

## **The State of Eritrea's Women's Association Revisited: An Analysis of its Past and Present Roles, and Future Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

This research analyzes the role of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in pre and post-independent Eritrea by focusing on national and international discourses on Eritrean women (ex)fighters. The NUEW was established in 1979 under the auspices of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), then fighting for Eritrea's liberation. Until Eritrea's *de facto* independence in 1991 it was regarded as one of the most effective women's movements in the African continent. In the aftermath of Eritrea's independence, however, national and international narratives on the emancipation of Eritrean women—particularly women (ex)fighters and their post-independence status—took divergent paths. This research, then, examines the contentious contemporary discourses on Eritrean women by revisiting the formation, strategies and objectives of the NUEW. Moreover, it scrutinizes the methodology and the data used to bring about the current image of Eritrean women in the international arena.

### **Introduction**

Feminism has no unique research method as its scholars admit it. It draws from a variety of methods: ethnography, statistical and survey research, cross-cultural research, philosophical argument, discourse analysis, and case study (Tickner 2005: 3). It suffers not only from lack of unique research method but from failure to come up with clear definitions as well. There are neither accepted definitions nor sound foundations to it on which to construct a theory or engage in meaningful praxis. This lack of clarity lends it to easy contentions and appropriations. As Hooks (1987: 72) argues, it becomes troubling when it [feminism] is associated with lifestyle choices rather than political commitments; and when the vast majority of women who equate it with these choices come from middle-class backgrounds, unmarried, college educated, often students without many of the social and economic responsibilities that working-class and poor women who are laborers, parents, homemakers, and wives confront daily. In

the midst of this cloud, and to distinguish herself from some “western women” who think they can trailblaze the emancipation of women in the “Third World,”<sup>1</sup> the researcher clarifies her stance as an “advocate of feminism,” borrowing Hooks term (1987: 73). More specifically, she reiterates the need for inclusion of the particular lived experiences of women from the “Third World” using Robertson’s expression the “universalization of particularism” (as quoted in Karam 2000: 196) as opposed to proposing universally applicable strategies of emancipation. Mohanty (1991: 55f) elaborates on the pitfalls and problems associated with the universal application of certain notions without due consideration to local cultures. She queries, and calls for others to do so, when “the notion of gender or sexual difference is being applied universally and cross-culturally. And the methodological approach used in providing such validity is an assumed homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group, which in turn produces the image of an “average Third World woman” who leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etcetera). It’s very likely that many would agree with Mohanty’s argument due to the fact that “Third World women” have not been given due consideration from their lived experiences and their socio-cultural contexts. More often, the analyses of “Third World women’s” movements focus on what Mohanty calls “victims image,” which overshadows the agency that they have in real life. What the researcher aims to do here is engage in discourse analysis and case study by revisiting the formation, strategies and objectives of the NUEW; and heeding Mohanty’s call for contextual analysis, investigate the methodology and facts used to bring about the current image of Eritrean women.

### **The Formation of the NUEW**

The NUEW is a women’s movement in the small Horn of Africa nation-state, Eritrea. This nation-state demonstrates a remarkable history that goes back to centuries of foreign domination and wars against foreign invaders (Zerai 1994: 63). However, it is legendarily known for its modern history where it had confronted a former neighboring colonizer, Ethiopia, initially supported by the United States and later by former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> In the three decades of independence war (1961-1991), fought against Ethiopia, commonly referred to in

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<sup>1</sup> In using the term “Third World” and “Third World women” The researcher is aware of the problems associated with their usage. Both terms are put in quotation marks to demonstrate that their usage here implies neither a single unit of analysis nor a homogenous notion that can be invoked across time and space to analyze the diverse nature and activities of “Third World women.” But rather to indicate that the case study analyzed here falls within the category of “Third World women’s” movements.

