

**'HE GAVE ME PERMISSION TO GO'  
GENDER IN POST-WAR ERITREA**

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## **Introduction**

This paper discusses fieldwork in Eritrea by a social anthropologist (Gruber) and a political scientist (Garcetti) between 1995 and 1998.<sup>1</sup> It provides a case study of certain aspects of development and change in the newest nation-state in Africa. Its specific context encompasses consideration of the ways in which disparate groups of women (and men) are addressing the realities of life in a post-conflict Eritrea that remains predicated in its traditional socio-cultural values and norms upon patriarchy and female submission, against a background of government and institutional adherence to the achievement of gender equity and equality. In addition the paper discusses the ways in which Eritrean national identity is being created from previously clearly and consciously self-delineated groups. The many and public ways in which the present government conflates the route to genuine nationhood with the structure of the family, and its centralising focus on the notion of the consolidation of the greater family of the nation, presuppose the participation of women and girls as equal partners.

There is a virtually unbroken line of descent in terms of theoretical perspective on gender issues between the wartime policies and programmes of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (the EPLF), and those of its post war successor governments. Since 1994 the EPLF has been reconstituted as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, the sole party of government. In the years since liberation there has been a significant shift with regard to implementation of initiatives to advance gender equity and equality. During the war in those areas liberated from the Ethiopians the EPLF actively and assertively instigated, promoted and implemented both military and civilian social and political mobilisation. In addition it put in place specific programmes in the fields of health and education; it further vigorously encouraged women's greater participation as fighters and support personnel within the EPLF.

The situation is now somewhat different: while commitment to the achievement of gender equity remains constant, the means by which this shall be attained have been redefined. The government seems to have decided that imposition of dogma, policy and practise is to be avoided: its view is that such top-down approaches are futile and counter-productive. Thus its stance could be described as depending on people and groups themselves to be pro-active, rather than following the lead of the government and other bodies. This does constitute a major change of emphasis: whereas before the EPLF took the lead in formulating and implementing policies with the potential to have profound social repercussions, it now appears to wish to step aside, to allow communities to implement change. Nonetheless, the government continues to be intent on giving direction insofar as policy definition. It is subsequent events that will be left more to the population to decide.

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### **EPLF wartime initiatives**

Those in the leadership of the EPLF demonstrated a keen awareness of gender inequity from the early days of the organisation's independent existence. At the First Congress of the EPLF in 1977 (at the height of the war) a National Democratic Programme was promulgated; it stressed that 'women [shall be assured] full rights of equality with men in politics, the economy and social life'. Specific objectives and programmes put forward and implemented from 1977 onwards include the Marriage Law and reforms to land tenure (both with potentially far-reaching repercussions for gender relations), and the creation of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW; in Tigrinya: *Hamade*), with its remit of mobilisation and education. A cornerstone of EPLF policy was that women should participate actively in all spheres of military activity. Women performed the whole range of military tasks: they were frontline fighters, served behind enemy lines, and worked in support units. Many received training in skills that had previously been entirely male domains (e.g. as motor mechanics and electricians). A few achieved middle and senior rank in the command structure. Towards the end of the war women made up 35-40 % of the entire EPLF membership; Pateman has estimated that women constituted 25 % of frontline troops in 1990 (1990: 465).

Nonetheless, full gender equity and equality were not achieved. In retrospect, the challenges to such equality become apparent, e.g. the nature of traditional society, customary behaviour and women's prior lack of access to formal education. While the EPLF promotion of gender equity was continuous and by most accounts entirely genuine (Wilson 1991; Silkin 1983 & 1989), the fact remains that relatively few women achieved high rank. A number became 'Merahit Botoloni' (team leader for 150 fighters) and 'Merahit Ganta' (team leader for 300 fighters); women became members of the EPLF Central Committee. Yet female participation in decision-making was not proportional to the numbers of women involved. In addition, while it is indisputable that many women were trained in fields in which they would never otherwise have had any experience, large numbers of women remained within more traditional fields.

The Table below (Table 1) provides information on female combatants' often multiple roles in the EPLF; while incomplete, it currently represents the most detailed information available. Percentages add up to more than 100, due it seems mainly to the fact that women engaged in several activities at the same time, or moved from one occupation to another over time.

<b>Table 1 Women's Participation in the EPLF by Employment Sector (1970-1993)</b>	
Sector	Women's participation by %
Combatants	23.0
Public Administration	35.0
Industry	29.5
Transportation	25.9
Health	55.2
Construction	19.6
Agriculture	19.8
Electronics	25.0
National Guidance*	1.7
Finance	9.5
Communications	33.1

\* Occupations such as journalism, teaching, broadcasting, and documentation

Source: NUEW (cited in Selassie 1992: 69)

The consensus among observers is that the continuation, however contested and limited, of stereotyping and occupation by gender owed far more to pre-existing issues of socialisation, levels of education and sheer numbers than to any widespread and/or concerted effort to maintain male dominance. Thus despite intentions to the contrary the EPLF continued to mirror gender relations and customary rôles as found within the wider context of Eritrean society. It was unable to break entirely with tradition or with the past.

### **Specific EPLF gender initiatives**

The EPLF promulgated a number of new laws and policies in the liberated areas of Eritrea that had the specific objective of promoting women's equality and enhancing women's rights. Chief among these was the 1977 EPLF Marriage Law whose rationale was the achievement of a "democratic marriage law, based on the free choice of both partners, monogamy, the equal rights of both sexes, and legal guarantees of the interests of women and children". Silkin discusses the fact that marriage was prohibited for members of the EPLF before 1977; after that date it was permitted, but couples were actively encouraged to live together for a year before marrying, in order to see whether they were genuinely well suited. "Promoting pre-marital sexual intimacy not only explicitly encourages responsible decision-making in marriage, it also implicitly undermines marriage as a family alliance, for it uncouples female sexuality and family honour" (1989: 152). Apparently many living in the liberated areas viewed such provisions with grave suspicion; initiatives as radical as these have not been carried forward into post-war society. No mention is made in government documents of the possibility

of future inclusion. While no research has been published on the subject of the post-war marital experiences of ex-fighters (female and male), it is possible that the difference between wartime behaviour and expectations and peacetime pressures to re-assert traditional practices and perceptions is a major reason for the often-reported but as yet unverified very high divorce rate among this group.

