

Research article

“We don’t know where we should go”: Migrants’ transnational journey across the East African trail at Kumer Refugee Camp, Ethiopia

Lake Mihret Alemu^{1}, Mulualem Atakilit Mekuriaw² and Tebabber Chanie Workneh²*

*Department of Social Work¹ and Department of Social Anthropology², Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia. *Corresponding author’s email: lakemihret@gmail.com*

Abstract: *The transcontinental journey along the East African migration trail underscores profound uncertainty and resilience. This study explores the cross-border migration experiences of individuals in East Africa. It focuses on the intersection of the drivers of migration, support systems and the challenges faced during a journey and at a refugee camp. It employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design, which included in-depth interviews with migrants who experienced complex migration journeys, alongside key informant interviews and observational methods. Twenty-one participants were selected through purposive sampling, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. The findings reveal that personal tragedies, such as familial loss, socioeconomic and political factors influence migration decisions.*

Vulnerability, including threats of violence and inadequate living conditions are critical in transits and camps. In conclusion, migrants’ transcontinental journeys along the East African migration trail emphasize the uncertainty and challenges individual’s face in their search for safety. The study recommends a holistic approach to migration management that addresses root causes, integrates security, mental health, and socioeconomic support, and fosters collaboration among governments, humanitarian organizations, and local communities to improve migrants’ quality of life and resilience.

Keywords: *East Africa, migration, migration trail, refugee, transnational migration*

Article history: *Received: 6 April, 2025;
Accepted: 24 July, 2025*

DOI 10.20372/ejss.v11i2.2872

1. Background of the study

Migration across Africa has become increasingly complex due to factors such as conflict, economic instability, and environmental changes (Zetter et al., 2022; IOM, 2023). Many migrants travel along the East African route to Europe and the Middle East, passing through countries like Ethiopia, Libya, South Sudan, and Sudan. Recent studies indicate that irregular migration routes through North Africa are critical for those fleeing dire situations, often involving dangerous journeys and exploitation by smugglers (Kälin, 2020; IOM, 2021). Socio-economic challenges, including high unemployment and political instability, drive individuals to seek better opportunities abroad. The migration experience is perilous, especially in Libya, where migrants face human rights abuses and violence. Libya has become a major transit hub, but many migrants find themselves trapped in a cycle of displacement within Africa (Mastorillo et al., 2016; UNHCR, 2022).

The journey through Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sudan is further complicated by ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises. In South Sudan, significant internal instability has led many to flee to Ethiopia for safety (World Bank, 2021). Economic challenges in Sudan also hinder migrants from accessing stable employment and essential services (Elhadi & Elhaj, 2022). Additionally, environmental factors like climate change exacerbate vulnerabilities, as shifting weather patterns and resource scarcity drive migration in search of more hospitable environments (Adger et al., 2014).

Migration in Ethiopia is deeply influenced by a range of socio-economic and political factors, where violence has displaced millions (Crisp, 2018). Economic challenges, including high unemployment rates and poverty, environmental issues such as drought and climate change exacerbate these pressures, prompting individuals to leave their homes in search of more sustainable living conditions. Migrants' journey through the East African corridor often involves danger causing significant risks including exploitation and abuse in transit countries (Alemayehu & Fenta, 2019).

Studies on migration and refugees in the Horn of Africa have been conducted by De Haas (2010), Zetter (2018), and relevant international agencies such as IOM (2023) and UNCHR (2024). Although these studies mostly use quantitative data and are useful in exposing the statistical realities and difficulties encountered by refugees, they do not provide a thorough qualitative examination of individual experiences. Furthermore, a number of studies conducted on migration and refugees in connection with interstate security and Ethiopia's migration strategy, including (Mesfin & Guday, 2017; Abdi, 2007; Munanye 2011; Nigusie & Cheru, 2022; Chalachew, Degefa, & Eshetu, 2024). Additionally, when we assess studies done on the study area; Kiya (2019) did research on the state incorporated business of migration and migration economy along the Ethiopia-Sudan border of Metema. Tekalign et al. (2018) also conducted a study on the social nature of human smuggling in migration from Ethiopia to Sudan. Similarly, Zeleke (2022) conducted a study on the complex transit trajectories of Ethiopian female migrants in Metema. In addition, Fikadu et al. (2019) and Girmachew (2017) also conducted studies on human traffickers, migrants and the state as well as on the dynamics of international migration to South Africa. Refugees face limited access to essential services and increased vulnerability to violence (AFSC, 2023; Desperate Sudanese Refugees, 2014). Legal and policy frameworks can hinder integration and access to rights (Kalin & Scharlig, 2018). These issues necessitate strategies addressing immediate needs and promoting long term integration and self-reliance.

This study addresses gaps in existing research by focusing on migrants who cross multiple borders and who face significant vulnerability of exploitation. It examines the transnational journeys of migrants at Kumer Refugee Camp in Ethiopia, contributing to the broader discourse on migration in Africa. The primary objectives are to analyze motivations for migration to Ethiopia, explore specific experiences and challenges, and assess available support systems. Key questions include:

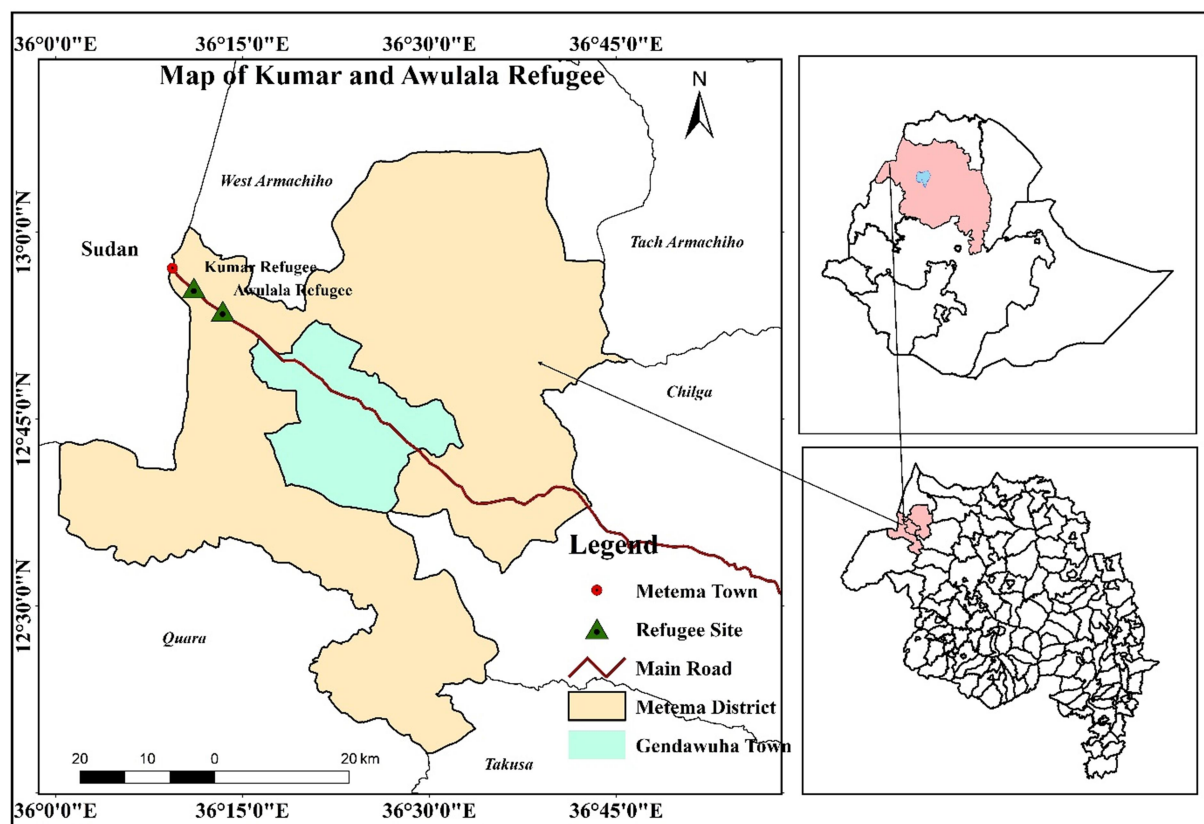
- What are the drivers of migration in East Africa?
- What kind of support is available to migrants during their journeys?
- What challenges do East African migrants face along their routes?

1.1.Theoretical framework

The Cumulative Prospect Theory (CPT), developed by Kahneman and Tversky in 1979, is crucial for studying how migrants make choices when faced with uncertainty. It demonstrates that people usually value potential losses more than similar gains, which contributes to the explanation of why migrants choose to travel risky distances despite the risks. The Push-Pull Theory was used to investigate and understand the causes of migration and the ways in which different situations influence people's decisions. These include elements that pushed people to move (push factors) and factors that lured them to seek opportunities elsewhere (pull factors) (Khalid & Urbanski, 2021). Additionally, the Social Network Theory is applied to examine the role of community and familial ties in shaping migration decisions and the availability of support systems during journeys. Lastly, the Human Security Framework will guide our exploration of the challenges faced by migrants, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to their safety and well-being beyond mere physical security.

2. Research methods

The study was carried out at Kumar Refugee Camp in Metema district and the target groups of this study were people who had traveled across the boundaries of two and more East African countries.



Source: The researchers

A qualitative case study design was employed as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of migrants' journey, capturing the complexities of their experiences. Case studies effectively examine complex phenomena in real-life contexts (Yin, 2018) and are particularly useful in migration studies for capturing individual journeys and sociocultural influences (Massey et al., 1993), while integrating various data sources for a comprehensive understanding (Creswell, 2013). The study employed purposive sampling to choose the participants using the criteria of English language speaking abilities, crossing two and more borders, living in the IDP camp, above the age of 18 and willingness.

Data were collected from April 13 to June 20, 2024, through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and systematic observation. Twelve interviewees (8 females, 4 males) and 9 key informant interviews (KIIs) from NGO workers, refugee committee members, and local officials were conducted. Local officials as key informants were interviewed to enhance data reliability through triangulation, as their insights into security concerns could be valuable. Additionally, non-participant systematic observation was employed to assess the safety and living conditions of

refugees, including food, shelter, hygiene, health, and recreational facilities, helping to cross-check the collected data.

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. In order to find recurring themes and sub-themes associated with the study's objectives, the data were coded. Open coding was initially applied to break down the data into manageable segments, followed by axial coding to establish relationships among the identified themes. This iterative process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the migrants' journey. For validating findings and enhancing the credibility of the study, triangulation, peer debriefing sessions and prolonged field say were conducted during the study. These methods allowed for cross-verification of information, thereby strengthening the reliability of the findings.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research. The participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured confidentiality, and given the right to withdraw or skip questions. Verbal informed consent was obtained for audio recording; pseudonyms were used in the analysis, and assurance for complete anonymity and privacy was given to all participants.

3. Results

This section presents the findings from the study of migrants whose journey provides valuable insights into the complexities of migration. The analysis of the study revealed several key themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of migrants' experiences. The primary theme identified includes drivers of migration, the challenges and support systems.

