

# Agency in Silence: The Case of Unaccompanied Eritrean Refugee Minors in the Netherlands

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**Submitted:** 22 October 2023 **Accepted:** 22 January 2024 **Published:** 26 March 2024

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Accomplices to Social Exclusion? Analyzing Institutional Processes of Silencing” edited by Ulrike M. Vieten (Queen’s University Belfast) and Emily Mitchell-Bajic (Arden University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i413>

## Abstract

Following the so-called refugee crisis, unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) from Eritrea were portrayed negatively in Europe. Although such portrayals are often amplified by media and policy discourses, the main reasons for this negative view were a lack of understanding of URMs’ subjectivities, the institutional silencing process they face in their everyday lives, and the ways they show agency in such precarity. This article addresses institutional silencing practices that Eritrean URMs encounter and the various ways they engage with them. Using data gathered during 2016–2018 from Eritrean URMs in the Netherlands, we explore how participants navigate the exclusionary processes they encounter in relation to institutions, such as refugee reception centres, refugee protection organizations, immigration authorities, and schools. Inspired by Sherry Ortner’s and Saba Mahmood’s work, we show the importance of less dominant forms of agency (delayed or docile forms) in how URMs engage with the power of institutional silencing practices. We then show the (often unseen) agency of these young people as the desire of the “less powerful” or “less resourceful” to “play their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even destroy them” (Ortner, 2006, p. 147).

## Keywords

agency; Eritrea; institutional silencing; the Netherlands; unaccompanied refugee minors

## 1. Introduction

We start with an observation by the first author, from 2016:

It has been a very heavy morning on all fronts. I just came out of a long funeral service at the Orthodox Tewahdo Church in Rotterdam. An Eritrean minor, whom we shall call Sinit, had committed suicide at

the age of 17. Her death shocked everyone. The funeral ceremony started with a long prayer headed by a senior priest. Sinit's body was lying in a casket at the front of the church altar, and the priest made several rounds while reciting a prayer in Tigrinya [one of the official languages in Eritrea] and Geez [an ancient language spoken in church]. In a long sermon, the priest talked about the difference between physical and spiritual death, underscoring that the latter refers to the spiritual and eternal body. He said "hence, our daughter has only died physically," and added, "she needs prayers, not mourning." Reflecting on Sinit's life, he said: "She has undertaken a horrendous journey—all the walks, the heat, and the thirst she encountered with all her tiredness. Today, she is leaving us for good." His words were strong and penetrating. People were bowing and nodding in agreement. In addition to Sinit's close friends, guardians, and mentors, several URMs were also inside the church. They came from both near and far. Some were crying aloud and some were sobbing silently. More importantly, they were comforting one another.

Before analysing the importance of this painful event, we first provide a layered description of it, including the performance of Sinit's friends, journey mates, guardians, and mentors. We then illuminate how this event can be situated within broader institutional and interpersonal silencing practices experienced by unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) from Eritrea. The excerpt refers to several issues that will be unpacked later, including the hardship of the journey and the possible reasons behind committing suicide. The hardship of Sinit's journey to reach the Netherlands and apply for asylum was described powerfully by the senior priest, who referred to "the walk, the heat, and the thirst." The "walk" refers to her arduous travels after fleeing Eritrea, and the "heat" and the "thirst" represent the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea (a common route for Eritreans trying to reach Europe; Belloni, 2016, 2018). His words "with all her tiredness" refer to all the energy and effort Sinit exerted to reach the Netherlands, which ended tragically. According to her friends, Sinit was quiet and modest. Another source told of how she was severely burned in Libya when the *mazraea* (መዝራዳ, مزرعة literally a "farmhouse," but in this context, a holding place where smugglers keep people before sea crossings) she was staying in caught on fire and the smugglers closed the doors, preventing her escape. After that, she became morbidly depressed.