The eradication of certain harmful traditional practices, primarily Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), in its most severe form infibulation, was also a main plank of EPLF initiatives. It was decided that while clear health reasons could be given for the abolition of infibulation, too much stress on eradicating clitoridectomy and excision might cause considerable resentment. Silkin posits that such action “would [have taken] the argument beyond women’s health and into the sphere of women’s rights to, and capacity for, sexual pleasure, which would alienate the people from [accepting] the more moderate reform” (1990; cited in Wilson: 1991: 138).

Agrarian reform was also instituted by the EPLF in the liberated areas, the central aim being the abolition of customary forms of land ownership, usufruct and tenure, all of which discriminated against women. Whatever the local system, it can be claimed that women everywhere in Eritrea were traditionally excluded from any ownership or genuine control, except in certain very specific circumstances. Such practice clearly reinforced women’s dependence on male kin. Thus the agrarian reform sought not only to enable women to own land but also to be involved in village and local assemblies where decisions on land use would be taken. Most elements of these reforms have been carried forward into the 1994 Land Proclamation.

NUEW itself is a clear indication of the genuine commitment shown by the leadership of the EPLF to gender issues. Its specific remit was to conduct mobilisation, politicisation and sensitisation campaigns, and to increase the overall participation of civilian women in the liberation struggle. In addition it campaigned for increased female participation in education, for the implementation of the EPLF Marriage Law and other measures, and for health initiatives at local level. During the struggle NUEW co-ordinated the activities of local-level women’s associations and encouraged the participation of members in wider activities. “Women’s mass associations allowed their members political representation from village to national level. Locally based branches provided a platform on which the concerns of women could be discussed with a view to influencing local policy. In theory, local concerns would, in turn, eventually feed into national-level policy formulation” (Silkin 1983: 912).

Many fundamental, traditional mores and customary practices were challenged, indeed altered, in the liberated areas during the war. Due to many a reason, some women's lives have seen profound shifts, either in a more traditional direction or sometimes towards considerable autonomy. However, research has indicated that many Eritreans have always been reluctant to change their

behaviour. There are indications of a peacetime 'backlash', where advances made in terms of equality, access and entitlement, for women and for other groups, have been set aside or repudiated. Such retrograde steps have profound implications for the post war development of Eritrea within its government's proclaimed ideal of equality.

### **Existing social structures and traditional practices: links to gender relations**<sup>2</sup>

'Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with brains'  
'Educating a girl is like watering another man's garden'

(Tigrinya sayings)

'An uncircumcised woman is like a coffee pot without a lid: both let the dirt in'

(Tigre saying)

Nine ethnic groups, or 'nationalities' as defined by the government, are stated to be resident in Eritrea. The largest of these is the Tigrinya, comprising some 50 % of the total population of 2.3-2.8 million (as defined by the FAO in 1993), and traditionally highland settled farmers and Orthodox Christians. The second largest group is the Tigre, predominantly Muslim lowlanders; many are agropastoralists or pastoralists. Within this group must be counted the Beni Amer, the Maria and the Mensa; people who define themselves as belonging to one of these may well feel separate from the broader Tigre identification. The Bilen have long viewed the highland town of Keren as their central focus. Many Bilen are Christian (especially Catholic), while others are Muslim; both farmers and agropastoralists belong to this ethnic group, which makes up 2-2.5 % of the population.

The agropastoralist and pastoralist Saho, who move their herds between the coastal littoral and the highlands, number some 175,000 (ca. 5 %), as do the Afar, resident in the harsh terrain of the Danakil depression. The Hedarib, ethnically and socio-culturally closely linked to the Tigre grouping, and the Nilotic Kunama represent some 2-2.5 % of the population. The Nara, also Nilotic, and the Rashaida (originally from modern Saudi Arabia) are numerically the smallest groups, with the former estimated at ca. 1.5 % and the latter at 0.5 % of the resident population.

All nine ethnic groups, including the matrilineal Kunama, are characterised by patriarchal structures. These limit gender equity and access and entitlement for women. The majority of women would seem to adhere to these as the 'least worst option' (see Kandiyoti 1988 & 1998); equality of opportunity and flexibility in

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<sup>2</sup> This section of the paper is informed by fieldwork findings by both Garceti and Gruber.

terms of the reproductive and productive gender roles are as yet only theoretical goals for all but a tiny minority.

Nonetheless, it would be entirely inaccurate to view all Eritrean women as facing the same obstacles at each and every turn, or having access to the same opportunities. Socio-cultural influences, ethnic, religious, residential, livelihood pattern, educational and other factors contribute to the patchwork of women's lives. This should be remembered throughout this paper, which has space chiefly to present normative behaviour and expectations. The implications of such influences can be seen in differential access of girls and women to health care and education; while this may be particularly noticeable in the lowland and Muslim areas, it can be claimed to be virtually universal in Eritrea.

It has also to be borne in mind that the views and behaviour of men cover a wide and differentiated spectrum. While the majority may well not consider greater gender equity as an important goal, some have demonstrated their allegiance to this aim; others may well be willing to participate more thoroughly than they have hitherto been able.

Patrilocal residence (with the husband's family or in his village) after marriage is the rule for all ethnic groups except the Kunama. Their matrilineal kinship structure and matrilocal residence (with the mother or mother's brother's family) patterns represent a rather more egalitarian role for women, albeit defined and largely controlled by male members of the community. Marriage, residence and inheritance patterns among all the ethnic groups customarily place women in a subordinate position to men.

Women's reproductive role, which involves childcare, raising of children, work within the household and almost without exception also water, fuel and fodder collection as well as participation in agricultural and pastoral activities, and which invariably involves extremely onerous workloads, is scarcely considered work, but simply what women do. As in many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's daily workload is likely to fill 14-16 hours. Girls are expected to assist their mothers from an early age, and to take on considerable amounts of work as young as 6 or 8. There is variation among the ethnic groups as to women's tasks within the reproductive role: among the lowland, pastoral and agropastoralist peoples women are seldom involved in any agricultural activities, due to restriction of their movement outside the home. These women are often mainly concerned with food preparation and the making of household goods. They are additionally usually responsible for preparing the household and its members when it moves to new pasture. As in so many other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, such tasks are ignored and almost invisible, while men's frequently far less heavy workload (on a day to day basis) is perceived as much more important and as constituting 'real' work.

It is in the private realm of marriage and the household that women's subordination is most sharply delineated and most clearly visible. A combination of tradition, customary practice and religious teaching and belief serves to perpetuate women's lack of opportunity and equal status in society and community. Girl children are sometimes claimed to be 'burdens on the family', as they will marry out. The Bilen for example call girls 'evening shadows', because they will soon be gone. This attitude has profound consequences for girl children and the lifetime expectations of girls and women. It must also deeply influence girls' and women's self-perception and self-esteem.

