

# **Gender, Nationalism and Revolution: Re-Assessing Women's Relationship with the Eritrean Liberation Front**

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a re-assessment of the role of women in the Eritrean national liberation struggle. As such, it challenges the existing literature surrounding the topic and interrogates the emphasis placed upon women who fought physically in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The bulk of this research attempts to give voice to women who participated predominantly through non-military means in the predecessor to the EPLF, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). Central to this research is the issue of why the role of female EPLF combatants is prioritized over female ELF non-combatants in existing literature and the growing nationalist mythologies of struggle, sacrifice and national and gender liberation. This paper concludes that the answers to such questions lie in the creation and re-creation of national narratives that exclude dissenting voices in order to preserve an artificial unity. As a result, it is both a denial of variegated female experience as well as an example of the totalitarian tendencies of national liberation ideology.

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## **GENDER, NATIONALISM AND REVOLUTION: RE-ASSESSING WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT**

### **Introduction**

Eritrea is a diverse multi-ethnic state,<sup>1</sup> territorially – and to some extent nationally – welded together through Italian colonialism (1890-1941), British administration (1941-1952), federation with Ethiopia (1952-1962) and a subsequent thirty-year war for independence (1961-1991). The development of an imagined national community through this period has therefore been a long and evolutionary process and one riddled with the usual complexities of nationalism and national identity (Anderson 1991; Brass 1991; Eriksen 1995). Women were central to these processes, although nearly all the nationalist literature concerning Eritrea omits detailed study of gender issues. This is consistent with studies concerning nationalism generally, since “most the hegemonic theorizations about nations and nationalism...even including, sometimes, those written by women...have ignored gender relations as irrelevant” (Yuval-Davis 1998b:23).

Existing literature concerning gender relations within Eritrean nationalist movements and political parties focuses almost solely on the role of women within the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). This is partly due to the EPLF's wartime statistical and data collection processes, and its active campaign to facilitate foreign research and media coverage, resulting in several important gender-related studies (Wilson 1991; Silkin 1989; Burgess 1991). Such research examines the vital role of the EPLF in initiating gender-based reforms to alter land ownership, marriage and personal laws, political participation, education and health.

This literature tends to obscure the role of women in the EPLF's predecessors, most notably the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). More specifically, the literature is inclined to merely reiterate the dominant EPLF ideology. This ideology positions women in the ELF as powerless and almost totally confined by feudalism and tradition. In this sense, the current discourse on Eritrean women largely categorizes their participation in the liberation struggle only in active or passive terms, a distinction that remains central to notions of Eritrean citizenship today.<sup>2</sup> In the context of the war for liberation, the ultimate demonstration of active female service was participation in the front as a military fighter or in roles previously reserved for men (truck and tank driving, mechanical work, political decision-making). “Traditional” gender roles situating women in fields such as health care, food preparation, child rearing and other non-combatant occupations during the war were frequently viewed as less significant, passive participation.

As a result, a dichotomy exists between the representation of women in the ELF and the women of the EPLF. Those of the ELF are seen as traditional, passive and submissive in contrast with women in the EPLF, who are projected as unified, modern and active regarding their rights and responsibilities. However, this dichotomy is inadequate as it essentializes women's role in the nationalist project and prioritizes certain activities over others. It also obscures the diversity of women's experiences within the ELF. An important question is, therefore, why should “traditional” roles be viewed as passive and less significant? This paper follows work by Afshar and others by arguing that women's activism in maternal or religious spheres should not be rendered invisible, nor should women in “traditional”

spheres be seen as helpless victims unable “to carve out a space for themselves in the political domain” (Afshar 1996:4). Rather, women can, and in the ELF did, utilize traditional roles to resist foreign occupation and also to challenge such roles in the process. This paper seeks to give such women voice and to interrogate the fighter/non-fighter dichotomy that exists in the current discourse concerning Eritrean women. As an important by-product, this examination highlights the fact that a large section of the population was, and remains, marginalized from political processes and “democratic” initiatives (Paul 2000:192). It is anticipated that the EPLF, now renamed and reworked into the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), will initiate multi-party elections in the future.<sup>3</sup> However, ten years after liberation, such change is yet to happen. This is an issue that may eventually be forced into Eritrean politics, even if much political discontent currently remains at a private or underground level.<sup>4</sup>

