

## **WOMEN IN ERITREA: REFLECTIONS FROM PRE-AND POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

**Ravinder Rena\***

*The role of Eritrean women in the thirty years war of Independence brought major changes that reflect in the present demography and economy of the country. Their participation in the economy contributes to local production and income by filling the gaps left by men who died in the war, or who have left the country and settled in different parts of the world. Despite the growing importance of women in the formal economy, paid jobs and self-employment opportunities available to women are still clustered in low-productivity and/or low-status industries. To cope with the growing number of female-headed households, Eritrea needs to increase the earning potential of women. This paper indicates that providing women with education at secondary or tertiary level is one way to go. It also explores the reasons for Eritrean women entering into the labour markets.*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Women play an important role in the war-ravaged Eritrean economy. Many enterprises are owned and run by women, and they make up 30 per cent of the workforce in manufacturing, services, and trade. It is to be noted that a legal framework for gender equality and equity is in place in the country. Eritrea's 1997 Constitution prohibits the violation of the human rights of women and "mandates the Legislature to enact laws designed to eliminate inequalities in the Eritrean society because of gender discrimination."<sup>1</sup> Laws forbid the kidnapping of women and the exchange of dowries upon marriage, and women now can initiate divorce. Women gain the right to access land for housing and farming at the age of 18 (United Nations, 2001). While this can partly be explained by rural-urban migration of women, the surplus of women both in rural and urban areas indicate that war casualties, refugees, and labour migration have played an important role in shaping the population. It is to be noted that, after Independence the women fighters (from rural areas) settled in towns after demobilisation as better facilities motivated them to settle in towns than in villages (NUEW, 1993).

Although globalisation has opened up new opportunities for women to enter the labour market, particularly in manufacturing and service sectors, the trade-off between unpaid domestic works and paid employment is not always profitable. Women often enter at the bottom of the salary scale and occupy precarious jobs with little security and few benefits (United Nations, 2004). An examination of Eritrean society reveals a more traditional picture, however. Nearly 67 per cent of Eritreans live below the poverty line; this pattern is particularly acute among the 20-30 per cent of households that are headed by women. Women are concentrated in low-skill, low-paying jobs and earn only 50-80 per cent of what their male colleagues earn. In addition, women's enterprises are concentrated in areas with limited growth, such as simple food processing and small tailor workshops. Thus, political and economic gender equality is still weak in Eritrea despite the enactment of mechanisms to empower women and to inform them

---

\* Associate Professor of Economics, Department of Business and Economics, Eritrea Institute of Technology- Mai Nefhi, Asmara, Eritrea. The author acknowledges the valuable comments of the anonymous referees on draft copy of this article. They are of immense help in filling the important gaps and clearing the ambiguities.

of their rights. This may be because of lack of organisations to mobilise and support them. Indeed, only one women's organisation, i.e. National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) is involved in advocacy and education on key women's issues, including health, education, microfinance and human rights (NUEW, 1994-95).<sup>2</sup>

The gender gap is prevalent in the area of basic education. Household responsibilities, early marriage, and economic and cultural factors hamper girls' access to education. At the primary school level, girls have lower enrollment rates and higher-grade repetition rates than boys. Only 13 per cent of eligible girls attend secondary school. The low education level among girls and women inevitably has a negative influence on their income-earning capabilities and on their access to economic opportunities (Gruber, 1998). Although, end of the Eritrean/Ethiopian war likely to have a negative effect on the economic participation of women because male workers tend to be the first to be employed in post-war jobs and enterprises, improvement in the availability and efficiency of the economic activities of women, and in turn their well-being, therefore is critical (NUEW, 1993; Tekle, 1996; Ruth, 1997; Rena, 2005).

Given this background, an attempt has been made in this paper to focus on the issues pertaining to women's labour force participation in Eritrea. In addition, the paper tries to assess whether women are being discriminated in the labour market or not. Finally, this paper provides certain implications in identifying how women's earnings can be raised in order to become self-reliant.

The study uses secondary data sources, mainly government documents, survey reports of NUEW and UNICEF, research articles, news papers (Eritrea profile), books and other published and unpublished materials on Eritrea by and about Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF).

## II. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Eritrea was an Italian colony since 1890 until the Second World War when it was temporarily taken over by Britain and finally federated with Ethiopia by a UN Resolution in 1952. The incorporation of Eritrea into the Ethiopian Empire in 1962 followed the Eritrean armed struggle for independence that started in 1961 and lasted until 1991. Eritrea got its independence in 1991 after thirty years freedom struggle.<sup>3</sup> It is located in the Horn of Africa, bordered in the North and West by Sudan, in the South by Ethiopia and Djibouti and in the East by the Red Sea. It is a small country with 125,000 square km (or over 48,000 square miles), with an estimated population of about 4 million. Women form more than 51 per cent in the society and the sex ratio is 51:49. The population is culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse with nine major ethnic groups<sup>4</sup> consisting of both Christians and Muslims. The country is divided into six administrative *zobas* (provinces/regions). Eritrea is one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income estimated at around USD200, and the poverty rate was 66.5 per cent in 2006. It has experienced a modest economic growth rate of 4 per cent and Eritrean Diaspora remittances contribute 40-50 per cent of its GDP. Its annual population growth was estimated at 2.9 per cent in 2006. The Gross National Accessibility (GNA) to schooling in 2003-04 was reported to be 5.1 per cent, 56.6 per cent, 43.4 per cent and 27.2 per cent in pre-primary, elementary, middle and secondary education, respectively. Its literacy rate is 60 per cent. Almost 50 per cent of the employees are working under national service for about USD25-30 per month. The women employees are about 45-50 per cent in the total workforce. Like the economies of many African nations, Eritrean economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture, with 75 per cent of the population involved in farming and herding. However, agriculture contributes only 16 per cent to its national income (National Statistics Office, 2003; Rena, 2006a). Eritrea's

