

From Warriors to Wives: Contradictions of Liberation and Development in Eritrea

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Any “peace” involves a reworking of power relations, not just between nations or parts of nations, but between women and men.

Liz Kelly¹

During nearly three decades of struggle, the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) appeared to represent a model of a new kind of nationalism that was built from the bottom up by women and men together. EPLF was exemplary in terms of breaking down gender barriers in a number of key respects. For one thing, while women in many other social movements participated as supporters, auxiliaries, or irregulars, in EPLF, women were integrated into the ranks as bona fide fighters in their own right. Thus, Eritrean women, perhaps as none others before them, participated extensively and intensively in the armed struggle alongside Eritrean men. EPLF fighters appeared to transcend gender, as men and women performed the same tasks and lived communally as comrades in mixed units. EPLF, moreover, was far more than simply a military organization; it was an incipient state, organized into various departments that carried out numerous functions aside from that of waging war.² The extent of women’s integration into EPLF thus seemed to prefigure a new kind of national integration for women once Eritrea gained independence and EPLF assumed control of the state.³

EPLF was successful in liberating Eritrea from Ethiopian rule, and women fighters contributed significantly to that achievement. Eritrean

women, thus, liberated a nation. But women's participation in the nationalist struggle and the achievement of independence for Eritrea did not necessarily liberate them.

Analyses of gender in the aftermath of revolutionary and national liberation struggles generally have shown the results to be disappointing in terms of gender equity.⁴ Nicaragua and South Africa are two notable examples where women's participation in the struggle did not garner them equality with men once victory was achieved.⁵ It is thus by now commonplace to lament the fate of women in the wake of liberation struggles and nationalist revolutions. While these struggles seemed to draw women into the public life of the nation as full participants, in the end, the promise of equality was left unfulfilled once victory was realized. However, feminist analysis requires us to look at the subordination of women as more than simply a historical inevitability. We must seek to understand the mechanisms of power involved and the relationships among constructions of gender, citizenship, and societal transformations. As Berte Siim has suggested, we need to shift "the focus of attention in feminist scholarship from a theoretical figure of patriarchy and exclusion to an analysis of the dynamic processes of women's participation in civil society and in public political life."⁶ This essay explores the experiences of women ex-guerilla fighters in Eritrea in light of questions about gender, citizenship, and nationhood that have preoccupied feminist scholars over the past decade.

This essay addresses one central question: why were the advances toward gender equality achieved within the Eritrean People's Liberation Front so difficult to maintain once EPLF achieved victory and assumed control of Eritrea's state? The search for answers to this question requires analyzing the policies and practices of EPLF regarding gender equality during the struggle for independence, and assessing the social changes associated with the end of the liberation struggle and the transformation of EPLF from a guerilla movement to a state power.

Thirty years of war have left, among other things, many gaps in research and documentation on Eritrea. Although there is a growing body of work on Eritrean nationalism,⁷ this scholarship largely ignores gender despite the significant roles played by women in Eritrea's nationalist struggle. This essay cannot promise definitive answers. Rather, it aims to lay important groundwork by using the uneven and fragmentary

data available to develop theoretical frameworks and advance arguments that will help set agendas for future research on gender and citizenship in Eritrea.

The essay is organized as follows: after a capsule history of Eritrea's nationalist struggle, I analyze the nature of women's participation in EPLF and the ways EPLF sought to implement gender equality among its members. I argue that EPLF created a kind of gender equality by eliminating the domestic sphere and feminine identity. I then explore the consequences of EPLF's approach to gender in terms of the problems faced by women ex-fighters after independence and the difficulty of translating EPLF's model of gender equality in the field to civilian life on a national scale. I draw attention to the ways women ex-fighters were reintegrated into domestic life after the war. I argue that another key to the marginalization of women after independence is the shift of the nationalist project from liberation to capitalist development. These very different kinds of struggles—national liberation and national development—affect profoundly the construction of gendered citizens and the nature of women's participation in the nation.

A Note on Methods

This essay is based on research I conducted in Asmara, Eritrea, in the winter of 1995–96, as well as on extensive archival research of published and unpublished materials by and about EPLF. I draw particularly on interviews and discussions I conducted with the woman ex-fighter I call Saba, and three other ex-fighters: Elilta, Samira, and Azieb.⁸

Asmara is Eritrea's primary urban center and the capital city. Eritrea has a population of approximately four million, about 400,000 of whom live in Asmara. The distinctive problems confronting ex-fighters who returned to rural homes must be explored in their own right. Many former fighters apparently preferred to settle in urban areas after the war, however. As the ex-fighter I call Samira explained, women fighters from rural areas settled in towns after demobilization rather than returning to their home villages because "we have our own culture within the EPLF. After that it would not be possible to go back and be obedient in the village."

Eritreans' Struggle for Independence

Eritrea came into being as a political entity when the Italians created an East African colony for themselves by military force in the 1880s. Italians then ruled Eritrea as their colony from 1886 until 1941. In 1942, Eritrea passed from the Italians into the hands of the British, who administered it as a “trusteeship” until 1952. Eritrea was then federated to Ethiopia under an arrangement that left considerable local autonomy. Despite historic ties and considerable cultural affinity between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Eritreans’ experience of colonial rule had laid the groundwork for forging a distinct national identity. In 1962 Ethiopia violated the terms of federation and annexed Eritrea. From 1962 until 1993, Eritrea was officially a province of Ethiopia. Eritrea’s first major independence movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), began in 1960. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (which ultimately succeeded in winning independence for Eritrea) first emerged as a splinter group that broke away from ELF in 1971. From 1974 until the definitive victory over Ethiopia in 1991, EPLF led Eritrea’s struggle for nationhood. During that time tens of thousands of Eritreans joined the forces of EPLF as fighters. Many others lived as civilians in “liberated areas” of Eritrea under EPLF control. Other civilians, like those in Asmara, the capital city, continued to live directly under Ethiopian rule. The war of independence also gave rise to an Eritrean diaspora as many (perhaps up to one million Eritreans, according to UNICEF⁹) fled to other countries where they lived as refugees and exiles.¹⁰ The armed struggle ended in 1991. More than 65,000 fighters died in the war.¹¹

Eritrea’s independence was officially declared in 1993 after an internationally supervised national referendum in which Eritreans overwhelmingly voted for nationhood. At that time, women comprised one-third of the roughly 95,000 fighters in EPLF.¹² In the aftermath of the war, some 30,000 women fighters thus began new lives in Eritrea.

