**In Between - Civil Status and Mediators- Eritrean Asylum Seekers Serving as Linguistic and Cultural Translators in Israel**

**Abstract**

This research project examines the dual liminality experienced by Eritrean asylum-seeking intercultural mediators who are employed as linguistic and cultural translators by the Israeli state and aid organizations serving asylum seekers in Israel. This study focuses on the work and personal lives of these mediators and the subjective meanings they attach to their professional roles. The article seeks to understand how their work as mediators and knowledge of the language affects the nature of their liminality, providing an opportunity to learn about the challenges and dilemmas that these intercultural mediators face and overcome. This qualitative study, which was based on interviews, reveals that asylum-seeking mediators experience dual liminality resulting from their personal and professional legal status. On the one hand, they lack permanent legal status in the State of Israel and belong to a community that is in “legal liminality,” and on the other, they provide services linked directly or indirectly to the Israeli authorities and their organizations. Thus, their role places them in an interstitial position between the state and the host society and those who receive their services. We argue that this dual liminality creates a distinctive and complex reality for the mediators, enabling them to challenge their situational liminality, cope with their legal liminality, and act as agents of change and the voice of their community.

**Keywords:** liminality, asylum seekers, intercultural mediation, Eritrea, community translation

**Introduction**

The number of refugees in the world has grown significantly in recent years, and those seeking asylum have increased even more dramatically (IOM, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015; UNHCR, 2019). The category of “asylum seekers” is relatively new and was rarely used before 2014. Since then, the number of people classified as asylum seekers has grown, and the classification itself has gained legitimacy (IOM, 2019). Its validity allows states to grant asylum seekers temporary immigration status in between official categories while waiting for a decision to be made regarding whether their refugee petition. This temporary condition places asylum seekers in a liminal legal category until their final status is determined (Gold, 2019; O’Reilly, 2018; Zetter, 2007).

Asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable due to the circumstances that forced them to emigrate and the traumatic experiences of their journey (Connell, 2012; Williams, 2005). At the time this study was conducted, between 2018 and 2020, approximately 32,000 asylum seekers lived in Israel. Of these, 71% were originally from Eritrea and 20% from Sudan (Population & Immigration Authority, 2019). Various motives drove asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Israel to leave their countries of origin. Some suffered persecution due to religious, political, or tribal affiliations. Many were forcibly conscripted into armies with conditions akin to slavery, while others ﬂed before they were conscripted; others were persecuted because of their sexual orientation or were victims of domestic violence. Most asylum seekers cannot apply for recognition as refugees but rather receive group-based “temporary protection" that does not include any entitlement to civil rights or social services and can be terminated at any time (Kritzman-Amir & Shumacher, 2012). Asylum seekers may live in Israel with residence permit 2A5, under “temporary collective protection,” for “asylum seekers.” Their civil status is in legal limbo: they are neither integrated nor deported, yet their chances of being granted residence status are practically nil (Gold, 2019; Kritzman-Amir, 2015).

The arrival of refugees and asylum seekers also affects the composition of Israeli society. This phenomenon must be understood in the context of Israel’s founding as a haven for Jews after the Holocaust. It also takes place against the backdrop of the presence of tens of thousands of migrant workers and of the Palestinian indigenous minority and discussions regarding the question of the right of return of Palestinians. Refugees constitute a third group that is not identified with either of the two dominant ethnic groups—Jews and Arabs—with different languages, religions, and national affiliations. In Israel, attitudes toward refugees have become a loaded political and legal issue.

Despite the highly developed tradition and infrastructure of immigration absorption in Israel, asylum seekers have not been handled by the absorption systems, which are designated exclusively for integrating Jews and their families, in accordance with the Law of Return To date, there have been few official provisions made for asylum seekers.

These newly arrived persons have crossed not only geographic borders but also linguistic, cultural, and identity borders. Language barriers and communication difficulties exacerbate their vulnerability, making it difficult to obtain public services and undergo the process of requesting asylum. Asylum seekers often face discrimination, which adversely affects their labor, housing, and healthcare rights (Gez & Schuster, 2018; Keller et al., 2003; Schuster, 2009; Stavans & Goldzweig, 2008).

In this state of “liminal legality,” in a space simultaneously controlled and abandoned by the law, asylum seekers experience constant uncertainty, particularly with regard to the expiration of their protection against deportation (Sabar & Shir, 2019). The law that determines their legal status is ambiguous about their relationship with the state, their access to state services, and their civil, social, and political rights (Barak-Bianco, 2019; Cvajner & Sciortino, 2010; Menjívar, 2006). Because of their ambiguous legal status, asylum seekers are not entitled to health and welfare services except in extreme circumstances or emergencies; instead, they largely receive social, legal, and health services from nonprofit aid organizations (Kritzman-Amir, 2015) that work closely with the government in various social services.

As such, they also find themselves in a liminal place concerning the health, psychological, social, and economic aspects of their lives (Conlon, 2011; Harrell-Bond & Voutira, 1992; O’Neill, 2010; O’Reilly, 2018). Their temporary legal status creates a space of “liminal legality,” where “legal violence,” perpetrated against them under the auspices of the state and the law, permeates their daily lives and private spaces (Barak-Bianco, 2019; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Menjívar,2006; O’Reilly, 2018).

