-threatening routes with death a common outcome. It also ended their expenditure for the migration journey. Moreover, my research shows that my participants were happy to reach the UK for its democratic principle and English language. Hans and Kibrom explained that they were pleased to reach the UK where they can live freely, study in a field that they chose, and pursue their dream. Explaining this,

Kibrom said, 'I was a bit relieved thinking that I am in a democratic state [to live freely and pursue my dream]'. He was speaking in comparison to Eritrea, where the youth are mostly restricted from chasing their dream due to socio-economic and political factors (see also Müller, 2009). Similarly, Issack shared that he was very happy and optimistic when he finally arrived in the UK. He thought that the democratic values of the country would enable him to live without any fear. Along with Haben, Issack also favoured the UK for its English language.

> I know that I have to be safe; and get a residence permit to live legally and peacefully. So, this was the foundation of my choice for coming to the UK. I need a conducive environment where I can live peacefully and develop my potential. The UK is one of the best countries in all dimensions including respecting human rights. It offers an opportunity to be a good citizen which is difficult in many other countries. The UK does not send back Eritrean refugees to their country. Besides, the English language, which I speak a little bit, is a plus when you come to this country. (Issack)
>
> I came here to flee from religious persecution in Eritrea. It is also probably because of the English language, which I can speak well. Back home, we study in English starting from junior school to university. We have some knowledge about the language which might help us to integrate and do some basic jobs. But it would be very difficult if you go to other European countries. (Haben)

The above testimonies show the opinion of the participants concerning their relief and choice of coming to the UK. They explain the differences in the information level of the participants which influenced both their choice and expectations. Issack and Haben knew that the UK is an English-speaking country and recognises the harsh condition of the Eritrean refugees. Both of them emphasised that their happiness about reaching the UK emanated from the assumption that the country would accept their asylum application, and they would be able to start a new and decent life. Issack further understands that the country is hesitant to deport rejected asylum seekers to Eritrea because the repercussions from the government of Eritrea could be harsh (Home Office, 2018). He was also aware of the rights and opportunities that the UK could offer for his personal freedom and professional development. At some point, it is all connected to the experiences of the refugees in Eritrea and during their journey to the UK. They wanted to live in a country that gives them a better life and an opportunity to start afresh.

Furthermore, the excerpts indicate the dominance of English not only as a mother tongue in the UK, but also as a dominant language in the world. It is the medium of instruction in many countries including Eritrea, and the undisputed language of science and technology (Nunan, 2003). Thus, in the UK, my participants saw an opportunity to socialise with the host people and gain access to essential services without studying the language anew. However, everything was not as they expected.

Hope: 'Get My Asylum and Realise My Dream'

My participants came to the UK with considerable work experience in addition to their degrees. Hence, they expected to soon get their residence permit and find a professional job to support themselves and their family. However, they faced many challenges. Issack commented that he was happy to enter the UK, emphasizing that, 'I could study and work hard to realize my ambition'. Similarly, Meron said that 'the hope was to use my educational qualification to enter the UK job market and to pursue further studies'. The arguments of Meron and Issack are mainly connected to their higher education qualification obtained from a university with English medium of instruction. They hoped that their educational attainment, work experience and English capacity would allow them to secure a professional job in the UK. The following excerpts further explain the perception and aspirations of my participants concerning their economic and professional growth.

> I thought that things are so easy in the UK. I used to think that the people in the UK have mansions, a luxurious life, etc. I used to think that when I work hard, I would be financially rich and would do whatever I want to do. (Senait)
> I was expecting to get my dream job: to work with any financial regulation company [as per my qualification] or to be a government expert. However, I knew I might face some challenges mainly due to lack of UK qualification and experience. (Michael)

Senait's account shows her perception of life in the UK. However, not all of them seem correct because not everybody can afford a lavish life, especially a mansion. However, hard work could provide financial security. When we examine Michael's statement, he was aware of the challenges that he might face. He was not educated in the UK and lacked a full understanding of the culture. This indicates that educational attainment and language do not guarantee a professional job for refugees and perhaps other migrants, especially when they come from developing countries. Along with Michael, many of my participants noted that having UK qualification and experience was, at least, desirable, perhaps necessary. Educational qualifications and job experience gained in Eritrea are less likely to be recognised as equal to those from the UK or those of migrants from developed countries (Garrido & Codó, 2017; Wilson-Forsberg 2014).

