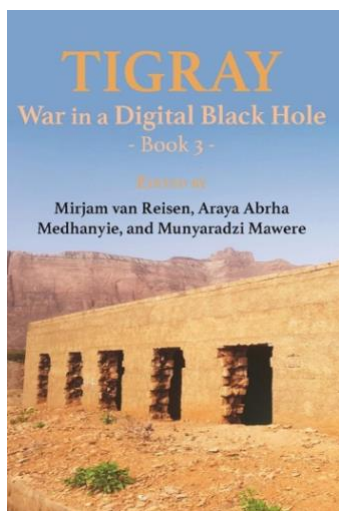


“If We Break, our Society Breaks”: Researchers’ Agony and Resilience in Times of War

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The list of figures in colour can be found here: https://raee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Figures_Tigray.-War-in-a-Digital-Black-Hole-Volume-3-1.pdf

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“If We Break, our Society Breaks”:

Researchers’ Agony and Resilience in Times of War

Araya Abrha Medhanyie & Alem Desta Wuneh

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*What is written is remembered to;
what [only exists] in words is forgotten.*

Abstract

In this research, the challenges faced by the researchers in Tigray during the 2020–2022 war were inventorised, as well as their sources of resilience, which included support from family and friends. Based on interviews with 34 researchers, the research explored the agency of researchers and the dilemmas they faced. The researchers did not predict the magnitude of the war and felt powerless given the magnitude of loss and devastation. Challenges included a siege, a communication and Internet lock-down, being without income, and the experience of atrocities and death within families and communities. Hysteresis explains the lack of preparedness of the researchers to face an entirely unexpected situation. Feelings of being betrayed by Ethiopia motivated many researchers to explore how more independence could be obtained for Tigray towards a greater sense of security. Most researchers expressed a strong belief that research can contribute to understanding the causes of the vicious wars in the Horn of Africa and to breaking the cycle of violence. The research advocates for recognition of the role of academia in promoting solutions to conflict.

Keywords: researchers, Tigray war, resilience, hysteresis, adaptation, agency

Introduction¹

In October 2020, Mekelle University convened an extraordinary meeting with its academic staff: they were to prepare for war. The escalating tensions in Ethiopia, coupled with the fraught relationship between the government and the region of Tigray, signalled that conflict was both inevitable and imminent. In the weeks leading up to the outbreak of war, the university urged its staff to mentally prepare and develop strategies to bolster their resilience.² But how does one prepare for a war when the extent of its brutality and duration remains uncertain?

Researchers are presumed to be resilient when exposed to challenging situations and crises (Ansoms, 2020; Siveres & Alves, 2022). They are seen as having capacity to anticipate and predict uncertainties, manage crises, be the voice of their society, and speak truth to power. As intellectuals, they are expected to put themselves in the driving seat of investigations and innovations. Research leaders, who have prior experience working in unstable situations and crises, have a much better understanding, empathy, and courage to take risks and express solidarity to support and maintain research partnerships (Bentele, 2020).

Recent published literature on researchers' challenges, resilience, and dilemmas in times of war and crisis tend to focus on the challenges of researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main challenges of academicians were perceived to be an inability to undertake face-to-face interviews, the difficulty in holding conferences, travel restrictions, and the lack of funding and partnerships (Kumar, 2019). However, the situation of academic researchers in a war situation is not comparable to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study, therefore, explores the researchers' challenges and resilience during war.

¹ This chapter reflects on the perceptions represented in the timeframe of the research among a population in Tigray. This should not be generalised and does not have inflammatory intent. The objective is not to contribute to conflict, the objective is to provide insights and understanding.

² Notes on communication by KB to MvR (November 2020).

The Horn of Africa is one of the world's most unstable and war-torn regions (Kurtzer *et al.*, 2022), with most of the states in the region having experienced civil war. The war in Ethiopia's Tigray was one of the deadliest and bloodiest wars that recently occurred in the region. Tigray was engaged in war from 3 November 2020 to 2 November 2022 (ICHREE, 2023; Africa Union, 2022). The federal government of Ethiopia and its allied forces – the Amhara regional police, militia, the Fano vigilante group, and the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF) waged war in Tigray. The war occurred while Tigray was fighting the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

During the war, Tigray was put under total siege and communication blackout (Kumar *et al.*, 2022); the government shut down all governmental and public services, all means of communication were completely shut down, the movement from and to Tigray was restricted, bank services were frozen, and all humanitarian and lifesaving assistance was blocked (Abay *et al.*, 2022; Amare *et al.*, 2024; Kabsay, 2024).

According to global reports, 600,000 people may have been killed, and more than two million displaced in the war (Pilling & Schipani, 2023). The joint investigation by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch concluded that large-scale war crimes and crimes against humanity were committed by the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) and allied forces on civilians in Tigray (Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, 2022). Additionally, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy report concluded that members of the ENDF, Amhara Special Regional Forces (ASF), and the EDF committed genocide against Tigrayans (New Lines Institute for strategy and policy, 2024).

All four universities in Tigray; Adigrat, Aksum, Maichew, and Mekelle Universities, were closed during the war and turned into military camps. Adigrat and Aksum Universities were even shelled and badly damaged. Libraries, laboratory settings, and classrooms were damaged and looted (Nyssen *et al.*, 2021). Most academic and research staff were either displaced, had unknown status, or had their very survival threatened as salaries were not paid. The war adversely

affected the teaching-learning, research, and community services (Nyssen *et al.*, 2021).

The events of the war and siege created a lot of strain on researchers, both in a practical and logistical sense, as well as in a mental and emotional sense. This research explores the coping strategies that were used by researchers during these unusual times. The study will answer the following research question: *What was the agency of researchers located in Tigray, during the two years of the Tigray war, what challenges did they meet and what did they develop as coping strategies to increase their resilience?*

The research question was divided into three sub-questions:

RQ1. Challenges of researchers: What were the main challenges that the researchers encountered and found difficult to absorb during the war?

RQ2. Resilience of researchers: how did the researchers at the individual level adapt to the challenges related to the war? What individual capacities did the researchers have to adapt to the shocks and maintain their research activities?

RQ3. Agency of researchers: how did the researchers view their situation? How did they act upon their interpretation of their situation?

Theoretical framework

Research is conducted within an ecosystem. The research ecosystem includes the researcher, research participants, research institution, funding organisation, the community in the study area, and concerned stakeholders. The political, social, and economic conditions have an impact on research undertakings and projects in any setting.

Researchers' resilience was explored from both a system and an individual perspective. To explore the researchers' resilience, the theoretical frameworks of systems resilience, everyday resilience, and human agency were combined. The word 'resilience' originates from the Latin prefix 're-' (back) and the verb 'salire' (to jump, leap) (Biddle 2020 *et al.*). The conceptual framework developed by Blanchet *et al.* (2017) was based on systems thinking and complexity theories. In this

framework, the resilience of a system refers to the capacity to absorb, adapt, and transform when exposed to a shock and still maintain the same control over its structure and functions. This framework characterised the management of systems resilience in terms of four interlinked dimensions: 1) Knowledge: the capacity to collect, integrate, and analyse different forms of knowledge and information; 2) Uncertainties: the ability to anticipate and cope with uncertainties and surprises; 3) Interdependence: the capacity to manage interdependence, to engage effectively with and handle multiple- and cross-scale dynamics and feedback; and; 4) Legitimacy: the capacity to build or develop legitimate institutions that are socially accepted and contextually adapted.

