

**“A New Race of Women”: The Challenges of Reintegrating
Eritrea’s Demobilized Female Combatants**

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ABSTRACT

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The demobilization of Eritrea’s female combatants after national independence marked an end to the gender equality and social liberation they experienced while participating in the guerrilla forces. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front’s resocialization of fighters sought to replace their traditional identities temporarily, such that the transformation of women’s wartime roles and identities led to their social stigmatization and economic marginalization during post-conflict reconstruction. An examination of female combatants’ experiences from other world conflicts, including Zimbabwe, Vietnam and El Salvador, reveals common patterns of disempowerment and arrested reintegration if women veterans are not able to peacefully remobilize themselves into civil society groups that recognize and reaffirm their proven abilities. Interviews, observations, and relevant literature point to the need for development interventions targeting female ex-fighters to employ identity crisis intervention principles and group formation methods to foster civil society growth amongst this population to lessen the further loss of their wartime gains.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to the women combat veterans of Eritrea's Liberation Struggle and to all female combatants of liberation wars for their strength, determination and inspiration.

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List of Acronyms

CSCA	Community-based Savings and Credit Association
CTTC	Consultancy, Testing and Training Center
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
DRP	Demobilization and Reintegration Program
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERREC	Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FMLN	Frente Faribundo Marti de Liberation National
IGA	Income Generating Activity
NCDRP	National Commission for Demobilization and Reintegration Programs
NDP	National Democratic Program
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NS	National Service
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Fund
UoA	University of Asmara
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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1 Rigbe

Outside the town of Akordat I was introduced to Rigbe¹. She invited us into her cookhouse for some tea that seemed to materialize out of nowhere. I was accompanying Awet, an Eritrean woman working for CARE International and Alazar, a young man who served as field agent for the local development organization VISION-Eritrea on their bi-annual monitoring and evaluation tour of project sites in the Western Gash Barka Region. As a summer intern for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) I was given the task of assessing whether and how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) under the Agency's support were addressing gender issues in their projects. CARE's activities were targeting the 'poorest of the poor,' which I came to discover often meant demobilized female fighters from the Liberation War. Rigbe was a former fighter.

Awet and Alazar both knew Rigbe well and she seemed accustomed to their visits. Via translation I asked her about her children—I counted four—who were curiously eyeing me from the doorway and about her calf tied near me whose wet nose kept finding the side of my neck. It was then I began to learn that Rigbe was somewhat of a celebrity—an NGO 'Success Story'—in spite of her difficult past. Married when she was thirteen years old, Rigbe quickly became the mother of two children. Her husband, a farmer and goat herder in the southern Debub region, joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) soon after their second child was born. The EPLF was fighting what would be a 30-year war against Ethiopia for an Independent Eritrea. After he left for the front, Rigbe never saw her husband again.

Slowly shunned by her husband's family when he did not return and when food stocks ran low, Rigbe moved her family to the Gash Barka Region to find work around the military camps at the front. Laundry, gardening, trench digging, cooking and companionship became her new occupations as she followed the EPLF for four years. Eventually she was trained to fire weapons, repair trucks and to care for the wounded and sick. When I asked Rigbe why she became a fighter in the Liberation Struggle she simply replied that they were her 'family.' The longer she was in the camps the more she learned what the EPLF was fighting for—to build a society based on

¹ See Appendix A: *Continent/Region/Country Map* and Appendix B: *Photographs from Akordat, Gash Barka, Eritrea (July 2004)*.

equality and self-reliance. They taught her basic literacy, how to handle money and how to repair guns. Even after the fighting ended she stayed around the camps, uncertain of what life held for her and her children after the war.

When I met Rigbe, in July 2004, she was the mother of four children and had recently taken in two more. Her two oldest children from her marriage were attending secondary school, a fact she was very proud of. Awet whispered to me that her two younger children each had different fathers, fighters from the Border War (1998-2000), and Rigbe was not currently married. Her neighbor had died in childbirth some weeks back so the widowed husband asked Rigbe to look after his children and went to look for work. As we sipped our tea in the sweltering cookhouse Rigbe nursed her one-year old son and smiled at us from time to time.

Rigbe's story contradicted much of what I had read about the Eritrean Liberation War and women's part in it. She just didn't seem to fit the picture of the glorified female fighter so often written about. She did not talk about life in the trenches being a Utopic time of equality between genders, ethnic groups and religions—points often made by scholars and journalists—but she did speak fondly of the close relationships she made in the EPLF. International donors had flooded hundreds of millions of dollars into Eritrea after the war to aid their Demobilization and Reintegration Program (DRP)², but somehow Rigbe had been missed and did not receive any assistance after she turned her weapon in. Rigbe had found herself shaped by the war, both by chance and by choice, and meeting her opened my eyes to the realities she and other women experienced when their lives were forever altered by the EPLF both during and after the conflict.

Awet and Alazar went on telling me Rigbe's story—which they had documented a year earlier as a development intervention success story—as she showed us around her fenced-in compound. When the war ended Rigbe's livelihood also seemed to be decommissioned. She never attended a formal demobilization orientation and thus

² Although the United Nations and International NGOs refer to this post-war process as Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) today, the Government of Eritrea uses the terms Demobilization and Reintegration Program (DRP) to refer to their efforts after the Liberation War and the Border War. Today, the National Commission for Demobilization and Reintegration Programs (NCDRP) operates under the direction of the UNDP to plan and execute initiatives for demobilized soldiers and those who have completed their National Service requirements. Therefore, this research uses the acronym DRP and DDR synonymously.

never received her certificate of service card or any 'transitional allowance' and food rations let alone vocational training and employment assistance. As a former rural farmer it was assumed that she would return to this life, but Rigbe felt as if she could not return to her husband's family or to her own. In 2002 she heard about women's groups being formed in the town of Akordat that would allow single mothers to borrow money for income generating activities (IGAs). Armed with this knowledge, Rigbe moved her family from the military camp to Akordat. She made friends through the local Coptic Christian Church and became a part of one of the first Community-based Savings and Credit Associations (CSCA's) initiated by a partnership between CARE International and VISION Eritrea.

Most CSCAs are made up of 15-20 women although gender is not a requirement for membership. CARE and VISION had held several town meetings open to the entire community where it was stressed that the CSCAs were designed to help the 'poorest of the poor', a population determined by the community members themselves. Rigbe fit this profile in Eritrea's post-conflict era: an ex-fighter, single mother of several children (and other dependents), head of the household, unschooled, with few skills and rural. Her membership in the group allowed her to take out a series of loans for IGAs—her latest loan purchased the friendly calf. Rigbe had built her cookhouse, animal pens, and home all by herself, while caring for her children and doing manual labor for local farmers when it was available. CARE called Rigbe a 'success', an example of a woman who had benefited because of their economic development programs. When most NGOs were targeting female ex-fighter heads of household with mixed results, Rigbe's economic independence and self-confidence offered a shining example of how a little intervention could go a long way.

As we were waving good-bye, I couldn't help but wonder what Rigbe had gained (and lost) from the war. Although she was now economically independent I still got the feeling that somehow she had been let down. Her traditional roles as a woman, a wife, and a mother had limited her choices in life and confined her identity. In contrast, the EPLF had opened the door to an education, skills training and liberated attitudes towards

marriage and sexuality for Rigbe. By choosing³ to be a military fighter she had experienced a power and a sense of belonging and value unlike before. All this seemed to disappear after independence. Only when CARE came to town did Rigbe's life take an upswing again. She said her success was due to the other women in her CSCA who had become her support system much the same way her fellow EPLF fighters had during the war. To many Eritreans, thirteen years after the conflict's end, Rigbe was not a war hero. Rather, she was seen as a fallen woman, illiterate and in need of assistance in a country lacking the resources and capacity to help her. She had done her duty to free her country but now an NGO—not her country—was helping her.

I guess I had hoped that Eritrea's liberation would have equaled Rigbe's liberation. Her identity had been undoubtedly reshaped by the conflict she had participated in and by the culture she returned to after the war. The EPLF had given women like Rigbe a glimpse at a society based on equality and opportunity for all, but ultimately it was her own resilience and resourcefulness that determined her survival. She had reintegrated herself into a community and into a group that allowed her to once again feel like she was in a family after her real family had disappeared. The EPLF had won the war but it seemed it was NGOs who were reintegrating the women warriors. Months after my return to the United States I still think about the afternoons I spent chatting with Rigbe and other female ex-fighters in Eritrea. Those memories inspired me to gain a deeper understanding of their participation in the war and its post-conflict impacts on their lives. I was also intrigued with the similar hidden benefits Rigbe seemed to have gained from belonging to both the EPLF and a CSCA. In many ways Rigbe's women's group was attempting to revive the EPLF's dedication to raising the status of women, allowing them to participate in all aspects of their development. But unlike the EPLF, CSCA membership encouraged both women's traditional and liberated identities to show through in an atmosphere of social support.

2 Research Focus

During the period of armed struggle against Ethiopia (1962-1991), significant changes occurred in gender relations due to the influence of the EPLF. One of the most striking features of the EPLF's program of social

³ I found no evidence that women in the EPLF's liberation army were ever forced into combat roles. To my knowledge, women who became fighters in the Liberation War did so of their own free will. However, as in Rigbe's case, some women surely felt that the protection afforded by the EPLF, the employment opportunities and the respect and freedoms fighters experienced were a strong lure into combat roles.

reform was placing center stage issues of women's rights. Front leaders seized the moment to redefine socially acceptable roles for women to fulfill in the war movement beyond their traditional supportive roles as wives and mothers creating an atmosphere for new female identities to emerge. When acceptable women's roles were redefined again after the war, society and the leadership expected women veterans to suppress their fighter identities and return to their old ways of thinking and doing resulting in a loss of women's equal rights. Eritrea's DRP program lacked gender analysis such that women were not a part of its planning and implementation and the expectations and needs of both the demobilized female fighters and society were ignored during post-conflict reconstruction. This resulted in the marginalization of women's issues and a lack of focus on the root causes of female ex-combatant's poverty and stigmatization.

