Reactive Ethnicity: Identity Shift Among Conflict-Induced Internally Displaced Persons (Idps) in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Internal displacement is a global issue, but the way it is dealt with is still almost completely based on humanitarian aid, an approach which generally presents displaced people as passive recipients of aid rather than as active participants in the social changes affecting them. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in China Camp, a settlement of about 20,000 internally displaced people in Debre Berhan, Ethiopia, this study examines the way in which displacement caused by conflict alters the ethnic, civic, place-based, gendered, and generational identities of Amhara internally displaced persons. In order to see how these identities shift in the context of displacement, uncertainty, and exclusion, the study applied an anthropological theory—drawn mainly from Fredrik Barth's theory of identity. The data were obtained from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and field observations.The results indicate that there is a two-stage process involving identity breakdown and reconstruction. What had previously been a coherent and unified sense of self became rigid and focused on ethnicity as a result of the impact of violence; civic identity disappeared as the social contract collapsed, causing people to be left aside and labelled "Tefenaqay" (displaced person); attachment to the land was replaced by a mixed identity which includes memories of one's home together with the new relationships formed in the camp; and there was a sharp divergence in terms of gender and generation — men facing a crisis concerning economic masculinity, women gaining some degree of agency even though they were still at risk, the older inhabitants grieving over what they had created, and the younger people seeing their futures come to a standstill. Since displacement is a lengthy social process rather than a single incident, the study contends that the displacement resulted in reactive ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

Internal displacement has now become one of the major humanitarian and social challenges of this century. As the International Organization for Migration and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IOM/IDMC, 2021) point out, millions of people around the world have had to leave their homes due to conflict, political upheaval, or environmental

disasters without ever crossing an international border. However, merely remaining within one's own country does not reduce the disruption caused. Displacement does disrupt people's means of livelihood, their housing, and their access to basic services, and it also affects something more intangible — a person's sense of identity, belonging, and community (Malkki, 1995). Thus, internal displacement caused by conflict doesn't merely interrupt people's lives; it also undermines who they consider themselves to be.

For a long time anthropologists and experts in migration have seen identity and displacement as closely linked. Barth (1969) maintained that identity is not a fixed collection of cultural characteristics but something that is worked out at social boundaries and becomes apparent through interaction with other groups. Turner (1969) stated that when people go through major life changes they often go through a liminal stage – a phase characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity which causes them to have to re-examine who they are. The camps housing IDPs often serve as exactly this kind of liminal situation, in which old social roles disappear before new ones are established. Bourdieu (1977) looked at the issue in terms of habitus, which refers to the everyday ways of thinking and acting by means of which people understand themselves and navigate the world; displacement disrupts this habitus at its fundamental level. Furthermore, Appadurai (1996) proposed that increasing mobility and displacement are leading to identities that are less connected to any one place or area.

In recent years Ethiopia has experienced widespread internal displacement as a result of communal violence and, in certain areas, environmental pressure. Millions of Ethiopians have had to leave their homes and have taken refuge in camps and other temporary shelters distributed throughout the country. One of these sites is China Camp in the city of Debre Berhan—this camp hosts nearly twenty thousand internally displaced persons, almost all of whom are Amhara from the East Wollega and West Shewa zones of the Oromia region and who escaped severe violence as well as the destruction of their means of livelihood (IOM/DTM, 2023). The situation of these people is well worth careful examination since displacement has altered their social identity to a great extent.

Research currently underway is starting to record the cost of displacement: Mekonon and others (2023) looked at its effect on the mental health of IDPs, particularly focusing on the gendered aspects of that effect, thus providing insight into the psychological trauma that these Amhara IDPs have experienced together with the everyday humanitarian difficulties of life in the camp. Other researchers have also investigated the gender-specific consequences of displacement for IDPs in Debre Berhan. The fact remains, however, that little attention has been paid to how displacement has altered these people's identities — a gap which this study aims to fill.

Prior to the conflict the people who now reside in China Camp had for about fifty years lived in areas where the Oromo were the majority and had become integrated into the local economy, culture and social life. They had developed a form of everyday multiculturalism which allowed them to move easily as an ethnic minority in another group's territory. But when violence and persecution caused them to be driven out as Amhara citizens from East Wollega and West Shewa, displacement triggered a process of reactive identity re-organisation — this involved a greater awareness of their ethnicity and the appearance of new kinds of belonging which had not been important to them before.

In order to complement the current empirical research on the effects of displacement upon mental health, gender relations, and livelihoods, there is a need for a theoretical explanation of how conflict-induced displacement alters identity. While most of the previous studies have concentrated on the humanitarian aspect and have described how people experience the crisis, they have not investigated how displacement affects their self-conception—that is, how it modifies their social identities, their self-image, and their relationship to categories such as IDP, Tefenaqay, or refugee. This study addresses that very question by focusing on the Amhara IDPs in China Camp. The fieldwork was guided by three research questions:

1. How do individuals who have been internally displaced identify themselves before, during, and after their displacement?
2. In what way do IDPs describe their understanding, their experiences and their sense of meaning concerning life in the camp with regard to identity and their future aspirations?
3. What role does age, gender, and generation play in the process of identity change among people who have been internally displaced?

The study makes use of anthropological theory in relation to the Amhara IDPs in China Camp. Barth's (1969) theory of ethnic boundary maintenance provides an overarching explanation of the mechanics involved in the identity change seen among the IDPs. Turner's (1969) idea of liminality applies to the extended and uncertain nature of life in the camp. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus is employed in the analysis of how disrupted livelihoods alter everyday practices. Finally, Tajfel and Turner's (1979; 1986) Social Identity Theory completes the anthropological perspective by providing a means of interpreting the wider process of social identity transformation that the Amhara IDPs have experienced.

These different frameworks reveal a number of common themes in the experience of the Amhara IDPs in China Camp. Being displaced usually leads to the loss of previous ethnic identities and a sense of belonging, since people are removed from the cultural and communal life they knew. It also causes a kind of re-organization of ethnic identity as individuals and the group as a whole comes to terms with their losses in response to the trauma. New social groups appear – the 'displaced person' being the most notable – indicating a changed social position. When one is redefining their identity after having been displaced, they also have to reconsider their connection to a place and get used to their new environment. Moreover, gender plays a distinct role throughout all of this, becoming particularly apparent as women assume new roles in camp life. A great deal of research has examined the humanitarian, economic, and psychological toll of internal displacement, but far less has looked at how displacement reshapes multiple dimensions of identity at once. This study addresses that gap by examining how conflict-induced displacement has shifted the ethnic, civic, place-based, gendered,

and generational identities of Amhara IDPs resettled in China Camp, Debre Berhan — combining anthropological theories of identity with Social Identity Theory to frame internal displacement as a process of identity reconstruction.