Socialisation from birth in such roles, however entrenched and familiar within society, and however much considered the correct and appropriate way to behave by the majority, must surely limit girls' and women's horizons and their beliefs about their own abilities and opportunities. The great majority of girls in all ethnic groups are socialised from earliest childhood to be submissive, passive, meek and quiet. Very many are taught that their chief focus is to be the home and household; boys on the other hand are far more often allowed wider horizons.

Women are invariably deemed to be the protectors of family virtue; in other words, their sexuality is controlled by norms and rules defined by others and patrolled by men. Severe repercussions may result if a girl or woman is considered to have behaved in an inappropriate fashion: in Muslim communities the merest suspicion of impropriety is enough to lead to divorce; women are still today often felt to bear the main blame in cases of rape. All such definitions, restrictions, expectations and prescribed behaviour lie at the heart of subordination and gender inequality. There is tangible expression of subordination in the continuing practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), child betrothal, early marriage, seclusion, and exclusion from education and health care. In some regions of Eritrea, e.g. in Northern and Southern Red Sea zones, women are frequently forbidden to seek medical care and attention, even when they are pregnant, because this will expose them to strangers' scrutiny and company.

### **Traditional harmful practices affecting women and girls**

These include the following:

- **Engagement of female children before birth:** the girl will wear a necklace or bracelet to indicate that she is promised in marriage, often to a man 30 or more years older.
- **Child marriage,** where the girl may be as young as 13 and the husband any age between 20 and 65, is still common throughout the country, despite the codification of the Eritrean Family Law. One report states that over 70 % of all Eritrean women are married by the age of 18; in pastoral societies (e.g.



among the Rashaida and certain sections of the Tigre) girls are still often married as young as 12 (von Braunmühl: 1996; see also National Statistics Office (Eritrea) & Macro International Inc. 1995 – the *Eritrea Demographic & Health Survey 1995*).

- **FGM** is still prevalent: the 1995 EDHS estimates that 95% of Eritrean women have experienced clitoridectomy, excision or infibulation. The practice varies according to ethnic group and religious affiliation.
- **Son preference** is entrenched: sons remain within the household and are expected to provide security for their parents in old age; males continue the patrilineage.
- **Domestic violence**: frequently considered an integral and necessary part of marital relations - this reinforces subordination and submission, and a 'good wife' is expected never to raise objections to such behaviour. The new Family Law is reticent on subjects such as domestic violence, marital rape and incest; however, there is keen awareness in judicial circles of the urgent need to address such issues. This point provides an unfortunate and vivid illustration of the huge gap between policy and practice.

### **The rationale for the current policy environment**

The Eritrean government view is that true and lasting alteration in gender relations and rôles can only come about through community-generated desire for change. As such it is in tune with much recent theory and practice in development. Stakeholder participation in grassroots initiatives, with genuine bottom-up direction, is seen as the most appropriate way to support sustainable change that is consonant with people's own perceptions of acceptable socio-cultural attitudes and behaviour. There is a significant literature on this subject (for a few perspectives, see e.g. Cleves Mosse 1993; Long & Long 1992; Moser 1995; Quarles van Ufford 1993) For a trenchant critique from an anthropological perspective of various aspects of this approach, for instance what is claimed to be its inherently Eurocentric theoretical stance and a continuing, albeit more subtle, emphasis on stakeholder ignorance, see Hobart (1993).

Where problems may arise with the participatory approach, and particularly in the area of 'gender and development', is in the gap between policy and practice: between those who formulate initiatives seeking to promote greater gender equity, and those whose lives will inexorably be altered by the implementation of such changes.

The Eritrean government has stated its continuing and unswerving commitment to the achievement of gender equity in numerous policy documents and legal instruments, most of which are derived virtually unchanged from EPLF policies and programmes. These include the Family Law; the Proclamation of Land Tenure (58/1994); the Labour Law (8/1991); the EPLF/PFDJ National Charter for

Eritrea (1994); the Macro-Policy document (1994); the Ministry of Foreign Affairs report to the 4<sup>th</sup> (Beijing) World Conference on Women (1995); and the ratified Constitution (1998). In so doing its official position has been made clear, in a manner that stresses the centrality of these aims to the creation of the independent Eritrean nation. It could be claimed that in addition the government has declared itself a hostage to fortune: its objectives are open to scrutiny, while it currently abjures any overt management of the ways in which greater gender equity might be sought and achieved.

Commentators such as von Braunmühl (1996) and Tadria (1997) refer to the reliance placed in Eritrean government instruments on people's and communities' own will to change. As they note, willingness is insufficient if not followed by effort. Only if impetus to change is accompanied by socio-cultural and economic developments that allow women and girls greater and more equitable participation can genuine changes in gender rôles and relations ever be considered to have occurred. There appears to be an implicit assumption on the part of the government that people, whatever their ethnic or religious background, their personal experiences during and after the war, or their degree of exposure to different approaches to gender relations, will share a certain communality of dedicated will and activity to foster, implement and then sustain change.

A delicate balance has to be achieved in this context, and one that no government anywhere has managed entirely adequately: many have failed even to address the issue. On the one hand it is essential to allow people and communities much opportunity and time. People must firstly somehow come to the realisation that changes in gender relations may be desirable, secondly to decide whether they may wish such changes to occur, and then to consider how, when, for whom and to what extent. On the other it is imperative not to let opportunities for genuine developments slip away through lack of directed action.

The Eritrean situation incorporates widely disparate communities. While people may be bound together to quite a remarkable extent by the suffering of the 30 years' war, their experiences differ greatly. So too do their ethnic origins and customs, their religious beliefs and practices, their level of formal education and their knowledge of other societies' perceptions of gender relations, to list only a few of the potential definitional criteria. In its focus on the creation of the nation as a cohesive and self-reliant entity, the government is intent on strengthening shared perceptions, and making them integral to national identity. 'Diversity in harmony' is one of its watchwords: such unity of purpose and identification will take considerable time and effort to achieve.

If the government of Eritrea is to achieve its objective of gender equity and equality, it is the heterogeneous national community that must somehow come to the realisation and, crucially, the acknowledgement, that it is in its best interests to introduce and sustain fundamental alteration in people's perceptions of social

and cultural norms: behaviour that is claimed to have existed and persisted for centuries will have to be set aside. Profoundly rooted expectations will similarly have to be discarded. Patriarchal structures and socialisation of women to be meek and submissive, to name but two fundamental constructs that have guided many, if not most, Eritreans' lives and those of their parents' and grandparents' generations, will be examined and ultimately may be rejected. Such expectations presuppose much that may very well be extraordinarily difficult either to envisage or to encompass.