The aim of this research was to discover how participating in the EPLF's combat forces impacted the roles and identities⁴ of female fighters during and after the Liberation War⁵ in order to inform future DDR programs and development initiatives aimed at effectively reintegrating women ex-combatants. Women who fought with the EPLF experienced new social freedoms and levels of respect they had not experienced in civilian life, and this feeling of emancipation led to similar expectations of life after the war. But in the words of one former ex-combatant,

“As for us, upon reentering society, we find that we are liberated but not free. In the field we were not liberated, but we were free (Hale 2001, 138).

The all-male leadership of the EPLF manipulated Eritrea's social structure and created the icon of the liberated, modern, woman soldier to fulfill their 'manpower' needs. In the trenches, the Front became a 'total institution' responsible for re-socializing combatants into roles and identities that would not be reintegrated after independence. Therefore we must explore the actions and conditions that benefited women combatants during and after the war and those that were detrimental to their livelihoods and social reintegration.

⁴ Female fighters who participated in the Border Conflict (1998-2000) are also discussed briefly as their experiences are similar to those of Liberation War combatants.

⁵ A *role* is a part one plays implying rights, obligations and expected behavior patterns associated with a particular social status. *Identity* is a condition of being one's self or the sense of self each individual holds. Roles are socially constructed and identities function at an individual level within roles. When roles change identities also change, however, because one's identity is unique to the individual; once it has shifted it forever changes the individual. People can play many roles in their lives whereas one's identity is a culmination of experiences that make up the self.

Although the EPLF's program of social reform paid particular attention to the oppression of women—especially their lack of education and marriage rights—during the war, the current Government of Eritrea has neglected to fulfill the expectations of its women veterans as traditional gender norms have returned. Therefore, the EPLF-created National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) may not be the best suited to speak on behalf of female ex-combatants. As an alternative, international NGOs are beginning to target the needs of female ex-fighters with the use of 'identity crisis intervention' principles and group formation methods aimed at fulfilling aspects of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000). The Resolution stresses the importance of adopting a gender perspective when assessing the different needs of female and male ex-combatants (and their dependents) during the reintegration and reconstruction process and involving women in the planning for disarmament, demobilization, reintegration and peace building measures.

3 Challenging Internal and External Oppression

The story of the Eritrean Revolution is as much as struggle against sexism as it is against colonialism. "Remember the women who have been martyred fighting and those women who have been born and have grown up fighting for the liberation of our country. We are the EPLF as much as anyone... We fight for our rights as women, but the world outside our bodies, outside our identity as women, belongs to us too." – Maaza, EPLF Women's Mass Organization (Wilson 1991, 1)

Eritrea is a diverse, multi-ethnic nation⁶ welded together by Italian colonialism (1890-1941), British administration (1941-1952), federation with Ethiopia (1952-1962), a subsequent thirty-year war for independence (1961-1991), and a recent Border Conflict (1998-2000)—conditions and events that have greatly impacted the country's current state. In order to better understand the context under which women willingly joined the armed forces in Eritrea's Liberation War and underwent a dramatic identity change women's experiences of oppression by internal and external forces will be briefly examined.

From birth, an Eritrean girl is seen as a burden, a child that can do many more things to embarrass the family than a son. Gebremedhin notes that Eritrean girls are referred to as 'pieces of cotton' while boys are compared to 'diamonds'. A diamond can be dropped into the mud, picked up and washed clean again, but a cotton ball can

⁶ Nine ethnic groups are commonly identified as occupying Eritrea. Some of these groups are shared with Djibouti (Afar), Sudan (Haderab, Tigre) and Ethiopia (Afar, Tigrinya, Saho); others are unique to Eritrea (Billen, Kunama, Nara). One group migrated in the last century from the Arabian Peninsula (Rashaida).

never return to its original purity once dropped into the mud, no matter how much cleaning is done (2002, 31).

Wilson quotes former female fighters describing how as girls their paths in life were largely decided for them. A girl's family and her religion, Christian or Muslim, prepare her for life as a married woman. Secluded from much of society, girls are circumcised very young in an attempt to control their sexuality⁷. Most Eritrean women have 5-6 children over their lifetime and few attend school past the 5th grade (Gebremedhin 2002, 12). Girls are taught to be withdrawn, obedient, and passive and to believe that they are inferior to men. They are the "guardian's of the family honor," which is dependent on their chastity and behavior. Women have little choice but to accept lives of illiteracy, economic dependence, arranged marriages and scrutiny of their actions. A woman's life is a struggle and those who challenge their place in society tend to be "isolated as individuals (Wilson 1991, 7, 65)." All of these traditional expectations of women differed with those the EPLF had for its female combatants. All fighters, regardless of their gender, were taught to be assertive and were encouraged to express their ideas and opinions. Respect for one's comrades included the allowance of women and men to freely chose their sexual partners without risking judgment. Female fighters were literate, skilled and lauded for their liberated behavior.

The first major impact on the roles of women in Eritrea came under Italian colonization. During the Fascists period, Eritrea experienced its first urbanization population shift bringing women to city centers where they experienced strict segregation laws. During this period, Eritrean women faced sexual violence characteristic of an apartheid society. With colonialism came prostitution "because society was changing and there was no education for women. So, if they left home there was little means of survival (Wilson 1991, 13-14)." Increased prostitution and sexual exploitation of women in turn heightened Eritrean society's control over 'good and pure' women. The entire Eritrean population was restricted to low levels of education and labor until the British defeated Italy in 1941 (Gottesman 1998, 43, Wilson 1991, 11). However, the eventual decision to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1950 reflected the strategic interests of Western Powers rather than the wishes of the Eritrean

⁷ According to Joni Seager, 99% of Muslim females and 92% of Christian females undergo female genital cutting in Eritrea (2003, 55). Carr's Demographic and Health Survey (1998) found that 44% of Eritrean females are circumcised before they are a year old. And, the majority of Eritrean women (69%) believe the practice should continue citing "custom or tradition" as their reasons for support.

people (Denison 2002, 33)⁸. A systematic policy of control and underdevelopment followed and women became active in worker protests and strikes (Wilson 1991, 23, Denison 2002, 34). However, women were rarely arrested because their political participation was not taken seriously, so more females were encouraged to join opposition movements. As one female fighter stated,

“People became involved because their day-to-day life was affected. Ethiopian oppression created consciousness in every household (Wilson 1991, 23).”

The Liberation War for independence from Ethiopia began in 1961 and for the next 30 years the conflict was virtually ignored by the international community. The first opposition group, the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM), restricted women’s involvement to traditional roles. Later, the more aggressive Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), dedicated to freeing Eritrea through an armed struggle, gained power. Women’s revolutionary roles expanded under the ELF to include more spying and message handling by those who interacted daily with Ethiopian officials (Denison 2002, 41). In the first decade, attacks by ELF guerrillas were answered by Ethiopian reprisals often directed against the civilian population. Rural women and girls experienced the war first hand as Ethiopian forces burned villages and killed hundreds forcing many to seek refuge in the Sudan. As a result the sympathy that might once have existed among some sectors of the population for a close relationship with Ethiopia rapidly disappeared (Tzehaine 1998) and war became a women’s experience.

From 1970 to 1974, the ELF and the splinter group the Eritrean People Liberation Front (EPLF) fought a civil war. Sherman reported in 1980 that one of the key factors that led to the formation of the EPLF was the movement’s accusation that the ELF was postponing fundamental changes, namely women’s level of involvement in the war and in society, until after independence was achieved (106). The EPLF eventually established itself as the more powerful force and its push for more soldiers to stand up to the formidable Ethiopian army led to women’s combat recruitment in the 1970’s (Tzehaie 1998). With few economic or educational opportunities for women in the country, it is no wonder that the prospect of employment, education,

⁸ According to Gebremedhin (2002) The UN general assembly granted Eritrea a “self-governing status within a federal union with Ethiopia (3-4).” But Connell feels that the notion of a Eritrea being a “distinct federal government” was flawed. After federation, the Ethiopian government immediately began whittling away at Eritrean identity, culture and tradition. And as part of a larger, feudal kingdom that had no constitution and few civil rights Eritrea had little chance at self-rule (1993, 57). Wilson notes Eritrea’s federation to Ethiopia happened in the face of “massive protests and against all historical and legal considerations” implying the forceful takeover of the former colony (1991, 7).”

skills acquisition and the fulfillment of a national duty possibly leading to more equal rights strongly lured Eritrean women to join the EPLF. In 1990, 40% of the total membership of the Front and 30% of front line combatants were women, fighting as equals next to male soldiers (Pateman 1990, 465). And by the close of the war a year later, one third of the 65,000 Eritrean casualties were female (Fisher 1999).