From May 1998 until December 2000, Eritrea was back at war in a border dispute with Ethiopia. Women once again served in the fighting forces. However, the 1998–2000 war stands in contrast to the war of liberation. Women and men soldiers in the border war were fighting as a conventional army on behalf of the Eritrean state, whereas during the

struggle for independence, fighters were members of EPLF, which constituted a proto-nation and a revolutionary society in its own right.

EPLF and “The Woman Question”¹³

During Eritrea’s long struggle for independence, women served in EPLF alongside men in all capacities except the top ranks of leadership.¹⁴ As guerilla fighters, women fought side by side with men in mixed units and marched to victory with their male comrades. In fact, the image of a khaki-clad woman warrior brandishing a rifle became emblematic of the nationalist movement. The woman fighter seemed to signify Eritreans’ determination to fight on to the last man and, beyond him, to the last woman. The woman fighter also served as a symbol of the grass-roots nature of the movement, which drew Eritreans from all walks of life and all ethnic groups. The woman fighter with her characteristic unisex dress and unkempt hairstyle, moreover, personified an image of progress, a rupture with the past, and liberation from oppressive traditions. Within EPLF, national liberation and advancement for women were seen as going hand in hand.

Women were drawn to the cause of Eritrean independence from the beginning. ELF, however, limited women’s participation to that of support, helping to supply the movement with provisions and information. Like ELF, EPLF also began as an all-male organization. But in 1973, when three women attempted to join the rebels, they were allowed to stay and were given military training.¹⁵ EPLF soon began to openly recruit women as fighters. Many of the first women fighters came from urban and educated backgrounds, but they were quite successful in mobilizing other women from rural as well as urban areas. Women from all ethnic backgrounds and walks of life joined the movement.

Eritreans use the term “fighter” (*tegadelti* in Tigrinya) to include all those who served in EPLF forces in Eritrea during the war. Fighters had many duties besides serving on the front lines, however. EPLF maintained a base area with schools, hospitals, repair shops, and small factories. EPLF produced its own soap, rubber sandals (which were worn by fighters), artificial limbs, pharmaceuticals, medical supplies, and even sanitary napkins.¹⁶ EPLF also administered and provided services such

as health care and education to populations in the areas liberated from direct Ethiopian control. Women received formal military training, and they lived and fought side by side with men in mixed units. According to Worku Zerai, one of the first three women to become a fighter, rather than being spared from combat, the majority of women fighters were, in fact, assigned to combat duty because they lacked specialized skills that could contribute significantly to support activities.¹⁷

Within its own ranks, EPLF attempted to put gender equality into practice. According to EPLF, women would gain equality through participation in political activities and socially productive labor.¹⁸ This was summed up in the slogan “Equality through Equal Participation.”¹⁹ The approach of EPLF, in practice, was to expand the notions of what women could do and to break down gender barriers that had kept women out of certain kinds of work. Thus, women fighters were trained to work as mechanics, drivers, carpenters, and barefoot doctors, among other occupations.²⁰ Furthermore, male fighters took part in food preparation and other tasks usually reserved for women in Eritrean communities.

EPLF’s approach to gender equality was grounded in Marxist ideas rather than feminist ones, however, and policies regarding gender were conceived and implemented in a top-down fashion by male leadership rather than by women themselves. Similar regimes elsewhere have been described under the rubric of “state feminism.”²¹ The emancipation of women was part of the cultural revolution advocated by EPLF, which saw itself as struggling against “backward,” “reactionary,” and “feudal” elements of traditional culture, as well as against colonialism.²² However, recruiting women also served the pragmatic need to maintain a strong fighting force despite the heavy toll of war upon the entire population of Eritrea.²³ The EPLF slogan, “No Liberation Without Women’s Participation,” thus accurately depicts the hierarchy of goals in which national liberation was central and women’s emancipation figured as one of the means to that end. There was no independent women’s movement in Eritrea or Ethiopia, only the male-led EPLF, which took up certain issues concerning the status of women and mobilized women to achieve the goal of national independence.

An important component of the Front’s strategy of popular mobilization was the formation of mass organizations.²⁴ EPLF created associations

of peasants, workers, and youth as well as a women's organization, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). Worku Zerai points out, however, that NUEW never articulated its own goals as being distinct from the nationalist goals of EPLF; NUEW simply implemented programs that came from the top.²⁵ Moreover, no woman served on EPLF's executive committee during the war, and the use of seniority in allocating positions of authority worked against women since the first members of the Front were all men.