<sup>2</sup> Eritrea as a country took its current shape as an Italian colony on January 1, 1890. In 1941, the British as part of their World War II fighting duties managed to kick the Italians out of Eritrea, and continued to administer it under a United Nations (UN) mandate until 1951. One year before the UN mandated British rule terminated, the UN adopted Resolution 390(V) which stipulated for the federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. According to this arrangement, the federation was supposed to last ten years after which the Eritrean

Eritrea's modern history as the Eritrean Revolution, Eritrean women had participated actively making up almost a third of the 95,000 strong Eritrean People's Liberation Front's army (EPLF) and constituting up to 13% of the frontline fighters (Connell 1998: 189). In addition, they underwent intense personal changes with regards to their outlook on social and political issues; and established their own movement. One of Eritrea's pioneer women ex-fighters,<sup>3</sup> who joined the EPLF<sup>4</sup> in 1973 together with hundreds of new members and three other women (Wilson 1991: 96), stated the EPLF considered women's emancipation as an integral part of a bigger mission. The bigger mission alluded to here is the emancipation of the entire society. Since the overarching agenda—emancipation of the whole society—necessitated everyone's contribution in what the pioneer calls the national democratic revolution, which the researcher refers to as the Eritrean Revolution, women's full involvement in that very struggle was considered a duty. It was an obligation that they had to contribute for the independence of their nation-state, just like their male comrades-in-arms, but not primarily for their equality and emancipation. Nevertheless, for that full involvement to be realized, the EPLF decided in favor of creating a women's organization through which women could actively partake in the national struggle, and have agency in the overall social transformation process (Zerai 1994: 65). Indeed, the EPLF, an "independent Marxist-oriented guerrilla movement" (Hale 2001: 156), "a professionally run and self-reliant nationalist movement, with formalized and centralized leadership" (Woldemikeal 1991: 31) proved capable in mobilizing and eventually setting women on the road to emancipation. Different studies indicate that Marxist orientation is not a sufficient precondition for the genuine emancipation of women. Barrett (1987: 44ff) argues that on the question of feminism—whose central conceptions are embedded in terms of morality, justice or equal rights—even Marx, one of the greatest revolutionary thinkers of the modern history, has failed to expand his vision and analysis to women's issues. Marxism's historical materialism and its scientific account of exploitation have yet to reconcile with feminism's ethical or egalitarian political claims, not so easy to document scientifically. This is reminiscent of the current debates on methodological misunderstandings between International Relations Feminists and International Relations theorists in social scientific work (Tickner 2005: 1-21). Despite its Marxist orientation then the EPLF drew a strategy for women's mobilization based on consciousness-raising. The fact that the EPLF used consciousness raising, which as a strategy falls within the techniques used to address strategic gender needs and interests (Moser 1991: 160) is instructive. The EPLF might have understood women's subordination to men, and by extension their overall disadvantaged position within the conservative socio-

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people would be allowed to choose their destiny. However, Ethiopia did not live up to what was expected of it and annexed Eritrea in 1961, sparking three decades of bloody wars.

<sup>3</sup>The pioneer woman ex-fighter is Worku Zerai, who had produced a first hand account of how women were organized within the EPLF quoted above.

<sup>4</sup>In early 1993 the EPLF was reincarnated as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) but for convenience purposes the EPLF rather than the PFDJ will be used throughout this research.