coastlines extend about 1200 km, flanked by coral reefs and 354 islands, including the important Dahlak Archipelago. Since its independence, the country has been undertaking a number of developmental programmes in rebuilding its war-ravaged economy.

Eritrean society is ethnically heterogeneous. The largest ethnic group is the Tigrinya, which comprises up to 50 per cent of the population, while the Tigre makes up another 31.4 per cent. Smaller population groups make up the rest of the population. Each nationality speaks a different native tongue, but typically, many of the minorities speak more than one language. The most recent addition to the nationalities of Eritrea is the Rashaida, who entered Eritrea in the 19th century from the Arabian Coast. The Rashaida, numbering approximately 61,000, do not intermarry, and are typically nomadic. The Kunama were originally the only settled people in the country. They adopted rain-fed agriculture and settled into communal villages in the 'lowlands' of Eritrea. Tigrigna, Arabic, Italian, and English are the languages widely spoken in Eritrea. The local Tigrigna and the wider Arabic language are the two predominant languages for official purposes. The dominant religions are Christianity and Sunni Islam, each group representing roughly 50 per cent of the population. Christians consist primarily of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church, which is the local Oriental Orthodox church, but small groups of Roman Catholics, Protestants, and other denominations also exist (NUEW, 1995; *Wikipedia, online encyclopedia*).

### **Traditional Status of Women**

Men are historically the breadwinners in the Eritrean society. This position of men compounded with the patriarchal culture that gave them a greater opportunity for an easy access to economic resources and education, ultimately left women in a subordinate position at all levels of the society and the state (Lionel and Basil, 1988; Negash, 1997). Women in Eritrea have long been under-represented at all levels of governance—as voters, candidates, party leaders, and elected officials. Cultural taboos and illiteracy have impeded women's participation in the economic development and political process. Cultural norms and structures can also make it difficult for them to participate in the development process. Besides, Eritrean traditions and culture are often described as traditional and patriarchal with regard to women. Several factors influence the current circumstances of girls and women and hamper their greater social and economic participation (NUEW, 1993; Rena, 2007).

Although some variations exist among the country's nine ethnic groups, social life follows a predominantly patriarchal system. As in many other cultures, Eritrean women are largely expected to play the roles of wife and mother (Negash, 1997; Tronvoll, 1998). Girls are often encouraged to be quiet and mild, and being assertive or taking a leadership role is generally looked down upon.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, girls could be pledged in marriage before they were born and were typically married around age 12 particularly in rural Eritrea (Amrit, 1991; Veronica, 1993; Gruber, 1998). Fathers would make the marriage decisions, and kidnapping and forced marriage have been accepted practices. Dowry system for the bridegroom has been commonly practiced. Although, the Eritrean Laws on Marriage strictly forbid dowry practices—these customs persist in many areas of the country (Connell, 1993).

Muslim and Coptic Christians in Eritrea differ with regard to their traditions, social practices, and gender-related attitudes. Variations in the level of restrictions placed on women also exist among different groups. It is observed that there are also significant differences between pastoralist and nomadic groups in terms of women's responsibilities for such aspects as farming, packing tents, or caring for livestock. However, in general, women have been excluded from ownership

of the means of production, i.e. land and livestock (Halden, 1997; Tronvoll, 1998). The majority of people in the lowlands are Muslim. The participation of women in agriculture is limited and follows strict religious prescriptions regarding gender roles. However, their responsibilities in the home are wide ranging; in addition to common household chores, they take care of family members, sell what the family produces at markets, and make purchases. An exception to this pattern is found in the western lowlands among Kunama women, who take part in all farming activities (NUEW, 1995; Connell, 1998; UoA and MoA, 1998).

As is true in other countries and regions of the world, a fundamentalist version of Islam is spreading among the Eritrean population, bringing with it increasingly restrictive mandates for women (Halden, 1997; Tronvoll, 1998). Among some ethnic groups today, particularly in Tigre, Rashaida, Sahoo and Afar, the women are restricted to their homes, have no public role, and must keep their faces covered. In this context, the opportunities of most girls and women have been severely limited for employment. It is also to be noted that there is very meager or nil enrollment in higher education from these ethnic groups. Literacy levels are lower among girls than boys, largely because they typically stay at home to perform household tasks (including fetching water, doing wash, gathering firewood, preparing meals, and caring for younger siblings). Men rarely participate in such activities (Connell, 1998; UoA and MoA, 1998; Rena, 2005).