Gender equality was constructed by EPLF in part through the erasure of the feminine.²⁶ This is reflected in the photographs of fighters that illustrate news articles and EPLF publications: women and men dress alike in khaki and rubber sandals and wear their hair "Afro" style. Indeed, one foreign visitor to the field reported difficulty distinguishing women from men.²⁷ Says one ex-fighter, "I never knew myself as a woman. I thought of myself as a man. I faced the same problems as men."²⁸ The construction of women as not only equal to men but as male equivalents meant, however, that some profound issues of gender relations were not so much transformed by EPLF's cultural revolution as repressed and rendered invisible.²⁹

The Front's initial approach to issues of sexual relations was an attempt to suppress them. At first EPLF required its members to be celibate, forbidding fighters to have sexual relations with civilians and, after women joined the Front, forbidding sex between fighters.³⁰ Responding to the reality of intimate relationships among fighters, EPLF introduced its own marriage law in 1977 based on a view of marriage as the partnership of a man and a woman who are each free individuals exercising choice, a radical departure from the marriage practices of Eritrean communities.³¹ EPLF not only forbade the repudiation of nonvirgin brides, it encouraged premarital sex among its members and made contraceptives available.³² Most fighter couples engaged in sex before marriage.³³

Even as EPLF officially recognized the marital relationships and families formed in the field, it accorded them little social status in practice. Fighters lived a collective life, eating and sleeping with members of their unit.³⁴ Loyalty to EPLF was to be uncompromised by other attachments. In the Front, fighters had little or no contact with their families of origin and such contacts were discouraged. Spouses were routinely

assigned separate work duties, with permission given to spend one month of the year together. Children were routinely separated from their parents. Mothers were permitted to spend the first six months with their infants, after which the children were raised communally. Initially the children of fighters were all raised in one institution along with orphans.³⁵ The children apparently did not develop properly under this system, however, and the Front subsequently allowed children to be raised collectively by the unit of their parent(s) (unless both of them were on the front lines).³⁶ Many domestic tasks such as cooking, gathering firewood, carrying water, and child rearing were organized as collective responsibilities that were carried out as public work by all members of the unit in turn. It is significant to note that some tasks, such as making *enjera* (the staple bread eaten with most meals) and carrying water, were also used as punishment, reflecting the devalued status of traditional women's work within EPLF. In some sense, EPLF's policies and practices constituted the triumph of the public over the domestic and the masculine over the feminine.

The Front 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 EPLF. 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.

The Return of the Repressed/Resurgent Domesticity

We came back from the field and instead of us pulling them forward, they are trying to pull us back. . . . We had changed, but the society had not changed.

Saba, woman ex-fighter

Once the liberation struggle ended, Eritrean women fighters confronted a new struggle to build secure economic, political, and social positions for themselves within the nation. Women fighters who had

spent much of their adult lives in the guerilla movement faced the particular challenges of reintegrating into civilian life. The majority of women fighters lacked resources, skills, and jobs. Some women ex-fighters felt they were being devalued in the new society of independent Eritrea.

During three decades of war, family life was disrupted, kin were scattered, and domestic and ritual routines were upset. But with independence achieved and their guerilla warfare days behind them, the first thing many fighters wanted was to reestablish family ties and to start their own families. As EPLF fighters became civilians, extended families were reunited and the older generation could once again exert its influence over the lives of sons and daughters returning from the war. Since 1991, when EPLF fighters returned to join Eritrean society at large, there has been a resurgence of the domestic that has meant very different things for women and men fighters as they resume their lives or improvise new lives as civilians. Women ex-fighters were painfully caught between the revolutionary aspirations they learned in the Front and the more conventional values and gendered expectations asserted by Eritreans in the civilian context. These heroes of the nationalist struggle found that the very qualities that made them good soldiers and comrades stigmatized them as wives and potential wives.

The marriages and divorces of women ex-fighters were big topics of discussion in Asmara during 1995–96. At that time, there was a widespread perception among men and women that women fighters were being divorced by their fighter husbands in favor of civilian brides. Discussing why women fighters were not sought after as mates and were even being divorced by their husbands, Saba and her ex-fighter husband Kidane attributed much of the blame to pressure from families. In Kidane's words, "It is the mothers and the sisters who have the most influence. They say 'why did you marry her because she is not from our [ethnic] group?' or 'she didn't give you a child.'" I was told by one relative that, behind Saba's back, her mother-in-law derides her as "neither a man nor a woman." Kidane himself spoke critically of his brother's wife (also an ex-fighter), telling me that she was "spoiled in the field," which, he explained, was the result of the fact that rural, uneducated peasants were accorded high status in the Front.³⁷ (Although Kidane

emphasized class rather than gender, women too were accorded higher status in the Front than is customary in Eritrean society.) The very focus of popular attention on the marital status of women ex-fighters reflects the new conditions in which EPLF women and men now live. The focus on women's qualifications as marriage partners also contributes to the process of redefining women in terms of their status in the private sphere and their dependent relationship to men, rather than as fighters in their own right within the EPLF or simply as citizens of the Eritrean nation.

The social perception of women fighters as undesirable mates and the abandonment of fighter wives by their husbands are particularly ironic given EPLF's own analysis of customary marriage practices as a key locus of women's subordination.³⁸ Furthermore, women ex-fighters faced rejection as marriage partners just as marital status emerged again as a significant factor in women's social and economic well-being (since EPLF no longer provided for their subsistence).³⁹ In Eritrea, as elsewhere, female headed households tend to be among the poorest.⁴⁰

The end of the guerilla movement also led to a renewed focus on childbearing among ex-fighters. This raised problems of infertility for some women, who spent their peak childbearing years in the struggle. Many fighters had delayed childbearing during the war and, for women, infertility problems brought on by age and by health problems associated with the war are a serious consequence in a society where infertility is commonly blamed on women and understood as legitimate grounds for divorce. No study has yet been conducted on fertility among ex-fighters, so the incidence and causes of infertility among them are not known.⁴¹ The association of barrenness with women fighters may be a popular perception reflecting doubts about ex-fighters' femininity and their ability to function properly as wives. Like the discussions of marriage and divorce, the discussions of fertility problems among ex-fighter women serve to reinscribe women's identities as wives and mothers, and to redefine their worth in terms of their contributions to the family rather than their contributions to the nation as EPLF had done.

