



'Alles van waarde is weerloos'

Exploratory research on concerns about the well-being of
Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands



Eritrea country profile, Africa, 2016.

Alles van waarde is weerloos

The very old one sings

*There is not more in little
nor is there less
still is uncertain what was
what is to be will be will-less
first when it is it is serious
fruitless it recollects itself
and stays in great haste*

*everything of worth is defenceless
grows rich from touchability
and equal to everything*

*like the heart of time
like the heart of time*

Lucebert (1924 – 1994)

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List of abbreviations

AZC	Asielzoekerscentrum (reception centre)
COA	Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers)
EU	European Union
GCA	Gezondheidscentrum asielzoekers (asylum seekers health care)
GGD	Gemeentelijke gezondheidsdienst (public health service)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
POL	Process reception location
UMA	Unaccompanied minor asylum seeker
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Abstract

Media attention, parliamentary questions and concerns shared by key players in the field of asylum led to this research. The study aimed to gather and provide information on the concerns of staff about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands. A qualitative exploratory approach was applied in executing this thesis. The research was conducted during the period between February 2016 and May 2016. Four focus group discussions and a literature study were used as methods of acquiring data. Altogether, thirty three professionals working in reception centres participated.

All the noted concerns seem to converge on the issue of integration of the Eritreans (as permit holders) in Dutch society. The lack of social trust, combined with a lack of language skills and illiteracy, the low level of education, a lack of European life experience and basic life skills, together with the characteristics of a closed community will make it very hard for Eritreans to connect with Dutch society and to request support. Most likely they are completely unaware of (how to exercise) their (basic) rights. The message from the participants of the focus groups was that Eritreans are easy to manipulate and are not used to making choices for themselves. In addition, the participants of the focus groups noticed a strict power structure. The so called leaders of the Eritrean group influence and control the behaviour and decisions on an array of life choices for other Eritrean community members. Finally, a number of (possible) signs of human trafficking were witnessed. The unfamiliar Eritrean rituals and traditions, such as dealing with female adolescents carrying the so called 'evil eye' or Buda caused an assumption that there might be a link with sexual abuse. Most concerns were linked to adolescents (age 18-23).

Preface

For more than twenty years a guiding principle in my work is (how) to empower people, how to coach people to come to terms with loss, especially vulnerable people like (unaccompanied minor) asylum seekers or (possible) victims of human trafficking. This principle was my motivation to start the Master Victimology & Criminal Justice at Intervict at the University of Tilburg. My thesis is the icing on the cake at the end of an unforgettable year with many interesting and inspiring lectures that strongly enriched my knowledge.

I would first like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Conny Rijken, whose enthusiasm and immense knowledge are a great source of inspiration. Thank you for sharing your critical perspectives, insightful comments and suggestions with me. Our meetings have been (and hopefully will continue to be) very enlightening.

Many thanks also to Esmah Lahlah, for being my second reader. I will cherish the memories of your inspirational lectures on addressing the bigger picture of childhood victimisation. I found them so thought provoking.

I would like to thank the experts who participated in the focus groups for sharing their views, expertise and concerns. Without their input this research could not have been successfully conducted.

Maybe it was good that I didn't exactly know what I started: what a journey this year has been, to combine a full time job with a masters study! However, as my mother says: *“Wenn du denkst es geht nicht mehr kommt von irgendwo ein Lichtlein her.”*¹ And I experienced those ‘Lichtlein’ (glimmers of light) coming from different people. In particular I want to mention Woody and Nicole: I really appreciated their help and I don't think they fully realize how valuable their support has been to me.

Lastly, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my mother and to Jos, who have always shown unconditional support, pride and interest in my study. Your love is returned. Mama, you always encouraged me to make the most of my studies and I'm happy you had such a great guardian angel last year who enables us to celebrate my second master-

¹ (freely translated) If you think you are at a dead end hope returns from somewhere.

graduation together. Thank you Jos for being so patient with me; I envy your intelligence and the way you approach life. You give meaning to my life and I owe you a lot.

This thesis is dedicated to all the Eritrean asylum seekers who are struggling with their new life in the reception centres and as permit holders in the Netherlands.

Désirée Horbach

1. Introduction

Political pressure, civil conflicts and persecution based on religious preferences can be some of the reasons why people are forced to leave their country and flee to a safer place to apply for asylum (Nakash, Langer, Nagar, Shoham, Lurie, & Davidovitch, 2015). Section 94(1) of the Immigration and Asylum Act of the United Nations Agency for Refugees defines an asylum seeker as a displaced person who ‘...is not under 18 and has made a claim for asylum which has been recorded by the Secretary of State but which has not been determined’².

The number of asylum seekers worldwide is rapidly growing: In 2014 1.8 million people applied for asylum worldwide and at the end of the year 2015 3.2 million asylum seekers had submitted an application (UNHCR, 2014; UNHCR, 2015). In 2015 the Netherlands faced a large increase of asylum applications: 59.100, a figure which nearly doubled the amount in 2014, namely 29.890 (IND, 2016). According to the COA (the Dutch Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) the majority of the asylum seekers who requested asylum in the Netherlands in 2015, came from Syria, followed by asylum seekers from Eritrea and Iraq (COA, 2016).

The COA is an independent executive body, an agency under the responsibility of the Minister of Security and Justice. The COA has to carry out the duty of providing reception, supervision and departure (from the reception location) of asylum seekers (COA, 2016). In its mission statement the agency declares that people in a vulnerable position should be accommodated and supported in a safe and liveable environment (COA, 2016).

In the last couple of years the influx of Eritrean asylum seekers has increased substantially: they belong to one of the three largest groups staying in the reception centres (COA, February 2016). It is not clear what the reason is for the sudden increase in the influx of Eritreans (Jennissen, 2015; VluchtelingenWerk, 2015). Nearly all of the Eritrean asylum seekers will ultimately be granted a residence permit (Engbersen, Dagevos, Jennissen, Bakker, Leerkes, 2015). According to the COA, the number of Eritrean asylum seekers in the

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol.

reception centres increased from 436 people in 2005 to 5.062 in 2015³. The majority are between the ages of 18 and 29⁴ (COA, 2016).

As noted above, it is difficult to explain the sudden increase of Eritrean asylum seekers. However, according to the Women's Refugee Commission (2013), Eritrea is one of the highest refugee-producing nations in the world.

“Eritrea is an authoritarian State. There is no independent judiciary, no national assembly and there are no other democratic institutions in Eritrea. This has created a governance and rule of law vacuum, resulting in a climate of impunity for crimes against humanity to be perpetrated over a quarter of a century. These crimes are still occurring today,” states Mike Smith, chair of the Commission of Inquiry in a press release of the latest Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in Eritrea (June 8, 2016).

The UN estimates that some 300.000 to 400.000 people can be considered as living in slavery in Eritrea. The country employs a shoot-to-kill policy where the Eritrean military will fire at civilians who try to cross the border (Van Reisen, 2016a).

Due to the unexpected high influx of Eritrean asylum seekers, received by May 2014, the Dutch Secretary of State for the Ministry of Security and Justice sent a letter to the House of Representatives, followed by a plenary debate. It appeared there were indicators of human smuggling regarding the Eritrean asylum seekers. The Secretary of State addressed the organised entry of Eritreans into the Netherlands which could be a sign of human smuggling. Other indicators were data retrieved from the asylum interviews with Eritreans, information from international agencies such as Frontex⁵ and Europol. The Secretary of State instructed

³ 767 Eritrean asylum seekers stayed in COA-reception centres in 2012, 1.322 persons in 2013 and 4.824 in 2014 (COA, 2016).

⁴ In February 2016, the number of male Eritreans in reception centres was 1319 (age 18-24) and 972 (age 25-29). Female Eritreans between 18-24: 1050 and between 25-29: 507 asylum seekers (COA, ICT, February 2016, private information).

⁵ Frontex is a “European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union. Frontex promotes, coordinates and develops European border management in line with the EU fundamental rights charter applying the concept of Integrated Border Management” (<http://frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/mission-and-tasks/>)

his services to be on the alert for the (possible) signs of human smuggling and human trafficking⁶.

Earlier, researchers and NGO's had shown an increased interest in asylum seekers from Eritrea, knowing the background of the country and the risks people take to flee. The perseverance of Eritrean people's attempt to escape and seek refuge in other countries makes them vulnerable for human smuggling and of becoming victim to human trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2013; Women's Refugee Commission, 2013; Simpson, 2014).

At the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 there were indications that young female Eritrean asylum seekers were going missing (temporarily) from the COA reception centres, putting themselves at risk of becoming victims of sexual abuse. It is unknown how many of them had become pregnant: one location mentioned an exceptionally high number of twenty women. Upon questioning they declared not having a boyfriend and not knowing what had happened to them.

Religion plays a major role in the life of Eritreans; the Eritrean asylum seekers frequently visit the Orthodox Church in Rotterdam and often stay overnight. Some of the girls showed changes of behaviour after attending services. The question arose if the pregnancies were connected to this church and in addition if the girls had consented to sex. Subsequently the COA and Nidos (the Guardianship for unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands) decided to stop giving permission for any unaccompanied minors to visit the Eritrean church. However, the public prosecution service could not find factors indicating abuse and did not start a judicial inquiry. This caused a lot of media attention and led to parliamentary questions⁷. The Eritrean church in Rotterdam claimed financial compensation from the COA (Visser, 2016; Bolwijn & Visser, 2016; Trouw, 2016; Chin-A-Fo, 2016a; Chin-A-Fo, 2016b, Chin-A-Fo, 2016c; Redactie binnenland, 2016a, Redactie binnenland, 2016b, Meijer, 2016).