cultural and political environment, or might have followed the technique as gesture to attract more women to its rank and file. Either way, in this awareness raising program the first targets were EPLF's own armed fighters. Out of whom were later formed armed propaganda units—that included both men and women—taking the role of itinerants in educating the general public about the war and women's issues in the nation-state. However, Eritrea's conservative society wasn't easily accommodating the EPLF's initiatives regarding women's issues. This can be understood more accurately seen in retrospect to the status and role accorded to women in traditional Eritrea. Eritrean society composed of nine different ethnic "nationalities"<sup>5</sup> is half Christian and half Moslem.<sup>6</sup> Likewise religion, Eritrea's socio-economic system is divided between sedentary agriculture and semi-nomadic pastoralism. For so long, the religious values and practices sanctioned by Christianity and Islam and the dual systems of production dictated the status and the roles that women could take up in traditional Eritrea. Generally speaking, Eritreans—Moslems or Christians—agree on the family structure. And that "family is a crucial unit of learning and cultural activities in addition to being hierarchal, patrilineal, authoritarian and strict in sexual and generational division of labor," argues Stefanos (1997: 659). This type of family structure privileged men over women in Eritrea, as in other parts of the world. Seen against such a backdrop, the EPLF's systematic approach which began with consciousness-raising was a shrewd strategy. It helped the front to steadily maneuver against backlashes from conservative circles that weren't used to treat women equally. The awareness campaigns and processes of setting up cells continued both in the rural and urban areas, although through different techniques. In the cities, which were under Ethiopian occupation, the process was done secretly around people's work areas once reliable people were identified, whereas in the countryside, faraway from Ethiopia's control, the EPLF's itinerants had less to worry about becoming targets of Ethiopian soldiers. Outside Eritrea, Eritrean immigrant workers in Middle East, Europe and North America were also organized in women's associations through similar methods used inside Eritrea (Zerai 1994: 65ff). The awareness campaigns led to the formation of cells inside and outside the nation-state, which finally evolved into mass organizations and national unions (Wilson 1991: 49). In November 1979, this process culminated in the first congress of women representatives under the slogan "emancipation through equal participation in the struggle" and "a revolution cannot triumph without the conscious participation of women." And in that congress the NUEW was formed. Upon its formation, the NUEW became responsible for the political representation of women on the national and regional levels (Wilson: 49 and 183). On the eve of Eritrea's independence it claimed to have a membership of 100,000 women from across different sections of the Eritrean society (Zerai 1994: 66), and currently has 200,000 signed-up members (NUEW: n.d.).

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<sup>5</sup> These nine "nationalities" namely Tigrinya, Tigre, Hidareb, Kunama, Nara, Bilen, Saho, Afar and Rashiada, have their own traditional cultures and languages.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to these two religions, some followers of African Traditional Religions within some "nationalities" such as the Kunama do exist.

### **Organizational Structure and Objectives of the NUEW**

The NUEW was established in a way that is supposed to be accessible for every member to participate in its activities. In reality, however, information flows from top-down, relegating the notion of bottom-up exchange of ideas impractical. Some of the reasons for this can be found in the nature of the Eritrean society and the EPLF as Zerai (1994: 66) explains "the poor democratic culture of women, [where] they have only to do what the elders and males in the family think is right," and "[women's] fear, blind obedience to authority and as the EPLF is an armed body, women don't feel at ease airing their needs." Although Zerai's arguments are plausible, this kind of information flow might have been a result of the organizational structure of the union more than simply lack of a democratic culture. The NUEW's highest authority, the national congress, elects its central committee that in turn elects the president and the executive committee of the union. The executive committee also appoints members of [NUEW's] administration for the provinces, with at least one person being a member of the central committee. Although it appears to have its own organizational structure, the NUEW was founded under the auspices of the EPLF in 1979, which means it was not an autonomous women's organization from the outset. It was purposely accommodated under the direct control of the EPLF's department of public administration until 1987 and afterwards came under the President's [of the country's] direct control (Zerai 1994: 67) and remained so until Eritrea's *de facto* independence. In September 1992 it held its fourth congress, and was re-launched as a semi-autonomous movement (Connell 1998: 192) or "autonomous but nominal" because its president is a member of the parliament and the EPLF, and is more accountable to the parliament and the EPLF (Zerai: 67) than to its members or constituencies. What is important to underscore here is the subordinate nature of the union. Undeniably, it was setup against the backdrop of a conservative culture with the help and full backing of the EPLF. Thus, its subordination might have been a necessity rather than a choice. However, the fact that NUEW didn't, and doesn't, have its own separate programs or policies that it wants to implement with regards to women is an issue of concern. Indeed, it has been the only women's organization championing on improving the status of women and their interests in the wider society. However, it implements all of EPLF's policies on women because either "it has adopted these policies as they are" (Zerai 1994: 67) or "the EPLF continued to exert strong behind-the-scenes influence, if not day-to-day control, over both the program and the composition of the NUEW's leadership (Connell 1998: 192). What is relevant here to reiterate is the EPLF's strategy on women's emancipation. The researcher already mentioned that the EPLF sought to emancipate women as part of its general mission for the entire society. In pre-independent Eritrea, the primary goal of the NUEW was to mobilize women to participate in the Eritrean Revolution, and in post-independent Eritrea its objective is to mobilize women in the national reconstruction and struggle for the emancipation of women (Zerai 1994: 66). Emancipation of women was, and is, not given priority over other more or equally pressing national issues, although it should be remembered that the EPLF and the