In April 1993 a referendum was held in which 99.8% of the population endorsed national independence. Later that year, Eritreans elected their first President, Isaias Afewerki, formerly Secretary-General of the EPLF (Tzehaie 1998). The EPLF became the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) offering hope that the social revolution that had taken place within the EPLF may eventually spread to the whole of Eritrea. Military leaders assumed positions of political power, although women were not present in the planning of the DRP and few were appointed in the new government relative to their participation in the liberation struggle. For the first four years after independence, the PFDJ introduced EPLF-inspired laws aimed at ensuring the rights of women. The National Democratic Program (NDP) formulated in January 1977 and updated in March 1987, became a part of the first Eritrean Constitution. It outlined the EPLF's wide-ranging objectives in relation to women's rights as follows:

- Develop a union through which women can participate in the struggle for national liberation and for social transformation.
- Outline a broad program to free women from domestic confinement and raise their political, cultural and productive levels.
- Assure women full rights of equality with men in politics, the economy and social life as well as equal pay for similar work.
- Promulgate marriage and family laws that safeguard the rights of women.
- Protect the rights of women to two months maternity leave with full pay.
- Protect the rights of mothers and children and provide delivery, nursery and kindergarten services.
- Struggle to eradicate prostitution.
- Respect the right of women not to engage in work harmful to their health.
- Design programs to increase the number and upgrade the quality of women leaders and public servants (cited in Green 1994, 6).

Several of the NDP's goals were achieved, to some degree, but the social reintegration of female fighters became difficult when traditional family values and gender role expectations clashed with the values of combatants⁹.

⁹ Traditionally, women's and men's behavior is reinforced by values and beliefs tied to religion in Eritrea so that any social change may be viewed as a challenge to deeply held religious beliefs (Gebremedhin 2002, 15).

National security and a return to ‘normalcy’ called for women especially to abandon the freedoms they had experienced as soldiers when females were once again seen as uniquely suited for domestic responsibilities and “too weak and emotional to possess authority (Gebremedhin 2002, 56).” In late 1997, Eritrea and Ethiopia resumed fighting along Eritrea’s southern border resulting in a two-year war. This abrupt return of conflict threatened to reverse reconstruction strides made towards gender equality. Militarism rebounded and females were once again called upon to defend their country. However, by this point female fighters held no illusions of their service leading to their equal rights with men in civilian life. Nineteen-year old Senait Tekleab’s mother and father fought with the EPLF. While fighting during the Border Conflict she remarked,

“My mother said, ‘I am really proud of you. We liberated the country. Now you are the ones to defend it. People like my mother did not accept it to be at home waiting for their husbands. We do what they did. After everything I have done here, I am sure everything else will be easier. But fighting does not make us equal. It is only a start (Fisher 1999).’”

4 Creating a ‘Revolutionary Role’ for Women

The EPLF had both practical and ideological reasons for arming women in the liberation struggle. Mason emphasizes that women serving in combat roles were central to the process of forming a national identity. But it was male authorities, not women, who created strategic roles for females to play in the war for independence that would be also accepted in the patriarchal society. Enloe reminds us that the ideas of masculinity and militarism are closely linked but this does not mean that militaries are only concerned about men. “For the military to obtain and keep the number and kind of men in the ranks that officials think they need, military policy makers have to control not only men but women (2000, 253).” In particular, the military must be concerned with the concepts of femininity and of the “liberated woman (235)”. The EPLF followed this model by shaping Eritreans’ ideas as to what constituted a new acceptable expression of femininity before women were encouraged to join the fighting forces as ‘liberated’ combatants.

In a highly traditional, gender-divided culture, certain conditions must exist for women to be allowed to forge new identities in new roles that are outside the conventional responsibilities allotted to them as daughters, wives and mothers. Through the succession of Eritrean liberation movements women’s revolutionary roles diversified, because, as Segal asserts, the military’s need for personnel has long been the driving force behind allowing

women to participate in combat roles throughout history and across nations¹⁰(1995, 757). Because the military may be the most masculine of all institutions certain socially constructed perceptions must be manufactured if women are to be armed. And if a military enlists women the institution “must remain appealing for men (Enloe 2000, 238).” For women to participate, either the military has to be perceived as transformed to make it more compatible with how women are perceived to be, or women have to be perceived as changing in ways that make them more seemingly suited for military service. Alternatively, “the situation has to be perceived as so dire as to require an extreme and unusual response (Segal 1995, 758).”

In the case of the male-led EPLF all three perceptual shifts were strategically constructed. The conventional idea of the military changed in people’s minds when the EPLF crafted an ideology of unity and equality in the struggle. All Eritreans had suffered under colonialism so all should have the opportunity to participate in their own liberation via political independence. Women changed when they were encouraged to assert themselves in ‘unfeminine’ ways—necessary and legitimated behavior within a military institution. Chu Chu became a fighter in 1977. She remembers how women had to prove their abilities to male fighters during the early stages of the war.

“When the women first joined [the Front] in 1973 the men thought, ‘What can they do, these women?’ Then the men saw what women can do—in the clinics and at the front line. They saw them fight and take prisoners, capture tanks; they saw them when they lost their legs and their eyes. Then they stopped speaking about women, now they accept us (Wilson 1991, 99).

These perceptual shifts would have been unnecessary if a “dire situation” had not called for them. For young girls to leave their sheltered homes, supported by family and country, to take up arms and live freely amongst not just men but soldiers was both extreme and unusual. So, the major factor that determined women’s inclusion in the EPLF’s fighting forces was society’s actual and perceived state of national security. The safety and future of Eritrea’s people (economically, politically and culturally) was under mounting threat by Ethiopia, and the EPLF’s adherence to self-reliance—denying any outside military support—jeopardized Eritrea’s security even more. The use of an all-volunteer force opened new avenues for young, unmarried women who otherwise would have had

¹⁰ Cultural values supporting gender equality, in more recent times, have contributed to the numbers of women in combat roles and are likely to have increased influence in the future, although this remains to be seen in Eritrea.

few career opportunities. Most women lacked formal education and training, but their labor could still be used to keep the war machine running and to maintain social services in the liberated areas. Under the EPLF females were trained to be fighters and in all skill areas men were trained in¹¹, albeit the numbers of women in predominantly male trades always remained relatively lower (Segal 1995, 761).

With so many factors contributing to the involvement of women in the EPLF's fighting forces, family structure and cultural values stood to prevent their participation. In most cultures, women's roles are strongly linked to family values so that the greater the family responsibilities for the average women, the less females tend to be represented in the military (Segal 1995, 770). To get around this the EPLF recruited many young, unmarried women and in doing so the Front took over as the dominant socializing force for these females. Segal points out that when young women are recruited into combat roles they tend to break away from traditional life patterns. They get married and have fewer children later in life. As women stayed in the EPLF's fighting forces the movement responded by relaxing its policy on marriage and consequently created a childcare system to fit the needs of the mothers who were needed to fight the war (768). Therefore, the EPLF succeeded in strategically reinterpreting and reconstructing society's perceptions of 'femininity' and of the 'family' when women became combatants by encouraging the population to minimize the importance of sex differences and reject a gender-based division of social roles in the name of increased military manpower and ideological unity.

4.1 Femininity Symbolized

The Liberation Front not only had to convince families and men to accept women as soldiers, women needed to be encouraged to step outside of their traditional roles¹². Although they comprised one third of the guerrilla forces, most female EPLF members were not fighters¹³. EPLF leaders needed to craft powerful propaganda messages (to be pitched by articulate women) to persuade females to volunteer for front line positions. To this

¹¹ See Figure 1: *Time at Skills Acquisition of Ex-Fighters—Disaggregated by Gender*

¹² Muslim leaders said that Islamic women were forbidden to go out of the house and to go around with men. And many, men and women, believed that the EPLF only wanted to make prostitutes out of women because females were incapable of being effective fighters. As a result of such resistance, some of the first women who took up arms with the EPLF were threatened with divorce or thrown out of their homes (Wilson, 1991 56-7). Eventually, either people came to realize the necessity of women as fighters, if only to stand up against the formidable Ethiopian forces, or women defied cultural norms and joined the EPLF of their own free will.

¹³ See Figure 2: *Women's Participation in the EPLF by Employment Type—1989*

end a women's arm of the EPLF—the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW)—was created in 1979 to motivate women's participation by promoting an image of the liberated, modern, female soldier as the new essence of femininity. The EPLF's socialist ideology linked women's oppression to social development and this developed into a critique of women's role in the domestic sphere (Silkin 1983, 909). Traditional or 'domestic' contributions to liberation, as opposed to military participation, were undervalued by the Front, creating a powerful rhetoric with which to harness the growing nationalist consciousness of women. The NUEW's mission was to impress upon women that the ultimate demonstration of female patriotism was 'active' participation in the front as a military fighter or in roles previously reserved for men (truck and tank driving, mechanical work, political decision-making, etc.). In these new roles, EPLF women were propagandized as actively exercising their rights and responsibilities (Mason 2001, 2). Enloe argues that it is a common phenomenon for military planners to seek the help of civilian women to orchestrate the enlistment of female combatants. "These women see younger women's entry into the ranks of the state's soldiery as a step towards all women gaining 'first-class citizenship' (2000, 238)." Instead of seeing themselves as militarized women the women of the National Union believed they were advancing a 'women's cause' by encouraging women to join the EPLF fighting forces.

As argued, women not only add numbers to a military force, they also "add legitimacy or symbolic power to the war effort." Barth states that female soldiers symbolize the unity of a movement; everyone is on board—even women. Pictures of female soldiers are often used in propaganda to send a message that the movement's cause is just, since even women fight for it¹⁴. Women fighters also represent a movement that fights for society's "most downtrodden" sending a message to the enemy that even the most oppressed classes are armed and ready to fight to the end. The use of women soldiers as poster girls for a movement also works to mobilize more men, as few males are able to maintain their manhood and resist the call to fight when women are already serving (2002, 9). John Sorenson concurs, declaring that nationalist movements gain a following by creating symbols and mythologies, which evoke emotional responses (1991, 308). And feminists have enriched our understanding of how women's roles are strategically created and shift to meet the needs of male-dominated societies. This strategic construction includes crafting mythologies and essentialized characters for women and men to play.

