Stories of Strength: Exploring Education for African Refugee Girls in Cairo

Arenós Karsten, Júlia

STORIES OF STRENGTH

Exploring Education for African Refugee Girls in Cairo

Júlia Arenós Karsten

Student number: S3270297

Email address: j.arenos.karsten@umail.leidenuniv.nl

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Declaration

This MA thesis is the result of my own work, is not copied from another person's published or unpublished work, and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration, except where specifically indicated. Neither the MA thesis nor any part of it is substantially the same as any writing submitted for assessment at Leiden University, another university, or any similar institution.

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Abstract

The way we tell stories matters, and it matters even more if the stories are about refugees. Narratives have transformative potential because the way we talk about displaced communities influences how we think and treat them. My research journey in Cairo is about Stories of Strength. Cairo is dust, organized chaos, and constant noise, but I enjoyed walking on Cairo's gritty streets with my friend Didi who told me her story. Life in exile is not easy, especially if you are a young African refugee female dreaming about going to university and becoming a businesswoman. Life in exile is not easy, but none talks about it, and none cares, or at least, this is how my friends felt.

This thesis intends to denounce the exhausting social context that young African refugee females experience when accessing education in Egypt, while at the same time, demonstrating that those girls are warriors. Ethnography became the central research method used to test the hypothesis, while the outcome resulted in non-fictional life stories of young African refugee female students, including their flight to Egypt and their struggle to survive, gender, and racial discrimination, and obtain an education. Two life experiences have been included in the Annexes of this study, while an analysis of them has been conducted in the main body. The results showed that African refugee females effectively navigate alternatives in a challenging educational context that limits them from achieving their academic and professional dreams. On this basis, it was confirmed that the stories of young African refugee girls are Stories of Strength while reminding the reader that narratives have transformative potential and that the way we tell stories matters.

Keywords: Education, Female, Africa, Refugee, Strength, Eritrea, Cairo, Dreams, Stories.

“I just imagined ourselves in the future, meeting again, being adults, what will have happened with our lives by then? I will invite you to my wedding."

...

“I will wear the earrings that you gave me as a present Didi”

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1-Introduction

On the 3rd of March 2022, I arrived in Cairo; I did not have big expectations. Cairo is organized chaos, with constant dust and noise. I did not have expectations at all, but now, back home, I swear that chaotic Cairo can consume one's energy; it finished mine and I am astonished how it has not finished theirs. I am referring to the energy of my friends; we are a group of nine: Didi, Vicky, Neoma, Lidia, Bero, Simona, Sephi, Leila, and me; all of them, except Leila, who is Egyptian, are young females from different countries in Africa that came to Egypt as they had the bad luck to be born in places where there is war, instability, and conflict. They fled from their countries of origin, seeking refuge in Egypt, but as they say, Egypt is "fucked up too". I just want you to imagine how bad their situation had to be in their home countries to leave everything behind, their family, their friends, their people, their culture, their comfort zone, and come to a new country like Egypt, to a new city like Cairo that is nothing but constant chaos and noise. The same chaos and noise that slowly consumes you.

It was Thursday when I arrived, and suddenly I found myself surrounded by uninterrupted hectic and the inner thought that time was running out and that my role was to do research, I kept doing it without even knowing what I was doing. In chaotic Cairo, you cannot plan because none does it; I learned to improvise, adapt myself to the needs of others, move around the city, build trust with unknown people in just a few minutes, and walk alone, always concerned about my body language. Although I was not, I needed to present myself as confident, not to make eye contact with anyone as in the middle of the chaos, eye contact is taken as an invitation. I learned to research the city's organized chaos, and now, back home, I am proud of myself. I perceive my discoveries as meaningful ones, and my journey made me realize that maybe resiliency is a skill that I did not even know I had. I conducted more than 30 in-depth interviews, reached the status quo organizations in Cairo, and was persistent and ambitious. Although my perfectionism brought me to experience some mental breakdowns and left me without energy at the end of the journey, I feel it was for a good cause.

Once someone said "work for a cause and not for applause", there was a purpose behind my research journey in Cairo. Apart from the in-depth interviews with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Embassies, NGOs, community school principals, and teachers, I conducted ethnographic research; I became part of the research, I made it mine, and here is where everything started.

On the 28th of April, I returned to the Netherlands, and reflexivity became my daily routine. I tried to take perspective and observe myself in my journey of discoveries in Cairo. Reflexivity is transformative, but for me, it came with a struggle. I saw myself in Cairo, promising my friends that I would come back, try to help them, and be by their side. Now, I see myself back in the Netherlands; I feel bad, I will not return to the chaotic and dusty Cairo, and I do not know if there is anything I can do for them. The girls dream big, but at the same time, they feel that they are wasting their time. They are in their twenties and still in high school. I am holding on to my discoveries. Holding on to my findings makes me feel a little bit better. I told myself that my purpose would be to expose the exhausting social context that those young refugee females are constantly navigating to reach their academic and professional dreams. What motivates me is to demonstrate that despite the enormous challenges and educational barriers they encounter in their journey, those girls are fighters; they are intelligent, brave, and extraordinary persons.

1.1 Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu's theory of Practice: Capital, Field, and Habitus

The theoretical optic that has inspired this project is Bourdieu's Capital-Field-Habitus Framework embodied in his *Theory of Practice* (1984). Nonetheless, contributions of additional authors have been considered to effectively apply Bourdieu's framework to today's vaporous, convergent, and changing world. Such incorporation has been done following the logic of Yang Yang (2014) based on rethinking Bourdieu's structuralist, deterministic, and pessimist criticisms while "identifying how change can be realized within a Bourdieusian framework" (Yang, 2014, p.1522).

The Theory of Practice, among other conjectures, explores the relationship between the individual and the context. Therefore, it serves as a theoretical lens in our research whose main objective is to demonstrate that young African refugee girls in Cairo, although being denied their right to education, still have the skill to handle and overcome the challenging educational contexts, while navigating alternatives to achieve their academic and professional dreams.

According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), the practice understood as actions, behaviors, and decisions of an individual will be determined by the interaction of three major concepts: *Field, Habitus,* and *Capital.*

Bourdieu perceives the world as a sports center where different games are played simultaneously. Each game has its own rules and players, but the power position of a player is

subjective. It will differ depending on the game that is being played, as also other aspects such as *Habitus* or *Capital* interfere. The world is "an ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres of play" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp.16-17). In other words, you can be the captain if you play football, but the pet team if you play basketball.

1.1.1 Field

According to the theoretician, the specific game and its rules epitomize the concept of *Field* or "social context". It is a structured and semi-rigid network or configuration with tight norms that are "objectively defined," determining an individual's participation, power, and privilege in a specific game. The "rules of the game" condition one's "place" while playing. Nonetheless, according to Mills (2008) in her paper, *The transformative potential of theoretical constructs of Bourdieu,* the structuring essence of the field is limited and leaves room for improvisation (Mills, 2008, p. 86). For Bourdieu, "Agents, therefore, are not 'particles' that are 'mechanically pushed and pulled about by external forces" (Bourdieu & Macquant, 1992, pp. 108-109). Hence, the dynamism of the field is due to agents being possessors of internal forces such as *Capital* and *Habitus*.

In this research, the *Field* represents the social context of Cairo, including its sub-fields (e.g. educational, legal, bureaucratic, professional, etc.) and their respective rules. Chapter 2 is designated to explore the "objective world"; an exhaustive analysis of the overall social context for African refugee students in Egypt will be conducted to understand the effects it has on the African refugee community and their access to a qualified education that meets their educational needs.

Intersectionality has been employed as the methodological instrument for acquiring the desired understanding: unbiased, accurate, and objective to the extent possible. According to Crenshaw (1898), intersectionality materializes an unequal reality where different systems of oppression and discrimination overlap one another. Under this optic, there are certain aspects of an individual's social and political identity, such as gender, sex, race, ethnicity, religion, origin, class, physical appearance, and others, that, given simultaneously, will trigger different levels of oppression and discrimination. Such an analytical framework applied to the research in question leaves evidence that specific agents within the group of "African refugee students in Egypt" will face higher levels of oppression and discrimination than others, mainly based on nationality and gender.

1.1.2 Habitus

The “rules of the game” partly determine your “place” while playing the game, but your “game-playing skills” do matter (Crossley, 2001, p.84). *Habitus* is an internal stable and durable force that is formed by a set of talents, cultural practices, language, behaviors, abilities, and skills that have been acquired through “the process of socialization” within family, friends, schools, peer communities, media, entertainment, and other sources (Park, Rinke, & Mawhinney, 2016, p.649). In sociology; from the moment of birth, an individual is exposed to different inputs (e.g., advertisements, school books, movies, family traditions, peer comparison, etc.) that serve as a source for understanding which are “the needed skills to perform as functioning members of their society”. The internalization of such knowledge will serve an individual as a source of self-awareness and self-evaluation in a specific field that might or might not “drives them to exclude themselves from places that exclude them” (Younes, 2022, p.18). According to Bourdieu, the “set of internalized skills” are “durable” and “transportable”, as they can actively function if there is a shift of *Field* (Joy et Al., 2020, p.2546).

Nonetheless, the concept of *Habitus* is abstract and often misunderstood by theoreticians; considered both, an individual and collective phenomenon, it includes a wide range of layers (Yang, 2014, p. 1524-1525). Therefore, in this research, the notion is treated as a collective phenomenon based on cultural and family values acquired by African refugee students. The cultural heritage influences their attitude towards education, including ambition, confidence, strength, motivation, and perseverance to overcome a challenging situation and navigate alternatives. These skills are treated as “the second nature” as they are irreflexive and unconscious.

1.1.3 Capital

Both the “rules of the game” and the “game-playing skills” will determine an individual’s “place” in the game. Moreover, the available “resources” and how they are being used represent another decisive factor. The existing resources are defined by Bourdieu as *Capital*; three types are identified by the theoretician: economic, social, and cultural Capital. The possession/acquisition or not of this capital and the capacity to use it properly in the specific field “might facilitate or constrain individuals’ access to certain services or privileges” (Younes, 2022, p. 18). *Capital* interplays with *Habitus*; the “way capital is being used” is influenced by an individual’s “second nature”. Several studies have shown that young students, despite being capable, talented, and having at their disposition the instruments for success, fail academically because of a lack of confidence and

motivation. Those students refuse to continue playing in an "objective structure" that excludes them and to put efforts into evaluating the existing field and its rules while navigating possibilities about how to use, combine, and reproduce their existing economic, social, and cultural capital for maximizing success (Yang, 2014, p. 1527). The respective definitions done by the theoretician include 1) *Economic Capital* as the number of economic and material resources available. 2) *Social Capital* is the "social connections", the capacity that one individual has to build and use the relationships to obtain resources such as information, privilege, or knowledge, that cannot be obtained by oneself alone. 3) And *Cultural Capital* is manifested in three forms, "embodied state" such as language, "objectified state" such as cultural objects: books or narratives, and "institutionalized state" as educational qualifications (Younes, 2022, p.19).

In this research, the stories in concern materialize a "second nature" in strength, motivation, and fight; therefore, the constant attitude based on navigating alternatives and possibilities about how to use, convert and reproduce the existing capital can be appreciated.

1.2 Significance of the Study, Methodology, Research Design, and Research Gaps

The research conducted by Hagar El Sayed Younes (2022) from the American University in Cairo represents the most recent available source analyzing exclusively the educational context for African Refugees in Egypt. The paper explores the main barriers and challenges that African Refugee Students encounter when accessing higher education in Egypt. Several research gaps have been identified in the existing literature.

1) The methodology used to identify the main challenges is limited and may bias the interviewees' responses. The selected sample included 15 respondents, diverse in gender and nationality. The connections were established through the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Office in Egypt, the international humanitarian agency that, closely cooperating with UNHCR, is responsible for the education of refugees in the country. CRS provided Younes with the contact information of the 15 respondents, and semi-structured interviews were conducted through a phone call. According to Keenan Steiner in his article (2017) "5 Ways to Establish Trust With Candidates and Make Interviews More Effective", sincere responses will be obtained if the environment where the interview is conducted is a "space of trust." From the author's statement: "Do it in a casual environment outside of your office to make candidates feel more at ease," it can be logically deduced that a phone call does not create a "space of trust"; hence, the responses may be inaccurate.

2) The second gap identified is content-related. Intersectionality has not been used as an analytical framework. Therefore, the identified barriers are general and do not englobe the experience of Eritrean refugee females or Eritrean refugees as the main vulnerable groups.

3)The third gap has to do with narratives. According to Borgen Stories (2020), sharing refugee stories and experiences is a meaningful act to tackle the refugee crisis as it fosters empathy (Bateman, 2020). Nevertheless, the UNHCR advises researchers and authors to consider how the stories are narrated. The organization highlighted that focusing on refugees' past, negative experiences, and barriers may induce pessimism, demotivation, and dehumanization. On the contrary, it is recommended to focus on "what individuals can accomplish despite what they have experienced."

The mentioned above research gaps have been considered to design and structure this research and thesis. 1) Overt ethnography has been used as a method for gathering data; in that sense, the probabilities of creating a "safe space" for the respondents were higher. The ethnographer has shared openly the intentions with the members of the group.

2) This research intends to address the content-related gap. Hence, the specific barriers considering nationality and sex are included when describing the educational context for African refugees in Egypt. Nonetheless, two gaps have not been fulfilled: A) Fieldwork in Cairo implied a deep understanding of the situation of South Sudanese refugee students as well as Eritrean refugee students. In contrast, other African nationalities of refugees in Egypt, such as Sudanese and Ethiopians, were not explored. This is the central research gap; other scholars are invited to explore the specific educational barriers for Sudanese and Ethiopians. B) Although the experience of female refugees has been considered, it serves as a basis to further research on two central phenomena: "prostitution networks for refugee females in Cairo" and "the role of females and power relations in the so-called *Sudanese gangs*."

3) This thesis acknowledges the transformative potential of narratives while attentive to "the way stories are told." Although the educational barriers that African refugee students face in Egypt have been analyzed, it does not represent the central argument of the project. The primary intention is to demonstrate that African refugee female students in Egypt are fighters: capable of navigating alternatives in a challenging and limiting educational context. Such a dynamic aligns itself with Oral History as the research design guiding this project.

Overall, the added value of this study is remarkable because of its content and approach. In academia, there is a lack of literature that analyzes the educational context for African refugee students in light of their different educational needs according to nationality and sex. Moreover, the research design and the "storytelling" format are expected to foster empathy in the audience, leaving room for positive change.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

As mentioned above, the objective of this research is to prove the existing hypothesis, while giving a response to our research questions:

Hypothesis: Young African refugee female students in Cairo are denied their right to education because they are educated in centers where there is 1)Poor teaching quality. 2)A curriculum that limits their access to university education. 3)A limiting social environment. 4)A limiting physical environment. Despite that, young African refugee girls in Egypt have the skill to handle and overcome the challenging educational context that limits them from achieving their academic and professional goals. As well as, navigating alternatives to accomplish their dreams, including family and friendship as a source of motivation and hope, and the use of Social capital to explore alternative paths.

Research question: Are African refugee female students educated in centers that limit them from achieving their academic and professional goals? If yes, which are the main limiting factors? Do the girls, have the skill to handle and overcome the challenging educational context? If yes, how do they do it? How do they navigate alternative paths to accomplish their initial goals?

Two empirical chapters aim to guide our research. Inspired by Bourdieu's theoretical framework, Chapter 2 focuses explicitly on the *Field*. An exhaustive analysis of the "objective world" will be conducted through the lens of intersectionality. The intention is to draw, to the extent possible, an unbiased picture of the overall educational context for African Refugees in Egypt. Due to the situation's complexity, this chapter is expected to be dense. Therefore, it starts with a general overview of Refugee Education in Egypt including a review of the legal instruments that regulate Education for Refugees. The second section embodies a more specific analysis of Education for African Refugees in Egypt, including a historical overview and the current situation. The "current situation" section illustrates the education that African Refugees receive in Egypt while presenting four central arguments to corroborate the unqualified nature of the imparted education. The grounds

are built mainly on the data gathered through in-depth interviews and focus groups (42 primary sources in total), with different actors such as experts, diplomats, teachers, school directors, community leaders, and students from different nationalities and gender. The data was gathered all between March and April 2022 with given oral consent of all the participants. Interviews have not been included in the Annexes due to their density, nonetheless, contact the researcher to access interview transcripts in case it is needed.

Guided by our theoretical lens, Chapter 3 embodies the concept of *Habitus, Capital,* and *Field.* The chapter consists of two creative nonfiction-style stories of female displaced learners' flight to Egypt and struggles to adapt, including the difficulties of finding secondary education that offers them the tools to access university education. Our hypothesis is confirmed through the analysis of those stories: the personal experiences materialize their strength, courage, and capability to overcome challenging situations and navigate alternatives to accomplish their dreams. The stories are attached to the annexes and analyzed through the concepts of *Field, Habitus,* and *Capital,* in the thesis body.

And our final chapter integrates the concluding thoughts, meaning a summary of the findings, as well as recommendations to impulse positive change.