This article addresses the complexity of liminal legality and its various expressions among asylum seekers in Israel who work formally as translators, but in practice, also work as cultural and social mediators. This liminality that stems from their ambivalent legal status places mediators in a legal limbo characterized by transience and uncertainty (Bhabha, 2009; Menjívar, 2006; Sabar & Shir, 2019; Turner, 1967); this compounds their professional liminality rooted in the tension between being members of the receiving/host country’s professional team at the same time that they are asylum seekers lacking permanent status. We argue that mediation is affected by political and social circumstances—transience, marginalization, and the ongoing threat of deportation—that result in dual liminality between their personal lives and professional legal status. Their work as mediators generates an activeness that challenges the passiveness inherent in their legal liminality and, furthermore, extends beyond their defined roles.

Focusing on mediators’ significance and the link between their status as asylum seekers and their professional role as intercultural mediators, this paper views mediation as a challenge to their liminal status as asylum seekers.

Empirically, asylum-seeking mediators in Israel and their experience of being in legal limbo have received very little attention. Thus, this project contributes to the research and body of knowledge in the fields of transnationalism (xBoccangi, 2012; Levitt P and Khagram s, 2007; Levitt P and Glick-Schiller N; Talmi- Cohn, 2017) regarding linguistic access for those lacking permanent status, both in Israel and around the world.

**Intercultural Mediation Language**

The liminality of asylum seekers is further reflected in the acquisition of—or failure to acquire—the local language. Legal liminality, together with the temporariness and uncertainty, daily struggles, marginalization, and tendency to reside in ethnic and linguistic enclaves, causes most asylum seekers to be passive about acquiring the local language. Asylum seekers in Israel do not formally study Hebrew, unlike their counterparts in many European countries. As a result, they depend upon translators and mediators for their daily interactions (Chiswick & Miller, 2005;Yaron Mesgena, 2015). Nevertheless, after living in Israel for over a decade, many choose to study Hebrew, despite the uncertainty and Israeli society’s refusal to make them feel welcomed. Language acquisition is the result of individual and instrumental determination to understand one’s rights, to feel more secure, to make the voice of the community heard, and to challenge the perceptions and actions of the receiving state and society. Thus, language acquisition challenges certain aspects of the “politics of belonging” (Eisenberg, 2019; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and the passiveness inherent in liminality while also creating control mechanisms and anchors of certainty (Talmi-Cohn, 2018). Some motivated asylum seekers living in Israel have acquired the language and leveraged this resource to become professional translators and mediators.

Intercultural mediation describes a practice that involves not just linguistic translation but also cultural mediation between a migrant minority and the receiving society, its institutions, and organizations. Mediation is carried out by mediators and translators whose origins are similar or identical to those of the migrant community and who are versed in its cultural codes and values. Intercultural mediation is, therefore, is a sociopolitical action (Doerr, 2018; Jakobson, 2000 [1950]; Shemer, 2016; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). The mediators are tasked by the organizations where they work with instilling confidence in the immigrants and reducing suspicion and distrust. Their mediation also serves to promote dialogue, contributing to the personal and collective well-being of the immigrant community (Shemer, 2016). Mediators provide asylum seekers without mastery of the local language with the fundamental ability to speak, be heard, and be understood, engendering a degree of certainty within the ambiguity that characterizes legal liminality. Mediators develop strategies of self and communal representation from a position of weakness in social power relations and the liminality of their temporary status.

Research literature has dealt extensively with the psychological aspects of the work mediators and translators perform with victims of torture in conflict zones and refugee camps, along migration routes, and in receiving/host countries (Gez & Schuster, 2018; Miller et al., 2005; Schuster & Baixauli-Olmos, 2018; Splevins et al., 2010; Tribe & Morrissey, 2003). This kind of work has significant effects on the mental well-being of mediators who are themselves refugees and asylum seekers with their own traumas and lived experiences (Brune et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2005; Splevinis et al., 2010; Williams, 2005).

Likewise, much of the research has focused on asylum seekers’ interactions, specifically discourse, with authorities in receiving/host European countries (Jacobs, M., & Maryns, K. 2021; Maryns, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Määttä, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Pöchhacker & Kolb, [2009](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)). For example, scholars have noted that mediators and interpreters play an important role in the production of the texts that are the written records upon which adjudicators base their decisions regarding asylum seekers (Killman, 2020; Määttä [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Pöchhacker & Kolb, [2009](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)). This focus on different aspects of the mediators’ agency allows us to take account of “interactional and interpersonal factors” (Inghilleri, [2016](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)) and “structural and institutional constraints” (Inghilleri, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518); Määttä, [2015](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)) that affect the various tasks that interpreters and mediators carry out. Attention to these functions and constraints can illuminate the shifting multiple roles assumed by intercultural mediators throughout a given situation (Downie, [2017](https://www-tandfonline-com.rproxy.tau.ac.il/doi/full/10.1080/0907676X.2019.1615518)).

While intercultural mediators have been the subject of many studies, their legal status has rarely been addressed. This article contributes an important perspective to the issue by highlighting the challenges entailed in working for authorities while their own status as asylum seekers places them in a liminal category tantamount to legal limbo.