## **Dichotomizing women: Analyzing the discourses of the EPLF and foreign researchers in Eritrea**

### *(i) The EPLF discourse*

The EPLF splintered from the ELF in 1970 following flagrant internal disagreements concerning the program and direction of the liberation movement. Many of the leaders initiating the split possessed more substantial social and political visions than those who remained, and this meant gender theorizing and reforms under the EPLF were more extensive than under the ELF. However, the EPLF reforms were still constrained by a commitment to national emancipation over and above female emancipation. This approach was clearly advocated by the “women’s arm” of the EPLF, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW):

At a time when the Ethiopian occupationist regime is trying to eliminate the entire population, the primary goal of the NUEW is to mobilize and organize women to participate in the national liberation struggle, until independence has been achieved (NEUW 1989:7).

Yet, this did not completely submerge the “woman question” as it did in some other nationalist struggles, and this issue became central to the EPLF’s counter-discourse against its predecessor. Sherman reported in 1980 that “the EPLF is critical of the ELF, whom they view as postponing fundamental changes, such as women’s status in the revolution, until independence has been achieved” (1980:106). The EPLF’s loosely socialist ideology largely informed this discourse since it linked women’s oppression to social production (Silkin 1983:909). This, in turn, developed into a critique of women’s role in the domestic sphere; thus “domestic” contributions to liberation as opposed to military participation were consistently undervalued and articulated as a postponement of the “woman question” by the ELF:

During the first stages of the armed struggle for national liberation, women were barred from joining the ranks of the liberation army because of the feudal attitudes of the then existing leadership. Such an attitude prevented women from playing their

revolutionary role of liberating their nation, their people and themselves to the full, and this had a negative effect on their development (NUEW 1988:1).

The feudalist ELF leadership, which fully espoused the women-denigrating reactionary ideology, prohibited them from performing their revolutionary duties...the participation of women in the armed struggle was thus greatly discouraged and limited until the 1970s. It should be stressed that the prevalent strictures curbing militant participation of women in active combat could not totally blind their patriotism and prevent them from supporting the revolution. They were thus active in preparing food for the fighters, propounding revolutionary music and other useful, even if *subordinate roles* (collecting and passing on to the Front information on enemy movements, etc.) (NUEW n.d.:2-3, italics added).

However, the EPLF's approach underestimated the diverse roles of women in the ELF and undercut the viability of women's resistance through "traditional" processes. Additionally, these approaches clearly gave higher distinction to combat roles as opposed to other, "subordinate" activities.

Ostensibly, this debate ties into larger theoretical discussions concerning whether or not women are empowered by inclusion into the military. A wide range of researchers and activists has, in particular, viewed inclusion as vital to the empowerment of women and the attainment of gender equality (Addis 1994). Yet, much of this debate, as with the EPLF discourse, excludes substantial interrogation of the relationship between gender and militarization. It mistakenly accepts the notion that female inclusion in the military will in turn lead to equal female socio-political participation (cf. O'Neill 1998; Cooke and Woollacott 1993; Enloe 1983; Jones 1984). It is a view that is still held by the NUEW today, as its current president Luul Gebre-ab told the author late in 1998:

The ELF leadership as a whole never believed in the participation of women in the armed struggle. Women were forced to migrate and therefore never got the chance to participate. When the EPLF broke away its objective was to struggle for an independent Eritrea and it believed this was only possible if the whole of society participated. In ELF villages, women prepared food but they were not allowed to join the ELF, not in armed struggle.

The emphasis on combat described above is closely linked to the symbolic nature of death for the Eritrean nation. The EPLF and the NUEW consistently emphasized the many women who

lost their eyes, legs or other parts fighting for the glorious aims of dignity and liberation. There are those who have also lost their lives in combat, those heroes will always be remembered by their people with great pride...All these feats of heroism that Eritrean women are demonstrating in practice are tearing apart the reactionary feudal myth that 'women are weaklings' (NEUW 1983:113).

Here, women are symbols of sacrifice as well as representatives of national modernity. They are "modern" because they have "earned" the right to bear arms and they are symbols of sacrifice as they are literally killed or "torn apart" in a demonstration of their love for the nation. The fighting woman,

as with other female symbols, is no longer “passive” since “it is her death and annihilation that makes her an active subject” (Rao 1999:319). A woman’s death or disfigurement allows her to transcend boundaries and enter the male world of martyrdom. Silkin emphasizes that

some male fighters have married women so disabled through battle injuries that the men, inevitably, will take the major responsibility for domestic chores, and such examples are cited by the EPLF as instances of old practices and prejudices breaking down (1983:911-912).