These four dimensions are interpreted considering the concept of everyday resilience and human agency to explore the challenges. Hanley-Dafoe identified five core competencies of everyday resilience at the individual level (Hanley-Dafoe, 2020). These are belonging, perspective, acceptance, hope, and humour. Everyday resilience is the ability of an individual to continue delivering services during ongoing challenges and strain. It is the result of a combination of absorptive, adaptive, and transformative strategies that actors in systems adopt in responding to strain (Béné *et al.*, 2012).

The core competencies associated with everyday resilience at a personal level are related to and better explained with the theoretical framework of human agency. Agency is the ability to understand the world and act accordingly. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) theoretically conceptualised human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). Bourdieu explained that shifts occurred over time between forward and backward switches in periods of social crisis, requiring adaptations; this phenomenon is termed hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1990).

Research method

The study took place at Mekelle University, the leading university in Tigray and one of the top three universities in the country for publishing research outputs, including project-related documents in reputable journals before the war. During the war, the university was severely attacked, damaged, and looted. All campuses of the university, including Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital and College of Health Sciences, were turned into military camps and safe fortresses for the Allied forces (Nyssen *et al.*, 2021).

The study used a phenomenological study design (Creswell, 2013) to explore researchers' lived experiences with the challenges, resilience, and dilemmas during the two-year war. A total of 34 (29 male and 5 female) researchers participated in the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with eight researchers and by email with 32. Six of the researchers participated in both interviews while two researchers only participated in the face-to-face interview. The investigators (AAM and ADW) and two research assistants conducted the face-to-face interviews while the email interviews were carried out by the principal investigator (AAM).

The participants for the study was selected based on their engagement in research during the war and their affiliation with ongoing research projects. Participants included researchers at the university, PhD students, and research staff working on research projects. The study was restricted to academics and researchers from Mekelle University due to movement restrictions, communication blackouts, and the total siege imposed on Tigray. These limitations inhibited the recruitment of researchers from other universities, such as Adigrat, Aksum, and Raya.

Of the 34 participants, 17 had an academic rank of assistant professor or above, 11 were lecturers, and 6 were non-academic research staff. At the outset or during the time of war, 14 of them were PhD students. Of the participants, 29 were health researchers including 4 medical doctors, who were engaged in clinical activities in the hospital. In addition, 4 of the participants conducted research in data science and digital health, 5 were social science researchers, 1 was an anthropologist, 2 were political science and international relations,

and 2 had backgrounds in journalism and communication. All the researchers lived in Tigray during the war. The researchers' work experience as academics and researchers ranged from 4 to 32 years.

The data collection process was conducted in two rounds. First, during the war in March and April 2022, the research team carried out in-depth face-to-face interviews (IDI) using an interview guide. The focus of this interviews was the collective challenges, resilience, and dilemmas for researchers in undertaking research during the war. Following a debriefing discussion on the preliminary findings with a group of researchers, the research team conducted second-round interviews to document individuals' unique experiences during the war and their case stories. These interviews were conducted after the Cession of Hostility Agreement was signed in Pretoria, South Africa on 2 November 2022, and the Internet connection had resumed in Mekelle. From February to June 2023 participants were asked to respond to questions on individual resilience and dilemmas as researchers. Conducting focus group discussions, ethnographic and surveys was not possible due to movement restrictions and security problems.

The total sample was determined based on the concept of saturation (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Deductive and inductive analysis were employed in combination. Initially, the principal investigator (AAM) used Atlas.ti to code and categorise the transcripts into themes. Then, the co-author (ADW) read the transcripts, validated the major themes, and a consensus was reached. The principal investigator (AAM) recorded and chronicled his lived experience and major events in his diary during the war. He triangulated this information with the themes identified from the face-to-face and email interviews.

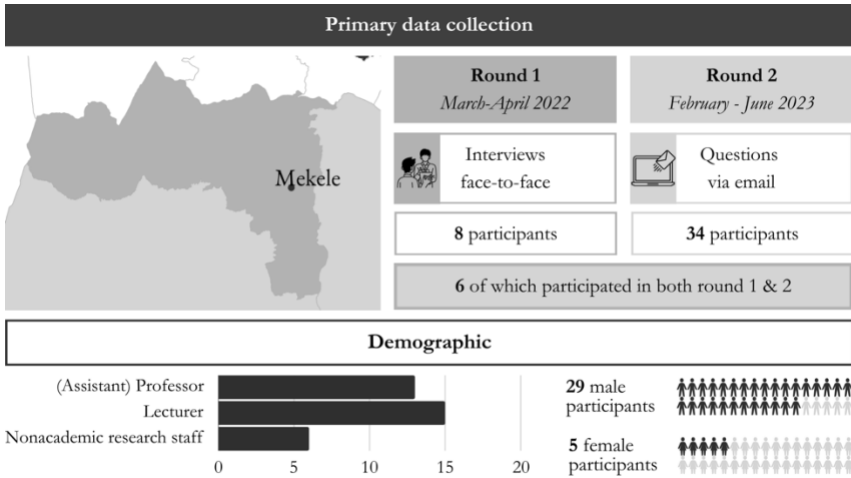


Figure 1.1. Overview of study methodology and participants

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) office of the College of Health Sciences of Mekelle University signed the ethical approval for this research. Participants of the study were informed about the purpose of the study, risks, and benefits of participation in the study. All participants consented to their participation. No participants' names and personal identifiers were recorded in the study.

Results

A total of 3 global themes, 14 themes, and 34 sub-themes emerged from the analysis (Table 1.1). Four themes were marked under 'resilience', four themes under 'challenges' and six themes under 'agency'.

Table 1.1. Main themes and subthemes emerged during the analysis in wartime, 2022/23

Global Theme	Theme	Sub-theme
Challenges	Endangering researchers' safety	Research institutions become military camp Violence against researchers Indiscriminate mass killings, shelling, air and drone strikes, and bombardments
	Total Internet connection blackout	Communication with partners stopped. Submission and publication of manuscripts become impossible.
	Blockage of banking services	No money for personal and family living expenses No compensation for researchers and no payment for covering the costs of research project activities
	The death of loved ones and its agony	Continuous agony and grief Difficult to focus on research work Personal and professional lives are affected.
Resilience	Knowledge	Information about war Misinformation and fake news Denial and disbelief
	Uncertainties	The roller coaster nature of the war Poor capacity for prediction and imagination Poor level or ill preparation
	Interdependence	Support from family, friends, colleagues and community Research partnership and solidarity
	Legitimacy	Weaponisation of education and health institutions and agencies

Global Theme	Theme	Sub-theme
		The hypocrisy of the international community and international human rights organisations
	The ethical dilemmas in conducting research	Rigor and scope Research versus life survival Research for free or with the family's financial support
	The researcher's role	Researcher or freedom fighter Serving the truth (impartial) or loyal to the cause of the people (partial)
	Existential questions	Defining moment and moment of truth What matters most in life? A blessing in disguise
<i>Agency</i>	The researchers' emotional trauma	Feeling of helplessness Guilty consciousness Double victimization Fear of political repercussions
	The sensation of disowning Ethiopia as an identity	Feeling of resentment Stateless Loss of trust
	The power of knowledge	The vicious cycle of war Quest for liberation Aspiration for the birth of a new nation-state Tigray

Source: Constructed by authors based on the themes of challenges, resilience, and agency

Researchers' challenges

The main challenges were identified as the researchers' safety, a total blackout of connectivity, the closure of banks and finance services, and the death of loved ones and their agony about their situation and the future.