¹⁴ See Appendix C: *EPLF Propaganda Photographs and Posters*.

While attending the wedding of a female Eritrean friend in Asmara I heard a popular song. Translated the chorus repeats, “Be brave, my sister. Be brave, my daughter. Be brave.” I was told the song is traditionally sung when a bride is sent to her husband’s house...or when she is sent into battle. This simple song expresses the two spheres that have impacted Eritrean women’s identities most. They have earned respect both in the domestic sphere and in the public sphere—limited to the battlefield. Emmanuel (2002) has examined the identities ascribed to female combatants and stresses that these constructions do not help us understand the individual motivations that drove each woman to take up arms or her expectations of the rewards she would receive for doing so. One identity ascribed to women fighters frequently in EPLF and NUEW literature is what Emmanuel describes as the ‘romanticized female militant’. Her identity as a political actor overshadows her feminized self as she becomes an unwavering fighter and a “liberated” woman who acts and sacrifices for her people’s freedom. But this woman cannot simply be free by choice because her liberation is one with the liberation of the land. Only through victory and independence of the nation can the female fighter hope to achieve her own independence. The woman’s motivations are second to the dominant political cause of the movement she belongs to. So, women combatants remain subservient to the male-determined cause—remain brave and selfless daughters to their families, their communities and to their country. Married to the cause, she can only live and die through it.

This caricature became a powerful symbolic identity women were encouraged to embody, but it was only a temporary role offered in the wartime theater. As Hale puts it, society and the combatants alike were taught to believe that “women fighters were indeed icons of liberated women (2001, 124).” Yet, Emmanuel urges us to reexamine this strongly held perception of female fighters and realize that it was nothing more than symbol and myth created to benefit the war effort. This becomes difficult when female fighters become bound, willingly or unwillingly, to their soldier identities. By taking on the new role of a fighter, women believed they would be freed from the constraints society had placed on their gender at birth. But the national independence women were fighting for would not guarantee their empowerment after the war.

4.2 Fighting Two Battles

Although the EPLF voiced its dedication in support of gender reforms in Eritrean society, the movement prioritized national emancipation over and above female emancipation. Many Eritreans I spoke to believed that without the combat participation of Eritrean women the long struggle for national independence would not have ended in victory. But Gebremedin goes as far as to say that “Eritrean women took up arms with men for independence *and* gender equality (my emphasis added). Women joined the armed struggle for two reasons: to secure their national identity and to assert their own emancipation against all the barriers to their progress and human dignity (8).” For the first time then, Eritrean women were led to believe—by the female-led NUEW under the direction of the male-dominated EPLF—that their sacrifices were not just for family and for country but for their own futures as women. Of course, the movements’ slogan of gender equality benefited them in recruiting female fighters, but Mebrahtu¹⁵ believes that in the long war for independence, appeals for equality alone were not what attracted the Eritrean women to join the armed struggle.

“It was the tolerant society imbedded in the traditional culture that allowed women to become fighters. If any, the EPLF role created a defiant attitude toward the traditional culture reflective in one of its songs – ‘Dad and mom don’t call me rebellious for I have a liberation movement that plays no gender favors (2005).’”

Thus in the eyes of some Eritreans, women who became EPLF fighters were rebelling against tradition by embracing new emancipated identities¹⁶.

5 Policy and Practice of Gender Equality

Doornbos (1998) tells us that many national liberation movements have had women’s empowerment in their program for political change, “encouraging women’s participation in the struggle and creating expectations of freedom and equality.” Women’s experiences in the EPLF’s fighting forces led them to believe their wartime liberation would be sustained after independence for two reasons: The Front trained, educated and treated all combatants in a gender-equal manner, and the EPLF became a ‘total institution’ in which fighters were convinced that their way of life would spread to the rest of Eritrean society after independence. Military training

¹⁵ Mebrahtu’s article from which this quote comes reads partly as a critique of the current leadership of Eritrea (the President and the NUEW especially) and partly as a glorification of women’s contributions to the war and reconstruction efforts. I feel his opinion is important because it reflects the views of many Eritreans in the post-conflict era when women are still not regarded as full citizens.

¹⁶ Wilson argues that women fleeing arranged marriages and those who clashed with their husbands on ideas of women’s roles joined the EPLF. To these “rebel women...the liberation movement had a position of authority that was not challenged (1991, 80).”

along with a program of political education, literacy and vocational training was given to all members of the EPLF affording female members unprecedented equality. The process of allotting tasks to men and women within military units was also theoretically free from sex bias¹⁷ (Johnson 1979, 22). Some women became commanders of EPLF units or were trained as tank drivers and all combatant women took part in guerilla activities on an equal basis with men (Pateman 1990, 465). The EPLF was also determined to overturn sexual divisions of labor in domestic work. Some of the roles considered the preserve of women prior to the liberation struggle (cooking, cleaning, firewood and water collection) became the duty of all combatants regardless of their gender (Silkin 1983, 911).

The EPLF's collective efforts forged a new culture that afforded fighters a nearly Utopian lifestyle despite the constant danger they were under. The Front-run Eritrea of wartime was for the most part a possessionless society and fighters did not have to provide for their basic needs. Education and health services were free as were the clothes on their backs. Even consumer goods such as watches, tapes, radios, books and newspapers were passed from hand to hand until they fell apart. EPLF members all dressed the same, ate the same food, and lived under the same conditions making it difficult for an outsider to establish the rank of a fighter. There was an absence of medals, insignia and salutes. All nine ethnic groups, all major religions, women and men became comrades (Wilson 1991, 96-97). Key to the military self-reliance of the EPLF was their ability to repair and maintain captured arms and equipment and to match work to workers. Because of gender differentials in skills training and educational levels prior to the liberation struggle, the EPLF therefore discriminated positively in favor of women by offering them training in many male-dominated fields (Silkin 1983, 911).

5.1 Equal Access to Education

One common element of wartime in virtually all twentieth-century examples is that conflict provides women with employment, and sometimes, educational opportunities (Meintjes 2001, 65). Pateman feels that a major reason for the great success of the EPLF lies in the fact that no one was fully accepted as a fighter until she or he was literate in at least one of Eritrea's nine languages. The EPLF's philosophy of education for development

¹⁷ However, it is probable that women's ability to reach a high rank was curtailed by their generally lower levels of education and work experience relative to men (Johnson 1979, 22).

dictated that all fighters learn to read and write to develop a broader understanding of their history and why they were fighting. Gottesman's *To Fight and Learn* (1998) details the five-year national literacy campaign the EPLF initiated in 1983. During this period, teenage graduates of the Zero School¹⁸ fanned out behind enemy lines to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, health and sanitation, and improved agricultural methods in areas that had been newly liberated. Fighters attended classes, lectures and discussions led by teachers and their peers in between fighting, affording many female combatants their first formal education.

An Eritrean proverb illustrates the traditional view of women: "Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with brains." Female fighters were socialized in traditional culture into believing there was no place for education in their lives. A female veteran recalls,

"As girls we had no right to go to school. [It] was regarded as a waste of time and a threat to our virginity (Gebremedhin 2002, 72)."

In contrast, women and girls in liberated areas made up the majority of students who learned along side EPLF fighters becoming some of the greatest beneficiaries of the Front's education and literacy campaigns. In the first year of the adult campaign alone 13,704 women registered for classes and 67 percent completed the course (Green 1994, 35). Wubnesh W. Selassie asserts, "Through education many women in the EPLF-administered areas developed their ability to analyze the real causes of their marginalization and learned skills that facilitated their involvement in traditionally segregated work areas. Many women came to realize that equality could not be achieved as long as they [were] seen as marginal to men, society and development (1992, 68)."

5.2 Resocialization in a 'Total Institution'

Aside from gender-equal practices of training and education, the EPLF created what Erving Goffman¹⁹ would call a 'total institution' that enabled the Front to enforce an over-reaching policy of gender equality. The EPLF's training camps and intrenched outposts became places of residence and work where a large number of like-

¹⁸ The Zero Schools started as boarding schools for EPLF member's children but grew into the only education system in the country during the war as teachers established and sustained classrooms throughout liberated areas.

¹⁹ Erving Goffman (1922-1982) was a Canadian sociologist and writer. Author of *Asylums*, the study of the institutionalism of patients and inmates, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* a study of social ritual and the personas we create for ourselves and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* in which he used phenomenology to understand how humans perceive the interactions they observe and take part in. I use Goffman's theory because I feel that the EPLF is a unique example of a total institution—part social movement and part military institution—that aspired to spread its ideology beyond the normal bounds of other total institutions (prisons, boarding schools) but failed for various reasons.

minded, like-situated individuals were cut off from the wider society for a period of time, which led to a unique way of life. Total institutions are a social microcosm dictated by hegemony that creates a ‘world within a world’ for their residents different from the basic social arrangements in society. Barriers that normally separate the different spheres of life—the private and the public sphere, women’s and men’s spheres—are reconfigured to meet the needs of an overall plan (Total). The total institution of the EPLF military camps afforded women fighters their first sense of a collective identity equal to the dominant group—men. And because the total institution of the EPLF was also militarized, it enforced an unquestionable routine, a sense of security and a code of respect that allowed women and men to express new ‘fighter identities’. Worku Zerai joined the EPLF’s fighting forces in 1973. Her recollection of life in the trenches shows how the total institution quickly transformed individuals into comrades.

