

From midwife in Eritrea to psychosocial worker in Egypt: a story of challenges and opportunities

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The author, an Eritrean psychosocial worker in Egypt, describes how she became a refugee from persecution. As a result of her flight from Eritrea, she lost almost everything: her job, her income and ties to her family. She knows how hard the life of a refugee is, from direct experience. Originally trained as a midwife, she later became involved in psychosocial support and is now a refugee worker assisting the Eritrean community in Cairo. In this paper, a personal reflection, she describes how becoming a psychosocial helper has been important to her personal development, while at the same time has also been personally very demanding. Peer supervision has been an essential element to keeping a balance in her life.

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Introduction

Cairo has twenty million residents. For the last five years I, an Eritrean woman, am one of them. I never thought I would end up in this bustling and overcrowded city, helping other refugees cope with their psychosocial problems. Currently, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has 50,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Egypt, but there are many more undocumented, forced migrants (those that do not ask for asylum or to be registered, mostly out of fear of the consequences), with estimates ranging as high

as 500,000. In this personal reflection, I share some of my experiences as both a refugee and as a psychosocial worker.

Becoming a refugee

I was born in 1979, in a village in Eritrea. At that time, the country was still occupied by Ethiopia. My father was a merchant. When I was very young he moved the family to a large city. This is where my brothers and sisters were born. In 1998, I started my studies to become a teacher, in the capital Asmara. Later, I had the opportunity to become a nurse/midwife. It was during my time as a student that I became interested in the Pentecostal movement of Christianity. I was impressed by the direct attachment to God in the church, and chose to become a member of it. This was not an easy decision to make in Eritrea. The Eritrean government and society have little tolerance for those not belonging to one of the four recognised religions in the country: Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Islam.

I knew this decision would, therefore, be problematic, but felt I had to follow my heart. My family was very unhappy with my decision, and rejected me. After 2002, it was illegal to be a member of the Pentecostal church. We conducted our services in secret, within the homes of church members. After completing my study, I was conscripted for National Service, as are all Eritreans. I knew then the time had come to take refuge

elsewhere, because it would be impossible to follow my religion while in the National Service. In 2007, I left my country through means of an exit permit, obtained through bribery. I arrived in Cairo, an unmarried young woman who had left everything behind: job, family, friends and country. In Egypt, there are several thousand Eritreans. Members of the Pentecostal Church helped me find a place to stay. I was happy; I could now freely attend the church of my choice. I felt poor, but free. However, the life of a refugee is not an easy one.

I was registered by the UNHCR and quickly received refugee status. However, as a single, able-bodied woman I was not eligible for financial assistance. Officially, refugees are also not allowed to be employed, so I had to work illegally as a domestic servant with a rich, Egyptian family.

The family treated me very badly. I had to stand all day and could only go to bed after the Madam went to sleep, often after 2 a.m. Then, I had to wake up again at 6 a.m. to prepare food for the children, help them wash and dress, and take them to school. I was entitled to one day off per week, but often did not get it. I had to always be available to serve the family. As a refugee you have almost no rights, and you are not seen as a human being.

After two years, I could not stand it any longer. I had many health problems. I isolated myself. During the few hours that I was allowed to sleep, I suffered from insomnia, kept awake by thoughts of my miserable existence in Egypt. I stopped seeing my Eritrean friends and even stopped going to church, even though being able to attend had been the reason I became a refugee. It just did not interest me anymore. I felt guilty about the consequences of my fleeing Eritrea on my family, as the family of a person who has run away is forced to 'compensate'

the government by paying a significant amount of money. As a result, my family had become indebted.

When I look back, I realise now that I suffered from severe depression. However, I had never heard of such terms at the time. I visited a doctor, who diagnosed me with severe hypertension. This made me realise that I had to change my situation in order to improve my life. I was ruining my health, the only thing I had left. I quit my job and lived for a few months on the money I had saved. I started to walk at least one hour per day and made a schedule to see friends again, even though I did not enjoy it.

Becoming a psychosocial worker

I slowly got better. Then, I had the opportunity to become a community interpreter with the international organisation Africa and Middle East Refugee Assistance (AMERA). As a community interpreter, I assisted other Eritreans to access information they would otherwise not be able to access. For example, interpreting when they visited the health services. Doing this work helped me to realise how rewarding it is to help others. So when I was asked to train as a *psychosocial worker* by the Psycho-Social Services and Training Institute Cairo (PSTIC), I grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Even though, to be frank, I had no clue what psychosocial work was when I started the training. We began with a six week, intensive training from 9a.m. to 5p.m., which was followed by four hours training per week during the year, and by intensive individual and group supervision. While learning how to help others, I also learned a lot about myself. In fact, I have become more open minded. I remember how, in the training one day, the discussion centred on how to assist a homosexual client. Initially, I was shocked, because

homosexuality is considered to be a very bad thing in my religion, and I thought I would be unable to help. That night I could not sleep, and worried I was not suitable to be a psychosocial worker. Then, I realised that my personal convictions should not lead to the rejection of anyone because of them. I have to accept everyone, as he or she is. It is their right to make different choices in life.