Safety in danger

Researchers from Ayder Hospital found it difficult to believe that their hospital turned into a military camp and was used as a fortress. After the ENDF forces took Mekelle, around 500 soldiers camped within the college. As a result, researchers did not go to offices to conduct research and perform academic-related activities. Similarly, it was not safe for medical researchers to go to the hospital during the war. Medical doctors at Ayder Hospital were forced to walk in uniforms of the Tigray police forces within the hospital and to inform them on the identity of their patients to the ENDF.

One of the study participants was on the wanted list by the Ethiopian Government and spent eight months in the mountains until Tigray was free. Additionally, two researchers were subjected to physical harassment and were threatened with being shot as a form of intimidation. One researcher was caught by soldiers upon returning home from the office. He illustrated his encounter as follows:

I was beaten or perhaps killed for trespassing the curfew which I wasn't well informed about. I had a Zoom meeting with a technical assistant from Stanford and I was challenged by the mismatch in the time zone. It was also an election day for Ethiopians except Tigray. [...] I was also humiliated by the occupying forces another day. One military personnel even told me to leave academia and join the army sooner or later. But I never did. (IDI 30, Email interview with a 39-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 12 March 2023)

A researcher was threatened with a gun because he was found with a tablet. The soldiers suspected and accused him of taking pictures and sending information to the Tigray Defence Forces (TDF). One of the interviewed researchers was a survivor of the Aksum massacre (Amnesty International, 2021; BBC, 2021) that took place on 28-29 November 2020. He was in Aksum at the time of the massacre and provided the following account of the tragedy.

I am one of the survivors of the Aksum Massacre. I have seen, from the second floor of a house through the window that the Eritrean soldiers massacred 8 people in our neighbourhood. Though helpless for myself, I still ask myself what I could have done to save life during the massacre. The soldiers tried to come into our compound but were unable to do so. I told my wife and the other four household heads living in the

same compound to keep quiet, pretending as if nobody was inside. I was in charge of coaching children in the compound to keep silent as well. [...] I lost three of my colleagues during the massacre. (IDI 23, Email interview with a 33-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 20 May 2023)

There was a constant threat of death at any time, with air and drone strikes happening nearby, within residential areas and workplaces. Despite the attacks, researchers continued to work and attend meetings. One of the researchers explained his moments of fear and vulnerability as follows:

[...] dealing with trauma, the risk of dying in the airstrike, and the burden of living with “survivors’ guilt” make it hard to look forward. This is surprising without even being sure that you would survive as the danger has never been closer. Damage has happened in a block close to our residence. A couple of times, while we were in meetings, a drone or a jet, had been hovering over the sky. We hopelessly wait for it to throw the bomb, hoping that we and our relatives will not be the targets. (IDI 30, Email interview with a 39-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 12 March 2023)

These testimonies of the risks of dying and violence are provided by researchers who live and work in Mekelle. Relatively speaking, researchers from Mekelle were safer compared to researchers who lived and worked out of Mekelle. For instance, those working at Adigrat and Aksum Universities faced higher risks, with four academics and researchers from Aksum University killed in the Aksum Massacre (EEPA, 2021). A PhD holder who was a faculty member of Adigrat University was killed by Eritrean soldiers when he was traveling from Adigrat to Adwa by minibus.

Total blackout of Internet connectivity

Internet connectivity is the lifeline for many research projects (Kumar, 2019). Thus, almost all researchers expressed that undertaking and sustaining multisite collaborative and globally funded research projects was impossible during the Internet blockade. They also reported that they had difficulties in publishing their manuscripts, while PhD students stated that they were under pressure to publish their manuscripts and extend their studies by two to three years. One PhD student whose manuscript was accepted for

publication a few days before the war began was unable to follow the status of her manuscript due to the Internet shutdown. After several months without the Internet, she discovered that her manuscript had been withdrawn and that she had to submit it to another journal.

Blockage of banks and no finance

The researchers reported that their bank accounts and the university's accounts were both blocked and frozen. This meant that researchers were not receiving their salaries for months. The financial insecurity linked to this tempted many of them to leave academics and research in search of other jobs.

Women faced additional challenges. One female researcher explained:

I didn't have any money. I was on maternal leave. My child and I were very demanding by then. When I had my first child, I had a plan to fulfill everything I could for my child. But the time didn't let us to do so. I didn't even have money to buy clothes for my child. I got clothes for my child from my nieces and nephews. To survive, I had to search for a job but I didn't as I was in labour. We were begging for money from relatives, friends, and everyone close to us. Had I not been pregnant, I would have searched for a job and survived. (IDI 13, Email interview with a 30-year-old female, interview by Medhanyie, 13 March 2023)

The lack of income was a challenge for all the participants. A male researcher said:

There were numerous instances. The second year of the battle was characterised by suffering and resentment on all sides. Academics had no salaries and no immediate means of generating income. I was highly tempted to leave academia once the full siege had become inevitable, and I had plans to look for employment with non-profit organisations. I come from a large family of ten, and I'm the eldest. I must provide for and sustain this family, including paying the majority of their regular monthly expenses like rent. Failure to do so has caused me to consider going back to the NGO [non-governmental organisation] job I left behind to uphold academic standards of excellence. (IDI 15, Email interview with 32-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 14 March 2023)

At the time of publishing, four of the researchers who participated in this study have left academia and research and joined UN-based

humanitarian organisations. One female researcher who joined an international humanitarian and emergency organisation shared her financial struggle and decision as follows.

Yes, there were multiple times that I questioned my choice of career as an academician and researcher. For instance, receiving no salary was an enormous life burden. I was not able to afford my own and my family's essential expenses. I was under constant worry about what we could do if one of us faced a health problem that required medical attention and might cost us a lot of money. Apart from that, seeing how my colleagues and friends had benefited from a change of career where they were able to carry the financial constraints of their own and their loved ones, compelled me to feel that I ought to do the same. [...] For that reason, I began to search for other opportunities that would address my financial issues and free me from the issues that come from the political situations. (IDI 27, Email interview with a 29-year-old female, interview by Medhanyie, 12 March 2023)

The primary reason for researchers leaving their careers in research was due to financial struggles.

Death of loved ones and its agony

Many reported that they lost loved ones and family members during the war and siege. Almost all the participants expressed that they had lost at least one close family member³. The participants reported a collective total of 44 family member deaths, with 16 having been executed by the EDF, and seven executed by the ENDF. Additionally, four family members died in battle after joining the TDF and 12 died due to illness and lack of medical care. One of the female researchers expressed her agony at the loss of her loved ones:

I have lost my grandmother who I loved the most. She was sick. I came to hear about her death after several days. This was because there was no telephone communication. We didn't even have the moral to mourn for a relative who died of illness. This was considered a luxury. Many youths were being killed in the battles by air and drone strikes. I also lost my cousin. She was killed by the Eritrean forces. I was shocked when I saw a neighbourhood woman shot dead with her son. They shot and killed her. They didn't allow the family to bury her. She was buried during the night once

³ Family members in this study refers to mother, father, cousin, nephew, niece, grandfather, grandmother, grandson, granddaughter, brother, sister, uncle, and aunt.

they left the area. My father-in-law is a member of the TDF, but we don't still have any information about his status. In general, we have lost many relatives, friends, and colleagues during the two-year war. Let alone work, we even lost the meaning of life and became despondent during the two-year war. Days pass without accomplishing anything in life. We used to live a meaningless life. (IDI 13, email interview with a 30-year-old female, interview by Medhanyie, 11 March 2023)

The stories of death and being unable to say goodbye to loved ones were common to all researchers. Often people would hear about the death of a loved one months later. Death became accepted as a normal phenomenon, with no reason to mourn and attend the funeral of a family member, even if it took place in the same city.