⁶ Kamerstukken II, 2013-2014, 19 637, nr. 1817

⁷ Kamervragen van de leden Karabulut en Gesthuizen (SP) over het bericht dat "Eritrese vrouwen gedwongen zijn tot seks", 25 februari 2016.
www.rijksoverheid.nl

Some key players in the field of asylum (the Dutch Council for Refugees, the COA, the Guardianship for unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands, the Police, the National Rapporteur on trafficking in human beings, et cetera) classified the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers as a major problem. The COA underlined the need for further research and expressed its concern about the actual things happening, described as ‘wrongdoings’⁸ in an internal memo (COA, 2016).

Knowing and identifying the current situation is crucial for the next step: identifying (possible) risk factors to enable the development of preventative measures. This thesis is the result of research carried out between February and May 2016. A qualitative exploratory approach was applied in executing this thesis. Given the overall purpose of this paper the research question to be answered is ‘*What are the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands?*’

The study aims to gather and provide information on the concerns of staff about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands. The insight gained will lead to policy and practical recommendations for the COA board. The study fills a gap in the literature in this field since it is the first study to undertake analysis of the concerns relating to the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands. The findings should make an important contribution to the field of asylum seekers.

Focus group discussions and a literature study were used as methods of acquiring data. Four focus group meetings were organized for which participants were invited from the COA as well as other (chain)partners⁹. The meetings took place at four different reception centres located in the north, middle and south of the Netherlands. The participants who attended the meetings worked at the centre where the meetings took place. Altogether, thirty three professionals participated. A literature study was conducted to provide context for the interpretation of the outcome of the focus group meetings.

⁸ ‘Wrongdoings’ is the general term the COA uses, to state that it is not clear yet how to describe or interpret what is going on with Eritrean asylum seekers in the reception centres.

⁹ The alien chain is the group of organisations that work together in partnership to carry out the alien policy. Each individual partner has their own responsibilities within the ‘chain’.

1.1 Structure of this thesis

This paper first gives a brief overview of the recent history and current situation in Eritrea in chapter 2. As a background discussion for this study, the chapter sheds light on the most important factors of the State of Eritrea. The third chapter is concerned with the methodology used for this study. In the next section, chapter 4, the findings of the four focus group meetings are described. Attention is paid to cultural concerns, social concerns and the concerns about human trafficking. Consequently, chapter 5 presents the results of the focus group meetings in a broader context, namely in the light of existing literature. In this section the focus will be on the three key concerns of the participants of the focus groups, to be precise: concerns about integration into Dutch society, coping strategies and the ‘evil eye or Buda’. The power of the evil eye or as it is more commonly called Buda belief is one of the most powerful beliefs among Eritrean asylum seekers.

Finally, chapter 6 lists the conclusions and recommendations. The first part of this last chapter will answer the research question by combining the results of the focus groups meetings with the literature study. The second part contains policy and practical recommendations for the COA board, as well as recommendations for further research. The paper ends with a list of references.

2. The State of Eritrea

The modern State of Eritrea achieved independence in 1993, after centuries of foreign rule and a thirty-year war with Ethiopia. The final version of the Constitution was written in 1997, there was change going on and democratic elections were expected to be held. The governing party even adjusted its name from Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (EPLF) to "The People's Front for Democracy and Justice" (PFDJ). However, the Constitution has never been ratified or implemented. Since coming to power President Isaias Afwerki and a close-knit group of men have ruled Eritrea (Tronvoll, 2009; Kaufman, 2015; United Nations Human Right Council, 2015; Weber, 2015).

Political opposition is not allowed, elections have not taken place: Eritrea today is a one-party state, an authoritarian regime under the control of the President. The government controls the mass media and the judiciary; freedom of speech and basic rights are denied. The country has a reputation for human rights violations and abuse, people are not permitted to organise and assemble and to practise religious beliefs (other than those allowed by the government) and freedom of movement is denied. Nowadays, it is nearly impossible to get independent information from within Eritrea (Tronvoll, 2009; US Department of State, 2011; UNHRC, 2015). A report issued by the United Nations Human Rights Council (2015) concludes that the country is ruled by fear, not law¹⁰. According to this UNHCR report, the disappearance of citizens, religious and political persecution, torture by the government and detention without trial are common practice in Eritrea.

In 2001 President Afewerki shot down all independent newspapers and journalists were arrested; some of those were still in prison in 2015. Eritrea is the only country in Africa that has no privately owned media. National service is obligatory for men and women, officially for 18 months, but in reality this national service can last up to ten years or more. This compulsory service must be completed between the ages of eighteen and fifty and in principle it is not possible to acquire a visa to travel abroad during this period. Officially the age for national service is 18, but the truth is that children are often recruited and forced to

¹⁰ United Nations Human Right Council (2015) *Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea* www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoIEritrea/A_HRC_29_CRP-1.pdf

join up for national service for an indefinite period of time. Eritreans have to spend most of their working lives in the service of the nation: apart from national defence, citizens may be obliged to work in agriculture, road building or mining. Fleeing the national service is considered synonymous with betrayal, so people who do so must expect harsh persecution and imprisonment (Connell, 2012; Nakash, Langer, Nagar, Shoham, Lurie & Davidovitch, 2015; Tronvoll, 2009, UNHCR, 2015; Weber, 2015; UNHRC, 2016¹¹).

Eritreans represent the second largest group of refugees in Europe (Brhane, 2016); in the Netherlands 5.062 applied for asylum in 2015 (COA, 2016). The above mentioned UNHCR report 2015 roughly estimates that 5.000 people leave Eritrea every month, mainly to neighbouring countries. They are largely single, young adults, primarily between 16 and 30 years old. Due to the shoot-to-kill policy, the refugees take an enormous risk as the possibility of being killed inside Eritrea while trying to leave is a very real one (Women's Refugee Commission, 2013; Brhane, 2016). They flee from their country into the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia, the Sudan and beyond. Consequently they continue their journey to Libya in order to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Italy and further into Europe (Pharos, 2015). Thousands of Eritreans have been killed at sea while attempting to reach Europe. On top of this they are vulnerable of becoming victim of kidnapping from within or around camps in the Sudan and of being brought to the Sinai-desert. They are often released on ransom after enduring horrible torture, or they are trafficked onwards and experience forced marriages and sexual abuse (Van Reisen, et al., 2013; Brhane 2016).

¹¹ Report of the detailed findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, June 5, 2015. Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea, May 9, 1026

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology and methods employed in this study. Attention is paid to the design of the study and the main reason for the research. In addition a closer look is taken at the validity and reliability of the study.

3.1 The research design

Every research starts with a problem statement. The underlying study deals with exploratory research and intends to explore the research questions. The research is carried out with the purpose of gaining insight and determining the nature of the problem and to add to a better understanding of the problem.

Aim of the research

The study aims to gather and provide information on the concerns of the staff about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands, in order to identify (possible) risk factors. This study will fuel the enabling of the development of preventative measures but this will not be object of this research.

The aim of the research is twofold:

- To acquire knowledge of the existing concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands.
- To acquire knowledge of risk factors for Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

The insight gained will lead to policy and practical recommendations for the COA board.

Given the overall purpose of this thesis the central research question to be answered is ‘*What are the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands?*’ The research will answer the following questions:

1. What are the concerns about Eritrean asylum seekers, according to the staff from reception centres?
2. What common characteristics of these concerns can be identified?
3. What possible risk factors for Eritrean asylum seekers can be identified?
4. What is known from literature about the specific concerns as identified by staff?

Definitions

The following terms are defined since they are relevant to the examination: asylum seeker, the COA, concern, reception centre, well-being.

Asylum seeker: A person who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of his or her status¹².

COA: Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers, an independent executive body, an agency under the responsibility of the Minister of Security and Justice. The COA has to carry out the duty of providing reception, supervision and departure (from the reception location) of asylum seekers.

Concern: a worry or anxiety for someone; it involves a sense of interest in something.

Reception centre: a central accommodation facility provided for asylum seekers from the time they apply for asylum until they receive a residence permit or must leave the Netherlands. Reception centres are located throughout the Netherlands.

Well-being: judging life positively and finding it meaningful. Feeling good, healthy, comfortable and happy; a balance between inner resources (coping skills) and responding to difficult circumstances.

Timeframe

Research was conducted during the period between February 2016 and May 2016.

3.2 Methods of research: focus groups and literature study

The research field is complex and the question is how much knowledge is available or accessible. The object of research can be described as an investigation into events (activities, situations), behaviour (practices, interactions), views and ideas.

Focus groups

Organizing focus group meetings can be a valuable strategy and is a common qualitative research method for collecting data in exploratory research studies. The current study aimed at bringing together data on perspectives, experiences and knowledge and in generating

¹² Section 94(1) of the Immigration and Asylum Act of the United Nations Agency for Refugees defines an asylum seeker as a displaced person who ‘...is not under 18 and has made a claim for asylum which has been recorded by the Secretary of State but which has not been determined’.

overviews of issues of concern. The advantage of focus group meetings is that the group dynamics can create new views which will result in a much more in-depth discussion. To avoid a scenario where one or two dominant people in the session could influence the outcome and thus make the result very biased; the 'Brown Paper' moderation technique was used. This method is helpful in bringing ideas together and to organise thoughts topically. The advantage of this interactive technique is that it allows group members to contribute and explain their individual ideas not only verbal but also with a marker on sticky notes. These sticky notes were attached to large sheets of brown paper. This way not only the talkative participants were giving their opinions, everyone was actively involved. Moreover, responses could be given anonymously, which made it easier for all participants to speak their mind. Open questions were mixed in with statements and brain storming sessions to start discussions. In a nutshell, the leading questions were:

1. What is the current situation of Eritrean asylum seekers?
2. What is happening in the reception centres that causes concern?
3. What are the major concerns related to their well-being?



Quotes have been taken directly from these meetings and were approved by the participants. The purpose of the research and intended use of the results was explained to all participants.