By focusing on the mediators and analyzing their professional practices, the dual liminality of their situation becomes clear. Our analysis concerns the implications of this dual liminality where the mediators themselves lack a secure status. This research has revealed a critical need for a welfare policy that recognizes the significance of asylum-seeker mediators.

**Method**

This research project involves fieldwork carried out during 2020 that entailed accompanying asylum seekers in their interactions with aid organizations and state institutions and mapping government ministries, local authorities, and organizations that employ asylum-seeker mediators. This led to approximately 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews with mediators who arrived in Israel from Eritrea between 2007 and 2011. Of 18 asylum seekers we identified who are regularly employed as interpreters/mediators in Israel, we interviewed 14.

These mediators work in seven organizations and one local authority in welfare, law, medicine, and mental health. The questions covered their personal immigration history, their lives as nonpermanent residents of Israel, and their work as mediators, including employment history, professional dilemmas, and the complex relationships with organization staff and those they provide services to, as well as the impact on their personal lives. The interviews then underwent a narrative analysis to identify themes and categories. This research also employs a qualitative interpretive approach that views the subjects’ reality as a whole rather than isolated segments. This approach focuses on what is invisible to the researchers—the unique subjectivity of the interviewees—and aims to depict their world through the cultural lens through which they view their world and their place in it (Sabar & Shir, 2019).

**Results**

**Mediation on the Ground: Mediation that isn’t of the State but Represents the State**

Each country takes a different approach toward providing linguistic access and intercultural mediation based on the relationship between human rights and immigrant status. The language services made available to immigrants depend on structural blocks, political constraints related to funding, initiatives to mediate linguistic and cultural barriers, and the state’s specific stance regarding immigration (Doerr, 2018; Schuster & Baixauli-Olmos, 2018). In Israel, the mediation services available to asylum seekers are very limited and what is available is the result of the efforts of nonprofit organizations. Very few services are offered by public institutions. We identified eight nonprofit organizations that employ intercultural mediators on a regular basis and discovered that some of these mediators worked for a number of organizations at the same time. Furthermore, some of these organizations also engaged volunteer interpreters, while others (particularly daycare and afterschool centers) did not work with mediators at all. The boundary between formal and informal mediation was unclear in these contexts, and it was difficult to quantify the number of interpreters and mediators who are active in these organizations. Following a mapping of government ministries and local authorities that deal with large numbers of asylum seekers, we found that of the eight ministries queried, four employ interpreters and mediators via external tenders and interpreting services. Just one of seven local authorities employs interpreters directly, and two are aided by nonprofits. The others do not engage mediators. This mapping reveals that intercultural mediation exists in Israel primarily because of the needs of the nonprofit sector and formal recognition of their importance. In practice, however, mediators are generally perceived as representing the state, even though it barely recognizes them.

**Mediation Creating an Imagined Civil Status**

The central tool employed by mediators in their work is language. The interviews clearly demonstrated that language is a power that reduces the liminal status of both service receivers and providers. The mediators interviewed learned Hebrew on their own—on the street, while incarcerated, while working, or through the media. Some knew English before arriving in Israel. A sense of duty toward their fellow community members led those with a command of these languages, including Tigrinya, Amharic, and Arabic, to volunteer in nonprofit organizations that aid refugees and asylum seekers. Their employment in these organizations allowed them to develop knowledge of the areas the organizations were active in and learn legal, medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial terminology. This knowledge provided a sense of independence, control, and security, transforming them into experts, as relayed by Nahum and Rita:

*I learned a lot. About people, rights… I am not afraid; I am not afraid of court. I*’*ve been to court; I*’*ve been to the police. I don*’*t need an interpreter. I know everything, what to say, how to bring the argument forward, I recorded it. You don*’*t need proof, I know how to get a restraining order, everything. I*’*m independent. I go there, and [they] say to me,* ‘*You. You*’*re Ethiopian? You*’*re Israeli-Ethiopian!!* ’

Rita works for an organization providing psychosocial aid, where she interpreted and assisted a group of women suffering from domestic violence for about two years. Rita herself also suffered physical and emotional abuse from her husband, but thanks to her knowledge of Hebrew and her work for the organization, she acquired the knowledge and tools that helped her obtain a divorce. She now relays these tools to women she supports outside the framework of the organization. Her command of Hebrew and her familiarity with her rights are so impressive that public service providers often assume she is an Israeli citizen of Ethiopian origin.

Hagos also described how his identity as a transient asylum seeker is unsettled when he speaks Hebrew:

*They [the legal system] cannot tell whether I*’*m an Israeli or an Eritrean. Usually, they think I*’*m Israeli. Usually, they don*’*t expect that someone from the community can come, so you get a little respect… That I come as an interpreter or, that you are the government*’*s interpreter. That, they don*’*t expect that a person who is from the community has this right to work in this [thing].*

These quotes from Rita and Hagos demonstrate how, thanks to their linguistic skills, different people in the aid organizations, and especially those in government, perceive them as citizens. Their language expertise provides them an “imaginary status,” since it is inconceivable that they are not citizens if they interpret for the state and speak fluent Hebrew. Asylum seekers also believe the mediators have been granted permanent residence status and are surprised when they learn otherwise. This misconception creates social hierarchies and internal conflicts, as described by Samhar and Rita:

*Like the community, I also renew my visa every month… and people are in shock when they see me at the visas […] What am I doing here? I came to renew […] maybe it, maybe I*’*m a citizen. Some people see me at the visa, like they are shocked,* ‘*what are you doing here?*’(Samhar)

*If they are telling me [things] crying and it*’*s really hard for them, I tell them* ‘*don*’*t go thinking here that I am working here and smiling all the time because I have a good life. I*’*m like that too, I*’*m like you […] I tell them I was also like that, you know, getting home to see my children at 21-22 o*’*clock …* ‘*what?!*’ *They think like I have a wow life […] What do you think? I earn like you. No more. I get 20 percent deducted[[1]](#footnote-1) like you […] I*’*m Eritrean, a refugee like you.*’  (Rita)

Acquiring the local language reinforces a sense of control and self-confidence in refugee existence and challenges legal liminality. Mastery of the language enables mediators to help other asylum seekers, but beyond that, it exposes them to professional knowledge about public services and the law and allows them to become “knowledge experts,” transmitting that knowledge onward to members of their community. Proficiency in several languages means, according to the cultural values expressed by Rita, command over a reservoir of wisdom; proficiency gives access to a broad store of linguistic and cultural knowledge and transforms the mediator into “five people or three people,” that is, into someone with significant power stemming from linguistic mastery. Likewise, there is a close correlation between speaking Hebrew and perceptions of these mediators’ residency status by organizations and state representatives, as well as by their own communities. Because of their proficiency in Hebrew, both groups believe the mediators have permanent residence status. This misperception affects their position as mediators, by attaching an active, sociopolitical significance to their work.

**Dynamics of Professional Relations Between the Mediator and Other Actors in the Mediation Process: The Professional Liminality of Mediation**

The interviews reveal that mediators experience professional liminality—suspended between aid organization staff and the receivers of their services. This liminality stems from their belonging to two worlds simultaneously: the state in the context of their professional role and their communities as asylum seekers with temporary legal status. Ostensibly, their mediating role is neutral—they translate without bias or involvement. In practice, however, the tensions inherent in mediation make that role an active one with unique emotional implications for their personal and professional lives.

In the next section, we discuss the professional position of mediators in the context of perceptions of the state and the aid organizations by asylum seekers (receivers of their services) and the dynamics between Israeli service providers (social workers, for example) and the mediators. We then discuss the professional tension created by their common identity as asylum seekers from the same country and characterize the mediators’ patterns of action as shaped by these tensions.

***Mediators Between Organization Staff and Asylum Seekers:*** *“****NGOs and the State Look the Same****”*

According to the interviews, most asylum seekers perceive nonprofit organizations and the state as one and the same. This perception affects the professional standing of mediators because they are often caught in the middle and are the target of asylum seekers’ frustration:

*Sometimes it is… a problem. Like, people get angry, and they begin to insult her, the social worker. For example, if she says that we cannot get this approved, or we cannot provide things like this, they become aggressive. Then it is difficult for me, also because I know my community, they don*’*t understand about what a nongovernmental organization is. We try to explain, but they… they still don*’*t understand. They think it [the organization] is the government. (Smart)*

These perceptions exacerbate daily struggles, the lack of state recognition, and the limitations of nonprofit organizations’ power to challenge mediators and confront them with the intense stress of the asylum seekers. This affects both the translation of the interaction and the dynamics that are formed.

Samhar described the difficulty of being caught in the middle and her sense of responsibility to both sides, making her role as mediator even more complex:

*I hear the language first like they are talking and all the anger, and all the disrespect and that they let out, and I hear it, and it*’*s up to me how I get it out to the social worker, it*’*s hard… I don*’*t know how much people appreciate what it is be a mediator, it*’*s not easy, it*’*s heavy, it*’*s difficult, it*’*s a lot of responsibility.*

Helen recounted that when those receiving services express their anger at the team, she tries to calm them down and let them explain themselves, even if the team members are simultaneously pushing her to explain what is being said:

*Why? Because I hear the language first. So, they say tell her this, you understand. You are from my community. You understand? Explain to them. They… They are Israeli. You have to explain to them… Sometimes they also curse. You? No. The team? Yes. Because sometimes they cannot help? Yes. And then I say,* ‘*Think carefully and tell me.*’ *But you know all those words, the Israelis [the staff] say to me* ‘*what did he say? What did he say?*’*… I tell her* ‘*Wait. I want to talk to him. If he really meant it or didn*’*t mean it.*’*… I don*’*t want to just translate. But they [the staff] don*’*t have patience. They don*’*t.*

Some mediators chose not to translate everything the service receivers throw at them, even if they are the target of the frustration:

*There are things we don*’*t translate for the staff or for … If it is cursing him in anger or if he is cursing me, then you, you prefer to take it alone and not pass it on. At the end of the day they [the asylum seekers] are like you [the mediator] and the social workers keep working with me after they are gone.*

