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Organising Women within a National Liberation Struggle

Case of Eritrea

Worku Zerai

Eritrea gained independence in 1993 from Ethiopian occupation after a long struggle for liberation. Women were active participants in the struggle and were organised under the National Union of Eritrean Women. What was the role of the union in the struggle? What impact did the large-scale participation of women have on the struggle and the nature of the new government? In what way has participation in a revolutionary struggle contributed to the emancipation of women?

I

Introduction

ERITREA is a country in the Horn of Africa with a population of 3.5 million. About 80 per cent of the population are peasants and nomads. Around 20 per cent of the population live in the urban area. In the absence of far-reaching urbanisation, it is only recently that radical extensive changes have begun to erode the traditional fabric of the Eritrean society. The cultural heritage of Eritrea is deeply rooted in the nomadic and peasant set-up and urban dwellers can thus be considered as resettled nomads and peasants since their cultural identity emanated from the traditional context which is essentially nomadic and peasant [NUEWmn 1985:2]. The two main religions are Islam and Coptic Christianity. There are also a few Catholics and Protestants. Men of religion, sheiks and priests still fulfil important tasks such as teaching the Koran in the case of Moslems and the Bible in the case of Christians, and elements of faith to the young, solemnising marriages and acting as judges (in the case of Moslems) according to Sharia's law in matrimonial and inheritance disputes, assessing damages for injury and generally directing the religious life of the community in which they live.

Eritrea has an extremely complex history, a history which is dominated by wars against invaders since the 16th century. It has been occupied in turn by Ottoman Turks, Egyptians, Italians (from 1886 until 1941), the British (who defeated Italian forces in Eritrea during the second world war) until 1952 and the Ethiopians ever since [Pateman 1990:5]. In 1950 the British and the United Nations determined on a federation of Eritrea and Ethiopia. This was done without giving any consideration to the wishes of the people nor to the strong Moslem opposition. The majority of the Eritreans were against the forming of a federation.

In the first 10 years after the federation was formed Ethiopia's direct rule over Eritrea was imposed. Towards the end of 1952 *La Voce de' Eritrea*, a newspaper critical of the federation, was banned. In 1956, following the suppression of the opposition waged by

workers and peasants, the Eritrean General Union of Labour Syndicates was banned. In 1960 the Eritrean flag was lowered and separate courts were established. In 1962 Eritrea was forcibly annexed by Ethiopia [Pateman 1990:6].

The national struggle for national liberation began in 1961 with the formation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). The ELF and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) which split from the ELF in 1970 got control over many towns in the country. But as the Soviet Union intervened on the Ethiopian side, independence could not be achieved in the late 1970s. The Soviet intervention forced withdrawal from the towns that were controlled by the EPLF to the northern part of the country. The EPLF continued fighting against the Ethiopian occupation until it liberated the whole of Eritrea in May 1991. Eritrea became an independent country officially in May 1993.

Eritrean women participated in the national liberation movement with enthusiasm changing their hitherto submissive roles to the extent of actually engaging in physical combat. They made up about 30-35 per cent of the liberation army. Thousands more women were organised in a union, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn) and were fighting on all fronts. Reddock (1982:11) says that "although women in many countries have struggled together with men for national liberation, at the end of that revolutionary struggle their position in society as women improves little as the era dawns". This view is correct in one sense but it forgets the objective reality of the stage of the socio-economic development of third world countries. There are many contradictions in the third world countries, between the people and the colonisers, between the different liberation movements that led the national liberation front, between the different classes in the society, etc. Hence, national liberation does not mean that all contradictions are going to be solved at one go.

The national liberation struggle can only solve the primary contradiction at that particular time, namely, imperialism and other contradictions will remain including class

and sexism. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that women's struggle for emancipation cannot be seen in isolation from society as a whole because women are part of the society; their struggles and demands are interrelated, connected and affect the interest of the entire society. As Kumari Jayawardena puts it, "the women's movement for emancipation which emerged in Africa and Asia can only be seen within the context of resistance that developed in many countries against imperialism and various forms of foreign domination on the one hand and to movements of opposition to feudal monarchies, exploitative local rulers and traditional patriarchal and religious structures on the other" (1982:8). Therefore, movements for the emancipation of women can also be revolutionary struggles "which could simultaneously help to transform society and improve the position of women in that society" [Jayawardena 1982:8].

