

Trotter Review

Volume 12
Issue 1 *Women of Color and Economic
Development*

Article 12

January 2000

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Recommended Citation

Stefanos, Asgedet (2000) "The Social and Economic Status of Eritrean Women: Advances and Reversals," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol12/iss1/12

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The Social and Economic Status of Eritrean Women: Advances and Reversals

by Asgedet Stefanos

Below is an excerpt of the speech delivered by Asgedet Stefanos at the 20th Anniversary of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in Asmara, Eritrea on November 28, 1999. The Union was founded in 1979 with the primary purpose of political mobilization and raising political consciousness among Eritrean women during the fight for independence. After independence, NUEW became a non-governmental organization with the primary responsibility of mass mobilization of women into public life and provision of services for women.

In assessing the post-independence status of women in Eritrea, I want to pose two questions. First, how did the leadership of the national liberation movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), embark on promoting women's emancipation, given the attitudes firmly rooted in the minds of both men and women that ran counter to the idea of an emancipated woman? Secondly, what changes were established in Eritrean women's public and personal lives during the national liberation struggle—in politics, economics, and the social realm?

In evaluating how changes occurred, it becomes clear that some were attributable to strategic institutional interventions designed by EPLF, while others had to do with the exigencies of national liberation effort itself. A major thesis of my analysis, and this address, asserts that during the armed struggle for national liberation there was great compatibility between nationalism and efforts at women's emancipation, while, later on, in the post-independence period of national reconstruction some tensions between nationalism and gender equity emerge.

Although, the term *nationalism* has many competing definitions, in this discussion I am referring to sentiments that emerge as a people resist foreign political domination and affirm their aspiration for national inde-

pendence. In addition, *nationalism* is a form of self-definition of a society that has historically evolved as a community and strives to establish and maintain a nation-state. Therefore the Eritrean national liberation struggle is a vivid example of a national movement that asserted the right for self-determination and independence. *Gender* is a cultural construct that refers to different roles, responsibilities and activities that a society ascribes for females and males. The terms *gender* focuses on the nature of the social relations between men and women. In contrast, the term *sex* is an analytical category that distinguishes males from females only by their biological or reproductive characteristics. The biological differences that distinguish one *sex* from the other one are natural, universal and unchangeable. But *gender* is a social construct and hence observed gender differences are products of social relations. Gender differences also vary by culture and over time. Usually they include attitudes toward division of labor and distribution of resources, which are based on culturally determined ideas of differences in men's and women's natures and capabilities. The ascribed differences between genders and the assertion of gender supremacy are so deeply embedded psychologically that they are sometimes thought to be biologically, not socially determined.

So, in Eritrea, we can say that it is the division of labor augmented by gender-based stereotyping that has led to 'women's work' as mostly undervalued and taken for granted. Women performed unpaid or underpaid productive labor in Eritrean rural economy. Even when women joined the workforce in the urban sector they were paid less than their male counterparts and were still held responsible for housework and childcare. And since women were solely responsible for unpaid tasks both within the private and public sphere, they were economically dependent on men. In turn these conditions have made women vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and abuse, which became a basis for the so called 'gender gap.' Reciprocally, 'gender gap' was manifested in women's unequal access to economic resources, political life, cultural resources, and education.

The Eritrean national liberation struggle led by EPLF drew on a legacy of anti-colonial struggles and its principles were democratic and egalitarian. It sought to build a society to be self reliant, economically developed, and to create a cohesive national identity and raise political consciousness. I believe, these official ideals were embedded in the unified resistance of Eritrean

people to foreign domination, mobilization of citizens for self-reliance, inclusion of social groups who have been traditionally subordinated, and demotion of conservative practices and ideologies through policy measures. The Eritrean national liberation struggle was singularly responsible for creating the context by which women and men were able to vigorously address gender issues within the society. The official policy measures that were undertaken to address gender inequality were in three domains: ideological, organizational, and legislative. The ideological approach consisted of a set of campaigns for political awareness around issues of women. The organizational aspect launched a programmatic increase in participation of women in political, socio-economic, and educational institutions; and the creation of a separate women's organization—i.e. the National Union of Eritrean Women. The legislative aspect included a series of laws designed to eliminate concrete barriers to Eritrean women's advancement.