All the study participants had at least one close family member, friend, or colleague who joined the TDF and fought on the war fronts. Not knowing their whereabouts and wondering whether they were alive or not was another painful agony. A researcher said:

I have a brother whose whereabouts are still not known. It is unknown whether he is alive or not. The entire family has been affected by this. This, in turn, affected both my personal and professional life as I am constantly thinking about him. My heart bleeds every time, I see young TDF soldiers on television or in the street thinking about him. It is bitter to not know whether your brother or any family member is alive or not. It is more difficult than the one you know for sure has passed away. (IDI 29, Email interview with a 35-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 07 March 2023)

Similarly, a female medical doctor and researcher said:

I lost my cousin in October 2022. He was a member of TDF; unfortunately, he was wounded during a battle and passed away on treatment in a hospital. His mother and sister don't know what happened to him yet. They are wandering around the region to find him. I found out about his death through my professional privilege but am not allowed to breathe a word about his death until it is announced formally by concerned stakeholders. It is horrible to hide such a thing from a family member; for that matter, I usually avoid meeting his mother and sister in family and other social gatherings. (IDI 18, Email interview with a 29-year-old female, interview by Medhanyie, 17 March 2023)

The death of relatives experienced by the researchers during the war greatly affected their morale, well-being, and mental health.

Researchers' resilience

The capacity of researchers to absorb and cope with the shocks that they faced during the war was investigated through four main themes: knowledge, uncertainties, interdependence, and legitimacy.

Knowledge

Most of the researchers were aware that war was inevitable and were actively following the political situation in the country. Understanding the political and conflict situation enabled researchers to make necessary trade-offs (Byrne *et al.*, 2017). However, most of them were shocked when the war broke out on the evening of 3 November 2020. They heard that the war started from the Prime Minister's media statement on national television and other state-owned mainstream media. He declared that the war formally began in the name of maintaining the constitutional order, which required a law enforcement operation in the early hours of 4 November 2020. Following his declaration, all means of communication including telephone and Internet were shut down. Air transport from and to Tigray was stopped. People's movement from place to place within Tigray was restricted and access to information was difficult across the borders of Tigray. The entire shutdown of telecommunication services worsened access to information and resulted in misinformation and fake news being common during the war. Many of the researchers were shocked when the ENDF seized Mekelle on Saturday, 28 November 2020.

Uncertainties

Many of the researchers described the Tigray war as a roller coaster. The capture of Mekelle was not the end, with the TDF and the Tigray People's liberation Front (TPLF) leadership retreating to the mountains and changing the military strategy from conventional to guerrilla fighting.

The researchers had assumed that the war would be between the warring parties and did not anticipate that the Eritrean government and its military forces would unite with the Ethiopian defence forces

to invade Tigray. During the occupation, it became clear that the war was not only between the armed forces. Most researchers agreed that the war targeted the people of Tigray. Yet, nobody expected that the war would become a war on the civilian people.

Due to the nature of the conflict, although researchers perceived themselves as impartial public servants, they were not able to remain neutral and observers. One of the PhD students said:

As I am a PhD student, once the war broke out in November 2020, I estimated the war would end within a few months. I had never assumed that the war would interrupt the teaching-learning process in higher education. As time went on, I felt annoyed that it mattered less whether I continued my education or not. I have seen many youths dying during the war including civilians. The situation made me feel that continuing my education was less purposeful. This feeling was exacerbated when the national troops controlled Mekelle City. For the first time in my life, I considered myself as less purposeful, to my institution and the community. This intensified further as airstrike and drone attacks were sustained. (IDI 11, Email interview with a 34-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 03 March 2023)

The participants did not expect that the presumed government would execute all these unimaginably evil actions on them. They perceived that they were betrayed by the country that they had been serving for years. One of the participants illustrated the sense of betrayal with a crying voice in his throat as follows.

[...]How on earth [is it possible that] the country that we have been serving wholeheartedly would do this to us? I couldn't imagine this would come. We have been doing our best for this country and now the country doesn't allow us to use our own money [...] They are so evil. If they could control the oxygen in the air, they would have prevented us from breathing and having oxygen. (IDI 17, face-to-face interview with a 55-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 04 April 2022)

Although Tigray was a war-torn region and many of the study participants had lived through previous wars (against the Derg Regime and the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrea war), how this war on Tigray unfolded was beyond the researchers' imagination and expectations. The researchers admitted that they had been unprepared for the adversity and that their only means was to console one another. They

did not have the means to predict the atrocities and eventualities that happened in Tigray.

For some, working was a way of keeping themselves together. One of the participants said:

I come to the office not to work but to share my pains and worries with my colleagues to get relief and feel at ease. If I didn't come to the office and talk with my colleagues and friends, I don't know how I would cope with all the challenges that we had been passing through. (IDI 17, face-to-face interview with 55-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 04 April 2022)

The researchers were going to the office to meet colleagues because they used it as means of coping the stress caused by uncertainty. They continued to work and collaborate, even though they were not receiving their salaries.

Interdependence

Researchers were able to cope with the challenges both individually and as a team with the help of their families, friends, and community. Global research partnership and solidarity emerged as a common element of interdependence.

Due to the blockage of banks and financial services, researchers had to do their research without being paid and with their own financial and material resources. For instance, in one research project, the researchers needed to solicit a favour for video cameras, time, and expertise for the production and editing, which took months and was a key part of their project. Most researchers claimed that their living expenses were being covered by the support of their friends and family members living abroad or in rural areas.

Most researchers claimed that it was difficult to cope with the siege and blockade during the first five months (June-October 2021). They were working as a team to find a solution or adapt to the siege and blockade. As a form of solidarity, the researchers established a pool fund. If members or projects of the research community obtained funds, 25% of the money would go to the pooled fund. This was done to support other colleagues working within the research centres or the College of Health Sciences in an emergency. With this approach,

researchers demonstrated how they were supporting each other to keep research members working and staying attached. One of the senior researchers who participated in this study stated that he established a humanitarian organisation with his colleagues. With this organisation, they were able to mobilise resources and give one meal a day to health workers working at Ayder Hospital who were unable to feed themselves. Additionally, they used to provide food twice a day to pregnant and lactating mothers with children under five who did not have anything to eat. Many academics voluntarily (without compensation) documented and assessed the health systems' damage during the war in Tigray.

Despite security agencies, including the police in Mekelle, not being functional during the war, society was able to maintain its security and peace. Neighbourhoods established safety measures to guard against theft and other dangers both during the day and at night. Researchers made an active contribution to the safety and security of their surroundings just like other members of society. They participated in patrolling and maintaining their surroundings at night. Researchers noted that their involvement in the community was a lesson in the society's traditions and institutions that were trustworthy and useful in times of war and siege.

The second element of interdependence that was common to most researchers was the importance of global research partnership and solidarity. For instance, there was an informal network formed by researchers and academics from different European countries (Norway, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the UK) who each had a partnership with Mekelle University. These researchers from Europe were trying to support and be a voice for Tigray in Europe and internationally. The coordination of research projects and those whose principal investigators were from outside Ethiopia or non-Ethiopian had a better sense of solidarity and commitment to maintaining the partnership and project. However, the participants acknowledged that they had difficulties communicating with and maintaining research projects coordinated by experts from Addis Ababa and/or Ethiopian citizens.