This article will discuss the part played by NUEWmn during the national liberation struggle and see if women's political representation was possible after the end of the liberation struggle. It takes into consideration that no dramatic change in traditional gender norms can occur in such a short time. To demonstrate that, the article will first discuss the position of women before the beginning of the armed struggle to highlight women's political activity before the war. Then it will discuss the formation of NUEWmn, consciousness raising, organising, reasons for the participation of women.

II

Position of Women before 1970

The traditional ideology about equality mystifies the material, historical conditions which brought about women's subordinate position and attempts to instil prejudices which justify their subservience. A typical religious story which attempts to justify women's lot is the following:

...In the Red Sea Area there was once a religious leader called Monisa. She was the head of the Mosque. Allah (Lord) wanted to test her fidelity and tempted her through

a naked devil who waited for her on the way to the Mosque. On the first day Monisa ignored her enticements. The same happened the next day. But on the third day she slept with him and arrived late at the Mosque. The Lord cursed her and from then onwards, women were consequently banned from entering the Mosque, became confined to their homes and were compelled to wear veils and were to be subordinated to their husbands [NUEWmn 1993: 3].

Such tales passed by word of mouth from generation to generation, served to conceal the real roots of women's oppression and have the force of law among nomads and peasants.

As a baby boy ensures the continuity of the family, women are valued according to their degree of fertility. In such a society the birth of a boy is valued far greater than that of a girl. A wife is expected to bear sons. If she gives birth to a girl the father is displeased and shows this either by staying away for a couple of days or by failing to provide food for visitors. There are even those who go so far as to remove their goats in order to deny the mother milk. The contrast when a boy is born is all the more revealing. The mother is extremely proud and the gratified husband provides food to well-wishers and meat and honey to his wife. He may give her a new dress and ornaments if he is wealthy [NUEWmn 1989a: 5-6].

There are tragic stories which highlight this discrimination. A peasant family in Zara (a village in southern Eritrea) had five daughters and two sons. Malaria being rampant in the lowlands the father took all his five daughters with him during one of his seasonal migrations, apparently hoping that malaria would kill them. He left his sons in his village, anxious to spare them. As it happened his daughters survived, while one son died of cold and the other by drowning while he was away. Embittered, he lamented: "Lord has ignored our prayers. I left you behind to save you from Bahri. One died in a river and the other in a stable."

Marriage is a transaction performed through the intermediary of a third party. As it is a contract made between the males of two extended families, girls have no choice in choosing their (would-be) husbands [Department of Administration 1986:19]. Another case is the marriage of one's deceased brother's wife. In some cases, the widow has to wait for her would-be husband, if he is still under age, before the marriage can take place. The feuding families may marry their offspring, the last family to commit a killing normally offering their daughters [Department of Administration, 1986:24].

Among peasants dowry is common and among nomads the bride price is common. But in both cases the woman is always the victim. In areas where dowry is common,

a woman who pays a large amount of dowry is more or less respected by her husband and his family and her marriage is stable whereas the one who pays a small amount is looked down upon by her husband and his family and her marriage ends in divorce most of the time. Girls from poor families remain unmarried, and as they are considered to be a burden to their family after a certain age they migrate to towns and end up becoming domestic servants or prostitutes [Department of Administration 1986:22].

In areas where the bride price is common most young girls marry men who are 20-30 years older than they are, because many young men cannot pay the price. Many girls also become victims of polygamous marriages [Department of Administration 1986:21]. A woman is expected to be a virgin upon marriage. Fidelity is also required from a woman, who should be submissive and silent in public towards her husband. To control her sexuality before and after marriage she is circumcised¹ [NUEWmn 1989b:8]. A wife cannot look her husband in the face, nor publicly call him by his name, nor ask him to help her directly. If she wants to remind him of jobs which need to be done she will use a formulation such as "will the wood be cut" or whatever may be appropriate to the job to be done. Another common practice is for the wife to wash her husband's legs at the end of the day and then kiss his soles. Wife-beating is also sanctioned. The parts of the body which can be beaten being specified in customary law. Article 8 of Shewate Anseba Law states that a husband can beat his wife below the neck as long as the beating is not damaging, otherwise she is entitled to collect damages [Department of Administration 1986:37].

SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOUR

In Eritrean society women have always been and continue to be an indispensable source of unpaid labour. The distribution is heavily against women. The greatest part of their daily work is shouldered by women in the harsh nomadic and peasant environment. The work of Eritrean women begins with the first crow of the cock. They have to grind grain and continue to work until sometimes after midnight. In the morning women prepare breakfast for their husbands. They have to process milk and milk products. They have to travel for as long as four hours a day to fetch water in some areas in Eritrea, carrying as much as 20 litres or more. It is women's work to collect firewood, from far distances for cooking and breaking bread. They have to cook and bake in the most primitive way using firewood while tears roll down their faces due to the smoke [Department of Administration 1986:39].

Women also make straw baskets or mats for household use or for the market. They

also make some of their kitchen utensils like pots, oven, water container, etc. They also prepare the ropes from which their main pieces of furniture (beds, chairs) are made. Among the nomads it is the woman who builds and dismantles the mountable house ('agnet') [Department of Administration 1986:40]. Women of course procreate and raise and socialise children, who will share the burden of the household as they grew up. Peasant women perform numerous tasks outside the home. They participate in land preparation, planting, weeding, scaring birds away from the field, harvesting and storing. Nomadic women participate in herding their animals. At times collecting fodder is added to their list of duties and domestic chores [Department of Administration 1986:42].

Filing for a divorce is not easy. Among the Christian Copts the woman has to go and ask the husband to call her parents to seek divorce on her behalf. If she leaves before the arrival of her parents, she forfeits her share of the property [NUEWmn 1985b:26]. Among the Moslems the man can divorce his wife at will, but on the other hand the woman can divorce her husband if he is mentally sick, impotent or if she feels threatened by his violence. In such cases her father can seek divorce on her behalf and effect it by compensating the husband for his loss. Most fathers rarely support their daughter's petitions as they are not willing to make these repayments nor do they want to be burdened with divorced daughters [NUEWmn 1985b:26-27].

The right of inheritance is reserved exclusively to males because it is considered that a son works for his parents when they are alive, migrates to earn money, looks after them in old age and after they have died, "guards" the home and guarantees the continuity of the family line. Where Sharia law applies women cannot inherit land. They are entitled to half of their brother's entitlements in moveable property. A wife inherits one-eighth of her husband's property and this is divided among all the wives if he was polygamous [NUEWmn 1985b:25-26].

Although women are the main producers in both nomadic and peasant societies and thus are a source of wealth, nevertheless they have been traditionally barred from the main access and functions of power. At marriage a man becomes eligible to participate in the village assembly and to enjoy whatever rights he can get from that, while women and children are considered legal minors and therefore need a lawyer when engaging in a court judgment because they are considered unable to defend themselves [NUEWmn 1985b:20]. The federal government had no different policy on women's roles or legal rights. The Federal Constitution stated that "... those eligible to elect are Eritrean nationals who are male..."

The different colonisers in Eritrea were in no way anxious to change the inferior status of women. Their rationale was that they did not wish to intervene in the Eritrean way of life, customs, traditions, religion, etc. This was a rather moot argument in a situation in which they were actively intervening in other crucial aspects of the Eritrean way of life. One of the actual reasons for this was that the colonial administrators were male. It was therefore natural that they should bring with them their own male-biased cultural paraphernalia concerning women and women's role in society.

As stated above the Italians introduced organised prostitution that criss-crossed racial boundaries. They created a separate area for prostitutes. Italians would come and pick women out like any commodity. The places were called 'casinos'. Italian rule added a new dimension to the women problem that still persists in the urbanised sectors of Eritrea [Wilson 1991:13-14]. What is more the initiation of the institution of 'madamism' with all its attendant implications has made subsequent innocent inhouse workers of European households in Eritrea to be suspect of 'madamism', so much so that all maids employed by Europeans are called 'gual-bedama' or 'the child of the madams' [Tsegai 1990:11].

Eritrea's relatively industrialised economy employed many women, but women were paid less than half the wages of men and were fired when they expected a child. Women also worked as wage labourers on the settler plantations for long hours at minimal wages.

Modern education in Eritrea was introduced by the Italians. Women were allowed to attend classes only after 1934. The type of education they got was geared towards enhancing the sexual division of labour that prevailed in the country. They were learning how to sew clothes, and domestic science. Even then very few women got that chance. Women are mainly trained on teaching, nursing, home-economics, etc. In the 1970s, 95 per cent of Eritrean women were illiterate [Moutart 1980:108].