Besides, some 10 per cent of the urban population is refugees who have returned home since 1991. However, one million Eritreans are still believed to live abroad, and many send their repatriation amount home. The high level of remittances income sent from abroad has opened up labour migration into Eritrea by Ethiopians, who constitute some 10 per cent of the urban population.<sup>6</sup> This is illustrated by the pattern of marital status, indicating that nearly half of all urban households are female headed. The largest group is the widows, constituting some 35 per cent of urban female-headed households (Bernal, 2001). Since many men have died from “non-natural” causes, widows are not necessarily old. As early as in their 40s, almost 20 per cent of women are widowed, and most widows have children living in the household. The second largest group (30 per cent) of female heads is married women with men absent on labour migration, followed by divorced women (25 per cent). Again, most of these women have children. Women who have not (yet) married constitute a small group. They are commonly young, and a few of them have children. All these cultural taboos and other socio-economic factors have become major impediments for the women to enter the labour market (Arneberg, 1999).

The 30 years of liberation war damaged most remaining economic and physical infrastructure. Economic growth after liberation has been at some 7-8 per cent per year, based heavily on foreign aid and remittances as well as the promotion of private investment (Rena, 2005). The outbreak of the new war between Ethiopia and Eritrea in May 1998 has regrettably reversed the ongoing economic development. The population structure in Eritrea bears the sign of war and migration with high fertility rate (5.6). There is a particular lack of adult men in the country, with 82 and 90 men per 100 women in urban and rural areas, respectively. In urban areas, there are almost twice as many women as there are men in the age group from 30 to 40 years (National Statistics Office, 1997).

### **III. WOMEN IN PRE- AND POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

#### **1. Woman in Pre-Independence Period**

Traditionally, all-male councils of elders had run Eritrean villages. Women had no formal role in public life—it was a male preserve. The Eritrean People Liberation Front's (EPLF) opening

of its ranks to women, without any limitation on the kind of activities that females could undertake, was thus a momentous event (Ruth, 1983). Women's involvement in the EPLF, politically and militarily, were unprecedented. They participated in local and regional political structures, both in liberated areas and behind enemy lines. They secured the right to vote and to be elected to public office. Many of them assumed positions in village councils and regional committees. During the independence struggle, women served in EPLF alongside men in all capacities except the top ranks of leadership. It is reported that almost 33 per cent of Eritrean freedom fighters were women (Amrit, 1991). Thus, Eritrean women have the equal potentiality to contribute substantially for the achievement of freedom and economic development of Eritrea. As guerilla fighters, women fought side by side with men in mixed units and marched to victory with their male comrades (James and Stuart, 1985). In fact, the image of a khaki-clad woman warrior brandishing a rifle became emblematic of the nationalist movement. The woman fighter seemed to signify Eritreans' determination to fight on to the last man and, beyond him, to the last woman. The woman fighter also served as a symbol of the grassroots nature of the movement, which drew Eritreans from all walks of life and all ethnic groups. Within EPLF, national liberation and advancement for women were seen as going hand in hand (Bernal, 2001).

Women were drawn to the cause of Eritrean independence from the beginning. Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), however, limited women's participation to that of support, helping to supply the movement with provisions and information. Like ELF, EPLF also began as an all-male organisation. But in 1973, when three women attempted to join the rebels, they were allowed to stay and were given military training. Thus, EPLF soon began to openly recruit women as fighters. Many of the first women fighters came from urban and educated backgrounds, but they were quite successful in mobilising other women from rural as well as urban areas. Women from all ethnic backgrounds and walks of life joined the movement (Bernal, 2001). Fighters<sup>7</sup> had many duties besides serving on the front lines, however. EPLF maintained a base area with schools, hospitals, repair shops, and small factories. It produced its own soap, rubber sandals<sup>8</sup> (which were worn by fighters), artificial limbs, pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and even sanitary napkins (EPLF, 1989). EPLF also administered and provided services such as healthcare and education to populations in the areas liberated from direct Ethiopian control. Women received formal military training, and they lived and fought side by side with men in mixed units (Ruth, 1983; Doris, 1989). According to Worku Zerai, one of the first three women to become a fighter, rather than being spared from combat, the majority of women fighters were, in fact, assigned to combat duty because they lacked specialized skills that could contribute significantly to support activities (Worku, 1994).

Within its own ranks, EPLF attempted to put gender equality into practice. According to EPLF, women would gain equality through participation in political activities and socially productive labour (Stefanos, 1988). This was summed up in the slogan "Equality through Equal Participation." The approach of EPLF, in practice, was to expand the notions of what women could do and to break down gender barriers that had kept women out of certain kinds of work. Thus, women fighters were trained to work as mechanics, drivers, carpenters, and barefoot doctors, among other occupations (Doris, 1989). Furthermore, male fighters took part in food preparation and other tasks usually reserved for women in Eritrean communities (Erich and Tammy, 1996; Ruth, 1997). Besides, EPLF's approach to gender equality was grounded in Marxist ideas rather than feminist ones, however, and policies regarding gender were conceived and implemented in a top-down fashion by male leadership rather than by women themselves. Women were part of the cultural revolution advocated by EPLF, which saw itself as struggling

against “backward,” “reactionary,” and “feudal” elements of traditional culture, as well as against colonialism (Bernal, 2001). However, recruiting women also served the pragmatic need to maintain a strong fighting force despite the heavy toll of war upon the entire population of Eritrea (Mary, 1980). The EPLF slogan, “No Liberation without Women’s Participation”, thus accurately depicts the hierarchy of goals in which national liberation was central and women’s emancipation figured as one of the means to that end. There was no independent women’s movement in Eritrea, except the male-led EPLF, which took up certain issues concerning the status of women and mobilised them to achieve the goal of national independence (Bernal, 2001).

