

# The walls have ears

Accessing participant narratives amid  
silence, secrecy, and mistrust

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## Abstract

Eritreans have long been considered a close-knit community bound by the memorialisation of history and the preservation of cultural practices. My anthropological enquiry into the everyday experiences of mental distress among diasporic women revealed that the depth of their exclusivity was a response to the continual and unsystematic surveillance of the Eritrean state. Government spies targeted outspoken critics, either forcing them into exile or pushing them into perpetual silence. In this essay, I explain how the perceived looming presence of secret agents created widespread mistrust and pervasive silence that complicated relationship-building among diasporic women. I then describe how negative perceptions of the term ‘mental health’ required an alteration of my lexicon and methodological approach, revealing the embodiments of silence and distress in everyday interactions. By reflexively and critically engaging with women’s everyday experiences, silence emerges as a central theme in my work, eventually becoming a conceptual anchor that has helped me understand and connect with a politically silenced diaspora. Through these ethnographic encounters, the complexities of the social, cultural, and political interactions gave meaning to simple utterances.

## Keywords

Eritrea, Diaspora, Distress, Political engagement, Silence.



'Black Scared Men Hiding behind Shabby Brick Walls' (Photo by Gugulethu Ndlalani, 2020).

I met Abrihet in a noisy and crowded coffee shop in west London. She leant back in her chair, forcing me to sit on the edge of my seat to discern her answers to my interview questions. I placed the audio recorder at the centre of the table, hoping to catch sound bites from our conversation. In 2016, Abrihet arrived in the UK as a refugee and quickly became an outspoken critic of the Eritrean government. Motivated by injustices back home—specifically the unlawful imprisonment of her nephew and the mandatory indefinite conscription of her older brother—Abrihet believed that engaging in activism would expose the plight of Eritreans and contribute to the growing campaign to dismantle the current regime. She described to me the benefits of participating in transnational politics and the unease of its consequences. Abrihet felt comfortable protesting the Eritrean government without fear of reprisal in the UK because she perceived her freedom of speech to be protected by the local authorities; however, reflecting on political engagement in Eritrea aroused feelings of insecurity, she said, 'If you ask for freedom or for some rights, you get imprisoned. You don't have to say anything [...] Even when you speak to people [...] you feel the wall [...] is going to tell about that.' I encountered this kind of fear or justified paranoia regularly during my fieldwork, where the fear of being seen to openly dissent compelled women to meet in loud environments so that they could conceal their disdain. This essay details the challenges of accessing a politically silenced diaspora and explores the ways in which the

relative safety of transnational political engagement has become overshadowed by the Eritrean government's inconspicuous presence in diasporic communities. Below, I describe how delayed access elucidated the depth of diasporic silence and prompted methodological changes to facilitate community engagement and ethnographic research.

My research investigated the ways in which Eritrean women in the UK understood and articulated everyday experiences of mental distress and the role of community groups in providing informal psychosocial support. Mental distress, or the 'varied negative emotions that individuals experience in their daily lives', is inextricably linked to social contexts and cultural expressions (Gu 2010). This definition of mental distress abandons biomedical frameworks and terminology for a critical exploration into the various forms of subjective negative emotional states. Gu (2010) posits that an inclusive enquiry into understanding distress should explore issues related to mental wellbeing rather than classifying experiences into specific mental ill health diagnoses.

To capture women's lived experiences with distress, I utilised participatory research methods as a means of engagement with a close-knit migrant community. My approach to public engagement consisted of partnering with an Eritrean women's charity in London that provides practical and social support to diasporic women. The charity has expressed a growing interest in mental health advocacy, and our shared objectives in exploring broader concepts of mental wellbeing made them receptive to advising my work. Despite our partnership, I experienced significant difficulties in gaining access to Eritrean women, and the complex social and power dynamics driving my primary gatekeeper were often hard to interpret. Some interactions with my gatekeeper were pleasant, but on other occasions she would appear agitated and suspicious of my work. She often encouraged me to interview women with postgraduate degrees or familiarity with clinical psychiatric symptoms, thus dissuading engagement with laywomen in her community. Our relationship slowly developed over several years, but persistent effort on my part was required to sustain our budding partnership. At times I felt interrogated when introduced to new and sometimes sceptical interlocutors, but I later learned that such suspicion and hesitancy were common reactions to unfamiliar individuals both within and outside of the diaspora.