Although Eritrean women have always been involved in all aspects of life within their society, the changes that occurred in women's lives during the national liberation struggle were very dramatic. In politics, women participated in all areas of the Front's organization. They were represented dramatically as members of the armed forces. This full participation in politics was unprecedented since Eritrean women were traditionally prohibited from *formally* participating in public affairs. In the economic domain, the recognition of Eritrean women's right to equal access to resources and the right to engage in all facets of productive activity was fundamental to the achievement of women's equality. During the national liberation epoch, significant advances had been achieved in mobilizing Eritrean women for productive work. Within the family, the dismantling of fundamental structural and ideological barriers that limited Eritrean women's personal rights were also pursued, such as banning arranged marriages and child brides, and equal judicial status for females. In the educational realm, the new educational system of formal and non-formal institutions were successful in mobilizing and recruiting female students to schools, literacy campaign and consciousness raising sessions.

In sum, studies have amply documented that during the national liberation struggle the effort to address Eritrean women's emancipation had significant success. Many Eritrean women felt sure that their status in private and public realm had improved as a direct consequence of the official policies and also due to the experimental

and creative way that the Front pursued female emancipation. In addition, the positive achievements of Eritrean women during the liberation struggle reveal how women tirelessly fought to change their subordinate status within the society. And it is worth noting that the male leadership's decision to elevate women's oppression as a social problem requiring official intervention was momentous and a significant departure in Eritrean history.

In establishing how Eritrean women's issues made substantial advances during the national liberation struggle, it is clear that gender equity and nationalism are compatible. The struggle against colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy converged with one another. The promotion of a revolutionary ethic during the nationalist struggle for independence, encouraged both Eritrean women and men not only to resist national oppression, but also to fight against women's subordination. Revolutionary nationalism encouraged the creation of cooperation, self-sacrifice, solidarity, political awareness, respect for labor, and equal worth. Eritrean nationalism also promoted the demotion of anachronistic customs and traditions within Eritrean society. The structural and social convention that obstructed women's access to public arena and the ideological constraints that inculcated sexism were significantly diminished.

The nationalist struggle and the military situation, created new opportunities, options, interdependence, and consensus. Eritrean women were able to integrate successfully into the political realm, work life, and educational institution and to expect equal status in familial life. The urgency of war and social upheaval created openings for women to participate, weakened patriarchal conservative impulses, and ultimately became a 'great equalizer' (in the phrase of an Eritrean woman fighter).

Notwithstanding this record of success, there were some notable tensions and gaps between nationalism and gender issues during the national liberation struggle. For example, it was clear from the perceptions and experiences of Eritrean women that the national liberation struggle itself created in some dimensions a conservative bias and got tangled in identity politics. By this I mean that some Eritrean women and men considered it divisive or a weakness to allow differences to surface. Some Eritrean members of the liberation struggle preferred to engage in polemics and exaggerate women's gains, while others viewed women's issues as diversion

from the nationalist effort and an idle preoccupation of Western-educated women. Some Eritrean females and males theorized that women have achieved full emancipation and that it is the “Eritrean culture” which needed to change its conservatism. Others felt that Western feminism (which they derisively viewed as inappropriate) is not suitable or relevant for Eritrean women’s emancipation. I believe it is invalid to blame the Eritrean culture or tradition as the sole source of intractability against women’s emancipation. Culture does not exist outside of the socio-economic condition that creates and sustains it. Culture is a system of learned behavior patterns and norms within a society. If it is useless and deemed negative, people can change their cultural beliefs, attitudes and values. As Amilcar Cabral (a West African revolutionary and thinker) said, culture can be used as an instrument of domination and also resistance. So one of the major challenges for both Eritrean women and policy-makers is to come up with a theoretical approach and to define policies and strategies to eradicate the negative aspects of Eritrean culture that subordinates women.

Now in assessing *The Status of Eritrean Women in Post-independence Period*, (which is a short period of time, less than a decade), we are aware that the main catalyst—the national liberation movement—for Eritrean women emancipation is not there anymore. Presently, in the post-independence period, Eritrean nationalism is in the process of redefining itself and the official commitment to women’s emancipation continues to be upheld. On the eve of the new millennium, we want to confidently declare that much progress has been made in the struggle for Eritrean women’s emancipation, but there also are persistent problems.