A female EPLF cadre told Wilson that male fighters saw women “when they lost their legs, their eyes. Then they stopped speaking about women, now they accept women” (Wilson 1991:99). Through such action a woman can metamorphasise, but this move “from being a passive to an active representation requires the abandonment of a woman’s body, suggesting the physical absence of the woman from the symbolizing process” (Rao 1999:319).

*(ii) Foreign researchers*<sup>5</sup>

The EPLF discourse discussed above flowed into the research of foreign academics and journalists during the wartime period. Methodological problems arose since most researchers spent a limited time in Eritrea and traveled almost exclusively with the EPLF, with no knowledge of Eritrean languages or culture except that which was explained to them (Tronvoll 1998:8-13). Almost all accounts denigrate women under the ELF as passive and valorize the role of women in the EPLF. However, the media images and attention may not always have been encouraged by those they interviewed. There was a desire by certain researchers to highlight the role of women in Eritrea, to romanticize and eroticize it. Sometimes to the dismay of EPLF women who were unclear as to why they were being selected, they were photographed and studied. As John Larkin noted with regard to interviews he conducted:

Conversation was not easy, not so much because we had to use an interpreter, but because they could not understand why they had been singled out for interview...later, I had asked the interpreter if they had been angry, “No,” he said, “they simply did not know why you wanted to talk about ‘women.’ They thought you would discuss the struggle of the masses” (1981:5).

This citation teases out some of the problems inherent in “research,” especially the confused setting in which it can evolve. The women Larkin interviewed focused on “the masses,” whereas Larkin accentuated “the women.” The gulf between them is painfully evident and epitomizes the problems with foreign research concerning women and wars for national liberation. Sadly, agendas are frequently divergent and issues of knowledge and power dominate the researcher/researched paradigm. It is, at times, inescapable.

Interestingly, even though the literature concerning the Eritrean revolution frequently underscored the role of women, the ELF is largely omitted from extensive and academic discussion. Rather, it is almost uniformly portrayed in a negative light as a feudal, ethnically divided and traditional body that

suppressed women. There is virtually no discussion of internal debates within the ELF about social and political reform and developments. In this regard, Gilkes' comments are interesting:

Much, indeed, of the writing on Eritrea has been at the level of the polemic or a product of the 'guerilla groupie.' A surprising number of eminent scholars and journalists have taken the leading Eritrean movement, the EPLF, at its own evaluation, and its historical claims as facts...Most recent writing on Eritrea, for example, relegates the Amhara and the original liberation front, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), to the role of demon enemies (1991:626).

Women, either as civilians within the ELF liberated zones or Front members, are woven into this discourse as symbols of its tradition and backwardness. As a result, these women act as a foil, in stark contrast to women in the EPLF, perpetuating a dichotomy of liberated/oppressed Eritrean women.

Cowan's work epitomizes this dichotomy, examining women in both Fronts as well as civilians living in the liberated zones of each Front. In 1981 she argued that "in no sphere was the comparison between the two fronts more stark than in the differing positions of the civilian women in the respective areas under guerilla control" (1981:17). In Cowan's work, civilian women become the cultural border markers between the two Fronts. She discusses how women in the EPLF zones (Sahel, Nakfa, Afabet) were benefiting under land reforms, participating in People's Assemblies and various relevant Associations (Women's and Peasant's Associations in particular), and experiencing increased access to education and health care. By contrast, Cowan argues that women in the ELF Barka regions were forced to eat after men, and eat only what was left for them; that they suffered from malnutrition, lack of education and socio-political oppression. This is emphasized with a graphic visual image of her trip where she described how women in the Barka region "cowered visibly at [her] approach, hastily pulling down their veils, completely obscuring their faces from view" (1981:16). This imagery is informed by a narrow discourse that equates veiling and Islam with female oppression. It serves to disempower women, and it denies them agency in their own spheres of existence (Friedl 1994).