3.1. Study participants' profile

The demographic and socioeconomic data from in-depth interviews reveal a diverse group of 12 migrants, comprising 8 females and 4 males, aged from 24 to 65. The majority were Muslims (8), with 4 identifying themselves as Christians, from Sudan (3), South Sudan (3) Eritrea (4), Syria (1), and Uganda (1). The educational background of the participants showed that five of them had college degrees (BA or equivalent), one had a PhD, two completed vocational training (TVT), four completed grade 1, and one was with an elementary education. Key informants included nine individuals who were involved in the camp's operations, consisting of five males and four females

aged from 30 to 53. Their educational background ranged from grade 12 to a master's degree, emphasizing relevant skills for their roles.

3.2. Drivers of migration

The study revealed that the migration journey is rooted in a complex interplay of socioeconomic and political factors that had shaped the life of individuals. The study participants' experiences reflected a broader narrative of individuals fleeing their countries forcefully as a result of social, economic, and political drivers.

3.2.1. Personal hopes

The study revealed that East African migration is slightly influenced by hopes for better conditions specifically in the Middle East and Europe than in their homelands. They become hopeless in their homeland and hoping for better lives influences their migration decision. Participants in the study reflected on their migration to Ethiopia as a strategic pathway or transit point to more prosperous nations. Eritrean migrants, in particular, expressed that they decided to migrate to Sudan and then come to Ethiopia with the intention of using it as a stepping stone to reach Europe or the United States. They noted that being recognized as refugees grants them certain privileges, allowing for safer movement across borders. This hope and support by former family member migrants led some refugees to decide to migrate. A women participant expressed her experience as:

I decided to migrate to Sudan after finishing school, viewing it as a stepping stone to Europe. Family members in Bulgaria and Canada successfully followed this path after staying in refugee camps in Ethiopia, which inspired me to seek similar opportunities. My personal aspirations and the challenging situation in my homeland significantly influenced my decision to migrate¹.

3.2.2. Social factors

The study highlights that social drivers of migration include factors that compel individuals and families to seek better living conditions. Loss of family and weak social bonds create emotional distress and isolation, motivating people to find environments with stronger networks, a sense of belonging, and supportive settings that align with their values. Rachel, a 38-year-old mother from Uganda expressed her life experiences as follows:

¹ An interview conducted with Eritrean women (April, 2024)

I made the difficult decision to migrate because of the overwhelming combination of personal loss and instability in my life. ... I faced profound grief when I lost my mother to cancer at a young age. Just three years later, I lost my father as well. These tragedies left me orphaned and vulnerable in a world filled with violence and conflict, where armed groups destroyed communities and lives².

The above account underscores the connection between personal trauma and social instability as drivers of forced migration. The speaker's grief from losing both parents, coupled with surrounding violence, illustrates how individual tragedies intersect with societal issues, making migration a necessity for those seeking safety and stability amid loss and insecurity. In addition, she narrated the following experience:

I felt an urgent need to seek safety and a better future, so I fled to the city...then to Juba, South Sudan and now Ethiopia. Eventually, I found myself in Libya, believing that there, I could find opportunities to enter Italy and rebuild my life, even though I knew the risks were immense³.

This journey illustrates the complex connections between familial relationships, emotional well-being, and migration motivations. Rachel's decision to move to Juba, Libya, and Ethiopia reflects the lengths individuals will go to escape pain and danger while seeking better circumstances.

Additionally, Efon, a 35-year-old young woman from South Sudan also recounted her story as follows:

I was born in South Sudan and lost my mother, father, and two brothers in the 2016 war. My sister and I migrated to Khartoum, facing many challenges and paying brokers for our journey. After two weeks, we found work as housemaids, and after five years, we opened a small shop. However, in April 2023, war broke out in Khartoum, forcing us to flee to Ethiopia without our belongings. We are now living in Kumer Refugee Camp, facing many difficulties⁴.

The narratives reveal that the primary motive for migration is the war in South Sudan, which led to their flight to Sudan and the subsequent outbreak of war in Khartoum in April 2023, forcing them to seek refuge in Ethiopia. Their journey reflects persistence amid hardship and highlights how personal loss, social instability, and the quest for safety shape migration experiences. Migrants' stories illustrate the interplay of social, economic, and political factors driving migration in East Africa. Emotional well-being and the need for belonging are critical motivators, often intensified by

² An interview conducted with a Ugandan woman (April, 2024)

³ An interview conducted with a Ugandan woman (April, 2024)

⁴ An interview conducted with a South Sudan woman (April, 2024)

the lack of familial support, leading to feelings of vulnerability. Personal trauma, combined with social instability, further compels individuals to migrate in search of safety and community.

3.2.3. Political factors (conflict and violence)

Violence and conflict within a nation have become critical drivers of migration and human crisis, particularly in East Africa, where political instability is pervasive. The study has underscored how conflicts and disputes have profoundly affected the lives of individuals and communities in the east African contexts. These conflicts often manifest in violent confrontations between rival groups, leading to the loss of livelihoods, displacement, and insecurity. This environment of chaos compels many individuals to abandon their homes in search of safer havens, leaving behind everything they know. The outcomes of such violence extend to intensifying the cycle of poverty and desperation.

The participants of study who were migrants and victims of conflicts in Uganda, South Sudan, and Syria serve as a stark reminder of how political and social turmoil can drive individuals to seek refuge and better opportunities elsewhere. The participant from Uganda recounts, “Armed groups would come; steal cattle, kill, and burn houses.” This illustrates the direct impact of political conflict on safety and well-being. The informants revealed that conflicts and undemocratic leaderships in their homelands were the causes of their migration seeking safe and peaceful areas. In addition, conflicts and war in nations where they lived as refugees caused continuous migration until they entered Ethiopia. For example, one of the study participants states:

I was living in South Sudan but fled to Khartoum in 2016 due to the outbreak of war. In 2024, I fled to Ethiopia because of the conflict in Sudan. I don't know where I should go next if it happens here⁵.