Participants found that they were unable to get feedback on their emails requesting updates on the projects and other issues. For example, the lead partners from a United Nations (UN) organisation based in Addis were unwilling to respond to emails of researchers from Mekelle as partners. Because of this, researchers felt that research integrity and partnerships were compromised.

On the other hand, global research leaders, who had prior experience in coping with insecure research situations, had much greater empathy with the researchers at Mekelle University. One of the research projects offered a VSAT connection to the research projects at the university in January of 2022. The connection was the result of engineering by the computer and information science experts at the University with material available in Tigray. Though the connection was very limited, it was a lifesaver to all the research projects at Mekelle University and it became a lifeline to all the researchers and research partnerships included in this study.

Legitimacy

Mekelle University is a public higher institution established by the Federal Government. As such, the Federal Government is mandated to protect academics and researchers working at the University, pay their salaries, and provide any other form of emergency support through the Ministry of Higher Education. However, during the war, researchers felt that Mekelle University was abandoned and became isolated. Institutions in other parts of Ethiopia cut communications with institutions in Tigray and some even raised funds to support the war. Because of this, researchers believed that the Federal Government had politicised all institutions in its war against the people of Tigray and that this contributed to the loss of trust in public institutions in the country. One researcher explained his frustration as follows:

I realized that, at least in the context of Ethiopia, academia is just not more than doing politics or business by other means. It has nothing or little to do with serving truth, justice, and thereby humanity via teaching, research, or community service engagements. Worst of all, in the war on Tigray, academics have served as a weapon of war in its own right (i.e., massively used as a tool of disinformation and misinformation, denial or fabrication of atrocities, false narrative setting, etc.). (IDI

22, Email interview with a 35-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 17 May 2023)

More than half of the researchers in this study worked at the College of Health Sciences of Mekelle University. The college governs a teaching and referral hospital, which is one of the federal hospitals, and gets its budget from the Ministry of Health. However, during the war, the Ministry stopped sending the budget to Ayder Hospital.

Because of the lack of funding, Mekelle University collapsed, except for the faculty members and the administrative staff who continued working. One of the participants expressed his sympathy for the University:

I have grown up professionally at this University. I have worked at the University for about 25 years and have been contributing all I can to the growth of the University. Now, when I see my university is without students, I feel bad. It has been almost two years since we stopped going to classes to teach our students. It is upsetting but I can't dare to leave Mekelle University at this difficult time. I can't abandon my university even if I know I can get work opportunities in the UN humanitarian organisation and get a decent salary. (IDI17, Face-to-face Interview with 55-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 04 April 2022)

Researchers were demoralised by the response of the international community during the 2 years of war. One senior researcher said:

I had a strong belief that the international community would stand on the side of victims from wherever they are. However, I have observed the international community, democratic governments, and UN agencies keeping silent while women are raped, civilians are displaced, civilians are killed, access to essential and basic services are denied, salaries of civil servants are denied, patients are denied access to health care services and medicines, children are denied access to schools, and people are put under siege or enclave and cut off from the rest of the world for more than two years. And I have come to realise that the planet Earth is not the right home for humanity. (IDI 17, Email interview with 55-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 17 March 2023)

Another researcher shared similar desperation calling out the ‘hypocrisy’ of the international community:

During the war, on several occasions, we thought the UN or the US would come to our aid. We believed that there were international monitors of peace and security who would ensure that America remained committed to its foundational purposes of justice, equality, and liberty. We thought they would value all lives equally, regardless of race. After a few months of war, when they released statements expressing concerns about civilian atrocities, we thought that help was on its way. However, we have come to realise that America and the UN are merely organisations with vested political interests that serve their ends. They only care about their interests and are willing to let millions die if it serves their political goals or benefits them from the war. We have learned that no one will come to our aid no matter what happens [...] Hundreds of pages of international agreements and conventions were neither observed nor enforced. Despite our harrowing experiences, I hope that others can learn from our suffering and understand that there is no global order to keep the world and its citizens safe. Our world is still led by money, muscle, and missiles. Do not hope otherwise. (IDI 21, Email interview with a 36-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 08 May 2023)

Similarly, one young male researcher said that, because of the experience, his view of the world fundamentally changed:

My perspective on the world has shifted. When it comes to people, I used to think there is the rule of law and accountability. But this is incorrect. Humans are statistics that politicians may use to their advantage. I have witnessed instances where a Kalashnikov was more valuable than a human life. My sense of morality and ethics has been 180 degrees turned since I found myself in a situation where another human committed an act of cruelty that other animals, who are close cousins of humans, wouldn't ever consider in their right minds. Rape is a crime, and trying to insert something into a woman's reproductive system is insane. Mass murder, pillaging, and vandalism are also common in other parts of the world. But, because the crimes were intentional, our situation is special. The enemy's ultimate objective is to humiliate the Tigray people by deliberate and methodical action. I find it astonishing when the international organisations which were established for this did nothing. Governments that appear as standard bearers of the democratic process and the rule of law have prioritised their interests over those of humanity. (IDI 15, Email interview with 32-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 14 March 2023)

The respondents expressed particular dismay about what they felt was a lack of adherence to the international rule of law and the impunity under which heinous crimes were committed with a lack of accountability.

Researchers' agency

The interviews demonstrated how researchers struggled with the shift in perception of the world and how this affected them on a personal and professional level. Six themes were identified as dilemmas that researchers faced under these circumstances. These themes are the ethical dilemmas in conducting research, the researchers' role, existential questions, the researchers' emotional trauma, the sensation of disowning Ethiopia as an identity, and the power of knowledge.

Ethical dilemmas in conducting research

The war caused severe restrictions and setbacks. Most of the researchers had to limit their research work to Mekelle or in places with relatively safe towns and villages that are found on major roads. Going to remote places and villages was riskier. For instance, one of the researchers who participated in this study (IDI 23, 33-year-old male) was held captive and imprisoned for two days in a small village some 50 km from Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. He had gone there to conduct interviews for his research, but local people suspected him of being a spy when they saw him interviewing with a digital recorder. Despite his explanation and showing his ID, they took him to a local police station. He remained imprisoned until his research colleagues briefed the relevant authorities in Mekelle about his research work.

While the ENDF and its allied forces were in Tigray, going out of Mekelle for field research work with a vehicle was unthinkable. Soldiers could take the vehicle by force, and possibly kill the driver and passengers. After the capture of Mekelle, the ENDF immediately captured thirteen of the university vehicles. Most of the researchers lacked experience in conducting research in war and conflict settings. The only option they had was to learn through the war. They found that things that work in times of peace did not work in crisis times. Finding acceptable research methods without significantly compromising the rigor of a given study was a mindboggling dilemma. Ethical procedures for researchers in situations that are

affected by war and/or violent circumstances should be produced to guide researchers who need to do their work under these circumstances.

Research as a systematic method of evidence-gathering, synthesis, and interpretation for problem-solving and making a timely evidence-based decision is more challenging in times of war and adversity than in normal times. Nevertheless, researchers noted the insensitivity of research partners and funding organisations to this Research, regardless of its importance, was considered a non-priority issue by most of the funding organisations. The researchers saw the hesitance of global funding organisations in taking risks, even on research projects which were developing and implementing life-saving interventions in unstable situations. Thus, researchers who participated in this study believed that there is a need to rethink the commitment to research in crisis and conflict situations.