III

Mobilising Women to Form NUEWmn

The EPLF believed that the social emancipation of women could not be seen separately from the question of the emancipation of the entire society. Thus great emphasis was given to their participation in the national democratic revolution. To realise this, however, the EPLF decided to create a union through which women could participate in the struggle for

national liberation and for social transformation [EPLF 1977:12].

In the early 1970s, all national liberation struggles – Vietnam, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, etc. were putting the women's issue on their agenda, so the EPLF was influenced by those movements. In addition women themselves were pushing for participation.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

The first step taken by EPLF to raise the consciousness of the whole population was done by first raising the consciousness of the armed fighters. From among the fighters (men and women) armed propaganda units were formed. The armed propaganda units used to go among the people to explain EPLF's objectives, such as the cause of the war and women's issues. In areas where the population is settled such as the highlands, people get together in large numbers during weddings and other festive occasions and funerals. These occasions were used to spread the EPLF's political objectives among men and women together.

In areas where women were not allowed to leave their house women fighters went in to their houses and helped them in their work and once they had established a good relation they would tell the women why they were there and discuss the war and women's issues. The armed propaganda unit after it had acquainted itself with the people used to form cells of five to six women. The cell has its chairperson, treasurer, etc, and once it was formed the cell was responsible for all the activities of the cell which was fund raising, politicising itself, etc. The different cells in a village then formed groups. One group was five to seven cells. Then the different groups formed a village women's association. With time the different village women's associations came together and formed the district's women's association and in 1978 there were full-fledged provincial women's association in almost all the provinces of Eritrea.²

But not without problems. Some men spread malicious rumours about the EPLF saying that "the fighters will rape the girls". Some priests even went to the extent of threatening excommunication of families who sent their daughters to attend meetings run by armed propaganda units. The situation was far worse in the lowlands where the two sexes never gather together except on rare occasions. Here husbands and some religious leaders did not content themselves by simply threatening families not to let their daughters attend the consciousness-raising occasions. They openly opposed the consciousness raising get-togethers labelling them 'evil-education'. They even went to the extent of planning to assassinate the members of the armed propaganda unit [NUEWmn 1985b:18].

The EPLF took a number of steps to tackle these serious problems. The first was to clarify its programme to men and women in separate meetings. This was done with much emphasis on women's issues. And as the strongest opposition was in the eastern part of Eritrea, the EPLF formed a committee made up of elderly religious Muslim leaders in Zara (a village in eastern Eritrea) and asked them to find a quotation in the Sharia law which says "a woman is not allowed to learn". After combing every line of the text they could not find any such phrase. Even at this point care was taken to encourage co-operative relations between men and women. Legal steps were taken against the few diehards.

The method used to set up cells and the tasks allocated to these cells were very different in the cities from those in the countryside far from the Ethiopian army. In the cities it was not possible to have open recruitment as there was the danger of Ethiopian infiltration. Cells were often organised around people's jobs secretly; for example cells of engineers, pharmacists, factory workers, teachers, nurses, etc. Each person knew only her cell members. Above the cells and groups were branches which were connected to the field, i.e., to the armed propaganda unit. Each branch had five to seven groups.

Women refugees and immigrants in the Middle East, Europe and the US were also organised in women's associations. The process here was more or less similar to the process of organising women inside Eritrea, but of course, there were some differences. For example, in the Middle East, due to the laws and customs of these countries, they could not attend meetings with men and found it very difficult to meet even among themselves. Wounded EPLF fighters who were in some of these countries for medical treatment were instrumental in mobilising and organising Eritrean women clandestinely. As these countries began to recognise EPLF and its established offices, Eritrean women found the facilities and support necessary to launch their own organisation. The association of Eritrean women in Kuwait was formed in 1976. Similar associations were also formed in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya and the Sudan [NUEWmn 1989c:6].

In 1965 there was already in Europe an association of Eritrean students formed in Europe. The association of Eritreans in Europe, later named Eritreans for liberation in Europe (EFLE) was formed in 1971. But since there were hardly any Eritrean women students in Europe, there were no women members until later. In 1973 a few women participated in the Fourth Congress of EFLE in Pavia, Italy. The following year it was decided to form women's study groups to encourage the participation of Eritrean

women workers and the few women students in Europe. By 1975, the majority of the members of the EFLE were women, due to the influence of women domestic workers in Italy. In addition to maintaining their membership in the EFLE they formed the Eritrean Women's Association in Europe at the founding congress held in Bologna, Italy in 1978 [NUEWmn 1989c:6]. The Eritrean Women's Association in North America was formed in 1977. Its first congress was held in Washington, DC.