2-Exploring the field: Education for African Refugees in Egypt

2.1 General Overview: Refugee Education in Egypt

The Arab Republic of Egypt (جمهورية مصر العربية), whose size exceeds 24 times the size of the Netherlands, is cataloged as a **large country** located in the Northeast corner of Africa in the Maghreb region. According to the World Bank (2022), with 106 million people residing primarily in urban areas such as Cairo, Egypt is a **large-populated country** ranking the 1st most populous in the Arab World, the 3rd in the African continent, and the 14th globally. Moreover, the number of inhabitants is expected to grow by 1.94% every year. The experts alert that the exponential growth "poses a threat to the Egyptian economy where one-third of people live below the poverty line, and the unemployment rate is around 10%" (World Population Review, 2022).

Such an economic instability, accentuated by other factors such as the COVID-19 crisis, is translated into the educational sector, whose impact falls on the children as they represent 40% of the Egyptian population (Tong, & Itad, 2021, p. 24). The education deficits of the country were materialized in the Global Competitiveness Report launched by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2014-2015, where the quality of primary education was analyzed in 144 countries: Egypt ranked 141 (El-Shaarawi, 2015). Furthermore, the UNHCR Educational Officer in Egypt, Mohamed El Shafei, explains in an interview that there are currently only 58.807 public governmental schools that serve the high number of 25.000.000 students; under these conditions, in overpopulated areas of Cairo, it is possible to encounter 100 students within one classroom. The statistical data provides evidence of Egypt's struggle to support its own nationals with quality education. As a matter of special treatment, one needs to reflect on the possibilities that the 137,490 officially registered refugee students between the age of 3 and 24 will have when accessing quality educational services in Egypt.[1] This reality was anticipated by Mushira Khattab, the Secretary General of the National Council of Childhood, in 2006 stressing: "the right of the refugee child to access school has to take into account that the government of Egypt is unable to provide access to schools for every Egyptian child." (Grabska, 2006, p.15).

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi acknowledged the educational gaps in the Egyptian public system; therefore, since 2014, the Government has positioned education as one of its main priorities within the national development strategies. The Ministry of Education (EoM), headed by Tarek

[1] Information provided by Mohamed El Shafei, UNHCR Educational Officer, in an interview

Shawky, introduced in the academic year 2018/2019 the 'Education 2.0' strategy, whose intention is to provide a multi-disciplinary learning approach that meets international standards (UNESCO, 2020). Such an approach also tackles the refugee crisis, as it recognizes the determinant role of mainstream education as an effective mechanism for promoting social integration. Hence, the cooperation between the EoM and the UNHCR resulted in the inclusion of already 42.000 refugee students in national education systems across the country. Further coordination implies the long-term vision to integrate all refugees of all nationalities into mainstream education.[2]

Nonetheless, much remains to be done to give refugees in Egypt an education that meets their needs and adheres to international standards. The 30% enrolled in public education face the deficiencies of the public system, while the barriers encountered by the remaining 70% are much higher. This project recognizes both; the fact that the ultimate goal of a good resettlement project is the integration of refugee students into public education; and the current education crisis in the Egyptian public system. Moreover, this study advocates the importance of conducting an exhaustive analysis of Refugee Education in Egypt to explore potential solutions.

2.1.1 Legal Framework

Governments have to guarantee certain human rights[3] to their citizens. Despite that, from the moment someone faces persecution in his or her home country, this safety net of protection disappears, and the life of this person is threatened. This explains why many people search for refugee and protection in other countries. This is the case for Refugees[4] in Egypt, Egypt by April 2022 hosts 282,891 refugees, from the ones a 50% are Syrians (141,303), followed by 20% of Sudanese (56,100), 8% Eritreans (21,816), 7.5% South Sudanese (21,584), 5.5% Ethiopians (15,944), and other nationalities (UNHCR, 2022).

International legal instruments: The United Nations (UN) agrees that Refugees in Egypt cannot be left alone and unprotected as this would suppose a threat to their lives and human integrity. Therefore, the organization has adopted different legal instruments that constitute the International Human Rights Law, whose purpose is to guide states such as Egypt in treating individuals within state boundaries, including those seeking refuge.

[2] *Idem*
[3] See Annex 1: Definition "Human rights"
[4] See Annex 2: Definition "Refugee, asylum-seeker, internally displaced person, and stateless people".

The right to quality education is a human right (Universal Declaration on Human Rights, 1948). On that account, Egypt must provide education to every human being within its boundaries. Refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt have "educational entitlements" mainly, but not limited to, the following International Legal Instruments: The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 and its 1967 protocol; The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

International treaties state that party states shall assure **primary education** (from 6 to 15 years old, but defined by the state)[5] to everyone[6], both[7] nationals, and non-nationals[8], including refugees[9], without discrimination based on race, nationality[10], color, or ethnicity. This is a must, and for those states that are not respecting it, they must make sure to implement this right immediately[11]. This legal framework is mainly defined by international law. Regional legal instruments from the ones Egypt is party, such as the African Charter on Human and People's Rights[12], the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), and the African Youth Charter (AYC) confirm the state's duties. Egypt also has internal law[13] adhering to these dispositions.

International treaties state that for **secondary education[14],** parties have the right to have a progressive action plan[15] until moving to the final objective of free secondary education for all[16]. Moreover, the developing countries have the right to differentiate and give special treatment to nationals[17] and non-nationals. And in the case of non-nationals, concerning refugee communities[18], they are legitimated to provide special treatment to some groups than others[19].

[5] See Annex 3: Art.47 Law No. 12 of 1996
[6] See Annex 4: CESCR General Comment No. 13 Art. 13 (1) and CESCR General Comment No. 11 para. 6 & 7
[7] See Annex 5: CRC General Comment No.6, para. 18, at principle b) Non-discrimination (Art.2)
[8] See Annex 6: CERD General Recommendation 30, pt. 7, para. 30
[9] See Annex 7: Art. 22.1 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 and its 1967 protocol
[10] See Annex 8: CESCR General Comment No. 20, para. 30
[11] See Annex 9: CESCR General Comment No. 13, Art. 13, pt. 2, para. 51
[12] See Annex 10: The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights specific Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, Art. 4.
[13] See Annex 11: Law No. 12 of 1996
[14] See Annex 12: Art. 13.2 (b) of ICESCR
[15]See Annex 13: CESCR General Comment No. 11, para.3
[16] See Annex 14: ICESCR Art. 2.1
[17]See Annex 15: ICESCR Art. 2.3
[18] See Annex 16: Art. 21.2 of the Convention Relating to Status of Refugees 1951
[19] See Annex 17: Refugee Entitelments in Egypt citation

Domestic legal instruments: Egypt violates its obligations under international and regional law regarding the provision of primary education that includes the elements of availability[20], accessibility[21], acceptability[22], and adaptability[23].

Egypt placed a reservation on Article 22(1) of the 1951 Convention regulating primary education. Stating that reservations have been made "because these articles consider the refugee as equal to the national." In primary education, Egypt discriminates by nationality; only refugees that hold the Sudanese, South Sudanese, Syrian and Yemeni nationality[24] and certain Palestinian refugee children[25] are legally allowed to enter public schools. Moreover, Sudanese, South Sudanese, and Palestinians are obliged to pay additional school fees for primary education[26]. Other refugee children such as Eritreans, Ethiopians, and other non-Arabic-speaking nationals are not included.

Article 6 states that refugee nationalities that are denied from accessing public schools have the right to enroll in private schools. According to *Refugee Entitlements in Egypt*, a report conducted by The Center for Migration and Refugee Studies at The American University in Cairo, "the cost of private education is prohibitive to most refugees families" (Hetaba, McNally & Habersky, 2020). The Egyptian curriculum in a private school, costs around 700 euros/year. The lowest cost for an international curriculum in a private school is 2.600 euros/year, with fees going up to 10.000 euros/year (Edarabia, 2018). Such fees are unaffordable to single-parent refugee families that must live on mostly salaries ranging between 100 euros and 200 euros.[27]

Egypt also violates its obligations under international and regional law regarding the provision of secondary education. A strategic progressive plan to effectively integrate all refugees from all nationalities into free secondary education is lacking. Nonetheless, the MoE, together with UNHCR and other partners, has taken some steps in the matter such as the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP). A strategic plan that includes a well-defined agenda with specific targets to meet the final objective of fully integrating Syrian Refugees into public education in Egypt, including free secondary education (Marshall & Al-Laham, 2022, pp.22-32). Another example of "good practice", represents the current "bridging programs" implemented by CRS. The intention is to offer language, culture, and extracurricular courses, to close the existing educational gaps among refugee students,

[20] See Annex 18: CESCR General Comment No.13, Art. 12.2-6a
[21] See Annex 19: CESCR General Comment No. 13, Art. 13.2-6b
[22] See Annex 20: CESCR General Comment No. 13, Art. 13.2-6c
[23] See Annex 21: CESCR General Comment No. 13, Art. 13.2-6d
[24] See Annex 22: Decree. No. 284 of 2014 & Signed Administrative Order
[25] See Annex 23: Educational Cooperation Agreement with Palestine
[26] See Annex 24: Decree No. 284 of 2014, Art. 11
[27] Data obtained from Center for Arab-West Understanding

hence, facilitating integration into mainstream education. The lack of funding results in limited spots for the "bridging programs".[28] According to the CRS Educational Officer, around 50 spots are available every year for the free Arabic Language Course, but those spots do not supply the demand. Counting refugee children from non-Arabic speaking countries such as Eritrea and Ethiopia, there is expected that at least, 16.000 children are the ones most in need of the free language course.

2.2 Education for African Refugees in Egypt

2.2.1 Historical overview: Education for African Refugees in Egypt

Fruit of the 1948 Palestine war and the huge influx of Palestinian Refugees arriving in Egypt; the country engaged in the 1954 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the UNHCR. It was a bilateral agreement between the UN and the Egyptian Government, where Egypt agreed to ratify the 1951 Convention if and only if three main conditions were given: 1)No refugee camps. 2)No local integration[29]. 3)The UNHCR is fully responsible for protecting refugees.[30]

The first wave of African refugees came to Egypt during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972) (Zohry, 2003, pp.13-14). This first wave resulted in the foundation of Saint Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) in 1979 by Saint Andrew's United Church in Cairo; the provided services included a refugee learning center. Ann Lado, an activist of the South Sudanese community who came to Egypt in 1975, explains in an interview that by then, Egypt was perceived as a country of temporary transit. Therefore, educational services were designed "to entertain the children until repatriation happened, so parents could go to work in the meantime."

The second wave of African refugees arriving in Egypt is situated in the period 1983-2005 because of the Second Sudanese Civil war, (Zohry, 2003, pp.13-14) a 22-year conflict that finished with the independence of South Sudan in 2011, the youngest nation in the world. During this time frame, we have the foundation of Santa Lwanga Learning Center; popularly known as "Sakkakini". Founded by Father Cosimo in 1989, a Comboni missionary, Sakkakini challenged the mainstream approach to refugee education of that time. Father Simon, a priest of the congregation in charge of the Learning Center (LC), explains "we realized that life in exile could last over 20 years, under such

[28] Information provided by Amira Salima, CRS Educational Officer, in an interview
[29] See Annex 25: Comment by Mohamed El Shafei
[30] Information provided by Mohamed El Shafei, UNHCR Educational Officer, in an interview

conditions, it was unacceptable that our children were just going to school to be 'busy', so we thought about start teaching them a curriculum, so they could take their exams and go to university; we were the first ones, we started with the Egyptian curriculum."

James Natalie, one of the first students of Sakkakini, and currently the headmaster, highlights in an interview that until 2006 the LC was following the Egyptian curriculum. Huge barriers were encountered with the Egyptian curriculum, especially concerning the national examinations for entering university. Father Simon describes it in the following way: "Most of the students were not allowed to examine themselves because they were exceeding the average age. Those meeting the age requirement were asked to present documents such as residence permits or birth certificates; most of the students lost those documents during their flight. And for the remaining students, Sakkakini needed to ask other Egyptian schools if there were free spots in their centers to take our students. Each school was just willing to accept a few students in exchange for money. These dynamics were exhausting, and they were also the ones that pushed us to rethink Sakkakini's educational program." Between 2006 and 2008, the priest congregation of Sakkakini analyzed the bilateral diplomatic relations between Sudan (including South Sudan) and Egypt and came up with the idea to bring the Sudanese curriculum to Egypt.

Both countries have historical positive diplomatic relations as a fruit of the 1951 Nile Waters Agreement.[31] The ones that were reinforced in 2004, with the summit meeting in Cairo that culminated in the Four-Freedom Agreement; including the right to property, work, movement, and ownership between both countries (Jacobsen et Al., 2012, p. 11).

The priest congregation in Sakkakini saw an opportunity in the ongoing positive relations, therefore, between 2006 and 2008, they elaborated a well-structured proposal, traveled to Khartoum, and met with the Minister of Education who would enable the negotiations with the Egyptian government on the matter. The outcome resulted in the Egyptian Ministry of Education (MoE) giving consent to Learning Centers (LCs) in Egypt to teach the Sudanese curriculum, prepare the students for taking the Sudanese exams at the Sudanese Embassy in Egypt, as well as to allow them to enter Egyptian public universities with this certificate. Boutrous, the director of Sakakini, remarked in a meeting that although the priest congregation was aware that the Minister of Education issued Decree No. 24 in 1992 allowing Sudanese refugees to enter Egyptian public schools, they thought that education in LCs was still the best option. He added: "Demands of the community were considered by the priest congregations; the Sudanese community was highlighting mainly racism in the Egyptian

[31] See Annex 26: Diplomatic relations Sudan, South Sudan & Egypt

public schools, difficulties with enrollment as documents were lacking, language barriers due to the Egyptian dialect, overcrowded classrooms, and more."

Within the second wave (1983-2005), the decade of the late 90s, and the early 2000s represent a peak of growth for African Refugees in Egypt[32]. Senior Researcher Katarzyna Grabska (2006), identifies two main causing factors. 1) The exponential increase is due to the 1995 before-mentioned reform (See Annex 26) that pushed the official registration of Sudanese and South Sudanese as refugees. 2) The exponential increase is due to the ongoing instability in the Horn of Africa, and the rumors among Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis perceiving Egypt as the best destination for resettlement to the West[33]. Both represented turning factors for the arrival of mainly, Ethiopians and Eritreans. The first Ethiopians came to Egypt during the "Ethiopian Red Terror" in the late 80s escaping from the repressive dictatorship of Mengistu Haile Mariam. The first Eritreans came to Egypt during the Eritrean-Ethiopian border conflict between 1998 and 2000 (Zohry, 2003, p.12-13). Eritreans fleeing their country seeking refuge in other places date from 1993 because of the authoritarian regime of Isaias Afewerki, popularly known as the "North Korea of Africa", their presence in Egypt became every time more noticeable, especially in 2015 and 2018[34], as two peaks of growth.[35] Of the new coming African Refugees in Egypt, there is estimated that 40% are children the ones that are in need of education (UNHCR, 2022).

African Refugees in Egypt, contrary to Syrians and Yemenis, are educated in LCs like Sakkakini and StARS. The increase of African Refugees went hand in hand with the increase of LCs. According to El Shafei, in 2014 there were only 26 community schools, from the ones six were ruled by churches[36] and the rest were secular. "This number increased mainly by secular LCs to 46, 65, 80, 100, 115, and currently we have 174 LCs in Cairo." El Shafei defines LCs as under-resourced refugee-established and managed schools that the government does not legally recognize, although, they are under the legal umbrella of the Sudanese and South Sudanese Embassy.

The UNHCR and the MoE acknowledged that African Refugees in Egypt were educated in LCs, and saw it as an opportunity to promote the self-sufficiency of the refugee community to meet their own needs. Such an approach was materialized in the UNHCR RO Cairo Country Operational Plan for 2005 (COP), the idea was to reallocate resources toward self-reliant projects (Grabska, 2006,

[32] See Annex 27: Increase in data
[33] See Annex 28: Egypt as a transit country
[34] See Annex 29: Arrival of Eritreans to Egypt in 2015 & 2018
[35] Information provided by Yassir, Eritrean refugee that came to Egypt in 2018 from Saudi Arabia
[36] See Annex 30: Church-Ruled Learning Centers data

p.26). The UNHCR, closely cooperating with CRS, started to assist LCs in different manners. Mohamed El Shafei further elaborates on the provided assistance: “We were the ones printing the Sudanese Curriculum and confectioning the books, then, we gave the LCs the books for free. We also used to pay each school, if they were having more than 90 students, an amount of money every year, we started with 900$ in 2004 per school. CRS also conducted an assessment on furniture and installation, we assisted them also in this way. We also used to train teachers in the British Council so they could improve their English, and for the principals, we gave them training for financial governance, so they could manage well their own resources and become self-sustainable. We also paid for the Sudanese examinations; at that time it was 80$ per student.” He continues explaining: “We started to realize that the number of LCs was increasing exponentially, something that makes sense if the refugee population also grows. But there was this day when the Einstein scholarship was sent by the German government, we had 150 scholarships available. CRS contacted the LCs and asked them to send us the data of their students to see if we could select some of them. What happened is that only one of them send us the data of 4 students, we were impressed because the highest mark was around 62% and the others around 53%, while with Syrians we have results of 99%.”

El Shafei catalogs this event as the one that pushed the UNHCR and the MoE to realize that LCs are a business, he adds: “Imagine I am the boss of an LC and you are a teacher, you see that I am receiving money, teaching training, furniture, everything. At the same time, you can also see how all the refugees from my ethnicity are coming to my LC and are willing to pay school fees. Furthermore, the expenses that I have are very low, I just rent a small flat, and I pay the teachers very low salaries as I know that most of my teachers are refugees, and they are fine with being paid such a small amount as it is the best option that they have. You are a teacher of my LC, and you notice all of that, you also see that you are from another ethnicity than I am, so you have a target group, and you decide to leave my school and open your own school, this is what happened.”