“If one goes to bring water, everyone tries to go. Everyone wants to teach you, inform you. When they see a battle everyone takes their belt and gun and wants to fight. No one wants to be left behind... This culture is what makes the EPLF what it is... you want to sacrifice yourself, everyone wants to be the first. You develop a kind of selflessness. I myself was surprised how quickly I got integrated into this society. It was not a conscious or deliberate integration... I used to say ‘you’ but then I started saying ‘we’—I don’t know what happened (Wilson 1991, 96-7).”

Starting with the creation of the NUEW—a state endorsed female authority—and continuing with the socialization of women into combat roles, the EPLF’s total institution was experimenting with creating new cultural boundaries before impressing them upon the larger society. And by making women more like men in war, females were learning how they might be treated as equals to men during peacetime. Women were fully aware of the new territory they were treading into as they joined the EPLF men at the front, so first thing a woman did upon arriving at the front was cut her hair—a sign of beauty in Eritrean culture. This eliminated any outward sign of femininity and was not only a practical step but also a symbolic action representing the severing of ties to past social beliefs and the strengthening of present commitments. A new form of gender-neutral greeting also evolved in the field²⁰. All recruits were expected to have learned a new asexual body language by

²⁰ In Eritrean culture women kiss three times on the cheek and men shake hands - unless they know each other well, in which case they also kiss. But in the field the new form of greeting became the ‘shoulder kiss’ whereby people rub and bump shoulders while shaking hands. This genderless greeting eliminated the social uncertainty of whom to kiss and whom not to. This gender-neutral greeting is still widely used and I witnessed it often on the streets of major cities in Eritrea. Many young

the time they graduated from training school and joined mixed units. In addition, female fighters were given baggy trousers and loose shirts to wear to conceal their figures and they were required to keep their shirts buttoned up to the neck (Gebreysus 1992). In other words, the idea of female sexuality being a dangerous temptation was retained from traditional culture and male fighters were taught to subdue their sexual urges, which were considered 'natural'. One male fighter told Silkin,

"It is not that I do not have any sexual feelings, but I have to repress them because I know that my male chauvinism will come out in my sexual relations with women. Any woman comrade has to trust me, to work side by side with me confidently. She needs to know that I think of her as a comrade and not just a woman (cited in Wilson 1991, 133)."

Thus, in the EPLF a new identity, shaped by an all-embracing dedication to the struggle, erased all other identities connected to family, ethnicity, religion, class and gender. In Worku's words, the EPLF was a 'society' she had entered complete with its own 'culture' previously unknown to fighters. Combatants were shaped into their new roles to such an extent that they still carry the label 'fighter' with them today over a decade after the Liberation War has ended. But women and men were shaped differently by living within the EPLF's total institution. Females underwent a rite of passage into the masculinized world of combat and this indoctrination changed how they and male fighters viewed their strengths and abilities. Consequently, the larger society judged female combatants as 'unfeminine' and 'unmarriageable'. Gender distinctions may have faded as comradeship grew in the trenches, but the civilian population went on living separate and unequal lives.

6 EPLF Marriage Reform

Goffman warns that when fulfilling a role in a total institution is seen as no longer socially acceptable, the person in that role becomes stigmatized (Total). Not only would female fighters be dishonored for their military service after demobilization, society would shame them for accepting one EPLF social reform in particular: The 1977 Marriage Law. Identified as a "political priority", the Front encouraged sexual intimacy between couples who "wanted to marry" because they felt such relationships "promoted responsible decision-making." Wilson feels the Marriage Law was an attempt to improve the position of Eritrean women relative to men (1991, 172) when it

people who have completed their NS requirements now greet their peers in this manner indicating some fringe elements of the EPLF's practices are still to be found in the country.

stated: “The feudal marriage norm based on the supremacy of men over women shall be banned²¹ (Silkin, 1989, 148 cited in Green 1994, 19).” The Law was wide-ranging in content and virtually overturned all customary marriage arrangements.²² Although this new permissiveness only seemed to be adopted amongst fighters,²³ it undermined the traditional view of marriage as a family alliance (Pateman 1990, 466).

Prior to 1977, marriage was prohibited within the EPLF because the movement was focused on raising the consciousness levels of its fighters—to become aware of and unlearn the gender role lessons society had taught them and see one another as comrades and equals (Silkin 1989, 151.) After 1977, a few years after women were allowed into combat roles, members of the EPLF were free to marry, but couples thinking of marrying were encouraged to spend at least a year in a ‘dating relationship’ assessing their sexual compatibility²⁴. Not only did marriage become an individual choice for fighters, parenthood changed as well. While in the field, there was widespread acceptance of the necessity for couples to be separated at times, to go where they were most needed (Green 1994, 18). Many female fighters married and once their children were weaned the mothers could choose to go on looking after them or place them in an EPLF ‘crèche’ where children received visits from their parents every six months. In Cowan’s view, the existence of comprehensive childcare facilities within the EPLF and the sight of men actively caring for children was evidence of a “lasting commitment to women’s emancipation and of a significant change in male attitudes towards women’s traditional roles (1984, 151)”. However, such visible signs of social change were largely lacking within civilian society and thus the burden of childcare was likely to

²¹ The legislation goes on to state “The new democratic marriage law is based on the free choice of both partners, the welfare of children, monogamy, the equal rights of both sexes and the legal guarantees of the interests of women and children shall be implemented. Polygamy, concubinage, child betrothal, interference in the remarriage of widows, dowry and other marriage prestations shall be abolished.” The Marriage Law also included articles making it legal for a woman to initiate divorce and allowed for the division of property. If a woman became responsible for child rearing upon divorce, the father was “required to contribute towards child maintenance (Silkin, 1989 148 cited in Green 19).”

²² A plethora of different customary marriage laws existed within Eritrea prior to 1977, many with common features: male elders of extended families pursued marriage alliances; alliances were, in general, formulated between couples sharing the same religious, ethnic and linguistic background; the betrothal of girls usually occurred between the ages of 8-14 years, and marriage took place between 13-15 years; Christian marriages involved the transfer of gifts in the form of a dowry to the groom’s family, while Muslim marriages involved the transfer of bride-wealth; And, the virginity of brides was highly prized and married women are expected to be monogamous (alluding to the insistence of female circumcision of some form) (Wilson 1991, 122, and Silkin 1989, 149 cited in Green 1994, 19).

²³ The EPLF was motivated by the belief that a participatory approach to confronting social inequity, including gender discrimination, and avoided the negative consequences of imposing rapid change on regions through top down legislation. Thus attempts to improve the position of Eritrean women relative to men through the 1977 Marriage Law largely took effect only within the combatant camps and to a lesser degree in liberated areas under their protection (Green 1994, 15).

²⁴ According to Green, male contraception was made available to EPLF fighters.

remain the preserve of women (Green 1994, 19). And many EPLF-sanctioned marriages, often between members of different ethnic and religious groups, would not withstand the social transformation of demobilization.

It was clear that the culture of the EPLF was diverging greatly from the strict gendered norms of traditional Eritrean society. In 1987, a new Civil Code, containing comprehensive provisions for the family was introduced by the EPLF. According to Silkin, Family Law was divided into two sections, one that dealt with civilians and the other with members of the EPLF. "In distinguishing between civil society and the EPLF, the code acknowledged both the tenacity of customary values among civilians and the diverging development taking place within the ranks of the EPLF (1989, 157)." These bold moves undermined traditional notions of marriage and the family and were to have dire social consequences for female fighters after the war. If women combatants were to go on asserting EPLF-sanctioned identities in EPLF-commissioned roles, their acceptance into civilian life in post-conflict Eritrea would be complicated. Foreshadowing the resurgence of traditional gender expectations and the future stigmatization of female combatants' future President Isaias Afwerki stated in 1987,

"...We know what our realities are at the moment. But we are not expecting that future Eritrea will be egalitarian the way that it is today... That would be Utopia and it is a foolish dream to believe that we will have the same society as we have now (Wilson, 1991, 160)."

Women were stepping out of their place in society and possibly taking a cultural risk that they would be accepted as liberated women after the war. Eritrean society showed its support for the symbolism and mythology of liberated women fighters, but was it willing or ready to allow women real liberation in civilian life? Barth reminds us that men and women are often encouraged to have similar roles as soldiers, while in peacetime they are expected to have different roles. But the pivotal difference lies in the fact that "men do not have a break in their gender socialization, whereas women do (2003)." Her interviews revealed that male ex-fighters in general are often extremely popular after the war. Unlike the women, the men did not step out accepted gender roles. As fighters they merely reinforced the image of a strong, masculine man, while women on the other hand disregarded accepted rules of feminine behavior. In order to achieve victory society allowed a shift in female gender roles, but in the post-war era female ex-fighters find themselves stigmatized (2002, 20). Bernal puts it plainly when she states, "[Eritrea's] former female fighters are seen as having experienced independence, sexual

freedom and equality with men, thus their morality is suspect, their femininity is doubtful and their ability to behave as obedient wives is questionable (2000, 61).”

Hence, the EPLF’s plan of altering the identities of women to make them fighters worsened the precariousness of their living conditions in the decade after independence. When their symbolic identities melted away, society saw that the ‘purity’ of their former female identities had been soiled by the war. This left women caught in the ideological conundrum of the EPLF’s identity construction machine. Women experienced emancipation from traditional and external oppression as fighters, but those experiences had forever altered their identities making them outcasts in the very society they fought to liberate. Fortunately, Kakwenzire’s work on gender developments during the war in Uganda shows us that women combatants can eventually benefit from their wartime identity shifts. She notes, “The multiple roles that women have taken on have engendered a *new race of women*. They have realized the potential of their own strength and this awareness has led them toward a more favorable socio-economic position (my emphasis added, 1999, 20).” What would it take for Eritrea’s female ex-combatants to fare as well as their Ugandan sisters when Eritrean society did not welcome a ‘new race of women’ after demobilization?