Moreover, Eritrean migrants' fluency in English can be considered insignificant in the job market especially in some areas like journalism. Ermias and Senait had to change to other fields since they were not able to continue their profession in journalism. Ermias said that, in addition to the Eritrean qualification, 'my English proficiency and accent' were the main challenges. Therefore, as the interviews from this study show, most highly educated Eritrean refugees were required to upgrade their educational level and start afresh. In fact, many of my participants studied for another degree with a different qualification from their previous ones due to their interest in the area of study or the demand the programme has in the job market.

Generally, this study elaborates that the early experiences of these highly educated Eritrean refugees were not only filled with exciting moments; they were also

vulnerable to different hazardous situations. The following section discusses the refugees' vulnerability.

Vulnerability

Bustamante (2009, p. 565) argued that 'the vulnerability of migrants is understood as a heterogeneously imposed condition of powerlessness'. In this section, I explain that the asylum application is a lengthy and complicated process. In doing so, I show that the early experience of refugees was filled not only with memories of joy and hope, but also of uncertainty, nostalgia and anxiety.

Embarrassment: 'It Feels Odd to Ask for Asylum at the Airport'

Contrary to their hope and expectations, my participants were exposed to humiliation, powerlessness, exclusion, uncertainty, fear, and other difficult conditions on arrival. These situations led to anxiety and psychological distress. Many explained that they feel humiliated due to their refugee status. However, almost all stated that they had not faced any overt discrimination in the UK. While many researchers (for example, Fangen, 2006; Hartling & Luchetta, 1999; Klein, 1991) reported direct personal attack, harassment or scorn as the main causes of humiliation for migrants, my participants did not find this to be so. Yet, my interviews with Simon and Marry suggest that seeking asylum is humiliation by itself. Marry sought asylum at one of the airports in London without finishing her studies started in another European country. She was very nervous and embarrassed to ask for asylum at the airport.

Similarly, Yohana explained: 'my initial experience in the UK was scary as I had no idea what would happen. I was scared; that is what I remember'. She continued:

> It feels odd because I asked for asylum at the airport. I felt vulnerable, scared and helpless. I had no idea what to expect. I stayed that night at the airport guarded by the police. Then, I was taken to a hostel.

There is anxiety about being an asylum seeker waiting for the decision of others about your life and future. Besides, seeking asylum in a crowded place such as airports increases the vulnerability and humiliation of refugees and asylum seekers (Lindner, 2001). While this is not necessarily the case, both Marry and Yohana felt that all the people in the area were talking about them. They also indicated that they were terrified by the tabloid media discourses on illegal migration. They felt unwelcome to the UK, where right-wing forces cast unauthorised, undocumented, or illegal migration as a threat to national security (Innes, 2015; Wohlfeld, 2014).

Furthermore, many of my participants emphasised that the fear continued until their asylum application was accepted. Although they were taken to a safe place and provided with basic supply for their daily life, they noted that these provisions did not diminish their fear. Michael said:

> Becoming a refugee makes you vulnerable. I was not sure what could be the best reason to apply for asylum. In fact, many people advised me to do dif-

> ferent things, including changing my name. Despite not changing my name, I didn't inform the Home Office that I had finished my study in another European country before coming to the UK. All these points made my asylum time depressing.

Michael's excerpt clearly illustrates that the vulnerability of the participants was mainly associated with seeking asylum. He entered the UK after finishing his masters' study in another European country. However, as with most Eritrean refugees who entered the UK from another European country, he did not declare his presence in this other country because he was afraid it could jeopardise his asylum process. The 2003 Dublin Regulation indicates that the State through which the asylum seeker first entered the European Union is responsible for examining an asylum application (The Council of the European Union, 2003). Refugees whose fingerprints and biometrics were taken in their first arrival European country could be identified and sent back to that country.