Although we may never fully understand why Sinit committed suicide, the first author's conversations with URMs and others who knew her offer possible explanations. In addition to her ongoing depression, her sense of helplessness and unhappiness had increased in the Netherlands. Those who knew Sinit said she had had a strained relationship with her caregivers that often left her feeling misunderstood. She had asked several times to be relocated in hopes that improving her living conditions would ease her psychological pain. But it took a long time for her request to be honoured. As we will show, Sinit's sense of muteness in the Netherlands is not an exceptional case; many URMs experience institutional and interpersonal exclusion (conceptualized here as silencing). During the funeral and its aftermath, the first author had informal conversations with several minors who said the event was traumatic for their community. For some, it was as if their own deaths were being enacted in front of them. Sinit's act of desperation and the ways URMs engaged with the funeral process reveal the contrast between their feeling of arriving in a safe haven after a devastating journey and their experience of exclusionary processes in the Netherlands that undermine their subjectivities. Before providing supporting arguments for this statement, we elaborate on how the URMs acted during the funeral.

### 1.1. URM<sub>s</sub> Carrying Their Soulmate

In attending Sinit's funeral, URM<sub>s</sub> paid respect to their soulmate through their collective presence and contributed to the funeral process through their meaningful actions. Their presence was an act of resistance because they were supposed to be in school. It was also an act of solidarity with someone they identified with because of their similar experiences and struggles. And finally, it was an act of cultural caring. By using cultural objects and rituals, they indicated that they are part of a community that cares for each other in times of precarity, pain, and loss.

The URM<sub>s</sub>' act of resistance requires more explanation. Although schools allow students to attend funerals, students must submit forms to the school principal or their classroom teacher to obtain permission. Unfortunately, the URM<sub>s</sub> neither submitted the forms nor communicated their intentions to their mentors, resulting in them missing school without permission. Later, when the first author discussed this situation with the URM<sub>s</sub>, they said: "Why do we need permission for this?" For them, it was natural to just go and honour their peer. It was both an act of resistance against a system that failed to understand them and a demonstration of their lack of connection with their Dutch caregivers, who did not understand their pain over the loss of someone they did not necessarily know. For the URM<sub>s</sub>, their presence at the funeral allowed the connectivity they felt was strongly needed for healing from this painful event.

## 2. Institutional Silencing and Agency of URM<sub>s</sub>

Clark (2020, p. 360) provides a framework to research silence that encompasses consumptive (negative and oppressive), negotiated (discursive silencing based on certain stigmas), and generative silence (as agency). This analytical framework helps us to analyse URM<sub>s</sub>' actions as informed choices regarding when and how they wish to articulate their experiences, thereby enabling their voices to emerge with spoken and unspoken forms of agency. But it also allows us to consider silencing practices related to the power dynamics involved in how individuals and groups interact and engage with various structural discourses and practices. To grasp the layered nature of silencing in relation to power, we use Lukes's (1986) three dimensions of power as a lens.

Lukes's first dimension of power focuses on visible forms of power or the power of decision-making, that is, the concrete actions and decisions that benefit people in positions of power. The second dimension considers situations in which decisions are prevented from being taken seriously. It is about the structurally hidden face of power, such as when power is exercised by controlling the agenda. The visibly exercised aspect of these two dimensions of power connects to Clark's consumptive silence. The third dimension includes hegemonial or discursive power, which comes close to what Clark calls negotiated or discursive silencing. This level goes further into the deep structures through which different societal actors take certain images of groups and their exclusionary impact for granted. These different dimensions of power produce various forms of silencing in practice.

Significantly, Clark's approach to silence also introduces silence as a form of agency. This approach fits within a broader approach to agency that goes beyond what Mahmood (2001) refers to as emancipatory politics. It creates more space for attending to desires, demands, contexts, and conditions that exist outside the discourse of liberation. In particular, agency for the "less powerful" or "less resourceful" can be about "having desires to play their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even

destroy them” (Ortner, 2006, p. 147). This could entail choosing a position “on the margin of the power” as an “enactment of a personal project” (p. 147).

## **2.1. Institutional Reception Contexts for URM: The Netherlands**

Refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed negatively in the public spectrum (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Gray & Franck, 2019; Moffette & Vadasaria, 2016), from being “at risk” to “as risk” (Gray & Franck, 2019, pp. 276–281). They have also been portrayed as “mistrusting,” “walking deficit,” and “children” (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Daniel & Knudsen, 1995; Dinesen, 2012; Ghorashi, 2010). Such images create binaries such as “victims or threats,” which are subsequently reinforced by media frames and discourses (Chouliaraki et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2018; Moffette & Vadasaria, 2016; Vultee, 2010). These images inform URM’s encounters with institutional settings, including the reception and care system, where they are treated merely as problematic children and victims who are inherently vulnerable and in need of constant intervention (Gray & Franck, 2019, p. 282). Studies have shown that treating (young) asylum seekers as passive victims leads to paternalistic forms of interventions that ignore their agency. An earlier study situating this approach to asylum seekers and refugees within the context of a welfare state (the Netherlands) argued that welfare states’ main aim is to help the weaker categories of people in a society (Ghorashi, 2010). Despite this noble promise, an unintended consequence is a fixation on the shortcomings of disadvantaged groups that denies their lived experiences. Ignoring asylum seekers’ agency and narratability can eventually lead to their silencing in institutional settings (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017).