Those women ex-fighters who were raising children born in the field or after the struggle also faced new difficulties. Civilian motherhood presented women ex-fighters with new problems of balancing work and

family, since child-rearing had once again become a private family matter, no longer organized collectively by EPLF.

The tensions associated with the resurgence of the domestic reveal the fact that EPLF was a youth culture where rapid social transformation of values and behavior was possible, in part because of the absence of elders with a stake in maintaining tradition and kin group hierarchies. In the field, young female and male revolutionaries were conforming to the culture of EPLF. After independence they were pressured to conform to civilian society and to the demands of their extended families. But for men ex-fighters this meant reclaiming positions of authority within their families and enjoying male privileges such as freedom from domestic work. For women ex-fighters, civilian life means a burden of domestic labor and familial responsibilities for which their experience as comrades in arms did not prepare them. There is some irony in the fact that, after liberation, women former fighters routinely perform at home those menial tasks that were regarded as punishment in the liberation movement. The women's sense of frustration is palpable even when left unspoken. Saba, for one, was outspoken, however, telling me, "after all we sacrificed, we sacrificed more than the men, it is like we are being thrown away."

From Movement to Government

If part of the difficulty in translating women's gains within the Front to peacetime life lies in the resurgence of domestic relations, another part of it lies in the difference between the relationship of a guerilla movement to its members and the relationship of a government to its citizens. Once Eritrean independence was achieved, EPLF embarked on a new era as its leader Isaias Afewerki became head of state and EPLF renamed itself the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), becoming, in effect, the ruling party of a one-party state.⁴² The new nation of Eritrea faced great tasks of reconstruction and economic development in the wake of 30 years of war and neglect. Eritrea is one of the least developed countries in the world, and its population is poor even by sub-Saharan African standards. Regrettably, the process of reconstruction and development was further strained by the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia in May 1998.

Once EPLF/PFDJ leadership became the official government of the Eritrean nation, it no longer denounced the family as a bourgeois institution, but embraced it. The Eritrean state, like other states, can use the family to help regulate society and to provide services that the government cannot provide. The Eritrean constitution asserts that the family “is the natural and fundamental unit of society.” The constitution strikes a blow against the patriarchal family, however, when it goes on to state that husbands and wives “shall have equal rights and duties as to all family affairs.” This is nonetheless a far cry from EPLF’s earlier assertion that “women can only be free when the power of kin groups is smashed.”⁴³ On the positive side, women participated in framing the Eritrean constitution: 21 out of the 50 members of the constitution commission were female.⁴⁴

But perhaps more fundamental is the great gulf between the constitution’s broad assertions, however progressive, and the realities of women’s lives. In the field, EPLF structured fighters’ daily lives; neither the constitution (which in fact has yet to be implemented) nor the government of Eritrea does so. EPLF, although victorious, in effect simultaneously lost some of its power as it went from regulating every aspect of fighters’ daily existence to administering an entire nation from the seat of government. Women ex-fighters then had no real institutional foundation to draw upon once they returned to civilian life. EPLF/PFDJ, facing the daunting challenge of making Eritrea’s economy viable, moreover, had shifted its focus from social transformation to economic development.

After independence, EPLF/PFDJ was no longer in the business of organizing food production or other domestic work. As the government of a new nation, it had much bigger production issues to deal with. Yet daily life had to go on: within the household food had to be prepared, children cared for, clothing washed, floors swept. So, in practice, household labor became once again a “private” matter and fell to women. Class differences, submerged among fighters in the field, became significant in fighters’ lives once again. For some women, extended family households and/or domestic servants made it possible for them to escape some of the domestic work. There is little evidence of men continuing to perform the domestic tasks they carried out as fighters in the field. Samira, a former fighter, laments, “In the field everything was arranged

for you—your food, your laundry. . . . Now you have to organize everything for yourself.” Another ex-fighter says she is trying to raise her daughter to believe women can do anything. But, she explains sadly, since her husband does not do domestic chores, her daughter now “understands that domestic work is only for women.”

The difficulty of extending the gender equality achieved within EPLF to civilian life seemed to crystallize in the issue of children. The subject of children was raised by Elilta, a woman ex-fighter I interviewed who was among the leadership of the National Union of Eritrean Women in 1995–96. When we met in her office, Elilta was dressed in a red suit and wearing matching red nail polish (a far cry from the khakis and Afro she must have worn as a fighter). Elilta said,

People complain a lot. They say “after all we women did, the government is throwing us away, women are being sent back to the kitchen.” But that is not official policy. All the rights are there, this is very clear. But there are personal problems. After the war, women wanted to have children; this is natural. But there are no facilities to take care of them. Most women are too poor to hire help and many do not have family to help them [so they can work outside the home]. They may not even have a husband.

Elilta’s views become more interesting when compared with Saba’s perspectives on the same topics. Saba is in a childless marriage because she delayed childbearing and then could not conceive after the war. Speaking of the prevalence of divorce among women ex-fighters, Saba explained, “most women fighters don’t have children” and, she added, “men use the excuse of children—that’s very important in our society”—to divorce their fighter wives for civilians. Elilta’s definition of childbearing as a “personal” issue and something “women want” stands in contrast to Saba’s perception that in Eritrean society a woman’s worth is partly measured by her childbearing ability and that children are important to society. On this topic, Worku Zerai, for example, states bluntly, “Eritrean women are valued according to their degree of fertility.”⁴⁶

The issue of childbearing thus reveals the limitation of gender equality based on women stepping into male roles. Although women gained

some equality by acting like and being treated as honorary men in the Front, this is unworkable in civilian life where women are mothers, and childcare and domestic work are no longer organized as public work.

At the same time, the shift of the nationalist project from that of liberation to one of economic development has abruptly constricted the opportunities available to women to work side by side with men for the national good in public arenas.