The evaluations of the UNHCR and the MoE cataloged the 2004 COP strategy as unsuccessful and decided to take a completely different approach. In 2018, UNHCR stop funding LCs, and all the available resources were designated to promote the full integration of all refugees of all nationalities into public education. The focus on Egyptian Public Education already started in 2014, UNHCR’s awareness of the educational crisis in Egypt, brought the agency to allocate capital to improve the system. UNHCR started supporting the capacity building of public schools where refugee students were accepted. 57 schools were taken as a pilot; schools were expanded, assisted with furniture, electricity, and other utilities, and digital education was introduced in 2017. The smart classroom global initiative between UNHCR and Vodafone foundation is expected to continue until 2025,

granting children with smart screens and joysticks, El Shafei describes this system as effective and efficient as costs are reduced, and better educational governance is given.

Since 2018, LCs sustain themselves exclusively with school fees, while receiving some additional support with furniture and reparations through NGOs such as "The Egyptian Society for Comprehensive Development", or Save the Children with its "opportunity project" that provided LCs with around 100 desks and tables during the academic year 2018-2019. UNICEF is also conducting the assessment of community schools during the year 2022, which financed by The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Civil Aid Operations (ECHO), intends to evaluate if LCs can or cannot be included in the ongoing strategy between the UNHCR and the MoE as a short or immediate solution. Overall, in 2022, the support that LCs receive is limited, and this has affected the 20.904 refugee children enrolled in community schools, from the ones a 95.18% (19.897) belong to the African community, including Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea.[37]

2.2.2 Current situation: Education for African Refugees in Egypt

Of the total number of refugees that Egypt is hosting in 2022, more than half (53 %) are between the age of 3 and 24, from the ones only 53.7% are receiving any type of education.[38] African Refugees in Egypt; understood as young Sudanese, South Sudanese, and Eritreans that hold refugee or asylum-seeker status, are educated in LCs[39].

According to Amina Salima, there are currently 174 community schools in Egypt, all of them, except one, concentrated in the Urban area of Cairo. Considering the nationality of the principal, the teachers, and the students attending the community school, Salima clarifies that from those 174, there is 1 Syrian community school, 8 Eritrean community schools, 32 South-Sudanese[40], and the rest are Sudanese. Abduselam Abdella, founder of the Faisal Eritrean School, and a member of the Sudanese School Union Group affirms that 103 Learning Centers are legally registered under the Sudanese Embassy. In this research, the Syrian community schools are not included, while the knowledge of the Sudanese ones is limited. Therefore, the conclusions of this section will be drawn mainly through the fieldwork, observation, and interviews done when visiting South Sudanese and Eritrean community schools, as well as the South Sudanese Embassy or the interaction with students that are attending or have attended the LCs in question. The researcher has visited and interviewed principals

[37] Information provided by Amira Salima, CRS Educational Officer, in an interview
[38] See Annex 31: Data on refugee school enrollment in Egypt
[39] See Annex 32: Data on learning center enrollment by Nationality and Gender
[40] See Annex 33: Picture of the list provided by the South Sudanese Embassy on LC recognized by them

from 10 South-Sudanese Learning Centers, and 5 Eritrean Learning Centers[41]. Other sources include two focus groups with African Refugee students, in-depth interviews with the students, informal conversations, observational analysis, and ethnographic research with 9 refugee African female students. Overall, the conclusion extracted is that LCs are unable to provide a quality education that meets the international standards, and the principal victims are African refugee children that are denied their right to quality education. Such an idea is supported by four main causing factors: 1)Poor teaching quality. 2)The lack of a curriculum that offers students the tools to access university education. 3)The limiting social environment of LCs. 4)The limiting physical environment of LCs.

2.2.2.1-Poor teaching quality

CRS in cooperation with UNICEF provides LCs with teacher training every year since 2018; the service offered does not fulfill the existing demand[42]. CRS acknowledges this reality; therefore, the organization has started the initiative based on instructing managers in teacher training. Nonetheless, the experience narrated by young African refugee students attending classes in LCs leaves evidence that teachers are not yet qualified nor committed to the education of their students.

Simona, a 16 years-old Ethiopian refugee teenager that attended several LCs in Cairo explains: “I went to Little Step. It was decent, not bad, but the thing is that the teachers there were not professional. They were chatting too much with you and trying to get into your life. I can remember that the English teacher was really bad, his English was horrible, I could not understand him at all, and in his notes, you could even find spelling mistakes. But the worse was the Arabic teacher who made me feel really bad, he was constantly judging me and making me feel stupid. The thing is that I do not know Arabic but I am a Muslim, so my Arabic teacher was like how do you read the Qur’an then? He judged me so much, he looked at me as being silly and gave me just some simple stuff, and left me alone.” Her experience mirrors the lack of knowledge on the subject, as well as the deficiency in professionalism and commitment of teachers.

The perspectives of Didi, a 20-year-old Eritrean refugee female, illustrate again the poor teaching quality. She explains: “At St. Joseph’s it was more about the teacher making the lesson and not making the students participate. You know, in Sudan I used to be a really good student, especially in Math. My whole life I have been good at maths, but when I came here to St. Joseph’s, no way, the

[41] See Annex 34: List of Learning Centers visited where the principal has been interviewed
[42] See Annex 35: Offer and demand teacher training explanation

teachers were not helpful, even if you were asking him several times to help you, they would just respond something like 'just try it, it will be fine, chill, if not you can google it."

The shortage of qualified and committed teachers in LCs is a fact. This phenomenon negatively impacts the performance and development of students attending LCs, in this case, African refugee students. The consequences of such a dynamic entail from bad results that enables them to accomplish their academic and professional dreams, to the development of psychological problems. Jok Marko, the coordinator of the youth project at the Psycho-Social Services and Training Institute in Cairo (PSTIC), already highlighted that when the matter is refugee education, teachers need special training in psychology and social work[43].

Several actors, such as UNHCR, community leaders, NGOs, and governmental institutions, have attempted to tackle this situation, identifying first the factors that have caused poor teaching quality in LCs. There is a lack of consensus when denoting the causing factors for it.

On the one hand, members of the refugee community argue that poor teaching quality resulted from UNHCR stopping its funding, combined with the COVID-19 crisis and the rise in living costs caused by the war in Ukraine. Jok Marko, originally from South Sudan, further elaborates on this argument "Cutting funding has just made things worse. This makes refugees enter a whole vicious circle of poverty and low-quality education. The principals of the LCs face more economic problems. They need to pay the rent, the salaries, the utilities, everything. In order to pay dispenses, school fees are raised and the teachers' salaries lowered, and in some cases, principals are even forced to delay the payment of salaries. It is a vicious cycle of unqualified teachers, and students getting bad results." The average salary of a secular Learning Center is 108 euros/month (2.155 Egp), while in church-run LCs the average increases to 129 euros/month (2.500 Egp) due to the economic support received by religious institutions.[44] Although qualified teachers will be mostly found in church-run LC, there are only 6 of them in Cairo, which cannot fulfill the demand of the whole community[45]. Moreover, most of the teachers are university students which conceive teaching either as a voluntary action or a part-time and temporary job to earn extra money. Such a dynamic goes against quality education; the vocation of teachers is not as strong as it might be for someone who has studied explicitly the bachelor in question. Additionally, even if teachers are motivated, and have the capabilities to become, in the

[43] See Annex 36: Jok Markos' statement on that
[44] See Annex 37: Data on teachers' salaries in LCs
[45] 4 out of 6 church-ruled LC in Cairo were visited. In total, they host only 1.612 students: African Hope (490), Sakakini (587), El Matariah Adventist LC (370) & St. Joseph Eritrean School in Zamalek (165).

long-term, qualified teachers; they will leave as soon as they finish their university and find a well-paid job in their field. The case of Red and Nancy[46] epitomizes the argument exposed by Jok Marko.

On the other hand, the second reasoning, supported by actors such as the UNHCR, CRS, the MoE, and some spheres of church-ruled LCs, argues that poor teaching quality results from the cultural attitude that most the principals have vis-à-vis education. The ones in charge of secular LCs, do not perceive education as a human right nor as a source of positive change. Otherwise, they read education as a source of income, personal benefit, and a "way of doing business". Following this line of thinking, the principals, aware of the vulnerable position of both, African refugee students and African refugee adults unable to find a decent job, will intentionally rise school fees, while reducing teachers' salaries. Such a logical operation increases the benefits of the LC's executives.

Overall, two predominant arguments in the field are intended to justify poor teaching quality in LCs. The lack of consensus should not limit the recognition of the ongoing problem. African refugees in Egypt have the right to be instructed by qualified and committed teachers. Those teachers must have a background in trauma and psychosocial expertise to assure their well-being and mental health. Moreover, teachers must have at their disposition the instruments and abilities to create a safe space for their students, while offering them an education that adheres itself to international standards and that stimulates their critical thinking.

2.2.2.2-The Sudanese curriculum and access to university

Thanks to the efforts of Sakkakini's priest congregation; current LCs have the privilege to teach both, the Sudanese and the South Sudanese curriculum in Egypt. Although the right to teach the South Sudanese curriculum was inherited once the country became independent in 2011, most of the LCs in Cairo still follow the Sudanese curriculum either in Arabic or in English.

Less than ten[47] LCs are teaching the South Sudanese one. Simon Tongnyiik, a committee member of the South Sudanese teachers union, expects that the number of LCs shifting from the Sudanese curriculum to the South Sudanese one will increase exponentially in the coming years, he highlights three causing factors: "1)The translation. Most of the LCs registered under the South Sudanese Embassy are following the Sudanese curriculum in English as English is the official

[46] See Annex 38: Experience of Red and Nancy as an example
[47] Wadi-El Nile Academy, El Material Adventist School, Winners International School, Sudanese Child Care, Nile Modern Academy, Nile Friendship and African Light.

language of the country. The books are originally written in Arabic, and the translation[48], mostly done by the Comboni College, is really bad. The ones in charge use Google Translator, therefore, some sentences do not make sense and it is hard for students to understand the content. On the contrary, South Sudanese books are much better, they are directly written in English and supervised and financed by UNICEF and USAID. 2) The second reason is that we are in Egypt, and most of the South Sudanese students are expecting to return home once the instability finishes. The problem is that by following the Sudanese curriculum they are just learning things about North Sudan, while almost no knowledge of South Sudan is acquired. 3) And the third reason is the increasing and unaffordable exam fees of the Sudanese national exams for entering university. Foreigners used to pay around 200$ for taking the senior 3 exams[49], while Sudanese nationals only 80$. Nonetheless, the MoE in Khartoum increased the price to 550$ for foreigners during the academic year 2019/2020, this is unaffordable, and many students simply decide to drop out of school because of the high price. By contrast, the South Sudanese exams for entering university are more affordable.[50]"

The three arguments exposed by Simon Tongnyiik are confirmed by the experience of students and other LCs principals.[51] Overall, the Sudanese curriculum represents a challenge, for foreign refugees, including South Sudanese and Eritreans, and even more, if it is followed in English and not in Arabic. For South Sudanese students, the shift to the South Sudanese system represents a potentially feasible solution.

Nevertheless, no attainable solution is available for the Eritrean refugees in Egypt. According to the CRS Education Officer, Amira Salima, a current rule states that Eritrean students holding the Sudanese or South Sudanese certificate are not legally allowed to enroll in Egyptian public universities. If those want to enter, they should either hold the Egyptian, the International, or the Eritrean certificate. Although the information is missing on the date of implementation, and the causes, this reality is confirmed by the experiences of Jacob, Sara, Osama, Ahmed, Abdulaziz, Nura, and Yassi. They are Eritrean students that were orally rejected at the Ministry of Higher Education Scientific and Technology (Wafedeen), the department responsible for the enrollment of foreign students at Egyptian Universities. Only one Eritrean Learning Center has acknowledged the ongoing problem and has taken some steps to grant their students access to university. This is the case of the

[48] There are three main institutions in Khartoum that translate the booms from Arabic to English: Nukhba, Manar and the Comboni College (Interview with Silvia Gore, 2022).
[49] There are two types of exams: the senior 3 exams and grade 8 exam. Senior 3 refers to the one for entering university, while grade 8 exam refers to the one for entering secondary education. When it comes to grade 8 exams, the price for Sudanese is 130$ while the price for foreigners is 150$.
[50] See Annex 39: Simon Tongnyiik further elaborating on the price of South Sudanese examinations in Egypt
[51] See Annex 40: Experiences of students and LCs principals confirming the arguments exposed by Simon Tongnyiik

Faisel Center for Sudanese Education, founded during the academic year 2018/2019 by Abduselam Abdella, the LC has currently three branches[52] that host a high number of 1480 students, a 90% of the ones are Eritreans. They came up with the temporary solution to teach the Egyptian curriculum in two of their branches: At the 6th of October Branch (senior 1,2,3) and at the Thamos Branch (senior 3). The founder highlights that such a solution is not sustainable in the long term and that another alternative should be considered[53].

Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge among other LCs about the recent rule that denies Eritrean their right to higher education. The principals believe that Eritrean students will be able to access university with the Sudanese curriculum, and so do the students themselves. The seven testimonies explain how such an experience impacted their mental health and well-being. Abdulaziz explains "We prepared ourselves, we studied hard every day, we saved money for the school fees, we were dreaming about going to university and studying what we were passionate about, and suddenly, without even expecting it, we were orally rejected at Wafedeen, we felt impotency, there was nothing we could do about it, and we lost our hope." The consequences of denying the right to education to Eritrean students can trigger mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, loss of hope, motivation, low self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, and self-dehumanization. This situation is unacceptable, by denying them their right to an education that allows them to access university, you are denying them, indirectly, their right to live.

2.2.2.3-The social environment of Learning Centers

Jean Piaget (1952) in his *Cognitive Development Theory* emphasizes how the outside world can impact a child's learning and personal development (DeVries, 1997). Learning Centers are not a safe space for African refugee students, as the social world within the school limits the student's performance, progress, and growth.

African refugee students value the social environment of the LCs, as they can find, to a certain extent, a sense of belonging and community in it. Gina, a South Sudanese senior 2 student from Innovation Academy LC, explained that she used to go to an Egyptian public school, but she left it because she was experiencing racism from Egyptians and not feeling comfortable. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of the LC's social environment that are threatening the security, well-being, and

[52] Al-Tagsim Attani Branch where they offer only primary education, 6th of October Branch, and Kafre Thazmos Branch. Additionally, Faisel Sudanese LC, introduced this year the Faysel Sudanese Technical School, more oriented to the labour market.
[53] See Annex 41: Abduselam Abdella further elaborating on the barriers that the Egyptian curriculum implies.

performance of the students. These conditions are often not recognized by principals, and if they are, effective security protocols are lacking. The social phenomena in question are both; the infiltration of Sudanese gang members in LCs acting as "spies", either to target someone for robbery or as a potential gang member. As well as the inability of some teachers and staff to make students feel important, valuable, and that have a voice within the LC, nothing but an incentive for students to seek refuge in gang membership.

The Sudanese gangs are mainly formed by male South Sudanese young refugees in their early 20s. Neighborhoods are taken as the point of reference for the establishment of the gangs as a hierarchical and well-structured network. Each neighborhood in Urban Cairo has a gang committee and a committee leader, those are responsible to decide on the agenda setting and gang members. According to Jok Marko, the average size of a gang is situated in 200 members and their main means of communication is a WhatsApp group. The expert explains its functioning with an example.[54]

Gangs engage in violent activities such as robbery mainly against other South Sudanese refugee youth as the most common one, but we could also encounter involvement in drug trafficking organizations, and for females, in prostitution networks.[55] Apart from the harmful before-mentioned acts, gangs also promote street and urban culture of hip hop, rap, graffiti, symbols, dress styles, code of conduct, etc.[56]

The exposure to Sudanese gangs as something that threatens one's security cannot be underestimated. Jok Marko estimates that 85% of the total South Sudanese refugee youth in Cairo, present high rates of getting involved in a gang. High probabilities are caused by the conditions under which most refugee children grow up. "Most of the refugee children live alone with their mothers, the ones that spend most of the time working outside the home. When you are a child, growing up surrounded by the love of your mother is essential. These kids, who have suffered from trauma, need it even more. What those kids will do is seek this love somewhere else, in the gangs, where they feel welcomed." Education plays a crucial role in creating a sense of home and preventing children to join gangs whose consequences go from dropping school to drug addiction, sexual violence, or even death[57]. PSTIC is aware of the key role of LC, therefore, they assist 13 community schools through workshop sessions. Jok Marko states that the main conclusion drawn from these seminars is that most

[54] See Annex 42: Example of Jok Marko for a better understanding on Sudanese gangs
[55] See Annex 43: Jok Marko further elaborating on gang involvement in drug trafficking and prostitution networks
[56] See Annex 44: Further information on gangs promoting urban and street culture
[57] South Sudanese community leaders state that in 2007 five Sudanese member gangs died in an inter-gang confrontation (Hauslohner, 2007).