While the literature on URM initially focused on their vulnerability and the psychosocial impact of their past experiences, we have observed a shift towards focusing on their current lives and the challenges they face in their country of destination (Enejajor, 2008; Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh, 2019). This shift also calls for a much-needed focus on the discourses and politics of care in their host communities (Ghaemina, 2022, p. 89). Ghaemina identified three discursive approaches to framing URM in the Dutch context. The first type of discursive frame looks at URM as an extremely vulnerable group of people who require rescue through additional psychosocial help, protection, and care (Adaku et al., 2016; Crawley, 2010; Huijsmans, 2011; Müller et al., 2019; Vervliet et al., 2015; Watters, 2008; Wells, 2011; Wernesjö, 2014). The second type of frame shows URM as dangerous. Such frames portray URM as deviants, damaged children, not “real” children, potential adult liars, problem groups seeking unjustified advantages, and so on (Crawley, 2010, 2011; Eastmond, 2007; Ghorashi, 2010; Ghorashi et al., 2018; Lems et al., 2020). The third type of frame looks at URM from the perspectives of lack and deficit. Such frames tend to view URM as economically, socially, and culturally “other,” as defective, and as ungrateful to their country of destination (Crawley, 2011). These three discursive framings have a direct impact on the policies of reception and care for URM and on the host societies.

In the Netherlands, the state is not directly involved in the care of URM, such as those in this study. Instead, responsibility for the custody of all URM is delegated to Stichting Nidos, the national guardianship institution for unaccompanied and separated children in the Netherlands. Nidos assigns each child a legal guardian and mentors—the mentors make sure the child eats properly, goes to school, and lives where they are supposed to live. Nidos oversees these arrangements and has agreements with several URM organizations (contract partners) that provide care for minors. URM generally stay under Nidos’s custody until the age of 18. After that, the municipality they live in takes over responsibility for care, assistance, and housing (Schippers, 2017,

p. 33). URM's first encounter with the formal institutions in the Netherlands is the Aliens Police. After the registration and screening process, Nidos assumes guardianship as stipulated by the 2014 Dutch Civil Code (Art. 1:253r). Nidos further ensures a smooth follow-up of the asylum procedure and legal representation as mandated by the Ministry of Security and Justice (Goeman & van Os, 2013; Zijlstra et al., 2017). The asylum procedure starts with a summons from the Immigration and Naturalization Service for subsequent interviews and eventually results in a positive or negative asylum decision with the right to appeal. Regardless of one's prospects for receiving asylum, accommodation must be provided, and Nidos remains the sole guardian of all minors.

There are three categories of housing for URM's. The first category is for minors whose asylum applications are not processed right away. These facilities are only for URM's without a residency permit, either because they are in the process of the prolonged asylum procedure or because their asylum request has been denied. These minors face uncertain residency prospects and have a high probability of being refused a residency permit. They are therefore not transferred to the municipality but remain under the care of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. The second category of housing is for minors who have obtained a residency permit. After their initial stay at the Ter Apel Reception Centre for Unaccompanied Minors, these minors are transferred to one of the small-scale shelters located throughout the Netherlands. The third category of housing is foster families for children with or without residency permits. The choice of location is based on the minor's age, vulnerability, and the idea that children do best in families from their own (or similar) culture, which helps them maintain their cultural identity.

In the small-scale shelters, children are housed together under the care of mentors. KWGs (*kinder woongroep*, or a children's residential group) usually house children aged 15 and older in groups of six to 10. They have mentors on site 24 hours a day. KWEs (*kleine wooneenheid*, or small residential units) are usually for 16- and 17-year-olds who are considered capable of living almost independently. They usually live in groups of four to five and can contact mentors 24 hours a day (Schippers, 2017). Our study focuses mostly on this group.

