**Simon[[1]](#footnote-1), 25 years old. MSF social worker in Hitsats**

I am from southern Eritrea, where I was a college student. I really did not want to become a refugee, but then I realized that all the people I knew that had a university degree still were not able to earn enough money to provide for themselves and their families. Many of them were forced to work in the military and had very little ability to make choices over their lives. Once all this became clear to me, I felt that the only way I could freely choose what to do, and be able to earn a decent living, was to leave the country.

I am very grateful to my family. My father did all he could to motivate me and my siblings to get a good education, even though it was expensive. I know many families who did not have enough money to put their children to school. Another problem is that from 12th grade on, you become part of the military. At the end of 11th grade, they have you take a big test. If you score high, you will continue your education under the military, otherwise you will just do military training. The subjects that you will study in college and university depend on your test score and quotas set by the government. There’s no possibility of choosing. I did pretty well and got into college, with teaching and chemistry majors, but all the duties and training made it extremely difficult to find the time to properly study. Also, you are graded more on your military experience than on your knowledge of the subjects. I would have really liked to become a nurse but if the government wants to make you a teacher, they will make you a teacher, even if initially they assigned you to a different education. How can you live in a place where you have no control over your life?

My first attempt to cross the border was the worst experience of my life. I did it at night, together with some of my college friends. It was very difficult to move in the dark. We had no idea of where we were going. And then we stumbled upon a group of border patrol soldiers, who started shooting at us. It happened three years ago but I still remember very clearly the glow of the bullets flying over and around me. A girl who was trying to escape with us fell down. I couldn’t leave her behind so I stopped to help her. The soldiers caught up with us and beat us very violently. Even though I was badly hurt, they put me in jail, where they kept me for two months with no medical assistance before sending me to military training. I still don’t know what happened to the girl.

After a few weeks of military training, I decided to try leaving the country again and this time I made it. I did not have a clear idea of where I wanted to go. All I knew was that I wanted to get access to a good education, get a job and be able to provide for myself and my family. Now I have been in this camp for three years and I haven’t been able to do any of these things. Many other Eritreans stay in Ethiopia for a short time, but I don’t have the money to afford a journey across other countries. Sometimes I regret not trying to move somewhere else because living in the camp is not so easy. The food rations that we are entitled to are not sufficient. We are also very exposed to diseases like malaria and there’s not much we can do about it. It is difficult to keep hope in your life when you live like this.

When I first arrived in the camp, I was not doing well. I was constantly reliving all the things that I experienced when first trying to cross the border and while in jail, like the shooting, the torture and the abuse. I had recurrent flashbacks and nightmares, I was very stressed and I felt guilty because I didn’t know what happened to the girl I tried to help. When I realized that MSF was providing mental health services, I went to seek help. The counselling really helped me get my life back together and I realized that this is something I could help other people with. I applied to become a social worker and got the job. Now, I go from shelter to shelter in the camp to raise awareness about mental health issues and MSF’s services. We also organize various activities to get people together, like sport events, traditional coffee ceremonies, drama groups and drawing sessions. All this to try to get people to seek help and get over their stigma towards mental health.

Working as a social worker in the MSF mental health program here in Hitsats camp is the only thing that gives me stability and motivation. Having a purpose has helped me not to think too much about further movements and the fact that I miss my family, my friends and my home. A lot of people here suffer from trauma and mental health problems. When I see that they get better, because of the support I provide through my work, I feel like staying here is worth it. Even if I didn’t manage to become a nurse like I was dreaming, I am still able to help people and this makes me very happy.

1. The name has been changed to protect the identity of the interviewee. As requested, to protect his anonymity, no images are available of Simon. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)