What are the gains for women in post-independent Eritrea?

Eritrean women have entered the work force in large numbers, women are running for political posts and are being elected to parliament; some Eritrean women are beginning to break the glass ceiling in governmental positions, young girls are going to school in large numbers, and men have become accustomed and even proud of women’s accomplishments. The government has promoted gender issues through policies aimed at creating new roles for women in the private and public domain. The policy measures are in areas of legislation, employment, politics, family and education.

Official legal reforms have brought about significant

improvement in Eritrean women’s position, particularly in laws of personal status. Traditionally Eritrean women were deprived of the rights enjoyed by men and the very granting of formal legal equality between the sexes represented a decisive break with the past. We know that employment is one of the major means to eliminate sex inequality and promote both women’s consciousness and material circumstances. Mass entry of Eritrean women into paid employment and the alteration of prevailing conditions under which women work have been encouraged by several governmental policies. Women’s right to private property and land ownership is a significant step toward creating equality in productive activity.

In the political realm, we can examine the question of political representation and the degree of representation of women at different levels of the political structure—both regional and national; and, the existence, influence and degree of independence of women organization—National Union of Eritrean Women. Again, there are major improvements in women’s political status. Women are running for election in regional and national levels, they hold senior positions in the governmental organizations, and on a grassroots level women are organized in large numbers under the auspices of National Union of Eritrean Women. The NUEW has been very effective in mobilizing and organizing women politically, in the local, regional and national level. The Union has also been successful in interfacing with other governmental agencies to bring educational and work related reforms for women.

The official family policy is geared towards passing legislation designed to support the Eritrean family as an elementary cell of society whose main function is the upbringing of a new generation. While all the family policy measures are significant, I believe there has to be a more critical stance towards the institution of family. Women’s condition greatly benefit from concerted challenges against the prevailing unequal division of labor and the differentiated status between genders within the family. The ideological factors and customary practices that propagate female subordination and sexist stereotypes have to be addressed also.

Education is an important institutional measure for building a non-hierarchical society. The government has committed itself to providing a universal education as a right for all its citizens including women. The structure of the education system has undergone radical reorganization to meet the needs of the new revolution-

ary personality created during the national liberation struggle. It appears that the problem of female participation is being addressed. However, there is evidence of much work to be done in redesigning the curricula and method of teaching that equip students to be free of gender bias. For example the problems of 'gender typing' (occupation associated with nurturing role such as home economics, primarily education, secretarial work, service work and health care) in education is an important element that needs to be firmly addressed. There is also a problem of dramatic decrease in female enrollment at higher levels of education. Nevertheless, there are substantial positive developments in education.

Despite all these substantial achievements, studies have shown that in post-independent Eritrea there is a resurgence of conservatism and backlash against women. In my study and interviews, many ex-militant women indicate that there is a loss of momentum, and perhaps a reversal in the movement to fully integrate women into public life. They express concern and some skepticism about the government's ability to sustain a commitment to advance Eritrean women's rights and status. Some Eritrean women state that in the post-independence period there is a singular preoccupation with economic development and national reconstruction effort. In contemporary Eritrea, women's issue have the potential to be seen as a side-issue and to some extent as a diversion and a distraction from the collective unity and sacrifice required for modernization and other national effort. In addition it is easier to revert back to a more tradition bound role and status, since the majority of Eritrean society still adhere to that form of life. In the view of some women activists, the government has been slow to implement the kind of infrastructural support for women—daycare centers, laundries, cooking establishments—that are vital to facilitate women's participation in education, political and economic activity. Women ex-militants have often been most undermined by the prevalence of and slide back into male sexism and privilege within the family and cultural and religious beliefs that legitimize female subordination. During post-independence, the women who have fared best are often from middle class backgrounds and are socially connected with the power brokers and/or those who were affiliated to men in a position of power. So, indeed, many women militants who were viewed as capable and skillful during the national liberation struggle have not been able to upgrade their positions during reconstruction.