Any potential developments towards greater gender equity must be seen against the background of actual conditions of life for the majority of Eritreans. It must be stressed that in the seven years since liberation in May 1991 both the Transitional Government (TGE)<sup>3</sup> and the present government have achieved a very great deal in terms of rehabilitation of a virtually totally destroyed infrastructure, rebuilding of schools, health posts and hospitals. There has also been a substantial improvement in key social capital indicators such as school enrolment. Nonetheless, Eritrea remains a desperately poor country: see Table 2.

<b>Table 2: Basic Estimated Indicators (1996)</b>	
Life Expectancy (M/F)	46 years
Female Literacy Rate	10 %
Male Literacy Rate	20 %
Female School Enrolment	47 % (gross); 13 % (net)
Maternal Mortality Rate *	988: 100,000
Total Fertility Rate	6.1
Contraceptive Prevalence Rate **	1.7 % (rural); 4 – 12 % (urban)
Population per Doctor	48,000
Population per Nurse	1,750
Gross Dependency Ratio	100.19
Female-Headed Households	138,000
GDP per capita	\$140-160
* MMR refers to death either within the <i>puerperium</i> or within one month of delivery	
** CPR in this instance refers only to modern methods of contraception	
Sources: National Statistics Office (Eritrea) & Macro International Inc. 1995 – the <i>Eritrea Demographic &amp; Health Survey 1995</i> ; NUEW documentation; UNICEF 1993 & 1996; pers. comm.	

<sup>3</sup> The TGE functioned until independence came about after the referendum in May 1993, when more than 98% of the population voted for separation from Ethiopia

The case may be that many Eritreans, both male and female, will be neither willing nor able either to contemplate or to bring about changes in their lives as revolutionary as alterations in gender relations. This may be due to a wide variety of factors, among which can be noted the following: necessary and time-consuming focus on daily existence; majority determination to retain customary beliefs and practices; understandable reluctance to be part of a minority whose actions are viewed with suspicion and disapproval. If the climate for change among the general population remains as limited as it is today, it would be a brave person or community indeed that went against the grain so much as to introduce and maintain radically altered gender relations. The example of women ex-fighters illustrates how swiftly and profoundly attitudes can alter.

Thus to conclude this section, there is considerable, it might be argued unrealistic, reliance in government instruments and policy documents that change will come about through people's own will and efforts in the communities of Eritrea. This approach depends heavily on individuals' and communities' desire for change, as well as their subsequent willingness and ability both to institute and sustain any such changes. Many of these would have to be fundamental, and to place most responsibility on the people themselves, without putting in place clear policy directives and support on the ground, might be asking too much. It has been argued that in certain specific instances there may be a need for a more directed, pro-active approach from the government. Furthermore, it could be argued that to initiate change at the top, particularly in the context of a population with 80% male, and 90% female, illiteracy, does not go far enough to promote change on the ground. People may need unambiguous and directed assistance, both in terms of practical advice and support and the more intangible area of an enabling environment. To implement change at the top, i.e. at governmental and ministry level, and then to await such changes to trickle down to the broad mass of the population, may be insufficient.

### **The nationalist ethos**

Within Eritrea there is very much a discourse of collective ideology, one in which differences must ultimately be subsumed in order to create 'diversity in harmony' and an entity in which the 'nine nationalities' co-exist on equal terms. In this context it should be borne in mind that there may in fact exist several 'collective ideologies', dependent on the groups involved, and that these may come into play in various permutations both during exile and after repatriation. The opportunities for either preserving or reconstituting a sense of continuity of purpose and common goal may vary enormously between different groups. Continuity *per se* does not only mean stasis and an absence of change, but rather an ability to absorb change and act upon it in a culturally consonant fashion. As this research has shown, returnees perceive, interpret and reify the social construction of post-return life in a variety of ways.

Appadurai has written of the potential for continuous negotiation, if not discord, inherent in the absence of nationally binding sources of identity and cohesion.

'The modern nation-state... grows less out of natural facts – such as language, blood, soil and race – but is a quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination... [N]ations, especially in multi-ethnic settings, are tenuous collective projects, not eternal natural facts' (1993: 414-415).

If a collective imagining and imaging of the nation is to be either re-introduced after a period of disruption and antagonism or in effect created (anew) after the resolution of conflict so deep-rooted that previous unifying memories and myths are no longer tenable, then returnees will play a crucial part in attempts to validate cohesion. To this work they will bring the enormous range of their experiences while in exile, their perceptions of 'home' and what that may imply, and their expectations of post-return resolution.

### **Post-war policy initiatives with implications for gender relations**

For reasons of space only two of the initiatives will be discussed:

#### **1. The Family Law (in succession to the EPLF Marriage Law)**

As has already been mentioned, the EPLF instituted significant reforms on this issue in 1977; these were ratified at its 1987 Congress. The Government of Eritrea has replaced previous Ethiopian marriage laws and its own proclamations with a new Family Law. This subsumes all EPLF initiatives. One major measure is the eradication of early marriage of girls (in some ethnic groups they can be betrothed at birth and married, often to significantly older men, at 10). The new Civil Code states: "Women can enter into marriage freely, and are afforded equal rights ...[to] men" (Article 48); " Marriage is based on the free consent of both partners, and needs no parental consent" (Article 46). Such articles represent significant alteration to both the Ethiopian Civil Code and customary law, on which Eritrean legal instruments have previously been based. For instance, the Ethiopian Civil Code states in Book 2, Article 562 (Betrothal) that: "Representatives of the spouses'/betrotheds' families must be male".

Customary law among most Eritrean ethnic groups in this respect is similarly one-sided: in many communities it is entirely the right and duty of the male members of the immediate family to choose a husband for a female. She will invariably have no say in the choice. In order to safeguard girls against early marriage, the legal minimum age at marriage has been raised to 18 from 15 (although marriage at the younger age is still permissible under certain conditions); husband and wife have the same rights within the family; dowry (among Christian groups) and bridewealth (among Muslim groups) have been prohibited; marriage by kidnapping (*Miziraf*) has been made illegal

There are a number of customary features common to most ethnic groups: for instance, women are expected to be virgins at marriage. In other words, social control of sexuality is defined by female behaviour and proscriptions regarding female sexual activity; men are nowhere so controlled. A woman once married is

considered to come under the control of her husband and his family; there are deep-rooted proscriptions against a wife seeking divorce, and in many situations this option is simply not open to a woman. The new Family Law specifically addresses many of these issues. For instance, whereas Book 2, Chapter 5, Section 2, Article 635 of the Civil Code of Ethiopia states that “ (1) The husband is the head of the family. (2) Unless otherwise expressly provided by this Code the wife owes him obedience in all lawful things which he orders”, the Eritrean Family Law notes that “Marriage is a partnership which gives the husband and wife equal rights as heads of their households” (Article 45). Presumably this or another Article of the Eritrean law covers joint and common property within marriage, so as to counteract Article 656 (1) of the Ethiopian Code: “Common property other than earnings, salary and income of the wife, shall be administered by the husband”.