An important component of the Front’s strategy of popular mobilisation was the formation of mass organisations (James and Stuart, 1985). EPLF created associations of peasants, workers, and youth as well as a women’s organisation, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). Worku Zerai rightly points out, however, that NUEW never articulated its own goals as being distinct from the nationalist goals of EPLF; NUEW simply implemented programmes that came from the top (Worku, 1994). Moreover, no woman served on EPLF’s executive committee during the war, and the use of seniority in allocating positions of authority worked against women since the first members of the Front were all men. Besides, women and men dress alike in khaki and rubber sandals and wear their hair ‘Afro’ style. Indeed, one foreign visitor to the field reported difficulty in distinguishing women from men (Olivier and Claire, 1982). Therefore, most of the women fighters felt like men and faced the similar challenges as men in the front. The construction of women as not only equal to men but also as male equivalents meant, however, that some profound issues of gender relations were not so much transformed by EPLF’s cultural revolution as repressed and rendered invisible (Bernal, 2000).

The Front’s initial approach to issues of sexual relations was an attempt to suppress them. At first EPLF required its members to be celibate, forbidding fighters to have sexual relations with civilians and, after women joined the Front, forbidding sex between fighters. Responding to the reality of intimate relationships among fighters, EPLF introduced its own marriage law in 1977 based on a view of marriage as the partnership of a man and a woman who are each free individuals exercising choice, a radical departure from the marriage practices of Eritrean communities. EPLF not only forbade the repudiation of non-virgin brides, it encouraged premarital sex among its members and made contraceptives available, and it is reported that most fighter couples engaged in sex before marriage (Doris, 1989; Worku, 1994; Lorensen, 1998).

Even as EPLF officially recognised the marital relationships and families formed in the field, it accorded them little social status in practice. Fighters lived a collective life, eating and sleeping with members of their unit (Doris, 1989; Tekle, 1991; NUEW, 1993). Loyalty to EPLF was to be uncompromised by other attachments. In the Front, fighters had little or no contact with their families of origin and such contacts were discouraged. Spouses were routinely assigned separate work duties, with permission given to spend one month of the year together (Mary, 1980). Children were routinely separated from their parents. Mothers were permitted to spend the first six months with their infants, after which the children were raised communally. Initially the children of fighters were all raised in one institution along with orphans. Since there was no proper care, thus, the children apparently did not develop properly. Therefore, the Front decided to allow children to be raised collectively by the unit of their parent(s). Many domestic tasks such as cooking, gathering firewood, carrying water, and child rearing were organised as collective responsibilities that were carried out as public work by all members of the unit in

turn (Doris, 1989). It is important to note that some tasks, such as making *enjera* (the staple bread eaten with most meals) and carrying water, were used as punishment in the freedom struggle. The Front revolutionised the social position of women by making them equal to men in all aspects (Bernal, 2001).

## 2. Woman in Post-Independence Period

During three decades of war, family life was disrupted, kin were scattered, and domestic and ritual routines were upset (Rena, 2006a). But with Independence achieved and their guerrilla warfare days behind them, the first thing many fighters wanted was to reestablish family ties and to start their own families. As EPLF fighters became civilians, extended families were reunited and the older generation once again influenced over the lives of sons and daughters. Since 1991, when EPLF fighters returned to join Eritrean society at large, there has been a resurgence of the domestic that has meant very different things for women and men fighters as they resume their lives or improvise new lives as civilians. Women ex-fighters were painfully caught between the revolutionary aspirations they learned in the Front and the more conventional values and gendered expectations asserted by Eritreans in the civilian context.

Once the liberation struggle ended, Eritrean women fighters confronted a new struggle to build secure economic, political, and social positions for themselves within the nation. Women fighters who had spent much of their adult lives in the guerrilla movement faced particular challenges of reintegrating into civilian life. Marriages and divorces of women ex-fighters were big topics of discussion in Asmara during 1995-96. At that time, there was a widespread perception among men and women that women fighters were being divorced by their fighter husbands in favour of civilian brides (Bernal, 2001). The majority of women fighters lacked resources, skills, and jobs. Some women ex-fighters felt they were being devalued in the new society of independent Eritrea. It is to be observed that some women ex-fighters are not in a position to earn Nacfa 500 per month (less than USD30) doing some petty jobs like public parking caretakers and office clerks/secretaries.