7 The Liberation War Demobilization and Reintegration Program

The Demobilization and Reintegration Program (DRP) initiated by the EPLF after independence marked a turning point in women’s war identities when their liberated and respected roles as fighters were decommissioned. Women were treated as the equals of men in the trenches and the same would be true in the DRP process. But this attitude did not benefit women veterans as they returned to a culture largely unaffected by the Front’s ideology and wartime social reforms. Gender equality was not a value that spread outside of the EPLF into the larger Eritrean society, so women especially were misunderstood and under-supported during their reintegration into civilian life. Neither individual women veterans nor the NUEW participated in the planning and execution of the DRP leaving women’s special needs unheard. With demobilization came the demise of the total institution of the EPLF and its attempts at social change making the reintegration of most female fighters nearly impossible. Although several economic support programs were implemented, DRP

planners failed to recognize the unique challenges female ex-combatants would face in reentering the traditional culture.

After Eritrea's liberation in May 1991, the new Eritrean Government—the PFDJ—decided to concentrate all of its resources on rebuilding the country by downsizing the EPLF forces. During the war, the EPLF fighting force grew to almost 110,000 fighters, nearly 3% of the total population. By the close of the war the EPLF army numbered around 95,000, one third of which, about 31,600, were women (Military). The initial plan was to reduce the forces by 50-60% between 1993 and 1995. Klingebiel reports that the PFDJ succeeded in demobilizing 48,000 (51%) fighters in two phases, but “due to lack of donor support many of the activities the government initiated to help facilitate reintegration were severely limited (1996, 1).” The international community had no part in the liberation of the country, and Eritrea was determined to remain self-reliant despite the great challenge reintegrating ex-fighters presented the war-torn country. However, cultural constraints had far greater impacts than the lack of donor support did on the successful reintegration of the female ex-fighters in particular.

The main objectives of the Liberation War DRP were to provide economic and social assistance to ex-combatants. Economic programs received the most attention while scant health services and psychosocial counseling were offered to some ex-combatants after disarmament²⁵. Mitias (now the NCDRP), a semi-autonomous agency created under the Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (ERREC), conducted all DRP activities (Klingebiel 1996, 4). The two phases of the Liberation War DRP are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Liberation War Demobilization and Reintegration Program Source: ERREC 1989, cited in Mehreteab, 2002.

Demobilization Phase	Phase One / June – October 1993	Phase Two / August 1994 – August 1995
Target Group	Fighters since 1990	Fighters before 1990
No. Fighters Demobilized	26,000	22,000
Male - % of total	21,5000 (83%)	14,000 (64%)
Female - % of total	4,500 (17%)	8,000 (36%)
Cash Payment	1,000-5,000 Birr (\$160- \$800 US)	10,000 Birr (\$1,600 US)
Other Support	Food for 6 mo, health care	Food for 12 mo, health care, service pay

Phase One fighters were expected to reintegrate easily into civilian society because they had not been in the fighting forces long. However, most of these combatants were from poor, rural areas and few received much

²⁵ Table 2 on page 25 shows that ‘Counseling and Guidance Services’ were indeed a part of Mitias’ reintegration program, but, as shown, no gender disaggregated data exists to determine if women were targeted for this support.

education or training²⁶ in the EPLF when these programs were phased out towards the end of the war.

Women in Phase Two had been in the EPLF longer²⁷ and had acquired more education and skills²⁸ than women demobilized in Phase One. Some Phase Two women therefore were hired for civil service positions, but most could not compete with the education and skills found in the civilian population. This group was also promised, “sustained assistance and service pay” of up to the equivalent of \$30US per month depending on how long they had served or if they were disabled in combat (Klingebeil 1996). Mitias recorded each fighter’s personal data so individuals could be “contacted for further services” including psycho-social counseling and vocational training, but it is unknown whether these services were ever comprehensively offered (Spring 2002, 33 and Mehereteab 2002, 20). Mitias did recognize that women “formed a particular vulnerable group amongst the ex-fighters” so a Gender Unit was established to “find ways and means of enhancing women’s self-help potential.” The Gender Unit survived only two years,²⁹ and after it was dismantled the “problem” of demobilized women was then ‘taken care of’ by the NUEW (Mehereteab 2002, 29). This amounted to a marginalization of female ex-fighter’s needs and the overburdening of the NUEW since the Union previously had no part in the women’s DRP (Hale 2001, 125).

7.1 Focus on Economic Reintegration

The majority of female ex-combatants had a difficult time reintegrating into rural communities where patriarchal domination prevailed and where families expected ex-fighters to assume women’s ascribed, submissive roles.

The NGO ACORD carried out a survey in 1995 to profile the characteristics of female ex-fighters and the results showed:

- Many had little education, few opportunities and lacked skills that translated easily into jobs;
- Most were young, ages 25-35, with 3 or more children, some with different fathers;³⁰
- Many were heads of the household because their husbands had divorced them, left or died;³¹

²⁶ See Figure 3: *Origin of EPLF Fighters* and Figure 4: *Educational Background of EPLF Fighters*

²⁷ See Figure 5: *Years of EPLF Military Service--Disaggregated by Gender*

²⁸ See Figure 6: *Ex-fighter Origin of Education--Disaggregated by Gender* and Figure 1: *Time of Skill Acquisition of Ex-fighters--Disaggregated by Gender*

²⁹ It is unclear why Mitias’ Gender Unit was phased out. However, Klingebeil, Mehereteab, Spring and Kaffel make frequent reference to the lack of capacity and resources that plagued Mitias. I suspect that these factors along with the strong traditional gender bias against women acted to shift the responsibility for reintegrating women veterans under the already well-established NUEW.

³⁰ See Figure 7: *Age Groups at Demobilization*.

³¹ Those that had been in mixed religion marriages during the war had experienced conflicts and separations when families did not approve of the union (Spring 2002, 33-34). See Figure 8: *Marital Status of Ex-Fighters*.

- And, they had little experience with a monetary economy and little to no business/marketing knowledge (Cited in Spring 2002, 33-34).

Female ex-fighters lacked the skills and social support to effectively reintegrate into society after demobilization and they were at a loss as to how they could change their situations.

The following table shows that Mitias' reintegration activities consisted of five key areas of support, four of which were geared towards economic assistance:

Table 2: Mitias Reintegration Activities 1993-1995 Source: Tewolde and Nielson 1998: 24 Cited in Spring, 2002

	Barefoot Bankers	Counseling and Guidance	Micro and Small Enterprises	Agriculture	Vocational Training
Men	13	NA	206	991	590
Women	10	NA	237	163	177
Total	23	6,000	443	1,154	767

Mitias devised various vocational training programs and business opportunities for women ex-fighters, however, training was mostly given in traditional women's activities (sewing, pottery and crafts). Women may have made up over 50% of the micro and small enterprise participants, but Tewolde and Nielson's further inquiry found that female ex-fighters faced many gender constraints to putting their training to good use—most of which point to the social roots of women's economic challenges.

Table 3: Gender Constraints of Female Ex-fighters 1998 Source: Tewolde and Nielson 1989, 35 Cited in Spring, 2002

Mutiple Choice Answer Options	No. of responses	Ranking
Missing employment opportunities	247	1
Lack of child care center	214	2
Not being accepted as marriage partners	169	3
Lack of women's groups	68	4
Cultural obstacles to schooling and vocational training	60	5
Excluded form participating in public affairs	37	6
No gender restrictions	8	7
Don't know	6	8

Meintjes notes that in general, men tend to find employment more quickly than women in skilled or semi-skilled work. Since women and men were trained in the same skill areas under the EPLF, female ex-fighters had to compete with their male counterparts for jobs after demobilization. The Liberation Army may have been integrated, but the market-driven productive enterprises of reconstruction society were not. Job market segregation presented one of the largest reintegration hurdles for female ex-fighters shattering what appeared to have been the gender-transformative process of the EPLF (2001, 69). Although female fighters had been trained in skill areas that were in demand in the reconstruction economy, the society's gender role stereotypes

determined that they would not be hired over a male veteran. Female ex-fighter's mobility and income generating chances were further restricted when the women found themselves alone with the burden of raising several children. Thus we see the effects of two of the EPLF's major social reforms: the outcomes of relaxed marriage customs could not be overcome by the education and training female combatants received because society still saw them primarily in the roles of wives and mothers and not as economically independent workers.

In 1996, New York Times reporter James McKinley (1996) met ex-fighter, Nuria Mohammed Saleh, one of many combatants who actually found herself missing the war. She didn't not long for the fear and the death, but she missed being "treated like a man." Like most women EPLF veterans, she found it hard to return to the deeply patriarchal society she left behind as a teenager. In 1990 she was firing away at the enemy but six years later she was sweeping the floor of an office building in Asmara for a dollar a day. Employers were reluctant to hire her for a skilled job despite her military service and EPLF training.

"The kind of life we were pursuing in the field was quite different. [Now] we don't get that respect, that prestige," says Saleh.

At the Asmara Brewery, one of the few private factories in the country, more than 600 Eritreans found work after independence, but women were only allowed to work as secretaries, cleaners and nurses. At the time the manager, Fesse Tedla, had no plans to involve women in the production process. Unconvinced by the abilities women had shown during the war Fesse stated,

"Maybe some of the women are strong, but how can you leave them with the boys? I know perfectly what the role of women fighters was. But it might be easier to involve women in production in Britain because it's more automated—they push buttons (McKinley, 1996)."