Four focus group meetings were organized to support one main objective: To gain insight into what is happening ‘in the field’ by exchanging knowledge, ideas, views, experiences and information with key players in the field of reception. Therefore participants were invited from the COA-staff as well as other organizations in the alien chain. The primary purpose was to collect, identify and map the concerns of staff, working at reception centres.

Three focus groups were carried out to assess information on the general concerns about the well-being of the Eritreans; the aim of the fourth meeting was to examine further the concerns connected to religion and rituals. Thirty three professionals participated, with groups consisting of five, six, ten and twelve participants. Meetings lasted for three-to-four hours. The meetings were conducted in Dutch and chaired by the author of this thesis, an experienced moderator. Participants work for the COA (15 people); the Trigion (security company¹³, 4 people); the Asylum Seekers Health Centre (GCA, 4 people); the Public Health Service (GGD, 3); the Dutch Council for Refugees (2); the police (2); the primary school system (1) and the secondary school system (2). Each focus group consisted of professionals working in one particular COA-reception centre. The meetings took place at four different reception centres located in the north, centre and south of the Netherlands. The goal was to have participants who are similar, as this is supposed to increase the quality of the data (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The similarity they shared, had to do with the common working experience, the direct contact with the asylum seekers and the experiences from one particular reception centre. The participants of the focus groups used their own experiences to avoid hearsay which would not be verifiable. Subsequently managers were not invited and only staff from the work floor participated in the focus groups.

This exploration lead to a framework for the literature study.

¹³ The Trigion staff work at the reception desk and are partly responsible for the in-house security.

Literature study

In addition to the empirical data of the focus groups, a literature study was used to provide a theoretical analysis and interpretation of the outcome of the focus group meetings. Books, articles and other related texts were used. A large number of academic sources have been consulted, and thus a thorough literature review was a fundamental part of this research. The application and combination of several methods, in this case focus group meetings and literature study, is known as triangulation. Triangulation improves the validation of the research.

Limitations of the study

This study offers insight into the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands. However, a couple of limitations should be considered. The first is that data was collected among participants who shared an interest and concern in the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers. Views, ideas, expertise and experiences were shared. This might be considered as soft information which can not be compared with hard facts. However, the findings of this study can be helpful when considering follow-up research. Second, unfortunately the study just didn't have the time and resources to present a full and all-inclusive analysis of all well-being-related concerns about Eritrean asylum seekers.

Validity and reliability

The essence of validity is to check whether a conclusion is well founded and covers the real world. Reliability refers to the ability to produce similar results under consistent conditions. However, in the case of a field study, it is not possible to exactly control and repeat the research setting. The replication of the focus groups under similar circumstances might lead to similar results. The data was systematically collected, written down on pieces of large brown paper and photographed: other people can easily understand the discussed topics and arrive at similar results. External validity relates to the extent to which the results of this study can be *generalized* to all reception centres. Further research with participants of other reception centres would lead to the same outcome, as similar patterns of behaviour seem to happen in every reception centre. A point was reached that organizing more focus

groups would not have led to additional data, the so called theoretical saturation was achieved.

The description of the focus group meetings were directed at unique phenomena: events, situations, behaviour, views and ideas, related to concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers. The purpose of the academic analysis was to further explain the concerns of the participants of the focus groups. In using the substantive and comparable aspects of the generalization, attempts were made to improve the external validity and relevance to other reception centres. The participants of the focus groups represented the different agencies and organizations that work closely with asylum seekers in reception centres. The focus group meetings were organized in exactly identical ways using the same questions and statements. Participants had interest in the topic, expertise and experience in common. This is a process called homogeneous sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and was done to increase the quality of the data.

Internal validity relates to the way of evaluating the reported interpretations and generalizations. The credibility of the findings was ascertained by exploring the experiences and views of the participants of the focus groups in sufficient detail and clarifying findings with the participants. In this thesis reliability and validity are mainly guaranteed by using a combination of research methods.

Relevance

Some key players in the field of asylum (the Dutch Council for Refugees, the COA, the Guardianship for unaccompanied minors in the Netherlands, the Police, et cetera) classified the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers as a major problem and the COA underlined the need for further research. Knowing and identifying the current situation is crucial for the next step: identifying (possible) risk factors and enabling the development of preventative measures.

The usefulness of the research points to the future: the study can play an important role in addressing the issue of the well-being of asylum seekers in general and more specific: the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers. The study fills a gap in the literature in this field as it is the first study to undertake analysis of the concerns relating to the well-being of Eritrean

asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands. The findings should make an important contribution to the field of asylum seekers.

4. Focus group meetings

This chapter contains the findings of the four focus group meetings. What are the concerns about the well-being of the Eritrean asylum seekers, according to the staff from reception centres? The primary purpose of the focus group meetings was to collect, identify and map the concerns. The leading questions were:

1. What is the current situation of Eritrean asylum seekers?
2. What is happening in the reception centres that causes concern?
3. What are the major concerns related to their well-being?

As a result some common characteristics were identified and categorised. There were understandably some overlap between the different topics. Issues mentioned by the participants were related to social concerns, cultural concerns, and concerns about the risk of becoming a victim of human trafficking.

One topic was selected for discussion in a separate (fourth) group, consisting of workers with a medical background (GGD and GCA) and COA-workers from a UMA-location (unaccompanied minor asylum seekers). The aim of the other focus groups was to gather information on the general concerns about the Eritreans; the aim of the fourth meeting was to examine further the concerns connected to religion and rituals. To reach a consistent approach, this chapter describes the outcomes of all four meetings.

4.1 Social concerns

Communication and reaching out

Language and culture seem to constitute significant barriers to communication, to getting into contact with the Eritrean asylum seekers or, rather: a lack of knowledge of any other language other than their mother tongue, combined with the characteristics of a closed community and distrust make it very hard for staff members to connect with them. No matter which topic was being raised, the participants of the focus groups stressed the challenges of engaging in a conversation, of getting behind the question. The bottom line is: how do we reach out to them? What are the do's and don'ts? Some argue that it takes time and that the language barrier will be solved in time; they explain that they try to get in touch by means of music or a shared hobby. Others tried to learn a few words of Tigrinya, the language spoken

by the Eritrean asylum seekers. However the question arose if time was really on their side, as the period allowed for Eritreans in the centres is limited. Typical sentiments were:

We do not succeed in establishing a constructive dialogue.

It is not possible to have a helpful medical consultation.

We are not getting on the same wavelength.

It is such an isolated group.

They are isolated but it is a tightly-knit group.

The use of interpreters seems an obvious solution, although unfortunately it is not a satisfactory one mainly because Eritreans seem to mistrust them, as described in the next section on cultural concerns.

Education

Another issue is the lack of education and the lack of motivation to go to school. Again: some attendees stated that it is mainly a matter of time to get them motivated. On the other hand, Eritrean parents show no interest in school and are not present at meetings. Thus one could argue how are young people supposed to get enthused without parental encouragement.

Participants of the focus groups expressed their concern about the low level of education in general. According to the attendees the lack of education combined with illiteracy makes them completely unaware of their (basic) rights. Apparently the first group which arrived in 2013/2014 had a higher level of education. These days a large number of the Eritrean asylum seekers are illiterate. As mentioned above: oral communication is easier said than done and in addition people are unable to understand written information. Focus group members asked themselves how can these adolescents be prepared for a future in Dutch society, considering the fact that they only stay temporarily in the reception centres. Abstract concepts are not understood and there is little understanding or awareness in relation to sexual and health topics. They seem to be reluctant to go to a doctor and often wait too long. The general opinion is that this makes young girls in particular more vulnerable. Young female Eritreans often seem to be unaware as to how they get pregnant (in biological terms).

Participants witnessed that as soon as women begun to understand English or Dutch they showed an increased independence and started to take their own initiative. As some participants concluded:

They do not understand the notion of contraception.

I explained about the birth control pill, but she did not understand what 'a week' is.

They are often too late for having a legal abortion.

Various participants talked about unwanted pregnancies and the alleged lack of interest in dealing with these (sexual) issues. In contrast, others said that female adolescents have many questions about pregnancy tests.

Deviant behaviour

Nearly all participants of the focus groups referred to the many parties, the inappropriate consumption of alcohol and the use of drugs, in particular by young Eritrean men. An exception was made by participants from the Process Reception Location (POL): they stated that the Eritreans here cause less noise nuisance or problems caused by excessive use of alcohol than they do on other locations. According to the participants of the focus groups this is easy to explain: in the POL asylum seekers don't receive any financial support and therefore they can't buy any alcohol.¹⁴

Parties are held in their own rooms or outside the reception centre. Young women who became pregnant declare that they were drugged at a party; it appears that this happens at so called baptisms outside the reception centres but the girls don't want or can't explain where these parties were held. The common characteristic in their stories is that they felt sick after a drink was offered to them and lost consciousness. Upon questioning by staff they declared not having a boyfriend and not knowing what had happened to them. Generally they

¹⁴ Asylum seekers who arrive in the Netherlands first stay in a Process Reception Location (POL). The stay in the POL is connected to the asylum procedure. As soon as there is an initial answer from the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), asylum seekers move to a reception centre (azc). Here the asylum procedure enters the next phase. In contrast to the POL, in a reception centre asylum seekers receive financial support; the amount of money depends on the family composition.

seem unwilling to discuss what has happened to them. The participants shared their experiences:

They get a drink and can't recall what happened.

She said that she did not have her period after the baptism-feast.

As noted in the introduction of this study, at the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 there were indications that young female Eritrean asylum seekers were going missing (temporarily) from the COA reception centres. It is unknown how many of them have become pregnant: one location mentioned an exceptionally high number of twenty young women.