As indicated above, refugees are those who leave their country and are unable to return because they fear racial, religious, political or other types of persecution there (UNHCR, 2011). Similarly, the Home Office (2016) states that migrants must be unable to live safely in any part of their own country in order to claim asylum as refugees to stay in the UK. My study indicates that, because they are afraid that their case might not fit the criteria used by the Home Office, some asylum seekers give incorrect information and even change their names to conceal their identity and obtain refugee status. At the same time, my data show that they are not comfortable with making false statements, changing their names and hiding parts of their identity. Many participants described this as a desperate act to make their dream a reality. Such false statements can have negative consequences on their socio-economic and psychological conditions. For instance, given that lying is a socially unacceptable practice, like in many other societies, many Eritrean refugees feel uncomfortable lying about their background. In addition, those who changed their name find it hard to use their previous academic records due to the name differences.

Uncertainty and Fear: 'You Can Even Get Rejected'

According to the Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Act 2002, migrants should claim asylum as soon as they arrive in the UK in order to obtain accommodation and other state support (Home Office, 2002). However, early application for asylum does not guarantee an early and positive decision from the Home Office. My interviews show that asylum application is a long and stressful process, which puts the migrants in an uncertain, powerless and dreadful situation.

Many of the participants emphasised that life in the UK was not as easy as they expected. They depend on Home Office decisions to start a new life and found that, as the decision for their asylum application took time, their joy faded and their concern increased. The worst part was the uncertainty caused by delays in the decision on their asylum applications. They stated that they were not ready for rejection, but they felt powerless to defend themselves. Many participants explained that these situations were a source of nostalgia, anxiety, frustration

and depression. In addition, the rumours and stories of rejections that they heard from others exacerbated their negative emotions, confirming and lending further insight into the findings of earlier research showing that asylum seekers experience social and psychological problems (Vinokur, 2006; Zembylas, 2012).

The following stories are presented to explore the vulnerability of my participants in relation to their powerlessness, uncertainty and fear. Kibrom, for example, said that waiting for the asylum decision caused him anxiety. Like most other participants, he was happy to have reached the UK and had thought that he would soon get his refugee status and find a job to help his family.

> After reaching London, the next day I went to the Home Office in Croydon and applied for asylum. I stayed there for a day and they sent me to a refugee reception centre in Leeds. I stayed there for about a month and re-housed to Newcastle. I was interviewed for my asylum process in Newcastle. The first four months were very stressful because I was awaiting a decision on my asylum application. I waited to be recognised as a refugee [which allows me to stay in the UK]. I could not do anything; just sit, eat and sleep. It was a bit frustrating. And the difficult thing was that I couldn't contact the Home Office for six months. So I had to wait for six months to ask about the process. Luckily, I got a positive decision in the fifth month. (Kibrom)

Helen is another participant caught in uncertainty for six months. She migrated from Eritrea, leaving the teaching profession.

> After coming to the UK, I was taken to Liverpool. So I waited for six months to get my papers [residence permit]. I had nothing to do except for some voluntary work and going to the library. In fact, with all the stress of waiting for my papers, I was not able to do that much. I came thinking that I would get my papers straight away and start a new life, but in reality it was not like that. If you are lucky, you can get your paper within two weeks. If not, it can take a long time and [you can] even get rejected. Many people were being rejected at that time. Therefore, this affected my life. (Helen)

As can be seen, these participants experienced negative emotions associated with their refugee status, the delay of their application decision and the aftermath situation. Lack of information and uncertainty about refugee status were significant sources of stress (Crocker, 2015). Moreover, the vulnerabilities caused by delays in the decision on asylum applications become sources of nostalgia and anxiety.

My participants were excited to reach their destination and start a new life. Nevertheless, their happiness and excitement faded as they started preparing their asylum applications and waiting for the decision. As a result, they experienced emotions such as fear, depression, anxiety, panic, and anger. It is also significant to note that many of the participants had been exposed to pre-migration traumatic experiences, which are key factors producing depression and other mental health problems (Bogicet al., 2015; Hollifield et al., 2018).