According to Wheelwright, even in state-owned industries there remained a strict gender division of labor stemming from the training girls received in school where they are taught traditional skills such as sewing, qualifying them only for the country's lowest paid work. Even women who were trained to be nurses and doctors during the war and through the DRP could not find employment as university-educated physicians took over staffing hospitals and clinics (1993, 13).

7.2 Disregard for Social Reintegration

Spring suggests that Mitias's lack of success in economically reintegrating female ex-fighters may have come down to their lack of attention to the greater need to create the proper gender awareness in the society towards women who were trained in traditionally male-dominated fields while in the EPLF but whose skills were ignored because of their gender (2002, 33). By failing to acknowledge how gender functioned in the culture and how gender roles were manipulated to help maintain the fighting forces, Mitias saw 'reintegration' in terms of economic prosperity only. The necessary psycho-social support female ex-combatants needed was never provided. Farr affirms that the psychological well being of ex-combatants is an essential part of reintegration as the success of long-term reconstruction initiatives relies on people's abilities to "shed the mentality of war (2002, 31)." But in the case of the EPLF, a 'war mentality' afforded women new roles to fulfill in society. For Mitias vocational training planners and Asmara Brewery Manager Fesse shedding a war mentality meant limiting women's possible contributions to the military or confining them to their traditional activities alone. If a 'war mentality' is a frame of mind that allows women to be liberated and empowered then this mentality should not be entirely forgotten in peacetime.

Although civilian society was mobilized in support of the EPLF to a large extent, "private and family life was exalted, even romanticized " amongst all fighters, which encouraged them "to overlook the harsh reality that private life is frequently the site of the greatest oppression of women (Hale 1999, 126)." EPLF fighters had sacrificed 'normal' family life for a life in the trenches so the 'old ways' held a certain appeal for both genders to return to. During the many years of fighting, the EPLF fostered strong expectations amongst fighters that all problems would be solved in an independent Eritrea. However, Mehreteab asked ex-fighters, "Did your expectations of life after the war match your current reality?" to which 57% said "no"³². Women were unsurprisingly more disappointed than men with only 5% of female respondents feeling that their post-war lives were everything they had expected. These disenchanted women attributed their disappointment to, more than anything else, a "lack of acceptance and recognition in society to the contributions they had made (2002, 35)." The EPLF's lack of attention to, or deliberate ignorance of, the constraints Eritrean women would encounter in

³² See Figure 9: *Ex-fighters Expectations Matching Reality-Disaggregated by Gender*

post-liberation family life amounted to the abandonment of most social gains experienced in the field. In the words of one female ex-fighter:

“Our families were happy at first when we came back alive. But after a year it changed. We have very different ideas from the rest of society. We do not accept the traditional ideas of our parents, but it is difficult to change them. It is very hard for us because we were used to equality in the field (interviewed by Hale 2001, 127).”

Photojournalist Chris Kutschera (1997) interviewed Salamawit who had joined the EPLF in 1981 when she was just 14 years old. Her mother, Alganesh would not see her for ten years, until the war ended in 1991. A few weeks after the liberation of Asmara, someone knocked at Alganesh’s door and a young stranger stepped inside and asked, *“Well, mom aren’t you happy to see me?”* During this initial period of reintegration Kutschera recalls, both groups of women, the fighters and the civilians, watched each other with an immense curiosity³³. The women fighters were easy to spot by their ‘look’, wearing short hairstyles, khaki pants and the EPLF issued plastic sandals—an appearance that “deliberately rejected all the tricks of femininity.” But it wasn’t only their looks that had changed, it was their behavior and their level of confidence. Several weeks after her homecoming, Alganesh was still praising her daughter’s difference in attitude—her change in identity:

“We, the civilians, always wanted to have more, but the fighters always seem to have enough and they are happy to share the little they do have. They have a culture of sharing. They also have a mutual understanding, a love of each other we do not have. They were happy just being together. They laughed, they sang and time went by joyfully. When there was no food, instead of eating, they danced.”

Four years after liberation, Kutschera revisited female fighters to find that many things had changed. Besserat Haptemariam, a fifteen-year combat veteran of the EPLF stated,

“Before we wanted the people to look like us. Now we have to look like the people around us.”

Some women made the transition into careers, marriage and motherhood smoothly, but for many, settling back into a life of domesticity was problematic. As of 1995, 12,000 female fighters had been demobilized and more

³³ McKay and Mazurana tell us that the role of the community’s women is central to female ex-combatant’s reintegration (2004, 162.) Bernal (2000, 62) believes that the current situation of female ex-fighters stems in part from what she calls the “repression of the domestic” and the “erasure of the feminine” by the EPLF (2000, 62). And Cock warns that if civilian women believe that participating in combat violates the biological urge in women to mother and care and that causing death and destruction is the realm of men only, female ex-combatants will lack allies amongst civilian women (1991, 4).

than half were reported to have divorced³⁴. The EPLF's failure to address gender differences in the organization of domestic life left both female and male fighters unprepared for the resurgence of traditional expectations after the war. Hanna's younger sister, Ruth, claims that it was the EFLF men that let the female fighters down.

"The men have changed, they have become traditional again. Traditional male thinking has deep roots. When they went to the front, men were forced to accept [the] EPLF policy of equality between the sexes. When they came back to the cities after liberation the government had their priorities. It did not concern itself with the emancipation of women and the men fell back into the old way of thinking (Kutschera, 1997)."

Having been intimately conscientized to the limitations Eritrean culture places on women, ex-fighters also became aware of their comrades' abandonment. Although male fighters often praised the women for their bravery and referred to them as their "moral backbone during the struggle", they soon felt society's pressure to forget the practices of gender equity sanctioned by the EPLF. In the words of former fighter Amair Adhana,

"In the field the men respected us—our brains, our strength. But in this society of ours, they now respect make-up and nice hair, being a proper housewife...if we kneel down now to what they want, we'll end up back in the kitchen. We never thought our men would betray us. We need to change laws and ways of thinking. This new fight is only beginning ("The Kitchen", 1994)."

Farr warns that unless the different needs of the genders are addressed appropriately any demobilization and reintegration program is likely to "assume, reestablish or reinforce unequal gender relations in the society under reconstruction (2002, 8)." This is evident by increased rates of gender-based violence after war. After war, it is often a matter of pride for male survivors to demonstrate control over their women through appealing to cultural and religious customs that restrict women and their mobility (16). Dr. Belainesh Araya from the University of Asmara reports that 65% of women ages 18-50 in Eritrea's urban and semi-urban areas, are victims of physical abuse by an intimate partner each year, 73% in rural areas. Belainesh found overwhelmingly that female victims of domestic abuse did not believe they could end their relationships due to lack of economic independence stemming from low levels of education and the traditional gender bias against female ownership of resources

³⁴ This contrasts with Mitias' official DRP data as shown on Figure 8: *Marital Status of Fighters*. Interviews with NGO staff members and government ministry officials in Eritrea led me to feel that Kutschera's claim that "half of the female fighters were divorced" was more accurate than the 19% Mehreteab's data cites.

(2001, 9-11)³⁵. Hence, we see how ignoring the gendered dynamics of post-war reconstruction society leads to both women and men feeling pressured to succumb to traditional behavior expectations for their genders.

The DRP's focus on economic reconstruction provided an opportunity to redefine women's roles solely in terms of family responsibilities (Meintjes 2001, 72) ignoring their earning potential and possible social influence for future generations.³⁶ Their progressive attitudes could have had a powerful influence over society, especially where gender relations were concerned, while the entire nation was transforming from a people at war to an independent country at peace. The delay in demobilization and reintegration amounted to a lost opportunity to spread the powerful, progressive elements of EPLF culture into Eritrean communities and families. But perhaps the biggest detriment to female fighters was the division that occurred amongst women in the EPLF—some women achieved an elite status that was rewarded after the war and others continued their battle with tradition.

8 Two New Races of Women

After the war the NUEW gained the leadership of many well-known female veteran EPLF commanders, yet, sadly the Union played no part in the DRP of female liberation fighters. Meintjes confirms, "The NUEW strategy did not include women ex-combatants. Women fighters were not educated and their skill was fighting, not politics (2001, 73)." Thus, two groups of militarized women emerged in Eritrea. The elite EPLF women appointed to government positions³⁷ and NUEW leadership were charged with tackling 'women's issues' (showing a clear break from the EPLF's viewpoint of gender neutrality and equality). And the poor, rural, uneducated, and unskilled classes of women—including many ex-fighters—became the masses the NUEW

³⁵ Turner found that amongst Vietnamese female ex-combatants, domestic violence was not considered a sufficient case for divorce and that a woman should place her family's happiness above her own even if it meant tolerating an abusive spouse. She feels this complacency is "another insidious consequence of Vietnam's long periods of war (1998, 155)."

³⁶ At the close of the war many EPLF members were not fully reintegrated back into their communities because demobilization was delayed a full two years after independence. Precisely during the time when the fighters could have had the largest influence as positive role models in the society's social, political and economic reconstruction planning the gap between the lives of the EPLF and civilians continued and possibly widened.