Attending and volunteering at the charity's events allowed me to dissuade notions of dubious intentions and demonstrate my commitment to the community. This varied approach to accessing Eritrean women prioritised stakeholder engagement and relationship building, thus creating an immersive ethnographic experience (Sixsmith, Boneham, and Goldring 2003). I frequently renegotiated participant access during my fieldwork. However, a reflexive approach to community

engagement, bolstered by my relatability with interlocutors as a black woman, mother, and wife, created social relationships that eventually overcame these barriers. By critically reflecting on the complexities of being an insider-outsider researcher, I was able to establish reciprocal relationships with community members that facilitated trust and that ensured the women felt comfortable inviting me into their world. Still, many were still extremely hesitant about participating in my research.

During the formative phases of my enquiry, I adopted the gatekeeper's language (characterised by terms such as 'mental health', 'depression', and 'anxiety') because she suggested that this lexicon was appropriate. However, as I began interacting with community members, I realised that 'mental health' was a culturally inappropriate idiom that assigned stigma and was synonymous with psychotic disorders. 'Mental health for us back home, it's like [...] mental health means you are crazy', an interlocutor told me. Most women openly discussed the negative 'mental health' experiences of their family members or friends; however, their personal experiences often went unspoken. After experiencing several deflections when probing for personal experiences of mental ill health, I realised that my methodology needed to be revised. Instead of documenting psychiatric symptomatology as initially intended, I opted to explore subjective experiences with distress. However, women continued to express discomfort when asked to share personal experiences of distress in interviews, as part of focus groups, and with interpreters. They thought that divulging their experiences to other Eritreans would expose them to stigmatisation within their close-knit community. As a result, conversational interviews replaced my semi-structured interviews and created a casual atmosphere where women were invited to discuss their experiences living in the UK. In these conversations, expressions of distress emerged through the mundane recitation of the women's everyday lives. This discursive approach acknowledged that the women's understanding and experience of distress were intertwined with their social, cultural, and political interactions, thus influencing how their experiences were communicated (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007).

Throughout my time in the field, diasporic women activists regularly condemned the state's governance and human rights abuses, especially the gender-based violence that has forced many women to embark on perilous journeys to Europe (Kibreab 2017; Van Reisen and Mekonnen 2013). Such activists were labelled as dissidents by the Eritrean government, but despite this assignation, many women continued engaging in transnational politics. With political engagement, however, came the realities of life in exile. Capturing experiences of political engagement was not the original intention of my research; however, it became a recurring theme during my time in the field. This insight encouraged me to replace the acculturative framework I had initially adopted with a more critical exploration of

women's daily experiences of distress, especially as it related to political participation.

I noticed that frontline women activists in the UK were few in number but very prominent within the diaspora. Underlying sentiments of anti-government ideology were quietly brewing within this society, where women would share their political views with trusted confidants. The 'silent majority' of those who secretly opposed the Eritrean government expressed fear of participating in overt opposition activities due to the state's threats to harm their personal and financial interests in Eritrea. Several interlocutors revealed widespread fear of speaking ill about the country due to the dangers of 'listening ears' who could alert the Eritrean authorities of their disdain for the state's governance. The extensive network of Eritrean secret agents, spies, and informants located throughout Eritrea and the diaspora not only silenced transnational activists but instilled fear and mistrust that complicated relationships within and outside of the broader Eritrean community (Massa 2016).

The fear of being targeted by spies and informants became more apparent when I attended an event on Eritrea–Ethiopia relations in 2018. During this event, a gentleman began video recording the session without the permission or consent of the attendees. He openly disputed the presentation's refugee statistics and the credibility of each panel member, quickly becoming confrontational and creating a hostile environment. Attendees and I shifted in our seats as the exchange between the gentleman and the event organisers grew increasingly uncomfortable and concerns about where the video would end up remained unanswered. After the event, Fiyori, a prominent activist, explained that 'government sympathisers', like the gentleman who video recorded the session, often infiltrated opposition events to report dissidents to the Eritrean government. She continued:

[government sympathisers] gather information, so they know who [the opposition event] was organised by, who spoke, who attended [...] If you attended an opposition meeting and you are going back to Eritrea [...] you're saying that you're a government supporter. Then when you go to Eritrea, you either get arrested, or you get questioned [...] It's basically to keep a tab on what's happening, to see your movements [...] They gather information on the activities that we do here in the UK and then it's sent to the embassy [...] and then from there, it goes to the security in Eritrea. So, Eritrea is then informed of the activities of Eritreans in the UK, and they do that in other countries as well. It's not just limited to the UK.