Exclusion and Loneliness: 'I Was Completely Lost'

As shown above, people migrate to flee from socio-economic and political hardships. Yet, many refugees experience a different type of vulnerability after they reach their destination. In this part, I discuss that exclusion and loneliness are two of the main conditions that my participants experienced, particularly during their asylum-seeking time in the UK. Besides, I reveal that, in addition to exclusion from work and the new culture, the dispersion policy of the Home Office negatively affected their life.

My participants explained that they were excluded from contributing to the economic development of their origin and host countries and the world. They are not allowed to work and travel to other countries before getting their permit to stay in the UK, which sometimes takes more than six months. According to the Home Office (2014), asylum seekers can only apply for permission to work if they have been waiting for over twelve months to get an initial decision on their asylum application. Consequently, these people were not able to support themselves and their families who, in most cases, depended on them financially. As a result, Kibrom and Helen, for example, felt marginalised. Many of my participants link socio-economic exclusion and other forms of marginalisation to nostalgia, depression and integration paradox (see also Verkuyten, 2016). However, it is important to note that some participants were able to engage in voluntary work to use their time and educational attainment to help other refugees and asylum seekers and gain local work experience.

The Home Office offers asylum seekers minimal basic facilities and links them with other organisations and agents to provide them with additional support (Home Office, 1998, 1999). Nevertheless, many participants noted that food and accommodation were not enough to ease their fear and make them feel at home. For instance, Marry stated that the Home Office provided her with an allowance of about £37 a week and accommodation. Yet this was not enough to relieve the stress and anxiety she experienced.

> When I asked for asylum at the airport, I was first taken to Cardiff. I was made to stay in a hostel for about seven months with other asylum seekers like myself. I was completely lost for the first three months. I was feeling lonely and worried about my status. I did not know anything and I could not even go to the town alone. Finally, I was given my refugee status after seven months. (Marry)

As indicated above, Marry's problem was beyond food and shelter. She needed a family or society to embrace her, as they did in Eritrea. Instead, she found herself lonely and moving from place to place, which increased the nostalgia she had been feeling for her home and family in Eritrea. Similarly, Semhar affirmed that the experiences of exclusion and loneliness were difficult. She left Eritrea illegally, primarily to avoid the long national service and religious persecution. She finally reached the UK through another European country in 2010. Talking about her early experiences in the UK, she explained:

> To be honest, it was not like what I expected. There were times when I missed home badly. There were times when I missed my family, my friends, my environment, and the weather back home. I used to remember the warm house and the coal stove that we used to heat our house during cold weather. Nevertheless, here it was as if I was locked in one room. I hardly used to mix with my neighbours. Therefore, it was a difficult experience as a refugee from Eritrea because we have a warm culture back home in Eritrea. We do not need a professional counsellor in Eritrea as everybody is our counsellor. Here, I was confined in one place, which almost got me depressed; and it was difficult to get support.

Resettlement and family separation aggravated feelings of homesickness among my participants. From their perspective, asylum seekers have no control over their life. They cannot even decide where to live until their asylum application is accepted. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 indicates that a no-choice based provision of housing should be made to asylum seekers (Home Office, 1999). This Act is intended to disperse asylum seekers around the UK in clusters (BBC, 1999), and reduce the concentration of asylum seekers living and working in key areas such as London and the South-East of England (The Guardian, 2009). The Act prevents asylum seekers' freedom to choose where to live (Stewart, 2005), removing their chance of living with or near their family, friends or other members of the Eritrean community which could provide them with social and psychological support.