Since the phenomenon under investigation — the changing social identity among IDPs — occurs naturally within the camp, this study employs an ethnographic qualitative method. The fieldwork was carried out in China Camp and involved conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews, holding focus group discussions, making physical observations, and carrying out key informant interviews with IDPs, humanitarian workers, government officials, and community representatives.

Conceptualizing displacement and identity

This section is about how this study conceptualizes displacement and identity. Besides, it retains Barth's theory as the overarching framework and uses Turner, Appadurai, Bourdieu and Social Identity Theory as complementary theoretical perspectives.

Displacement is conceptualized in this study as a multidimensional process that extends beyond the physical relocation of individuals from their habitual places of residence to encompass disruptions in social relationships, livelihoods, cultural practices, community networks, and established senses of belonging. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals or groups who have been forced or obliged to leave their homes or habitual residences without crossing an internationally recognized state border (United Nations, 1998). Although this definition establishes the defining characteristics of internal displacement, its social consequences may extend to the disruption of established relationships, routines, and attachments to place. Displacement is therefore understood not merely as a geographical transition but also as a social process that can reshape the conditions under which individuals maintain and negotiate their identities.

Identity, in this study, is conceptualized as a dynamic, relational, and socially constructed process through which individuals understand themselves, establish group affiliations, distinguish themselves from others, and negotiate recognition and belonging. Drawing on Barth's (1969) theory of ethnic groups and boundaries, identity is understood as being maintained and negotiated through social interaction and the reproduction or transformation of group boundaries, rather than through the preservation of fixed cultural characteristics alone. From this perspective, displacement may alter the social contexts in which ethnic and other collective identities are expressed, recognized, and contested. Interactions between IDPs and host communities, for example, may reinforce existing group boundaries, generate new distinctions, or create opportunities for more complex forms of identification.

Turner and colleagues' social identity approach complements Barth's theoretical framework by explaining how group membership, social categorization, and comparisons between groups contribute to individuals' self-understanding (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Displacement may change the salience of particular identities as IDPs negotiate their relationships with other displaced populations, host communities, and institutions. Shared experiences of displacement may strengthen identification with other IDPs, while interactions with host communities may reinforce, challenge, or reshape existing affiliations. Such changes, however, are contingent rather than inevitable and depend on the social circumstances in which displacement occurs.

Appadurai's (1996) perspective on imagination, mobility, and cultural processes provides a further dimension for understanding identity transformation. His work emphasizes how movement, changing social environments, and imagined futures influence cultural and social life. Applied to internal displacement, this perspective directs attention to how IDPs renegotiate their attachments to places of origin, interpret their present circumstances, and imagine possible futures involving continued displacement, local integration, or return. These aspirations may influence how individuals express their identities and understand their relationships with places and communities.

Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus, capital, and social fields further illuminate the material and practical dimensions of identity. Displacement may disrupt the everyday practices, social relationships, livelihoods, and cultural knowledge through which individuals reproduce familiar ways of life. Changes in access to economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital may consequently influence how IDPs navigate new social environments, maintain existing affiliations, and develop alternative strategies of belonging. Nevertheless, IDPs may also mobilize existing resources and acquire new forms of capital through their interactions and experiences in displacement.

Integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualizes displacement as a multidimensional social process that creates changing conditions for identity maintenance, negotiation, and transformation. IDP identity shift is understood as a context-dependent process through which changes in social boundaries, group affiliations, place attachments, aspirations, everyday practices, and access to resources influence how displaced persons identify themselves and are identified by others. Identity shift does not necessarily imply the abandonment or complete replacement of previous identities; rather, it may involve the reaffirmation of existing affiliations, the emergence of new identifications, or the coexistence and renegotiation of multiple identities. Accordingly, Barth's theory provides the overarching analytical framework, while social identity theory, Appadurai's perspective, and Bourdieu's concepts offer complementary explanations of the social, aspirational, and material mechanisms through which identity continuity and change may occur.

Theorizing displacement and identity

Rather than treating conflict-induced displacement solely as a disruptive force, this study focuses on its capacity to transform people through their multiple, overlapping identities. It argues that IDPs actively reconstruct their identities as a way of adapting to new social conditions — adjusting former roles and affiliations and renegotiating belonging across

ethnic, civic, place, gender, and generational lines.

This framework helps explain the shifts in ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational identity observed among China Camp's participants. Displaced people do not simply discard old identities; they revise them in light of new social, political, and institutional realities, so that some identities fade, others intensify, and still others emerge from new interactions with conflict parties, state institutions, humanitarian organizations, host communities, and fellow displaced people.

To trace this process, the study combines anthropological theories of identity and belonging with Social Identity Theory (SIT). The anthropological approach grounds identity in social relationships, cultural practice, historical experience, and place; SIT complements this by explaining how people categorize themselves and others, how group boundaries acquire significance, and how people respond when their identities come under threat or stigma.

Together, these perspectives provide the analytical scaffolding for understanding how conflict-induced displacement has reshaped the ethnic, civic, place-based, gendered, and generational identities of the Amhara IDPs in China Camp.

Theorizing identity as relational and contextual

One of Barth's central insights is that ethnicity is not some essential trait inherent to individuals but a social category produced through interaction between groups — an understanding that fits closely with what this study found among China Camp's IDPs. As in Barth's (1969) account of ethnic structure in East Africa, most participants described identifying, before displacement, simply as citizens of Ethiopia who also happened to be Amhara.

Displacement changed that. As relations between IDPs and the host community grew strained and violence emerged, participants' ethnic identities became far more salient — a shift consistent with the broader realignment of ethnic relations taking place across Ethiopia at the time.

Barth's framework helps explain this shift directly: the concept of ethnicity was reshaped by displacement because participants' Amhara identity was reinforced by the socially constructed differences — and the hostility — directed at them by the host community.

Social Identity Theory: from multiple belongings to reactive identity

Barth's theory illuminates ethnic identity well, but it says less about the other dimensions in play — civic, place-based, gender, generational — or about the underlying mechanism of change. Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel (1978) and extended by Tajfel and Turner (1979; 1986), fills that gap. It frames identity as something constructed through categorization into groups and the social comparisons that follow, with self-image shaped by group membership in ways that guide attitudes and behavior toward other groups.

This lens fits the reactive identity China Camp's participants describe. The socially constructed distinction between the host community and the IDPs fed directly into the negative attitudes IDPs encountered.

SIT also helps explain the shift in civic identity: participants described their status as citizens of Ethiopia very differently before and after displacement. On place-based identity, the displaced Amhara no longer identified as citizens of the Oromia Regional State — their self-concept had shifted along with their circumstances.

