

## **WOMEN, GENDER AND PUBLIC OFFICE: SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA; EAST AFRICA; ERITREA**

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Women played a central role in Eritrea’s thirty-year war for independence from Ethiopia, which annexed the former Italian colony in the 1960s, but their post-independence participation in public life presents a mixed record. By the nationalist victory in 1991, they made up nearly a third of the 95,000-strong Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) and 13 percent of the frontline fighters in what had been the longest-running conflict in modern African history — a conflict characterized by remarkably successful efforts to unify the diverse society (four million people, half Muslim and half Christian, from nine ethnic groups) while promoting egalitarian social relations across both gender and class.

Women served in many non-combat capacities — as teachers, paramedics, political organizers, technicians, garage mechanics, drivers and more — while thousands of women civilians organized to support the war effort. This positioned them to challenge traditionally submissive roles in the strictly patriarchal society and to demand equal participation in the economy and the country’s post-independence political life. But there was significant slippage in their war-time gains.

Women activists were drawn into important but time-consuming political projects: writing a new constitution, revising the civil code, developing legislation, restructuring the civil service, demobilizing former fighters, forwarding recommendations for economic development and drafting other new policy initiatives. This represented a sharp break with the grassroots-level work to change gender relations with which they had been engaged. Meanwhile, women fighters saw a spike in the divorce rate as male comrades opted for more subservient partners. Men in some communities also formed clandestine committees — later exposed and dismantled — to prevent women from participating in postwar land reform.

These social struggles took place against the backdrop of a complex process of state-building. The decades-long independence war had left Eritrea in ruins. At the close of the fighting, water and sewage systems in the towns barely functioned; the few asphalt roads had been torn up; port facilities were badly damaged; the rail system was entirely dismantled; and the entire country had a generating capacity of only twenty-two megawatts, barely enough to keep the lights burning in the major towns. The World Bank estimated the country’s per capita income at less than \$150, compared to \$330 for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Nor was there a political infrastructure to take over and transform — it, too, had to be built from scratch.

The starting point was decidedly weighted against women’s participation. In a mixed Muslim and Christian society where close to 80 percent of the people relied on agrarian-related activities, women were uniformly denied the right to own or

inherit land. Women had been specifically denied the right to vote in the 1950s Constitution that governed Eritrea's early relationship with Ethiopia, and in all but one minority community (the Kunama, whose people practice an animist faith), women were excluded from traditional forms of village and clan self-administration.

In both Muslim and Christian communities, girls were routinely married at puberty under contracts arranged at birth. A bride might be as young as nine, though she continued to live at home until menstruation. Genital cutting was widely carried out – as clitoridectomies in the settled farming communities of the mostly Christian highlands and often in more radical infibulations in the agro-pastoralist communities of the Muslim lowlands. A 1997 Demographic and Health Survey of 5,054 women found that 90 percent of Eritrean women had gone through one of these procedures, with as many as one-third infibulated. Girls frequently contracted vaginal infections during these crude operations, and death in childbirth was extremely common, due to the chronic malnutrition and anemia. At the end of the protracted conflict, Eritrean women had a life expectancy of barely forty years. (By 2001, it had risen to fifty-four.)

In August 1994 the new government nationalized urban and rural land and allocated use-rights to all Eritrean women and men. The government also decreed a national service campaign that required women and men over eighteen to undergo six months of military training and spend a year on reconstruction projects. This was partially intended to weld together the diverse society, while placing women and men in a condition of relative gender equality, much as service in the liberation front had done.

However, measures such as land reform, national service, the enforcement of laws against sex discrimination by a woman Minister of Justice, the appointment of a near majority of women to the Constitution Commission, and the reservation of 30 percent of the seats for women in newly-elected regional and national People's Assemblies were not enough to counter the resurgence of patriarchal values in the deeply conservative society. In addition to struggles over land and spiraling divorce rates, there were sharp rises in child marriage and other formerly banned practices, such as humiliating "virginity testing" for prospective brides.

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), with 200,000 members in 2004, was the largest of three sectoral associations (with workers and youth) that spun off from the liberation movement and was the main institutional vehicle for women's interests in postwar Eritrea. Founded in 1979 by the EPLF, the NUEW retains strong links with the liberation movement, renamed the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in 1994, which controls both the program and the composition of the NUEW's leadership. Its current head, Luul Gebreab, is a former platoon commander in the EPLF who now sits on the central council of the PFDJ.