In a later article, Cowan specifically examines the Barka region where she argues that the "feudal production and social relations [were left] in pristine purity over 21 years of ELF rule" (1983:145). As such, she argues that women who were included in the ELF were "invariably confined to the traditional female roles of cooking and nursing" (1983:148). Only with the EPLF, she argues, were "women deliberately and seriously included in the military and political struggle for independence" and allowed to "fight and die in the Front alongside men" (1983:148). Cowan is, in effect, arguing that traditional forms of resistance employed by women in the ELF were inherently passive activities. This is contrasted with women in the EPLF, who, in Cowan's schema moved beyond and above such positions. The fact that EPLF women were able, in a symbolic act, to die beside men exemplified the degree to which they were liberated (Baudrillard 1976:246-252).

Other authors, rather than setting up a stark comparison, omit reference to the ELF altogether (Magos 1981; Silkin 1983; Zerai 1994; Green 1994) or emphasize women's participation as fighters in the military under the EPLF (Houtart 1980; Wilson 1991; Hall 1989; Magos 1981). Houtart argued that

prejudices against women were “shaken by the impressive participation of women in armed struggle...women fighters actively participate in military operations. In the EPLF, there is no work that is considered as being only for men” (1980:108). La Duke’s work on Eritrean women’s art during the war examines how the wartime artistic genre depicts women’s traditional roles – raising children, making *injera*, weaving baskets – but that by contrast “new *non-passive* role models of women as combatants and martyrs were beginning to emerge” (1997:148, italics added). Here, tradition is directly equated with passive behavior, and fighting with non-passive behavior. Hall also alludes to this, arguing after interviewing female fighters that “ordinary life somehow seems less productive and purposeful after serving in the trenches” (1989:29).

This research fails to delve into the many dilemmas faced by ex-combatants in post-war Eritrea, the types of issues interrogated by writing concerning the First and Second World Wars (see Higonnet et al. 1987). In Eritrea, women (and men) faced problems of demobilization, re-integration and rehabilitation (Mehreteab 1999). Many women no longer felt useful and needed and found it difficult to transfer their wartime experiences into life skills in post-war Eritrea. At other times, women were rejected by conservative families or divorced by husbands for their role as “fighters” – a predicament which ex-combatants face in other post-liberation states, such as Zimbabwe (Lyons 2001).

In addition, an ambiguity persists in the work of many authors who masculinize as well as sexualize female fighters, often equating fighting for the “nation” with masculinity and aggressive (sexual) strength (Nagel 2000). For example, Gauch recreates a popular image, emphasizing that

In Eritrea, women with long afros and black rubber sandals walk the streets. They have a masculine swagger and their gaze is intense and serious...these are former fighters of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (1993:20).

Another journalist was bemused to find that the female fighters he interviewed “were fierce in both their will to win and their battle dress. The impression was not softened by their being women” (Larkin 1981:5). Estevez also seemed to feel this was a visual phenomena worth commenting on after a 1987 visit to the EPLF liberated zones, though he perhaps felt that the addition of blue hair coloring alluded to the femininity of female fighters:

The slenderness of their figures and the thick, bushy hairstyles, similar to those sported by their men comrades, make it difficult to distinguish between girls and boys. A few – as the only sign of coquetry – color their hair with a blue powder (1987:5; cf. Curnow 2000:38).

These changes in hairstyle and clothing, made during wartime necessity, are radically different from women’s traditional attire and the connotations associated with it (neatness, order, femininity). Yet, in popular culture, images of “woman in war” have come to represent masculinity and strength, as well as female sexual excesses and even notions of promiscuity and immorality. Women often straddle the symbolic imagery of dangerous “Amazonian fighter” and sensual “Mother-Goddess” (Burgess and Valaskakis 1995). As Freweini<sup>6</sup> commented:

I remember journalists swarming female combatants and photographing them in tight clothing – clothing that was revealing for Eritrean women. Many of the women would be leaning on tanks or posing with guns, laughing and flirting...I never saw photos of male cadres like this--no one was interested in taking their pictures in this way anyway.

This phenomena is comparable to media images perpetuated in other countries, often by the state, to display its perceived modernity evidenced by its female fighters. Sunindyo's discussion of media and popular discourse surrounding the Indonesian military heroine, Herlina, is instructive in this regard:

Herlina appears without any makeup and in military uniform...Not only does she look powerful (in her military uniform, with a glimpse of war machinery in the background) but also sexy (her hair has been left to hang loosely) (1998:9).