The theory extends, too, to gender and generation. Women's identity shifted as they were recast — and increasingly saw themselves — as caregivers and active contributors to camp life. Among older and younger participants, social roles and self-perception shifted differently: older participants lost standing as providers and protectors, while younger ones found their intended career paths cut off.

Theorizing liminality

Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality offers a useful frame for the socially ambiguous status IDPs occupy in host communities. It describes displacement as a period during which people are neither in their former social position nor settled into a new one — a description that matches what participants in China Camp reported. Many described feeling like outsiders even within their host community, not received as equal citizens, while their formal status as Ethiopian citizens remained unchanged. Their liminality, moreover, was prolonged by relocation to a settlement with its own distinct, uncertain status.

Turner also suggests that people in liminal states are not necessarily aware they have entered a new social phase — and that, too, resonates with China Camp: participants described a shift in how the host community treated them as Ethiopian citizens without fully registering the change themselves.

Theorizing habitus

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice helps explain the transformation of social roles, behavior, and lifestyle that participants underwent after displacement. IDPs described significant changes to daily practice as their social roles and access to resources shifted, along with real changes to self-perception. This was especially visible among camp residents who had once run their own businesses and could no longer draw on that earlier skill and knowledge.

Theorizing place, memory, and a sense of belonging

The findings show that displaced people do not sever their ties to home so much as recontextualize them within a new set

of social realities — a pattern that aligns with Appadurai's (1996) concept of deterritorialized identity, in which human affiliation grows more multifaceted and less anchored to a single place. This helps explain the shift in place-based identity among China Camp's participants: they remained attached to their home villages while no longer identifying as citizens of the Oromia Regional State.

Appadurai's framework also captures the shift in ethnic self-identification. Displaced Amhara continued to see themselves as citizens of Ethiopia, but that self-identification had been reshaped by the social distance drawn between them and the host community — their ethnic identity growing more salient as their sense of belonging to that group intensified.

Theorizing gender and generation

Participants experienced displacement very differently depending on gender and generation, and that difference shaped both their identity transformation and their social roles. Displacement significantly altered women's self-identification and roles: caregiving responsibilities increased alongside unemployment, economic hardship, and vulnerability to gender-based violence, even as household structures shifted to give women a larger role in decision-making, economic activity, and community leadership.

Older and younger participants diverged along generational lines. Older participants described feeling uprooted from their community, a sense tied closely to their diminished role as providers and protectors and to a corresponding drop in social status. Younger participants, by contrast, felt their futures had been disrupted — education and career plans suddenly out of reach because of the conflict. This study set out to understand how conflict-induced internal displacement has transformed the identities of IDPs living in China Camp, Debre Berhan City, Ethiopia.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative ethnographic case study design to address its research questions. China Camp served as the case because it is, in effect, a social world in which IDPs live, experience, and negotiate their identities amid ongoing conflict-related displacement. The ethnographic approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how participants' realities are socially constructed — how they experience displacement, and how ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational identity shape their understanding of it. The study's theoretical scaffolding drew on social identity theory, social constructionist approaches, Turner's liminality, Bourdieu's habitus, and Barth's social boundary theory, resting on the assumption that internal displacement is itself a social process that transforms identity. Ethnographic methods made it possible to trace the mechanisms behind that transformation — social boundary-making, identity negotiation, symbolic ethnicity, and the socially constructed sense of belonging that develops in camp life. Three questions guided the research: (1) how do IDPs identify themselves before, during, and after internal displacement? (2) How do IDPs describe their understanding, experience, and sense of meaning of camp life in relation to identity and future aspirations? (3) How do age, gender, and generation shape the identity-shifting process among IDPs?

Because the study aimed to capture the lived, socially constructed experience of China Camp's residents, participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The target population included camp residents who had stayed for a relatively long time, those who had resisted returning to their place of origin, those who had tried to return but were displaced again and camp and community leaders. Thirty-five participants were purposively sampled for in-depth interviews, representing a range of perspectives on displacement, gender, age, and ethnicity — young and older adults, community and camp leaders, long-term residents, and people who had attempted to return home before being displaced a second time. The research combined focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual in-depth interviews (IDIs); nine FGDs were held with IDPs using the same purposive and snowball approach.

Three FGDs brought together men and women of mixed ages, and six were stratified by age and gender, each with eight to ten participants. These discussions focused on how IDPs negotiate identity and talk about the impact of displacement on their ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational sense of self. Individual interviews were also conducted with twenty-two key informants — camp committee members and local officials — to capture the perspective of external stakeholders on the IDPs and the camp itself. Nine of these came from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), UNHCR, and various NGOs; the remaining eight were local government officials and community-level administrators.

Field observation rounded out the data, tracing how IDPs interact with each other and with both informal community authorities and formal government institutions. This combined participant observation with conversational analysis, carried out at the camp's main gathering points — food distribution sites, water wells, churches, youth meeting spaces, and informal discussion forums — with attention to social networks, friendship patterns, code-switching and language use, humor, conflict, and solidarity: the everyday texture through which social identity gets expressed.

Observation also captured how IDPs assert and negotiate identity across ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and social status. Documentary research supplemented this by examining the official discourse around IDPs — administrative reports, humanitarian guidelines, welfare-officer manuals, registration forms, public notices, and the signboards posted around camp by various official and unofficial authorities.

Data from interviews, FGDs, key informant interviews, and observations were analyzed thematically and narratively, guided by an ethnographic interpretive framework. Interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were

typed up and expanded soon after each observation. The analysis proceeded inductively; initial themes included loss, displacement, belonging, identity, ethnicity, home, gender, age, religion, masculinity and femininity, and social support.
The core of the analysis focused on how participants narrated the shift in their ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational identities — how they engaged in social boundary-making and negotiated their sense of self, and what meaning they attached to loss, displacement, and identity transformation. Beyond the narrative analysis of transcripts and notes, the analysis also compared experiences across groups: youth and elderly, women and men, long-term and more recent residents, and those who had returned to their place of origin against those who had chosen not to.
The study protocol was approved by the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, and followed international ethical standards for research with vulnerable populations. Participants were fully briefed on the study's objectives and procedures, and informed consent was obtained before every interview and group discussion. They retained the right to withdraw at any point, for any reason, without consequence. All personal information was kept strictly confidential, and pseudonyms were used throughout the findings to protect participants' identities; particular care was taken to avoid disclosing anything that might identify them. The research adhered to principles of integrity and respect, avoiding harmful, deceptive, discriminatory, or exploitative practices, and honored ethical reciprocity by sharing results back with participants — especially camp committee members — once appropriate permissions were secured.