My participants asserted that the best support comes from those who understand and share their socio-cultural background. They also suggested that one way to build a good support system is to develop a strong diaspora community and create a platform to share experiences and help the newcomers. Well-organised diaspora communities make migration easier and accelerate socio-cultural integration (Beineet al., 2011; Collier & Hoeffler, 2014). However, many countries wish to avoid facilitating such supportive circumstances, especially in the context of the rise of far-right populisms and nationalisms (De Peyer, 2017; Grice et al., 2017; Moreau, 2016). Besides, the Eritrean diaspora political division as 'supporters' or 'critics' of the Eritrean government and other differences have weakened their overall organisation and activities to support newly arrived migrants including asylum seekers (Hirt, 2014; Hirt & Saleh Mohammad, 2018). Yet, my study indicates that those participants who have close family or friends in the UK were able to get social, financial and psychological support.

Conclusion

This study has explored the early settlement experiences of highly educated Eritrean refugees in the UK, with a specific emphasis on their hopes and vulnerabilities. The findings show that most of the participants are what Bauman (1996) calls 'vagabonds'; they left their country due to lengthy national service, hostile political environment and human rights abuse. The Ethio-Eritrean border war and the aftermath developments paved a way for the erosion of the rule of law, gross violation of

human rights, and lengthy national service. These halted the dream of highly educated Eritreans who were forced to work for a very low salary. Hence, they paid a heavy financial and emotional price and travelled through risky routes to reach the UK. However, contrary to their expectations, the risky and painful journey was not over even when they reached their final destination. It was followed by, what Stewart (2005) stated, a cold reception, apprehension and powerlessness.

The participants explained that they felt relieved to reach the UK, a democratic and English-speaking country. However, their happiness evaded when they found themselves trapped in the long asylum application process. Considering the push factors in Eritrea, the risky route they travelled and the high price they paid to reach the UK, they hoped to get a positive decision on their asylum application immediately. They thought that they would start a new life and pursue their dream without losing any time. Nevertheless, the asylum application in the UK is a long and complicated process which excludes asylum seekers by disallowing them to work and distributing them to different places (Home Office, 2009, 2014). As the participants stated, they became vulnerable; they felt embarrassed for coming 'uninvited' and became uncertain about their life and future. Yet they had to fight to get their permit to live in the UK, even by distorting their personal information including their names.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of 'pull factors' by analysing the effect of globalisation and diaspora. Through different networks such as the internet, television and diaspora networks, my participants were able to know the socio-economic and political conditions of different countries and the living standards of their citizens. This increased understanding of their problems and motivated them to migrate, expecting a quick start-over and lavish lifestyle. However, as indicated, not all of their expectations were correct. As a result, hoping to find a welcoming home, they met a hostile environment. Of course, this was often confusing and distressing, in many cases causing psychological problems. Moreover, the participants found that their educational attainment and language capacity were not enough to guarantee them a professional job. Hence, they used their educational qualifications to learn the new culture, gain local work experience and go to college to re-qualify.

The study concludes that asylum seekers have less control over their life and future. Furthermore, even though this study might not be generalisable to all other countries, it is important to note that most refugees flee socio-economic and political instability, and face similar conditions in many destination countries. Hence, the lessons learned in the UK could be useful to other countries. Besides, studying the early experiences of refugees is significant to better understand their feeling, perception, aspiration and desire. Accordingly, they can be provided with the necessary support. Nevertheless, failing to listen to the voices of refugees and asylum seekers could make them feel unwelcomed, and create an integration paradox by isolating themselves from the host society.

This study provides a better understanding of the lives of highly educated Eritrean refugees in the UK. However, it is not without any limitations. Time and financial constraints confined the study to a particular sample or interviews. The study was solely based on narrative interviews conducted with refugees. It also lacks data from any comparator group (such as Eritreans without higher education) and other

stakeholders. Therefore, comparative research or similar research that captures the view of other stakeholders including refugee support groups is necessary to increase the credibility of the results (Creswell, 2013).

Acknowledgements I thank my participants. I am also grateful to Prof. Debbie Epstein, Prof. Marie-Pierre Moreau and the anonymous reviewers for their comments, which improved the manuscript significantly.

Funding This research was partially supported by Roehampton University-Sacred Heart (RUSH) and Roehampton University-Santander Scholarships.

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