Thus, the media and academics perpetuated sexualized images of Eritrean women, perhaps at times with EPLF encouragement since it would seem to emphasize the modern nature of the national front and therefore bolster its right to a state in a modern world of nation-states.

### **The voices of “Other” Eritrean women**

With this discourse in mind, a diverse cross-section of Eritrean women was interviewed in a variety of locations about their experiences with the ELF. Women interviewed were not confined to one ethnic group or religion but originated from diverse backgrounds such as Tigrinya, Tigre, Billen, and Saho. In this sample several informants were atheist but the majority adhered to some type of religious conviction (Sunni Muslim, Coptic and Catholic Christianity), ranging from the secular to the Islamist. Most were involved in the various ELF organizations (women, workers, student, political, health) and a few were high-ranking political figures and combat fighters. As a result of such research, trends emerged about the relationship between the ELF and women. These conclusions are by no means exhaustive but are a necessary start to a long and much needed process in academic writing with respect to the multifarious and complex nature of women's experiences in Eritrea.

#### *i) Negotiating the ELF*

The ELF evolved in an atmosphere of African decolonisation and Arab nationalist revolution in Nasser's Egypt. Launched by Idris Mohammad Adem, Idris Glaidos and Osman Salah Sabbe in exile in Cairo, the Front initially focused primarily on liberating Eritrea through armed struggle. The fact that the above leaders and many early members were Muslim led many elements of the international community, media, and Ethiopia to conclude that “the dissidents in Eritrea, who are mainly Muslim, want local autonomy and closer ties to the Arab world” (Campbell 1971). In view of this, the Front is still frequently defined in the following myopic way:

During the 1960s, the ELF defined itself as a pro-Arab, Islamic movement opposing Christian-dominated Ethiopian rule in Eritrea. Its leaders held that the majority (70-80%) of Eritreans were Arabic speaking Muslims. The ELF presented the fight for



Eritrean independence from Christian Ethiopia as a holy war (Woldemikael 1993:187).

Negash also argues that the “ELF perceived itself as a Muslim organization engaged in freeing Eritrea, which it continued to describe as predominantly Muslim and Arab” (1997:150).

Yet, these approaches focus too heavily on the personal opinions of certain figures within the ELF, especially Idris Adem, who were more radically Islamized but who did not represent the broad spectrum of approaches nor the evolution in ideological positions during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> These views also overlook the isolation that the Eritrean dissidents faced which forced them to seek support where possible, using what shared identity and commonalities they could to secure outside patronage. I would therefore agree with Iyob that the “ELF leaders’ choice of Arab support was more a matter of necessity than a reflection of enduring Arab identity” (1995:110).

Soon after its inception, women became involved in the ELF. They began by utilizing their traditional roles to resist Ethiopian occupation. This encompassed everything from cooking, nursing and shelter provision to weapon collection and message transmission. These varied forms of resistance are gradually being acknowledged (Ranchod-Nilsson 1994) and even recognised as strategic. As Nagel explains:

Women are less likely to be seen as dangerous or ‘up to something’, and so can serve as escorts for men or messengers for men who are sequestered inside houses. Similarly women are often more successful at recruiting support for nationalist efforts because they are seen as less threatening and militant (1998:253).

Initially, during the mid-1960s, women took part in diverse resistance processes. One ELF woman highlighted the issue Nagel is discussing:

I was working for Yemeni Airlines in the early 60s, on the flights from Asmara to Yemen, and I was taking military documents to the ELF in Yemen. The Ethiopian Ambassador in Yemen knew some documents were coming to Yemen within Yemeni Airlines and I suspect another hostess informed him of my work because he invited me to meet with him. He called me a *shifita* [bandit], which I denied, and he told me I was just a little girl and that he didn’t want to hurt me. He warned me not to work with the *shifita* or talk to the ELF in Yemen.<sup>8</sup>

In this case, the woman in question was not interrogated, imprisoned and tortured as so many of her male colleagues were. This is no doubt due to the prevailing Ethiopian view at the time that a woman could not be transmitting anything serious or important nor have any significant role to play in the resistance movement. Thus, the woman was protected by her traditional role in a distinctly female position, as a “subordinate” hostess (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990; Tétreault 1994). Under this guise, she could therefore subvert Ethiopian military intelligence and gradually increase her own sphere of influence beyond accepted boundaries. She later spearheaded reforms within the ELF and is one of the few women to have held key political posts in the new state of Eritrea (cf. Scott 1990 and 1985).