The disruption of opposition events emerged as a routine imposition that jeopardised the diaspora's physical and mental wellbeing and their families back home. The intricate yet unsystematic surveillance techniques used by government

sympathisers also sent waves of anxiety and distress through the diasporic community, causing silent critics to hide their associations with notable dissidents. On the other hand, outspoken critics were accustomed to the routine monitoring of their activities and whereabouts and accepted that the consequence of their actions was exile. ‘We advocate, obviously we lose, we can’t go home,’ Rida, a prominent activist, told me as we discussed her life in exile. She continued: ‘I think about home every day when I wake up in the morning [...] I’m hopeful that one day I’m going home.’ Though ‘home’ was a distant memory for Rida, it also felt like a near reality—for her, a change in Eritrea’s governance appeared eminent. Yet the words that remained unsaid and the gaps in our conversation pointed to a common theme that emerged again and again during my interactions with diasporic women: silence. Sympathisers of the Eritrean government appeared to not only silence dissidents and actively push vocal critics into exile, but also perpetuate communal silence by instilling a fear of unfamiliarity among government critics, hindering their engagement with outsiders. Embodied silence also penetrated discussions of sensitive topics (including mental health), meaning access to participant narratives of lived experiences of distress and mental illness were also restricted.

The emergence of silence as an overarching theme was not readily apparent during my time in the field; instead, reflexively engaging with my field notes, data, and positionality after completing data collection revealed the interconnectedness of silence and distress in women’s daily lives. The difficulties I initially experienced in gaining access to participants could not necessarily be attributed solely to hostile researcher-community relations, as documented with minority groups in the United States (George, Duran, and Norris 2014); rather, the ambiguous presence of covert agents scattered throughout the diasporic community created a pervasive distrust of outsiders that inherently clouded perceptions of my research intentions and community involvement. Verbalising personal experiences of distress and mental ill health appeared culturally unacceptable; however, I later learned that their language, Tigrinya, had a limited psychosocial vocabulary, essentially rendering these experiences inarticulable.

I initially considered my challenging fieldwork experiences common obstacles for foreign investigators conducting ethnographic research among close-knit communities. A critical and iterative examination of my interactions with the Eritrean women allowed me to deeply reflect on the ways my positionality was influencing my interpretation of ethnographic encounters. Experiences of distress were not always explicit, but conversations about the Eritrean women’s experiences of living in the UK and their engagement in transnational activism revealed distressing group interactions that had at some point become normalised within diasporic relations. Reflecting on the verbalisation of these normalised

community interactions provided valuable insight into the ways distress emerges through the complex socio-political dynamics of their community.

Suspicion within the Eritrean diaspora was profound, and practising silence allowed women to circumvent sensitive topics that carried negative social connotations, like political affiliations and 'mental health'. Disclosing personal experiences in noisy and crowded coffee shops appeared to mitigate the risks of exposure by covert agents while also creating a safe environment to discuss the subjective experiences of distress that arose through daily interactions with community members. Such methodological hurdles yielded rich ethnographic insights that unveiled the interconnectedness of silence, distress, and transnational activism among Eritrean diasporic women, which in turn highlighted how expressions of distress were bound in the compelling yet contentious politics of the women's homeland.

## About the author

*Brittney S. Mengistu* is a PhD student in the Global Health and Social Medicine Department at King's College London. Her dissertation is an ethnography exploring the lived experiences of Eritrean women living in the UK, with a specific emphasis on identity, distress, and help-seeking behaviours. Her research interests include feminist theories, participatory methodologies, and the anthropology of health and migration. Brittney holds an MPH from Emory University and a BS in Psychology from Oral Roberts University.

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