NUEW have been working jointly in advocating for women's equality. In a recent article posted on its website, the NUEW announced what appears a strategy for its future plans, but in essence very similar to its past approach on women's issues. Praising the courage and heroism of Eritrean women fighters in the Eritrean Revolution, which resulted in Eritrea's existence as a sovereign nation, the article reads "Eritreans have a unique and proud political experience and history as regards to women's rights. However, this experience should not be limited to being only a shining moment in our history. His Excellency President Isaias had in one occasion reminded that in Eritrea, women's participation in the development drive and in the economic, political and cultural sectors goes beyond the issue of equal rights. It is by all measurements an issue of national welfare" (NUEW: n.d.). This statement gracious as it's it lacks clarity. The crux of the message lies, nevertheless, in its implication that the NUEW will continue to implement policies devised by the government and even if it does implement its own, it will make sure that these policies don't fall outside the overarching government programs for women.

Whether relegated to secondary position, or given equal weight with other national policies, few people will disagree with the fact that emancipation of women will continue to be an issue in Eritrean politics. Before Eritrea's independence, it was clearly relegated to secondary position. But still the EPLF did intervene on behalf of women by helping the NUEW to spearhead a number of substantial reforms, which would have been unlikely to pass without the EPLF's recognition of the role of women in the society and in particular the stamina and resilience they have demonstrated in being active members of the Eritrean Revolution. For the sake of brevity the three major reforms—landownership, marriage laws and education—that the EPLF enacted will be addressed.

**The question of landownership:** traditional land tenure system in Eritrea didn't allow women to own land. As a result of that their contribution in the production sector went unrewarded. Wilson states this fact by quoting a former liberation fighter on her mother's essential contribution to the maintenance of the household and the economy:

"My mother would get up early before anyone else. She would do all the housework, the cleaning and the cooking which takes hours, and the fetching of water from a long distance. And then she would work in the fields [owned by her husband] doing jobs which are not considered heavy but are very tiring like weeding, cleaning, cutting and so on. When my father came back from the fields she would wash his feet in a bowl of warm water. She would be the last to go to bed...There is a proverb which says that asking a woman to rest

is like making a donkey your guest" (Wilson 1991: 6).<sup>7</sup>

The above citation clearly elaborates the economic powerlessness of Eritrean women and also the burden they endure in balancing the triple roles—reproduction, production and household management—without due recognition or rewards. To help women to come out of that the EPLF passed a progressive land reform. Its core elements include:

- In case of divorce, land is allocated equally between parties. And a woman who comes back to her village upon divorce may choose to have land either in her town or in her husband's town. Widows and children receive full rights to land allocations,
- A spinster past the age of marriage, and a woman above the age of 25 and unfit for marriage for different reasons, receives half of the family's plot (Zerai 1994: 67).

One can argue that these reforms were enacted with a genuine interest to empower women and transform the prevailing unfair gender relationships. Although the EPLF seemed to have well recognized that traditional Eritrean women have been carrying the burdens of balancing simultaneously the triple roles, such dramatic change in land allocation didn't go easily down the throats of some men. Connell (1998: 191) mentions in 1992 a clandestine postwar men's mobilization aimed at blocking women from gaining land was discovered. The incident led to women protesting and marching to the President's office asking for intervention. Although several of the men behind the secret movement were jailed, the incident thought Eritrean women that they have to continue fighting against backward cultural practices and some sections of their society who are not willing to accommodate the reforms enacted by the EPLF.