Displacement and Identity Shift

This section presents the findings and discussions on how conflict-induced internal displacement has reshaped the ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational identities of Amhara IDPs from East Wollega and West Shewa now living in China Camp, Debre Berhan City. The findings draw on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork — in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and physical observation — and together they show that displacement has done more than physically remove these people from their places of origin; it has set off a complex process of transforming how they see themselves and where they belong socially.

Overview of the Camp

China Camp sits in Debre Berhan City, North Shewa Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia — one of the largest IDP settlements in the area, hosting close to 20,000 residents. Most are Amhara from the East Wollega and West Shewa zones of Oromia, displaced by violent conflict. The camp is administered by a mix of local government authorities, OCHA, camp committee members, and informal community leaders, and sits alongside Debre Berhan's other IDP camps, Woynishet and Bakelo. Daily life in the camp involves inter-ethnic exchange, mutual adaptation, and competition over scarce resources and the ongoing contact between the host community and IDPs has produced new social, cultural, economic, and civic dynamics.
China Camp made an apt setting for this study precisely because it brings together IDPs, host community members, local officials, humanitarian agencies, and community leaders in close, ongoing contact — a setting where IDPs are constantly negotiating and renegotiating ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational identity in the aftermath of displacement. Beyond being a place of residence, it is a site where new bonds, institutions, and relationships take shape among IDPs and between IDPs and the wider community, government, and humanitarian sector. That makes it a useful vantage point for understanding how these groups interact, and how those interactions shape the social, cultural, civic, and economic life of the displaced — particularly their ethnic, civic, place-based, gender, and generational identities.

Ethnic Identity Shift: Intensification of Ethnic Consciousness

Among the most striking findings of this study is how profoundly participants' ethnic identities have changed since displacement. Before being forced out, participants described ethnicity in fluid terms — a relatively minor part of daily social life, something they rarely thought of as defining who they were. Violence and destruction changed that: displacement pushed ethnic consciousness to the forefront, turning it into a central element of participants' sense of self. Participants themselves trace this shift directly to the hardship of being displaced.
Identity formation has long occupied anthropologists, who have debated its sources — social interaction, history, culture, and lived experience (Barth, 1969; Hall, 1990) — for decades. The experience of China Camp's IDPs illustrates that debate concretely: identity clearly shifts with social interaction and lived experience. Before displacement, participants identified themselves as farmers, traders, and citizens of Ethiopia, living amid Ethiopia's many languages and ethnicities without ethnicity acting as a meaningful boundary in their social networks. What mattered more, before displacement, was their work as farmers and traders, and their standing as taxpayers contributing to the state.
Pre-displacement ethnic identity: fluidity and "Ethiopianness": Before displacement, participants described their ethnic identity as fluid — something they did not actively claim membership in. What mattered more was their status as Ethiopian nationals, with all the privileges and responsibilities that came with it. Having lived in East Wollega and West Shewa for nearly half a century, they identified as residents of those areas and as citizens of Ethiopia first. Many described deep familiarity with local customs and norms, and fluency in Afan Oromo — evidence of how thoroughly integrated they had been into the broader Oromo community.
Most participants said they lived comfortably alongside other ethnic groups and rarely drew distinctions along ethnic lines before displacement. Umer, for example, said he used to think of himself as Oromo — a striking statement, since his sense of ethnic identity wasn't tied to being Amhara at all, and points to just how deeply integrated he had been into Oromo community life.

Participants generally said ethnicity carried little weight in their self-understanding before displacement. Many held Oromia regional identity cards and took pride in being Ethiopian citizens; they owned farmland, houses, and businesses in the areas where they lived. In short, before displacement, they defined themselves by residence rather than ethnicity.

Elfinesh's account captures this well: I was born and grew up in East Wellega Zone of the Oromia Region, and my parents also were born there. We lived believing that Ethiopia everywhere is Ethiopia. Before our displacement, I did not even know about ethnic labels like Amhara, Oromo, or Gurage. I only knew living together in Ethiopia. I did not even realize I was Amhara while living peacefully with Oromo society in my area of residence (Elfinesh).

Ethnic identity during displacement: violence, categorization, and forced re-identification: Participants agreed almost unanimously that displacement transformed their ethnic identity. Ethnicity became one of the most salient parts of who they were — not by choice, but because others used it to sort and separate them from other groups. Displacement, in their telling, turned ethnicity into a tool of social division. Several recalled being called "Komche" and "Amhara kumche," and told that "Amhara is a donkey." These labels and stereotypes forced participants to rethink their own ethnic identity — and the same process of forced re-categorization pushed many toward negative attitudes of their own, directed at other ethnic groups.

Getu's account illustrates this shift vividly: As the conflict and internal displacement started, I returned to my true ethnic self. Because I was expelled from the place where I was born and grew up because of my ethnic identity, and because Amhara people were killed there, I started to think about my Amhara identity. I used to consider myself to be Oromo, but I have confirmed my Amhara ethnic identity now (Getu).

Getu had identified as Oromo before displacement, but came to see himself as Amhara afterward — a shift he attributes directly to the violence he experienced and the killing of others in his ethnic group. His account also suggests that this experience of violence and exclusion left him with negative feelings toward those responsible. Many other participants described a similar arc, in which displacement turned ethnicity from a minor detail of identity into its most prominent feature.

Displacement changed all of that. Being forced from their homes disrupted participants' lives profoundly enough to reshape both identity and social networks. Ethnicity, which had not been a meaningful social boundary before displacement, resurfaced sharply once participants were confined to the camp. Relations between Amhara IDPs and local Oromo communities grew strained, eroding the Amhara's broader social capital. After displacement, ethnicity became central to IDPs' social networks in two ways: as a boundary, produced by hostile interaction with those responsible for the violence, and as a point of reference — a source of support and survival many IDPs increasingly relied on within the camp.

3). Post-displacement ethnic identity: reactive ethnicity and symbolic marginalization: By the time participants reached China Camp, ethnicity had become, in their own accounts, the most salient part of who they were. The losses and destruction that came with displacement produced what might be called reactive ethnicity — a process in which members of a group, in response to trauma, come to see themselves as part of something larger and more distinctly defined. Participants described feeling like outsiders because of discrimination from the host community, and they pointed to displacement as a major driver of their declining social and economic standing.

Many talked about how displacement turned them into "Tefenaqay" — a label for the displaced that participants said damages their civic standing by stripping away the status of full citizen. As one participant put it, "we became more aware of who we are after displacement." Along with the sting of being labeled Tefenaqay, many said displacement also sharpened their awareness of being Amhara — a clear illustration of how displacement reshapes social identity, ethnicity most of all. Participants also described a deteriorating relationship with the state. Many said the government had once protected them but had since betrayed that trust; they described losing faith in its ability to guarantee their security or deliver basic services. That disillusionment points to a real erosion of civic identity alongside the ethnic shift.