African refugee students feel that they are unable to find a sense of home in their families/communities or at school. Annex 45 confirms Jok Marko's argument with the experience of students and other data.[58]

Overall, the social environment of the LCs can induce students to join the harmful phenomenon of Sudanese gangs. On the one hand, teenagers' awareness of the huge educational barriers that they encounter in Cairo as black refugees make them feel demotivated vis-à-vis education. Unable to identify community schools as a safe space, they seek belonging and refugee in friendship relations, gathering in the streets surrounded by gang violence, sexual harassment, drug consumption, etc. On the other hand, the gang members that are attending LCs. Although it is likely that components drop out of school, there are some that still attend education mainly because of family pressure. These gang members within the centers represent a threat to the security of other students either because they target students for attack or as potential gang members. Annex 46 illustrates a case of gang violence within a LC.[59]

This situation is unacceptable, LCs are unable to offer African refugee students a safe social environment that promotes the positive development of the child, both academically and personally, while effective security protocols based on detection, prevention, intervention, guidance, and sensibilization are lacking. It is this incapacity to build a welcoming learning environment that increases students' probability to join the harmful dynamics of Sudanese gangs. Most of the LCs principals do not notice nor acknowledge the ongoing problem. An effective response represents an emergency where responsibility sharing shall become the guiding principle.

2.2.2.4-The physical environment of Learning Centers

Jean Piaget (1952) in his theory mentioned the impacts that the social world can have on a child's experience. Furthermore, he also emphasized the physical world's impacts on a child's performance (DeVries, 1997). Therefore, the LCs and their respective physical environment will affect the students' performance, progress, and growth in a certain manner. The evaluation of LCs' tangible space will be conducted through observational analysis of 16 LCs, 4 church-ruled LCs, and 11 secular ones. The criteria used to determine whether LCs are or are not safe spaces include the examination of the building, the external environment, and the internal environment. The analysis is supported by pictures in the Annexes.

[58] See Annex 45: Argument of Jok Marko confirmed with student testimonies and other data
[59] See Annex 46: Experience of Nichola from Materiah Adventist LC with gang membership at school

▪*The building:* Of the 16 visited LCs, 10 were using a residential apartment as the school building.[60] The remaining 6 were installed in a villa, a space enclosed by a grate or a wall, including an independent building, with its main entrance, and a playground[61]. From the before-mentioned LCs fulfilling the building criteria, 4 of them were church-ruled schools, and the building was provided by the church. An apartment functioning as a school limits students' development in many senses. For example, the conditions do not allow the installation of a playground, therefore, the students are denied their right to play. Other limitations include the lack of natural light and fresh air, a limited amount of space, or in the most extreme cases, the neighbors' complaints threatening the security of students and teachers. Annex 49 illustrates three cases of LC facing problems with the neighbors.[62]

▪*The external environment:* It refers to the surroundings outside the school such as air quality, external noise, rubbish on the streets, etc. Of the 16 LCs where the observational analysis was conducted, only 2 LCs were situated in a neighborhood surrounded by other schools in clean and wide streets. The external environment of the remaining LCs implied, narrow streets with the constant traffic of tuck-tucks, accumulated garbage next to the building, including broken glasses, rotten food, and once the researcher encountered a dead dog corpse[63]. Those conditions represent a threat to health that automatically affects students' performance academically.

▪*The internal environment:* It refers to the classrooms, facilities, furniture, and decoration. The observational analysis suggests that most of the LCs pay special attention to decoration[64], while other elements of the internal environment such as appropriate furniture, or the provision of facilities such as an adequate bathroom, bus services, library, or computer lab are less considered as they require economic resources that are not abundant among LCs[65]. Although decoration plays an essential role in boosting students' sense of belonging in school, the lack of adequate furniture and other facilities such as a library, bus services, and computer labs, harm their personal and academic development. Old furniture can result in physical harm, the absence of computer labs and a library leaves refugee students without IT skills and a place where to focus, while no bus services imply

[60] See Annex 47: Pictures of LCs not fulfilling the building criteria
[61] See Annex 48: Pictures of LCs fulfilling the building criteria
[62] See Annex 49: Experiences of LCs having problems with neighbors
[63] See Annex 50: Pictures external environment of LCs
[64] See Annex 51: Picture internal environment: emphasis on decoration
[65] See Annex 52: Picture internal environment: other elements are neglected

racism[66] and sexual harassment for girls on Cairo streets and in some cases, rape[67]. Annex 53 and 54 englobe an episode of racism and an episode of rape respectively.

After the observational analysis, it can be concluded that most of the LCs' physical environment is not adequate, and goes against the safety, and active learning of the students.

2.3 Results: *The Field*

Overall, African refugee students, mostly educated in LCs, encounter in them a limiting educational context that does not allow them to meet their academic and professional dreams. Precisely because of four main causing factors: 1)Poor teaching quality. 2)A curriculum that limits their access to university education. 3)The limiting social environment of LCs. 4)The limiting physical environment of LCs.

From the analysis of the *Field*, it can be concluded that LCs do not offer students good teaching quality or a welcoming social environment. Moreover, the physical environment including the building, neighborhood, facilities, etc. threatens their physical safety. And finally, the followed curriculum, mostly the Sudanese one, does not adhere to international quality standards, nor enhances the critical thinking of the students. Moreover, as the analysis has been guided by the optic of intersectionality, it becomes clear that the most vulnerable group within the category of "African refugee students in Egypt", are Eritrean young females. On the one hand, their nationality situates them in a vulnerable position as internal legal dispositions of the country state that Eritreans are not allowed to access Egyptian public universities if they hold the Sudanese certificate. On the other hand, their biological condition as females, expose them to sexual violence and misogyny that threatens their life and human integrity.

This situation is unacceptable, African refugee students are constantly exposed to an exhausting social context that limits them in their journey to accomplish their professional and academic dreams. Despite that, ethnographic research on young refugee females suggests that students constantly navigate alternatives to overcome the before-mentioned challenges to effectively accomplish their goals. The following section entails the analysis of two creative non-fictional life stories to test the hypothesis.

[66] See Annex 53: African Hope students experiencing a racist event on their way back from school
[67] See Annex 54: Case of rape in Cairo streets explained by Janneke Wijman

3-Stories of Strength: An analysis

3.1 Didi: "If I cannot open my own makeup business I become a makeup artist" [68]

Didi is a 20-years-old Eritrean teenager that was born on the 3rd of June 2002 in the Gash-Barka region, Eritrea. She arrived in Cairo on the 12th of August 2019, seeking refugee together with her pregnant mother, and her younger siblings, Eline and Ramon. Before Egypt, the entire family, her mum, her dad, her younger siblings, and her older sister Lulu were living their exile in Khartoum, Sudan, for 12 years. Nonetheless, they decided to cross to the desert to reach Cairo because of the instability in Sudan, as well as her older sister escaping secretly to Cairo. Didi has experienced the exhausting living conditions of Cairo as an African refugee female for three years, which has supposed, to a certain extent, a limitation for accomplishing her personal and academic dreams. Despite that, her story demonstrates that Didi has the strength and capability to be constantly navigating alternatives, not lose her hope and keep her motivated. Her story proves that she is a fighter. Her story is analyzed under Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical lens, including the before-explained concepts of *Field, Habitus*, and *Capital*.

Didi's dream is to go to university, study business, and open her own makeup boutique, preferably in Canada. At the same, she is realistic and conscious about her condition as a refugee Eritrean female in Egypt trying to access qualified higher education. In other words, Didi is aware of the *Field* that has been exhaustively analyzed in Chapter 2, and this understanding is materialized in the following sentences: "It is hard to find a good school in Egypt, I used to go to St. Joseph Eritrean School, I finished my primary school at 18 years old, teachers were not teaching, Tigrinya was spoken instead of English, and I felt empty, not a complete person. My dream has always been the one of going to University and opening my own make-up business, my dream is to be a businesswoman. Sometimes you just need to be realistic, education for refugees in Egypt is bad, teachers do not motivate you, and if you want to improve your English, the only way to do it is by yourself. Refugee education is even worse if you are looking for a high school, and I have heard from many Eritreans that due to your nationality, you will never be accepted at University in Egypt if you attend a LC that follows the Sudanese curriculum. Sometimes you just need to be realistic, accept that things are not as you expected and imagined, and just try to find something else that at least, makes you a little bit happy. I just thought about make-up, do a make-up course and at least, have something."

[68] See Annex 55: Complete story: Didi. Didi has given full consent on publishing the story and the pictures, names have been changed.

Didi realized through her first academic experience in Egypt that she would not be able to accomplish her dream to go to university, at least, if they remained in this country. This information caused frustration in her, the feeling of wasting her time, and the idea that she should already be in her second-year university became more intense. Nonetheless, Didi was able to overcome the situation, accept the reality, and retake the motivation and optimism while rethinking her academic and professional career. Didi thought about doing a make-up course instead of going to university to study business, such a path would allow her to gain experience, obtain a job, and escalate positions within the business. She was navigating alternatives, it was her *Habitus,* her cultural heritage, and the education that her family gave her, based on always trying to make the best out of it, that provided her with the needed energy to continue. Moreover, it was her ability to use properly the available *Capital* surrounding her to accomplish her objectives. For example, Didi asked her oncle *(Social capital)* to borrow her money to finance the course.

Didi's attitude concerning her first academic experience illustrates her strength, but another episode confirms it. "There was this day when my mum heard about CAWU, and she was very excited. The name comes from the Center for Arab-West Understanding, an NGO, with a small refugee learning center attached. The school is small, with only 30 students, and selective, meaning you have to take a test to get in and keep your grades high to stay in. Best of all, the school teaches the British system. That means I could sit the British exams and get a certified diploma and go to any university in the world." Didi was about to pay for the make-up academy when another alternative came across her, an affordable school that was following an international curriculum that would allow her to go to university in Canada. After reflecting carefully on this option, and being motivated by her mum, she finally took the decision to join CAWU. Her ability to see opportunities in unexpected situations demonstrates once again her strength and ambition. Didi is currently enrolled in CAWU, her favorite subject is business, she studies hard for the exams, and this is reflected in her results. Didi is a fighter, sometimes we gather in my apartment, and we spend the whole afternoon checking which are the best universities in Canada. Didi's story is a story of strength.

3.2 Neoma: "The most beautiful views of the starts that I have ever had were when I was crossing the desert"[69]

Neoma is a 17-year-old Eritrean teenager that was born on the 30th of October 2005 in Asmara, the capital. She arrived in Cairo in 2016 with her mum, and her two older brothers, Jacob and Dawit, she was 10 at that time. Before Egypt, they had been three years in Uganda, but they decided to leave the country as everything was becoming more expensive and the rumors about Egypt as a dreamland for refugees started to grow. Neoma crossed with her family the desert and made a safe trip, but life in Egypt was not as expected. As an Eritrean refugee female, she has been exposed for 6 years to the exhausting lifestyle of Urban Cairo which has limited her, to a certain extent, to accomplish her dream to continue getting a quality education, going to university, and studying law to become an experienced lawyer. Nonetheless, through her life story, her strength can be appreciated. Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice serves as a basis to analyze her experiences.

During her stay in Egypt, Neoma became aware of the *Field.* On the one hand, she experienced by herself the barriers that African refugee students in Egypt encounter when accessing education: "I realized that the Sudanese curriculum was not serious, and those correcting the exams were not following any criteria at all." On the other hand, her brother Jacob shared with Neoma his experience of not being allowed to enter Egyptian public universities because of his nationality as an Eritrean. Both episodes gave her an understanding of the existing "objective world", while she could acknowledge her position in the *Field* as an Eritrean young refugee female whose dream was to go to university. "I was starting to accept the idea that I would never be able to become a lawyer although I had the capability and the motivation to do it." The encounter with this new reality affected her mental health and well-being: "Those days were about emptiness and hope fading away."

Despite the challenging situation, it was her *Habitus* and strength that help her to overcome this frustration and navigate alternatives: "I learned quickly how to find refuge in other places, music became my shelter, and so did anime comics. My mum became my safe place, and the church my second home. I joint the choir in the Eritrean Orthodox St.Anthony church in Ardelwa. The church is much more than just praying, I feel welcomed, and I feel that I belong somewhere. I met Yosan in the choir, she was an Eritrean girl of my age, and we became friends." Navigating alternatives required her ability to evaluate the existing *Capital,* and use it to overcome discouragement, including

[69] See Annex 56: Complete history Neoma. Neoma has given full consent to publish the story

the use of cultural (the church), and social capital (friends and family). This first experience illustrates her strength, although, a second episode reaffirms her braveness.

It was again Neomas' *Habitus* of perceiving education as a fundamental element in life, the one that was pushing her not to abandon her dream to go to university and become a lawyer. This vision of education has its roots in her family's cultural values: "My mum is an educated person, who wants us to have a brilliant future. But she also knew that in Eritrea opportunities were lacking and freedoms taken away." The *Habitus* as a durable force is the one that gave her motivation to continue, to never give up her dream to become an educated person. "I know how important it is to get a quality education." And she was ambitious in evaluating the *Capital* surrounding her and using it to achieve her dream, in her case, social capital became a decisive element. Neoma knew that her friend Yosan was going to a learning center, whose name is CAWU, that was teaching the international curriculum, a certificate that represented the door to the university. Therefore, she used Yosan knowledge and connections to enter CAWU, and she succeed. In 2020 Neoma joined CAWU and since then she has ranked the best student in her class year after year. Every Saturday we meet and go to play basketball together at Maadi Community School, we play the game of imagining our future. Neoma is a fighter and her story is a story of strength.

4-Conclusion

This thesis aimed to demonstrate that young African refugee female students in Cairo have the strength to navigate alternatives in a challenging educational context that limits them from achieving their academic and professional dreams. In order to prove the hypothesis, ethnography has become the central method to gather data; the researcher established a close friendship with a group of 7 young females from different countries in Africa. Moreover, the nature of the existing hypothesis required, simultaneously, a deep understanding of the "challenging educational context", therefore, further research methods have been employed to conduct the analysis in question, including in-depth interviews, observational analysis, focus groups, and informal conversations.

To meet the before-mentioned research objectives, the thesis has been divided into three central chapters excluding the conclusion. The first chapter was intended to contextualize the thesis, including an introduction, research question, design, methods, and ethical considerations, as well as a literature review while outlining the added value of the study in academia. This section also introduced the reader to the theoretical framework that would be guiding the entire research: Pierre Bourdieu's *Theory of Practice* (1984), and his concepts of *Field, Capital*, and *Habitus.*

The second chapter was embodying the concept of *Field,* as an exhaustive analysis of the "challenging educational context for young African refugee female students in Egypt" was conducted. As almost no literature exists on this topic, the inquiry has resulted from data gathered during fieldwork, always contrasting sources. The chapter intended to give the reader a meticulous understanding of the education that African refugee students receive in Egypt, always guided by intersectionality and cautious about objectivity. Furthermore, the unit provided the reader with the required knowledge to effectively go through the third chapter, demonstrating that African refugee females are educated in centers where there is 1)Poor teaching quality. 2)A curriculum that limits their access to university education. 3)A limiting social environment. 4)A limiting physical environment.

The third chapter represents the practical part of the thesis while epitomizing the concepts of *Capital* and *Habitus,* as well as illustrating some components of the before-analyzed *Field*. The chapter entails two non-fictional life stories of young African refugee females who have been analyzed under the guiding theoretical lens. Through the analysis, our research question is answered: "Do young African female refugee students in Cairo, have the skill to handle and overcome the challenging educational context? If yes, how do they do it? How do they navigate alternative paths to

accomplish their initial goals?" The story-analysis is the component of the thesis that brings the researcher to conclude that young African refugee females in Egypt, despite encountering huge limitations during their educational journey, have the strengths to overcome challenging situations and navigate alternatives to finally meet their professional and academic dreams. Didi's and Neoma's stories are Stories of Strength.

Their life experiences are not isolated, they teach us that the way we tell stories matters, and it matters even more if the stories are about refugees. They remind us that narratives have transformative potential and that it is about shared responsibility because how we talk about displaced communities influences how we think and treat them. Their life experiences are not isolated, Didi's and Neoma's stories are stories of strength, but it is unacceptable that those girls are denied their right to a quality education that meets their needs.

5-Annex

Annex 1

Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination. (The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).

Annex 2

According to the International Refugee Regime, a "refugee" is someone who is outside of his or her country of origin because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted, before receiving the refugee status we refer to as an "asylum-seeker". An "internally displaced person" is attributed to someone who has been obliged or forced to flee from their habitual place of residence to another one, within their own country. And "stateless people" include all those individuals that do not have documentation, thus, a nationality, and who is "outside their habitual country of residence", not every "stateless person" is necessarily a refugee.

Annex 3

According to international law, the exact definition of "Elementary education" is to be defined by the own State authorities. Hence, Elementary education is determined by the Egyptian Educational law: *The child club shall be considered a social and educational institution ensuring social care for children aged from six (6) to fourteen (14) years of age.*

Annex 4

Art. 13 (2) General Comment No. 13 (ICESCR): *Primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all*. (a.10): *As formulated in article 13 (2) (a), primary education has two distinctive features: it is "compulsory" and "available free to all". For the Committee's observations on both terms, see paragraphs 6 and 7 of general comment No. 11 on article 14 of the Covenant.*

Para. 6 General Comment No. 11 (ICESCR): *The element of compulsion serves to highlight the fact that neither parents, nor guardians, nor the State are entitled to treat as optional the decision as to whether the child should have access to primary education.*

Para. 7 General Comment No.11 (ICESCR): *Free of charge. The nature of this requirement is unequivocal. The right is expressly formulated so as to ensure the availability of primary education without charge to the child, parents or guardians. Fees imposed by the Government, the local authorities or the school, and other direct costs, constitute disincentives to the enjoyment of the right and may jeopardize its realization. […] Other indirect costs may be permissible, subject to the Committee's examination on a case-by-case basis.*

Annex 5

Para.18 General Comment (CRC): *In particular, it prohibits any discrimination on the basis of the status of a child as being unaccompanied or separated, or as being a refugee, asylum-seeker or migrant.*

Annex 6

Para. 30 General Recommendation 30 (CERD): *To ensure public educational institutions are open to non-citizens and children of undocumented immigrants residing in the territory of a state party*.