Amongst the participants the question arose how women cope; severe concerns are linked to young adolescents (age 18-23). Women are regarded as very vulnerable due to the lack of knowledge, their 'wait-and-see' attitude and their sensitivity to peer or community pressure. The way they often dress raises eyebrows and questions amongst participants of the focus groups. According to the participants the young Eritrean women are often barely dressed. This, in combination with their habits of hugging and showing open, public affection with other Eritrean girls, gives the participants the impression that the girls seem to be focussed on sex.

The last topic concerning deviant behaviour are positive comments about the devotion the Eritrean asylum seekers show to work. The participants of the focus groups expressed their appreciation for the dedication of the Eritreans to get involved in voluntary work or tasks with a symbolic payment. Although other asylum seekers also get involved in these kinds of chores, there is no other nationality that is as active as the Eritreans are in and around the centre.

4.2 Cultural concerns

Trust

Many Eritreans do not appear to trust people of authority (including all the workers at a reception centre) or interpreters. According to the participants of the focusgroups trust is a key reason for why many Eritreans accept or decline to be supported. This lack of trust,

combined with a lack of knowledge makes it very hard to communicate about personal and delicate topics, as stated in another part of this chapter.

What do the participants of the focus groups say about this lack of trust?

Culture of fear.

Distrust against each other and against employees.

Fear to report offences or abuse.

They don't trust the medical sector; they appear suspicious.

A complicating factor is, that workers are also reluctant to trust the interpreters. In addition there are doubts as to the quality of the official interpreters. Participants wonder why they need to know the family name of the client. There might be a harmless explanation: one participant suggested that maybe this way they can trace back the region and thus the dialect they have to use while interpreting. However, the majority of the attendees talked about a gut feeling, and mentioned the recent trial of a Dutch professor, who had expressed concern that two official interpreters for the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service were connected to the centre of the Eritrean intelligence agents in the Netherlands.

Etiquette and customs

In contrast to some other staff members, the participants of the focus group meetings shared the opinion that Eritreans are not difficult, they can be challenging, but are not unpleasant people. Of course there are some issues, but overall the participants tried to understand their behaviour and background. Some of them stated that they have a lot of fun together, although this was only the case when communication in English was possible.

What about the parties? Are the signals correct; are there more parties amongst Eritreans than other groups? According to the participants of the focus groups the Eritreans do organise more parties. The following experiences cause concern:

Parties organised by men are often linked with a lot of alcohol and increased noise pollution, beyond the limits of acceptance.

Parties organised by women: tea-lights, candles, crosses, rose petals.

Countless parties in women's rooms: causing lots of nuisance, many male visitors, alcohol, and noise pollution.

Girls frequently share a bed, often get together, and there is a lot of hugging and holding hands. Boys show the same behaviour. It seems that the Eritrean boys and girls don't mix, unless at parties. Open public affection between two people of the opposite sex has not been witnessed by the respondents of the focus groups.

Respect for authority is often lacking, as stated by the following observations:

If they don't agree, they just throw their papers, ID or money-card at you or on the floor.

Some just get on the bus without paying.

Girls act like they are the queen of the centre: proud and arrogant.

Vulnerability

Participants concluded that most adolescents not only *look* significantly younger than they are supposed to be according to their documents, but also *act* like children. None of the respondents had experienced this before with other nationalities, on the contrary. One commented: '*Usually they (sic: other nationalities) say they are 16, yeah right, if that's true then I'm sure Santa Claus is real too.*'

Eritrean asylum seekers are not only vulnerable because of a lack of European life experience, abilities and skills but they are also physically vulnerable. Whatever the reason, they are discriminated at the reception centres and Eritrean children are at risk of being bullied. In the opinion of one participant: '*Eritrese kinderen zijn het haasje, Syriërs het baasje*'¹⁵

The message time and again is that Eritrean adolescents are easy to manipulate, that they are not able to exercise their rights, and that young women are not used to saying 'no'. Comments of the participants:

These people are not used to making choices for themselves.

They have to be empowered.

¹⁵ Eritreans are the victims, Syrians are the boss

They just wait-and-see.

They don't show any initiative..

They seem to be disinterested.

Strikingly, most concerns were linked to the adolescents (age 18-23). As claimed by the participants of the focus groups, 'older' Eritrean asylum seekers (30+) behave differently and seem less vulnerable. Younger ones have the advantage of going to school and they might thus benefit from the provided knowledge and expertise. When asked what differences there are with other large groups of asylum seekers, the participants of the focus groups made comparisons with Syrians who are considered:

More western; share a western culture.

Higher educated.

Easier to communicate with; they speak English.

Not as much peer/community pressure.

The pressure amongst Eritreans limits their opportunities and individual development.

Hierarchy, family and kinship

Participants of the focus groups were struggling to find answers to who is related to whom: how extended are the families? Women (age 18-30) talk about a fiancé, then husband, then cousin or brother abroad (often in Israel).

Employees notice strict power structures. The idea is that leadership changes often and through religion. Those who speak English have a 'higher' position. The so called leaders do not communicate with COA- workers and in case of an issue it is impossible to reach a compromise between COA-staff and the involved Eritrean asylum seekers. As a security worker stressed:

“With other nationalities, if there are issues, there are always a few asylum seekers who represent the group. They negotiate with us and although they do not always agree with what the others say: a constructive dialogue is possible. With Eritreans, there is always someone in charge and it seems like a military hierarchy.”

Usually the leaders are male, although the focus group members state that some women act like they have a military past: they influence and control the behaviour of other Eritrean community members. This is in contrast to other remarks on the minor position and role of women. The respondents of the focus groups emphasised that decisions about an array of life choices are influenced by others in the social environment. The role and influence of the so called leaders, (extended) family members and the wider community in decision-making should not be ignored.

As witnessed by the participants of the focus groups, even the young ones (age 15-17) show a peer-hierarchic structure: if one youngster shows interest in school, others clearly show disapproval and use their influence to stop this person being engaged. Eritrean teenagers in general (age 15-17) seem dreadfully afraid of making mistakes. They often have a negative image of themselves which adds to the risk of being influenced or manipulated by others, as the participants of the focus groups stated.

Some of the participants questioned whether, there is an involvement of a higher level of authority, referring to the Orthodox Church or the Eritrean government in their day to day lives, while others were convinced this is the case.

Integration

All the above noted concerns seem to converge on the issues of integration. The lack of social trust, combined with a lack of language knowledge, a lack of education, a lack of European life experience and basic life skills, and the characteristics of a closed community will make it very hard for Eritreans to connect with Dutch society.

The degree of adapting to Dutch culture is by the focus group participants regarded as an essential part of what will shape the success of integration of the Eritreans. One focus group meeting actually regarded this topic as the main concern: they expressed their worries for the future, especially for the single adolescents (age 18-23). As one COA-worker stated (and others agreed):

“Here I can keep an eye on them, but what happens when they live in a town somewhere? Do they know where and how to seek advice?”

On a scale of 0-100 % they estimated that the Eritreans face a risk of 80% of not integrating into Dutch society and becoming socially isolated, because of, what the participants described as:

Lack of interest in the future; living in the present.

Being a tightly-knit group.

No motivation to learn anything about Dutch society.

Where do they start? There are so many barriers.

Only a couple of the participants claim that in the end everything will work out fine, depending on the backgrounds of the individual Eritreans. Most of the participants believe it would be beneficial for the Eritreans to be spread out once leaving the centres to municipalities.

Religion and rituals

Wooden cross

The first question relates to the wooden cross: the participants of the focus groups wondered why all the Eritrean asylum seekers wear a wooden cross, even the babies. In the opinion of one attendee the meaning of the cross is linked to the death of Christ: after the resurrection the cross was lost for 15 days before being found again. This also leads to additional fasting: after the 40 days of Lent in the Christian calendar, the Eritreans have an extra period of 15 days fasting. There is no real concern linked to the well-being of Eritreans about this topic, it was more general curiosity of the participants of the focus groups that raised the question.

Chasing away the 'evil eye'

The majority of the participants of the meetings have a lot of expertise in working with asylum seekers. Yet, until now they had never experienced sessions where people try to chase away evil spirits by different means. According to these participants, the most common methods used by the Eritreans are hitting the infected person hard with cables, belts or bibles; burning incense; screaming; beating drums; burning rubber, and pouring so called holy water up the nose. A few participants of the focus groups recently got involved in such an event. As one of them admitted: 'It scared the hell out of me'. These particular examples were reported

from COA- and medical staff, working in the same reception centre. After this incident burning rubber is no longer allowed on the COA-premises. It is unclear if the burning rubber and water pouring experiments take place in other reception centres. Staff are not allowed to attend an Eritrean religious meeting, however, in a few cases the alarm was raised by other asylum seekers, who were worried by the screaming and the smell of burnt rubber. The members of the focus groups shared their concerns as burning rubber could easily cause fire in the room and intoxicate, poison or even burn people. It appears that in Eritrea there are people known as ‘without a face’, this means that their face has been burnt by rubber.

Pouring water up the nose while people lay on the floor appears to be a very scary experience for both staff and the person undergoing the treatment. One participant of the focus groups stated that people were sitting on a girl and it was hard for her to interfere, because (as she found out) the main belief is that they will kill the evil spirit and not the girl. She was surprised though, to see how fast the girl in trance came to her senses when she interfered.

The participants of the focus groups tried to get more information by asking Eritrean-Dutch interpreters about these rituals and by talking to Eritreans who speak English. As a result, they concluded that:

In the Netherlands only girls and women get infected by evil spirits.

The aim of hitting the infected person is to isolate and remove the evil spirit; the spirit is very strong and thus violence is involved in employing this method of ‘exorcism’.

Boys or men have a role in chasing the evil spirit away.

In the question of whether in Eritrea men can get the evil eye: the sources are not clear. Some interpreters believe that it might occur with young boys, but not with adult men.