Challenges as a psychosocial worker

My work is primarily with people from the Eritrean refugee community in Cairo. They are from a variety of religions and backgrounds. I speak their language and can easily understand their concerns. When I started work, many people in the Eritrean community, including the community leaders, had no idea what psychosocial work meant. Additionally, people in the community already knew me, so when I arrived as a psychosocial worker, they found it difficult to accept my new role. It is often much easier to introduce yourself as a psychosocial worker to people you do not know, than to people who know you well.

Clients often expect too much from psychosocial workers. Once people know that we are *'helping people'*, they want assistance with everything, and may be disappointed. For example, people who are asylum seekers, but not yet recognised as refugees may want me to help them resettle in another country. However, as long as they do not have refugee status, this is not possible, as it must be requested through the UNHCR.

Another one of the tasks of a psychosocial worker is to provide information on rights, legal possibilities, and impossibilities. The negative side of this task is that the community may easily perceive psychosocial workers as being *'on the side of the UNHCR'*. I can understand why this happens, as we

are working with and for the community, while at the same time also with a non-governmental organisation. Furthermore, our salaries come through UNHCR funding. It requires a lot of effort to build and retain a relationship of trust, and to show the community we are independent professionals who do not *'side'* with the authorities. Sometimes this, in itself, poses difficulties. For example, my colleague worked with a woman who reported to the UNHCR that she was beaten and mistreated by her husband. The psychosocial worker met the woman in her home and learned that the husband was not even in Egypt! So, what should the worker report to the UNHCR?

Respecting confidentiality is the other side of this challenge. Sometimes, community leaders want to know what we discuss with our clients. It can be difficult to say this is none of their business, because it is essential for us to keep good, working relationships with them. For example, I had a client I helped to get into a shelter after she had been severely abused by her husband. A church leader asked to know where she was hiding. I knew this church leader had a close relationship with the husband of the client. Of course, I did not tell him anything about her whereabouts, but this posed a real challenge for me. The community does not always understand that I have to respect the confidentiality of my clients.

Maintaining a balance

As a community based psychosocial worker I do not have an office and travel a lot within the city, meeting my clients in their homes, a coffee shop, or sometimes even in the street. I have no office hours. I need to be available to the community at all times. When I arrive home after a long day, I still have to write client reports and arrange referrals. It never

stops. It is very difficult to safeguard my personal boundaries and ensure any personal time. Although my supervisors push me to respect my boundaries and take time off, this is often difficult because my work is so connected to my private life.

Within our team of psychosocial workers, there are also refugee workers from Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Iraq and Ethiopia. It gives me a sense of satisfaction, helping people, and to assist them to cope better. I love this work, and it gives me a feeling of strength and pride.

Yet, it is also difficult. Sometimes, I get too involved in the problems of a client. I find that it is important to handle this within our peer supervision group. All of the psychosocial workers at PSTIC are in small support supervision groups that we facilitate for ourselves. I meet with eight of my colleagues, each week, to discuss difficult cases. This often provides me with some relief as I get to share my experiences and feelings, it stimulates new ideas and I feel supported. We also laugh a lot. We are from different backgrounds, different countries and different religions, but we face similar challenges.

It almost feels like a second family. I need that support because becoming a psychosocial worker is not easy. One should be knowledgeable about many things, be open minded, have a good sense of humour, and be able to confront people, while at the same time remain empathetic. Even though it is difficult sometimes, I like it very much. What I like most is that through our work we, as psychosocial workers, can help people to become more aware, to look at the world with an open and more positive view, and discover new possibilities they may have overlooked.

The future

The revolution in Spring 2011 initially provided hope for refugees in Egypt that our living conditions would improve, however, we are actually worse off now. Life has become harder for refugees, particularly for those with a dark skin who face discrimination. There is increasing harassment and a worsening security situation, but this does not discourage me. I want to further develop my skills in the psychosocial field, and perhaps become a professional counsellor. I hope one day to go back to Eritrea, my country, and start something similar there. I do not want to remain a refugee forever. I love to help others and want to continue growing, both as a person and as a helper.

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