However, while all the changes described above are entirely laudable, it must be stressed that the strength of tradition and perceived appropriate gender roles, which are anchored in generations of customary behaviour, are likely to render such reforms unacceptable and, therefore, untenable in many situations. One observer also notes: “Ignorance of the law is one of the reasons for the continuing pressure to provide a dowry and [make] arrangements for early marriage, despite the laws which prohibit [these customs].” (Tekle 1996: 13).

## **2. The Proclamation of Land Tenure 58/1994**

This derives from the agrarian and land reforms instituted in the liberated areas during the war by the EPLF. In 1994 all land became the property of the state; usufructory rights are to be granted to all Eritreans, male and female, aged 18 and over. This is a genuinely revolutionary move, in that the traditions of centuries of customary laws of tenure, access and entitlement are abolished.

The Proclamation removes the opportunity of ownership of land by individuals, households or villages. Its potential effect on people’s lives, returnees and others, is extraordinarily complex; certain repercussions may take years to emerge. ‘Under the new system of land tenure... individuals...will be granted a lifetime usufructory right in land, which can be rented but not sold. While the land itself is not inheritable, the new system of land tenure... individuals...will be granted a lifetime usufructory right in land, which can be rented but not sold. In addition, while the land itself is not inheritable, any improvements to it are’ (UNICEF 1994: 123).

Moreover, in the event of the death of the usufructory, his or her children will have a prior claim on the land. It is apparent that such provisions may well give rise to disputed inheritance claims. It may well also be that given the noticeable confusion about returnees’ rights to what most of them still consider is ‘their’ land there will be additional tension on this point.

### **Gender Dimensions of the Land Proclamation**

The central ruling that all land has been nationalised is no longer likely to be widely implemented even in the medium term. The very process of informing people that 'their' land has now become subject to entirely new tenurial systems will take a long time indeed, and may well meet with extremely stiff resistance. So too might the notion that adult women now have equal usufructory rights to men. Customary laws among many ethnic groups in Eritrea do not allow women either to inherit land or to undertake many agricultural tasks (e.g., among the Tigrinya it is common to prevent women from ploughing, for fear that they 'sour' the land). In one Tigrinya highland village, Amhur, the whole community, including its women, refused point blank to accept the Land Proclamation, although the report on this does not discuss whether female resistance to change was entirely independent of male pressure (Tekle 1996).

When land reform with provisions similar to those enshrined in the Eritrean Proclamation was instituted in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, it rapidly became apparent that women continue to suffer disadvantages, especially those in female-headed households (Hendrie 1996). Add to this list the facts that Muslim women in many Eritrean ethnic groups have absolutely no right in customary law to own or use land, and that the provisions of *Sharia* law are known to be frequently flouted or manipulated. It becomes clear that the very idea of greater female entitlement would probably be stoutly resisted; the extreme complexity of the situation becomes evident. Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that there have been no official indications that the Eritrean government has abandoned its overall commitment to land nationalisation.

The clauses in the Land Proclamation that deal with restitution of property also have potential gender dimensions. Many women are simply either not allowed to make representations in public, or would be mortified if called upon to do so. This remains the situation, whatever the provisions of the Constitution and the reshaping of the local government structure to allow women theoretically greater and more equal access to decision-making processes in the villages. In addition, certain ethnic groups do not allow women to play any part in agricultural activities: this is true not only of the Tigre and the Hedariib, whose homeland is in the lowlands and whose livelihoods traditionally revolved around agropastoralism, but also of the Bilen. It remains a point of honour that Bilen women and adolescent girls are not seen to work on the land.

Thus even if a woman were first to claim and second to have land restored, she would have to rely on male labour, either from her own household or hired hands. She herself might very well not be allowed to have dealings with those who worked her land. Clearly such issues become more acute when female claimants are part of female-headed households (FHHs: perhaps 40 % of the entire resident population are members of such households). This point was made by a Tigrinya returnee widow resident in Hagas; while she was confident of eventually having land restored, she was awaiting the return of her brother from the Sudan

before she initiated what she was sure would be a lengthy process. This young woman (in her very early 30s) was literate and self-assured, had worked with her husband in a small business in Kassala, and was well able to present her own case. Yet she felt it both better and in some ways more proper to involve her far younger brother.

Concern was also expressed in Keren, a town experiencing considerable growth. Just one of several examples: a widow was finding it difficult to gain access to information about the procedures to be followed to regain her house. Herself illiterate, unwell and currently without close relatives who could present her case, she was awaiting her daughters so that they might present her case. This woman clearly felt intimidated by the situation and her inability to deal with it on her own. One woman in Asmara, who had spent time in Europe and was more than capable of dealing with legal and procedural matters, spoke of her frustration at the sheer amount of time required to resolve the issue of property ownership. In the meantime she was sharing her compound with an increasingly resentful extended family that had moved in as long ago as 1977.

Discussion with representatives of the national Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), the sole national organisation with a remit to address women's issues, did not reveal any mechanism from its side with regard to information or advice on any aspect of this subject for its membership. This is now estimated at close on 250,000 women the length and breadth of the country.

### **The National Union of Eritrean Women**

The existence of NUEW is one of the most potent signs of the enduring commitment of the EPLF, the PFDJ and the GoE to gender equality. As mentioned above, the EPLF put forward a National Democratic Programme at its First National Congress in 1977; its principles were reiterated at the Second Congress in 1987 and at the Third in 1994 with the National Charter. It was in 1977 that NUEW was first proposed; from the outset it was seen as providing a lead in social transformation, in conjunction with EPLF and subsequently GoE national initiatives and policy mechanisms. Numerous observers, such as Silkin 1983 & 1989 and Wilson 1991, have described the contribution of NUEW during the war. Its particular remit was to conduct mobilisation, politicisation and sensitisation campaigns, and to increase the overall participation of civilian women in the liberation struggle. NUEW organised an estimated 100,000 women in various literacy and other educational projects, health programmes and political awareness campaigns.