The study also identified national political ideologies and affiliations, and human rights violations as drivers of migration. A 27-year-old young woman from Eritrea shared the following story in this regard:

I was born in Eritrea. Soon after completing school, my friends and I had to flee because of the political climate. We tried to seek the help of brokers but in vain. Chaos and theft awaited us from the smugglers going to Sudan. There, we spent more

⁵ An interview conducted with a South Sudan man (April, 2024)

*than a month apprehended in Khartoum and war broke out. And here we are once again; this time, refugees in Ethiopia*⁶.

It shows that a lot of Eritreans do not leave their country because of a running conflict; they leave because the political situation is difficult. Young refugees at Kumer who had stories like that fled their country because their governments' ideologies and the conditions in their countries were so bad that they lost hope. It was also found that all migrants from Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, and Syria shared similar experiences during their journeys. Many of these migrants faced considerable hardships in their quest for safety. A 41-year-old man from Syria named Nasir shared his story in this way:

*... First, I went to Egypt in 2019, and from there to Sudan, passing through Port Sudan. After the war that broke out in Sudan, I shifted with my wife and daughter to Ethiopia. Presently, we stay in a small tent with my family, and we do not know what to do next*⁷.

Ibrahim, a 65-year-old elder informant from Sudan shared his story in the following way:

*... I was working as a professor in one of the universities of Sudan. Following the Sudan war, the ruling government targeted me, suspecting me as pro-Rapid Support Force due to my critical articles on Sudanese politics. To escape, I fled to Juba, South Sudan, but after two weeks, I came to Ethiopia. Along my way, I faced severe tragic events....*⁸

These accounts demonstrate how political factors can drive migration. The account of the above informant shows that being a critic of the government can lead to persecution and, ultimately, to fleeing one's country. This is also applicable to human rights defenders who are often targeted by authoritarian regimes hence highlighting the dual threats of violence and the suppression of free expression.

3.2.4. Economic drivers

The study highlights how economic struggles deeply affect lives in East Africa, pushing people to leave their homes in search of better opportunities. Many face job scarcity and poverty, while ongoing conflicts and political instability make their situations even more challenging. Rising inflation and living costs force individuals to seek safety and stability, as they strive for a better

⁶ An interview conducted with a young Eritrean woman (April, 2024)

⁷ An interview conducted with a Syrian man (May, 2024)

⁸ An interview conducted with an elderly Sudanese man (June, 2024)

future amid these hardships. Rachel, a 35 year women, explained how migration is deeply influenced by economic factors:

Since I was a child, life has been a struggle..., I fled to the city, where I often found myself begging just to survive. In search of stability, I migrated through Juba, Libya, Sudan, and Ethiopia, but each new place brought its own challenges, constantly threatening my ability to feed myself and my child⁹.

The above account reveals the deep complexities of migration driven by economic hardship and systemic poverty. The speaker's journey to Ethiopia, crossing five borders, was fraught with danger, forcing her to beg for survival while grappling with the weight of persistent poverty. The study also found that economic hardships and poverty are significant causes of continuous migration crossing multiple nations. Individuals are often compelled to migrate and cross multiple national borders due to the economic difficulties and poverty. The stories of the refugees have shown that refugees live under conditions of economic hardship and food insecurity, often failing to get food, health and sanitation services. An informant complained: "I want to provide food for my child, but it feels impossible here." This illustrates the dire economic circumstances that compel individuals to seek better opportunities elsewhere.

The participants reflected that the economic challenges faced by migrants were worsening as they cross multiple borders. The researchers' observations of migrants in the camp and begging in the streets revealed the harsh economic conditions, where limited access to resources and job opportunities exacerbated their struggles. Many were trapped in a cycle of poverty, relying on inadequate humanitarian aid, and facing difficulties in meeting their basic needs. Haben, a 29-year-old young woman informant from Eritrea expressed her experience as follows:

I am from Keren, Eritrea, and grew up in a poor farming family. After completing high school, I could not continue due to financial constraints. ..., I traveled to Sudan to go to Italy through Libya. It was terrible; full of violence that left me HIV positive and depending on humanitarian aid instead of helping my elder parents¹⁰.

The accounts above highlight the struggles of migrants who faced significant hardships and health issues due to poverty. Driven by economic challenges, migrants' journeys are further complicated by the physical and psychological scars of experiences.

⁹ An interview conducted with a Ugandan woman (April, 2024)

¹⁰ An interview conducted with a Eritrean young woman (May, 2024)

3.3.Support systems

The study found that refugees often rely on a variety of support systems that can be categorized into three main levels: family support, host community support, and camp-level support. Each of these levels plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of migrants as revealed by the study participants.

3.3.1. Family support

The study revealed that family members were often the first line of support for refugees. They provided emotional, financial and material assistance. This includes sharing resources, offering childcare at homeland, and providing a sense of belonging and stability during turbulent times. The presence of family can significantly enhance the resilience of refugees, allowing them to navigate their new environments more effectively. Family support alleviates the childcare responsibilities and allows parents to migrate to other countries like Europe focusing on securing employment or accessing essential services, thereby enhancing their overall stability. One participant reflected as follows:

...Emotional support from family members can be a lifeline for refugees facing the stress and trauma of displacement. Hearing words of encouragement and understanding from loved ones fosters resilience and hope...having family members who care about our well-being helps us navigate the challenges of our new circumstances¹¹.

This expression indicates that emotional support from family members is a lifeline for refugees facing the stress and trauma of displacement. Hearing words of encouragement and understanding from loved ones fosters resilience and hope.