Other women formed cells in urban Eritrea, mainly in Asmara and Keren, to discuss the occupation and implement resistance measures under the auspices of the ELF. Such groups raised money for the Front, distributed pamphlets, protested in schools and universities and transmitted information about Ethiopian activities. When fighters came to Keren and Asmara, they were hidden in women's houses and the men collected information that women gathered in the urban areas.

Many of the cells were made up of women from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. As Meheret and Dahab explained:

Our backgrounds were so different, but it was never an issue [between cell members]. They were my sisters in revolution, and I became closer to them and trusted them more than my sisters in blood.<sup>9</sup>

It was rumored that the ELF was a Muslim movement, so I avoided it. After some time, there were no other options, so I decided to find out about it. When I met some of the other women, I realized they were not all Muslims at all, and even at a point when I was the only Christian in my cell for a period [after others fled from Asmara] it wasn't an issue. We were all suffering at the hands of the Ethiopians – this was the issue.<sup>10</sup>

Some ELF cells were therefore less affected than the military by ethnic and religious maneuverings,<sup>11</sup> operating separately from men and in a predominantly urban environment. At the same time, however, there were examples of ethnic/religious tension experienced by women within the ELF, even if not at a cell-based level. Yasmeen explained a situation in the late 1960s:

We arrived at an ELF 'camp site' at dusk, situated in a deep and dry riverbed. Food was being prepared in the religious way<sup>12</sup> and everyone was moving around and talking. But, when the food was ready, the group started to divide, mainly at the initiative of certain conservatives from a particular ethnic background who felt Muslims shouldn't be eating with Christians. Some of the other Muslim men and women objected, but we gave in because we were tired. We formed two separate groups, and I felt sad, after all, I'd walked for two weeks with Christians to get there...

## *ii) Challenges and changes for women in the ELF*

In 1967, a politicized and structured organization, the General Union of Eritrean Women (Cairo Branch), was formed amongst the mainly educated exile community in Egypt with Amna Malikeen as its Chairperson and Zahra Jaber in charge of Foreign Affairs. The Union, perhaps even more broadly than the ELF leaders, made links with international movements and bodies regarding gender issues and solidarity. The Union was able to secure some funding, media profile and invaluable secondary and tertiary educational scholarships for women. For example, numerous women went to Baghdad to take up scholarships to study nursing, and others were given scholarships to complete elementary and primary education in Damascus, Cairo and Baghdad. Union representatives published articles in

newspapers and distributed pamphlets abroad about the struggle, as well as giving lectures in Universities in Jordan, Iraq and Khartoum and attending the ELF student conference in Syria.

However, at this time the Union faced difficulties with the ELF leadership structure: Women effectively participated in all aspects of democratic struggle that constantly escalated in the face of the leadership's backward mentality and which found its manifestation in the Supreme Council. Women, like the rest of the Eritrean population, undertook the task of convoking the First National Congress as a historical necessity required by prevailing circumstances (The Eritrean Women's General Union n.d.).

The Congress, held at Ar in 1971, was crucial for many reasons. It was held amidst the turmoil of defections from the ELF due to the fighting amongst the leadership and persistent ethnic tensions and Muslim/Christian rivalries in the field (Iyob 1995:108-122). In addition, other elements of Eritrean society, especially women and students, were pushing for a greater recognition of their diverse needs and roles in the struggle. The Women's Union, led by Amna Malikeen, prepared papers relating to gender issues pertinent to the struggle and Eritrea generally, and lobbied the leadership at the Congress. The ELF leadership, working within a climate of internal political strife, realized that it must respond to the claims made against it and initiated the reforms put forward at the 1969 Adobha conference. These reforms included cessation of the authoritarian relationship between the ELF leaders and the ELF fighters/members and improvement of the deteriorating relationship between the people and the army (Eritrean Liberation Front 1979:19). It also endorsed the notion that the role of women and other groups (workers, students, peasants) was essential to the struggle, and it decided to form mass organizations. The head of Women's Union was also to sit on the Revolutionary Council, a decision that received mixed reviews. As Amna Malikeen reflected:

At this time, as in the past, some men were not happy about having women in the ELF, but the majority at the Congress, especially students and workers, supported the inclusion of women at all levels. At least we got our rights on paper, but at times, it was not easy. Some men on the Council used to say I was half a man.