Researchers' role

The participants described that they were not clear about the role they should play during the war, feeling confused and experiencing dilemmas with their role during the crisis. One researcher said:

The main reason is the mismatch between my perceived being and my actual being. Before the conflict, I considered that my expertise contributed to the power balance among the state, party, and democratic institutions. Following the conflict, I realised I was no one in the middle of nowhere. Someone, who had an understanding of the practical gaps and prospects of society through research and community engagements, looking for hideouts from bullets, is weird. As the bullet changed its form through time, I am now working for an NGO to feed my family. (IDI 23, Email interview with a 33-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 20 May 2023)

According to the legislation from Mekelle University, every academic is employed to teach, research, and provide community services. However, this academic responsibility was broken during the war due to the collapse of Tigray's educational and health system. During the war, fighting against the invading forces was the top priority of the people of Tigray.

Most of the participants also perceived and understood that the struggle of the people was for freedom and dignity and had a just cause. This put researchers in a dilemma. On one hand, researchers and academics considered themselves neutral and expected to avoid political issues, instead focusing on their academic and research work. On the other hand, as members of the Tigrayan society, they felt an obligation to join the cause of their society and contribute meaningfully to the struggle for liberation in any way they could. Two of the PhD students who participated in this study decided to quit their research work and join the TDF. They served the defence forces until the agreement for the Cessation of Hostilities was signed on 02 November 2022 (African Union, 2022). One of these PhD students said:

When the situation changed, in Tigray; institutions were destroyed and looted, women were gang raped by soldiers; children starved and suffered, people were displaced and settled in caves, the sick died because of lack of medicine, and the elderly were left without a caregiver. Children were separated from their parents and scattered across the hills and roads without a caregiver. This situation made me decide to quit my PhD study and join TDF. (IDI 5, Email interview with 38-years old male, interview by Medhanyie, 10 February 2023)

In addition to the two PhD students, two of the participants who were medical doctors and researchers (one female and one male) said that they had decided to leave their medical profession and join the TDF. The female medical doctor and researcher expressed herself:

This was the most frustrating and darkest time of all. As the war between the TDF and opposing allied forces re-initiated at full-scale in August 2022, it escalated intensively through the two months until October 2022 at which time there were rumors of recolonizing the region as a whole by the opposing forces right before Pretoria's peace deal was signed. Personally, the idea of being recolonized was extremely grave and unimaginable to bear. It was at this time that I decided I belonged somewhere else, where I could share my contribution even if a small one. I was looking for a spot on the battlefield, not in my academic career. Now, I thank God for making the peace deal come true. (IDI 18, Email interview with a 29-year-old female, interview by Medhanyie, 27 March 2023)

In a debriefing discussion with the researchers, some questions remained unanswered and puzzling: where is the boundary between research and politics? Where is the boundary between science and politics? Despite these repeated and unanswered questions, there seemed to be a consensus that the researchers wanted to be loyal to the cause of their people and do whatever they could to help. One of the senior researchers said, “If we (academicians and researchers) break, our society breaks and vice versa. We break as Tigrayans”. For these reasons, almost all the researchers supported the struggle against the invasion in one way or another. For instance, three of the researchers were involved in the diplomatic and advocacy efforts of the people at the international level to influence the international community to act and put an end to the war against the Tigray people.

Research and academic work are thought to be a right for scholars who do not want to engage themselves in politics and power struggles, especially in the politics of undemocratic and unstable societies. Researchers assumed that their role as academics, researchers, and intellectuals was independent of any political organisation. They believed that the responsibility of academic researchers was to produce knowledge and speak the truth. However, in the context of the Tigray war, they felt that the contrary was true. In a brutal war like the one that took place in Tigray, the brunt of the war affected every segment of the population.

Existential questions

The two-year war was a defining moment for most academic researchers. It was an existential situation that led to many questioning the meaning and purpose of their life. One of the researchers articulated how their life’s purpose and worldview changed from a PhD student to a politician because of the war.

Yes, of course; and to some extent it changed my view and tactics in this concern. These include (1) After November 04, 2020; I was not comfortable teaching at the university. Because few students were coming to the university campus with ENDF soldiers and those soldiers were intimidating academic staff; (2) I was a PhD student too and I could not collect any data for my dissertation for security reasons, and associated issues, such as the costs related to executing the research (3) I could not track my manuscript submitted for blind reviews in various online journals because

I have no communication about the progress, since there was no Internet access; (4) talking about scientific research was sometimes also a luxury business for most people; (5) other two research projects were halted at the mid of data collection because of the war; (6) moving from one area to other and talking with people and carrying tools that are important for data collection was very difficult; (7) I was also interested in the political movements and joined the IRA [Interim Regional Administration]. (IDI 31, Email interview with 42-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 26 May 2023)

Although it varied, almost all participants agreed that the war changed the purpose of their lives and what was deemed important in their lives. They agreed that the crisis was a moment of reflection on what was important in life at the individual and community level. This reflection pushed some of the researchers to question the value of research and an academic career in times of war. They put themselves in a dilemma regarding the type of professional career to pursue, to contribute to stopping the war and limiting the damage. Some of the participants expressed feelings of unease in that they would have preferred to be soldiers or politicians rather than researchers and academics. One young female researcher said:

Certainly, so, there were many times that I regretted and doubted whether or not I should be an academic. The reason for such thoughts and feelings lies in different facts that have happened. To begin with, I am from Addis Ababa. And I was cut off from contacting my family and friends. On top of that for 2 years I wasn't getting paid or involved in a job that could generate money that could help me or my family. But most importantly for me being academic meant, I had some power to make a difference and help the community to improve however this event has shown me the bitter truth, you only have power with money and status and whatever meaning and purpose you give to your life can shatter with those who have political power and money and there is so little you can do to help yourself or the community. The knowledge and the rights you have been taught or preached in your life only apply in stable conditions [...] so it made me question whether I have chosen the right path and whether was it even worth being far away from family to be able to work as an academic and what is the purpose of knowledge or spending your whole life telling yourself you are doing some significant work in higher educational institutions when you can't provide solutions to a community in worst times. This feeling still lingers

in my thoughts. (IDI 16, Email interview with a 27-year-old female, interview by Medhanyie, 14 March 2023)

There is nothing good about war. However, a blessing in disguise that many of the researchers witnessed was the reflections on the meaning of life and what should take priority in life. Many agreed that family should come first and admitted that they had spent adequate time with their families and children when compared to before the war. They had been relieved from unnecessary business and sometimes meaningless workshops and meetings, and there was no more social media. Another insight that most researchers shared was that they changed the adversity to opportunity. Many of the researchers said they used the time for reading books to acquire new knowledge. They also created a weekly learning forum to discuss different topics related to research, politics, and the crisis, and to review books and share their thoughts. Many agreed that they read more books and improved their reading habits.

Researchers' emotional trauma

All participants experienced bad encounters and emotional trauma. They passed through the upheaval of the war and were victims of the total siege and war. On the other hand, as researchers and academics, they were expected to be front liners in documenting and being a voice for their people, telling the rest of the world the truth of the war. However, the researchers in this study found themselves helpless and not able to help others. One of the researchers shared how he had felt powerless in helping his sister:

I have an elder sister who lives in a rural area where she was raped by the Ethiopian military forces on 5th April 2021. When the military forces invaded the entire woreda [district], the health workers abandoned the area, and the health facilities were looted. As a result, my sister was unable to obtain medication for HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. She was not even able to access pregnancy-controlling tablets. She was not able to travel to Mekelle to get medical care. The Eritrean forces had control of all the roadways leading to Mekelle. She remained untreated. I was not even able to travel to the village and provide her medications. I heard that she was raped quite late. There was no telephone communication. (IDI 4, Email interview with a 35-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 9 February 2023)

What was traumatising for most researchers was not only the violence and atrocities that were committed on oneself, loved ones, and the people of Tigray but also the feeling of guilt and the impotence to prevent families and their people from such dehumanizing acts of violence.