Annex 7

Art. 22.1 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees 1951: *The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals concerning elementary education.*

Annex 8

General Comment No. 20, para. 30 (ICESCR): *The ground of nationality should not bar access to Covenant rights, e.g. all children within a State, including those with undocumented status, have a right to receive education and access to adequate food and affordable health care. The Covenant rights apply to everyone including non-nationals, such*

Annex 9

General Comment No. 13, para. 51 (CESCR): *As already observed, the obligations of States parties in relation to primary, secondary, higher and fundamental education are not identical. Given the wording of Article 13 (2), States parties are obliged to prioritize the introduction of compulsory, free primary education. 24 This interpretation of Article 13 (2) is reinforced by the priority accorded to primary education in article 14. The obligation to provide primary education for all is an immediate duty of all States parties.*

Annex 10

Art. 4 AU Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa: *Member States undertake to apply the provisions of this Convention to all refugees without discrimination as to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions.*

Annex 11

Art. 54 Law No. 12 of 1996: *Free education in public schools is a right for all children*

Annex 12

Art. 13.2 (b) (ICESCR): *Secondary education in its different forms, including technical and vocational secondary education, shall be made generally available and accessible to all by every appropriate means, and in particular by the progressive introduction of free education.*

Annex 13

General Comment No. 11, para. 3 (CESCR): *In line with its clear and unequivocal obligation under article 14, every State party is under a duty to present to the Committee a plan of action drawn up along the lines specified in paragraph 8 below... The Committee is fully aware that many diverse factors have made it difficult for States parties to fulfill their obligation to provide a plan of action.*

Annex 14

Art. 2.1 (ICESCR): *Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by «all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.*

Annex 15

Art. 2.3 (ICESCR): *Developing countries, with due regard to human rights and their national economy, may determine to what extent they would guarantee the economic rights recognized in the present Covenant to non-nationals.*

Annex 16

Art. 21.2 of the Convention Relating to Status of Refugees 1951: *The Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships.*

Annex 17

p.145: "States are not allowed to discriminate between non-nationals on the basis of nationality; however, they are permitted preferential treatment to nationals of states with which they have close ties. Egyptian law effectively bars non-nationals who are not Sudanese, Libyan, Syrian, or Yemeni from accessing public primary school."

Annex 18

General Comment No.13, Art. 12.2-6a: *Availability - Functioning educational institutions and programs have to be available in sufficient quantity within the jurisdiction of the State party. What they require to function depends upon numerous factors, including the developmental context within which they operate; for example, all institutions and programs are likely to require buildings or other protection from the elements, sanitation facilities for both sexes, safe drinking water, trained teachers receiving domestically competitive salaries, teaching materials, and so on; while some will also require facilities such as a library, computer facilities, and information technology.*

Annex 19

General Comment No.13, Art. 13.2-6b: *Accessibility - Educational institutions and programmes have to be accessible to everyone, without discrimination, within the jurisdiction of the State party. Accessibility has three overlapping dimensions: Non-discrimination - education must be accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable groups, in law and fact, without discrimination on any of the prohibited grounds (see paras. 31-37 on non-discrimination); Physical accessibility - education has to be within safe physical reach, either by attendance at some reasonably convenient geographic location (e.g. a neighborhood school) or via modern technology (e.g. access to a "distance learning" programme);*

Economic accessibility - education has to be affordable to all. This dimension of accessibility is subject to the differential wording of article 13 (2) in relation to primary, secondary and higher education: whereas primary education shall be available "free to all", States parties are required to progressively introduce free secondary and higher education."

Annex 20

General Comment No.13, Art. 13.2-6c: *Acceptability - the form and substance of education, including curricula and teaching methods, have to be acceptable (e.g. relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality) to students and, in appropriate cases, parents; this is subject to the educational objectives required by article 13 (1) and such minimum educational standards as may be approved by the State (see art. 13 (3) and (4))*

Annex 21

General Comment No.13, Art. 13.2-6d: *Adaptability - education has to be flexible so it can adapt to the needs of changing societies and communities and respond to the needs of students within their diverse social and cultural settings.*

Annex 22 Translation retrieved from: Refugee Entitlements in Egypt (Hetaba, McNally, Habersky, 2020).

Article 6 Decree no. 284 of 2014

Incoming students should be registered in private schools, unless they are in the categories that have the right to enroll in public schools under the same conditions as Egyptian students considering age and academic score required for the different educational phases and pursuant to Article XI on the cost of education and exempted categories. The categories [of students permitted to enroll in public schools] are:

1. Students enrolled on a scholarship from any of the following:

a. Ministry of Education

b. Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs

c. United Nations Office of Refugee Affairs – Cairo office

2. Children of employees in the General Secretariat of the League of Arab States and its associated organizations in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

3. Children of political refugees accredited by the Foreign Ministry and the President of the Republic.

4. Children of the advisors and cultural attachés in Arab embassies accredited in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

5. Children of people sent to study in the Arab Republic of Egypt.

6. Children of Egyptian women were married to foreigners and are now divorced or widowed.

7. Sudanese students 8. Jordanian students

9. Libyan students

10. Saudi Arabian students

11. Children of Palestinians employed in or retired from the government, public sector, or armed forces in Egypt.

The Signed Administrative Order on Treating Syrian and Yemeni Students as Egyptian for the Year 2018/2019 and extended every year:

"Dear Sir/ Heads of the Department of Education in Governorates,Kindly be informed that his eminence, the professor and Minister (of Education) has agreed on continuing treating Syrian and Yemini Students as Egyptian Students for the year 2018/2019. Hence, kindly advise and administer education offices and departments that fall under your jurisdiction to take necessary measures in the light of the approval of his eminence, the professor and Minister (of Education), whilst attaining from the students the necessary documents, taking due diligence in the application of Decree 384 Year 2014 regulations, and taking into account security issues."

With sincere respect, Head of cultural and incoming students department: Hanan Hasan Muftah

Head of the central administration for central services department: Hanaa Mohamed Said Allah

Head of the services and activities sector: Hisham El-Singry

Annex 23 Translation retrieved from: Refugee Entitlements in Egypt (Hetaba, McNally, Habersky, 2020).

Educational Cooperation Agreement with Palestine adopted on 7 July 1999: *Palestinians whose parents are employed in or retired from the government, public sector, or armed forces in Egypt." And independent of legal status (refugees, asylum-seekers, and migrants are included) to enroll in public education (both primary and secondary) and recognize Palestinian educational certificates.*

Annex 24 Translation retrieved from: Refugee Entitlements in Egypt (Hetaba, McNally, Habersky, 2020).

Art. 11, Decree No. 284 of 2014: *Incoming students who are enrolled in official schools pay a cost determined by the Ministry of Education, in addition to the fees paid by Egyptian students, except in the following cases.*

Annex 25

The UNHCR Educational Officer in Egypt, clarifies that "no local integration" means that refugees will never acquire the Egyptian nationality; such a disposition was implemented to maintain Palestinian identity. Such conditions were applied to all refugees, including African refugees.

Annex 26

In the early 90s Egyptian government planned the construction of the High Dam on the River Nile which was expected to cause the flood of 170 km of Sudanese territory. After a period of negotiations, the agreement was finalized, including favorable conditions for Sudanese such as unrestricted right to travel and residence in Egypt. Additionally, the Minister of Education issued Decree No. 24 in 1992 allowing Sudanese refugees to enter public schools (Grabska, 2006, p.19). Although in 1995, the country's privileges were limited with the imposition of visa and residence permits, precisely because of Sudanese Islamists trying to assassinate President Mubarak; positive bilateral relations have always existed between both countries, as well as inherited by South Sudan once it became an independent country in 2011.

Annex 27

"In 2001, the number of asylum seekers was 13,176, which represents a 96 percent increase from 1998." (Grabska, 2006, p.13).

Annex 28

Egypt has a historical reputation for its large resettlement programs, both through private sponsorship programs to Canada, Australia, the USA, and Finland, as well as through the UNHCR. Between 1997 and 2004, the number of resettlements was relatively low: From 32.000 Officially recognized refugees, only 18,400 were resettled in the West (Grabskha, 2006, p.14). Meanwhile, the acceptance rate for getting the refugee status was, "ranging from 24% in 1997 to 38% in 1998 and 1999, back down to 31% in 2000, up to 42% in 2001, down again to 27% in 2002." With the 2005 presidential elections and the raise of Mubarak to

Annex 29

Eritreans mostly take either the Northern Route (Eritrea-Sudan-Egypt/Libya-West) or the Eastern Route (Eritrea-Yemen-Saudi Arabia). Concerning the Northern route; the number of Eritreans entering Egypt increased in 2015 due to instability in Sudan. In 2001 the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) estimated that 350,000 Eritrean refugees were living in Sudan, the number decreased with Omar al-Bashir's repressive regime with arbitrary detentions. Unprotected by the UNHCR, and after experiencing events such as the forced repatriation of 442 Eritreans, the number of Eritrean refugees in Egypt passed from 3,633 to 15,442 in only two years (UNHCR, 2016 &2018). Libya was not a safe alternative route anymore due to the several incidents of Islamic State (ISIS) militants kidnapping refugees (Refworld, 2016). Concerning the Eastern Route, Saudi Arabia was perceived as the final destination due to its labor opportunities in the oil sector, in 2006 the Eritrean Embassy estimated 100,000 Eritreans to be living in Saudi Arabia (Thiollet, 2007, p.4). In January 2018, the family tax for ex-pats came into force in Saudi Arabia, increasing every year. An article published in Firstpost (2017) states: "This means an ex-pat living with his wife and two children in the kingdom will have to pay this year 3,600 Saudi riyals (900 euros) or 62,000 (15.400 euros) when he goes for the renewal of his resident permit if he likes to retain his family with him." (Firstpost, 2017). This is another factor that explains the steady increase of Eritrean refugees in Egypt in only two years.

Annex 30 (2022 data gathered through in-depth interviews with the principals)

	Number of students	Religious institution	School fees average	Foundation year
African Hope LC	490 students	Anglican Mission (Anglican church)	2.600 Egp	1998
StARS	No data	Presbyterian Saint Andrew's Mission (Protestant Church)	1.000 Egp	1979
Material Adventist Sudanese School LC	370 students	Adventist missionaries (Catholic Church) -	600 Egp	2003 but 2019 under the church
Araba Wa Nus (St. Josephine Bakhita LC)	No data	Comboni missionaries (Catholic Church)	No data	No data
Saint Joseph Eritrean School LC	165 students	Comboni missionaries (Catholic Church)	1.000 Egp	2017
El Sakkakini (Sainta Lwanga LC)	587 students	Comboni missionaries (Catholic Church)	1.000 Egp	1989

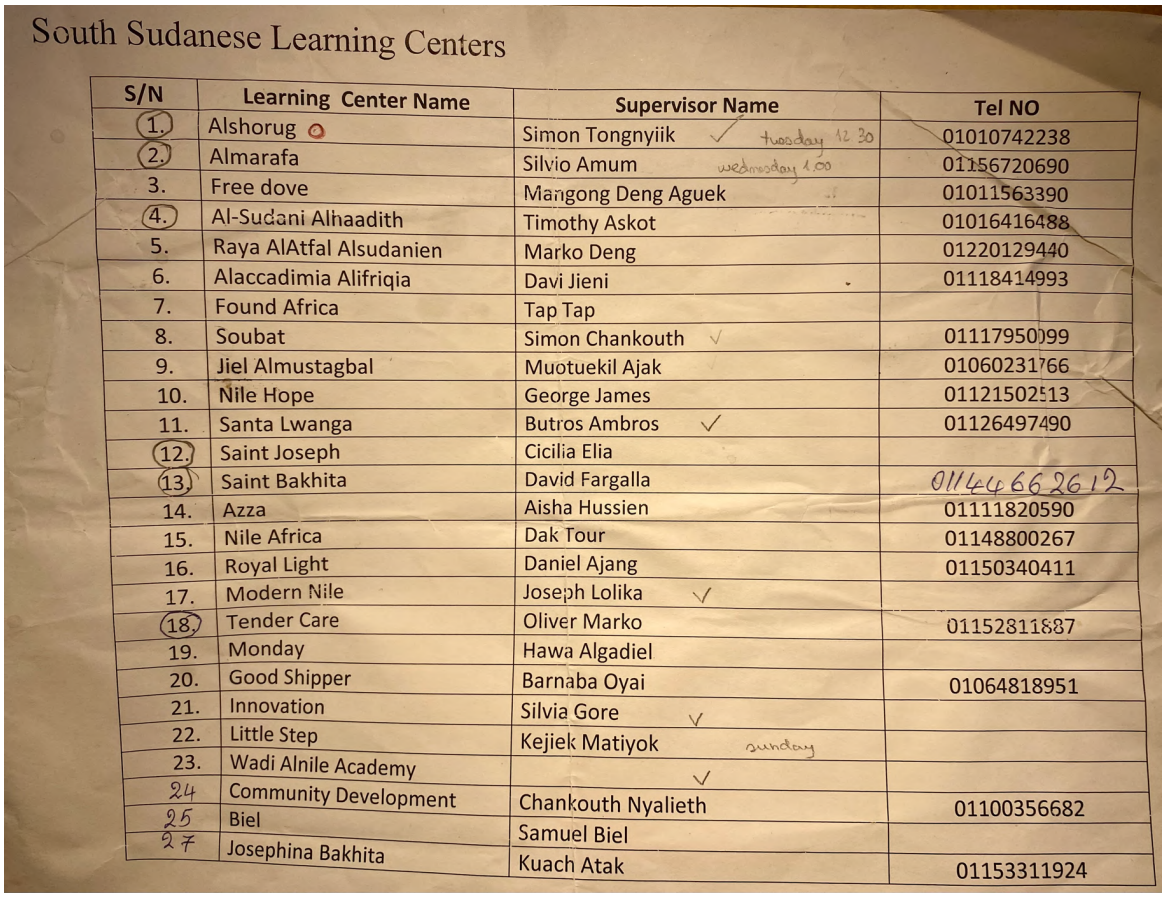
Annex 31

In April 2022, Egypt hosts 273,152, from the ones 137.490 are young refugees. Approximately, 30.5% (42.000) of those are enrolled in public schools. A 8% (11.000) are enrolled in private schools. (El Shafei, 2022). And a 15.2% (20.904) are enrolled in Learning Centers, and the remaining 46.3% (63.586) are out of school. It can be deduced that most of the remaining 46.3% also belong to the African community, mainly Eritreans (Salima, 2022).

Annex 32 (2022 data provided by CRS)

Community schools enrollment by Nationality and Gender in number and %	**Female**	**Male**	**Total**
Sudan	5.429 (47.9%)	5.904 (52 %)	11.333 (54.21%)
South Sudan	2.861 (51.1%)	2.732 (48.8%)	5.593 (26.75%)
Eritrea	1.380. (46.4%)	1.591 (53.5%)	2.971 (14.2%)
Total refugees in community schools: 20.904	Total refugee females in community schools: MISSING	Total refugee males in refugee schools: MISSING	19.897 (95.18%) of the refugee students enrolled in community schools are African refugees

Annex 33



South Sudanese Learning Centers

S/N	Learning Center Name	Supervisor Name	Tel NO
1.	Alshorug	Simon Tongnyiik ✓ tuesday 12 30	01010742238
2.	Almarafa	Silvio Amum wednesday 1.00	01156720690
3.	Free dove	Mangong Deng Aguek	01011563390
4.	Al-Sudani Alhaadith	Timothy Askot	01016416488
5.	Raya AlAtfal Alsudanien	Marko Deng	01220129440
6.	Alaccadimia Alifriqia	Davi Jieni	01118414993
7.	Found Africa	Tap Tap	
8.	Soubat	Simon Chankouth ✓	01117950099
9.	Jiel Almustagbal	Muotuekil Ajak	01060231766
10.	Nile Hope	George James	01121502513
11.	Santa Lwanga	Butros Ambros ✓	01126497490
12.	Saint Joseph	Cicilia Elia	
13.	Saint Bakhita	David Fargalla	01144662612
14.	Azza	Aisha Hussien	01111820590
15.	Nile Africa	Dak Tour	01148800267
16.	Royal Light	Daniel Ajang	01150340411
17.	Modern Nile	Joseph Lolika ✓	
18.	Tender Care	Oliver Marko	01152811887
19.	Monday	Hawa Algadiel	
20.	Good Shipper	Barnaba Oyai	01064818951
21.	Innovation	Silvia Gore ✓	
22.	Little Step	Kejiek Matiyok sunday	
23.	Wadi Alnile Academy	✓	
24	Community Development	Chankouth Nyalieth	01100356682
25	Biel	Samuel Biel	
27	Josephina Bakhita	Kuach Atak	01153311924

Annex 34

South-Sudanese Learning Centers

African Hope LC: Chris Rupke

Nile Academy LC: John Manassie

Wady el Nile LC: Albino

Sakakkini/Santa Lwanga LC: Boutrous Ambros and James Natalie

Innovation Academy LC: Silvia Gore

Great Equatoria LC: Alfred Lado

ElShorug LC: Simon Tongnyiik

Little Step LC: Kejiek Matiyok

Matariah Adventist Sudanese School LC: Nichola

Knowledge Educational Center LC: Silvio Amun

Eritrean Learning Centers

Kafre branch Faysal LC: Abduselam Abdella

6ht October branch Faysal LC: Abduselam Abdella

Al-Tagsim Attani Branch Faysal LC: Yassir

Teabe LC: Mahmoud

Sho'alat Alnour; Alhassen Ibrahim

St. Joseph Eritrean School in Zamalek: Father Claude

Annex 35

There are around 400 or 500 spots per academic year, including a 5 to 7 days course. Although UNHCR estimates that in 2020 there were around 800 teachers within community schools (UNHCR Egypt, 2020, p.30), it can be expected from the research findings that the number exceeds greatly 800; the miscalculation is expected to be caused by the constant movement of teachers among LCs. 15 out of 174 LCs have been visited, and from there, 315 teachers[1] can be counted, 201 teachers among the 10 South Sudanese visited LC, and 115 teachers among the 5 visited Eritrean LC.