**New marriage laws:** the EPLF also banned feudal marriage customs, such as child betrothal, polygamy, concubine, which were based on the supremacy of men over women, arbitrary and coercive procedures that didn't take into account the welfare of children (Zerai 1994: 67 & Wilson 1991: 195). Seen in retrospect to the traditional marriage practices that sanctioned early marriage for girls aged as young as ten to twelve years (Stefanos 1997: 660) this new marriage laws were a huge step forward.

**Education:** the basic education that women would have acquired in traditional Eritrea was accessible within the religious frameworks of either Christianity or Islam. As women, however, weren't expected to play any roles within the religious realms and were excluded from non-religious worldly affairs, there was no need to allow them to be educated (Stefanos 1997: 660ff). In addition, parents themselves viewed girl's education as unnecessary venture because they

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<sup>7</sup>Eritrea is full of prejudices against women as subsequent proverbs reveal. For instance, "Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with a brain." "Women and donkeys need the stick" or "You must hit an ox at every turn and beat your wife every three days."

believed that a girl's goal should be to prepare and succeed in getting married, and not acquire education. This view didn't change much even with the advent of colonialism. For instance, during the Italian era, education wasn't only exclusionary but also racist in its essence. Moreover, there was little effort made in the provision of education and other developmental skills for women in Eritrea. Women were allowed to attend classes only after 1934, and the content of that education was geared towards reinforcing the sexual division of labor that traditionally prevailed in the nation-state, such as, sewing clothes and domestic science (Zerai 1994: 65). Italian colonizers did not have to bother about establishing equally accessible educational opportunities for both men and women, but rather institutionalize a separate program for women, which incorporated Victorian strictures (Berkman 1990: 143),<sup>8</sup> of acceptable sex roles and capitalism's division of labor. All this meant underpinning an already traditional and conservative environment with racist and subjugating colonial norms, which further constrained the status and role that women could play. Although some women did enter industrial sectors such as textiles, matches and coffee factories with a lower payment rates than men (Stefanos 1997: 664), which is the norm of the capitalist order, their status did not change much. Seen against this backdrop, it shouldn't be surprising that the majority of Eritrean women even in the colonial era did not have basic education. Figures from the 1970s indicate that 95% of Eritrean women remained illiterate (Zerai 1994: 65). The EPLF, as indicated above, in the 1970s was working to encourage the full and active participation of women in the Eritrean Revolution. Different techniques including awareness raising campaigns were employed to educate its members and the public at large on the need to transform the feudal and backward practices that constrained women from being fully involved in public life. The establishment of the EPLF's Revolutionary School in 1980 in its base area was a major development in combating male chauvinism and sexual stereotyping. In the School, boys and girls were equally engaged in academics, construction work, and other household tasks—traditionally reserved for girls and women. The new setting created an emancipatory environment for girls. According to 1987 EPLF report, 40% of its Revolution School students were females (Stefanos 1997: 666). Although this report didn't include Eritrean territories under Ethiopian occupation, it was a huge development in a nation-state where women faced considerable difficulties in having access to education. 2003-2004 figures indicate the Eritrea's Gross National Accessibility to schooling as 5.1 percent, 56.6 percent, 43.4 percent and 27.2 percent in pre-primary, elementary, middle and secondary education respectively (Rena 2007). In the early 1990s, the government of Eritrea in order to guarantee the continues participation of women in the national affairs reserved 20 percent of elected offices in the country for women, in addition to giving them green light to contest against men in the remaining 80 percent (Zerai 1994: 67). Soon after, 30 percent of the national and regional assembly seats are reserved for women, while they can also

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<sup>8</sup>Victorian morality focuses primarily on the emphasis of women's reproductive power at the expense of physical and intellectual prowess, and restricting women to home, away

compete against men in the remaining 70 percent (NUEW: n.d.). In addition, the Eritrean political landscape includes four women ministers, which is quite a progress.

### **Contemporary Discourses on Eritrean Women and the NUEW**

The formation, organizational structure and objectives of the NUEW have already been analyzed contextually. However, the major issue that the researcher wants to address, the subordinate nature of NUEW, can be further investigated.