From Liberation to Development: Gender and the Nationalist Project

The Eritrean government has not turned its back on the progressive gender ideals espoused by EPLF. It has continued to support gender equality under the law, even taking affirmative action measures such as reserving 20 percent of the seats in the National Assembly for women candidates. Despite this, Eritrean women seem to be distinctly disadvantaged as citizens of the new nation. One explanation for this lies in the resurgence of the domestic as discussed above. Another reason, I argue, is the shift of the nationalist project to one of development. During the liberation struggle, women could serve well as female manpower, but capitalist development calls for particular skills and assets and rewards them differentially. The goal of development involves different tasks and processes than did the struggle for national liberation. This is particularly true in Eritrea since development is clearly understood to be development within a global capitalist economy, while during the struggle for national liberation EPLF was guided by socialist ideals.

Capitalism is not new to Eritrea, of course. From 1886 to 1941, Eritrea was under Italian colonial rule; during that period the Italians established agricultural plantations and began to industrialize Eritrea. By the 1930s, Eritrea had 730 factories, making it one of Africa's most industrialized areas. By the 1940s, 20 percent of Eritrea's population was urban.⁴⁷ In 1941, however, Eritrea passed into the hands of the British, who did little to develop the country and, in fact, dismantled its railroad and shipped it to India. In the 1950s and 1960s, Eritrea was federated and later annexed to Ethiopia, which dismantled or allowed to fall into disrepair the enterprises and infrastructure that had been established by the

Italians in Eritrea. Many enterprising Eritreans left Eritrea to find work or education in Ethiopia. As the Eritrean struggle for independence gained momentum in the 1970s, Ethiopia's strategy in Eritrea became a military one and no efforts were made to promote development. The Eritrean struggle for independence was thus, to some extent, about development. The only way out of poverty and exploitation for Eritreans appeared to be by gaining control of their own nation and ending subjection to colonial powers or to Ethiopia's despotic rulers. Ironically, both the revolutionary Dergue that took power after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and EPLF embraced Marxist approaches to development.

In the field and in the liberated areas of Eritrea, EPLF pursued a strategy of development rooted in Marxist-socialist ideologies that emphasized equality and grassroots efforts. Self-sufficiency emerged as a key strategy in part due to the reality that EPLF had little support from non-Eritrean sources. One of the ways the Front gained and retained mass support was through the provision of services such as free health care and education in liberated areas. A key initiative of EPLF was land reform, which they promoted in the liberated areas, giving all peasants, including women, land of their own.

Over time, EPLF modified its strong Marxist statements so that by the late 1980s, EPLF (like many movements and regimes in Africa) no longer equated socialism with development. Despite this more pragmatic attitude, however, strong elements of socialist practice nonetheless continued to govern the lives of fighters in the field until independence. No money was used in the base area. Fighters were all volunteers who received subsistence, free education, and health care, but no pay. Egalitarian ideals remained important in fighters' social relations and work was organized collectively.⁴⁸ After independence, all that changed rapidly.⁴⁹ The degree to which the current government of Eritrea has embraced capitalism therefore represents a profound break with the revolutionary socialist orientation of EPLF.

Ruth Iyob, a U.S.-based Eritrean political scientist, describes the Eritrean government as a developmentalist state and says they "talk the same language as the World Bank."⁵⁰ Another observer comments that "the IMF should have no problem in Eritrea," where foreign investment

is being encouraged with “liberal policies.”⁵¹ This capitalist turn is also reflected in the fact that President Isaias himself (“rebel leader turned chief executive,” in the words of *Time* magazine) began working toward an M.B.A. soon after independence.⁵²

As development assumes national priority for Eritreans and capitalist values come to dominate peoples’ lives, the revolutionary nationalist struggle (once a vision of the future) is being reconfigured as history. The struggle is mythologized as an inspiring and uniquely Eritrean past—but not as the model for Eritrea’s future. Thus, even as officials swear their oaths of office “in the name of the Eritrean martyrs” (Constitution of Eritrea, 1997), they look to the examples of Korea and Singapore in charting Eritrea’s future. As the past assumes mythic status, it also becomes removed from the practical concerns faced by Eritreans in everyday life. What Eritreans call “the field,” the culture and experience of fighters during the war, is being defined as a special place, but one that is no longer relevant. Paulos, an Eritrean who returned to work in Eritrea after many years abroad in England and the Sudan put it this way:

They used to produce children’s cereal in the field and people said “how wonderful!” But [after independence] they opened a factory in Decamhare [an Eritrean town] and now you’re competing with products from the Netherlands, Germany, and so on. The presentation and the hygiene! In the field, it didn’t matter. But now we’re in the real world! You have to compete. The same with pharmaceuticals. They used to produce 25 different drugs in the field. That was great. But now you have to compete. You have to have packaging. Everything is taken into account.

Like Eritrea’s revolutionary experience, the woman fighter is also being mythologized as an emblem of heroism and self-sacrifice. The preamble of Eritrea’s constitution, for example, invokes “the Eritrean women’s heroic participation in the struggle for independence.” But even as the mythico-historical woman fighter is being revered, her real life counterparts are being disempowered as their experiences and skills are rendered irrelevant to the new nationalist project of development. Women who spent years in the struggle must compete with everyone else in the

marketplace. Money and education have become the keys to status, wealth, and power.⁵³

During the struggle, EPLF used the slogan “No Liberation Without Women’s Participation.” After independence, the Eritrean government introduced a new slogan: “No Development Without Women’s Participation.” However, the simple change of slogans obscures the marked differences of these goals. In an earlier era, EPLF argued that participation in socially productive labor was the key to improving women’s status. By that standard, the market clearly is not a suitable vehicle for emancipating Eritrean women, since women are less competitive in market terms than their male counterparts due to their unequal access to education and training and to their heavy domestic and reproductive workloads. Eritrean women ex-fighters thus embody, among other things, the tensions inherent in the redefinition of the nationalist project from one of liberation to one of national development within a global capitalist economy. While extreme, the problems of women ex-fighters are not unique to them. Many civilian women in Eritrea often assumed “male” responsibilities for managing households, property, and businesses in the absence of their brothers and husbands. Men returning from their sojourns as fighters, exiles, and refugees reasserted their claims to family resources and authority. Civilian women thus experienced their own form of displacement and devaluation.