[1] 201 teachers among the 10 South Sudanese visited LC, and 115 teachers among the 5 visited Eritrean LC.

Annex 36

Jok Marko explains: "You need to have background knowledge of psychology and social work, because you need to be able to detect that a student is not doing well, that something is happening, and go there, find out without harming even more, as well as give him or her a sustainable and effective solution. Their mind is not the same as that of normal kids, and we need to take this into account."

Annex 37 (2022 data gathered through in-depth interviews with the principals)

Remark: In some LC teachers' salaries differ depending on the level they teach, if this was the case, the average between the lowest salary and the highest one has been done in order to get unbiased data.

Average salary Church-ruled LC	**Teachers' salaries x month**
African Hope LC	2.200 Egp
Material Adventist Sudanese School LC	3.000 Egp
El Sakkakini (Sainta Lwanga LC)	2.300 Egp
Total average	2.500Egp x month

Average salary Secular LC	**Teachers' salaries x month**
Nile Academy LC	1.500Egp
Wady el Nile LC	2.000Egp
Innovation Academy LC	2.000Egp
Great Equatoria LC	2.250Egp
ElShorug LC	1.500Egp
Little Step LC	1.500Egp
Knowledge Educational Center LC	2.250Egp
Faysal LC	2.200Egp
Sho'alat Alnour	2.000Egp
Total Average	2.155 Egp x month

Annex 38

Red, who is in his thirties and a second-year medical student at Cairo University, explains that he is a biology teacher at the English department of Knowledge Educational Center as a way to earn some money to sustain himself. He clarified that becoming a teacher in an LC is the best job a black refugee male can get in Cairo, the other option left is hard physical work on carrying things, whose salary is the same. Moreover, the highlights that as soon as peace returns in South Sudan he will go back to his country to serve as a doctor.

The case of Nancy Gore represents another example, she is the daughter of Silvia Gore, the director of Innovation Academy Learning Center. Nancy is a first-year nursery student at Cairo University, she volunteers as a science teacher twice a week in her mother's LC. Although she does not receive any economic compensation and this is vocational for her, her teaching knowledge is limited due to her academic background. And even if she could become a qualified teacher in the long term due to training sessions and experience acquisition, she would leave as soon as she is unable to combine studies with volunteering, or she gets a job.

Annex 39

Simon Tongnyiik, 2022 **states** in an interview: "We know it because during the academic year 2016/2017 the senior 3 exams increased to 200$, and the students complained. So the South Sudanese Teachers Union came up with the idea to have the students sitting for the South Sudanese exams at the Embassy. That year we had 190 students doing the South Sudanese senior 3 exams, but only 24 of them passed because they were prepared for the Sudanese curriculum and not the South Sudanese one. In front of this situation, the MoE in Juba told the Embassy that no exams would be brought again until LCs were really following the South Sudanese curriculum, and preparing their students for the examinations. The South Sudanese Teacher Union is planning to bring the exams back for next academic year, 2022/2023."

Annex 40

The poor translation argument can be appreciated in the experience of Jacob, a twenty-two-year-old Eritrean boy that attended Found Africa LC: “The main barrier that prevents most refugees from finishing their secondary school is the quality of education. The Sudanese education system is not even available in good English. We just get textbooks translated from Arabic to English that are hard to understand. Even the exam is translated poorly. I had to connect the dots and comprehend the meaning of some sentences when I sat for my final exam.” The second argument can be encountered when the focus group with senior 2 students from Innovation Academy LC was conducted. Students complained about the history curriculum where they were forced to memorize the name of the weapons used by the Sudanese army to fight South Sudanese militias during the civil war. And for the third argument, we observe LCs principals such as Nichola from Matariah Adventist Sudanese LC stating: “Last year we had around 22 students in the senior 3 exams but not all of them sat for the exam because they were surprised to hear about the cost of 550$. From the 22 students we had prepared, only 11 sat for their exam. The same for Silvia Gore, the director of Innovation Academy LC: “Last year, we prepared 37 students to take the senior 3 exams, but only 29 were able to pay the exam fees, from those, 19 passed and the rest failed.”

Annex 41

Abduselam supports his idea under three main arguments: 1)The registration to take the Egyptian national exam is too expensive. He explains: “We pay an overall fee to the MoE to have the permission, then we pay an additional fee for each student, around 4.500Egp per student, this is only for registration. And then we need to pay for the CRS paper that is 700Egp more. 2)Many refugee students do not have the documents required to enroll for the Egyptian national exams. A residence permit, UNHCR card or passport, and birth certificate of the student must be presented. Most of the refugee families struggle to have a valid residence permit as it needs to be renewed every 3 or 4 months, and the renewal process can last from 3 to 4 months, this implies that students will not have their residence permit during this time period. The birth certificate represents another limitation, MoE demands the original hard copy, most of the Eritreans, fleeing dictatorship and persecution, left it in their home

country. 3)Faisal LC needs to bribe other Public Schools so those agree to register our as 'online students' in their center." (Abduselam, 2022).

Annex 42

"For example, the neighborhood of Maadi has a whole committee that has distributed the neighborhood in sub-gangs such as Hadayeq El-Maadi gang and Arab El Maadi gang. They are the ones deciding the rules and these rules must be respected by the members. For example, imagine that the committee decides that stealing in a specific area is now prohibited, and you as a member of your gang decide to steal anyway, you are breaking the rule of the gang. This is about your honor. The committee will expel you, and your partners and friends from the gang will see you as the one who betrayed and you will feel so much pressure and shame. Such coercion will probably force you to leave the neighborhood and join another gang. I mean gangs know each other. So there is no problem if you go now to the gang in Ain-Shams and tell them, look I had a problem with my gang, can I join you? They will welcome you, and your position in the hierarchy will depend on your previous position in the Maadi gang. What is more, as there is inter-gang fight and competition, probably the gang of Ain-Shams will feel proud to have 'stolen' a member of the Maadi gang." (Jok Marko, 2022).

Annex 43

In the case of the drug business, Jok Marko explains it in the following way: "We find a large number of refugee youth taking drugs. There are many factors that explain this phenomenon. First, refugees that are now in their 20s grew up in the street, surrounded by violence, crime, and drug dealers, as they had not any alternative space where to gather. Secondly, drugs function as a means of evasion from all trauma they have suffered. Drugs are the norm in South Sudanese gangs and the peer-group pressure to consume them is there. And thirdly, the difficult economic situation of refugees represents another incentive. Under these conditions, we observe cases where Egyptian drug dealers see an opportunity in young refugees to become drug pushers. Such activity provides them with money, as well as cheaper drugs for self-consumption." In the case of prostitution networks, female gang members might join prostitution networks as a means to earn a higher salary. Most of the female gang members are girlfriends of the male components; patriarchy as a system of sexual oppression

Annex 44

Sudanese gangs grew exponentially in 2005 after the governmental decision to stop resettlement programs to the West. Richard Allhusen, the former director of StARS explains in an interview published by Reuters in 2007: "The leaders told them 'bring your suitcases because the planes will pick you up here and bring you to America'. Many gang members left their parents behind in Sudan and came to Egypt expecting to be sent to the United States or Europe. But when that prospect evaporated, the resulting frustration had a "ripple effect" in the community." The frustration, demotivation, and lack of feeling of belonging, combined with the growing globalization and the spread of the American dream, resulted in the rapid growth of Sudanese gangs copying Western black gangs. Jok Marko explains that one of the famous US gangs that they copy is Tupac Shakur, it has its origin in the late 90s, and they imitate the dressing style, they use the same nicknames, hairstyles, art performances, events, language expressions, etc.

Annex 45

This feeling was confirmed by the focus group conducted at Innovation Academy LC. Students explained that although the LC was much better than Egyptian schools, it was still hard for them to find a sense of home at school, as sometimes they felt that teachers were judging and not caring about them. Most of them were relying on friends, highlighting that most of the time they were gathering on the streets as encounters in other spaces such as cafes or clubs were too expensive.

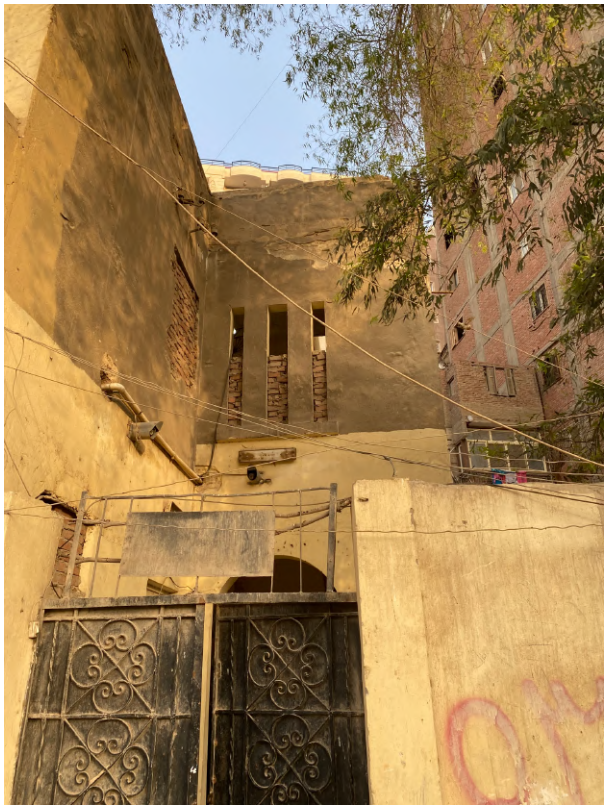
Ethnographic research shows that most teenagers were seeking a sense of home with friends and peer groups. Moreover, the lack of a space where to gather and feel comfortable was also noticed. Personal reflection of the researcher during her stay in Cairo: "We use to gather in my apartment because there is no other space where we can go, cafeterias are always busy and the coffee is expensive for them. We also did not like to stay on the streets, a group of young females alone on Cairo streets is a synonym of sexual harassment, and if you are a black female, racism is even worse. My apartment is a safe space for them."

The visit to an Eritrean family living in a rooftop and the interaction with the children left in evidence the impossibility to find a sense of home in such conditions.

Annex 46

Nichola from Matariah Adventist LC illustrates this violence in the following way: "Our students face a lot of problems with Sudanese gangs. These gangs used to come to our school and wait outside for our children. They carry knives and usually rob our students. But you know even some of the members of the Sudanese gangs are students here, and they target specific students. For example, if they see someone who is weak and goes back home alone, they simply communicate with other gang members about who is he, what he looks like, and which is his way back home. Or maybe they can see a potential member in a friend that they have made at the LC, so they recruit them too. This is a big problem. There was this day when we found two of our students, one in senior 2 and one in senior 3 carrying a knife. We called their parents." Along the same lines, the principal highlights the lack of knowledge, economic resources, and support of the LCs to give an effective response to the phenomenon in question. "We have been thinking about many solutions, but we are struggling a lot. We earlier had the idea to allow our students to come a little bit late so they were not encountering Sudanese gangs on their way to school. But we realized that this was not a real solution and just counterproductive for the student's performance. Then we thought about parents bringing and picking up students directly, but many parents work and feel that their sons and daughters are old enough to move around alone. So what we did was to expose the problem to CRS, but they told us that they could not do anything about it as their responsibility was limited to taking care of the children inside the schools. Then we asked the South-Sudanese Embassy, and they told us that they could also not do anything because most of the members are holding the UNHCR blue card, and are not under their responsibility. And the UNHCR does not do anything either, we have encountered so many cases of Sudanese gang members going to jail, and the UNHCR just paying the fee for freeing them, but without providing them additional services such as reinsertion programs."

Annex 47



Annex 48

Annex 49

"Before our LC was located in Shari'a El-Nadi, in the building next to the South Sudanese Embassy, but the neighbors complained. The Egyptian authorities came and arrested me, they closed the school and the children could not attend school for two days. The Egyptian authorities allowed us to reopen the school until we found another building. But even in this new building, we have many problems. Last year, I arrived in the morning and the learning center was burning. There was a big fire, I guess the neighbors did it." - Kejiek Matiyok, Little Step director

"The first two years were really serious because the neighbors did not accept us, they used to throw our children and our guests cold water, and they also threw us onions and bottles, especially those neighbors on the third floor." - Silvia Gore, Innovation Academy director

"We used to have problems with the neigbhors. They just threw all the garbage and rubbish in front of our school, they did this because of racism. We asked them to stop but nothing was happening. So the parents had the idea to pay a little bit more per year and hire an Egyptian guard." - Nichola, El-Matariah Adventist School

Annex 50

Annex 51


Sunday
Tuesday
Thursday
Winter


Mission:-
To provide proper Education
To build South Sudan Society
To prepare leaders for Tomorrow
Announcement

Annex 52

Annex 53

Victoria (18) is from Congo but was born in Egypt. She explained the racist event: “I have attended my whole life African Hope LC, my dad was the director. There was this day when the students of the evening shift were going back home, all of them live at the other side of the metro so they go home in groups. There was this day when they were crossing the metro bridge and some Egyptian youth started to throw them glass bottles, one of the guys was injured. My dad immediately came and this calmed down. Racism is common in Cairo.”

Annex 54

Janneke Wijman is a Dutch MA student in International Development Studies at the University of Amsterdam who was researching African Woman refugees in Cairo and their lived realities. The researcher had the pleasure to meet her and on one of the occasions, she shared the case of an Eritrean 23-year-old girl who came to Cairo alone seeking refugee. She had experienced rape by an Egyptian man and was pregnant by the time Janneke interviewed her.

Annex 55

In collaboration with Dr. Brooke Commer: Dr. Brooke Comer is a writer and AUC instructor, whose research writing courses identify social justice issues. She is responsible for designing Community-Based Learning courses in which AUC students engage with displaced learners. She co-edited VOICES IN REFUGE (AUC Press, 2009), a collection of creative nonfiction, real-life stories of African refugees in exile. Brooke is the Duke Engage liaison in Egypt, coordinating CBL opportunities for Duke and AUC students. In addition to her teaching, Brooke serves as an advocate for marginalized youth, enabling bright, economically challenged children to attend school. The focus of her research is social justice, including imagination as a transcendent power in the lives of marginalized youth in Cairo and the impact of gender identity on the success with which young female refugees adjust and succeed in asylum and resettlement. She has collaborated on this story. The researcher: Júlia Arenós Karsten, was the one conducting the interview with Didi, taking the pictures and writing a first draft of the non-fictional story, while Dr. Brooke edited the first draft, including language and style edits.

Didi: “If I cannot open my own makeup business I become a makeup artist”

I learned to be in two places at once; a kind of magic trick that lets me still feel I am a part of Eritrea, even though I am far away in Egypt. This helps me to survive exile, and I admit that it was not easy; it required a mix of memory and imagination and the discipline to summon the green hills of the Gash Barka region in the South West where I lived for the early years of my life. Today, I can make myself feel the peace and quiet of the countryside, even the cool breeze against my face when I am standing on a noisy street in hot dusty Cairo. This skill—the ability to transport myself—is something my parents taught me from a very young age because they too have had to learn it over time and from hard, sometimes excruciatingly painful experiences.

That experience, which involves pain but joy too, is what I want to share. Even though I don’t like to tell my story. I am going to tell you how I became a refugee so that you will know who I am because it is important to me that I am recognized as a unique and complete person and not simply brushed away because I am displaced. So that you will not read this and pity me; oh, that poor refugee! No, I do not want your pity! Because I reject that word, Refugee, as the sole definition of who I am. I am Didi, I am 20 years old, and if my life was more normal, I would be in my freshman year of university studying what I am most passionate about, business. I want to open my own boutique. I love make-up, clothes, and color and I have an instinct for what works together; a scarf and a sweater, shoes and a dress, with a certain shade of lipstick. You might read my story and think I am like your daughter, your sister. Or even like you?