Taken together, the evidence points to three distinct phases in how ethnic identity shifted in China Camp. Before displacement, ethnicity mattered little. During displacement, the violence directed at participants made ethnicity far more salient. And after displacement, ongoing loss and stigma intensified that ethnic identity further. Overall, the findings show that displacement has fundamentally reshaped participants' ethnic identity — moving it from a relatively minor part of who they were to one of its most central and defining features. Barth's (1969) account of ethnicity as something produced through social boundaries helps make sense of this shift. Before displacement, Amhara IDPs lived and interacted daily with a different ethnic group, and ethnicity mattered relatively little as a result. After displacement, living in a camp among people of the same ethnicity created new boundaries, and ethnicity became central to how IDPs organized their social world — serving simultaneously as boundary and reference point.

Civic Identity Shift

Displacement also produced a fundamental shift in how China Camp's residents relate to the state as citizens. Before displacement, participants saw themselves as contributing members of Ethiopian society. Violence and forced uprooting changed that relationship: participants moved from active citizenship to something closer to internal exile. Even while remaining within Ethiopia, many described the conflict as leaving them feeling like outsiders — without rights, voice, or recognition. This section traces that shift across three stages — before, during, and after displacement — using belonging and citizenship as a framework for understanding participants' experience.

1).Before displacement: integration and Ethiopian citizenship as the primary identity: Before displacement,

participants described themselves as fully integrated citizens whose ethnic identity rarely took center stage; what mattered more was their Ethiopian citizenship. To them, Ethiopia was a country of diverse ethnic groups who had chosen to live together — their ethnic affiliation something transient, their Ethiopian identity permanent. They saw themselves as contributors to the state through trade, farming, and other work, and took pride in paying taxes, holding jobs, and owning property under their regional identity cards. None described themselves as second-class citizens; instead, they described the security and belonging that came with full, active citizenship.

As Mulatu put it: "During the peaceful times before the conflict, all I knew about my civic identity was that I was Ethiopian. I was not aware of my ethnic identity. I did not even know I was Amhara while living among the Oromo society before displacement occurred" (Mulatu). In short, participants treated their ethnic identity as fluid and their Ethiopian citizenship as fixed and non-negotiable.

During displacement: loss of citizenship and trust in institutions Displacement stripped away that sense of citizenship as violence and trauma forced participants from their homes and into camps. Along the way, many lost faith in the Ethiopian government and its institutions — trust that had once made them feel protected gave way to the realization that their basic rights had been violated.

Tesfa explained: Though I had trust in the state security organs to protect and safeguard me in times of trouble I was wrong. I lost the trust I had for the security organs because during targeted violence, they left us at the mercy of our attackers (Tesfa). That sense of betrayal took different forms, but it consistently left participants feeling like second-class citizens. Being tagged by ethnicity during the conflict cost them self-esteem and dignity, with several describing their Amhara identity, in that moment, as something undesirable. Seid recalled: Before the displacement, I felt like I was Oromo and Ethiopian because my ID card said I lived in Oromia. However, after eviction and bad politics around displacement, I was forced to rethink my ethnic identity. After being evicted and displaced because of my ethnic identity, I discovered Amhara as my actual ethnic identity eroding my previous civic identity (Seid).

After displacement: stigma, internal exile, and loss of citizenship: Life after displacement, participants said, bore little resemblance to life before it. People who had once taken pride in their work and prosperity found themselves stripped of property, businesses, and dignity — sometimes by their own countrymen. Many described feeling as though they lived in a foreign country as their sense of belonging eroded. The label "Tefenaqay" became a constant, humiliating reminder of that lost status, compounding the loss of property, documents, and reputation.

Mohammed described it this way: The name I have been given since my displacement is 'Displaced' (Tefenaqay) or 'Refugee' (Sidetegna). The recognition has been humiliating as I always feel as if I am in a foreign land. Whenever the people of Debre Berhan refer to me as a displaced or refugee while I still live in my country, it makes me feel not as a citizen (Mohammed).

Participants attributed this loss of dignity and status to the state's failure to protect them from violence and eviction, describing their situation as a kind of internal exile — physically present in Ethiopia but politically and socially cut off from it, unable to claim real belonging. Mrs. Zinet put it simply: Despite being in our ethnic homeland, I feel as a foreigner in my own country. In this camp, I feel like a temporary citizen who deserves resettlement somewhere else as a permanent resident (Zinet).

The Tefenaqay label effectively barred them from the benefits of active citizenship. Beyond the loss of citizenship rights and any real claim to belonging in Ethiopia, participants described a wrenching shift from "provider" to "recipient" — people who had once lived with dignity as investors now dependent on humanitarian aid.

Lakew described the change directly: I used to be a productive farmer whose products supplied the market in Addis Ababa. However, now I reside in Debre Berhan city at China Camp as an IDP seeking refuge and handouts to survive (Lakew).

For participants, becoming a "recipient" was humiliating in itself, stripping away pride, dignity, and self-respect. That loss, combined with the loss of citizenship, weighed especially heavily on younger IDPs, many of whom described feeling alienated and humiliated — and increasingly drawn toward migrating abroad in the hope that international recognition might restore some of the dignity they felt they'd lost as Ethiopian citizens. In effect, belonging eroded steadily through displacement, leaving participants as internal exiles — citizens in name, without voice or standing.

Displacement also reshaped participants' relationship to citizenship. Before displacement, participants valued their Ethiopian citizenship and saw themselves as contributors to the country's welfare; forced displacement changed that relationship substantially. Having lived through such a traumatic experience, many lost trust in government officials, coming to see them as having abandoned IDPs at the moment they needed support most.

What emerges overall is a shift from proud, contributing citizens to IDPs dependent on charity and aid, with the Tefenaqay label as the visible marker of that loss. The result is a form of exile that has kept participants from the ordinary rights of active citizenship — though ongoing contact with various institutions has given some participants a clearer sense of their rights, which in turn shapes how they advocate for consideration as IDPs. Broadly, this shift in civic identity moved through three stages: an initial sense of belonging, violent uprooting, and, finally, a kind of internal exile in which IDPs now live in camps having lost faith in the institutions meant to protect them.

Place-Based Identity Shifts

Place-based identity emerged as a central theme, with participants repeatedly stressing its role in their experience before, during, and after displacement. Displacement disrupted participants' ability to define themselves through their place of

origin - reshaping their relationship to that place from one of attachment into one of trauma and exile. Yet the loss of that original self-identification did not mean participants became wholly detached from their homeland; instead, many gradually built new bonds with their current settlement, China Camp.