The National Union of Eritrean Women, after liberation, has been engaged in mobilizing women to its mass organization and providing services to them—literacy, political education, and social services. However, as my studies revealed, NUEW has not been as focused on addressing the emancipatory needs of Eritrean women activists. To be fair, even during the national liberation struggle, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was not given mandate to represent activist women. It was only viewed as one of the mass organization involved in recruitment of women to support the national liberation effort. NUEW has never departed from or critiqued the leadership or government's stance towards women's emancipation.

In discussing this reversal, I would like to address my previous statement about the tensions between nationalism and gender issues by posing a question: *Why are women's gains at risk after national liberation*, by examining broadly the official policies of the government and Eritrean women themselves.

In post-independent Eritrea, we observe that gender and nationalism are not as clearly compatible and mutually reinforcing with each other. Instead the tension between them becomes more dramatic and pronounced. The reason for this is two fold. First, as I have said earlier, the official policies and the exigencies of war itself were the main catalyst for women's emancipation. Eritrean women were dependent on change from above and a context that created new options. After the war was won, there was no pressure and willingness to change. In addition, the theoretical and practical limitation and contradictions of EPLF official policies during the national liberation struggle became more pronounced after liberation. On close examination, the weakness of the official policies towards women could be traced beyond the policy measures and into the set of assumptions that adhered to the notion of that Eritrean women's emancipation was seen as part of the overall economic transformation and national independence. This meant that when the wider national goals did not coincide with the social policies designed to emancipate women, it was put by the way side.

Secondly, a large segment of Eritrean women seemed to put aside a vigorous struggle for an autonomous institutional base. They may well have calculated that such an effort needed to be deferred in the interest of national solidarity and political necessity. Some might have viewed it as a pragmatic political necessity to sta-

bilize their substantial gains and to consolidate meaningfully enhanced personal and institutional positions. There may be others who simply found it easier to revert back to conventions and abide by prevailing norms and cultural expectations. Women also had to contend with the reality that divisions could be created among them by pressures of patriarchy and the men to whom they were still beholden. Accordingly, those women who may have wanted to push more assertively for autonomous women's power and rights faced the prospect of perhaps being sidelined or isolated from the political and other public spheres. Reconstructing the society required breathtaking collective energy and effort. Activist women have wanted to be part of the mainstream particularly to secure productive employment and one of the surest ways of doing so has been to utilize traditional personal networks. Competing for a yet limited number of paid positions, some women have reverted back to the age old negative sexist stereotypes—squabbling, gossiping, denigrating and undercutting each other. Indeed when such negative behavior and attitudes exists, it is an indication of both society's oppressive conditions, as well as women's own internalized oppression.

Does the sustenance of a vibrant women's movement advance or curtail the national liberation struggle?

From the Eritrean governments' point of view there is an understandable reason for caution. The struggle to eradicate women's oppression is not a very simple and neat undertaking. Advocating gender equality vigorously may create divisiveness and strife at a time when unity and cohesiveness is needed for national reconstruction. It is also clear that much of the gains Eritrean women achieved is largely among women who have been directly involved in the national liberation movement and the less engaged elements of society would need a more creative approach and more time to be included in this fold. In addition, a struggle to build a unified and viable nation requires much sacrifice. This is particularly true for Eritrea which has undergone a long and harrowing war against an economically underdeveloped African society supported by powerful allies from the West and East and which had to create its entire infrastructure, state apparatus, and cultural institutions from the ashes of three decades of devastation. Nonetheless, demoting the struggle for Eritrean women's emancipation would directly undercut democratic impulses and runs the risk of emboldening conservative elements within the society. And the govern-

ment of Eritrea cannot afford to run the risk of losing its most ardent supporters. My point of view is as Amilcar Cabral said that "the national liberation movement (or a nationalist government) is not only a product of culture but also a determinant of culture; it should be able to discern the entire cultural values and keep what is good and do away with what is bad." He also added that "we should gently lay to rest some of the cultural practices which had outlived their use . . . that cultural transformation becomes possible only when a revolutionary movement self-consciously works to eradicate negative element of the culture." In the long run, I believe that Eritrean women's emancipation can only enhance and not detract from the overall social goals to create an egalitarian and democratic society.

What is critical to sustain Eritrean women's emancipation?