All participating researchers comprehended that they had a professional and moral obligation to document, analyse, and write about the atrocities and damage that happened during the war. The health researchers felt that they had a dual responsibility. The war targeted the health system of Tigray, and the siege resulted in the blocking of medical supplies and lifesaving medicines from entering Tigray. Death from malnutrition and starvation increased from day to day. Sexual violence was used as a weapon of war. All these were related to the health of the people and health researchers were expected to document the problems and devise and deliver a solution by being a voice for their people and informing the international community. However, many of the researchers found that it was traumatising to hear and document the situation. One of the participants reported that she could not continue writing the stories of the sexual violence that she had collected through interviews. She found it difficult and traumatising to listen to them again and again, to transcribe and put them into a manuscript. Many of the researchers reduced or stopped watching local TV as a means of protecting themselves from the painful stories of atrocities and associated trauma.

Researchers in health had relatively better access to and understanding of the atrocities and crimes that were happening to their people. However, their knowledge did not seem relevant to help stop the atrocities from being committed.

The politicisation of research is another emotional upheaval that exacerbated the researcher's emotional trauma and feelings of helplessness. Every aspect of thinking was politicised. The deaths of hundreds of thousands were politicised. Many of the researchers who participated in this study believe that the crimes that happened to the people of Tigray amount to genocide. With all their readings and understanding of the concept of genocide based on the UN

convention, they believe that the war on Tigray was genocide. However, they could not write and express their ideas by labelling the Tigray war as a genocidal war in fear of political repercussions and judgments by others, in particular by partners who did not want to enter into conflict with the Ethiopian Government. In most cases, research partners and colleagues from other countries were hesitant to make statements about the war.

In addition to the war and the siege, the politicisation of research also posed a methodical challenge to undertake research in a time of war and crisis. Many research agendas needed investigation but it was unthinkable to travel to rural areas and conduct surveys. Surveys and assessments of damage, crimes, and atrocities that happened during the war and their findings were perceived as politically sensitive assessments. Researchers found themselves in controversial territory when they presented and published the findings of their assessment or views about the war and associated consequences. Considering this, the researchers in this study admitted that they were not well prepared on how to conduct research in times of war and conflict.

They were particularly not prepared when all means of communication, transport, and bank services were shut down, and everything being rendered uncertain and controversial. A research project that was being implemented at the time of war was halted for five months by local political leaders because they suspected it had political aspirations and did not align with their interests. The researchers who coordinated this project had to abide by the instructions of the local political leaders.

The trauma experienced by researchers resulted in a loss of trust in the reasoning and the intentions of the decisions that were affecting their ability to cope professionally with the circumstances. This led to feelings of frustration and desperation, which undermined the sense of self-efficacy to be useful and to be a good researcher who could contribute to ameliorating the situation. It led to a sense of powerlessness.

The families, friends, and colleagues' monetary and in-kind support were crucial to remain resilient and stay focused on research work.

However, some of the researchers expressed that they had a troubling guilty conscience of using family support to stay focused on their research work. In one of the debriefing sessions among the researchers, the lead author of this study admitted and expressed his gratitude to his childhood friends but also his guilty feelings which he illustrated as follows:

It was a paradox to see my childhood friends who were living abroad sending money every three months through all the means they found. They encouraged me to continue my office and research work. I came to feel that my salary was paid by my childhood friends [...]. I was really in an emotional dilemma about whether to receive money from friends to keep working and save the research projects from failing in times of darkness. (First author, self-narration)

Another researcher expressed this feeling of guilt as:

There were times when the financial challenge was unbearable as due to the siege transport and other costs were high and we couldn't withdraw our savings as well. Spending the little cash, I felt like a paradox as I felt I was paying to work while I should have been paid. (IDI 30, Email interview with a 39-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 12 March 2023)

A study by Ansoms (2020) explored the psychological challenges that researchers faced in terms of the prevalence of trauma and mental health problems in times of war. She found that the researchers endeavoured to normalize the stress and psychological challenges associated with the war for different reasons. First, the war and associated crimes were massive and affected the entire population. So, researchers assumed that the challenges they experienced were less intense than the atrocities and challenges reported in the general and the rural population, and the vulnerable women and children. Second, the sense of purpose and cause was the single most important string that pushed researchers to keep going and prevented a complete break with their research work and serving their community. The researchers perceived that the challenges they experienced over the two-year war were a sacrifice paid for liberty and dignity.

Most researchers considered that the enemies gave only one option to the people of Tigray, which was to choose between freedom and

slavery. However, this attitude can conceal the actual trauma that researchers might have faced and the consequences it might have had on their future mental health and intellectual capacity.

Disowning the Ethiopian identity

Many of the researchers developed a feeling and sentiment that they were no longer associated with the Ethiopian identity. With the war and all the atrocities that happened, they could not think that they belonged to Ethiopia any longer. Consequently, they began to express aspirations for greater autonomy and the potential establishment of a distinct Tigray nation-state. One of the researchers said:

So far, I have lost five of my relatives; two members of TDF and three in the Aksum massacre. I have also lost my youngest son due to sickness and the problem I had was difficulty in getting medicines. During my two-month stay at Ayder Hospital in Mekelle, I observed many victims die due to lack of medicines and I was so traumatised when I was visiting the war victims. Many of the victims from TDF members were saying that they were struggling for the independence of Tigray via a referendum and their sacrifices were for such a grand goal so that Tigray would be relieved from the historical vicious cycle of violence. Also, they were saying we couldn't live with the genocidal state of Ethiopia. (IDI 24, Email interview with a 41-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 14 June 2023)

During the war, they developed a feeling of being without a country. This feeling was not only felt by the researchers but by most people, and particularly the youth. This posed researchers with a blurred vision of the future and how they would like to pursue their research and academic careers in the context of turmoil in Ethiopia. One of the researchers stated that if the future of Tigray was to continue with Ethiopia, he would not have any reason to stay in Tigray and the better option for him would be to look for a life somewhere out of Tigray and Ethiopia.