The study found that financial support is crucial, especially in emergencies. The participants noted that family members in Europe or America often provide assistance during their journeys, particularly when facing challenges like kidnapping and extortion. One Eritrean informant said, “I have been supported by relatives in Canada and Germany... They encourage me to flee to Europe by any means.” This underscores the vital role of family in offering both emotional and financial support, which also encourages migration to cross multiple borders in search of better opportunities.

¹¹ An interview conducted with a Eritrean woman (April, 2024)

3.3.2. Host community's support

The study found that the host community played a vital role in supporting refugees. The study participants highlighted the significant role of the host community in supporting refugees through financial and material assistance, and emotional support. Many noted that, despite being restricted from venturing far from the camp, local residents frequently offer essential resources such as water, money, food and other basic necessities. This generosity helped alleviate some of the immediate challenges faced by refugees as they navigated their new environment. In addition to material assistance, the emotional support from the host community was invaluable. A 39-year-old informant reflected: "The community is very helpful, providing water, food, money, and emotional support. They show empathy and assist us in many ways." This sentiment indicates the compassion and understanding that local residents extend to migrants, fostering a sense of solidarity and connection.

3.3.3. Supports from humanitarian organization

The study revealed that the migrants often received humanitarian support only after gaining refugee status. During their perilous journey across borders, they faced a lack of assistance from organizations or governments. In refugee camps, while some healthcare services were available to meet immediate needs, support was often limited and delayed, leaving significant gaps in care. In connection to this, a 47-year-old woman key informant said, "We have a clinic within the camp, and there are doctors available to support refugees." The participants also acknowledged that there were significant gaps in support and facilities within the camps. Moreover, food and shelter were a major concern of humanitarian organizations, with the participants calling for better food options to meet the diverse needs of vulnerable populations, especially children and women. A 53-year-old woman lamented about the food, saying, "We have food support but the food that is being cooked isn't suitable for my baby. This situation can be very stressful, and it weighs heavily on me."

3.4. Challenges

The findings of study revealed that the migrants encountered a range of challenges that began in their homeland, persisted throughout their journey, and continued in the refugee camps where they currently resided. These difficulties encompass various aspects, including socio-economic barriers, cultural adjustments, security issues and psychological stressors that affect their overall well-being and adaptation.

3.4.1. Life in refugee camp

The study highlighted the challenges of life in refugee camps, with one participant stating, “Life in the camp is incredibly challenging.” Many fled violence in Sudan, facing inadequate shelter and basic needs. Restricted mobility due to the host country’s policies complicated access to education and healthcare. Additionally, the refugees faced exploitation by human traffickers, enduring long waits for UNHCR assistance, which underscores the difficulties of migration. An interviewee said:

Our struggles as refugees began after crossing the Galabat River Bridge. In Metema Yohannes, brokers exploited us, claiming to guide us to registration services while demanding large sums of money. Those seeking asylum had to wait in open spaces and tents until the UNHCR could relocate us to a transit camp 2 km away¹².

The study revealed that refugees were initially housed in tents without mattresses for two weeks, facing challenges, especially for children, the elderly and pregnant women. They received only one daily meal of biscuits and lacked access to water and latrines, increasing health risks from dust, scabies, and trachoma. Moreover, after being relocated to the transit camp, refugees shared tents with multiple households, receiving limited assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and Innovative Humanitarian Solutions (IHS). The camp lacked recreational and educational services for children, and the researchers noted inadequate water and unhygienic toilets, forcing refugees to go to the bushes to relieve themselves, exposing them to potential harassment.

3.4.2. Challenges faced during journey

The study revealed that migrants encountered numerous challenges during their journeys, often subjected to abuse, looting, kidnapping, and other forms of violence. The participants described these experiences as “the acts of dehumanization”, highlighting the profound impact of such hardships on their dignity and humanity.

The study exposed a range of profound hardships and adversities faced by migrants during their journey. It is filled with obstacles, both physical and psychological. The migrants not only have to flee their homes but also lose their possessions, which can be critical for their survival and sense of identity. A 42-year-man noted: "We faced many challenges coming to Ethiopia, including looting in

¹² An interview conducted with a Sudan man (June, 2024)

Sudan and being charged large sums for transit at the border. We arrived here with nothing." Similarly, a woman informant reported facing violence and oppression, stating, "My husband was beaten by military groups, and we were asked to pay money at the border." The study noted that migrants face significant challenges during their journeys, often traveling long distances on foot with children and belongings, enduring hunger, thirst, and trauma. Overall, migration in East Africa is a harrowing experience marked by loss, violence, and exploitation.

3.4.3. Food and health related challenges

Food-related challenges are a recurring theme in the accounts of the participants of the study, highlighting the desperate need for humanitarian assistance in refugee camps. An informant expressed a clear concern about the lack of enough and suitable food options, emphasizing, "The food that is being cooked isn't enough, culturally inappropriate, not suitable and not nutritious for my baby. Even there are no special provisions for religious holidays." The inadequate food supply, lack of clean water, and unsanitary living conditions contributed to a deteriorating health and sense of wellbeing.

The study brought to light the immense health challenges faced by migrants, who endure conflict, violence, and poverty, leading to deep emotional distress and psychological struggles. Unfortunately, there is a lack of adequate mental health and psychosocial support services to help them heal, a concern echoed by key informants and interviewees. Afiyan, 53-old-woman informant, explained the psychological impact of their experiences:

...There are moments when stress becomes so intense that I worry and I lose my mind. I've even had thoughts of harming myself and I would want to die ... Honestly, I struggle with feelings of depression. There have been times when frustration has clouded my judgment, and I have felt like I might hurt my baby. In a moment of desperation, I left my child with the UN, believing I couldn't cope any longer ... I've been struggling for so long, ever since I was a child ... I vividly remember the hardships ... It has been a long and painful journey, and now I am not in good health to envision a better future¹³.