The role of the priest brought up some issues among the focus group-participants. The fact is that the presence of priests can cause stress and nuisance in the reception centres. The Eritrean adolescents behave differently as the priest is the one who can tell them whether or not they are possessed by the evil eye and the priest decides what treatment should be used to cure them. Subsequently, the priest has an important role and position in the reception centres. The presence of the priest has an impact on the behavior of the Eritrean asylum

seekers. The participants of the focus groups witnessed that stress disappeared after the transfer of the priest to another reception centre.¹⁶

However, unfortunately there were other male adolescents who immediately claimed to be a priest. The question is how can men become a priest: do they need specific education and if yes: what does this involve? Can all men claim to be a priest and do the sons of a priest automatically become priests themselves?

Key concerns were the interest boys and men might have in taking the role of priest or person who is allowed to treat a girl. There is a strong assumption that male Eritreans can call or influence evil spirits in young girls and as such they might have an ulterior motive in the whole event. The participants of the focus groups explained that during religious events girls give the impression of being very willing and dependant on the priest. The boys on the other hand react in a lustful manner and there seems to be a thin line between religious and sexual behaviour. Participants working with unaccompanied minors decided therefore, to ensure that the boys and girls had separate praying sessions.

The focus group participants emphasised that the Eritrean religious services at the reception centres include many rituals, occur at unusual times (at night) and that many people are involved. The praying sessions last for hours, sometimes the whole day. The adolescents wear white clothes and a sort of hat, while they pray and dance. After dark they stand still in places with moonlight. Some participants of the focus groups had witnessed sexual encounters in low bushes; the youngsters did not really try to hide themselves. People passing by could see the activities.

Not all participants observed religious activities: sometimes the Eritreans leave the centre and go somewhere else. A few participants noticed large groups (30-50 people) leaving their reception centre on foot, together with a priest. Upon return there were always two or three extra people within the group, trying to get into the centre in the group's company. These people did not live at the reception centre and could or would not show their ID to security-staff.

According to the participants of the focus groups people have to pray a lot to avoid the evil eye: praying in groups is most preferable. As one participant quoted an asylum seeker:

¹⁶ In general, asylum seekers who cause trouble or nuisance can be transferred to another centre.

‘praying together makes you strong’. The core concern of the Eritreans is to avoid the evil eye. This can be done by praying together but also, in some other circumstances by staying away from people. As participants of the focus groups stated, sometimes there is a conflict of interest: in the case when a baby-girl is born, the mother has to remain in the house for 80 days, with a baby-boy the rule is 40 days. This is done because it reduces the risk of getting the evil eye. However, if the mother is granted the status of refugee, she is obliged to follow a Dutch integration course. How is she going to fulfil this requirement if she can’t leave the house due to her religious obligations?

Change of behaviour

UMA’s are allowed to visit relatives or friends outside the reception centre. However, staff often notice a change in behaviour when they return. They look extremely tired, they withdraw to their rooms and stay in bed. This is remarkable because the same girls were cheerful and open before their visit.

Sometimes underage girls would go to visit family, so they say. However, they would not be reachable by phone when staff tried to get in contact with them. The question arose if they were really visiting their relatives or if they were visiting the Eritrean Orthodox church in Rotterdam instead. This is a topic young Eritreans try to avoid and their answers are vague when questioned. As a result there is a lack of knowledge among the focus group participants about the role of the church. At the beginning of the year adolescents were told not to visit the Eritrean Orthodox church in Rotterdam anymore. The concern of the COA was a possible link between pregnancies of twenty young Eritrean girls and visits to this church. Even today it is still not clear whether these girls had consented to sex.

Medical care in relation to religion

As quoted before in this chapter there is a general lack of trust. The Eritreans give the impression of distrusting the staff, medical care and health services. In the opinion of the GGD and GCA it is a challenge to provide them with adequate care. Sometimes they go to the doctor with inexplicable complaints that can be easily misunderstood. To cite one example: “There is a risk in making a wrong diagnosis; one could for instance determine epilepsy as the evil eye or the other way around”. What the participant of the meeting was

trying to say, what looks like epilepsy to a westerner, would be perceived as having the evil eye by an Eritrean.

Among the participants of the focus groups there are questions and concerns about vaccinations or taking a blood sample: “As soon as they see a syringe, they freak out”. As Eritreans stated this is connected to the evil eye. One participant of the focus groups explained: “If they are possessed, they refuse an injection”. Assumptions expressed by the participants are that girls might be afraid of becoming a victim of rape: while on the move through Libya they all got contraceptive injections before being raped. The participants of the focus groups are aware of the fact that for African refugees Libya is considered the main route to Europe and the country has become the heart of the region for organised criminals who operate in trafficking and smuggling. Eritreans have been exposed to traumatic experiences such as witnessing violence and/or being a victim of sexual violence, rape and forced pregnancy. Another assumption noted by the participants of the focus group as to why Eritreans might be frightened of syringes, is that they are afraid of being tracked down by the Eritrean government, a strong belief amongst young Eritrean asylum seekers. They are certain that being tracked down outside the State of Eritrea would lead to threats and revenge against family members back home.

All the described events in this paragraph call the attention time and again to the assumption that there might be a link with sexual abuse or even human trafficking. To what extent are the rituals part of normal Eritrean traditions and religious life and to what extent is it likely that the traditions have become the basis for exploitation?

4.3 Concerns about human trafficking

The participants of the focus groups addressed several concerns about human trafficking. They stated that asylum seekers are in general vulnerable to human smuggling and human trafficking. However, they raised particular concerns about the young Eritrean asylum seekers suggesting that they might be more vulnerable than other asylum seekers.

In recent years much of the emphasis of the COA has been on raising awareness among staff members on both topics. The number of COA-workers has increased in the last couple of years and this is related to the high influx of asylum seekers. Obviously, not all new staff members have participated in an awareness training yet which increases the risk that red flags will not be recognized as a (possible) indicator of human smuggling or human

trafficking. In addition there is concern about the knowledge among asylum seekers. Are they aware of the meaning of human smuggling and trafficking and do they recognize themselves as being a (possible) victim? One attendee of the focus groups described the unwillingness of a young Eritrean girl to report her rape to the police. According to her, the girl stated that she had been raped so many times on the way to Europe that she assumed that ‘*apparently this was part of the deal*’.

In the opinion of the participants it is remarkable that other asylum seekers report signs of human trafficking to staff members, and the Eritreans don’t. The question arose if this relates to a lack of knowledge of the concept and the risks of human trafficking or if it relates to a lack of trust or not knowing where to report.

The participants of the focus groups reported that female Eritrean adolescents seem reluctant to explain what has happened to them: for example, how did they get pregnant? The answers are vague; in cases where the questions are considered too difficult or maybe too intimate, there won’t be any answer at all. This might appear to be an indication of their lack of trust in authorities and social workers as well a function of a lack of (sexual) knowledge, as described in another part of this chapter. Some members of the focus groups believe that due to the unusual behaviour some young women display there is a reasonable suspicion of a background of human trafficking. Quotes from the discussions in the focus groups:

They exhibit behaviour that I have seen from victims of lover boys.

The way they dress, the way they act: they just seem to be focussed on sex.

In the first group (in 2014) prostitution was more likely to occur; with Eritrean men as customers.

As mentioned by several participants, there are a number of red flags and gut feelings, mainly concerning young females, although some had heard stories of sexual violence and rape amongst male adolescents. One of the two major concerns expressed in the focus groups was the fact that female adolescents get picked up by cars at night time. In one location a visitor who picks up women claimed to be a dentist, although it seems doubtful to everyone that this is true. The other major concern is the possession of a brand new I-phone 6: apparently the Eritreans receive this smart phone after they move from a Process Reception

Location (POL) to a reception centre. Focus group participants working in a POL stated that the Eritreans either had a simple older model Nokia cell-phone or no phone at all. They had definitely not seen any new smart phones. Once the Eritreans received their new Phones it is noteworthy that they do not use their phone for internet, e-mail or WhatsApp: most of them seem to have a lack of knowledge of how to use these options. Furthermore, the girls are completely focussed on their I-phone. Several workers declared that the girls refuse to give their number. The question arose whether the phones are used to track down the Eritreans. The participants indicated:

The girls don't know their own phone number.

Even when they have an appointment at GCA they are constantly distracted by their phone and keeping an eye on it.

The phone is always there, on the table in front of them.

They often make long phone calls; they lay curled up, frequently half covered in the curtains.

In addition to the men who pick up females, some participants of the focus groups described an English speaking Eritrean man who frequently visited the location, supposedly to conduct research as a journalist (there are doubts about the research as well as the profession of 'journalist'). According to the workers he showed manipulative behaviour and told lies. However, as a result of his visit many young women went to church.

Most participants of the focus groups were aware of the route from Eritrea to Europe and the risk of Eritrean refugees ending up in (torture) camps in the Sinai-desert or being (sexually) abused in Libya.

Perhaps their trauma is a possible explanation for their behaviour.

The voyage to Europe takes 2-3 years; they have experienced a lot.

Their long journey is different from other asylum seekers; they have experienced loneliness.

Young female Eritreans often visit each other. They frequently sleep in the same bed; this creates a feeling of safety.

Young females don't speak another language: this makes them more vulnerable to becoming a victim as they have no one to rely on.

It is generally known that young Eritrean women receive a contraceptive injection in Libya. In the opinion of the medical participants of the focus groups this must be a severe one, as women have been known to be protected for at least one year. It is not known who provides these injections. As described earlier in this chapter young women panic when they get an injection. One could argue that they link this injection with the rapes they experienced after the contraceptive injections were received in Libya.