### 3. Methodology

Our main research questions were the following: What are the institutional silencing practices encountered by Eritrean URM's? How do Eritrean URM's engage with these practices through different forms of agency? We used data from two years of participant observations and interviews with Eritrean URM's collected over two years (2016–2018). As a researcher in the youth care system, the first author was able to gain access to the URM's and establish a relationship of trust with them. This helped to gauge the power balance (Kydd, 2006, p. 450) and allowed the URM's to speak about their troubling experiences with various institutions over the years. The first author conducted 15 interviews, four of which will be presented here. Interviews were conducted in Tigrinya and Arabic, and excerpts were translated into English for this article.

URM participants were selected based on snowball-effect techniques and trust-building mechanisms. Building on his long-term relationships with this group, the first author invited the URM's for an interview via phone calls and WhatsApp messages. Most interviews were conducted in the URM's' homes. Occasionally, they took place in parks, on public benches, or sidewalks. In choosing the four narratives selected for this article, we considered the duration of stay in the Netherlands (between two or three years at the time of the interview)

and the extent of institutional silencing experienced by the URM<sub>s</sub> involved. The participating URM<sub>s</sub> permitted the first author to take notes during the interviews but not to make audio or video recordings, as they were uncomfortable with being recorded. This stemmed in part from political divisions in the Eritrean community and the fear that what they said could implicate them here in the Netherlands as well as back in Eritrea. Thus, no recordings of the interviews were made (following Bozzini, 2011; Plaut, 2016). The first author paid special attention to the affective and highly sensitive nature of the data-gathering process involving children. He was guided by Vervliet et al.'s (2015) insightful study identifying several critical features of research involving URM<sub>s</sub>, including the “freedom not to participate,” “building mutual bonds,” “taking responsibility,” “acknowledging requests,” “channelling emotions,” and “not rushing out” of the research process (pp. 477–479). Inductive thematic analysis was applied to the emerging data while reading the qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). The two authors then thoroughly examined and reflected upon emerging themes: “skipping school,” “rebellious through one’s faith,” “acting dumb,” “dealing with impossible demands,” and “plotting against the authorities” were extracted from the data and will be discussed next.

To gain participants’ approval in an ethical way, we adhered to three key practices: (a) establishing relational trust and maintaining good rapport with participants—the first author is related to URM<sub>s</sub> linguistically and culturally; (b) obtaining verbal consent—building relational trust was more important than the narrow process of signing forms (Metro, 2014); and (c) creating a safe space to gain verbal consent not only once but repeatedly over time. We were constantly mindful of the sensitivity of participants’ needs and concerns, especially avoiding the reproduction of any trauma. Additionally, the conventional rules of conducting research with children and other vulnerable groups—such as doing no harm, avoiding data traceability, and obtaining verbal consent—were carefully observed during the interviews. These methods emerged from a broader interaction context that enabled more intimate and trusting relationships, that is, through active listening and investing more time and energy in building trust.

## 4. Setting the Scene: A Brief Overview of the Selected Biographies

In what follows, we present narratives from four URM<sub>s</sub>—Daniel, Yonatan, Ghirmay, and Sham (all pseudonyms)—reflecting institutional silencing and agency in various institutional contexts.

### 4.1. Daniel's Story

Daniel, a 17-year-old, was born to a farming family in the Eritrean village of Segheneyti in 2002. He left Eritrea in 2017 and lived in various refugee camps in Ethiopia before entering Sudan. After a long journey through Sudan and Libya, he finally arrived in the Netherlands almost a year later. The first author met Daniel in a local school, where he was trying to get access to schooling. Records kept by his guardian indicated aggression, sometimes physical, and withdrawal from social interaction with mentors and translators. When Daniel appeared for an intake at the school, he was wearing a hat. The school principal immediately asked him to take off his hat, which Daniel did reluctantly. Later, Daniel heard the principal describe him as “rude.” This judgmental description was probably based in part on what the principal had read in a reference letter accompanying Daniel’s application. So his prejudices were seemingly confirmed by Daniel’s chosen attire for the intake. Hearing the principal’s remark, Daniel got up and left the room with some antagonism. There was no follow-up from either the school or the principal after that, and Daniel did not continue with his education. The negative atmosphere in this encounter was set even before the meeting because Daniel’s legal guardian

had shared an unfavourable appraisal of him. Even worse, as Daniel pointed out, the legal guardian was not proactive in the dialogue with the principal. After this incident, other schools did not welcome him.