“We say they are not our issues (issues such as domestic violence) at the moment. It does not mean that we do not believe in them but that it is not our priority when Ethiopian soldiers are disemboweling Eritrean Women” (Wilson 1991: 88f).<sup>9</sup>

This was Menkerios's perspective. Menkerios's name invokes gender equality and its challenges in Eritrea. Having headed the NUEW before Eritrea's independence until the second half of 1990s, she was at the forefront of championing for women's rights. She put forward her point of view at a critical juncture in time when Eritreans were battling Ethiopian forces. Then the NUEW couldn't prioritize fighting against domestic violence over fighting for national independence. Zerai (1994: 66) had similar views on this and states “emancipation of women was given secondary importance before Eritrea's independence because the question of survival was at stake.” Despite accepting the relegation of emancipation of women to a secondary position before Eritrea's independence, Zerai seems to query it afterwards but only to find a plausible answer herself “if women continue to put all their efforts in the struggle for the reconstruction of their country, they will not get time to invest in the struggle that concerns them. But on the other hand, can women's lives be improved if the institutions that are supposed to serve their need, the economy, and health etc...aren't rehabilitated? Is it possible to claim that women's issues should be given importance when more than 75 percent of the people depend on food aid and where women make the majority of the poor (Zerai 1994: 66)?” These were ,and are, not easy questions to answer because they incorporate complex issues of nation-building. These complexities are far deeper than one can imagine, especially in societies like that of Eritrea, where socio-cultural aspects continue to put limits on what women can achieve. As Zerai (1994: 63) explains:

“There are many contradictions in the Third World countries, between the people and the colonizers, between the different liberation movements that led the national liberation front, between

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from the hurly-burly of the market place, no less the battlefield, and their delicacy.

<sup>9</sup>This perspective was expressed in response to issues of domestic violence by Askalu Menkerios, former Chairwoman of the NUEW and former Minister of Labor and Human Welfare, and current Minister of Tourism of Eritrea.

the different classes in society etc...Hence national liberation does not mean that all contradictions are going to be solved at one go."

What this means is that Eritrean women must continue to deal with their post-independence contradictions, which includes intricate socio-cultural issues, while fighting for their economic and political rights. While the above perspectives seem to be sympathetic to the national narrative, more contentious analyses about the NUEW and Eritrean women were produced by Bernal and Hale. According to (Bernal 2001: 136):

"The Front (the EPLF) revolutionized the social position of women by making women over in men's image and by virtually eliminating the family as a social institution within its ranks. In some sense, domestic social patterns were not so much reorganized as suppressed by (the) EPLF. (The) EPLF included women by treating them like men and there was thus little need to reorganize anything for their inclusion. Seen from this perspective, it is easy to understand why the gains women made in the field were not easily translated into daily life once Eritrean independence was achieved."

Bernal argues this in search of an answer to a question she raised at the beginning of her article: why the advances made towards gender equality within the EPLF before Eritrean independence were so difficult to maintain once the EPLF achieved victory and control of the state (Bernal 2001: 130)? What is notable here is not the issue of whether women have made gains in independent Eritrea, but the simplistic and backward reading of history in which Bernal has gotten engaged in. Bernal, writing ten years after Eritrea's *de facto* independence, argues the gains of women in the field were not easily translated into daily life in post-independent Eritrea. The reasons, as can be understood from the above citation, are because the EPLF revolutionized women by making them over men's image and by virtually illuminating the family as social institution. These arguments have more fallacies than facts. In the first place, the EPLF's priority wasn't to fight for women's equality, although for its credit it had done so, but rather to get rid of Ethiopia's colonial rule from Eritrea's landscape once and for all. The issue of making women over men's image wasn't a matter of choice but a necessity that served well in its era. The EPLF and Eritrean women liberation fighters didn't have the luxury of dressing in modern style clothes because the circumstances and what they had to deal with didn't allow them anything more than living on basic necessities. What Bernal is alluding here is "the image of a khaki-clad woman warrior brandishing a rifle" (Bernal 2001: 130). This notion of "combative motherhood," a term commonly used to describe women of modern revolutions who hold a rifle on one arm, and a baby on the other, to show that if they are to care for their children, their country's "liberation" must come first (Berkman 1987: 142), is not a timeless concept. Of course, Eritrean women fighters are real archetypes of "combative motherhood," and they knew that they have issues of equality and emancipation to deal with, once independence is