## IV. WOMEN WORKERS

In 1996, women made up more than 40 per cent of the total workforce in Eritrea. The role of women in the micro-enterprise sector is even more important. They own 46 per cent of these businesses, a figure that decreases as the size of the enterprise increases.<sup>9</sup> Women also formed a major part of the large-manufacturing workforce, in particular, in the garments, leather, and tobacco industries. This participation probably increased during the war with Ethiopia as a result of the military mobilisation of a large proportion of the male workforce (Stefanos, 1997; Wudassie, 1997; NUEW, 1998). Women made up 50 per cent of the workforce in the public sector, compared with 22 per cent in the private sector. About 80 per cent of the workforce in women-owned enterprises is female.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, women in rural Eritrea play important roles in all productive activities, including male dominated activities such as farming. These roles vary according to religious, ethnic, and regional affiliations (Halden, 1997). It is observed that women living in the highlands and mid-altitude areas are predominantly Christian, and they actively participate in the social and economic life of the community on a more or less equal basis with men. In agriculture, women take part in such activities as weeding, clearing fields, harvesting, and transporting crops. Women do not, however, plough; women who are widowed, divorced, or unmarried depend on male relatives or acquaintances to plough their fields (Rena, 2007).

The composition of the persons engaged in manufacturing sector indicates that there was a high rate of female participation in the sector. It can be seen from the Table 1 that the number of female workers increased from 5591 in 1998 to 6151 in 2001. As indicated in Table 2, the percentage of female employees in the manufacturing sector increased from 43.7 per cent in 1999 to 45.4 per cent in 2001. The high rate of female participation may be due to the large number of women enrolled in textile industry. In 2001, female employees engaged in textile industry numbered 2141 and accounted for about 77.9 per cent of the total enrollment in textile industry. The foreigners engaged in manufacturing sector accounted for only 4 per cent of the total number of persons engaged. It is interesting to find that the non-Eritrean male percentage gradually declined from 4 per cent in 1999 to 2.5 per cent in 2001. This indicates that Eritrea is moving towards self-reliance. Most of them are engaged in bakery, textiles and knitting, manufacturing of non-refractory clay and ceramic products (Table 2).

Table 1  
Number of Employees by Sex and Nationality

Description	1998			2001		
	No. of unpaid workers	No. of employees	Total workers	No. of unpaid workers	No. of employees	Total workers
Eritrean male	304	8037	8341(54.07)	191	6760	6951 (50.60)
Eritrean female	56	5591	5647(36.61)	88	6151	6239 (45.42)
Sub-total	360	13,628	13,988(90.68)	279	12,911	13,190 (96.02)
Non-Eritrean male	10	987	997 (6.46)	17	334	351 (2.56)
Non-Eritrean female	1	438	439 (2.85)	6	189	195 (1.42)
Sub-total	11	1425	1436 (9.31)	23	523	546 (3.97)
Total male	314	9024	9,338(60.54)	208	7094	7302 (53.16)
Total female	57	6029	6086(39.46)	94	6340	6434 (46.84)
Grand total	371	15,053	15,424 (100.00)	302	13,434	13,736 (100.)

Note: Figures in brackets are percentages.

Source: Ministry of Trade and Industry (2003), Eritrea, *Statistical Report on Census of Manufacturing Establishments-2001*, Asmara, June.

Table 2  
Workers by Nationality, Sex, and Occupation

Occupation	1999	2001
Administrative employees	2020 (14.67)	2005 (14.92)
Technical employees	2429 (17.63)	2495 (18.58)
Production workers	9325 (67.70)	8934 (66.50)
Total No. of employees by occupation	13,774(100)	13,434 (100)

Note: Figures in parenthesis indicate the percentages in relation to total.

Source: Ministry of Trade and Industry (2003), Eritrea: *Industrial Statistics 1999-2001*, Statistical Bulletin, Asmara, June.

Women are engaged primarily as unskilled labour in the production process. Skilled women represent a very small percentage (7.4 per cent) of employment in large enterprises. In both public and private sector offices, women do predominantly secretarial work with little participation in management. In addition, social and cultural barriers prevent women's advancement, including the popular belief that women should not work outside the home. As stated by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), "The main reason for job misplacement, loss of



seniority or promotion, and [low] wages of women is due to frequent pregnancy coupled with the demands for childbearing that results in absenteeism (Wudassie, 1997).

Women's low education level is a limiting factor. Only about half of women workers are literate, and 35 per cent have only an elementary school education. Most vocational training schools are oriented towards male-dominated professions such as mechanics and woodworking (UNICEF, 1994; Stefanos, 1988). However, it is to be noted that there are women in the construction industry, as taxi and truck drivers, barbers, etc. Thus, women are entering into different fields for their survival. In addition, the low level of education of women limits their flexibility to accept other jobs in industry. Consequently, they often do the same job for years and have less chance to upgrade their experience and receive training than their male counterparts (Lorensen, 1998; Rena, 2007). It was observed that very few women benefit from enterprise-level training because many are in non-regular employment and lack the necessary seniority and qualifications. In addition, it is more difficult for women to take evening classes because of their childcare and household responsibilities.

Sex segregation in the labour market appears to be strong in Eritrea. Thirty-six per cent of medium scale enterprises (MSEs) employ only women, whereas 45 per cent do not have any women employees at all.<sup>11</sup> Although, women hold many jobs traditionally reserved for men—for example, in construction—they will most certainly lose these jobs as men in the military are demobilised and re-enter the labour market. As stated earlier, women do make up the majority of workers in garment, leather, and tobacco industries. These industries have export potential, but their wage levels are low (Stefanos, 1997; Wudassie, 1997; Gerde, 2001; Rena, 2006a). Education plays an important role in reducing gender-discrimination. It is found that women who have received education above basic level seem to be treated equal to men once they have entered the labour market. Systematic gender bias in wages and career mobility is mainly found among people with no or little formal education. Hence, the future for Eritrean women in the labour market looks promising, taking into account the rapidly increasing education level among girls (Rena, 2005).