***Constant Testing: Mediator as Brother and Expert, or as Traitor Representing the State of Israel***

In addition to misconceptions regarding their legal status, mediators are often associated by asylum seekers with the state and seen as professionals/translators with their own personal motives. Most mediators feel the clients are constantly testing them, demanding they solve their problems, and expecting more from them than the Israeli staff members. Thus, when the mediators are unable to help, asylum seekers assume this is a choice motivated by personal interests, such as protecting their own legal status and livelihood. Daniel describes this as a pressure cooker:

*Some people who know us specifically, whom we live with day to day… They know our problems and who we are… Look, we see both sides. First of all, the side of the person, you know him. And then the other side, the side of making a living and then we are in a pressure cooker… We get along as much as we can, right? But when I see here a sick person or a person who really needs help, and he comes to you and you try with all your power, and then he says to you: well, you [intercultural mediators] don’t help us by sitting here, and its… then you have this feeling here that you are exploding. Some people say: You aren’t helping us, you are here just for your money and you aren’t taking care of us. And there are people who say to us: it’s good that you are here. If you weren’t here, we wouldn’t exist […] mediators who work at organizations, it is really hard for them, you are blamed and always they say that you are selling us out together with the Israelis, like that you are not helping us together, there are lots of stories about each of the mediators.*

Samuel reinforces the claim that mediators are perceived as traitors and snitches, or as collaborating with the establishment by putting pressure on asylum seekers.

*We find ourselves conflicted… Part of the community, even a large part, you can say, think of us as traitors. Collaborating with us... with strangers to torture them or put pressure on them… If a person comes and you solve it, you solve his problem, he will appreciate you, will adore you to the end. But a person who comes, for example, where there is nothing you can do here, and if I tell him that it can’t be done… then, it comes to raising a hand and such, like curses, threats, you are snitches, you are this, you are that, like you are traitors.*

Mediators experience tension between their shared identity as asylum seekers, living together outside work, and the expectations of them, on the one hand, and the imagined perception of permanent civil status on the other. This complex position, stemming from political, cultural, and social contradictions, underscores that mediation is not a neutral practice.

**Mediation Creates a Special Status and Agency that Enable Challenges to Liminal Status**

This unique tension generates a singular status and agency within the organization and beyond, enabling their liminal status as asylum seekers to be challenged. For example, Smahar initiated a project on sexuality and Johannes participated in meetings at the Knesset.

Other mediators recounted incidents where they encountered difficulties in translating the words of service receivers, or refused to translate them, because they touched on subjects that are taboo in Eritrean culture, for example, descriptions of male rape. Their ethnic and cultural affiliation with the service receivers interfered with their ability to maintain professional neutrality and to do their job. In such situations, mediators found themselves conflicted between their professional responsibility to translate and their loyalty to their culture. Helen describes the conflict:

*Wow. The difficulties I… when a man tells you* ‘*I was raped,*’ *this is trouble I don't feel like translating. I say it is difficult for me to translate. So, what do you do? I tell them… If Mabrahtu is around I say* ‘*Mabrahtu, come in, come translate, I can't translate.*’ *It's hard for me to hear.*

The subject of sexuality is taboo in Eritrean culture. Samhar recounted her reluctance when she was asked to mediate between a counselor from an organization promoting sexuality and the group participating in a workshop on family planning at one of the organizations:

*It has always been difficult for me to speak about sexuality and how to explain*, *and that, not because of the words. It's like I was embarrassed to even say the words, and someone came from* ‘*Open Door,*’ *she wanted to teach the group for pay, etc. The director said to me* ‘*Samhar, you have to be with her.*’ *So, I told her,* ‘*No. It's too heavy. I can do whatever you want, but about this, I can*’*t [say] the words. If I am embarrassed with the words, what will the group think?*’ *So, she said to me* ‘*No. you have to…* ’*.*

Samhar eventually found a solution in translating pamphlets on sexual education, studying the topic independently, and adapting it culturally. Her efforts were effective: the workshop was successful, and Samhar is scheduled to lead the sessions herself next year. Her role expanded, and she became a community counselor.

*It was really amazing, and I had ideas. I bring things from Eritrea, from my parents, from the family. We had an amazing group, like… it was planned for a month and we finished in four months. And my director and someone from Open Door thought like I should study, I should run these groups. So, I studied for a year, I finished the test, and I*’*ll take over the second year in October.*

Johannes, who has worked for many years as a mediator, studied Israeli politics, participated in the meetings of various organizations and became a leading activist who made it to the halls of the Knesset: “*It's true that I'm an asylum seeker, but I realized that I had to fight, that from translating I learned a lot, and in the end I was in the Knesset more than once for various meetings that discussed us, asylum seekers.*”

These activities demonstrate that, despite the complexities and challenges of their duties as mediators, the mediator position itself can combine with personal interests and enable them to confront their legal liminality.

**Emotional Implications of Mediation Work for Mediators**

Mediation entails significant emotional consequences that extend beyond the work itself. Mediators are exposed to the traumatic experiences and testimonies of their clients. Indeed, every one of the mediators interviewed spoke of the emotional effects of mediation, noting that the stories they hear continue to affect them in their personal lives.