In November 1979 representatives of the different Eritrean Women's Association held their first congress in Arag (in the northern part of Eritrea, the liberated area of EPLF), under the slogan: "Emancipation through equal participation in the struggle" and "a revolution cannot triumph without the conscious participation of women". The congress formed a union, NUEWmn, elected a central committee with 30 members [NUEWmn 1989c:7].

In 1989 NUEWmn had around 100,000 members. Some were peasants, students, nomads, workers, professionals, etc. To be a member one had to be at least 16 years old. She should be ready to pay the membership fee. She should believe on the EPLF's line. She should be ready to attend meetings called by the union [NUEWmn 1979:5].

IV Objectives and Activities of NUEWmn

The objectives of NUEWmn before independence was to organise women to play a more active and conscious role in the independence struggle of the Eritrean people and to mobilise them to change themselves and their society towards achieving full equality and dignity [NUEWmn 1989c:7]. In order to put this into practice the union outlined its programme in accordance with the current stage in the struggle and taking into consideration the then status of women in Eritrea. At a time when the Ethiopian occupational regime was trying to eliminate the entire population, the primary goal of NUEWmn was to mobilise and organise women to participate in the national liberation struggle led by the EPLF. After the independence of Eritrea the main objective of NUEWmn became to participate in the reconstruction of the country and to struggle for the emancipation of women [NUEWmn 1992:2].

What is worth observing in the objectives of NUEWmn is that before and after independence the struggle for the emancipation of women was given secondary importance. It is not problematic when it becomes secondary before independence because the question of survival was at stake.

That is, one has first to live in order to struggle. But putting the struggle for their equality second to that of reconstruction creates a problem. As women have been struggling on a part-time, i.e., by extending their daily work, if they 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 needs, the economy, health, etc., are not rehabilitated? Is it possible to claim that women's issues should be given primary importance when more than 75 per cent of the people depend on food aid, and where women make the majority of the poor?

As the primary objective of the union before independence was to mobilise and organise women to participate in the national liberation struggle, the activities of NUEWmn were focused on meeting the needs of the national liberation struggle. The activities the union took up differed from place to place. NUEWmn carried the responsibility to mobilise Eritrean women to participate in the armed struggle for national liberation and social justice. By conducting meetings and seminars, it politicised and organised women to raise their consciousness. It organised demonstrations to condemn and expose the atrocities of the Ethiopian army, oppose the forced conscription of youngsters and against the repression by the so-called neighbourhood associations called 'kebeles'. It also conducted demonstrations in support of the policies and victories of the EPLF [NUEWmn 1989c: 7]. Members of the NUEWmn in the areas under the Ethiopian occupation collected information about the enemy, raised funds, collected essential items such as medicines for the fighters in the field, and planned, guided and sometimes executed guerrilla activities [Wilson 1991: 73-74].

Women refugees living outside Eritrea raised funds for the front through street collections and organised evening meetings where they sold Eritrean food and drinks, raised money from members who 'donated' their hairdressing and braiding skills at special events. They prepared projects and raised funds for them. There were some who gave more than half of their monthly income. Offering 20 per cent of their monthly income was common. They have also been instrumental in publicising the Eritrean struggle to the outside world, winning friends and sympathisers [NUEWmn 1985a: 36].

NUEWmn members in the liberated areas participated in the reconstruction of family houses destroyed by the Ethiopian air raids and worked in building roads and digging trenches and bomb shelters. They also

worked in supplying food, water and ammunition to the combatants. They also participated in taking care of the wounded.

Though of course not as intensive as the activities related to the war, NUEWmn also waged a systematic campaign against backward culture and ideologies which oppressed women in Eritrea. Among the activities carried by NUEWmn is an attempt to eliminate illiteracy and raise the academic and technical skills of women. With the co-operation of the EPLF's medical department they had undertaken a campaign to educate women in elementary health care. Seminars on nutrition, hygiene and the negative and positive aspects of traditional medicine and the hazards of female circumcision were organised for its members and other women in the villages. It also worked to end the oppressive traditional role of women, promoted programmes to train women in leadership and created opportunities for women to engage in active service of the people. To bring a change in the traditional marriage system it acquainted women with the new marriage system, promulgated by the EPLF in 1977 [NUEWmn 1989b: 8].