Eritrean women themselves have to create the institutional means to raise their own consciousness. It is important that Eritrean women have a clear analysis of the source and nature of their oppression in order to create strategies and programs for change. Eritrean women have to acquire knowledge, skills and awareness necessary to participate in the economic, political and social life of their society equally. We have to strengthen our capacity to learn to value human diversity in terms of the ethnicity, class, and religious differences among us—appreciate how these differences shape varying experiences and perceptions. We need to strengthen our tolerance of diverse points of views and opinions. Many Eritreans have lived in diaspora—and their journeys and bicultural experiences can add to the diversity of the Eritrean people. Diaspora has been a hardship—and a consequence of the oppression we suffered at the hand of colonialists. Inclusion of those who have lived in other societies add another challenge to the Eritrean people, and Eritrean women in particular, to become skilled in embracing differences and tolerating multiple realities. Indeed, in this regard, Eritrean women can learn from other diasporic nations who have upheld the notion of unity in diversity.

Eritrean women have to invigorate the commitment to fight the subjective conditions that oppress us and learn to value each other through consciousness raising. This effort can be daunting—since men can be greatly resistant to it. We need the nourishment that comes from valuing one another. We have to increase our self-regard and our belief in women's equal worth to men, and be willing to combat sexist images of women. I

believe that Eritrean women's struggle for gender equity will be nourished if we actively gain knowledge of other women's movements, particularly in Africa and also in the world beyond.

I believe that the National Union of Eritrean Women can build upon its substantial successes and expand its mission. It can be the major catalyst in creating programs and projects that will enable women to raise their consciousness, gain skills, and acquire knowledge about *all* women in Eritrea. This can be done through education and training that will enable Eritrean women to acquire facility in organizational skills, policy analysis, advocacy work; research on women; to be involved in consciousness-raising campaign, public media, theatre, music, street performances, poetry slams, and story-telling; and, to have access to social and health services. The NUEW can be instrumental in developing a new Eritrean women's culture. Tenets of that culture will create ways to nurture the energy and courage women will need to identify and attack constraints against women emancipation. NUEW can provide leadership in women learning skills to embrace and tolerate differences and in diminishing the practices that undermine our unity—such as women gossiping and talking about each others' shortcomings rather than focusing on what we admire about each other. We have to question the motives of those who try to denigrate other women. Women have to try to educate those that offend us and praise those that impress us. And most of all, as women, we should stop having negative feelings about ourselves as a result of someone else's judgement of us. NUEW can help to move women in this direction toward a new women's culture. This can be accomplished through individual self-reflection, group meetings, and other means of educating oneself and the nation. These activities create unity, solidarity and appreciation of special skills and sensibilities women bring to struggle for female equity and overall social change. Generally, I believe that a women organization (or National Union of Eritrea Women) has the capability and experience to mobilize and create a broad base of women who would take on an array of women's issues and concerns within their local villages, regional settings and national arena.

I also believe that an Eritrean women's organization has to be fully autonomous in order to be effective in its relationship with women and with the governmental organs. While the women organization has to have a good rapport with policy makers in order to be effective, experiences of other societies indicate that the of-

ficials of women organizations have to work hard not to be tokens. Members of women's organization need to learn to be power brokers on behalf of their female constituency while avoiding being isolated as a special interest group.

If the momentum of Eritrean women's emancipation is to keep abreast and/or to inform the nationalist interest, women have to press their own demands to get policy support from the government. Again, the autonomy of a women's organization is vital. Male members, no matter how much committed they are to female emancipation—and Eritrea's government has many such committed men—are not able to articulate the needs of women since it is outside of their own experience. So it is incumbent upon Eritrean women, through the organ of women organization to clearly present issues and concerns. Particularly during national reconstruction, there are always tensions between competing demands for material resources and policy support, so the women organization has to be very adept in presenting its case and pressing for reforms.

The women organization (National Union of Eritrean Women) can also recruit male supporters to raise men's consciousness about gender issues. Cultivating and broadening an Eritrean male constituency to support women's rights not only expands the support system for women's organization, but also educates men about the nature of women's oppression. To elicit the support of Eritrean men helps contend with backlashes and negative reactions and ease the misfortunes of slippage when conservative tendencies take hold within the society. The National Union of Eritrean Women can strengthen itself and enhance knowledge for all Eritrean women by actively seeking to create and participate in coalitions of women's movements in Africa, other Third World societies, and with Euro-feminists.

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