achieved. As Menkerious said it rightly they couldn't deal with issues of domestic violence while Ethiopian soldiers were disemboweling Eritrean women. The other aspect Bernal mentions in explaining why Eritrean women have failed to cash-in from their liberation era achievements is the EPLF's elimination of the family as a social institution. This is but a self-defeating argument. Contrary to what she claims, family as a social institution has not been eliminated in Eritrea. Had it been the case, female ex-fighters would not have succumbed to familial values once independence was won. Bernal, rather than supporting her argument with empirical evidence that demonstrates the elimination of the family as a social institution, contradicts herself by stating that "women ex-fighters have painfully been caught between the revolutionary aspirations they learned in the Front (inside the EPLF) and the more conventional values and gendered expectations asserted by Eritreans in the civilian context" (Bernal 2001: 137). This logic begs the question: don't the conventional values and gendered expectations constitute familial principles, and if the family as a social institution, as she claims, has been eliminated how was it possible to have it reincarnated so quickly in independent Eritrea? To demonstrate what she calls reversals, Bernal brings issues of widespread divorce rates in 1995-1996 in Asmara and argues that there were familial pressures from sisters and mothers towards men fighters to divorce their fighter wives in favor of civil brides (Bernal 2001: 137). Plausible or not, the familial pressures she mentioned should have allowed her to shift some of the blame away from the EPLF and analyze Eritrea's post-independence reality contextually. Socio-cultural issues were, and are, largely still at play. A government can draft and promulgate a law but cannot pressure men not to divorce their wives. In addition, to socio-cultural obstacles, some of the women she interviewed had to deal with lack of resources, skills, and jobs. Indeed, some women ex-fighters were not even in a position to earn Nacfa 500 per month (less than \$30 dollars) doing some pet jobs like public parking caretakers and office clerks or secretaries (Rena 2007). These issues are not easy to tackle even for countries that have gained their independence fifty years ago, let alone for mid 1990s Eritrea, who was just few years through her independence, and had to deal with a devastated economy. In 1993, Eritrea had a per capita income of less than US\$ 150 compared to US\$ 330 for Sub-Saharan Africa. Most Eritreans lived at below subsistence levels, and there was no wealthy class of Eritreans left in the country from whom to pull resources for a program of redistribution (Connell 1998: 190f). Bernal lacked not only a clear methodology but also produced spurious arguments at best. Had she looked at Eritrean socio-cultural and economic context, and the lived reality of the nation-state, she would have come to a different conclusion. The EPLF and the NUEW might have done their fair share of mistakes, but to blame them for post-independence realities based on a flawed methodology is not appropriate.

Hale (2001: 158), in a similar tone to that of Bernal, claims the EPLF could have done better with regards to promoting gender norms in post-independent Eritrea, but gives it credit for certain issues:

“Despite EPLF’s enlightened gender ideology, the ruling party’s lack of attention to the constraining processes that Eritrean women were encountering in post-liberation family life amounted to the relinquishing of some of the gains that EPLF women had experienced in the field; others have had to be fought for again. The new gender norms invented in the field were both minor and cosmetic, such as dress and hairstyles and freer social relations with men, and highly significant including the lack of social pressure toward marriage and childbearing, the collapse of the conventional gender division of labor, the recognition of the need for women to share political power, and the projection of the rights to land ownership for women after liberation.”