The IDPs' experience also sheds light on how people build relationships to place more broadly — either through long, continuous residence, or through the accumulated attachment of living somewhere for a shorter but still meaningful period. Appadurai's (1996) account of place suggests that attachment can grow out of exposure itself, and the findings bear that out: participants' feelings toward Ethiopia have shifted through the forced exposure of displacement, even as they continue to regard East Wollega and West Shewa as their true homeland. The result is a kind of dual attachment — multiple, overlapping ties to place that shape participants' identities, networks, and daily lives. This section traces that shift across the same three stages.

Before displacement: attachment, investment, and social interaction as foundations of place-based identity: Participants described a strong attachment to place in the Oromia region that ran alongside — but was distinct from — their ethnic identity. That attachment came from real investment: homes built to live in and store grain, livestock, extensive business activity, and children rose as locals. Participants took visible pride in the farms and businesses that sustained not just their own households but their wider community.

Hailu explained: My place attachment in West Shewa Zone of Oromia Region manifested itself through my long-term investment in agriculture and business. I built permanent houses and acquired grain mills and livestock because I considered the land as my home within a bigger Ethiopia. Not only was I self-sustaining, but I also had a great reputation as an investor. I have numerous memories attached to this place but I was forcefully displaced (Hailu).

That attachment, it seems, was rooted less in ethnicity than in economic investment and social ties — the place had become home through the ordinary rhythms of neighborly life, from weddings to shared work. Years of close contact with the Oromo community reinforced that place-based identity further. Participants recalled, with evident fondness, generations of living side by side with their Oromo neighbors — relationships that had, over time, become part of their own sense of belonging. In short, place attachment grew out of sustained interaction, economic investment, and social bonds with local ethnic groups.

During displacement: loss of home, wealth, and belonging: The ethnographic data point to real, shared trauma during the period of conflict and displacement itself — the loss of property, belonging, and social relationships all at once. As Seid described: During conflict and displacement, I lost my home, wealth, and social belonging. The feeling makes me think of myself as a foreigner in my own country and among my own people (Seid).

Place-based identity, in this period, became bound up with exile and trauma. Participants described the loss of home as the central reason their feelings toward the Oromia region shifted — though that change did not happen all at once; it unfolded gradually as people adjusted to life as IDPs.

Beyond losing homes, businesses, and belongings, participants described losing faith in their own ethnic group and former neighbors, many of whom became caught up in the violence itself.

Mrs. Zinet recalled: During the conflict and displacement, I lost my beloved home, business, and animals. What makes the experience unbearable is the fact that the people I used to interact with went into the looting and killing of my relatives and friends (Zinet).

Place-based identity, then, shifted from belonging toward trauma and loss. That shift compounded a broader loss of self-esteem and pride, deepening participants' sense of exile from both their ethnic group and their country — a sense sharpened further by the state's failure to protect them from targeted violence and robbery. Tesfa's account, echoed earlier, captures the same loss of institutional trust: Though I had trust in the state security organs to protect and safeguard me in times of trouble I was wrong. I lost the trust I had for the security organs because during targeted violence, they left us at the mercy of our attackers (Tesfa).

Losing both wealth and trust pushed participants' place-based identity from belonging toward exile — a shift tied closely to a loss of self-esteem, in which their Amhara identity came to feel, for a time, like a liability rather than a strength. Ethnicity, in effect, had become a barrier to basic rights, and that barrier produced internal exile. In short, participants described losing their sense of place-belonging altogether during displacement.

Post-displacement: China Camp as liminal space and the development of hybrid identities: Participants described the initial shock of arriving in the camp, and how, over roughly five years, that unfamiliar and supposedly temporary space slowly became something closer to home. Relationships, community structures, and institutions reorganized themselves around camp life, reshaping participants' sense of belonging even as it remained difficult for many to think of themselves as full citizens of the state. Participants described strong social, religious, and communal ties within China Camp, while still holding onto Ethiopia and their places of origin as "home" — a belonging that felt conditional on being accepted.

Mrs. Zinash said: Living in China Camp was initially shocking but today I see the camp as more than a temporary relief center. Not only have I developed social relationships, but I have also joined church activities to develop a sense of community belongingness. Nonetheless, I feel as if I continue to live in my own country (Ethiopia) and my sense of belongingness exists only when I am accepted (Zinash).

Even as the camp became a kind of home, participants held onto their sense of belonging to Ethiopia — a genuinely liminal process, in Turner's (1969) sense: a phase in which people are neither fully in the past nor fully in the present but suspended between both. Participants echoed this directly, describing an inability to feel like citizens because they had lost faith in

political institutions even as they built real bonds within the camp community — existing, in effect, in two places at once. Mrs. Elsabeth explained: Despite being in our ethnic homeland, I feel a great sense of alienation as a foreigner in my own country. In this camp, I am treated as a temporary citizen rather than a permanent one (Elsabeth).

Participants described losing faith in their country as its institutions failed them — a failure tied to their inability to move on after years of camp life. Despite remaining within Ethiopia and the Oromia region, many identified as foreigners; their relationship with Debre Berhan city, meanwhile, had deepened over time into something like belonging. But the underlying sense of internal exile persisted — citizens who nonetheless remained liminal in their new surroundings.

Participants also pointed to the "Tefenaqay" label as central to this identity transformation. It reshaped how they saw themselves and behaved, tying their sense of belonging to the camp rather than to the region or the country. Many described this as a kind of "lowering of self" — a loss of self-worth and pride as citizens that, over time, hardened into an identity as residents of China Camp.

Place-based identity mattered deeply to participants before displacement, tied closely to home, property, business, and social relationships — and closely bound up with ethnic identity as well. Losing land and home during displacement reshaped what "place belonging" even meant, turning participants into internally displaced people almost by definition. But over time, the camp itself changed, becoming more than a temporary shelter. Participants built social, religious, and institutional ties there that point to a real, if partial, identity transformation — a dynamic process shaped by liminality as IDPs restructured their surroundings into something resembling home.

The findings also show how displacement has shaped IDPs' collective memory and, through it, their ethnic identity. Trauma is woven deeply into participants' memories, shaping both identity and social networks. The shared experience of severe stress, and the memory of what they endured, has become central to how participants understand themselves — with ethnicity functioning as a kind of carrier for that collective memory, binding IDPs together and shaping their networks. As Barth (1969) suggests, memory of this kind shapes interpersonal relationships and guides how people act and perceive others; here, the memory of displacement's horrors continues to guide participants' actions and their relationships with others. That collective memory functions as a boundary, separating IDPs from others, even as the shared trauma binds them together through a common experience — a memory that shapes both action and social connection.