Helen spoke of a client who survived trafficking and slavery who then worked in prostitution to repay the ransom paid by members of the community. This affected her so deeply that she dreamt that the client was her daughter. The next day she called in sick. Samhar said that when she thinks of work, she has no peace:

*I compare myself to them […] I trade places with them. I take their problems upon myself, and I say, if it was me, what could I have done, or why didn*’*t this happen to me and did happen to them?*

Yamani also described the emotional burden of mediation:

*When you hear sad things, you also take something of it with you…. You take something even if you are a mediator, you bring something home. You experience it…. At first it was hard to hear hard things, there were situations at home where I would cry, really, cry with his pain, what he told me.*

Nahum was tortured in the camps in Sinai and found it difficult to discuss his personal experiences:

*Sometimes I can*’*t even continue translating because of really difficult stories, both because it is difficult to hear and also because it sometimes takes me back to Sinai. The doctors also can*’*t always continue the treatment because they also find it hard to hear the patients*’ *stories. There are times that even the doctors would cry.*

Secondary trauma is a common phenomenon among mental health professionals. The expectation that mediators be professional and strong and that they not show weakness while translating only makes it more difficult. Despite this, they often use their own personal stories to calm and support the clients:

*It helps them, I think, it motivates them. I tell them to keep fighting and that they must forget things and live, forget the past because you can*’*t go on like this…. And it helps them, it helps them that their mediator went through and that he knows what he feels better than someone else who can*’*t understand, who doesn’t' know how the body feels… sometimes it is so difficult to translate, when it is really difficult, it gets into my head, I take it home, it makes me fall. (Nahum)*

Some of the mediators described how the intensive treatment they provide to clients and its positive outcomes also help them:

*Each treatment I do, I also treat myself… the symptoms of the patients, most of the patients, also the experiences they had, are experiences I also had and the symptoms are the same symptoms. I manage to get over it, but I am like everyone, the uncertainty, the things we went through on the way, missing the parents, missing the children if they have them, and like… being a stranger, being far from the place, from your home, it*’*s not easy. These are things that make the situation of most of our patients there terrible, so I like, the patient coming in now, there*’*s another patient after that. Now, I can get really depressed with the first patient, and then when the second patient arrives, it*’*s possible that he will cure me, because sometimes you also see patients who change, who really, really came off the streets, they throw, people even arrive after hospitalization, and you see them shaping their lives, standing on their feet, and that, that is something that makes you happy and gives some kind of satisfaction. (Samuel)*

Each of the mediators claimed that as time passed, and thanks to professional training and psychological guidance at the organizations, they were better able to deal with the difficult testimonies. Spending time with friends, listening to music and watching television, talking to other mediators, and going to church also help.

**The Importance of Mediation ~~for refugees’ regular needs~~ in Refugee Existence**

Mediators noted that they also perform mediation activities outside of formal working hours. They accompany organization staff making house calls, travel to conferences, and assist in translation. They also accompany asylum seekers to hospitals, clinics, and educational institutions, assisting them with specific translations, bureaucratic and linguistic mediation, and finding their way in public spaces. Thus, they play the roles of municipal authorities, nonprofit organizations, and public institutions.

Samhar and Asmarat live in southern Tel Aviv, close to a neighborhood with a high concentration of asylum seekers. They describe requests received outside the framework of their job:

*I live too, not far, I live near Salame [Street]. I walk around, it happens with my children in the playground and it, they ask me about the job, they catch me at the kindergarten, and the community center, and it’s not part of my working hours… I work outside too [laughs]. (Samhar)*

*On Saturday when I go to church it's sometimes difficult. I get stopped and asked things and I want to be with my children and my husband. Sometimes I don*’*t go so I have a little quiet, but always. I know it is important that I help people. (Asmarat)*

Nahum noted that his telephone number is known in the community, and people who need a telephone translation call him:

*In my other job [a position that doesn*’*t entail translation] there are times that I find myself in the warehouse spending 25 minutes translating for someone who is in the hospital. There are little things people ask me […] calling at unusual hours… not five in the morning, but nine in the evening… sometimes there are days with no calls at all, and those where there are about 8-10 calls.*

Daniel also testifies to the critical importance of informal mediation and the many requests he gets:

*Now, if I show you Messenger you will see it is full here. I get sent messages all the time. At the Interior Ministry, what did they say to me? Read, tell me, translate for me. At the gym, when they go in they have to sign, what this? Tell me. Lots!! Sent to the phones, to Facebook, especially Facebook. Not everyone has my telephone, on Facebook I already don’t have… So, like they*’*re constantly mailing me, Daniel, translate for us, translate this, translate this, everything! Aside from also translating everything said on television or the newspaper or something like that, for, that has to do with the community, right? So, they see and then they say: help us with this too. So, as much as I can. Look, I* ’*m not saying that I help everyone, but whoever I can, I help.*

All the mediators described playing a role broader than the formal definition of mediation. For refugees, mediation becomes primarily informal mediation, entailing practices such as translating conversations and documents and filling out forms. Informal mediation is a burden for mediators and usually takes place during their own time, without compensation. This affects their personal lives and places them in a dilemma about balancing their needs with those who need assistance. Still, most feel they cannot ignore the requests they receive; they act out of a sense of duty, an inner drive to help, and in recognition of the importance of their role.

