

# Missing Eritrean minors and young adults

Information report

Centre of Expertise  
on Human Trafficking  
& Migrant Smuggling



- No indications of human trafficking or migrant smuggling
- Research period 1 January 2020 to 1 November 2021
- Classification: open publication

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## Colophon

The Centre of Expertise on Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling (Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel & Mensensmokkel, EMM) is a collaboration between the Netherlands Police, the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, the Netherlands Labour Authority, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the Public Prosecution Service.

At the EMM, indications and criminal investigations into human trafficking and migrant smuggling converge and are subsequently translated into operational, tactical and strategic products based on which the partner organizations can apply their criminal or civil law authorities.

The EMM uses stock photography; the persons depicted in the images are not part of the cases discussed in this report.

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## Reason for the report

At the end of 2020, a minor Eritrean girl is reported missing to the police by her family, a few days after she reported for family reunification in the Netherlands. In response, the police asked the Centre of Expertise on Human Trafficking and Human Smuggling (in Dutch: Expertisecentrum Mensenhandel en Mensensmokkel, abbreviated as EMM) what could be the reason behind her disappearance. Could it involve a sham marriage as a form of human smuggling, forced marriage, any other type of coercion, etc.? Furthermore, the police asked the EMM whether there had been more of these disappearances and whether a trend could be discerned. Research by the EMM showed that in 2020, other minor Eritrean girls were reported missing in the Netherlands as well and have not yet been located. In addition, young adult Eritrean women have gone missing. In 2021, once again Eritrean minor and young adult women appear to be missing. Therefore, the EMM monitored this phenomenon until the end of 2021 and recorded the research findings in this report.

## Research findings

In the year 2020, a couple of minor Eritrean girls were reported missing in the Netherlands. There appear to be similarities between these missing persons. They all traveled to the Netherlands based on the family reunification procedure, to join relatives already resident in the Netherlands. The Eritrean girls had legal residence in the Netherlands at the time of their disappearance. Most of them had only been in the Netherlands for a short period of time. In some cases, they went missing before they reported to the registration centre for family reunification, which renders identification by means of fingerprints impossible. The girls were reported missing by relatives, who usually did not appear to be worried, but rather seemed to resign themselves to the disappearance and did not ask for an official police report to be drawn up. In a few cases, a relative indicated that the missing girl may be abroad, but this could not be confirmed officially. There is no apparent connection between the disappearances of the minor girls. A criminal investigation has been launched following one of the missing girls, but the whereabouts of this girl are as yet unknown. At present, there has been no evidence of human trafficking or migrant smuggling.

Beföre 2020, namely between 2016 and 2019, several young adult Eritrean women and several minor Eritrean boys have been reported missing in the Netherlands as well. In some of the cases in which a criminal investigation has been started, the missing person turned out to have traveled abroad. In other cases, there were sometimes suspicions (from the family) that the missing person is abroad, but the police have not been able to confirm these suspicions. The criminal investigations that were started, have been discontinued due to the lack of leads on their whereabouts or a motive for their departure. There has been no evidence of human trafficking or migrant smuggling to date. Before 2016, Eritrean minors and young adults also went missing. In 2016, the EMM conducted research into Eritreans in the Netherlands. This research showed that in 2014 and early 2015, a couple of reports were made of disappearances of Eritrean women who had entered the Netherlands based on the family reunification procedure. The police were able to trace that some of these women applied for asylum in Sweden, using different personal details.

In the summer of 2021, there were again reports of a couple of missing Eritrean girls. The situation was similar: they were in the Netherlands for a very short period of time (on their way to the registration centre) when they disappeared, the family did not seem concerned and no indications of human trafficking or migrant smuggling were discovered. The EMM inquired through Europol whether this trend had also been spotted in other countries. Denmark, Sweden and Italy indicated

that they do not recognize the trend. Belgium has been noticing since 2016 that Somalis and Eritreans travel to Belgium for family reunification and subsequently disappear to unknown destinations. It mainly concerns Eritrean women and one of them was found in Sweden under a different identity. Belgium also refers to a call from Norway to crosscheck their list of missing Eritreans, as a result of which Belgium was able to locate two of the missing persons on the list.

Scientific research shows that there are concrete indications of abuse of the family reunification procedure by Eritreans. During the Provisional Residence Permit procedure, persons falsely present themselves as relatives and thus gain access to the Netherlands in order to subsequently submit an individual asylum application, possibly first traveling on to another EU country. There are no indications that this is happening in an organized manner. The Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) has taken steps to curb abuse of this procedure. However, given the constant disappearances of Eritreans who appealed to the family reunification procedure, the modus operandi in question, which was already observed in 2014, still seems to be applied.

## Conclusion and recommendations

In response to recent disappearances of Eritrean minors, the EMM has researched into indications of human trafficking and migrant smuggling with regard to this phenomenon. The missing minors traveled to the Netherlands through the family reunification procedure to join (so-called) relatives who already reside in the Netherlands. They were often in the Netherlands for a short period of time when they went missing and their relatives did not seem to be concerned. Since 2014 to present, several dozen disappearances of minor or young adult Eritrean women have been reported in the Netherlands, and, to a lesser extent, minor Eritrean boys. This trend has also been recognized by other European countries. Sometimes the missing persons are found in another European country (under a different identity). To date, no indications of human trafficking or migrant smuggling have been identified. Scientific research has shown that the family reunification procedure is being abused as a means to gain access to the Netherlands, in order to subsequently submit an individual asylum application (possibly in another EU country). There are no indications that this takes place in an organized manner. Steps have been taken to contain abuse of the Provisional Residence Permit procedure, but the ongoing disappearances seem to indicate that the abuse continues.

The government authorities involved are recommended to be alert to indications of departure during their contact with Eritrean persons who have traveled to the Netherlands through the family reunification procedure and to ensure identification by taking fingerprints as soon as possible. In the event of a missing person, a fingerprint could help to locate the person, which may help to gain more insight into the phenomenon of missing Eritreans from the Netherlands and in Europe.



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