In 1974, in line with the proclamation of the First Congress, the General Union of Eritrean Women was officially established. By this stage, more women had joined the ELF (as well as the now steadily increasing EPLF) in the face of a new wave of brutal Ethiopian offensives. With more women in the Front, a greater number of issues about women's liberation and equality were raised and debated. One female ex-combatant explained the following problems in the field:

On a general level, relations between men and women in the ELF were good. But, I always felt there was a tendency among some high-ranking ELF cadres in the field to leave the beautiful women behind when an attack was launched. They didn't want them to fight and be wounded or killed. They wanted them in the camp – to look at or admire, and hopefully seduce.

Another woman, a nurse who completed six months military training with the ELF and subsequently worked in a large clinic, revealed other issues:

There was a problem with high-ranking men seeking sexual relations with women in the Front. If a woman refused, the man could make trouble for her, often in subtle ways. She might later need new trousers and, because he is her superior, she would apply through him and he would refuse her and then make it look like the refusal was related to a rule, not her sexual rejection of him. Still, if it went further than this, it was more serious. I remember two men who were treated very severely and imprisoned because they had raped a woman. It was the more underlying tension and harassment that went unpunished.

Thus, questions of sexuality and sexual relations, especially marriage, gained prominence. In the front itself, sexual relations had been prohibited, punishable by death, but had persisted.<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the Front permitted sexual relations between married couples, several years before the EPLF's 1976 Marriage Proclamation. Several informants felt the ELF had generally been more relaxed about such issues:

The ELF was more democratic in that it was not nearly as strict and disciplined as the EPLF. Sexual relations were allowed earlier and in fact it was often easier for women to voice their concerns and opinions because it was not so militant and organized.

These issues were raised at the Second National Congress in May 1975. After debates, more concrete proclamations relating to women were inserted in the ELF's political program. Article 2 of the Social and Cultural Policies of the Program declared that once Eritrea was liberated:

The revolutionary state shall protect the rights of women workers. It shall remove all historical prejudice against women and will safeguard equal opportunities for women in the different activities of the state, social and private life. Women shall have a revolutionary place in revolutionary Eritrea. Any manifestation of discrimination against women shall be severely punished (ELF 1975).

In practice, changes were being instituted in the liberated zones to some extent. Amna Malikeen and Zahra Jaber traveled throughout the liberated zones talking in villages about women's rights. They especially targeted the importance of educating women, access to adequate nutrition and birth control. By 1975, the ELF had firmly established schools and health clinics in the major towns in the liberated zones. Peasants were taught about hygiene and cleaning clothing, whereas the conventional nomadic lifestyle was not drastically altered. Traditional marriage configurations were also questioned, but mainly by more educated ELF women such as Amna Malikeen. However this questioning was met with great resistance, from men and women. Even some educated men and women, sympathetic to the inequities in marriage and divorce, were largely silent. As time passed, lengthy debates led to only limited change. The ELF leadership agreed that marriage expenses should be minimized and women's voices recognized but that this was largely subsumed by respect for cultural and religious norms; thus,

polygamy, child betrothal, lack of female consent and a related issue, female circumcision, were all tacitly condoned.

By 1981 the prolonged fighting between the EPLF and ELF took its toll, and the ELF was eventually pushed out of Eritrea and into the Sudan. The Front retained offices in the Sudan and the Women's Union continued to work, largely with Eritrean refugees in Sudan. However, as a political and military force, the Front clearly declined. Many members left the struggle and many moved abroad to Europe, North America and Australia. Despite the decline of the ELF, factions still exist today, though it is difficult to estimate their size or the extent of support at present (Medhanie 1994). This is an issue that will, no doubt, continue to resurface in Eritrean politics and a problem that will need to be resolved at the conclusion of hostilities with Ethiopia.