This narration indicates extreme circumstances migrants faced in terms of mental health challenges; feeling overwhelmed by their circumstances, leading to heightened anxiety, a sense of helplessness and suicidal thoughts. The decision to leave children with organizations like the UN was seen as a

¹³ An interview conducted with a 53 old woman(May, 2024)

moment of surrender due to the overwhelming responsibility she felt. The study found that harsh living conditions in refugee camps severely limited access to nutritious food and healthcare. The respondents noted inadequate supplies, primarily consisting of "rice and bread," exacerbating health issues, especially for children. Shemsiya said, "Life here is difficult, especially for children and women." Similarly, a 50-year-old interviewee noted, "I suffer from gallbladder issues due to being beaten, but I can't get treatment here."

Overall, the study found that migrants in East Africa face severe health challenges, including high rates of trauma-related disorders, yet lack adequate mental health and psychosocial support services which is evidenced from a 42-year-old man who stated, "There is a lack of psychological support here, yet mental health issues are prevalent."

3.4.4. Security challenges

The study found that security challenges are significant and alarming both at the camp and during the migrants' journeys. In the refugee camp, the migrants were confronted with the harsh realities of life as a displaced person. a respondent said, "The camp environment was fraught with dangers, including overcrowded latrines and threats of violence when seeking privacy." The emotional toll of these experiences weighed heavily on them, as they often felt overwhelmed and stressed while trying to care for their young children amidst such uncertainty.

The study reveals severe security challenges for migrants in East Africa, especially for women, who frequently face threats and sexual violence. This pervasive insecurity forces them to sacrifice sleep and safety. One woman stated, "I've experienced threats of sexual violence, and men have tried to assault me." This evidences the pervasive insecurity particularly for women, making their living conditions even more perilous. Similarly, another woman stated, "I can't sleep at night because I must protect myself and my child from threats of sexual violence."

Also security challenges were prevalent during their migration. They recounted extreme violence including being beaten, raped, bullying and looting, highlighting the dangers migrants face. Such trauma has profound psychological implications, fostering lasting fear and instability as individuals attempt to rebuild their lives in threatening environments. Rachel expressed it as follows:

... After arriving in ... Juba, I initially found stability by working as a babysitter. However, a fateful decision to trust a man who promised to help me reach Italy led me into a perilous situation in Libya. Violated... facing severe illness,... returned to Sudan, the challenges continued ... fled to Ethiopia ... I crossed borders..., I don't know where I should go next¹⁴.

3.4.5. Isolation and Marginalization

The study found that migrants often face significant challenges due to their isolation from family members. This separation can lead to emotional distress, as they grapple with feelings of loneliness and loss. The lack of familial support hinders their ability to cope with the hardships of camp life, making it difficult to find stability and resilience. On the other hand, interactions within the camp are complex, as the participants noted a significant diversity among residents, including Sudanese, Eritrean, Ugandan, South Sudanese and Syrian refugees. Minority groups felt marginalized as often overlooked in favor of the larger Sudanese and Eritrean populations. This sense of invisibility can exacerbate feelings of isolation. For example, the Ugandan and Syrian migrants said that they felt emotional distress since they were small in number.

The participants' accounts of life in the camp reveal numerous challenges they have faced throughout the journey in terms of isolation. In the camp, interactions with other residents were marked by a sense of invisibility. A mother informant from Uganda noted, "I am the only from Uganda and the camp is dominated by Sudanese and Eritrean refugees. I feel lonely and have no one to communicate with." This feeling of invisibility can lead to social isolation, as she expresses a lack of connection with fellow Ugandans, complicating her situation further. The absence of recreational activities in the camp worsens these challenges.

4. Discussion

This study provides an in-depth analysis of the drivers, support systems and challenges associated with migration along the East African migration trail to Kumer Refugee Camp in Ethiopia. Factors for migration identified in this study underline the significant impact of personal, social, economic and political instabilities.

The study's findings on reasons for migration, including hope for better living conditions and fear of dire circumstances at home, align with De Haas (2021) and Ghosh (2000) findings emphasizing that

¹⁴ An interview conducted with Ugandan women (April, 2024)

migrants are motivated by the desire for better living conditions and the hope of reuniting with family abroad. This supports the Push-Pull Theory, illustrating how socioeconomic instability drives individuals to leave while seeking opportunities in new environments.

Social factors, including familial loss and disintegrated communities were marked by the psychological trauma of losing immediate family support leading to migration. This is consistent with the findings of Adugna (2017), Mesfin and Guday (2017), Keya (2019), Kälin (2020), Zeleke (2022), and the UNHCR (2022), which highlight the profound effects of disrupted social networks on migration decisions. This aligns with Social Network Theory indicating that emotional and financial support from community members and family significantly enhance resilience among migrants and social connections play a vital role in shaping migration decisions.

The findings on economic factors of migrants like poverty, dire circumstances at home, population pressure and unemployment found in studies conducted by Adgna (2017), Ayalew et al. (2018) and Kwesiga et al. (2023) have shown that migration to Arab countries has been intensified due to poverty, unemployment, social networks, and expansion of illegal agencies. The findings of this study aligned closely with Push-Pull Theory and Social Network Theory. Push factors, such as familial loss and community disintegration, compel individuals to leave their homes, while pull factors, including the search for better economic opportunities, attract them to new environments. This dual influence highlights the complexity of migration motivations in the context of East Africa.