4.4 Conclusion

For every newcomer in the Netherlands, the challenge is to strike a delicate balance between their own culture and customs and those of this new country. This balance is complicated and may be difficult to achieve. However, the participants of the focus group meetings expressed particular concerns about the integration of the Eritreans. All the noted concerns about the well-being of the Eritreans seem to converge on the issue of integration. The lack of social trust, combined with a lack of language skills and illiteracy, the low level of education, a lack of European life experience and basic life skills, and the characteristics of a closed community will make it very hard for Eritreans to connect with Dutch society and to request support as they are most likely completely unaware of their (basic) rights. In addition, the participants stressed the difficulties of engaging in a conversation and making a constructive dialogue. The key issue is: how do we reach out to them in order to support them as much as we can while they still live in the reception centres? Generally they are worried about the vulnerability of adolescents, females as well as males. According to the participants of the focus groups there is a huge gap to bridge for successful integration. The question is whether the Eritreans are ready, willing and able to minimise this gap.

In addition to the concerns about integration, the participants of the focus groups raised the question: how to deal with religious events in the reception centres? Asylum seekers are allowed to practice religion in their room, however one of the core values of the COA as declared in its mission statement is that it offers a safe environment to asylum seekers. And the COA-policy is not clear about whether or not big religious services in rooms are allowed. The participants of the focus groups noted that they have a lack of knowledge

about religious Eritrean rituals and traditions. This makes it difficult for them as staff to understand these ceremonies and to distinguish between normal Eritrean religious behavior and behavior that might be an indicator of manipulation or abuse.

The next chapter will link the major concerns of the participants of the focus groups with the outcomes of the literature study.

5. Discussion

This chapter presents the concerns of the participants of the focus groups in a broader context, and reflects on the findings, thus answering the fourth research question: *What is known from literature about the specific concerns as identified by staff?*

Four meetings were organised for the personnel of reception centres to share concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres. In general one could sum up these concerns and conclude that, according to the participants of the focus groups, the Eritreans have of a lack of European life experience, and in addition, a lack of crucial abilities and skills to face this new life. Nearly all of the Eritrean asylum seekers will ultimately be granted a residence permit (Engbersen et al., 2015) which will change their status from asylum seeker to permit holder. The main concerns of the participants of the focus groups were related to the integration of the Eritreans (as permit holders) in Dutch society, concerns about religious rituals and traditions, and gut feelings concerning indicators of human trafficking. Therefore this chapter will focus on these three key issues.

The first paragraph will briefly describe the challenges that permit holders face when trying to establish a foothold in Dutch society. The second paragraph will focus on coping strategies among East African refugees. As religion plays an important role in coping techniques (Gladden, 2012), the next section highlights the so called ‘evil eye or Buda’: the power of the evil eye or Buda belief is one of the most powerful beliefs among Eritrean asylum seekers. Finally, attention will be paid to the modus operandi in Nigerian human trafficking. This is done because some participants of the focus groups associated the unfamiliar Eritrean rituals and superstitious practices with the methods of the human trafficking networks exposed with the Nigerian girls who disappeared from the reception centres for an unknown destination.

5.1 Challenges for integration

The participants questioned if the integration of the Eritreans in Dutch society would have any chance at all of being successful. The transfer from a reception centre to a municipality is an important milestone in the lives of asylum seekers: are the Eritreans ready for this next step?

The Women’s Refugee Commission (2013) carried out field research in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Sudan. The report describes the reluctance young Eritreans feel when

thinking of a life outside the refugee camps. “Some of the young men admitted that they were worried about what might happen to them in the community, who would care for them and how they would cope” (p 23). It is not common practice for young men in Eritrea to live alone, except in the cases where they are forced to do so because of national services obligations. Adolescents usually live with their family until they marry.

Professor Mirjam van Reisen was quoted in the *Volkskrant* (Bolwijn, 2015) as saying that she is gloomy about the integration prospects for the Eritreans. The country in which they grew up is a poor one without too many prospects; the government is malfunctioning and there is widespread oppression. She is of the opinion that Eritrean adolescents need professional guidance and structure as they have not learned how to build their own lives. They are disillusioned with everything. On top of that they often have huge debts to relatives and human smugglers.

The same article quotes Professor Jan Abbink who says that the strong social control and tensions within the Eritrean community in the Netherlands, makes them inward-looking and socially excluded. These aspects combined with their social distrust might be major obstacles for integration (Abbink, 2016). At the same time, no matter the distrust, they are an isolated but a tightly-knit group. Scholars argue that social exclusion is linked with isolation from society. “The concept of social exclusion tends to be defined as the opposite of social inclusion. Social inclusion is, broadly speaking, people’s abilities to exercise their human rights and the set of civil liberties that enable them to participate in society and to reinforce their individual and collective identity”. (Coumans, 2012, p.781). Coumans (2012) developed indicators for dimensions of social exclusion:

1. A lack of social and cultural participation;
2. (Lack of) economic-structural resources, including material deprivation;
3. Insufficient normative integration;
4. Inadequate access to social rights and social-cultural resources.

As Entzinger and others state: refugees (the so called permit holders) have fewer chances of a successful participation and integration in Dutch society than other migrants (Klaver, 2015; Engbersen, et al., 2015; Entzinger, 2015; CBS, 2015). This is partly because they face

problems that are often linked to traumatic experiences in their home country or during their journey.

Just one out of three permit holders between the ages of 15 and 64 have paid jobs and many depend permanently on social assistance benefits¹⁷ (Engbersen, et al.,2015). The difficult situation permit holders find themselves in, when confronting the labour market can be explained by common factors such as a low level or lack of education, socioeconomic background, motivation, intelligence, inadequate skills with the Dutch language, a lack of (relevant) work experience and the absence of relevant social networks (Klaver, 2015; CBS 2015).

Back to the concerns relating to integration as expressed by the participants of the focus groups. Socioeconomic integration of permit holders in general is difficult and this combined with the specific characteristics of the Eritreans means they might run the risk of social exclusion. The question which logically arises is how to facilitate their integration while they still live in the reception centres. The matter as such is acknowledged by the Dutch government, who has said that “ the core of the asylum policy is to guide permit holders as quickly as possible from the COA shelters to a place in Dutch society, and offer them access to integration and work as soon as possible¹⁸.”

This thesis is focussed on the concerns for the well-being of Eritreans while living in the reception centres. The listed concerns of the previous chapter make the Eritreans vulnerable, not only in the current situation, but also in their future. Understandably integration will be a challenge. However: all the concerns and problems are linked, and mainly rooted in their home country Eritrea. No matter where these Eritreans live, they will face challenges, mainly because of their difficult background.

¹⁷ Letter of 27 November 2015 from the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment to the President of the House of Representatives of the States-General. Integration and participation of permit holders. Reference: 2015-0000298184, p. 5.

¹⁸ House of Representatives of the States-General. Session year 2015-2016. Letter from the Minister of Housing and the Central Government Sector. Immigration Policy. 19 637. No. 2053. See also the letter to the House of Representatives from the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment of 27 November, explicitly stating that the aim of government policy is the rapid integration and active participation by permit holders (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid 2015).

5.2 Coping and resilience

Living in a new country demands a new form of socialisation. Despite the past and present difficulties, many refugees are resilient and their coping strategies are unique (Isakson & Jurkovic, 2013; Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015; Nakash et al., 2015). This paragraph intends to explain the coping skills used by East African refugees, however, there is limited literature on hand concerning Eritrean coping abilities.

Longitudinal research on the effects of migration illustrates that compared to other migrants, refugees have higher rates of anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015). This higher prevalence for such issues are often related to experiences in the country of origin, the journey and exposure to traumatic experiences en route, and experiences in the new home country (Nakash et al., 2015). Refugees use a range of coping skills to deal with the loss of home and family, and the (sexual) violence during their flight.

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Second World War Nazi concentration camps, wrote one of the first books on the subject of coping: 'Man's search for meaning' (1946). According to Frankl, people find meaning to their life or to their suffering (Frankl, 1992; Gladden, 2012). Frankl's favourite quote was Nietzsche's '*He who has a Why to live for can almost bear any How*'. As Gladden states (2012), there is a frequent overlap between meaning making and belief in God.

In general, religion has been found to be a dominant coping strategy among refugees (Gladden, 2012; Isakson & Jurkovic, 2013; Kira & Tummala-Narra, 2015). Since religion and religious rituals are central to the value systems and the overall feeling of well-being for most Africans, one can expect that African refugees choose to practice religious activities during times of adversity. A study by Gladden emphasises that African refugees use spirituality to heal body and soul from traumatic experiences (Gladden, 2012). Their religion is the bridge that gaps the old world they have left and the new one in which they find themselves.

Research on East African refugees' coping strategies, show several commonly found approaches, including faith, religion and spiritual beliefs, political ideologies, values, social support, traditional medicines and practices, and cognitive reframing or finding meaning in

the situation (Gladden, 2012; Isakson & Jurkovic, 2013; Simmelink, Lightfoot, Dube, Blevins & Lum, 2013).

Some Eritrean refugees make meaning out of their experiences by putting a high value on their country and their fight for freedom. This is what Frankl describes as making meaning to their suffering: people might consider their suffering as a trade-off for the life of relatives in the home country (Frankl, 1992; Farwell, 2001). Analogous to what is described by Frankl, the difficult circumstances of the Eritreans at times lead to existential questions about good, evil, and the nature of humanity. In addition to the coping strategies cited above, silence regarding their experiences, showing patience and self-control have also been witnessed as methods used by the refugees in order to deal with their situation (Farwell, 2001).

5.3 Buda or the evil eye

As religion is crucial in the majority of refugees' coping strategy, this might lead to the question of what is the role of the evil eye or Buda sessions in the COA-reception centres and at parties outside. The participants of the focus groups stressed that they face a lack of knowledge about religious Eritrean rituals and traditions, particularly regarding the belief in Buda or the evil eye. This makes it difficult for them to understand these ceremonies and to see the difference between normal Eritrean religious behaviour and behaviour that might be an indicator of manipulation or abuse. What is known from literature?