What I am challenged to figure out the most is where the position of academics and research is in Ethiopia. [...] I felt stateless. While being in life-threatening conditions during the war, I hoped to live longer so that I could explore more about what happened and why. I will be back to my lecturer and researcher career as universities formally start their roles. Peace can't prevail at the cost of justice. All my research will be geared towards how peace and justice should be served together, if not I will

try exile as I can't wait for another cycle of genocide. (IDI 23, Email interview with 33-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 20 May 2023)

Another researcher said:

Nationally, I hate to share the same passport and citizenship with those who perform unbelievably inhuman atrocities, mass rape, looting, and destroying public and individual properties of civilians, churches, and health facilities by inviting foreign troops. And the most painful thing is the world was looking and doing nothing except putting statements that say "we are concerned". In these two years, I concluded that the UN is a toothless lion, powerless to implement the goals of the organisation, it can't save starving people, can't save patients who need lifesaving drugs, and even immunization for children. (IDI 14, Email interview with a 38-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 14 March 2023)

Similarly, a senior researcher said:

It also made me lose trust and confidence in some Ethiopian institutions. Afterward, I am not interested in saving money in the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia and other private Banks in Ethiopia. I do not want to be a client of Ethiopian Telecom Services. I do not like to fly the Ethiopian Airlines. I do not trust the security apparatus of the country as they failed to protect me from foreign forces and domestic armed vigilante groups. The lesson for others is to stay focused and get involved in activities other academics and research that matter most to the victims of the war. (IDI 17, Email interview with a 55-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 17 March 2023)

The sense of being violated by the Ethiopian state caused a sense of statelessness and aspiration for an independent state, Tigray, or the desire to move elsewhere. The war in Tigray was a life-defining moment for most researchers. They believed that the relationship between the people of Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia would not be the same as it was before the war. The federal government of Ethiopia and the TPLF signed a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 2 November 2022, in Pretoria (African Union, 2022). The politicians who signed the agreement and the international community were hopeful that the war would be over and Ethiopia would return to the status quo before the start of the war on 3 November 2020. However, the scars that the war left in the hearts and minds of the researchers did not heal. Most of the researchers considered that what happened

to the people of Tigray had not passed. As a result, many researchers expressed doubts about the long-term prospects of Tigray remaining within Ethiopia.

Power of knowledge

In the debriefing discussion with the researchers, it was evident that breaking the vicious cycle of violence and war in Tigray became the question. One social science researcher said:

From November 2020 to June 28, 2021, I was with the TDF on the battlefields of Tigray and totally off my academic life, struggling for survival from the genocidal atrocities. I had fortunately survived life-taking attacks and sieges. On the battlefield, I witnessed the heroism, resilience, and exceptional and determined mobilisation of the Tigray people. I had lost my relatives and friends from members of the TDF and innocent civilian massacres in Aksum. My wife and my kids also faced the trauma and were hiding themselves in different places in Mekelle. They lived without salary and were supported by relatives and my friends abroad. After, I came back to Mekelle in June 2021, after the “historic operation Alula”, I rejoined my family but was cut off from my academic life due to an Internet and communication blackout. The only academic engagement I had during the two-year war was writing a book chapter. Therefore, in the two-year war, I had no appetite and access to academic life but simply struggling for survival from the genocidal atrocities. (IDI 24, Email interview with a 41-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 14 June 2023)

The researcher also added:

I did not consider myself an academician or researcher but one whose life existence was at high risk as the government has accused me a “wanted terrorist” until February 2023 and my bank account is still blocked by the federal government. My family’s life was dependent on others’ support. Due to security reasons, I couldn’t visit my family in Aksum. After the war, my outlook towards Ethiopia, Amhara, Eritrea, and the international community has shifted. And I believe the only solution to Tigray’s problem is establishing an independent state of Tigray. Tigray has been a victim of Ethiopia and Eritreans although Tegararu [Tigrayans] were considering Ethiopians and Eritreans as brothers. Also, the international community failed to stop the genocide in Tigray in favor of the Ethiopian and Eritrean states. So, Tigray should continue its struggle for statehood and be a member of the family of states. If Tigray fails to secure statehood, it will also face another cycle of genocide shortly.

Therefore, my research and academic focus will be on how Tigray's vision for statehood will be secure. (IDI 24, Email interview with 41-year-old male, interview by Medhanyie, 14 June 2023)

The general sense was that there was an academic task to solve the problem of vicious cycles of war in Tigray and to contribute to a solid area of work on how these cycles could be prevented.

Discussion

The researchers who participated in the study shared some of the serious challenges that they had to face and overcome in their work, as well as in their personal lives, during the Tigray war. Significant challenges related to the inability to conduct research as they had been used to, due to lack of financial or material resources, relationship breaks with partnering institutions and universities, lack of connectivity, unsafe working situations, and the inability to conduct fieldwork. Next to this, researchers experienced struggles related to the emotional burdens of the war, shifting world views, and a conflicting sense of identity as Ethiopian and Tigrayan researchers.

Using the concept of hysteresis as described by Bourdieu provides a useful framework within which to place these challenges. Bourdieu described hysteresis as:

The presence of the past in this kind of false anticipation of the future performed by the habitus is, paradoxically, most clearly seen when the sense of the probable future is belied and when dispositions ill-adjusted to the objective chances because of a hysteresis effect are negatively sanctioned because the environment they encounter is too different from the one to which they are objectively adjusted. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62)

This hysteresis effect creates discordance for researchers having to continue their research in times of war and crisis despite being ill-adjusted to working in these conditions. This drives adaptation, for instance through researchers changing the scope of their research and the pool fund to deal with the lack of financial resources. Bourdieu discusses how hysteresis can lead to adaptation:

The persistence of the effects of primary conditioning, in the form of the habitus, accounts equally well for cases in which dispositions function out of phase and

practices are objectively ill-adapted to the present conditions because they are objectively adjusted to conditions that no longer obtain. The tendency of groups to persist in their ways, due inter alia to the fact that they are composed of individuals with durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced, can be the source of maladaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 62)

The findings of this study indicate that the circumstances to which the researchers were subjected led to both revolt and resignation. At a personal level, there was an internal revolt for some against being a researcher, and for most against being Ethiopian. Yet researchers also resigned to the situation they were in, and the challenges that they were facing, and continued their work within this new framework. The support of family and friends was critical to supporting resilience, confirming the findings of Suttie (Suttie, 2017).

Several researchers expressed frustration with being treated so poorly by Ethiopia, the country that they felt they had served dutifully. This led to hysteresis in two ways. First, the conditions around them changed as Tigrayans were antagonised, their institutions stopped receiving funding, and partnerships were discontinued. In this instance, the researchers were confronted with being put in a situation by others resulting in a mismatch with what was before. This led to a belief that Tigray should be independent. After the war ended, and the researchers' perspectives and sense of identity had changed because of the war, a second mismatch occurred. This mismatch between the reality of having to return to the status quo, denying the emotional shock, devastation, and loss they had lived through during the war.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the researchers lived experiences, challenges, the dilemmas they faced, and resilience during the Tigray war are explored. The resilience of researchers primarily depended on research partners resolving the communication blackout. Research projects financed and coordinated by global partnerships, that were built on trust and mutual understanding, were found to be crucial for researchers to develop resilience. The researchers noted that adapting, continuing,

and maintaining research activities in wartime was impossible without the support of family and friends.

Despite preparations in anticipation of the war, researchers were ill-prepared for the enormity of the shocks that the war brought to their lives and research work. The researchers who participated in this study had not predicted the war. They felt powerless in the face of the overwhelming loss and senseless devastation. The shocks experienced during the war pushed society to the extent of breaking point and this experience fundamentally changed the world view of the researchers. These emotions created self-doubt and humility about what academia can bring in a time of war.

Nevertheless, the researchers found that the systematic problem-solving approach of academia has important contributions to make to documenting and stopping the cycle of violence in the region. Many researchers selflessly continued with their research, despite the many challenges they encountered. The researchers who participated in this study said that they believe that there is a need to step up the commitment to research in crisis and conflict situations, as it can contribute to understanding the causes and breaking the cycle of conflict.

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Authors' contributions

The first author conceived, designed and implemented the research. He did the interviews with the assistant of the second researcher and two research assistants. Both authors did the data analysis. The first author wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Both authors have contributed to the revision of the first draft and subsequent versions of the manuscript. Both have read and approved the final version.

Ethical considerations

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) office of the College of Health Sciences of Mekelle University signed the ethical approval for this research, Reference number MU-IRB 1973/2022.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on Content and Editorial Decisions'.

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