From Daniel's perspective, when he met with the school principal, he was complying with the norms that regulate admission into an educational institution in the Netherlands. His compliance and his resistance towards such norms need to be situated within his life history, which shows almost no educational experience in Eritrea. Daniel's initial compliance was a form of agency as was his antagonistic expression of tension over wearing a hat and his storming out of the meeting room, which resulted in his withdrawal from the situation. His behaviour illustrates a shortcoming in negotiating unfamiliar contexts and cultural expectations. But the judgement of Daniel's apparent antisocial behaviour is best understood as resulting from specific images of refugees (in this case as being rude) determining the interaction with the school principal. Daniel's account reveals a specific instance of silencing by putting more emphasis on his hat instead of focusing on what he really needs. We see this as an instance of what Clark called oppressive silencing brought on by a school principal's and legal guardian's apparent lack of imagination and empathy. Instead of focusing on Daniel's circumstances and subjectivities, more emphasis was placed on Daniel's defiance of the norms and etiquettes, which were then framed as bad and aggressive behaviour.

This story also evokes a double standard regarding Daniel's guardian. His guardian serves as a parental and protector figure, but he is also a silencing figure who fails to listen to Daniel and make real contact with him and who amplifies the negative portrayal of Daniel by sharing his personal files and records with the school principal. Additionally, the guardian could have prevented this negative portrayal by better preparing Daniel for the meeting with the principal. Thus, Daniel was put in a precarious position in which he felt compelled to act out, even against his caregivers.

Daniel is a minor who is dependent on the principal's approval for education, but he does not know how to act properly to get accepted into school. The combination of his guardian failing to help him navigate the system, the principal not looking beyond the negative images presented to him, the guardian and principal setting the agenda for the meeting, and the young boy who cannot control his temper led to Daniel's long-term exclusion from the education system. Luke's three dimensions of power are at play here. The first dimension is visible when Daniel is abruptly denied an education opportunity by the school principal. The second dimension is seen in how the guardian sent unfavourable information about Daniel and in how he and the principal set the agenda without input from Daniel. However, the third dimension is much more relevant because, in this meeting, it was taken for granted that Daniel and his guardian should listen to the principal rather than the other way around.

This example of institutional silencing highlights the discursive power of certain images and expectations. Yet, it also shows the negative consequences of Daniel's agency in claiming his dignity and the inability of institutional actors to connect to his lifeworld and to help him navigate the system properly so he could access the education that is obligatory in the Netherlands.

#### **4.2. Yonatan's Story**

Yonatan is a 12-year-old boy from the Senafe's Forto neighbourhood in Eritrea. He fled the country in 2017. His first two attempts were not successful, and after the second one, he was apprehended by Eritrean guards

who imprisoned and violently interrogated him. On his third attempt, he successfully crossed to Ethiopia. After a year-long journey, he finally made it to the Netherlands in the summer of 2018. Yonatan first lived with a foster family where he was happy because he was participating in extracurricular activities. However, when that foster family ceased fostering minors like him, he was transferred to another foster family he disliked and various problems started to emerge. He had a roommate at this home and did not sleep well in the bunk bed. His back would hurt so much that he had to sleep on a mattress on the floor. He told his foster mother about the situation, and she assured him she was doing everything she could without truly addressing the issue. The decision to move him from the first foster family, whom he had bonded with, disregarded his preferences and affected his education. The move meant that he had to change schools, and the bus ride to his new school made him feel nauseous. His requests to change to a closer school were ignored, and so his attendance became sporadic: he would show up or disappear on a whim. For Yonatan, refusing to go to school was the only way he could express his agency in a context that ignored his requests. Using the “truancy card” got the attention of the institutions involved and forced them to reconsider the decisions that had been made for him. Yonatan stayed with the second foster family until he was reunited with his biological mother through family reunification in 2019.