In addition it campaigned for increased female participation in education, for the implementation of the EPLF Marriage Law and other measures, and for health initiatives at local level. During the struggle NUEW co-ordinated the activities of local-level women's associations and encouraged the participation of members in wider activities. "Women's mass associations allowed their members political representation from village to national level. Locally based branches provided a



platform on which the concerns of women could be discussed with a view to influencing local policy. In theory, local concerns would, in turn, eventually feed into national-level policy formulation” (Silkin 1983: 912).

In 1991 NUEW became an organisation separate from the EPLF, with formalised freedom of budgeting and programme definition. An important statement was made at the 4<sup>th</sup> NUEW Congress in 1992: its primary objective is to advocate the protection and development of those rights achieved by women during the struggle. As a World Bank report notes: ‘[This is] no small task given the entrenchment of male-centred, patriarchal structures, the resilience of traditional gender rôles and male pre-eminence in the new government. Moreover, the priority given to economic reconstruction and national consolidation may tend to overshadow ‘social issues’ ‘(1996: 11)

### **Women in particular circumstances in Post-war Eritrea**

#### **1. Ex-combatants**

There were some 20,000 female combatants at the end of the war and perhaps 3,000 female militia members. Some 3,000 of this total were disabled and many had children; it is estimated that 80% of all female combatants were of childbearing age when the war ended. About 16,000 women have hitherto been demobilised. Most of those demobilised either at the end of the war or shortly thereafter had schooling only up to Grade 4 of Primary level, and many in this category had been illiterate when they joined the EPLF. It may be that many of those who were rapidly demobilised had joined the EPLF in 1989 and 1990 (the so-called ‘sunrise fighters’): there was apparently a quite significant influx during those years. It is feasible to suggest that many such women did not have the time to derive full benefit from EPLF literacy and training programmes.

The situation for many female ex-combatants is bleak. Only a minority is deemed to have employable skills or professional experience, although estimates vary. “Many are without employment and without employable skills...only 20% [of all female fighters] had skills or professional experience [neither specified]” (von Braunmühl 1996: 27). A World Vision Eritrea report states that: “Only 14% [of female ex-fighters] have readily employable skills” (Hains *et al* 1994). In addition it is claimed by both the above sources that many female ex-combatants do not have a home or a family to whom they can return.

This group of women represents a distinct entity, with its own very special history. Many have been radicalised by their years in the field and have found it difficult to accept post-war life; their gender training while fighters has often had two particular effects. Firstly, the women themselves are frequently reluctant to conform or return to gender perceptions and prescribed appropriate female behaviour; secondly, the wider population is often unwilling to accommodate such views and progressive attitudes.

Many Eritreans seem to have rather exaggerated views as to the purported extreme radicalism of all female ex-combatants: anecdotal evidence reveals that a number of communities have dubbed female (ex) combatants the 'women in trousers', with all that the name implies of both rejection and suspicion. The BANA Newsletter describes how significant numbers of female ex-fighters have experienced problems in the work place.

'Many female ex-fighters are unfairly denied employment opportunities due to a variety of prejudiced reasons based on their military past and gender. They expect their bosses to treat them as equals; they are said to be critical when faced with injustice.' (n.d.: 2).

With reference to the broader socio-cultural environment, a UNICEF report concludes.

'Working women [i.e. ex-combatants] found it impossible to return to old ways of life once the fighting ended. But discriminatory expectations remain strong. While the EPLF women will probably resist any loss of their freedoms and opportunities, success (if it occurs) will not automatically reach all Eritrean women.' (1996: 25)

'It has become clear that many... [female ex-combatants] are experiencing a number of economic and social difficulties in their reintegration...many of the values and habits that they acquired during the struggle seem no longer to be needed, indeed they appear almost to be a handicap.' (Rosso 1996: 40)

Therefore, any idea that female ex-combatants represent a natural constituency as potential gender change agents must be viewed with caution: it is very possible that a number will be marginalised in society. It has also to be realised that although female combatants and ex-combatants have all had a similar and life-changing experience, they do not necessarily form one cohesive group, sharing the same goals and needs. A few such women have achieved very senior positions, such as the past head of NUEW and the Minister of Justice; others are struggling under an extreme burden of poverty. Some will have returned to education or been able to capitalise on the education they received before they went to the field; others will be illiterate. Some will be in stable marriages, while others will be in FHHs; some will live in the rural areas, others in towns. Thus to force all such women into one category is to ignore the realities of their post-war lives.

In addition, while the majority of (ex) combatant women do indeed have wide personal experience of gender equality and opportunity and have unique life histories, it must be the case, despite the optimism voiced above by UNICEF, that many also simply do not want to fight any more, but are eager to resume as 'normal' a life as possible, even if this involves loss of such equality. Others may be very much more willing to pursue such objectives, but may be faced with

extremely difficult situations of antipathy and suspicion. Even those who are most committed to continuing the struggle for lasting gender equality may be daunted by personal circumstances. Anecdotal and fieldwork evidence additionally suggests that many in the general population would be particularly averse to female ex-combatants being either promoted as the vanguard of such change or encouraged in such activities. Their perceived radicalism (often seen as inimical to tradition and age-old custom) might simply provoke a serious counter-reaction and resurgence of gender inequality.

Fieldwork experience (Janet Gruber) in the Foro area in 1995 provided ample evidence of the wider community's reluctance to accept female ex-combatants and the skills they had to offer. An ex-combatant Traditional Birth Attendant who had been taught modern midwifery while in the field described how local Tigre and Afar women were specifically forbidden to visit her or to request home visits, because of male fears that she might introduce subversive and disruptive ideas. As a result this woman with extremely useful training had very little to do; many of her female ex-combatant colleagues in other parts of the country had told her of similar exclusion.

As previously mentioned, there is much anecdotal discussion of the reported very high divorce rate among ex-combatants. One reason that is often given is that once they return to civilian life, many husbands find their wives too modern and demanding; another is that husbands' families exert extreme pressure, preferring their sons to be married to more 'traditional' women. It is interesting that there is no reference in any such discussion to the possibility that some wives may be taking the initiative in divorce; marriage break-up seems to be seen as a male decision. Unfortunately no research has been disseminated on this subject that has significant implications, not only for female ex-combatants but also for the wider female population as a whole in terms of attitudinal change, either in a progressive or regressive direction. von Braunmühl cites a thought-provoking statistic, unfortunately without providing a source: 'The divorce rate of ex-fighters is 60%.' (1996: 27).