**Challenging Legal Liminality: Activities Beyond the Aid Organization**

Most mediators used terms such as empowerment, satisfaction, and mission to describe their formal and informal work. Moreover, their positions as mediators enabled them to launch their own initiatives within the community, in the organizations, and related to policies regarding asylum seekers. The mediators transmit information in Tigrinya to the community through social networks, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, and engage in social activism by meeting with members of Knesset and participating in demonstrations. Samuel, for example, established a Facebook page where he posts professional information about medical, legal, and bureaucratic rights in Tigrinya. He launched the page after realizing that many members of the community were not familiar with their labor rights and obligations. Thanks to his command of Hebrew, he is also able to share other information on his page:

*Over time at my job, where I sometimes work at the labor court, I discovered that the community doesn*’*t understand what it is, what is the right and what is the obligation of the employer and also the employee… Now, I started this Facebook page, I don*’*t, it doesn*’*t have a lot of followers, but I… Every day, one day every week I dedicate myself, I try to improve the community*’*s knowledge. It*’*s not that I*’*m a lawyer or … an expert in the field, no. But I, from my experience, I have, I go onto websites, such as Kol Zchut [All Rights] and the like. I read things and I try to use it and translate and write it on Facebook, so… it succeeds in helping people.*

Many mediators recounted their impact during demonstrations or as participants in Knesset committee discussions:

*I was a lot, I did a lot for the community. I organized some of the big demonstrations, I spoke on stage, and I spoke at the Knesset. Everyone in the community knew me because of the organization I worked in. (Yosef)*

The interviews revealed that mediators’ work generates activities across a range of fields within the community and beyond. As they see it, their work may “only” provide professional support, but it is relevant at every level: personal level, the client level (asylum seekers), the organizational level, and even the policy level. Despite the dual liminality within which they exist and the misconceptions regarding their status, mediators succeed in making a difference, in challenging their liminality and place, and in creating stability and meaning in a chaotic world. Formal mediation transcends the boundaries of the role; it is part of their daily lives and helps them deal with their liminal status. Mastery of the asylum seekers’ language and sharing the experiences of their refugee journey are key to their role in negotiating their own civil status and that of their community.

At the same time, these testimonies reveal that mediators exist within dual liminality: they experience pressure and demands from both the organizations they work with and asylum seekers. This liminality is also expressed at the individual level; their mediation activities are rooted not just in language and culture but also in the shared experience of the refugee journey.

**Discussion**

“Intercultural mediation,” as used here, represents the transition between cultures and emphasizes the back-and-forth between two sides (Shemer, 2016). In the world of asylum seekers, intercultural mediation takes place while on the move, a reflection of the refugee experience, marginality, and temporariness. Intercultural mediators whose ethnocultural identity is identical or similar to that of the asylum seekers they provide services toforge an important bond with the service providers, since beyond the linguistic divide, many cultural differences and traumatic refugee experiences divide them. Intercultural mediators reduce the differences between the two sides, improve access to community services and enhance the quality of those services and the trust between the two sides. Intercultural mediation, which mediates both language and culture, is distinguishable from translation or simple linguistic mediation.

This research has shown that intercultural mediators deal with dual liminality: personal and professional. Personally, they are asylum seekers who live with temporary residence status, while professionally, they are an integral part of the nonprofit teams that assist asylum seekers. As such, they are often viewed by asylum seekers as representatives of the establishment.

Unlike most asylum seekers, mediators successfully acquired a command of the Hebrew language, providing them with a measure of control and security in their personal lives and helping them deal with bureaucracy. Mastery of the language also allows them to challenge passiveness, policies, and social perceptions by taking action that helps themselves and their communities. There is abundant research on language acquisition among migrants and their motivation to learn a foreign language (Dörnyei, 1994, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Schuster, 2009). This article elaborates on the notion that language enhances one’s sense of belonging and serves as a resource in challenging civil categories. Although mediators exist in a liminal legal status, language creates an imagined sense of belonging. They are motivated to acquire the language auto-didactically precisely because it helps them challenge their liminality and acquire social influence.

In a reality where liminal subjects experience marginality, social inferiority, and limitations on their rights, the interviewees link command of Hebrew to empowerment. They believe those who are not versed in the local language are more vulnerable to being taken advantage of and that their command of the language permits them to acquire knowledge in different fields in the organizations where they work, which enables them to advocate for their rights and those who turn to them for help and advice. In essence, mediators become “knowledge specialists” who pass that knowledge on to members of their community. This reveals the affinity between discourse (language), knowledge, and power, as described by Foucault (date); through a circular process, access to knowledge of the language and the discourse creates power, which, in turn, creates knowledge. The lack of access to language and discourse marginalizes many populations from the circles of power (Foucault, 1979; Zohar, 2013). The cultural understanding of mediators equates control of a language with control of a reservoir of wisdom, providing access to vast cultural and linguistic resources and imbuing the mediator with immense power.

As noted, the command of additional languages by mediators is a means of social mobility and a blurring of social identities and boundaries. It also establishes a social hierarchy between mediators and those who use their services. As far as their clients are concerned, mediators successfully “crossed” into citizenship. Their work in nonprofit organizations is seen as evidence that they changed their civil and professional status and acquired cultural and social capital. This is why some clients believe that mediators act out of personal interest and view them as part of the organizations serving government policy, and even as snitches and traitors to their community. The employment of mediators by public governmental institutions further highlights their liminality: they lack legal status and, at the same time, are part of the establishment.