For women ex-fighters, opportunities for employment became crucial once they had to reintegrate into civilian life and were no longer guaranteed subsistence by EPLF. In 1992 the government decided to decrease military manpower by 80 percent over several years, and by the end of 1995 about 50,000 fighters had been demobilized. According to the Eritrean Relief and Refugee Commission, nearly two-thirds of the demobilized fighters left school before the fifth grade and 80 percent lacked nonmilitary skills.⁵⁴ The majority of these ex-fighters are men, but women were apparently disproportionately discharged against their will. Eritrean women, moreover, have higher illiteracy rates than men, and it is not clear to what extent education in the Front was able to close the educational gap between male and female recruits.⁵⁵ Worku Zerai reports, for example, that many women lost the literacy skills they had gained through EPLF because they did

not use them. Ann, a U.S. expatriate employed by a UN agency in Eritrea, says of the ex-fighters, “It’s like a lost generation. It’s as if they are being written off and the women are doubly disadvantaged.” Women’s inclusion in the nation is being redefined by capitalist market values in the terms of which women are seen as having little to offer their nation.⁵⁶

Elilta’s analysis of the situation of women ex-fighters is telling. She says:

In general fighters were not educated. In the struggle, everyone can contribute as manpower, but now the government cannot simply carry everyone as an employee. You need to have skills, qualifications. It is simply not budget-wise or efficient. So we try to train women. We have literacy programs and credit programs to help with small businesses and there is a separate [government] department handling demobilization. That is all we can do for them.

If Elilta is reflecting an official government view, it can be summed up as first, government policy is OK even if women are not enjoying equality, because the reasons for that are not public but private (referring to her earlier comments about childbearing); and second, equality for women, if it depends on government resources, is not “budget-wise” or “efficient.” Using the capitalist calculus of budgets and efficiency clearly casts women’s emancipation in a very different light than did the struggle for national independence. In the Front, women were simply female manpower doing the same tasks men did, but now domestic relations organize a vast part of life that the government does not directly organize, and capitalism rather than revolutionary ideology dictates many of the values.

Azieb, a woman fighter who spent 12 years in EPLF, said she too is disappointed that women haven’t benefited more now that EPLF (PFDJ) is in power. She pointed to the fact that at Asmara University, a public institution, only one out of eight or ten students is a woman and there are few women faculty. Then, as if to soften her critique, she began to list the handful of Eritrean women who hold high government positions. But, when I asked provocatively, “So you feel optimistic?” she replied:

No. I am getting more pessimistic as I get older. I used to be optimistic. Perhaps I was naive. I WAS naive. I thought if we fight and die with men, we will have equality. But now I see it is not enough to fight and die to get equality. We need institutions. We need something more.

Saba is also critical of the government's current treatment of women: "Women's problems can't simply be solved by political education. Women need something more—like a guarantee of work," she said. In a political atmosphere that has been described as necessitating "self-censorship,"⁵⁷ these women's statements should be understood as bold critiques.

The ex-fighter Samira told me:

Conditions for former women fighters are very difficult. Every fighter was given 10,000 *birr* (\$500), a year's budget until they can find work.⁵⁸ But there is no work. Government work is little and we don't have qualifications to apply to ministries and so on. And the private sector has not had time to develop yet.

Samira viewed the government's attempts to promote gender equity from a critical perspective: "You can't make equality by laws," she stated flatly. "We have excellent laws giving women equality—really good laws. But so what, if you don't use them! If women have economic independence, social equality will follow." On the subject of children, Samira asserted,

Women are not just working to participate in society, but to have money to live. They are desperate. So they will work somehow [even if they have children]. They will leave their children with a neighbor or a sister. Kindergarten [which means day care in Eritrea] is not an issue for them; that will come later. But there is no work [for women ex-fighters].

Samira herself spent 14 years in the field as an EPLF fighter and then two more years in EPLF until the referendum on independence. She said to me, "We were educated [in the field] to believe [in gender equality]. But we did not achieve success in Eritrean society." Then, perhaps out

of nationalist pride, she added, “As an anthropologist you know that social change comes slowly.”

As members of EPLF, women achieved a kind of equality with men through cooperating toward a common goal. Once national liberation was achieved and the nationalist project was redefined as one of capitalist development, the conditions of women’s participation in the national arena were radically altered.

Conclusion

Exciting bodies of work have emerged in recent years to address the complexities of gender in relation to nationalism, citizenship, and women’s rights. Margot Badran’s study of feminism and nationalism in Egypt stands out as one that shows the complexities of the process in which nationalism is constructed in the context of gender politics even as nationalist movements and national institutions define gender and regulate gender relations.⁵⁹ Too often, however, studies and debates about women’s rights and citizenship have simply taken the nation for granted as the arena in which struggles over definitions of rights and entitlements take place. This literature hasn’t completely broken free from the constraints of the so-called “woman question,” which takes nationalism as a given and constructs gender as a problem to be resolved within the national context. In its crudest form, this view suggests, for example, that postcolonial women must first help to emancipate their nations; only then can gender issues be addressed. Scholarship on nationalism often has implicitly constructed nation-building as a male enterprise so that when gender is addressed at all, women are cast as “the problem” or “question,” while the hegemony of the masculine goes without remark. This helps to explain why (as in the case of EPLF) the answer to “the woman question” has sometimes been to make women over in men’s image. Women and gender relations are not simply problems with which men, as nation-builders, must contend, however.⁶⁰ Rather, gender is fundamental to constituting the identities, communities, and power relations that form the