Besides educated women, women who are former liberation fighters constitute a group who has been able to break through the much of the traditional barriers in the labour market. Female fighters have the same earnings as male fighters, and fighter status alone gives women almost 80 per cent wage increase—twice the effect for men. Once they have entered the labour market, they also seem to have the same promotion opportunities as male fighters. In order to understand the real situation, additional research is necessary to measure possible gender-related distortions, including pay differential and pay discrimination both among and within various types of jobs, differences in human capital, and differences in available jobs and types of jobs accepted.

## **V. NUEW, GOVERNMENT AND WOMEN**

The National Union for Eritrean Women (NUEW), women association in Eritrea, had played an important role in drafting the Constitution of Eritrea by organising workshops and sensitising women on the crucial issues that concern them (Connell, 1998). It is the only big women organisation that addresses women's issues in Eritrea (Bernal, 2000). NUEW is administered through its headquarters located in Asmara, as well as by regional offices located in all six zones in the country. It has a membership of over 200,000 women. NUEW continues to play a key role in advocating, monitoring, and evaluating the formulation/planning and implementation of government policies and programmes from a gender perspective. Its mission is "to promote

gender equality and the development of women as an integral part of the political, economic, social, and cultural sphere.” It intervenes in various sectors including health, education, and agriculture, and has received support from donors for its loan fund that operates outside Asmara, though repayment rates have been low because of the war. NUEW also organises 3-6 months’ training courses for women in such areas as computer, obtaining a driver’s license, catering, and handicrafts. Women generally obtain information through family events, such as marriages and funerals, and through women’s groups called *urq’ud*. These groups typically have 10-15 members who save and pool their money, which is disbursed either to one or group of people consisting less than five.

NUEW is striving hard to achieve the following objectives: a) The development of women’s confidence in themselves and respect for one another, and the raising of consciousness to ensure their rights in the political and legal systems; b) Laws that protect women’s rights in the family: entitlement rights and other civil laws; c) Equal access to education and employment opportunities: equal pay for equal work and equal rights to skills development to promotion; d) Improved access to adequate health care, paid maternity leave, and child care services; e) The eradication of harmful traditional practices that endanger women’s health and well-being; and f) The reduction of poverty for Eritrean women and their families.

To give women better opportunities to participate in the economic development of Eritrea a new National Gender Action Plan, covering the period 2003-2008, has been developed and endorsed by the government. Its main objective is “To achieve equal opportunities and capabilities for women, men, girls and boys of different categories to participate in and access resources, and benefit from a supportive, sustainable and appropriate economic, legal, social and political development system”.

### **Women and the Legal Framework**

Following the referendum of 1993, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) launched a series of legal reforms aimed at women, including the adoption of provisions in the 1997 Eritrean Constitution.<sup>12</sup> The Constitution favours the rights of women by mandating “the Legislature to enact laws designed to eliminate inequalities in the Eritrean society because of gender discrimination.” Specifically, Article 7 prohibits “any act that violates the human rights of women or limits or otherwise thwarts their role and participation.” Further, the GSE has repealed provisions of civil and penal codes that discriminate against women. As a result, laws forbid dowry and kidnapping, women have the right to choose their spouses and to initiate divorce, and the legal age for marriage is now 18. The penal code has also been amended to exclude discriminatory clauses and to add protections for women. The Land Proclamation entitles women to equal ownership of land, stating that “every citizen, man or woman, has the right of access to land for housing and farming upon the attainment of the age of 18” (GSE, 1994).

Both the EPLF and the GSE have done a great deal for women.<sup>13</sup> Even before Eritrean Independence was achieved, the EPLF promoted laws and policies within the areas that it controlled that secured the rights of women to land and equal pay for equal work, as well as their position in the family. Beginning at the community level, the EPLF established new norms regarding women’s status, participation, and leadership. Furthermore, in the national and regional assemblies 30 per cent of seats are reserved for women.<sup>14</sup> Women compete against each other for the votes of both men and women. They also run against men for the remaining 70 per cent of seats.

In November 1994, the GSE issued a Macro Policy Document. The Human Resources Development and Population Policy section contains a clause (No. 13.5) on gender issues that stipulates the following:

- a) All efforts will continue to be made to sensitise and enhance the awareness of society about the decisive role that women play in the socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country.
- b) The equal rights of women will be upheld and all laws that detract from those rights will be changed.
- c) Participation of women in education, economic activities, and employment will be expanded.
- d) Appropriate labour-saving technologies will be introduced to reduce the drudgery of women in the household and in other activities.
- e) Mother–child healthcare services will be improved and expanded.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The role of Eritrean women in the 30 years War of Independence brought major changes in the country. This analysis of women guerrilla fighters during and after the liberation struggle in Eritrea draws attention to the ways the national arena is itself constructed and the different dynamics of gender in processes of national liberation and nation-building. By examining the liberation struggle and post-war development in Eritrea, an attempt is made to reveal some of the issues related to women employment. The analysis of gender within EPLF reveals that, to some extent, women were integrated not so much as the equals of men, but as male equivalents. Moreover, within its ranks, EPLF did not so much revolutionise domestic relations as it suppress them. After Independence, women and men faced a resurrection of the domestic, coupled with a profound shift in the nationalist project from one of liberation to one of capitalist development. This shift, however, created conditions that marginalise a large number of people as poor, uneducated, unskilled; women largely fall into these marginalised categories. This suggests that women may have potential allies among some sectors of the male population, and it draws attention to the significance of historical processes as opposed to the character of the male leadership or to men in general.