Institutional silencing and Yonatan’s acts of agency also occurred within the school. On one of the days Yonatan decided to attend school, an incident happened in his cooking class, which he narrated as follows:

The teacher asked us all to make a dish in the cooking class. I made a nice dish, but when it came to explaining the dish and tasting it, I refused to taste it because I was fasting. So, the teacher was pretty upset with me, and I told him the reason that I was fasting and that I am not allowed to eat any products of meat, butter, or milk [according to Coptic Orthodox faith, such products cannot be eaten during fasting]. But I did not expect that they [the school] would call the guardian.

This quote shows that when Yonatan’s faith-based choices did not fit the school norms, he became singled out and silenced. However, Yonatan was active in the process rather than docile. We can identify several aspects regarding the nexus of agency and institutional silencing in this story. Yonatan refuses to taste his cooking class food, arguing that it is against the rules of his faith-based fasting. When Yonatan and the first author further discussed the issue, he argued that openly discussing his fasting experience could negatively impact its authenticity. Furthermore, there is a misunderstanding between Yonatan and authority figures, revealing a clear mismatch in their understanding of the appropriate roles for the teacher, the school principal, and his guardian and mentors. Hence, silencing happened through sidelining factors such as taking Yonatan away from a family he was attached to without honouring his wishes. This shows Lukes’s hegemonic operation of power through which institutional choices are privileged above participants’ preferences. It is also shown in authority figures’ fixating on dominant forms of performance in school regardless of faith-based limitations. Yonatan, however, showed agency by using truancy to attempt to be relocated back to the family he was closely attached to, and he tried to gain control over his life by asserting his faith.

### **4.3. Ghirmay’s Story**

Ghirmay is from a small town called Aligieder in the western part of Eritrea. He comes from a family with strong religious attachments. Ghirmay lived in Sudan for some time before embarking on his perilous journey to Europe, eventually arriving in the Netherlands in 2018, where he had lived for less than two years when



interviewed. Ghirmay's caregivers were worried that he may need intensive guidance. He would turn 18 in a few months, and his caregivers thought he might face some difficulties afterwards. One reason for their concern was a previous incident that involved the police.

The interview with Ghirmay took place in the kitchen. After sitting together in silence, the conversation slid towards the "incident with the police." Ghirmay was allegedly involved in a traffic collision with a car, but he insisted that it was not him. An excerpt from that conversation with the first author (FA) follows:

FA: Would you mind telling me about the "incident with the police"?

Ghirmay: I thought I explained it well, and the issue is closed. Why are they raising it again? It was not me, and I did not do it. That was not me. Listen, the day they say "the incident" happened, I was not even in this place. I was somewhere else. In fact, I was at my previous residence. I was not even transferred here yet.

FA: Why do the police think you have something to do with it?

Ghirmay: I do not know. But a while ago, I lost my wallet in [name of a city in the Netherlands], and I found it after a couple of days. Maybe someone has used my ID. I do not know. I am saying "maybe." All I know is that it was not me who was involved in that incident. Do they have some sort of photo of me or any video of me? I think they have none. So, this does not make sense.

As this situation continued, Ghirmay started to protest against the allegations by refusing to cooperate with his mentors and coaches because they would not believe he was speaking the truth. He protested by completely ignoring them and refusing to do the routines expected of him. For example, he spent time doing things for his church and his church community rather than fulfilling expectations where he lived. In this way, he defied the rules but did not engage in overt conflict with his coaches and mentors. He was subtly resisting with a smile because he felt his side of the story was silenced. After months of waiting and trying to convince his caregivers, Ghirmay was cleared of all charges. The police investigation found that he was not involved in the traffic incident. He knew all along that he was speaking the truth, but everyone was sceptical about his story. During this time, instead of working towards disproving his mentors' and guardians' scepticism, Ghirmay drifted away from them by protesting and disregarding them and every rule and protocol the care system adheres to.

To deal with the negative silencing (Clark, 2020) he was facing (i.e., his caregivers not believing his side of the story), Ghirmay used his faith as a means of expressing his grievances in a quiet, gentle, and non-aggressive way. In other words, he focused on his faith instead of his caregivers' requests. His strict adherence to his faith had earned him respect among his peers, and he worked to maintain that respect during this time. Ghirmay's case reveals how URM's like him deal with the institutional silencing process they face, that of not being listened to and not being believed. In his case, Ghirmay expressed agency by refusing to cooperate with his mentors and drifting more towards his faith.