The union manages skills-training, literacy and self-improvement programs, as well as rural credit schemes and other development projects, each of which is accompanied by consciousness-raising seminars, and it advises other bodies on legislation, trade union contracts and policies that affect women. However, the ruling party does not tolerate rival nongovernmental organizations, and it discourages program initiatives outside the union's mandate, so there is no

women's organizing or advocacy outside the NUEW framework except for that among youth.

Another party-controlled mass organization, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, runs education and training programs and cultural and recreational activities for young women and men aged sixteen to thirty-five in both Christian and Muslim communities. Unlike the NUEW, the youth movement, with an estimated 120,000 members in 2004, makes the issue of combating "harmful traditions" a centerpiece of its advocacy work and campaigns against FGM in Christian and Muslim communities with considerable success. Female NUEYS members target young women, and male members target young men in three-day educational programs held in villages and poor urban neighborhoods around the country to end the practice.

One alternative attempt at women's self-organizing came in 1995 when former guerrilla fighters established the Eritrean Women War Veterans Association, BANA. Members pooled demobilization payouts to set up a share company. Later, they registered as an NGO to solicit foreign funds. In one year, membership grew to 1,000. They established a fish market, a bakery, a training program for commercial drivers and other projects aimed at economic self-sufficiency. However, in 1996 the government shut down the NGO, forbidding BANA to raise foreign funds but permitting it to operate as a private enterprise.

The Tesfa Association, formed by ex-fighters in 1994 to address the lack of child-care facilities for working mothers, was another failed NGO experiment. Tesfa established a kindergarten and ran public fundraising campaigns in Asmara. Soon, however, it, too, began to attract foreign funds, as its leaders looked to replicate their success. In 1996, shortly after BANA was stripped of its NGO status, Tesfa was closed down without explanation. Its projects and resources were given to the NUEW.

The government's early hostility to independent civil society organizing intensified after the renewal of conflict with Ethiopia in 1998-2000 over unresolved border issues. Since then, it has also shut down the country's private press, detained leading critics and stifled policy-oriented public debate. Thus there are no public forums in 2004—in or out of government—where women can contest law or policy.

Despite these stark limitations, the Eritrean women's union provides a base for women to struggle at the local level with "traditional" power, and it functions as a discrete lobby with government and within the ruling party. In the early 1990s, the NUEW successfully spearheaded a number of reforms in the inherited Ethiopia civil code (*Eritrea Profile*, August 20, 1994):

- Marriage contracts can now only be made with the full consent of both parties.
- The eligible age for marriage is raised from fifteen to eighteen for women (matching that of men).
- Both mothers and fathers are recognized as heads of the family.
- There is to be no discrimination between men and women in divorce cases (grounds for which are adultery, desertion for two years, venereal disease and impotency).

- Paid maternity leave is extended from forty-five to sixty days.
- Abortion is now legal in cases where the mother's mental or physical health is threatened and in instances of rape or incest.
- The sentence for rape is extended to fifteen years.

The country's new Constitution, ratified by the National Assembly in 1997 but not yet implemented by the President, prohibits discrimination based on race, ethnic origin, color, and gender and mandates the National Assembly to legislate measures designed to eliminate such inequality. The government has also declared International Women's Day an official holiday and signed the Convention for the Rights of the Child and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

A number of prominent women influence public policy. In 2004, three women, two of whom are Muslims, held ministerial portfolios: Justice (Fozia Hashim), Tourism (Amna Nur Husayn) and Labor and Social Affairs (former NUEW chair Askalu Menkerios). The same three women sat on the PFDJ's nineteen-member Executive Council, chosen at the party's last congress in 1994, and women held 22 percent of the seats in the National Assembly and 11 percent of ambassadorial posts. In no-party elections held throughout the country in 2002 for village administrators and deputy administrators in both Muslim and Christian communities, women won more than a fifth of the posts.

However, gender-related changes in the public sphere are not woman-led. Eritrean women have access to the top, but they lack organized representation in the President's inner circle, where most policy is determined. More importantly, women lack a genuinely autonomous and activist social movement to push the state (and the party) from the outside.

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