## **2. Women doing military service**

All Eritrean women and men under the age of 40 are required to complete 18 months' military training and community service. The first six months are spent at the military camp at Sawa; during the remaining year personnel are allocated to a wide variety of tasks. In 1996 women made up 1,400 conscripts out of a total of 10,740. It appears that married and pregnant women are at least temporarily exempt, as are women with children; this must go a long way towards explaining the statistical gender imbalance. There is little information available on the subject, but it must be assumed that those undergoing military service are exposed to the same type of gender training as experienced during the war by those in the EPLF. In addition, it is presumably the case that tasks and training are allocated irrespective of sex, and that on the whole women and men share the same duties and can expect to gain advancement solely on merit.

Thus in future both women and men who have participated in military service may conceivably serve as change agents: 18 months' concentrated experience may well alter people's attitudes, behaviour and expectations in a fundamental way. It is interesting to note that in this instance, for obvious and understandable reasons, there must surely be a very clear structure of authority and at least an element of imposed training. Such a structural approach can be contrasted with the wider arena, that of civil society, where the position is that people themselves should mainly take the lead in matters pertaining to attitudinal and behavioural change.

### **3. Female-headed Households (FHHs)**

A distinction should be drawn between *de jure* FHHs, where women are either widowed or divorced, and *de facto* FHHs, where the husband, male partner or related adult male(s) is constantly or regularly absent. The key differences between these two categories are that *de facto* FHHs may receive remittances from their husbands or other related males, and may also have closer links with their husbands' wider kin group, including material and financial support. The operative word is may, in that many such FHHs receive nothing or only very intermittent assistance; however, it is true that a large number of such households have separated for the precise reason that husbands (etc) can earn more money elsewhere to support their families. In his 1996 report, Rosso addresses this issue with specific regard to returnee households. He questions whether all reported FHHs are in fact genuinely so: there will always be strategic FHHs, both in exile and after return.

During fieldwork for this paper, women in FHHs frequently described in quite considerable details the constraints that they felt were specific to their position as women without male support. Life is very often seen as a grim and unremitting struggle to keep just one step away from the direst poverty. Many women, both those in FHHs and those in other households, work as day labourers or as fuel wood collectors. Earnings are very low and often unreliable. It is all too often impossible to plan ahead and to think of even the most limited future resource allocation. In Tessenai, a town on the border with the Sudan, a number of women are petty traders, selling *injera* or charcoal and other commodities; some of these are members of the *Hamade* market trader scheme. The latter group focus on their ambitions to save money, to gain even the tiniest degree of security for themselves and, especially, their children.

A number of returnee women respondents considered themselves to be lacking in even the minimum of means to make ends meet for themselves and their children. For many, education of their children was a luxury: the children were needed to contribute to the household income. Because so many women are illiterate or virtually lack any education, they are often to be found in the unskilled formal or informal sector. Large numbers have become domestic servants, while others have turned to commercial sex work in order to survive.

'The University of Leeds [has] found that the average annual cash income per FHH is less than half of what a male-headed household generates. Remittances are almost twice as much as those for the former [category].' (von Braunmühl 1996: 27).

Many FHHs will be unable to call on the protection and/or support of male relatives. Many, if indeed not most, FHHs will need additional support from one source or another in terms of access to child care, health and educational provision, income earning opportunities and, ideally, a degree of income security.

Few FHHs will have any financial fallback if the chief wage earner becomes ill. Such grim facts are undoubtedly true of many households in contemporary Eritrea: where significant numbers of FHHs stand out is in the added amount of vulnerability in a generally desperately fragile situation. While FHHs may not differ markedly in terms of educational level or skills training when compared to the majority of Eritrean women, it is the particular set of circumstances that will often make them especially vulnerable. Returnee FHHs may additionally have to cope with the dislocation brought about by return 'home' after a long period of exile. There was a sense of desperation among some of the women in FHHs who were encountered during fieldwork in the Eritrean lowlands.

Rosso's study for the UNRISD War-Torn Societies Project examines four returnee settlement sites in Gash-Barka, all of which received dedicated assistance from ERRA/ERREC (the past and present Eritrean refugee bodies) and international organisations. FHHs made up 30% of the population in Alebu, closely followed by Fanko (28%).

'This constitutes a serious challenge, both economic and social...the existence of so many women household heads, with limited experience of working outside the house, makes it difficult to reintegrate them as self-supporting community members.' (1996: 32-33).

Rosso also writes that there are real physical and social constraints that render unlikely their full and equal participation in agriculture; he urges the development of alternate Income-Generating Activities. His findings are corroborated by further research undertaken in the lowlands of Eritrea (Gruber: forthcoming). Women in FHHs spoke constantly of facing problems and constraints additional to those experienced by women in male-headed households (MHHs); within the former group those with young children described themselves as especially restricted. While some women stressed the ways in which social networks enable them to work at least some of the time, others seemed very much left to their own resources, however limited these so often were. Capacity to earn money, and to set aside funds to pay for longer-term goals such as education or health care, was often minimal.

During interviews by Janet Gruber, several female heads of household resident in Asmara voiced their regret at having to leave their rural homes; the most common reason given was that they were simply unable to cope with agricultural labour and the burden of providing for themselves and their children. Urban residence seemed to offer greater opportunities for wage labour and for flexibility of employment.

### **Girls' access and entitlement to education**

Research undertaken for the Eritrean Ministry of Education and UNICEF in the southwest lowlands provides graphic and detailed information about socio-cultural norms shaping female educational access and entitlement. The report on this study indicates how entrenched traditional views are with regard to the appropriateness of female education, and the way in which fathers and other male members of a household are the ultimate arbiters of girls' access to schooling (Kane 1996).

'The most dramatic and indeed telling finding in this report occurred as a result of communities being asked to map their households and indicate which of their school-age children were or were not in school. Assuming a near equal birth rate...[more than] a third of school-aged girls are missing from the maps...In many countries, the major obstacles to girls' education are the need for girls' labour at home, costs, and distance from school. While these are important in lowland Eritrea, it is clear that they pale into insignificance when compared to the cultural and religious obstacles identified in this study: fears about the loss of girls' traditional values (respect, obedience, virtue) and thus about their reduced marriageability...a girl's livelihood is marriage. Education may prevent her from marrying – and at best it is irrelevant.'(Kane 1996: 15-16).

The research indicates that if girls are educated, they may one day consider stepping outside their time-hallowed roles as daughters, wives and mothers.

