Experiences of Couplehood Among Eritrean Women Seeking Asylum in Israel

The past decade has witnessed the widespread displacement of citizens from their home countries. As of 2021, there were approximately 4.1.million people worldwide seeking asylum from persecution in their home countries on racial, religious, social, or political grounds. Additionally, there are currently 20.7 million people who have been 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 widespread phenomenon of vast proportions has had far-reaching effects on both the individual and the social levels. Therefore it has become a central issue in immigration research, as well as in social and political discourse throughout the world.

With Eritreans representing the largest asylum-seeking population in Israel, this study addresses the issue of couplehood among Eritrean women asylum seekers in Israel. Various circumstances impelled 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 circumstances, including economic hardship and lack of institutional or community support (Kritzman-Amir, 2015; Shamir & Mundlak, 2013). Furthermore, women comprise only approximately 13% of Israel’s 21,455-strong Eritrean community, their minority status possibly posing an additional risk factor (Foreign Data in Israel, 2021; Zabar & Shir, 2019).

The literature identifies couplehood as a significant influence on a person’s life, primarily 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 issues (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 Eritrean men’s perceptions of sexuality and marriage are influenced 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.

Given this background, the current study on experiences of couplehood among Eritrean women seeking asylum in Israel focused on two research questions: First, how is couplehood experienced in the shadow of trauma and migration? Second, how does couplehood serve as a stress factor or a source of resilience?

The research was conducted using a descriptive approach and a qualitative-phenomenological method involving semi-structured interviews. The interviews included both general questions about the participants’ life stories and questions focused on specific aspects of their experiences of couplehood. Interviews were conducted with fourteen female asylum seekers from Eritrea living in Israel, aged 20 and over, who at the time of the study, were in a significant relationship or 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, after which a categorical content analysis was performed (Denzin, 1983).

The findings of this analysis 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 creating emotional distress. Nearly half of the interviewees reported that their current spouse played a significant role in their escape from Eritrea. Others said they chose a partner from Eritrea with whom they shared a common background.

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 participants’ desire to change the balance of power in their relationships. Interviewees’ descriptions of their emotional experiences in their relationships reveal a picture of loneliness, lack of support, and longing for supportive communication with their partners. Despite the distress and feelings of emotional inadequacy that most participants described, some interviewees stated that 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, including religious faith and other significant figures in their lives.

This study summarizing the significance of couplehood among female Eritrean asylum seekers in Israel expands our understanding of the impact that living in Israel has on their unique experiences of couplehood, as well as on their general emotional state. The study gives voice to a distinctive community in Israel, which is seldom heard in the research, despite the strong attention to the issue of asylum seekers in the country’s social and political discourse. Its 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, indicating 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 the general public and professionals with a better understanding of the community of asylum seekers, which can contribute to improvements in the quality of services provided to them.