Political factors, such as conflict and authoritarian regimes in South Sudan, Sudan, and Eritrea, drive migration to avoid potential losses, as noted by Elhadi and Elhaj (2022) and Mastrorillo et al. (2016). Zeleke (2022) highlighted Yemen's civil war as a major driver. These political challenges are intertwined with economic factors like poverty and unemployment, reflecting Dustmann and Frattini's (2014) economic lens. This is also intertwined with the Cumulative Prospect Theory, which shows how individuals prioritize avoiding losses that lead them to undertake dangerous migration routes and the Push-Pull Theory.

The study shows the dangerous nature of migration journeys in the region, marked by violence, exploitation, and deprivation. The Participants detailed harrowing experiences of abuse, looting, extortion and the physical toll of traversing dangerous terrains, with women facing additional gender-specific vulnerabilities. These findings resonate with Adugna's (2017), IOM's (2021), and

Zelege's (2022) accounts of the risks migrants face along irregular routes through North Africa, emphasizing the dire consequences of migration under such conditions. Furthermore, the health-related challenges during these journeys, compounded by camp living conditions, underscore the intersectionality of physical and mental health in migration. Poor nutrition, inadequate healthcare, and pervasive mental health issues concur with findings from the World Bank (2021) on the toll of displacement and the psychological impact of prolonged instability. These key findings show that migrants often make risky decisions during their journeys, and the challenges they encounter can be supported by the Cumulative Prospect Theory (CPT) which illustrates how security is the inherent danger involved in migration.

Life in Kumer Refugee Camp reveals systemic challenges for displaced populations, including overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and limited access to healthcare and education which are characterized as the worst forms of treatment. The lack of educational and recreational opportunities leads to stagnation, particularly for children. Women and children face increased vulnerability and harassment, lacking protection under local labor laws. These findings echo with Jureidini (2003) which revealed that the erosion of cultural identity and various forms of assault are the worst forms of treatment. These findings also align with UNHCR (2022) and Hassan and Ahmed (2023). The researchers' observations of an under-resourced refugee camp in East Africa highlight the urgent need for improved infrastructure and comprehensive support within the Human Security Framework. This finding aligns with the Human Security Framework that advocates for addressing not only physical security but also health, safety, and access to essential services, reflecting the multifaceted challenges that displaced populations encounter.

The study highlights the crucial role of support systems in alleviating hardships faced by migrants as well as in enforcing migration decisions. Family support, including emotional and financial aid through remittances, emerged as vital for resilience, echoing the findings of Ghosh (2000), and Nyaga and Ochieng (2023) on the significance of family and social networks and Médecins sans Frontières (2023), which reported that humanitarian aid and community engagement also bolster resilience for migrants. The inadequate support system at Kummer camp echoes Gebremariam et al. (2023) findings which found that inadequate support systems in Ethiopian refugee camps worsen health challenges. Furthermore, this finding illustrates the applicability of the Social Network

Theory that explains that emotional and financial support from community members significantly enhance resilience and influences migration decisions.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The study concludes migration in East Africa is driven by a complex interplay of personal, socio-economic and political factors. The back-and-forth between personal hopes for a better standard of living and the pervasive sense of hopelessness in their homeland significantly drives individuals to migrate, shaping their decisions in pursuit of improved opportunities and a more fulfilling life.

Social issues and economic deprivation compel individuals to migrate. It is also influenced by a combination of psychological and emotional drivers. The loss of social connection at home, coupled with the presence of networks abroad, creates a compelling urgency to seek new environments. Personal trauma, intertwined with social instability, further propels individuals to migrate, as a means of finding safety. The journey itself is fraught with danger, marked by violence and exploitation, particularly for women and children. Life in the Kumer Refugee Camp underscores the systemic challenges faced by migrants, including overcrowding and inadequate resources, which perpetuate their vulnerability. Ultimately, the resilience of migrants is the hidden power to be used at home.

This study calls for a reimagining of migration policies that prioritize the dignity and safety of migrants. We recommend both immediate and long-term initiatives to meet refugees' needs and foster resilience, involving collaboration among governments, humanitarian organizations, and local communities. For a more equitable response to forced migration in East Africa, the following initiatives are proposed:

- Strengthen security protocols in transit areas and camps to safeguard migrants and avoid dehumanization acts.
- Increase investment in refugee camps to improve housing and sanitation, with dedicated resources for women, children, and individuals with disabilities.
- Expand mental health and psychosocial support to include counseling and trauma recovery, using culturally sensitive approaches.
- Introduce skill-building and vocational training programs to empower refugees and enhance their employability.

- Focus on durable solutions to prevent the causes of irregular migration. Advocate for comprehensive migration policies that tackle the root causes of displacement, including conflict and poverty.
- Implement interstate cooperation policies and programs to protect human rights and dignity of migrants.

Conflict of Interest: There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Acknowledgments: We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the participants and of facilitators of this study for their invaluable contributions. Our deepest gratitude also goes to the local authorities of Metema *Woreda* and the administrators of Kumer Camp.

Reference

- Abdi, C. M. (2007). The new age of security: Implications for refugees and internally displaced persons in the Horn of Africa. *Development*, 50(4), 75-81.
- Adger, W. N., Pulhin, J. M.; Bhandari, M. (2014). Climate change, human security and the role of the state. *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management*, 6(3), 307-322.
- Adugna, F., Deshingkar, P., & Ayalew, T. (2019). Brokers, migrants and the state: Berri Kefach “door openers” in Ethiopian clandestine migration to South Africa. *Migrating out of Poverty (Issue Working paper 56)*. <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/publications>.
- American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). (2023). *Annual Report*. American Friends Service Committee.
- Alemayehu, G., & Fenta, S. (2019). The Impact of Migration on Development in Ethiopia. *Journal of Migration Studies*.
- Ayalew, T., Adugna, F. and Deshingkar, P. (2018). Social embeddedness of human smuggling in East Africa: Brokering Ethiopian migration to Sudan. *African Human Mobility Review*, 4(3), 1333-1358.