Hale has as well involved herself in backward reading of history, which is again methodologically questionable. She used the post-independence situation of women ex-fighters in analyzing whether what they had achieved in the field will continue to hold for them and the society at large. She mentions six general observations about the situation of women in Eritrea and their participation in the national struggle—ranging from the conservative nature of the Eritrean society to the active participation of women in the national liberation struggle and the high degree of emancipation they had acquired in that context (Hale 2001: 155f)—and uses these observations to make recommendations on the current situation of women in Eritrea. The conclusion she reaches, among others, is that NUEW needs to change its strategy from literacy campaigns and development mentality, and should strive for political equity in high-ranking decision-making positions (Hale 2001: 172). Although the NUEW might need to reassess its strategy, literacy campaign and development mentality are not necessarily bad approaches in a nation-state where women have to struggle to achieve educational parity. Education is an important asset and the NUEW’s literacy campaigns should be seen within that context. In the contemporary world, it is not even easy for women with substantial educational background and exposure to contest for high-ranking decision-making positions, let alone with basic education. One can’t help but wonder how the NUEW can strive for equity in high-ranking decision-making positions, without literacy campaigns if huge numbers of Eritrean women have yet to be educated.

### **The NUEW’s Future Challenges**

Critics of the NUEW argue that the union needs to overhaul itself if it is going to maintain its viability. Hale states the NUEW’s staff complain about being overloaded, and having to deal with issues that belong to the common good, but still there is no discussion either from the government side or from the union about clarifying what belongs to the “common good,” “national interests,” and “gender interest” (Hale 2001: 169). Connell, quoting former NUEW members and outside evaluators, makes similar statements. The NUEW is spread all over the place and covers too many constituents. It doesn’t have clear mandate on what it

should exactly focus, which lead to its ineffectiveness. This is so because the government asked it to take responsibility in programs, such as adult literacy, job training, income generation and health care provision that it should have run itself, and let the union focus on experimentation, mobilization and advocacy (Connell 1998: 193). In addition, the NUEW is criticized for wanting to dominate the Eritrean political arena vis-à-vis women's issues and its intolerance to other rival organizations. For instance, the Eritrean Women War Veterans Association (BANA) established in 1995 and shutdown in 1996 (Connell 1998: 193), was a good case in point. These criticisms—constrictive or otherwise—should be taken seriously. Having clear mandate and focusing on areas where one can effectively deliver are important strategies for success. Given its willingness to implement the government's policies on women, as indicated above, and not being interested in devising its own, and the NUEW is very likely to work hand-in-gloves with the government for the foreseeable future. This is not necessarily evil because asserting its independence from the government might as well be not a preferable strategy at the moment. Eritrean society still harbors backward socio-cultural outlook on the status and role that women can play in the public sphere. The NUEW seems to have well understood the challenges that it might have to deal with if it asserts its independence from the government. However, it should also critically assess its current situation. Whatever reforms it might come up with, it must make sure that it doesn't do it from an oppositional stance. In addition, it should also make sure that these reforms take into consideration the lived history and aspirations of Eritrean women.

### **Conclusion**

This article analyzed the discourses surrounding the NUEW and Eritrean women, and queried the backward reading of history and some detached arguments Bernal and Hale resorted to in explaining what they refer to as post-independence reversals in the lives of Eritrean (ex)fighters. Indeed, there might have been reversals because Eritrean women (ex)fighters, who formed only a third of EPLF's 95,000 strong army (Connell 1998: 189), were too small to bring a radical change after having returned to live among around four million Eritreans. The majority of Eritrean people are not as exposed as those fighters to the EPLF's enlightened outlook on women and their issues. However, to argue that, as Bernal and Hale did, the reversals happened because the EPLF was engaged in cosmetic changes and not really in emancipating women is erroneous. The EPLF's primary goal was not to emancipate women but to liberate Eritrea. Despite that the EPLF's role in setting women on the road to emancipation and undertaking major reforms in their favor can't be denied. Had Bernal and Hale followed a different methodology, and tried to understand the diverse socio-cultural obstacles Eritrean women have been facing since centuries, and Eritrea's dire economic situation of the early 1990s, they would have come to different conclusions. In the immediate aftermath of Eritrea's independence, the Eritrean government had so many huge challenges, including creating jobs and training its personnel. This problem becomes further complicated in relation to women,

because they lacked even the basic education and skills that their male counterparts had. These issues appear, however, insignificant in the eyes of international researchers who visited Eritrea after 1991 and were interested in producing contestable arguments, but less concerned about proposing sustainable complimentary solutions.

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