### *Notes*

1. The Labour Law in Eritrea has been drafted by representatives of workers, trade unions, NUEW, and the various governmental bodies. Eritrean Labor Law is governed by the Provisional Labor Proclamation No. 8/1991. This proclamation was enforced since September 15, 1991. Thus, Article 113(3) abrogated all laws and proclamations that existed prior to this provisional labour proclamation. Article 47 requires an employer to pay the same starting salary for the same work. Thus, this proclamation leaves no room for discrimination based on sex, race, religion or any other ground. Moreover, Article 42(2), as amended by the proclamation No.42/1993, allows a woman to take paid maternity leave of 60 days which is counted after the day of delivery. She can also take paid leave before the delivery day if a doctor confirms so (Article 42.1.3).
2. NUEW has issued a report based on a meeting in December 2000 to recognise the organisation's 20th anniversary. Discussions from that event have contributed to the setting of an agenda for NUEW's future development.
3. According to UNICEF, the Eritrean War of Independence also gave rise to an Eritrean Diaspora as many as about one million fled to other countries where they lived as refugees and exiles (UNICEF, 1994). The armed struggle ended in 1991. More than 65,000 fighters died in the war. Eritrea's Independence was officially declared on May 24, 1993 after an internationally supervised national referendum in which Eritreans overwhelmingly voted for the nationhood. At that time, women comprised one-third of the roughly

95,000 fighters in EPLF. In the aftermath of the war, some 30,000 women fighters thus began new lives in Eritrea.

4. The nine Ethnic groups are: Afar, Bilen, Hadareb, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho, Tigre, and Tigrinya. and their languages are Afar, Bilen, To Bedawi, Kunama, Nara, Arabic, Saho, Tigre, and Tigrinya, respectively.
5. An exception is the Kunama, a matrilineal group that greatly respects women and affords them significant autonomy and power. At the same time, this central position is closely linked to reproductive roles because women are viewed as maintaining the community precisely because they are mothers. Women in other traditions are not allowed to leave their tents or reveal their faces, even to their husbands. Woman at a time on a monthly basis, or the group as a whole saves for a year and then spends the money on a big celebration. *Urqu'd* meetings give women the opportunity to eat, drink, and talk together without the presence or oversight of men.
6. The figures relate to the period before the latest war. At present, most Ethiopians have (temporarily) left Eritrea.
7. Eritreans use the term "fighter" (*tegadelti* in Tigrinya) to include all those who served in EPLF forces in Eritrea during the war.
8. Popularly known as Congo *Shidda*. Eritreans honour these rubber sandals including the ones which the President Isaias Afewrki wears on certain occasions like Independence Day and Martyrs Day. Besides, government has set up a square with big portray of Congo *Shidda* in the capital city Asmara.
9. For example, there was only 29 per cent female ownership of medium-sized enterprises.
10. See different publications and tables of the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare of the State of Eritrea during 1998–2004.
11. A study of the private sector in Eritrea with a Focus on the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises, prepared for the Macro Policy and International Economic Cooperation Department, July 1996.
12. In February 1994, the Eritrean National Assembly elected a 50-member Constitutional Commission of which 20 were women members. The Constitution has been ratified but is yet to be implemented.
13. The number of women in government is an indication of women's opportunities for decision-making. Three out of 15 ministers are currently women (Justice and Labor, and Human Welfare and Tourism). In the National Parliament, women make up 33 of 150 members (22 per cent). Less than 5 per cent of director generals (2 of 41) and less than 8 per cent of directors are women. There are two female provincial governors, and only 3 of 53 (5.7 per cent) sub-regional administrators are women. Two of 18 ambassadors are women. At the local level, 30 per cent of local assembly (*Baito*) seats are reserved for women. Women's representation in regional (*zoba*) councils increased from 20 per cent in 1996 to 30 per cent in 1998.
14. Proclamation No.86/1996 on the Establishment of Local Government stipulates that 30 per cent of the seats in the Regional Assemblies would be reserved for women and that they would also contest the remaining 70 per cent.