Considerable concerns were evinced during fieldwork for this paper over the potential loss of girls' 'traditional values' (seldom, if ever, defined by them). Such loss could occur through too much contact with boys, through the development of independence and a desire for self-determination, and through threats to girls' safety and sexual purity. In a situation where the great majority of mothers will have received no education, and there is no tradition of female attendance at school, it is often considered either irrelevant and/or dangerous to allow daughters to be educated.

Another significant research finding is that girls themselves have often been socialised to view their own access to education as only a low priority. Thus 50% of girls in one sample site agreed with the statement 'girls do not really need to go to school' (Kane 1996).

### **Women's access and entitlement to health care**

Considerable steps have been taken to ameliorate health service provision in the relatively short time since liberation, but enormous challenges still remain. More than 50% of all Eritreans live more than 20km from a health facility of any description. Real distance becomes even greater when it is considered that those 20km often have to be travelled over mountainous or very rough terrain, potentially a desperate journey for a sick person. Even once a health station, centre or hospital is reached, the necessary expertise or equipment may not be available, necessitating a further trip. For instance, in 1996 there were 6 functioning X-ray machines in the entire country and 7 complete operating theatres. Referral can often be difficult and a lengthy procedure. Not only are more than half of all Eritrea's doctors to be found in Asmara, so too are that proportion of hospital beds. This means that 20% of the population is relatively well served.

It was perhaps with regard to women's access and entitlement to health care that differences based on ethnicity came most to the fore. While a number of traditional Muslim Tigre were willing to consider the prospect of female participation in education, at least so far as to allow girls to become literate, there were indications of resistance to the idea of women and girls being seen and treated by health professionals. The view was expressed several times by men that customary practices, such as the use of Traditional Birth Attendants, had sufficed for generations; why should they suddenly become untenable? Women tended to be rather more amenable to the provision of a wide range of health services, while not necessarily rejecting the continued involvement of traditional health practitioners. However, it would be wrong to suggest that views were also and so neatly split according to sex. Thus some few men were much in favour of equal access, while older women were often vehemently opposed to any changes to customary behaviour. There are indications from the Sudan that it is often grandmothers who are most fervent adherents to the continuation of FGM, while younger women and many men would like to see an end to this practice. Anecdotal evidence from Eritrea suggests patterns similarly sometimes predicated more on generational than on gender lines (see also the EDHS 1995)

This is a complex subject, where all manner of issues come into play. For instance, attitudes towards the continuation or abolition of certain customary practices to do with the physical expression of gender perceptions (known to health professionals as 'traditional harmful practices') are extraordinarily varied and dependent on a sometimes bewilderingly wide range of criteria. The road towards acceptance of modern biomedical health care will be lengthy; the Eritrean Ministry of Health and the government appear conscious of the need not to discard appropriate and beneficial traditional health practices, with which many returnees and others are comfortable. At present the main challenge is to develop the actual physical aspects of health care provision; education and gender-sensitive initiatives must be concurrent.

### **Conclusions: the 'backlash' against gender equality**

Eritrea is in the process of creating itself as a nation. One element of that development, in terms of both policy and practice, is the promotion, implementation and sustainable development of gender equity and equality. Therefore, it is necessary to review and to understand the wider population's perceptions of gender rôles and relations. These perceptions are obviously neither standard nor static, nor any developments unilinear. On the one hand, there is increasing evidence of a return by some people to a more traditional approach to gender issues. As has been the case in other countries after prolonged warfare that led to changes in behaviour and expectations, ex-fighter women represent the most distinct and discrete group subject to this 'backlash'. Namibia and Zimbabwe provide examples from elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa. On the other, there is a minority of women and men who have been radicalised by experience so as to desire different, more equitable gender relations.

Traditional beliefs and patriarchal structures profoundly militate against gender equality. The majority of girls in all Eritrean ethnic groups are socialised from earliest childhood to be submissive, meek and to see their future in terms of marriage and motherhood. They are also imbued with the perception that obedience, firstly to their fathers and male kin, and latterly to their husbands, is integral to appropriate female behaviour.

One potential danger of allowing change in gender relations to evolve 'naturally', as is the government's stated intention, is that this process may result in the all too lengthy survival of the gender gap. The significant developments seen during the years of struggle may otherwise be dissipated or even lost. There are already indications that this is occurring, e.g. in the reported resurgence in instances of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and negative attitudes towards female (ex) combatants (Gruber (forthcoming); Hains, Ijumba & Nicholls 1994; Tادria 1997; Tekle 1996; UNICEF 1995 & 1996).

The attitudes and behaviour of men need to be specifically addressed in this context. These are bound to vary. For men as for women, social, religious and customary pressures may overcome personal wishes with regard to behaviour. One instance of this can be seen in anecdotal remarks from many ex-combatants, male and female. A number of men state that the pressure from family to conform, to find a more 'malleable' and 'traditional' wife, can be profound and ultimately inescapable.

Another group whose attitudes and behaviour can be seen to have undergone occasional alteration is that of returnees from the Sudan. Discussions with women and men in the towns of Hagas and Keren, and in the capital Asmara, indicate how return has sometimes ushered in, or re-introduced, more restrictive practices: respondents' views vary on the acceptability of such changes. This finding adds to the growing body of research on various aspects of gender relations in post-war Eritrea that has highlighted the partial resurgence of



traditional attitudes and behaviour. Thus studies such as that on girls' access to education in the lowlands by Kane (1996), the reports by Tadmira (1997), Tekle (1996), and the UNICEF studies (1994, 1995 & 1996) all to varying extents call attention to the 'backlash'.

There are indications of some small shifts towards greater genuine equality in gender relations. Nonetheless, while the positive experiences of what appears to be a small minority of ex-combatants, and of those resident in the wartime liberated areas, and among some returnees, will doubtless have some influence, there is little suggestion as yet of a genuine revolution or even a more modest shift. The determined stance of the Eritrean government may be influential, although the response may well in certain instances be entrenchment rather than alteration. Another longer-term influence will be the large numbers of FHHs: they will have no choice but to develop new gender relations with the wider society. So too will ex-fighter women, whose perceived radicalism, and the attitudes of those around them, does rather give the lie to any hope of speedy improvement towards greater equity and equality.

A considerable amount of research now exists on the position of women in post-conflict Eritrea. None of those studies has uncovered evidence or indications of noteworthy changes in gender relations and rôles. Findings are more complex and less entirely and uniformly positive. Eritrea is undergoing profound and difficult change: people's reactions will be many and various. The strength of customary attitudes and behaviour cannot be minimised; neither indeed can the potentially path-breaking influence of war, exile and dislocation.

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