Altogether, place-based identity moved through three stages: attachment and belonging before displacement, loss of that belonging during displacement, and the gradual formation of a new, hybrid place-based identity within the camp. Displacement, in other words, redefined what "home" meant for these IDPs — even as it stripped away their original place-belonging, it left room for new social, institutional, and religious structures that helped them adapt to their new environment.

Generational Identity Shifts

Age and social role shaped how IDPs experienced identity transformation in distinct ways. Though participants across generations lived through broadly similar events, their perceptions, memories, and hopes diverged sharply — and so, in turn, did the identities they constructed from those experiences. Older participants described displacement chiefly as a loss of achievement and standing as providers and leaders; younger participants described it as an interruption to their education and career hopes.

From achievement and aspiration to identity rupture: Before displacement, participants described their former identities largely through achievement and aspiration. Most adults defined their earlier social status by occupation — many had been farmers, traders, and businesspeople, deriving their sense of self from their role as providers and as respected community members. Violence and forced displacement stripped that away, along with their businesses, property, and farms, triggering both shame and a degree of exclusion within the host community. The shift from respected provider to occasional aid recipient tore into their earlier sense of identity.

Among the younger participants, many had been students before displacement, with studies at the center of their lives and academic achievement fueling real hope for the future. Displacement interrupted that trajectory overnight. Many young participants described their current identity largely in terms of what had been taken from them — the studies they could no longer pursue, the career path suddenly closed off. Moving abruptly from self-sufficiency to dependence on aid left many describing their identity almost entirely through what they used to be, before displacement, rather than what they are now. Lost hope emerged as a recurring theme among the young IDPs interviewed.

Yimer put it this way: I really lost my previous hopes and aspirations because of this displacement. My family had great hopes for me because I had very good academic achievement. They lost their hope, and I lost mine too. The only hope I have now is to travel abroad in search of better opportunities and a better life (Yimer). Yimer's account captures that sense of lost opportunity clearly — hopes and aspirations, built on real academic achievement, shattered by the conflict. Displacement reshaped how he understands himself, largely around the studies he was no longer able to pursue.

Tension between generations and negotiating futures: Older and younger IDPs diverged sharply on the question of return. Older participants — many of whom had lived in their home areas for decades — were far more eager to go back than their children were, and that difference created real tension within families. Younger participants had little confidence that life would return to normal, fearing the violence could resume at any moment; many were also still processing the trauma of having their lives upended with no say over where they would live, who their neighbors would be, or what their future work might look like. Where older participants pushed to return home, younger ones tended to feel it was safer to

wait things out.

Alemu described the tension directly: I lost everything I used to do for a living. My life had gone very well, but everything has changed now. I wish the conflict would end so that I can go back to my farming activities. However, my son and daughter want to stay here for a while before going back because they say that it is safer here (Alemu).

That generational tension came through clearly across interviews. Older participants felt an urgent need to return home, while younger ones sometimes saw that urgency as unrealistic. Parents explained their desire to return as, in part, a rejection of living indefinitely as strangers in their own country — and pointed to the loss of property, livestock, and farmland as a loss of their identity as providers. Younger participants, meanwhile, prioritized their studies and future careers, arguing that staying at the camp a while longer would help them get back on track. That disagreement, layered onto the older generation's nostalgia for their former neighborhoods, kept tension simmering between the two groups.

Both young and old participants, in the end, described themselves as foreigners in a country that was supposed to be their own — a shared feeling rooted in the loss of home, neighborhood, and community that came with becoming IDPs. All described a changed status: no longer fully part of their former community, not yet assimilated into a new one. Bourdieu's (1977) claim that identity is embedded in everyday practice and social position fits this well — participants' sense of self had shifted precisely because displacement altered their daily practices and social standing.

The IDPs' experience shows clearly how a person's sense of belonging to a place can shift with their interactions with it. Turner's (1969) concept of liminality is useful here: IDPs occupy a genuine "in-between" state, set apart from those around them. Though physically located in Ethiopia, many no longer consider themselves full members of Ethiopian society — their negative experiences with local officials have hardened into a broader erosion of trust and belonging. In this sense, IDPs remain liminal, suspended between two states.

At the same time, a substantial number of respondents insisted that their attitude toward Ethiopia had not really changed — even though the label "Tefenaqay," which they use to describe themselves, carries clearly negative connotations, and even though their own accounts point to real transformation. Before displacement, they saw themselves as active contributors to the national economy; that no longer feels true. In that sense, participants' attitudes toward Ethiopia have shifted in ways that have reshaped their sense of belonging, membership, and, ultimately, civic identity.

In sum, older IDPs in China Camp had been providers and respected community members before displacement; during and after it, they faced a loss of status and recognition, becoming dependent on aid while carrying real nostalgia for home. Younger IDPs, mostly students and aspiring professionals before displacement, lost hope and opportunity during it, and in the camp now lean toward migration and adaptation to their new circumstances. Displacement, in short, produced sharply different identity shifts by generation: older participants experienced it as a disruption to what they had achieved, while younger participants defined their identity increasingly around what they had lost.

Gendered Identity Shifts

Displacement reshaped participants' social identity and status differently depending on gender. Male participants shifted from protected providers to IDPs dependent on outside help; female participants took on a wider range of roles, moving between caregiver and provider often simultaneously. For both, though, the new social status carried real costs — a devalued sense of self, lost reputation, and the shared burden of being seen as Tefenaqay. These shifts followed directly from how displacement disrupted livelihoods, social practice, and access to resources, forcing participants to reconstruct their identities differently depending on gender.

The crisis of masculinity and the loss of provider identity: For most male participants, occupation had anchored their sense of self before displacement — many had been self-employed, deriving identity from their role as provider and protector. Being suddenly uprooted, and losing their property and farms in the process, made it impossible to keep fulfilling that role, and many described what might be called a crisis of masculinity as a result.

Tilahun said: I feel very helpless since I cannot protect my children. I do not think there is any man in this camp that can fight and protect his family from those armed attackers. Moreover, I still feel traumatized over the fact that I was not able to stop the conflict from happening. I lost my wife during conflict, and now I cannot honor her by burying her with my own hands (Tilahun). Tilahun's account makes that crisis visible — the shame of being unable to protect his family, the trauma of feeling powerless against the conflict itself, and, more recently, the pain of being unable to bury his wife himself. That loss of control and power runs straight through his fear and grief, tied to his inability to fulfill the two roles Oromia society envisions most centrally for men: provider and protector.

Beyond losing that role, male participants also described a real loss of economic self-worth — displacement, for many, meant a "reduction of status and social recognition." Most had been farmers or businesspeople who measured themselves by what they had built; becoming dependent on humanitarian aid in an emergency camp brought on real psychological strain.