### *References*

- Amrit, Wilson (1991), *Women and the Eritrean Revolution: The Challenge Road*, Red Sea Press Inc., Trenton, N.J.
- Arneberg, M. and Pedersen, J. (1999), "Urban Households and Urban Economy, The Urban Eritrean Income and Expenditure Survey 1996/97," *Analytical Report*, Statistics and Evaluation Office, Asmara.
- Bernal, Victoria (2000), "Equality to Die For? Women Guerilla Fighters and Eritrea's Cultural Revolution", *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 61–76.
- (2001), "From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and Development in Eritrea", *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (New Series), pp. 129–154.
- Connell, Dan (1993), *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution*, The Red Sea Press Inc., Trenton, N.J.
- (1998), "Strategies for Change: Women and Politics in Eritrea and South Africa." *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 76, No.2, pp.189–206.
- Doris, Burgess (1989), "Women at War: Eritrea," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 45-46, No.2, pp. 126-32.
- EPLF (1989), *Eritrea: Dawn after a Long Night*, Eritrean Liberation Front, Information Department, Asmara.
- Erich, Frankland and Tammy, Noble (1996), "A Case of National Liberation with Feminist Undertones: The Secession of Eritrea", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 401–24.

- Gerde, Heyde (2001), *Women's Employment and Micro-enterprise Development in Eritrea*, Development Alternatives, Inc., USA.
- GSE (1994), *Macro Policy Document*, Government of the State of Eritrea, Government Press, Asmara.
- Gruber, J. (1998), *Gender Situation Analysis Report: Eritrea*, UNICEF, New York.
- Halden, S. (1997), "Moslem and Christian in Eritrea," *Thesis* (in Norwegian), Department of Political Science, University of Oslo.
- James, Firebrace and Stuart Holland (1985), *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development, and Liberation in Eritrea*, Red Sea Press Inc., Trenton, N.J.
- Lionel, Cliffe and Basil, Davidson (eds.) (1988), *The Long Struggle of Eritrea for Independence*, The Red Sea Press Inc., Trenton, N.J.
- Lorensen, John (1998), "Eritrean Women: Dual Struggle in the Horn of Africa", *Canadian Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 9, No.1. pp.3-4.
- Mary, Dines (1980), "The Land, the People, and the Revolution", in Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe, and Bereket Habte Selassie (eds.), *Behind the War in Eritrea*, Spokesman, Nottingham, pp.125-39.
- National Statistics Office (1997), *Eritrea: Demographic and Health Survey -1995*, Female Circumcision, Chapter 12, Macro International Inc., Calverton (USA).
- (2003), *Eritrea: Demographic and Health Survey 2002*, National Statistics Office, Asmara.
- NCEW (2001), *Women Workers Committee Draft*, Brochure of the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, NCEW, Asmara.
- NUEW (1993), *The Role of Females in Socio-economic Development*, Natoinal Union for Eritrean Women, Asmara.
- (1994-5), *General Conditions of Eritrean Women Factory Workers: A Case Study of Asmara Area* (Report), NUEW, Asmara.
- (1995), *General Conditions of Eritrean Women Factory Workers*, NUEW, Asmara.
- (1998), *National Confederation of Eritrean Workers*, Asser Printing Press, Asmara.
- Negash, T. (1997), *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala.
- Olivier, Delenze and Claire, Leloup (1982), *Women in the Eritrean Revolution: Eyewitness Reports and Testimonies*, National Union of Eritrean Women, Asmara, pp. 23-29.
- Rena, Ravinder (2005), "Gender Disparity in Education – An Eritrean Perspective," *The Global Child Journal*, Vol.2, No. 1, pp.43-49.
- (2006a), *A Handbook on the Eritrean Economy: Problems and Prospects for Development*, New Africa Press, Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania).
- (2007), "Women and Economic Emancipation in Eritrea – Some Observations", *Nigeria: Gender and Behavioural Journal*, Vol. 5, No.1 (June), pp. 1082-1088.
- Ruth, Iyob (1983), "Eritrean Struggle: Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa", in Lewis, M. (ed.), *The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea*, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 26, No.2, pp.132-145.
- (1997), "The Eritrean Experiment: A Cautious Pragmatism?" *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 647-73.
- Stefanos, Asegedetch (1988), "An Encounter with Revolutionary Change: A Portrait of Contemporary Eritrean Women," *Ph.D. Dissertation*, Harvard University.
- (1997), "Women and Education in Eritrea: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 67, No.4, pp. 658-688.
- Tekle, Woldemikael (1996), "Ethiopians and Eritreans," in David Haines (ed.), *Case Studies in Diversity: Refugees in America*, Praeger and Westport Conn., London, pp. 147-69.
- Tronvoll, K. (1998), *Mai Weini, A Highland Village in Eritrea*, Red Sea Press Inc., Trenton, N.J.
- UNICEF (1994), *Children and Women in Eritrea*, UNICEF, New York.
- United Nations (2001), *Common Country Assessment (CCA) – Vol.I*, Government of State of Eritrea, Asmara.

- (2004), Eritrea: Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Outcome of the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly, March.
- University of Asmara (UoA) and Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) (1998), *Rehabilitation of Degraded Lands*, University of Asmara and Ministry of Agriculture, Asmara.
- Veronica, Rentmeesters (1993), “Women and Development Planning,” in Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis (ed.), *Emergent Eritrea*, Red Sea Press Inc., Trenton, N.J, pp. 72–85.
- Worku, Zerai (1994), “Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle”, Master’s Thesis (*Mimeo*), The Hague.
- Wudassie, Yohannes (1997), *Women in Industry in Eritrea*, United Nations Industrial Development Organisation.