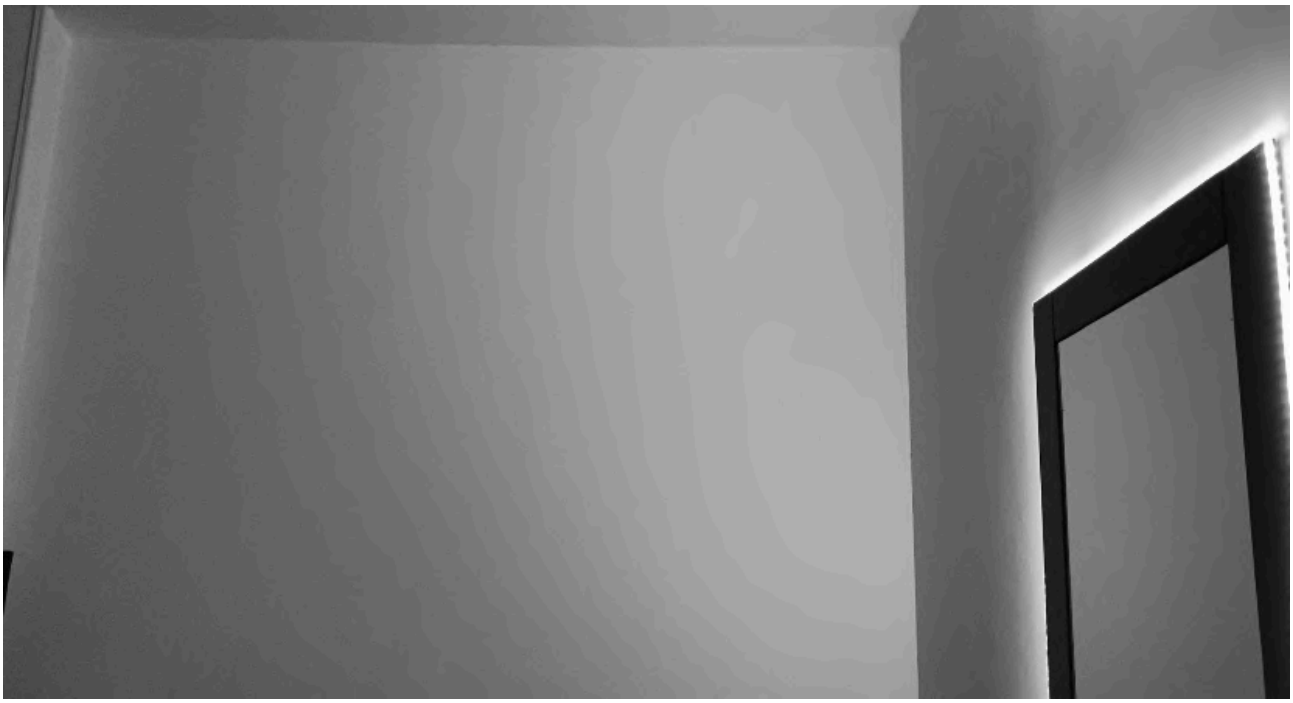
What holds me back from any accomplishment—including writing my story—is my terrible fear that I will never have the chance to fulfill my dreams and I will stay in this limbo in Cairo forever. This constant uncertainty prevents any active achievement on my part. The not-knowing what will happen next frightens me and sometimes paralyzes me. If I could go to college, if I knew that I had this chance, I would be okay. And I have to admit that college is a possible, though remote option—I am currently attending the best refugee school in Egypt, CAWU. It is the only selective Learning Center in Egypt and the only one that teaches the British system and if I can graduate I will have a diploma that will allow me to apply to any university in the world. But if I have learned anything it is that nothing is certain, there is no permanent security. My school is struggling with funding… My family and I live on the brink of poverty and desolation.

But if I had to describe myself in one word I would say I am a fighter. And despite my panic, my wild fear that time is running out, I still manage to enjoy my life as a teenager; I love to go for a run, I put on makeup and party with my friends, I flirt with boys, I do TikTok, I love to go shopping even if I cannot afford to buy anything. In this sense, my life is normal. I even enjoy the occasional secret cigarette. But what I love most is my time with my family, and cooking Eritrean food. This always makes me happy, and this is what I will remember if I live to be 100 years old, preparing a typical Eritrean dish with my mum and preparing our special coffee, which we call "buna". These are things that life in asylum cannot change. This is the part of me that remains the same as before. When I am cooking, I am not a refugee, I am a daughter, I am a chef. When I am writing my story, I am a writer. I do not feel that time is running out.

I was born near the Sudanese border in a tiny village of mythical beauty called Golij, where everyone knows everybody else's business. I only lived there for three years, but we moved first to Sudan, so it was easy to often return for visits. I feel that part of Eritrea is my true home; the way the land itself, the green hills and wooden houses extend their arms to embrace you—it makes me feel wanted there and loved. In my hometown, I always know who I am. I think it is important to keep the things that make you happy—even if it means holding onto them only in your dreams—and leave behind the things that hurt you.

Why did we leave our beloved Eritrea? We left because of the forced conscription imposed by the Isais Awerki regime. Our president has been in power since 1991 and his dictatorship is popularly known as the North Korea of Africa. Men and women are forced into the prison-like conditions of military service and failure to comply can lead to torture. But you can also be tortured while serving. Technically, the government tells you that at age 22 you are free to leave the military, yet this is not always the case. Service can be extended indefinitely—We know that because my father was almost 30, and not allowed to leave; he had to flee the country because he could not support his family and remain in the military. He was assigned to service in the Assad region, where people are rumored to be dropped dead from the heat, and they kept prolonging his stay there. Mum's store—she sold everything, from soap to sweets—was failing, and she had no support. When I was six months old, my father decided to flee to nearby Sudan, to the capital, Khartoum. We—my mother, older sister, and me—planned to follow him.

Women going into the military service can expect to be raped and tortured, so for this reason, girls marry young, because married females do not have to do military service. My parents did not want their daughters to be forced into an early marriage that leads to an early pregnancy, which can endanger the health of the mother and child, and often leads to an unhappy life ahead because you must give up on your dreams. My parents wanted us to go to university. There is no freedom in Eritrea.



We left our beloved homeland to find freedom. I was three years old when my mum and sister and me, set out on foot to Kassala, then took a 10-hour bus to Khartoum, a journey I do not remember well. My mother told me later about that escape, how it was easy, safe, and legal. We were free. But in many ways, life in Khartoum was harsh, and our circumstances did not improve in the 12 years we remained there. We could not afford our own home, so we shared rooms in a larger house with a communal kitchen.

My father drove a tuck-tuck, while my mother cleaned houses, and also baked bread and sold it. Even though Sudan is a part of Africa, and shares a border with Eritrea, I found the Sudanese people to be arrogant and to treat us with disdain. Especially our neighbors, who judged other people by religion and then national and tribal origin. We were Christian, not Muslim. That put us down a few notches. Then, we had no family connections in this country to elevate our status. But we understood where they were coming from, the fewer people had the more they discriminated against others who had less. We knew we were in transit, that we would not remain in Sudan, so we endured the psychological abuse we received. We endured the abuse for 12 years.

The stress and pressure of poverty and racial discrimination took a physical toll on my health and well-being. Not everyone treated us badly — my older sister had a friend named Laila, who seemed to be rich because her family had their own house, plenty of food and she had toys. Laila had an uncle who liked me so much, he would bring me sweets. But I attribute my illness to the animosity that we received from most of the people in our neighborhood.

I was four. I saw my sister going to school and I also wanted to go. Whenever my parents bought her books and things for going to school, I cried, I want this too, I want to go to school! I remember that day when my dad went to ask my sister's teacher if I could attend classes. I remember I was standing there while my dad was talking to the teachers, and when they said no, I just started to cry. Then I turned 6 and I went to Hope of Eritrea— the same primary school as my sister; I saw her on the playground. She would not look at me.

I loved school but I struggled socially because all the other children were constantly leaving, getting resettled, and going to other countries, so I was not able to really make friends. And the teachers were so mean! They hit you with a ruler on your hands and taught you to hold the pen with two fingers, and they pressed your fingers so hard that it hurt. I became sick.

I began to faint in class, so my mom decided to seek medical advice in Eritrea. By then, I was eight years old and had two younger siblings, Ramon and Elaine, but they stayed in Sudan with my dad, while my mother and sister and I went back to our village to find a cure. None of the local doctors could figure out what was wrong with me. People in our village told us to go to the priest. He spoke in tongues, a language we could not understand, and gave me incense to burn—I had to put my face into the hot smoke and breathe deeply through my nose. And I had to wash myself with another product that smelled like dead fish, it was truly disgusting. But I washed it. We spent three months in Eritrea—I washed, I breathed vapors, and I began to feel better. We returned to Sudan, where the white spots appeared all over my face—they got into my eyes, it was so painful in the sun! My aunt sent medicine from France, but it burnt the spots and they got bigger. We returned to Eritrea. This time we did not go to the priest, we went to a sacred spring in the mountains called Gedam Abune Endrias, where, according to legend, the water of Jerusalem comes out. I stayed for seven days with my mother and my grandmother, and I could feel the energy working to heal me. I felt so attached to this place! The water comes from out of the middle of the mountain and a water-gatherer brought the water to us; I drank the water. I washed with it, and the white spots have not come back. I thank God for this miracle.

My illness forced me to miss so much school and I struggled to catch up. I changed schools three times, but I never found the kind of education system that suits me in Sudan. I love learning—especially Math and Science and I love to study but I need a certain structure, I need to know my teachers are supporting me—tI need a strong lesson plan and I do not find that in Sudan. Academically, I suffered. Eventually, I dropped out of school.

I was 15 when Lulu, my older sister, decided to secretly escape to Cairo. She was 18, had quit school, and was studying hairstyling. She planned to go with a friend and she got so excited; she told me: “In Cairo, you can get a UNHCR card. You are legal!”. My mom had gone to the Eritrean Embassy to ask for a residence permit and was unable to get one; refugees in Sudan receive no support. Lulu made me keep her secret, so I was the only one she trusted, and this made me feel torn apart and guilty later on, as if I was responsible for her departure. I wanted to tell my parents to stop her, to keep her safe. But I was also her friend and I needed to keep my promise. We used to hang out together every day, but on the day she left, I told my mom I was busy with friends, and that I had plans, so she would not think I was part of Lulu’s escape plan. Lulu already had a friend in Egypt and this friend connected her to the big boss, Mr. T, T for Trafficker—the man who would take her $500 to bring her across the desert to Egypt. I have no idea how she got the $500—maybe her friends gave it to her? She would also need money for food and water along the way, and for when she arrived in Cairo, so she had to have a lot more than $500.

Mr. T gave her a map, so she already knew the route, she knew how it would all go down; nothing would be paid till the desert crossing was completed; then, everyone would gather in Aswan in a space where the families are taken to pay the $500 to T.

I asked Lulu, “how do know you’ll be safe, even if you pay the money?”
“You don’t know,” Lulu replied. “Even if you pay, they can hurt you, maybe they will kill you? I don’t know.”

Lulu made a safe trip. When my sister arrived in Cairo, she called us and my dad was so angry he could barely speak—my mother could only cry and as for me, I never covered my hair in those days but I was so upset I covered my hair, I covered my face too, and I cried and cried. Dad told me that he felt betrayed by my sister‘s departure, it hurt his honor but when he finally understood that my sister left not just for her own interest but to help the family he calmed down. In fact, life in Sudan was becoming more and more difficult and expensive. Lulu told us that she was making a living working in a coffee shop; she tried cleaning houses but that did not work out well. My father was pleased to hear that she was supporting herself. Once the relationship improved between my dad and Lulu, he decided that we would all go to Cairo to be with her but he would continue his business in Sudan and send money to us in Egypt.

I wanted to go to Egypt—I did not have my own room in Sudan. I shared with my older sister and my younger brother—this doesn't sound too bad, does it? But my room share was only in theory I slept on the floor with all my siblings. Because it is a custom in our country to always give your bed to a guest. And our last few years in Sudan we had nonstop guests. It is not only your bed that you must give up; it is your clothes, your jewelry, If you are a child—it is your toys. Basically, according to Eritrean custom, anything that your guest wants, you have to give to them, no matter how much value it has to you. We had guests who stayed for five months. They went through my drawers and picked through my clothes and took what they liked. But I will not let that happen again. I learned from experience.

My sister had been in Cairo for 10 months when we set out on our own voyage to the desert. She made it in three days with few problems. It took us nine days. With more than a few problems.

How do you prepare for the unknown? We knew where we were going but we were not quite sure how we would get there. When my parents decided that we should go to Egypt to be with my sister, they hired the same trafficker, Mr. T, who successfully took her across the desert. We had to prepare for a trip without really knowing what our needs would be since we have never been led through the desert by human smugglers before.

They had complete control of us and our belongings, they could kill us and take everything we had. These thoughts occurred to me and probably to my mother though she never said anything. I kept reminding myself that my sister had made it, and in just three days.

We started out in a shiny red Toyota Century convertible that would take us to Wadi Haifa, the border town—that part was easy. What was not easy was finding a place to sit. The car was so crowded, that we had to sit on each other. Someone sat on my knees, and I had so much pain in my legs. We knew there would not be a lot of space so we only brought the barest necessities; everything else my father could bring when he turned 50 and joined us, because by then, no one could stop him from leaving the country. To raise money for our trip, we sold almost everything we owned.

The drive in the red Toyota was not bad at all, aside from being squashed; we hid ourselves when we got near the border, waiting until night, and even then, there were lights, so they could've seen us —at first, I thought it was strange that there were absolutely no security forces, no border police at all. Perhaps this was because we took another route, one not used much, so the police did not waste their time there? No—This is what I think —I believe that a deal went down between the police and smugglers like Mr. T. They give them money—the Traffickers simply pay off the policeman. They are working together.

Our smugglers kept stopping the car, getting out and moving things in the boot around, then starting again. Since all of our things were packed in the boot, I worried when we stopped, that they were moving our things out of the car—what were they doing with them? My sister who is very smart, the little one, started to scream; "hey they are stealing our iPad!" I ran out of the car and indeed they were going through our luggage taking things out—Food, electronics… One of the thieves had set his expensive iPhone down and forgot to pick it up, so I grabbed it and I told them to give me back the iPad and exchange it for the phone, and they did, but so reluctantly! This kind of thing is to be expected on journeys like ours, I suppose but I was hoping it wouldn't happen, not to us, not on this trip.

We left the red Toyota behind when we crossed the Aswan dam. We were on foot in the desert at midnight under a full moon. We would try not to make a sound and we did move with the greatest stealth, but still, my head pounded with noise and fear—in my mind, I heard people coming after us, I imagined searchlights, and police sirens, but the only real noise was the crunching sound of our feet in the sand. Just as we were about to arrive in Aswan, the noises became real. The fear I had imagined suddenly crystallized—We were facing a loose assortment of people, real people, their faces indignant, enraged, as if we were trespassing on their desert. When I got a little focus, I could see that they were very young, children, really…wielding knives, yes —even the smallest child held the shiny tip of the knife and plunged it into the air as if it was my throat. We froze, of course—We just froze. Our leaders, Mr. T, and his men were big and strong, but even they seemed to be afraid of these children, perhaps because they were Egyptians. The leader must have been 15 or 16; he told us finally, that they were going to tell the police that we were coming into the country illegally; we would go to prison or face deportation. "No, no!" Mr. T tried to argue, and he offered money but they would not take it, and they seemed insulted—then, what did they want? I shivered. My mom at the time was pregnant although I did not know it then. I am glad I did not know.

So how did we escape the children with knives? We turned and we ran—we followed Mr. T. We took another road, and they did not follow us, I'm not sure what their real intent was. This alternative route that we took to escape the children with knives was a detour and it took us longer to arrive at our destination. We spent two days in the desert sleeping on the sand with no water. We were so thirsty! We were walking with another caravan of people being smuggled into Egypt and one member of this group kept stealing our water. Finally, I shouted, "give us our water, we are thirsty, give us our water!" And we did get water, someone shared, but it was water mixed with Petrol and it made us sick.

At last, we reached Aswan. I thought that finally our troubles would be over and we would be safe, but I was wrong.

We were taken to a space where the families are brought, a rough structure in a big sandy lot, to pay the big boss, and one of the men called my little brother and asked him to come with him to get water--luckily my mom realized quickly that this was not a good idea so she said, “he will not go! I will go instead.” So she followed him to a spot on the sand where there was no water and then just sat down on the sand, and looked up at my mother, my big powerful mother. He said, “Come here, sit with me on the sand.” What would’ve happened if my little brother had gone instead of my mom? She was so angry she called the main man personally, Mr. T’s boss, and told him everything and he called his men who were actually frightened—or the first time their faces showed fear. They left us alone. So we sat for five hours in this big empty space like a garage, without cars, without blankets or anything we just sat and we were told that we could go to the train station soon, to take the train to Cairo but we missed it because my brother went to find water and we couldn’t leave him behind. We were terrified—we thought we would be caught, but Thank God another train came and we took it. I just have to add that waiting for that second train was the most boring part of the trip, there was absolutely nothing to do. Finally, right before we left for the station, we were taken to a garden cafe and given grilled chicken because it was the Eid holiday. But we barely had time to eat--we could not afford to miss another train. And in that very short time, we were eating, someone reached into my backpack and stole my perfume.

The train from Aswan to Cairo took 16 excruciatingly boring hours, but it was worth it when we saw Lulu waiting for us at the train station, her anxious face opened into a smile when she spotted us. We went directly to her flat in Faisal, an area near the Giza pyramids, popular with Eritreans. I quickly realized something was wrong with Lulu—she was not herself, she seemed terrified. She was hiding a secret, Lulu had known she'd need to save some money, find a flat, and make sure that once we were here we had what we needed. She had succeeded, but how she succeeded—that was the secret. She first tried to work as a cleaner, then in a cafe, but she could not earn enough money, So, she started to sell her body, which would leave her with trauma that would remain forever. She had a sugar daddy; a rich, 40-year-old South Sudanese man, in love with my sister and they were often together. He paid for the flat, the gifts, and the food.