The interviews reveal that mediators are also in liminal space in terms of their employment status. They are temporary workers in the space of power relations between service providers who are white citizens and consumers of these services who are stateless strangers of color. Asylum seekers often view the mediator as “omnipotent,” someone who can and must solve their problems. Expectations of the mediator are greater than of other staff members in the aid organization. Thus, they sometimes find themselves in situations where they must choose between performing their professional duties without bias and going beyond their neutral professional role in helping the clients who expect them to do so because of their ethnocultural affinity. Such situations mean that mediator is constantly being tested by the clients. If the mediator is able to help, he is one of their own, and if not, he becomes an extension of the host society: inadequate (Shemer, 2016) and the target of their anger and frustration (Williams, 2005; Zara, 2011).

An analysis of the interviews reveals that the mediators, in their liminal refugee status, play a double role as informal intermediaries on top of their formal mediation duties. Formal mediation is conducted through paid employment by nonprofits, government institutions, and private translation companies and according to the criteria established by the employers. Half of the mediators interviewed did not undergo formal training before beginning their work, relying on the knowledge they developed through their experience gained on the job and as informal translators within the community. Mediators and translators also perform their services on a voluntary basis, informally. They are well-known within their ethnic enclave, their telephone numbers are public knowledge, and they are expected to assist in various aspects of exercising rights, filling out forms, and finding *ad hoc* solutions to problems, all during breaks or after working hours. They are motivated by a responsibility toward and shared destiny with their community. The primary rewards are personal satisfaction, empowerment, and the esteem and respect of the community. Our research shows that both these models—formal and informal mediation—are part of the liminal space occupied by asylum seekers and that the distinction between them tends to blur. Living on the margins means that some basic needs are not addressed formally by aid organizations or government institutions. The mediators’ sense of commitment and responsibility to their community leads them to support their people beyond their professional capacity.

The mediator’s role is not merely a conduit of information but also a guide, “counselor and bringer of hope,” “bureaucratic mediator,” “technology mediator,” and “social and political activist.” Indeed, the mediator hears the asylum seekers’ problems and speaks for them to the establishment. Many are community leaders because of the combination of language, refugee experiences, and status.

Mediators deal with an additional layer of liminality stemming from the paradox of being both caregivers and care receivers. They are professional caregivers with experience accrued through working in their aid organizations, but their very experience dealing with the hardships of asylum seekers exacerbates their own post-trauma. It is no wonder that there is an ongoing ethical debate in the literature and among mental health professionals about the suitability of refugees and asylum seekers working as mediators because of the potential risk of triggering their own traumatic responses (Miller et al., 2005).

Nonetheless, research on employing mediators who have experienced trauma to work with refugees and asylum seekers found that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages (Miller et al., 2005); that they have experienced similar trauma and share the same legal status makes it easier to establish trust with the receivers of their services. Furthermore, their role in aid organizations provides hope of success for refugees.

Mediators’ work is emotionally intense, which has implications in their personal and professional lives. In response, they develop a range of coping strategies, including talking with friends, psychological treatment, repression, and going to church, as well as interacting and sharing their challenges with other mediators.

Studies posit that mediators’ personalities and training contribute to positive professional and personal growth. Exposure to the intensive treatment of asylum seekers and refugees by their employers provides satisfaction and meaning (Splevins et al., 2010). The present research confirms this finding: the mediators’ work contributed to their self-esteem, professional empowerment, and ability to influence outcomes within the organizations.

A command of Hebrew allows mediators to represent themselves and the community within liminal legal space and to demand recognition of their rights as part of their work for aid organizations. They take part in campaigns, research, and information gathering that later serves policy-makers. Mediators are key members of the aid organization team by their function as bridges to the community. They are part of the social process. As social activists and community leaders, they collaborate with other activists, for example, in the general strike of January 2014 or during the 2017–2018 deportations, and in emergencies they help complete requests for asylum independently (Eisenberg, 2019). Such actions demonstrate how command of the local language and their informal and formal activities challenge the passiveness imposed by their liminality and by the politics of belonging. Through their work for aid organizations, mediators are witnesses to the power relations and structural inequality in the interactions between the state and their community; as such, their social and political influence extends far beyond their defined roles as neutral mediators.

Proximity to power within aid organizations helped relieve the uncertainty and fear about the future felt by some mediators. Only two of them claimed that the threat of deportation in 2018 affected them professionally or emotionally. Others expressed confidence in their aid organizations’ power to prevent deportation, based on their familiarity with the organizations’ work. Some of the mediators interviewed are in the process of filing for a visa to Canada, testimony to less uncertainty.

**Conclusions**

In summary, the present research examines the activities of asylum-seeker mediators to understand how they deal with their liminal status and subjective experiences as mediators. This twofold liminality, we suggest, generates a unique complexity that allows mediators to question their situational liminality, deal with their legal liminality, and act as change agents.

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1. Employers of asylum seekers must make monthly deposits into a security fund that replaces payments that the employer would generally pay for pension insurance, other savings accounts, provident funds or severance pay. Sixteen percent is paid by the employer and 20% is deducted from the worker’s salary. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)