## **Conclusions**

This paper aimed to reclaim, in a sense, the “traditional” role of women in liberation struggle. Instead of glorifying woman-at-arms, it gives validity and value to those acts often viewed as less important, such as cooking, health care, message transmission and other tasks that lack “excitement” and exoticism but are indispensable. The PFDJ and its supporters currently argue that Eritrea is notable for “the absence of deeply-felt inter-communal hatred or ill-feelings...probably, attributable to the fact that no ethnic group or religious group ever succeeded in physically or politically subjugating or dominating any of its neighbors” (Tesfai 1997:8). This approach revolves around a notion of an all-encompassing Eritrean national identity that overcomes internal ethnic, religious or gender rivalry. However, the majority of the women interviewed for this paper felt that they were currently excluded from Eritrean history, myth and political rhetoric. Moreover, several expressed great anxiety over the prospect of discussing their role in the ELF out of a fear that they may be viewed as “anti-Eritrean” or separatists and may be imprisoned as a result. This paper recognizes that while some “signs of possible openings” are emerging (a freer press, increased political debate, a renewed NGO presence), post-liberation Eritrea continues to remain an otherwise tightly controlled and closed political framework (Human Rights Watch 2001:7). This framework is still dominated by a narrow historical national narrative that largely excludes dissenting voices in order to preserve an artificial unity. It is both a denial of variegated female experience as well as an example of the totalitarian tendencies of national liberation ideology.

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## Notes

1. Nine ethnic groups are commonly identified as occupying Eritrea. Some of these groups are shared with Djibouti (Afar), Sudan (Haderab, Tigre) and Ethiopia (Afar, Tigrinya, Saho); others are unique to Eritrea (Billen, Kunama, Nara). One group migrated in the last century from the Arabian peninsula (Rashaida). Such ethnic categorization should be understood in light of debates concerning ethnicity and nationalism, since each ethnic group tends to identify itself in relationship to an "other," rather than as a distinct group existing in a vacuum.
2. This could be further examined in light of compulsory national service for both men and women in Eritrea. This "active" contribution to the Eritrean nation-state is however forfeited by certain groups on gender grounds. Thus, few if any Rashaida or Afar women participate in national service, and the number of Muslim women is generally lower than Christian, despite the equal religious composition of Eritrea. In addition, married women and women with children are frequently exempt, as are the aged (Author's Interview with Luul Gebre-ab, Head of the National Union of Eritrean Women, 22 December 1998). The issue, therefore, is how far are such groups excluded from the project of nation building and conception of the Eritrean "nation" on the grounds of their "passive" citizenship? For an interesting discussion of active and passive citizenship, see Yuval-Davis (1997a).
3. It should also be acknowledged that the 1998-2001 border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia has hampered plans for multi-party Eritrean elections.
4. Despite some public terrorist-type attacks by Eritrean Islamic Jihad, little powerful protest has been leveled against the current government. It appears that recent overtures have been made by the PFDJ to former ELF members, including some in exile (Author's personal correspondence, 1998-2000). Debate has also appeared in *Eritrea Profile*, suggesting that much needed reflection and openness may slowly be appearing.
5. Naturally, I am aware of the theoretical and methodological difficulties of identifying "other" researchers as "foreign," as if I can differentiate myself from them. Instead, I attempt to draw upon work by authors such as Hale (1996), and I therefore situate myself, as far as possible, in the narrative

of my own work without claiming that objectivity is possible or, even if it were, that it would be preferable.

6. Author's interview in Keren, November 1998. All names used in the paper have been changed to protect the privacy of the information.

7. The term "fighter" is ambiguous since it usually refers to any active member of the EPLF (and at times it is used in the same context to women in the ELF), even though they may never physically have fought at a frontline. However, the PFDJ clarified this in 1997 explaining that while one third of the EPLF was female, only 13% were frontline fighters (see Connell 1998:18).

8. Author's interview with Senait in Massawa, January 1999.

9. Author's interview in Asmara, November 1999.

10. Author's interview in Decemhare, November 1999.

11. One of the controversial ELF initiatives was the adoption of the Algerian strategy of dividing territory into *wiliyat* (zones) based on ethnic and tribal affiliations (see Sishagne 1989; Negash 1997; and Iyob 1995).

12. That is, animals slaughtered according to Islamic principles for Muslim members (*halal*) and Christian food prepared by Christians, for Christian consumption.

13. Author's interview with Tekle in Asmara, 1999. This fighter had been informed of the rules by the leader of his group, yet he had sexual relations with several women despite the severe repercussions this behavior could attract.

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