basis of nationhood.⁶¹ National regimes are always also gender regimes.⁶²

This analysis of women guerilla fighters during and after the liberation struggle in Eritrea draws attention to the ways the national arena is itself constructed and the different dynamics of gender in processes of national liberation and nation-building. By examining the liberation struggle and postwar development in Eritrea, I have sought to reveal some of the complex intersections and contradictions among national liberation, development, and gender equality and to uncover some of the reasons why the equation of national liberation with women's emancipation has so often led to an impasse. My analysis of gender within EPLF reveals that, to some extent, women were integrated not so much as the equals of men, but as male equivalents. Moreover, within its ranks, EPLF did not so much revolutionize domestic relations as suppress them. After independence women and men faced a resurgence of the domestic, coupled with a profound shift in the nationalist project from one of liberation to one of capitalist development. The shift of the nationalist project to capitalist development has created conditions that marginalize large numbers of certain kinds of people (poor, uneducated, unskilled); women largely fall into these marginalized categories. This suggests that women may have potential allies among some sectors of the male population, and it draws attention to the significance of historical processes as opposed to the character of the male leadership or to men in general.

There is no single answer to the question of why gender equality has proven such a difficult and illusive goal even for successful revolutionary movements. The two most significant factors in the Eritrean case are the shift from a focus on social transformation and political mobilization to a focus on national development and the resurgence of the domestic, private sphere as a social arena not directly governed or organized by the progressive movement. Perhaps what the Eritrean experience forces us to confront above all is that gender equality is a political project no less complex or fundamentally transformative of society than nation-building or democracy.

Notes

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2. Ruth Iyob, *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
3. Sondra Hale, "The Soldier and the State: Post-Liberation Women: The Case of Eritrea," in *Frontline Feminisms: Women, War, and Resistance*, ed. Marguerite Waller and Jennifer Rycenga (New York and London: Garland Publishers, 2000), 349–70.
4. Mary Ann Tetrault, *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).
5. Norma Chinchilla, "Nationalism, Feminism, and Revolution in Central America," in *Feminist Nationalism*, ed. Lois West (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Zengie Mangaliso, "Gender and Nation-Building in South Africa," in *Feminist Nationalism*, 130–44.
6. Berte Siim, *Gender and Citizenship: Politics and Agency in France, Britain, and Denmark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.
7. Ruth Iyob, *Eritrean Struggle: Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London: Ithaca Press, 1983); John Markakis, "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 26, no. 1 (1988): 51–70; Bereket Habte Selassie, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1980); John Sorenson, "Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (1991): 301–17; *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*, ed. Lionel Cliffe and Basil Davidson (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1988).
8. All names used in this essay are pseudonyms with the exception of public figures such as President Isaias.
9. UNICEF, *Children and Women in Eritrea* (New York: UNICEF, 1994).
10. Tekle Woldemikael, "Ethiopians and Eritreans," in *Case Studies in Diversity: Refugees in America*, ed. David Haines (Westport, Conn., and London: Praeger, 1996), 147–69.
11. Berhane Woldegabriel, "Demobilising Eritrea's Army," *Review of African Political Economy* 58 (1993): 134–35.

12. Ruth Iyob, "The Eritrean Experiment: A Cautious Pragmatism?" *Journal of Modern African Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 647–73.
13. I put this phrase in quotes to indicate that it refers to EPLF's approach rather than my own.
14. Amrit Wilson, *Women and the Eritrean Revolution: The Challenge Road* (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1991); Veronica Rentmeesters, "Women and Development Planning," in *Emergent Eritrea*, ed. Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1993), 72–85.
15. Worku Zerai, "Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle" (master's thesis, The Hague, 1994).
16. EPLF Information Department, *Eritrea: Dawn After a Long Night* (EPLF, 1989).
17. Worku Zerai, "Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle."
18. Asegedetch Stefanos, "An Encounter With Revolutionary Change: A Portrait of Contemporary Eritrean Women" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988).
19. *Harnet* (Liberation) [bi-monthly organ of Eritreans for Liberation in North America] 6, no. 4-5 (1977): 18.
20. Erich Frankland and Tammy Noble, "A Case of National Liberation with Feminist Undertones: The Secession of Eritrea," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 7, no. 3 (1996): 401–24.
21. Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (London and New York: Verso, 1993); Mayfair Yang, "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China," in *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, ed. Mayfair Yang (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 35–67; Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Susan Greenhalgh, "Fresh Winds in Beijing: Chinese Feminists Speak Out on the One Child Policy and Women's Lives," *Signs* 26, no. 3 (2001): 847–86.
22. Eritrea Women's Association, *Women and Revolution in Eritrea* [pamphlet] (Rome: Eritrea Women's Association, 1979); EPLF, *Eritrea: Dawn After a Long Night*. Given the modernist orientation of EPLF, it is not surprising that the status of women assumed importance in their agenda. EPLF was also a product of its historic moment; in the 1970s, progressive movements around the world were addressing the status of women. Women often serve as symbols of group identity, and gender relations figure in constructions of modernity and progress; see *Identity Politics and Women*, ed. Valentine Moghadam (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994); and Victoria Bernal, "Islam, Transnational Culture, and Modernity in Rural Sudan," in

- Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*, ed. Maria Grosz-Ngaté and Omari Kokole (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 131–51.
23. Mary Dines, “The Land, the People, and the Revolution,” in *Behind the War in Eritrea*, ed. Basil Davidson, Lionel Cliffe, and Bereket Habte Selassie (Nottingham: Spokesman, 1980), 125–39.
 24. James Firebrace and Stuart Holland, *Never Kneel Down: Drought, Development, and Liberation in Eritrea* (Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press, 1985).
 25. Worku Zerai, “Participation of Women the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle,” 35.
 26. I am indebted to Mayfair Yang’s work on “gender erasure” in China for helping me to conceptualize the absence of the feminine in this way.
 27. Olivier Delenze and Claire Leloup, *Women in the Eritrean Revolution: Eyewitness Reports and Testimonies* (National Union of Eritrean Women, c. 1982), 23–29.
 28. Eva Egensteiner, “The Dream Becomes a Reality,” University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, Berkeley, Calif. (1996), catalog number 38337, videorecording.
 29. Victoria Bernal, “Equality to Die For? Women Guerilla Fighters and Eritrea’s Cultural Revolution,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 23, no. 2 (2000): 61–76.
 30. According to Worku Zerai (“Participation of Women”), the prohibition on sex among fighters was to protect the much smaller number of women in the Front from male advances.
 31. Trish Silkin, “‘Women Can Only Be Free When the Power of Kin Groups is Smashed’: New Marriage Laws and Social Change in the Liberated Zones of Eritrea,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 17 (1989): 147–63. In keeping with EPLF’s Marxist ideology and revolutionary goals, its marriage law was taken from China’s 1950 marriage law (Worku Zerai, “Participation of Women,” 49).
 32. EPLF forbade abortion, however (as does the present government, except in cases where the mother’s health is threatened).
 33. Silkin, “Women Can Only Be Free When the Power of Kin Groups Is Smashed.” This does not necessarily indicate great promiscuity, however. According to Silkin’s study of EPLF Department of Social Affairs, three-fourths of those applying to marry said they had had no other prior relationship. (However, it is not clear whether fighters gave a full accounting of their sexual histories.)
 34. Tekle Woldemikael, “Political Mobilization and Nationalist Movements: The Case of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front,” *Africa Today* 38, no. 2 (1991): 31–42.

35. Doris Burgess, Jenny Pierce, Jenny Rossiter, and Trish Silkin, *Eritrean Journey* (London: War on Want, 1985); see especially the introduction.
36. Fighters were encouraged to marry someone in their unit or assigned nearby; see Silkin, "Women Can Only Be Free When the Power of Kin Groups Is Smashed."
37. Fighters from bourgeois backgrounds, on the other hand, were stigmatized to some extent.
38. Eritrean Women's Association, *Women and Revolution in Eritrea*.
39. Worku Zerai ("Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle"), in fact, sees the divorce of fighters for civilians as an expression of the renewed material significance of marriage with the return to civilian life. However, the fact that civilian women still marry men ex-fighters while women ex-fighters are rejected by fighters and civilians alike cannot be explained solely in economic terms, but must be placed in the context of gendered inequities.
40. UNICEF, *Children and Women in Eritrea*.
41. While it seems probable, given EPLF's progressive stance and that women fighters were more likely to have had multiple sexual partners than civilian women (and therefore a greater likelihood of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases), civilian women can be exposed through the activities of their male partners who may frequent prostitutes or keep mistresses.
42. PFDJ explicitly calls itself a Front and not a party.
43. Silkin, "Women Can Only Be Free When the Power of Kin Groups Is Smashed."
44. Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, "When the Drafting of a Constitution Is Not Confined to Men of Stature or Legal Experts: The Eritrean Experience," *Eritrean Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (1998): 143–61.
45. Egensteiner, "The Dream Becomes a Reality."
46. Worku Zerai, "Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle," 10.
47. Stefanos, "An Encounter with Revolutionary Change."
48. Roy Pateman, *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning* (Trenton, N.J., New York, and London: Red Sea Press and Routledge, 1998).
49. There is one area of continuity with EPLF's earlier practices; national service is required of all young people (men and women alike) who did not serve in EPLF. They receive six months of military training and are then deployed in rural areas for a year to help with road building, reforestation, and other projects. Some Muslim Eritreans have tried to argue for the exemption of Muslim women and some families apparently tried to use marriage as an exemption for women, but the government has held fast to the requirement that all young citizens regardless of

- gender, religion, or marital status must do their national service. The requirement of not only national service but military training for women is a significant legacy of EPLF's revolutionary culture. It also can be interpreted as emphasizing the supreme authority of the government over its female citizens over and above patriarchal domestic and religious authorities.
50. Ruth Iyob, "The Eritrean Experiment: Inherent Conflicts in the Pursuit of Democracy," UCLA African Studies Program, Los Angeles, Calif., 24 October 1997 (unpublished).
 51. John Markakis, "Eritrea's National Charter," *Review of African Political Economy* 63, no. 22 (1996): 128.
 52. Robin Wright, "In the '90s, Ex-Soldiers Don't Just Fade Away," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 April 1998, 1.
 53. Women are not alone in being devalued, however. A whole generation of men who have few marketable skills or credentials other than military experience are now confronting nationalism as development largely defined by capitalist market values, in the terms of which they are expendable.
 54. Wright, "Ex-Soldiers Don't Just Fade Away," 1.
 55. Kifla Gebremedhin and Afeworki Measho, "Strategies for Technology Transfer: Lessons for Eritrea," *Eritrean Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (1998): 111-31.
 56. Worku Zerai, "Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle."
 57. Iyob, "The Eritrean Experiment."
 58. Eritrea has since introduced its own currency, the *nakfa*.
 59. Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
 60. Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali and the Book Review Literary Trust, 1989).
 61. Moghadam, *Identity Politics and Women*; Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988); *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).
 62. Karen Kampwirth, "Legislating Personal Politics in Sandanista Nicaragua, 1979-1992," *Women's Studies International Forum* 21, no. 1 (1998): 53-64; Suad Joseph, "Gender and Citizenship," *Middle East Report* 198 (1996): 4-10.

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