Lulu is my special person, my soulmate. Everyone needs a special person in her life and she is mine, and I also know that I am hers. Lulu explained everything to me—everything, and I swear that I had never cried so much in my life, but I know that telling her story gave her the energy to move on and to promise herself to never do anything again if she is not feeling comfortable with it. I feel that since then my sister has become stronger, I admire her, she has always been the one supporting our family, and thanks to her we are now where we are. Today, she is the most confident person I have ever known.

The best part about our move to Egypt was school. Education can ensure one's future. In Cairo, I finally found a good school. It is hard to find a good school in Egypt, I used to go to St. Joseph Eritrean School, I finished my primary school at 18 years old, teachers were not teaching, Tigrinya was spoken instead of English, and I felt empty, not a complete person. My dream has always been the one of going to University and opening my own make-up business, my dream is to be a businesswoman.

Sometimes you just need to be realistic, education for refugees in Egypt is bad, teachers do not motivate you, and if you want to improve your English, the only way to do it is by yourself. Refugee education is even worse if you are looking for a high school, and I have heard from many Eritreans that due to your nationality, you will never be accepted at University in Egypt if you attend a LC that follows the Sudanese curriculum. Sometimes you just need to be realistic, accept that things are not as you expected and imagined, and just try to find something else that at least, makes you a little bit happy. I just thought about make-up, do a make-up course and at least, have something.

There was this day when my mum heard about CAWU, and she was very excited. The name comes from Center for Arab Western Understanding, an interfaith dialogue NGO, with a small refugee learning center attached. The school is small, with only 30 students, and selective, meaning you have to take a test to get in and keep your grades high to stay in. Best of all, the school teaches the British system. That means I could sit the British exams and get a certified diploma and go to any university in the world. CAWU gave me hope, and I became a student there, this is my second year at CAWU and I'm excited for the first time about learning. I have so many friends, people like me, many of them made the same trip as I did, or experienced similar horrors in their homeland. We don't really talk about that though--we talk about regular teenage things, films, Netflix, video games. Without my school, I think I would go a little crazy in Cairo because it's a bit like a circus, with all the noise and people and possibilities, but school keeps me grounded and focused. My teachers are wonderful—they're British, Indian, and Egyptian, and I love every subject I'm taking especially math. Seriously, CAWU was making me so happy. Even at home—until we got a new building manager.

Oh, that new building manager! Ever since he arrived, we felt the constant tension, his perception of us as inferior Africans, as useless as animals, was consuming us emotionally, and his constant attempts to cheat us furthered our desire to leave that house that could never be called home. We could not make it cozy at all, with one small window, no natural right, tiny rooms, and an annoying landlord that wanted us to pay an insane amount for electricity that we were not even using. At that time, I was sharing a room with Lulu and Ramon, I never had a room for myself, and space is important, I have always been obsessed with finding my own, personal space. For me, physical space is not just something passive in the background, it shapes us but we can also shape it. We all agreed that it was important to leave the flat in Faisal— it was stealing our energy—and we found a new flat in Ard-El-Lewa, for less money, and we finally feel that we belong somewhere and have the chance to be happier.

When we reached Cairo, my dad suddenly felt so lonely in Sudan that he insisted us on coming back. My dad's stubborn attitude made Mum feel too much pressure and discomfort, until the point that she decided to break the relationship with him. This is the story of how, after losing my homeland, I almost lost my family too. I did not hear anything from dad for three months. Those months were difficult, as we were still living in Faisal, and we also knew that we were supposed to stay there at least until my baby sister Musi was born because Faisal was the only certainty that we had. During those months we were also struggling with money, my mum refused to ask my dad for help, and Lulu felt that she was responsible for bringing money home. But we found other ways to survive until my dad came in February because my mum would give birth to Musi in March, and it was a must to have my dad there in order to get all the legal documents that she needed. He was planning to stay three months, but it took nine months to mend the relationship with my mum, and only then I could feel peace again. I was exactly where I was supposed to be, Spring was coming, the sun, the flowers, and the birds singing early in the morning, and with it, Mum gave birth. COVID-19 had us in full lockdown but my mum managed to go to the hospital, Lulu and dad went with her, I stayed at home, I felt like a big mother, my home was the kitchen for two days, and if I so say to myself, the Eritrean Ga'at that I prepared was delicious.

Musi had the same face as dad, and it was at the precise moment that I held her in my arms, that I promised myself that this baby would have the best future ever. I imagined her going to kindergarten in Canada, where we applied for resettlement. I promised myself that she would grow up surrounded by love and peace, that every year for her birthday she would wear a beautiful dress while blowing the candles of a fairytale castle cake. To know where she comes from, to feel that she belongs somewhere, this was the most important for us. Eritrean culture is amazing, and we want to give Musi the opportunity to discover all our traditions, step by step. COVID-19 made our family become more united, but COVID-19 was also hard, especially for my dad. He needs to be the one bringing money to the family, he is happy as long as he knows that he is protecting us, that he is our guardian. During COVID-19, in Egypt, there was no work, and even less for non-Egyptian males. My dad was not able to find a job, and it was Lulu who found some temporary jobs as a receptionist, which hurt my dad's honor as a male. But he is OK now, we all are.

I would be lying to you if I told you that everything is perfect. Our new flat has just two bedrooms, so again I was sharing my room with my sister Lulu, with no place to be alone, no space to study. Then, Lulu was resettled to Northern Germany, very close to the Danish border. When Lulu left, my mum knew that having my room, and my own space was important for me. My brother Ramon and my sister Elaine agreed to share a room with my mum and Musi, and for the first time in my life, I had my own room.

I can be home but at the same time far away; home is relative when you live in exile. But this is why I need space, and why I am never homesick: Alone in my room, I can dream. I can visit my village in the green hills of Gash Barka, or roam the streets of Asmara, the capital city, where you can find cakes so light, they might be whipped right out of the air. I learned to be in two places at once; a kind of magic trick that lets me still feel I am a part of Eritrea, even though I am far away in Egypt. This, and knowing I have a chance to attend university one day, help me to survive exile.

Annex 56

Neoma: "The most beautiful views of the starts that I have ever had were when I was crossing the desert"

Once someone told me that bad memories from the past are automatically erased from our minds. I was seven when I left Eritrea, and just a few vague memories have awakened since then. I have stories, stories that my mum explains to me before going to bed. I also have feelings and intuitions, nothing else.

My mum is my favorite person in the world, and the second one is my aunt: Salem. I belong to Massawa, to the sea, to the salty air, and to the sand. The childhood of my mum and dad also belongs to this coastal city, the same place that sometimes makes you feel as if you were dying because of the heat. The night when my mum shared how she felt giving birth to my older brother Jacob in Massawa, was the same night when I understood why my family moved to Asmara. I was born in the capital, but I do not belong to this part of Eritrea. I know it because the 5 hours-drive through the road with leads felt like two minutes, and the desire to breathe again the fresh salty air while the whole family was reunited was never so intense. I do not belong to Asmara; I do not have good memories from there.

In Asmara, I used to go to a very famous primary school, I cannot remember the name, but it was famous because the green and red uniform was always appearing on TV shows. I really do not have a good memory of school because I did not have friends there. I just wanted to be alone. Once someone told me that we automatically forget bad memories from the past, my past in Asmara almost drowns me.

Nights were dark because having the same nightmare night after night makes them even darker. It was the darkness that almost drowns me. But there was this time when there was light in Asmara. We used to live next to my second favorite person in the world, my aunty. Music was always playing in her house, she taught me how to write songs, and how to sing them. By that time she became my soul mate, my pillar in life, and I swear there was light everywhere. But when she moved to another house and I could no longer sing to her the songs that I had composed, nights became dark. Night after night I dreamt about Salem's death, she was leaving me alone, I was losing a part of my soul, and there was nothing I could do about it. Nights in Asmara almost drown me, but I got used to the nightmares, the same ones that sometimes still appear without warning.

I was just living. So was doing my mum when my dad was forced to leave his family and job as a Bank dealer to join again the national service, this time as a policeman. Eritrea is a dictatorship and none talks about it, according to the rules, a person has the duty to join the national service only for two years, but rules do not exist in Eritrea. And it was precisely this totalitarian regime that was leaving my dad without air. In a desperate attempt to escape from what was drowning him, he abandoned us and I have never heard from him again.

My mum is my favorite person in the world because she is a fighter. Alone, with three children, me, and my two older brothers: Jacob and Dawit; she became a businesswoman. She opened her own household appliance shop and the money made was saved for us to go to university. My mum is an educated person, who wants us to have a brilliant future. But she also knew that in Eritrea opportunities were lacking and freedoms taken away. I can guess that she always thought about escaping this country once my older brother Jacob was turning 18, the age that you are forced to join the military service. We left behind our land, it was uncertain if I would ever breathe again the salty air of Massawa, and it was uncertain if I would ever see again my aunty.

I could not say goodbye to where I was belonging to. My mum told me about our departure just three days before we left. Not saying goodbye sometimes can also drown you.

Uganda is beautiful. If I had to define Kampala in just a few words I would choose green, fresh, and freedom. It rains but it feels good, I never thought I would be able to enjoy playing basketball in the rain. But Uganda is also dangerous, especially if you are a woman or a child, it is full of kidnappers and child trafficking. You also need to be careful because everyone steals from you, I feel it is kind of the culture there. Even those highly educated are thieves, and the police do not do anything about it, sometimes they just join the game. The most random way of stealing that I have ever seen was in Kampala. There was this day when my brother Jacob was sleeping that someone stole his phone. Our windows were having those bars, you cannot even put your hand through them, Jacob had his phone under his pillow and when he woke up there was no phone anymore, just a wood stick on the floor. We were all shocked, how could someone steal a phone just with a wood stick? Then my mum's friend told us that they put a plastic bag on the stick, and they committed the robbery. Safety lacks in this country.

Some good memories come to my mind when I think about my time in Uganda. My mum worked hard in a cafe just to pay for my boarding school, she wanted me to be there, far away from the child traffickers. Some good memories come to my mind, one of them is teacher Toni, he became the father that I once lost, he was the one by my side when I was having nightmares. Education was really good, we were following a curriculum that would allow me to go to Canada to study law, and I was the best in class. I also had some friends that made me feel less alone, although they were friends of convenience. The food of the boarding school was disgusting, therefore, my mum sometimes brought me some extra snacks, such as chocolate and sweets. Those days I had friends.

We spent three years in the country where the rain feels good, before moving to hot and dusty Cairo. We left because everything was becoming more and more expensive, even for registering as a refugee at UNHCR you needed to pay a fee. Rumors were also spreading rapidly through the Eritrean community in Uganda. Everyone was talking about Egypt as a dreamland, the place where UNHCR was the one rescuing you, giving you a job, a quality education, and a home. We left the land of freedom and fresh air to come to noisy Cairo. There is nothing that we regret more than that. My nightmares in Cairo are downing me.

Uganda left wounds open because, again, I did not say goodbye. My mum told me just one day in advance that we were leaving the country, I could not say goodbye to teacher Toni, nor to my mum's friend who took care of me when I got a hard attack and malaria, both the same year, her name was Nagret.

If there is something I have learned since we left is how important it is to have friends. From Uganda to South Sudan, and from South Sudan to North Sudan by flight: my mum had at least one friend in each country. We spent one week in North Sudan, we stayed in Khartoum, the sleepy and dark capital where the heat consumes slowly your energy. That week I had nightmares because Mum's Sudanese friend introduced us to the dangers of the desert. It was 2011 when a friend of her escaped Eritrea seeking refuge in Israel. On his way through the desert, a group of Islamists raped the whole group, and he was the one decapitated in front of everyone. Since then, everything started, we call them "shafatus" and this was a warning to all those crossing the deserts that were about to refuse to give the "shafatus" what they wanted, it was a warning to us too. Those days I had nightmares, but the day arrived and by then I was just living.

The smuggler was from Sudan, he was nice, I guess he was nice to us because one of my mum's friends was her girlfriend. There are good and bad smugglers, we were lucky enough to have a good one. In Adhara, the border town, we bought everything we needed for the journey, and at midnight we cross the border. I always thought that the police were there to make justice. I was mistaken, police are corrupted. I want to become a lawyer to make justice to it.

It took us three days through the desert. We made a safe trip although I had the chance to meet in person the famous “shafatus”. They are a group of people that live in the desert and sustain themselves with the things that they rob from people like us. “Shafatus” are families, with kids: kids with guns. They ride big tracks and persecuted our white Toyota with them. I tell you that we made a safe trip because our driver was smart, he could escape, hide behind a dune and cover the car with the mad so it was colored according to the sand of the desert. “Shafatus” left and the night came, there was calmness for the first time after a while. That night I saw three shooting stars, I made three wishes one for my mum, and the other two for my brothers. That night I saw the most beautiful sky I have ever seen. It makes me sad to realize that the most beautiful views of the stars that I have ever had were when I was crossing the desert.

In the morning we entered Aswan, the Egyptian city next to the border with Sudan. From the dangers of the desert, this part also gave me nightmares. Once you arrive in Aswan they take you far away from everyone and they keep you there until your trip is paid. As it is a whole network you must make sure that someone you trust is meeting with one of the smugglers elsewhere and paying. There are good and bad smugglers, our smuggler was good but I have heard that some smugglers ask for more money, and if you do not pay it immediately they kill you in front of everyone. We were lucky.

The dangers of the desert were over, we took the train and went to Cairo. My mum also had a friend there. Having friends is important although they give you a boring pasta dish as your first meal after a traumatizing journey. We also made a friend during our journey through the desert, he was 27 and from Ethiopia, Dawit and the Ethiopian guy became really close friends. He was also the one who helped us to find our first flat, although it was small and I was sharing a room with my mum, I was happy because at least we had something.

My first memories in dusty Cairo are about hospitals. The nights in the desert gave me incredible views of the stars, but also a layer of sand inside my ears that resulted in an infection. Hospitals in Egypt are not hospitals, and the doctors just pretend so. There was this day when a nurse came and asked me if I was hearing what she was saying, I nodded, and her answer was: "If you can hear me well, everything is okay, you do not have any infection, just go home." Hospitals in Egypt are almost as bad as schools. It was my brother Jacob the one in charge to find a good school for all three of us. Finding a good school in Egypt is difficult, almost impossible, we were one year and a half without receiving any type of education.

Found Africa became my school, I entered grade 5, and most of my classmates were from South Sudan. I have always been the best student in the whole class, but this time everything was different. I guess that when your classmates are lazy when there is no competition among students, and teachers do not push you hard, you simply go to school. I started to feel empty, the school was far away, and dusty Cairo was slowly consuming my energy. My mum knew that something was going wrong.

Sometimes I feel that my mind and body are connected, whenever I am not in peace I get sick. My mum also knows it, this is because we moved to another flat in Maadi, close to our school. Being close to Found Africa was useful to avoid Cairo's dust, noise, and chaos, we also had a nice flat with a room that we were using exclusively to study. But it was not enough, I know how important it is to get a quality education, and by then, although I was getting the best grades in the whole course, I just felt that I was wasting my time.

Everything went worse once I sat for the grade 8 exam at the Sudanese Embassy and I failed. I felt that I was wasting my time because I realized that the Sudanese curriculum was not serious, and those correcting the exams were not following any criteria at all. Grade 8 exam allows you to enter secondary education, the same year, my brother Jacob sat for the senior 3 exams, the ones that give you access to public universities in Egypt. Contrary to me,

But that day, when Jacob came home, frustration took over me. He explained to us that the department responsible for the enrollment of students into Egyptian universities just rejected him orally. The guys in the office told him that there was a recent rule that stated that Eritreans holding the Sudanese curriculum were not allowed to enter public universities and that they should either present the Eritrean, the Egyptian, or the International certificate. Frustration took over me and that night I had a nightmare. Those days were about emptiness and hope fading away, we went to church, and I was starting to accept the idea that I would never be able to become a lawyer although I had the capability and the motivation to do it.

I learned quickly how to find refuge in other places, music became my shelter, and so did anime comics. My mum became my safe place, and the church my second home. I joint the choir in the Eritrean Orthodox St.Anthony church in Ardelwa.

The church is much more than just praying, I feel welcomed, and I feel that I belong somewhere. I met Yosan in the choir, she was an Eritrean girl from my age, and we became friends. After some days I told her about my struggle, I would drop out of school because it had no sense to continue if the certificate was not allowing me to go to university and accomplish my dream to become a lawyer. At that moment, Yosan told me about CAWU, a refugee school that instead of following the Sudanese curriculum was following the International one. I knew about the potential of the international curriculum because it was the one that I was following in Uganda, it is about quality education, and it promises you a bright future in any university in the world.

I joint CAWU in 2020, my favorite subject is English because our teacher, whose name is Leila, makes the lessons interactive and stimulates our creativity. Once the homework was to write a poem, I wrote about Massawa, the sea, the salty air, and the sand. While I was writing the poem, I felt I could leave behind at least, for a moment, this noisy city that was downing me and keeping me awake at night. While I was writing the poem, I felt that I was breathing fresh air again. While I was writing the poem, I imagined myself at university studying what I was most passionate about. Leila's English lessons gave me back what once I thought I had lost forever. And I will be eternally grateful for that.

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