- Chalachew, A., Degfa, T. (2024). Correlates of migration networks among recent out-migrants from Ankasha District of the Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia. *Ethiopian Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(1).
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Crisp, J. (2018). The impact of conflict on migration patterns in Ethiopia. *African security review*.
- De Haas, H. (2010). Migration and development: A theoretical perspective. *International Migration Review*, 44(1), 227-264.
- De Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: The aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(8).
- Dustmann, C., & Frattini, T. (2014). The fiscal effects of immigration to the UK. *The Economic Journal*, 124(580), F593–F643. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ecoj.12181>
- Elhadi, H., & Elhaj, M. M. (2022). Socioeconomic challenges in post-conflict Sudan: Implications for migration. *Journal of African Studies*, 45(3), 345-362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2021.1234567>
- Fekadu, A., Deshingkar, P., & Ayalew, T. (2019). Brokers, migrants and the state: Berri Kefach “door openers” in Ethiopian clandestine migration to South Africa. *Migrating out of Poverty, Working paper 56*: 1-35. <https://www.migratingoutofpoverty.org> .
- Gebremariam, A., Tadesse, A., & Abebe, S. (2023). Mental health struggles of refugees in Ethiopia: A qualitative study. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36(1), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fex123>
- Ghosh, B. (2000). Return migration: Journey of hope or despair? *International Migration*, 38(5), 15–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2000.tb00369.x>

- Girmachew Adugna. (2017). Ethiopian female domestic labour migration to the Middle East: patterns, trends, and drivers, African and Black Diaspora: *An International Journal*. 10.1080/17528631.2017.1342976
- Hassan, M., & Ahmed, S. (2023). Conditions in transit camps: A study of South Sudanese refugees. *East African Journal of Migration Studies*, 5(2), 78-95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eajms.2023.02.004>
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2021). *Migrant vulnerabilities and irregular migration*. Geneva: IOM Publications. <https://www.iom.int>
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023). *Migration in East Africa: Trends and challenges*. International Organization for Migration.
- Jureidini, Ray. (2003). Migrant workers and xenophobia in the Middle East. *Program Paper Number 2*. Geneva: UNRISD.
- Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263-292.
- Kälin, W. (2020). Migration and the human rights of refugees: A Global perspective. *Refugee survey quarterly*, 39(1), 1-22.
- Kälin, W., & Schärli, A. (2018). *Mobilizing political will for refugee protection and solutions. A framework for analysis and action*. Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI).
- Khalid and M. Urbanski.(2021). Approaches to understanding migration: A multi-country analysis of the push and pull factors. *Economics and Sociology*, 14(4), 242–268.10.14254/2071-789X.2021/14-4/14
- Keya, G., 2019. Sell Me the Oranges’: change in migrants’ worth across the Ethiopia-Sudan Border. *Ethiopian Journal of Human Rights*, 4,168-186.

- Kwesiga, B., Nansubuga, E., & Muwanga, M. (2023). Familial disruptions and economic pressures: Migration patterns in Uganda. *Ugandan Journal of Development Studies*, 12(3), 112-130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ujds.2023.03.005>
- Massey, D. S., Arango, J., Hugo, G., Kouaouci, A., & Pellegrino, A. (1993). Theories of international migration: A review and appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19(3), 431-466.
- Mastorillo, M., Ranza, L., Sanchez, M., & Bernauer, T. (2016). Migration and environmental stress in sub-Saharan Africa. *Global Environmental Change*, 41, 144–157. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2016.06.013>
- Médecins S., Frontières. (2023). *Community engagement in humanitarian aid: Lessons from South Sudan*. MSF Reports. <https://www.msf.org/community-engagement-south-sudan>
- Mesfin, D., Guday, E. (2017): Living and working as a domestic worker in the Middle East: the experience of migrant returnees in Girana town, North Wollo, Ethiopia, African and Black Diaspora: *An International Journal*, DOI: 10.1080/17528631.2017.134298.
- Munanye, F. J. (2011). *The impacts of refugees on security in the Horn of Africa: an appraisal* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Nairobi, Kenya).
- Nigusie, A. A., & Cheru, F. (2022). Negotiated securitization? examining Ethiopia's Post-2016 Refugee Policy Shift. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 00219096221131996.
- Nyaga, J., & Ochieng, A. (2023). The role of social networks in coping with displacement in South Sudan. *African Journal of Social Work*, 13(1), 23-34. <https://doi.org/10.2924/ajsw.2023.01.003>
- Tekalign, A., Adugna, F., & Deshingkar, P. (2018). Social embeddedness of human smuggling in East Africa: Brokering Ethiopian migration to Sudan. *African Human Mobility Review*, 4(3), 1334-1355.
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1992). Advances in prospect theory: Cumulative representation of uncertainty. *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 5(4), 297-323.

- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2022). *Global trends: Forced displacement in 2021*. Geneva: UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). *Vulnerabilities faced by migrants: A global overview*. UNHCR Policy Brief. <https://www.unhcr.org/vulnerabilities2023/>
- World Bank. (2021). *Migration and remittances: Recent developments and outlook*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications. <https://www.worldbank.org>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: design and methods*. Sage Publications
- Zelege, M. (2022). Metema became my Istanbul: The complex transit trajectories of Ethiopian Female Migrants. *African Human Mobility Review*, 8(1), 9-33.
- Zetter, R. (2018). More than a Numbers Game: The Challenges of Migration Governance. *Journal of Migration and Human Security*, 6(1), 1-15.
- Zetter, R., Oucho, J. O., & Mistral, J. (2022). *Conflict and displacement in the East African region: Patterns and implications*. International Organization for Migration. <https://www.iom.int/reports/conflict-and-displacement-east-african-region>