Kassaw explained: Being an IDP is very humiliating because it means losing your dignity as a provider. I feel very devastated and stressed since my status and social recognition have significantly deteriorated. I want to do something so that people can see me as the strong and successful man that I used to be (Kassaw).

Male participants consistently framed displacement as a blow to their self-esteem and social standing as providers, often describing their distress in terms of fighting and defeat — Kassaw, for instance, described feeling "wounded." Many also described a related loss: the failure to stand up and stop the conflict from reaching their community, which left them

struggling to reclaim recognition as strong, protective figures. That double loss — of provider status and protector status — sits at the heart of the crisis of masculinity these participants described.

Women's changing roles and identities: Female participants framed their experience of displacement mostly around hardship — becoming vulnerable, becoming dependent. At the same time, the loss of livelihood and resources pushed many of them into new, overlapping roles as they worked to rebuild their lives.

From productivity to dependency: Before displacement, most female participants defined themselves through their contribution to the household economy, drawing self-worth from being self-sustaining. Displacement cut off their access to income-generating work almost entirely, and once resettled in China Camp, many came to define themselves instead by their dependence on others — a shift that brought its own psychological toll.

Mrs. Kedija said: My biggest challenge as a displaced woman is being dependent on others for basic needs such as food for children. Living in camps and being reliant on humanitarian aid has significantly altered my perception of who I am" (Kedija). Kedija's account points to a real transformation — displacement reshaped not just livelihoods but self-perception, as social recognition gave way to reliance on aid. Their social status shifted, in effect, from self-worth built on economic contribution to the discomfort of depending on charity.

Gendered vulnerabilities and new responsibilities: Female participants also described becoming more vulnerable in specific, concrete ways — struggling to access healthcare, losing privacy in camp life, and carrying the burden of raising children while uprooted.

Mrs. Lemlem recalled: I was forced to walk four hours on foot nine days after childbirth, and I still suffer from back pains to this day. This experience of walking long distances while being pregnant and right after childbirth defines me as a mother. I miss the privacy of my room, and I feel my dignity as a woman is being challenged as I share a factory warehouse with hundred people (Lemlem). Mrs. Fantu described a similar loss of privacy and security, saying simply, "I do not think what I used to think. I do not desire what I used to desire."

For Lemlem, displacement has become bound up with her identity as a mother — her account of lost dignity and privacy points to a real shift in self-perception. Fantu's words point in the same direction: displacement changed not just her circumstances but her inner life, shaped in part by lost access to education and the ongoing demands of raising children.

Fantu also pointed to gender inequality itself as a major source of stress. Many female participants took on farming and trading to survive, yet Fantu noted that women were rarely recognized as equally valuable contributors to the household economy, before or after displacement. She explained: Although I feel proud of my contribution to the household economy through trading, there are times when I feel as if I am not valued as much as my brothers are. Even when I work hard to contribute to the well-being of my family, I am still regarded as a secondary breadwinner. The worst part about it is the fact that it is socially acceptable for me to be in this situation (Fantu).

Displacement, in other words, layered new economic pressure onto existing gender inequality: despite taking on real economic activity, women were still seen as lower in social status than men — a dynamic that left many describing themselves as poorer and more vulnerable than before, compounded by the loss of access to education.

Declining social status and the stigma of displacement: Female participants described a marked drop in social status after displacement, coming to see themselves as Tefenaqay — a label they tied to the loss of earlier roles as nurses, teachers, homemakers, farmers, and businesswomen. For many, becoming Tefenaqay felt like an insult to their earlier standing, implying they no longer contributed anything of value to society.

Mrs. Aisha explained: The label Tefenaqay has greatly affected my self-perception. Before displacement, I was a nurse, and I used to feel proud of my profession and my contribution to society. However, becoming Tefenaqay means that I am now perceived as a person who has been displaced and who does not make any contribution to society (Aisha). Aisha's account reflects a broader pattern: female participants described displacement as a loss of the social roles that had once defined them, with the Tefenaqay label landing as a particularly sharp insult — implying, wrongly, that they had nothing left to contribute. That shift in status carried real psychological weight.

Taken together, these findings show that displacement disrupted participants' social status, roles, and responsibilities in ways that forced them to redefine themselves under new circumstances. That disruption showed up especially clearly among women, who described becoming vulnerable and losing their earlier sense of worth as providers and caregivers. For both men and women, displacement produced a negative shift in identity — the loss of former social roles, and the shared burden of becoming "Tefenaqay."

Gender, Age, and Differences in Experience

Gender and age shaped participants' experience of displacement in distinct ways. For men, being Amhara had always carried real weight; for women, it was simply part of how they lived, not something that defined them outright. Men's ethnic identity resurfaced sharply after displacement, while women tended to experience ethnicity more as one thread within a broader social network — and, in part because ethnic identity was not as central a boundary for them, women generally adapted to displacement somewhat more readily than men. Age mattered too: older respondents described the loss of farms, livelihood, and social networks as central to their experience, while younger respondents described displacement as changing everything about their lives.

Nearly all participants described displacement as the most traumatic experience of their lives, though not in identical ways. Those between 18 and 30 at the time of displacement described it as the most critical turning point in their lives, even

though most had not lost a farm or an established livelihood of their own. Older respondents, by contrast, pointed to the loss of family and friends as the most painful part of displacement, while younger respondents were more likely to frame their loss around a disrupted future. Many of those in their twenties at the time described feeling that everything had changed for them, with their sense of the future turning notably darker.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how conflict-induced internal displacement has shifted the identities, relationships, and sense of belonging of Amhara IDPs in China Camp, Debre Berhan City. The findings show that displacement is a profound social process that reshapes identity on multiple fronts at once. It altered participants' ethnic identity, as forced removal itself became a kind of social boundary. Conflict-induced displacement reshaped IDPs relationship to citizenship, eroding the trust and respect they once apprehended for public institutions. And it disrupted their sense of place-based belonging, as the loss of homes and livelihoods became a defining part of the displacement experience. The effects of that disruption, the study also found, differed meaningfully by gender and by age.

The impact of displacement did not, however, vary meaningfully by region of origin. Amhara participants from both East Wollega and West Shewa described coming to terms with life in China Camp, even as they described the loss of their farms and businesses as deeply traumatic. That trauma eased somewhat over time, as participants gradually accepted that they were unlikely to return home.

Taken as a whole, the study shows that conflict-induced internal displacement carries far-reaching consequences for identity, relationships, and belonging. Effective policy responses, accordingly, need to reckon with the full range of these effects if they are going to meet IDPs' needs.

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