The activities of the NUEWmn demonstrate the NUEWmn was mainly concerned in doing supportive work for the liberation struggle. It did not try to attack patriarchy or to change the sexual division of labour. The members had to do their duties by extending their regular tasks. This often made the women's work-load more cumbersome and difficult to carry, but in the presence of a formidable enemy who wanted to exterminate them, they had no alternative. This became worse when the members had to strictly implement one of the aims of the union, which says "work to allow women to have two months paid maternity leave" [NUEWmn 1979:2].

V Organisational Structure

The organisational structure is built in such a way that it allows every member of the union to participate in the activities of the union and to get all the information that comes from the top. The exchange of ideas and information is one way, i.e. it is top-down. Through their monthly or weekly meetings (which depends on their situation) information and demands can move from the bottom to the top, at least theoretically. It has never been practised because of the poor democratic culture of the women. (In the family they have only to do what the elders and males in the family think is right. There is fear, blind obedience to authority and as the EPLF is an armed body, women do not feel at ease airing their needs. The fact that winning the war is the primary aim makes women

overlook their needs.) However, the union has its ways of knowing the feelings and concerns of women. It uses a mechanism called 'murmurs of women'. After a new directive or policy is declared it collects information informally through its secret members.³ If the union thinks their murmur is important it responds in the form of seminars or writes an article in its organ.

The highest body of NUEWmn is the national congress. The congress elects the central committee. The central committee elects the president and the executive committee. Each member of the executive committee heads one of the 10 provinces in Eritrea and women abroad (Middle East, Europe and US are taken as one province). The project, research and information departments are also headed by members of the executive committee. The executive committee appoints the administration for the provinces, each of which includes at least one central committee member.

LINKS BETWEEN NUEWMN AND EPLF

After its formation in 1979 the NUEWmn did not become an autonomous entity but was accommodated within the structure of the EPLF. It came under the direct control of the department of public administration (mass organisation).⁴ After 1987 it became under the president's direct administration. After independence it became autonomous but this is nominal as the president of the union is a member of the parliament and now a member of the EPLF's executive committee. She is accountable to parliament and the EPLF, which makes the autonomy of the union nominal. NUEWmn implements all EPLF's policy on women. It has adopted these policies, as its objectives.

VI After the War

In May 1993 Eritrea became an independent country formally. The EPLF became the provisional government of Eritrea. Though the Eritrean government is still in the process of being established, some structures and institutions have been created at least temporarily, though change may occur any time. What have been the legal changes and the degree of women's participation in politics? How much have women gained from their involvement in the national liberation struggle?

One of the areas where the EPLF has tried to intervene on behalf of women is on the question of land ownership. The three types of land tenure system in Eritrea do not allow women to own land [Tsfay 1973:7]. To help women to come out of economic powerlessness it made the following reforms:

- (1) In the event of a divorce, the land is divided between the parties equitably;
- (2) Widows and their children receive full rights to land allocation;
- (3) A childless woman receives half of the family plot;
- (4) A woman past the age of marriage (a spinster) receives half of the family plot;
- (5) A woman past the age of 25 who is unfit for marriage and who may live with her family or relatives receives half of the family plot;
- (6) A woman who comes back to her village upon being divorced may according to her choice receive land in her home or in her husband's village [Wilson 1991: 119 and NUEWmn 1985a:50].

Women also benefited from the introduction of the new marriage law which banned feudal marriage customs (specifically child betrothal, polygamy and concubinage) which are based on the supremacy of men over women, arbitrary and coercive arrangements which do not safeguard the welfare of children. It was "based on the free choice of both parties, monogamy, the equal rights of both sexes and legal guarantees of the interests of women and children" (EPLF's New Marriage Law 1977).

Women's consciousness is higher now than it was before the war. Women have started to participate in politics (war) collectively, i.e., via their union. They have also got the experience and knowledge of collective action and the chance of learning how to organise, lead, administer and formulate demands. One of the means through which the EPLF produces and develops leaders is by giving training to selected cadres. In 1985, women made up 30.5 per cent of EPLF's cadres [Department of Administration 1985: 28].

