Experiences of Couplehood Among Eritrean Women Seeking Asylum in Israel

In the last decade, there has been widespread displacement of citizens from their home countries. As of 2021, there were approximately 4.1 million individuals worldwide who were living in a country other than their country of citizenship and seeking asylum from persecution on racial, religious, social, or political grounds. Additionally, there are 20.7 million people who were granted refugee status, which provides protection and various social rights under the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees (Figures at a Glance, 2021; Harel, 2015). This phenomenon of vast proportions has had far-reaching impacts on individual and social levels, and is therefore central in research on immigration, as well as in social and political discourse, globally as well as in Israel.

The present study addresses the issue of couplehood among women from Eritrea, which is the country of origin of the largest population of asylum seekers in Israel. Various circumstances forced these women to flee their homeland and many of them experienced traumatic events in their country of origin, during their migration journey, and/or upon arrival in the host country (Ghebrezghiabher & Motzafi-Haller, 2015). Current information on women from this community indicates a high incidence of traumatic events within or outside their country of origin (Abraham et al., 2021). In Israel, they face multiple stress-inducing factors, including economic hardship and lack of institutional or community support (Kritzman-Amir, 2015; Shamir & Mundlak, 2013). Further, women are a minority within the Eritrean community in Israel (only approximately 13% of the population of 21,455 individuals are female). This may constitute an additional risk factor (Foreign Data in Israel, 2021; Zabar & Shir, 2019).

The literature identifies couplehood as a factor with significant influence on a person’s life due to its potential to function as a source of stress or of resilience (Nelson-Goff et al., 2020; Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2011). However, most studies dealing with refugees in Israel focus on legal and mental health aspects (Chan et al., 2016; Youngmann, 2021; a), and few refer to couplehood, despite its important role (Birger & Peled, 2017; a). A quantitative study by Nakash et al. (2016) examined postpartum depression among female Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel, and found a correlation between the quality of the mother’s experiences of couplehood and the formation of a secure mother-infant bond. A qualitative study by Birger and Peled (2017) found that the perceptions held by Eritrean men regarding sexuality and marriage are impacted by the context of their life in Israel, especially their lack of status, their encounter with a foreign culture, and the disproportionate number of men versus women in the community.

In light of all this, the current study on experiences of couplehood among Eritrean women seeking asylum in Israel focused on two research questions: How is couplehood experienced in the shadow of trauma and migration? How does couplehood constitute a stress factor or a source of resilience?

The research was conducted using a descriptive approach and a qualitative-phenomenological method, namely conducting semi-structured interviews. The interviews included general questions about participants' life stories and specific questions focused on their experiences of couplehood. Interviews were conducted with fourteen female asylum seekers from Eritrea living in Israel, aged 20 and over, who were in a significant relationship at the time of the study, or who had previously been in at least one significant relationship. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew or English, according to the participants' preference; all participants were functionally fluent in at least one of these languages. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, then a categorical content analysis was performed (Denzin, 1983).

The findings of this analysis that were related to interviewees’ experiences of couplehood were organized into three main categories according to a timeline: the circumstances in which the relationship formed, the current context of the relationship, and interviewees’ emotional experiences in the relationship. Regarding the formation of the relationship, six of the interviewees entered into arranged marriages while in Eritrea to avoid being recruited into the army. Most of these marriages did not survive, and the interviewees described the relationships as evoking emotional distress. Nearly half of the interviewees said their current spouse played a significant role in their escape from Eritrea. Others said they chose a partner with whom they shared a common background in their country of origin.

Regarding the current context of the relationship, the analysis indicated two primary factors that produce tension among the couples. The first is economic distress, attributed to Israel's policies toward asylum seekers. The second is the influence of Israeli culture on the partners’ desire to change the balance of power in the relationship. Interviewees’ descriptions of their emotional experiences in the relationship reveal a picture of loneliness, lack of support, and longing for supportive communication with their partners. Despite the distress and feelings of lack that most participants described, some interviewees said they successfully maintain dialogue with their spouse, that they are partners in decision-making, and describe the relationship as a source of support and self-worth. The women also described additional sources of support, such as religious faith and other significant figures in their lives.

This study highlights the significance of couplehood among female Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel. It expands our understanding of the impact that living in Israel has on their experiences of couplehood in specific and on their emotional state in general. The study gives voice to a distinctive community in Israel, which has seldom been heard in the research, despite the strong presence of the issue of asylum seekers in the social and political discourse of the country. The findings of this study may assist professionals in the field of migration, particularly those working with asylum seekers and refugees. The study expands existing knowledge regarding the complex reality of life among asylum seekers in Israel, which is greatly affected by post-migration conditions including poverty, exclusion, and lack of support. The findings enrich existing theories regarding couplehood as a source of stress or resilience, and indicate how the challenging circumstances make it difficult for couples to be a source of mutual support. This window into the lives of Eritrean women seeking asylum in Israel provides professionals and the general public with a better understanding of the community of asylum seekers, and therefore may lead to improvements in the quality of services provided to them.