#### 4.4. Sham's Story

Sham is a 17-year-old boy, hailing from the southern part of Eritrea, who had been living in the Netherlands for less than two years when he was interviewed in 2018. At first, he found it challenging to talk about his life. After some time, however, he explained that his lack of focus was due to his involvement in a court case with his friends. Initially, he told the same story he had told the police. However, when probed further, he changed his account and admitted that the incident did happen. This is the story as he recounted it:

We went to the city to socialize with my friends. We were having fun. We had a couple of beers. We went outside, and it was quite late. One guy was passing by on a scooter and he uttered an “F” towards us without any reason. And we were upset and we ran after him. We threw bottles and stones. The guy vanished but then he returned with police officers. He accused us of assault and of damaging a part of the scooter, and he wanted 300 euros in compensation. We denied all the allegations. My friends and I had decided not to talk to the police, and we had all agreed to keep our mouths shut. Little did we know that there was a neighbour who saw everything from the window and had a few camera images of the street.

After narrating the story, Sham added that he had been thinking about the case a lot and wanted it all to go away so he could focus on his life here and the family reunification procedure he had been working on. But he had dreaded telling his story for fear of betraying his friends:

I do not want to betray my friends. You see, we promised each other that we would not tell a soul. If I tell you, I will be small in front of my friends. I will be a snitch, basically, and I do not want to be that way. Do you see what I mean here; it is so difficult for me as well.

In Sham's story, agency is present in the form of self-silencing, by emphasizing his loyalty to his friends while ignoring all charges against him. Group involvement and loyalty have been central to his mode of existence at various stages of his journey. Thus, choosing to be loyal to his friends is an existential choice for him: without his group of friends and peers, he is nothing. Nonetheless, his well-intentioned caregivers were asking Sham to make the difficult choice to tell what had happened, and so he had responded to these motions and pressures with self-silencing and denials. Sham eventually agreed to confess his involvement to the judge, and he somehow managed not to implicate his friends when he apologized. Luckily, the case and the charges were dropped, and the judge granted Sham clemency in view of his past traumatic experiences.

Sham's agency through self-silencing is especially interesting here. The URM community has a common saying: ትም፡ ሕትም, loosely translated as “quiet and quell.” Another common expression is ኣይፈልጥን እዮ፡ ሓንቲ እያ፡ ደፈልጥ'ዮ ግን ብተሕ ሕቶ ኣለዎ, which translates to “if you say ‘I don't know,’ it is one definite thing; if you say ‘I know,’ you tend to invite many questions.” In other words, self-silencing is an act of survival (Clark, 2020, p. 365). Sham was highly dependent on the familiar resources and strategies he knew well: to remain silent and lay low. Such behaviour makes sense. Throughout their difficult journeys, many URM's like Sham discovered that secrecy, caution, and discretion were effective strategies when facing various challenges. These strategies also helped them to gain control and express their agency. Sham's response was therefore consistent with what he had been doing for a long time. However, he had not considered the contextual differences at play. In describing his strategies, Sham remarked:

If you are quiet and act dumb, an official or caregiver exerts more energy and time to help you. If you are lucky, you get sympathy, and if you are really lucky, you get empathy as well. But if you act smart, people do not care about you. They just leave you on your own to struggle with the system. So, why would I be smart? I will lay low!

This quote illustrates that Sham had learned how to respond to and navigate the language of help. It also reveals why many minors prefer to “act dumb”—acting smart makes people not care about you.

## 5. Discussion

This article explored the institutional silencing practices URM from Eritrea encounter and the different ways they engage with those practices. Our analysis of Daniel’s, Yonatan’s, Ghirmay’s, and Sham’s stories reveals that URM employ diverse forms of agency—defying educational and social norms, committing truancy, disrupting daily routines, or even testing boundaries in a cooking class—to combat institutional silencing. We drew inspiration from Ortner (2006) and Mahmood (2001) who defined agency more broadly than as only visible and vocal acts of resistance to power structures. This broader framework enabled us to show the variety of ways in which URM engage with power.