In the Eastern and Western lowlands of Eritrea the population is mainly Muslim. Most Christians live in the highlands. All Eritreans are familiar with religious practices (Stokes & Gorman, 2010; US Department of State, 2015). The current group of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands belong to the ethnic group of Tigrinya and is Christian Orthodox (Pharos, 2015).

The power of the evil eye or as it is more commonly called Buda belief is one of the most powerful beliefs in central Tigray. Eritreans often believe that people carry Buda, the evil eye. Many Eritreans experience great fear when dealing with those who are possessed with the evil eye as they are believed to have spiritual and paranormal power. The believe these people are able to communicate with devil spirits. People with Buda might cause harm to others just by looking at them. Many of life's adversities are believed to be caused by Buda attack and as a result, there are widespread traditional healing practices in order to aid the

victims . On top of this, discrimination of the alleged Budas by the community is very common (Hodes, 1997; Stokes & Gorman, 2010; Murugan & Birhanu, 2014).

Identifying the people who carry Buda is a difficult challenge and Tigrinya people use different methods. Since carrying Buda is hereditary, tracing the paternal lineage is the universal and most preferred way (Stokes & Gorman, 2010; Murugan & Birhanu, 2014). Another indicator is one's occupation. "Since craftworks like goldsmith, blacksmith, pottery, etc. are thought to be the typical jobs of the Budas, people engaged in craftworks are perceived as Buda"¹⁹ (Murugan & Birhanu, p. 63, 2014). Buda can also be identified by physical characteristics: beauty is such an indication. If a girl is beautiful and not married, people believe that she must carry the evil eye.

People in Eritrea have developed several preventative and healing techniques of dealing with Buda. Preventative measures include the evoking of prayers, using holy water, singing victory and thanksgiving songs, reciting sacred writings and wearing amulets. The latter is the most popular method. In addition they often use cultural rituals and sacrifices such as wearing costumes, placing a metal object in the hair, dressing children opposite to their sex and shaving half their heads (Pili, 2009; Stokes & Gorman, 2010; Murugan & Birhanu, 2014).

In combating and punishing the evil spirit different curative methods can be used, however, *Buda Milkak* or exorcism is the most frequently used method. Other techniques are providing traditional medicines, drinking holy water and carrying amulets. Having a dialogue with the evil spirit is a vital part of the exorcism ceremony. The ceremony requires no special priest or specialized exorcist, only an elderly person and an animal dung fire. Fires can also be made with pieces of cloth and hair from the person carrying Buda. The possessed person has to breathe the smoke from the fire. At times a fire is made and a piece of metal is heated in the flames. The hot metal is then put onto the face, thus creating a small pattern of burns (Pili, 2009; Stokes & Gorman, 2010; Murugan & Birhanu, 2014).

It has to be noted, that for this thesis no research could be found on burning rubber as a means of chasing away the evil spirit, and in addition no research was found of women

¹⁹ 'Craft workers collaborated with enemies of Jesus to crucify him; they used their skills against Christ and they have facilitated both his arrest and crucifixion by providing the tongs to pull him out of a crevice and finally the nail to crucify him with' (Murugan, p.67, 2014).

being the only target group who carry Buda. Moreover, and definitely more important: the participants of the focus groups stated that in the reception centres only female adolescents carry Buda. This leads to the logical question: How come that apparently in the Netherlands only young women are vulnerable to carrying Buda? As stated by the participants of the focus groups in the reception centres, young Eritrean men sometimes accompanied by a priest have a role in chasing away the evil spirit. This has led to the assumption among the participants of the focus groups that male Eritreans might have an ulterior motive in the whole event.

Some members of staff associated these rituals and superstitious practices with the modus operandi of the human trafficking networks exposed with the Nigerian girls who disappeared from the reception centres for an unknown destination. A form of witchcraft was used to manipulate the girls. Today, there are reports of young Eritreans who go temporarily missing from the reception centres. They are reluctant in telling where they were. These signals in combination with the (for staff) unfamiliar religious rituals cause growing concern among the participants of the focus groups about the well-being of the Eritrean asylum seekers.

5.4 Mysterious rituals

Since the beginning of the nineties Nigerian human traffickers took advantage of the Dutch asylum procedure. After hundreds of young Nigerian women and girls disappeared from reception centres in the Netherlands, a police investigation was initiated (Baarda, 2016). The investigation in 2006 led to a breakthrough in international cooperation in the field of human trafficking (Kamerling & Wittenberg, NRC, 2009).

The remarkable matter of the modus operandi of the Nigerian traffickers was the use of Voodoo-rituals. *Voodoo* in Nigeria is a form of witchcraft existing in cultural traditions in Christian and Islamic belief. In the context of the Nigerian human trafficking, voodoo was used or rather misused as a variation of West-African religious traditions, in which a priest has the power to manipulate people's lives (Van Dijk et al., 2006).

The mysterious rituals among Eritrean asylum seekers today raise concern and lead to the assumption that these ceremonies might be used to control the young adolescents, as comparable with the Nigerian case. As stated in chapter 4, the participants of the focus groups stressed the lack of language skills and social mistrust of authority among the

Eritreans, which makes communication with them very difficult. This combined with the conclusion that they are easy to manipulate by other Eritrean community members raises concern about their well-being. The Eritrean community is deeply religious, and priests have an influential position. To what extent might this influence be used to control the Eritreans in the reception centres? Participants of the focus groups emphasised that Christian Orthodox priests or representatives frequently tried to organize religious meetings in the reception centres. In addition young male Eritreans were often appointed as priest. It was noted that the attention of the so called priests was mainly focussed on young female Eritreans.

The participants of the focus groups raised the concern about the religious events in the reception centres. All the described religious rituals call the attention to the assumption that there might be a link with sexual abuse. A crucial difference between experience of the Eritreans today and that of the Nigerians is that it seemed most Nigerian women who travelled to Europe somehow knew what sort of future and work was awaiting them on arrival. The question was did they fully realize what working as a prostitute in the Netherlands meant. They were almost certainly provided with a misrepresentation of the facts (Van Dijk et al., 2006). The Eritrean women and adolescents did not come to the Netherlands to work in prostitution. As noted before, the reasons to flee Eritrea are numerous, rooted in the background of the country and not linked to work in the Netherlands.

In the Nigerian cases, *Voodoo* was connected to fears and beliefs that were present in Nigerian culture and was adjusted into rituals for the advantage of human traffickers (Baarda, 2016). *Voodoo* is not part of the Eritrean tradition. However, the tradition of the evil eye is unfamiliar to the participants of the focus groups and therefore it is difficult to distinguish between 'normal' religious ceremonies and meetings where adolescents are being influenced. At the present time there is still a lack of detailed documented empirical knowledge about the rituals Eritreans use in reception centres. This knowledge is crucial in identifying a possible role in the temporary disappearance of young Eritreans from reception centres. The knowledge is also essential in giving meaning to and recognizing the change of behaviour as witnessed by the participants of the focus groups when girls have attended a religious meeting.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter presents the conclusions and recommendations. The conclusions in paragraph 6.1 are formulated by using the research questions as noted in chapter 3 on methodology. The most important findings from the study are outlined by combining the results of the focus group meetings with the results based on the study of literature. This study dealt with exploratory research. Exploratory research does not have the intention to provide definite evidence, as it is conducted in order to determine the nature of the problem. Therefore this study is supportive in having a better understanding of the problem, i.c. the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres. For that reason the conclusions have a reflective character. The second part of this chapter, paragraph 6.2 contains policy and practical recommendations for the COA board, as well as recommendations for further research.

6.1 Conclusions

Chapter 3 described the research design and the main reason for this research. This was explained as follows: The study aims to gather and provide information on the concerns of the staff about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands, in order to identify (possible) risk factors. The aim of the research is twofold:

- To acquire knowledge of the existing concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands.
- To acquire knowledge of risk factors for Eritrean asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

The insight gained will lead to policy and practical recommendations for the COA board.

The research question to be answered is ‘*What are the concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers in reception centres in the Netherlands?*’ The research will answer the following questions:

1. What are the concerns about Eritrean asylum seekers, according to the staff from reception centres?
2. What common characteristics of these concerns can be identified?
3. What possible risk factors for Eritrean asylum seekers can be identified?
4. What is known from literature about the specific concerns as identified by staff?

By answering the four different research questions, the central research question will also be answered. The answer to the first research question looks in detail at the concerns of the participants of the focus groups. In order to avoid needless repetitions, the answers to the second and third question will be more compact.

1. What are the concerns about Eritrean asylum seekers, according to the staff from reception centres?

Four focus group meetings were carried out to gather information about the concerns of staff from reception centres. The witnessed concerns can be linked to several areas for attention. First of all the participants noticed that Eritreans tend to show a level of distrust against other Eritreans and Dutch people in a position of authority (including the workers at a reception centre). At the same time though, despite this distrust, they are an isolated but tightly-knit group. Communication is difficult due to the language barriers and the lack of trust the Eritreans show towards the interpreters. The bottom line is: How do we reach out to them in order to support them as much as we can while they still live in the reception centres?

The message time and again is that Eritreans are easy to manipulate, that they are not used to making choices for themselves, are not able to exercise their rights and that their young women are not used to saying 'no'. In addition they show a 'wait-and-see' mentality and seem to have no interest in anything but religious rituals, and tasks for which they receive pocket money. The so called leaders of the Eritrean group influence and control the behaviour and decisions on an array of life choices for other Eritrean community members. Even the young ones (age 15-17) show a peer-hierarchic structure. Some of the participants of the focus groups questioned whether, there is an involvement of an even higher level of authority, referring to the Orthodox Church or the Eritrean government in their day to day lives, while other participants were convinced this is the case.