In the village administrations, which were formed by the EPLF, women made up 13-25 per cent of the elected bodies and in some areas as Foro (eastern part of Eritrea) women made up 40 per cent of the elected bodies because the workers and youth unions were electing women to represent them. But after independence the village administrations were not composed of workers, women, peasants and youth unions alone, but also by individuals who were not part of the unions. The EPLF, in order to guarantee women's participation, decided to reserve 20 per cent of all elected offices in the country to women. Women can also compete for the remaining 80 per cent [Department of Public Administration 1992:2]. The present transitional government in Eritrea is made up of the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. The judiciary is independent of the government. The minister of justice is a Moslem woman. To have a Moslem woman in such an office, aside from the representation, gives a blow to some of the oppressive nature of Islam to women. For instance, according

to Islam a woman's witness is worth half that of a man. Special attention was also given to train women judges⁵ so that women can have a say in court cases. More than 22 per cent of the members of the national parliament of Eritrea are women. Here also conscious attempts have been made to involve women in all committees within the parliament. In the council of ministers, out of the nine members two are women. There are more women in high government office positions – the respective heads of the postal and telephone authority and social affairs are women.

It has been observed that the legal foundations of equality in spite of its fundamental importance can neither transform nor guarantee equitable gender relations without any accompanying change in attitudes [Weiss 1986: 131]. In Eritrea the cultural and traditional norms had not been fully challenged, therefore, women are unable to claim their legal rights. Besides the customary laws are intact and are still in operation at the lower level. Women even though they have access to land, cannot plough, sow, pound and winnow as according to Eritrean culture these activities are not supposed to be carried by women. As a result women have to depend on men's labour in regard to those activities which are considered of primary importance to production. And this makes them dependent on men and unable to play a decisive role on their land.

One cannot however ignore the importance of these laws for women. They create a space for women to claim those rights and use them. Not only that, it also paves the way in which women's consciousness should be geared. One should also remember that society changes slowly and these rights cannot be undervalued.

Women's political representation in the country at present is still very low. Since women have been fighting on all fronts with men, one expects a fair deal. In addition, as the EPLF has not addressed the private sphere there has been no change in the sexual division of labour, nor were services (day-care, creches, etc) that would have helped women to spend some time in the public sphere, provided. The new marriage law also does not address wife beating. Women also have to get permission from their husbands to participate in such activities. Now the political participation of women which was supposed to give them more rights becomes an additional work-load. And because of this many women (specially married women) refused to take up office (Report to the Executive Committee of NUEWmn, 1990).

Have women joined the struggle to fight for emancipation? Women have joined to end the hardships they were facing from the Ethiopians. Some joined for vengeance.

The main contradiction for them was the one between the enemy and the Eritrean people. As far as their main contradiction is concerned they have come out victorious. Emancipation is something they have learned in the process of struggle and that cannot be seen in isolation from the change that has to come within the entire society. Life in society is still under poor conditions in which more than 85 per cent of the people are dependent on food aid. So to bring a change in the life of Eritreans including women, the economy has to be rehabilitated so that people can get adequate services (education, health care, day-care, etc). But still one cannot deny that women have made some gains; that is, they have been able to infiltrate and play a part in those structures and institutions that have been male domains for centuries. The change in the laws also have opened a space which would empower women the moment they start to claim and make use of them.

CONCLUSION

Eritrean women organised around NUEWmn for many reasons. They have played a decisive role in the support sector of the national liberation struggle. Women struggled by extending their work-load. With the end of the war – though no dramatic change has occurred in gender relations – women have got recognition and space (however small it is) for participating in politics. In addition the mere fact that women make up more than half of the committee (out of a 42-person committee 22 are women) that drafts the constitution of Eritrea, given them more chance to draft a constitution that recognises the equal status of women.

On the other hand, women have to actively struggle for emancipation. This can be done by raising the consciousness of women and allowing women to organise around the issues of their interest and create an umbrella organisation which is linked to the government. As being linked to the government eases the implementation of the issues which are supported by the government, women should also not try to separate their struggle from the struggle of the whole population. Women alone cannot reach far. They should be able to differentiate between types of power relations and try to use them whenever it is possible.

Notes

- 1 Circumcision leaves the women with no sexually sensitive genital tissue.
- 2 In the western part of Eritrea this was not possible, as this area was under the full control of ELF. So it was not easy to infiltrate into that area for the armed propaganda unit until

1981. That is until the ELF moved out of Eritrea.

- 3 These are the most dedicated members of the union who report what women discuss informally. In meetings they also talk in support of the chair. They are the ones who try to influence the members. Before the general meeting the leader has a secret meeting with them.
- 4 A department is somewhat akin to a ministry in the more usual governmental context.
- 5 This was done by giving women short-term training on legal practices.

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