Lukes’s three dimensions of power are reflected in all four stories presented. For instance, the first and second dimensions are seen in decisions being made based on the image of URM as rude and problematic, such as when school authorities set the agenda of a meeting because a URM fails to fulfil certain school norms or when they call a URM’s guardian because he refuses to taste the food he made in class. This also connects to what Clark (2020) calls oppressive silencing. The third dimension of power is reflected in underlying assumptions about URM as liars or criminals, which influence how various institutions interact with them. This connects to shifting discourses about asylum seekers “as risk” (Gray & Franck, 2019) and to dominant discursive approaches that frame URM as dangerous and not fitting the norm (Ghaemina, 2022). These are clear examples of what Clark refers to as discursive silencing.

All four cases also demonstrate that the URM acted in agentic ways by engaging in truancy, abstaining from tasting food, undermining routines with a smile, using faith as a source of resilience, or using silence as a survival strategy. Furthermore, their actions demonstrate their role as social agents capable of acting from the margins (Ortner, 2006). Clark adds to this by considering silence as a form of agency and as a survival tactic. Religion also played a significant role as a tool for coping with institutional silencing. Ghirmay’s case illustrates his use of faith as agency, especially when his caregivers did not believe him regarding the police incident. Ghirmay’s faith gave him the strength to refuse to play the game, which was informed by hegemonic discourse (Lukes’s third dimension of power) that considered him a liar and untrustworthy.

Various studies have emphasized different forms of agency by (young) asylum seekers in the Dutch context (Ghaemina, 2022; Ghorashi, 2005; Ghorashi et al., 2018; Pozzo & Ghorashi, 2022; van Liempt, 2023). However, what is significant about this study is the choice of community-embedded self-imposed silence to subvert institutional silencing. Sham built trust and loyalty among his peers through self-silencing and secrecy. But his actions also facilitated leniency from the judicial system and displayed a distinct form of agency. Sayings from the URM community, such as “quiet and quell” and “if you say ‘I don’t know,’ it is one definite thing; if you say ‘I know,’ you invite many questions,” reveal how self-silencing and secrecy serve as a form of agency within

institutional practices of silence. So, Sham's behaviour (in line with the Eritrean saying about laying low) is a way of engaging with a system to survive, of playing the game to get the help he needs rather than the help the system thinks he needs. As Clark noted, silence has a survival value. In this respect, Sham and other URM are using silence strategically, choosing when to speak and when not to speak. Ortnor (2006) refers to this as agents' capability to play their own "serious game" in changing the challenge and changing the world around them. In this study, we demonstrated the value of less dominating forms of agency (i.e., delayed or docile forms; Mahmood, 2001) in how URM deal with the power of institutional silencing practices. We thereby revealed an example of discursive power in which caregivers are blinded by generalized images of URM or refugees, which limits how caregivers engage with them. In self-silencing their smart side, URM like Sham show they are quite reflective about the context and the discursive power involved.

## 6. Conclusion

Returning to Sinit, whose friends and companions carried their soulmate in the funeral procession, a multitude of questions arise. How and why did Sinit fall into silence and ultimately choose suicide? What options did a 17-year-old girl like her have? What could have been done differently to support her? There are many contributing factors in the world of URM: the hard journey, the experience of not being heard, of being mistrusted, misunderstood, and ignored, and the persistence of negative images. URM often do not have a voice; others make choices for them. They need to self-silence to fit the dominant image as people who do not have agency, and by doing so, they might actually forget their own strength that got them all the way to the Netherlands. As the narratives we presented have shown, in the Dutch context, there are subtle forms of exclusion even when the intention is to help. The negative images of URM embedded within the dominant Dutch discourse of (young) refugees have a strong silencing effect. Some of the stories we presented reveal that even if URM show agency, it might work against them, especially in structures where the power of exclusion does not work in an explicit way. What might have been effective agency during their journey to the Netherlands, which involved explicit forms of power and exclusion, does not always work in contexts where power works in more subtle ways. The institutional silencing creates confusion for URM compared to clear structures of oppression that they can fight against. However, as we have tried to show, URM's lack of success in resisting institutional silencing does not mean they have no agency. The URM in the stories we presented found ways to negotiate the power structure. Unless mechanisms of care based on what they need are put into policy, URM will continue to take matters into their own hands, even to the extent of self-silencing through suicide.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Nidos for their collaboration and support, including providing us with access to URM during this research. Nidos had no influence in the research findings or the writing of this article.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

Participants in this study did not give consent for their data to be shared publicly. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to [n.a.kusmallah@vu.nl](mailto:n.a.kusmallah@vu.nl).

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