Whatever the reason, Eritreans are discriminated against at the reception centres and Eritrean children are at risk of being bullied. Most adolescent Eritreans not only *look* significantly younger than they are supposed to be according to their documents, but also *act* like children: these people are probably younger than they claim and this causes concern for their future in Dutch society.

To what extent are the religious events and rituals part of normal Eritrean traditions and religious life and to what extent is it likely that the traditions have become the basis for exploitation? The presence of priests has an impact on the behaviour of the Eritrean asylum seekers and causes stress in the reception centres. Key concerns are the interest boys and men might have in taking the role of priest or the person who is allowed to treat a girl possessed by the evil eye. There is a strong assumption that male Eritreans might have an ulterior motive in the whole event: during religious events girls give the impression of being very willing and dependant on the priest. The boys on the other hand react in a lustful manner and there seems to be a thin line between religious and sexual behaviour. In general, the young Eritrean women are often barely dressed. Due to the unusual (dressing) behaviour some young women display there is a reasonable suspicion of a background of lover boy experiences. A number of other (possible) signs of human trafficking have been mentioned. One of the two major concerns was the fact that female Eritrean adolescents get picked up by cars at night time. The other major concern is the possession of a brand new I-phone 6: apparently the Eritreans receive this smart phone after they move from a Process Reception Location (POL) to a reception centre. It is noteworthy that they do not use their phone for internet, e-mail or WhatsApp: most of them seem to have a lack of knowledge of how to use these options. The question arises whether the phones are used to track down the Eritreans.

There have been cases where young pregnant Eritrean women declared that they were drugged at a party; it appears that this happened at so called baptisms outside the reception centres. The girls don't want or can't explain where these parties were held. Generally they seem unwilling to discuss what has happened to them.

It seems a challenge to provide the Eritreans with adequate medical care, due to the social distrust, the lack of education and language skills. Eritreans often wait too long to go to a doctor. Abstract concepts are not understood and there is little understanding or awareness in relation to sexual (pregnancy) and health topics. The Eritrean asylum seekers get scared as soon as they see a syringe (for vaccinations or taking blood samples). Assumptions are that girls might be afraid of becoming a victim of rape: while on the move through Libya they all got contraceptive injections before being raped. Another assumption is that they are afraid of being tracked down by the Eritrean government, a strong belief amongst young Eritrean asylum seekers.

2. What common characteristics of these concerns can be identified?

The main concerns were related to the integration of the Eritreans (as permit holders) in Dutch society, religious rituals and traditions, and to indicators of human trafficking. One focus group meeting actually regarded the concern about their future in Dutch society (the challenge of integration) as the key concern. The lack of social trust, combined with a lack of language skills and illiteracy, the low level of education, a lack of European life experience and basic life skills together with the characteristics of a closed community will make it very hard for Eritreans to connect with Dutch society and to request support as they are most likely completely unaware of their (basic) rights.

Strikingly, most concerns were linked to the adolescents (age 18-23), females as well as males. 'Older' Eritreans (25+) behave differently and seem less vulnerable. Minors have the advantage of going to school and they might benefit from the provided knowledge and expertise. Women are regarded as very vulnerable due to their lack of knowledge, their wait-and-see attitude and their sensitivity to community pressure.

3. What possible risk factors for Eritrean asylum seekers can be identified?

On a scale of 0-100 % the participants of the focus groups estimated that the Eritreans face a risk up to 80% of not integrating into Dutch society and thus becoming socially isolated, due to the many barriers already stated.

There are two possible risk factors for Eritreans that could be affected by a lack of knowledge from the staff working in the reception centre. The first is a lack of knowledge about religious Eritrean rituals and traditions. This makes it difficult for staff to understand these ceremonies and to distinguish between normal Eritrean religious behaviour and behaviour that might be an indicator of manipulation or abuse. The second risk for Eritrean asylum seekers is a lack of knowledge among staff about the indicators for human trafficking. Furthermore there is concern about the knowledge among the Eritrean asylum seekers. Are they aware of the meaning of human smuggling and trafficking and do they recognize themselves as being a (possible) victim?

Finally, risks were reported for a change in behaviour when UMA's visit relatives or friends outside the reception centre. Upon return they often look extremely tired, they

withdraw to their rooms and stay in bed. This is remarkable because the same girls were cheerful and open before their visit. Sometimes they are not reachable by phone when visiting relatives or friends. The question arose if they were visiting the church in Rotterdam instead. This is a topic young Eritreans try to avoid and their answers are vague when questioned.

4. What is known from literature about the specific concerns as identified by staff?

The literature study proved that participation and socioeconomic integration of permit holders in general is difficult and can be explained by factors such as a low level or lack of education, motivation, intelligence, inadequate skills with the Dutch language, and a lack of (relevant) work experience and the absence of relevant social networks. These factors combined with the specific characteristics of the Eritreans (as noted above) means that integration will be a challenge for them.

According to the literature study as regards to the meaning of religious traditions, refugees use a range of coping skills to deal with the loss of home and family, and the (sexual) violence during their flight. In general, religion and spiritual beliefs have been found to be a dominant coping strategy among refugees. What causes concern among the participants of the focus groups is the belief of Eritrean asylum seekers in the power of the evil eye or Buda. Literature study confirmed that this belief is one of the most powerful beliefs in central Tigray, where most Eritrean asylum seekers have their roots. Many of life's adversities are believed to be caused by Buda attack and as a result, people in Eritrea have developed several identifying and healing techniques in dealing with Buda. In the reception centres they are burning rubber as a technique to chase away the evil spirit. However, no research could be found on burning rubber. In addition, no research was found on women being the only target group carrying Buda: in the reception centres only female adolescents carry Buda.

Last but not least

Media attention, parliamentary questions and concerns shared by key players in the field of asylum about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers led to the research described in this study. At the end of 2015 and the beginning of 2016 there were indications that young female Eritrean asylum seekers were going missing (temporarily) from the reception centres.

Some of these women got pregnant and the question arose whether they had consented to sex. The concern was a possible link between the pregnancies and the visits to the Orthodox Church in Rotterdam: the Eritrean asylum seekers frequently visit this church and often stay overnight.

To gain insight into the problems, the research question was focussed on concerns about their well-being and not limited to concerns about sexual abuse, pregnancies and the possible role of the church. The findings give a detailed answer to the research question. The original concerns are thus put in a broader perspective and make it clear that, according to the participants of the focus groups, there are many more concerns about the well-being of Eritrean asylum seekers.

The findings of this study can be helpful when considering strategies to support the Eritrean asylum seekers in the reception centres, since they identify the concerns and give a broader understanding of which aspects in particular need to be tackled.

6.2 Recommendations

This section starts with policy and practical recommendations for the COA board, and finishes with recommendations for further research. The results from this study have implications both for present practice in the reception centres and for future research.

Recommendations for the COA board

The main concerns of the participants of the focus groups were related to the integration of the Eritreans (as permit holders) in Dutch society, religious rituals and traditions, indicators of human trafficking. Subsequently the recommendations will focus on these aspects.

Integration

A lack of knowledge of any other language other than their mother tongue is a barrier for Eritreans to communication both in their current situation in the reception centre and in the future when integrating into Dutch society. In view of the importance of Dutch language skills for education and work, it is crucial to make the best use of the period spent in the reception centre. Eritreans should immediately engage in activities that will support them in

their future integration and participation in the Dutch way of life. The COA should consider offering language lessons and vocational training to all Eritrean asylum seekers.

The COA should organise preparatory meetings for Eritreans for integration, including the raising of awareness for future challenges and risks, and improving the skills of coping with situations of adversity, both in the reception centres and outside in Dutch society. Attention should be paid to Dutch values and the European way of living. These meetings should also focus on practical issues such as sexual education and health topics. These good practices could be collected in a manual for COA-staff.

Religious rituals and traditions

The participants of the focus groups face a lack of knowledge of the culturally grounded religious practices and beliefs of the Eritreans and therefore it is difficult to distinguish between ‘normal’ religious ceremonies and behaviour and meetings where adolescents are being manipulated. The COA should organise meetings for personnel where, on one hand they get the opportunity to exchange experiences, and on the other hand they should be provided with knowledge on Eritrean rituals and traditions.

Human trafficking

Although the COA offers awareness training for staff in recognising (possible) signs of human smuggling and trafficking, not all staff members have participated in training yet. Targeted training to develop staff knowledge and skills in recognizing the indicators of human smuggling and trafficking, should be made available to all workers in the reception centres, not just the COA-staff. Employees who are likely to come into direct contact with asylum seekers must be equipped with the necessary skill set. The COA might consider taking a leading role in offering training.

In addition the question arises if the Eritreans are aware of the meaning of human trafficking and if they recognize themselves as being a (possible) victim? It is recommended that the COA investigates first the current knowledge of these topics among the Eritreans and second, offers tailor made awareness training for them.

Final comment

The data in this study highlight the need for a well-coordinated effort to improve the well-being of the Eritrean asylum seekers in the reception centres. The COA has to carry out the duty of providing reception, supervision and departure (from the reception location) of asylum seekers. People in a vulnerable position should be accommodated and supported in a safe and liveable environment (COA, 2016). Therefore the concerns of the staff as noted in this study should be recognised. The COA should develop a growing awareness of the well-being of the Eritrean asylum seekers as they seem to be more vulnerable than other asylum seekers.

Recommendations for further research

Further study will be necessary to get comprehensive explanations on the Eritrean religious rituals in the reception centres. This might lead to answers for the remaining questions.

In order to improve their well-being in the reception centres, further research should examine the needs and concerns of the Eritrean asylum seekers.

Further research is required to develop the understanding of the indicators of human trafficking, such as the possession of the brand new smart phones and the change of behaviour girls show when returning from visiting friends and relatives.

The findings of this study can be helpful when considering follow-up research: it would, therefore, be recommended to compare the current ‘soft information’ with hard facts by carrying out further quantitative research.

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