³⁷ Women occupied more than half of the seats on the committee that drew up Eritrea's first Constitution, but as of 1994 less than a sixth of the party's central council was female, and women ran only two Ministries—The Ministry of Women and the NUEW (*The Kitchen*, 1994). Thirty percent of Congressional Seats are set-aside for women to hold according to the Constitution, and the State introduced an electoral quota at the local level resulting in 23-30% of all local government seats going to women. But this often leads to under-qualified and under-supported women being in government (Meintjes 2001, 72-73).

aimed to assist. But, as Meintjes notes, no special focus was given to female ex-combatants in the NUEW's development strategies and the Union rarely targeted men (Hale 2001, 129).³⁸

Several factors contributed to the rapid drop of women ex-combatants' status after demobilization. After the war, female combatants were no longer a collective body united under the total institution of the EPLF. Once the movement's purpose, that of independence, had been achieved political remobilization for social causes disintegrated. In the aftermath of the conflict the only official women's organization in the country, The NUEW, faltered because it existed under the EPLF. According to Meintjes, there was no organized, independent movement to remobilize women after the war to act or lobby in terms of women's interests and needs. Thus, the "national debate excluded a women's agenda and military demobilization deprived women of the gains they made during the war (2001, 70)." As in most post-war societies, educated women and women with political influence and status found paths to economic independence and political power (72), but for poor, uneducated women, the post-war reconstruction did not necessarily translate into improved access to resources, let alone any transformation of gender relations. All fighters had undergone a new socialization into equal roles such that female fighters did not see themselves as women in need of the NUEW's help. EPLF veteran fighter Ghdy recalls her feelings towards the NUEW after independence:

"The Women's Union started Women's Associations. So women who were fighters were now represented simply as women, not as fighters. I did not agree with the idea of such an organization, nor did other women, first because it was ineffective and inefficient, and second because I felt that women fighters did not need to be under such an organization since they were already under the discipline of the army. In theory, this organization was fighting women's oppression but in practice it was a tool in the hands of the leadership. In any case, I never joined the organization, and I was not alone. There were many women who did not accept it although the leadership tried to force it upon us (Wilson, 1991, 59-60)."

The EPLF's anticipated new society, like most revolutionary movements in the twentieth century developing world, was to be created through the spread of education to eradicate 'backwardness' or traditional beliefs and behaviors. The status of women in society thus became an indicator for 'revolutionary progressiveness' as opposed to 'traditional backwardness' (Muller 2004, 4 and Moghadam 1997,137). Therefore, an underlying battle

³⁸ Because of their continued close connection to the government—an unquestioned authority in Eritrea—Tsegga Giam, head of the NUEW's Social services and Rehabilitation Department says that men, in general, take their advocacy seriously (author's interview July 13, 2004). According to Giam, the only project the NUEW has done targeting men has been gender-based violence sensitization workshops with male soldiers set to be demobilized. The UNDP and NCDRP requested the services of the Union to "add a gender component" to their DRP efforts just in the past year.

of the Eritrean Liberation War was the competing forces of modernity and tradition as evidenced in the shifting identities of women and measured by their new levels of education and skills. Although all fighters were educated and trained in skill areas most women were unable to put these new abilities to use after the war when they were ushered back into their reproductive roles. Thus, as Muller claims, the ‘modernizing’ aspects of the EPLF’s ideology and practice “opened up new spaces for women to join an elite,” though mostly for women who’s prior education and affluence made them conducive to such a future life path (2004, 8).

Therefore, more than one ‘new race of women’ metamorphosized out of the EPLF’s fighting forces: women who were allowed to step into an elite status of male-patterned leadership and those who had deviated too far from society’s confines of femininity. Farr believes that because women combatants did not play roles that fit with predominant gender ideologies, to some they posed unique challenges and possible threats to society’s (read: the traditional culture supported by the PFDJ and NUEW) reconstruction plans. Their experiences had proven that accepted ideas about womanly behavior could be suspended, at least during conflict. Contradicting the stereotypes of appropriate female behavior through actively participating in the war made them “more deviant and unnatural than [the] men” who had fought along side them (Farr 2002, 8). Regarded with suspicion by the civilian population and later betrayed by male veterans and elite female veterans alike, female ex-combatants could not resume the lives they had left behind nor lead the lives that had planned to after the war³⁹.

8.1 Elite Women’s Leaders

It hardly seems possible that the EPLF could have created an elite class of women when the ideals of the movement were based on what Pateman (1990) calls “liberty, equality and fraternity.” But the values and development strategies of the NUEW’s leaders lead one to think otherwise. The Union’s propaganda places emphasis on how far Eritrean women have come in government representation due to the NUEW’s “major role during the drafting of the Eritrean Constitution by organizing workshops and *sensitizing women on the crucial issues that concern women* (my emphasis added, NUEW 2002, 2003). This statement makes a bold assumption that the

³⁹ Rigbe and several other women belonging to CSCAs in Akordat moved to the city from rural areas after demobilization because they felt as though they were no longer accepted in their families and/or villages. By comparing Figure 3: *Origin of EPLF Fighters* with Figure 10: *Geographic Preference after Demobilization* we see that a large percentage of fighters who had come from rural areas wished to resettle either in urban or semi-urban areas after the war.

female leaders of the NUEW know which issues are crucial and what should and should not concern all Eritrean women. The NUEW also boasts of its achievements in securing women at least a quarter of the delegate slots at the 1987 Congressional Session. Seven elected seats on the 71-member Central Committee went to women, the highest ranking being the head of the NUEW, Luul Ghebreab. According to the EPLF's NDP, women are to be assured full rights of equality (under the law) with men in political, economic and social life. However, even Ghebreab herself advocated for a gradual approach to be taken towards the realization of this equality.

"We [the NUEW] work with women on differing levels, according to their level of consciousness. We raise issues very slowly. As time goes by women from the villages take up new concepts themselves, and then they become those who are working for change (Hale 2001, 129)."

The liberation movement was dedicated to radical social changes in gender relations, but Ghebreab's statement shows after the war the Union followed suit with the PFDJ and took on a tentative stance towards women's rights, allowing for the backsliding of traditional norms. Hale feels the transition from EPLF to PFDJ represents a shift from an organization devoted to empowering disenfranchised groups (women, peasants, youth, workers, Muslims etc.) to a government assigned to monitor, control or contain these very groups (2001, 124). Just as the EPLF devised Unions⁴⁰ to help it carry out its wartime mission, the Government of Eritrea continues to hold on the NUEW to monitor, and perhaps control, the progress of women in the country⁴¹. In essence then, the elite women of the NUEW and the predominantly male PFDJ let down the majority of Eritrean women by not seizing the cusp moment between war and peace to truly redefine gender relations and women's rights nationwide. But the PFDJ did not want to be seen as completely abandoning their former goal of equal treatment and opportunities for both genders. During the initial phases of the DRP President Isaias expressed his concern for the future of the women fighters.

*"We have women who were commanding platoons, companies, battalions. **How** can we ask them now to go back and live like every other woman? They have special needs (my emphasis added, "The Kitchen", 1994)."*

⁴⁰ The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) and The National Union of Youth and Students (NUEYS) have remained active after independence whereas the National Union of Eritrean Peasants lasted only during the Liberation War.

⁴¹ When the war ended in 1991, the NUEW lobbied Congress to become an independent organization, but instead they evolved into what Giam called the "National Machinery" responsible for handling all 'women's issues' in the country and reporting to the United Nations and regional bodies on the status of women in the country.

Although the President himself was an EPLF fighter alongside women one must wonder from this statement if women were high on the priority list amongst all the challenges the new government had to deal with in the war-shattered country. Perhaps he was thinking just *how* would the PFDJ deal with women and still get on with their nation building? Many claim that the NUEW has been overburdened by the PFDJ, but perhaps the Union's women and other elite females are allowed their status to show the rest of the world how modern and progressive Eritrea has become as a result of the EPLF's victory. After the war only some women would be allowed their equal rights and the others would have to wait for the NUEW to "slowly" deliver their rights to them.

8.2 A Growing Critique of the NUEW

More Eritreans are beginning to see the NUEW as a means for the new government to marginalize the problems of common women and female ex-combatants. Muller's interview with a female lecturer from the University of Asmara (UoA) voices the growing critique of the Union and hints at the limited powers of NUEW leadership under the PFDJ.

"I would say this organization, the NUEW, does not represent women. The organization just supports the government and wants to hide all the government's faults and victimize women. For example, always women in the military service, they try to express their opinion, they have these problems, sexual problems, other problems ... they, the NUEW, always try to silence them ... they don't see objectively the problems women are facing. We need strong women in politics, independent women (2004, 9-10)."

In an article published on the popular Shaebia.org⁴², Tekle is critical of the government's overuse of the Union.

"The decisive factor is to make the organization inclusive of women from all walks of life and create grounds for them to have a say. To date, only the NUEW has been given any clout with the EPLF-based government, leaving little legitimate room for other organizations to bring about social change. Their close relationship with the central government affords them a powerful voice, but one organization cannot be expected to handle every social issue that affects women (2004)."

Mebrahtu (2005) joins Tekle by referring to the NUEW leadership as "token women" and "party loyalists who *cannot* speak of the majority of Eritrean women⁴³ (my emphasis added)." According to Hale, other women's organizations have emerged in Eritrea after independence, but they have not been coordinated in any national

⁴² Since the Border War the Government of Eritrea has suspended the freedom of the press forcing most critiques of the leadership and of the NUEW to be published on a handful of Eritrean web sites. This web site also posts frequent articles praising the NUEW leading one to believe that they are an unbiased source of local viewpoints.

⁴³ Tekle claims the Union boasts raising its numbers of rural members, but these women are often beneficiaries of NUEW micro-credit loans or they took part in Union sponsored training workshops. They do not have any official avenue to voice their needs or ideas within the Union. He feels *"The NUEW condescends to rural, uneducated women when implementing their economic, educational and health projects and seeks to continue to recruit mostly young educated, urban women (2004)."*

effort, and “the NUEW often undermines them (2001, 125).” In this sense, the women heading the NUEW may also be struggling to reintegrate into the gender-divided culture of post-war Eritrea where all women must adapt to patriarchal expectations. In order for the NUEW to remain a ‘powerful voice’ they must continue appease the government leaders who legitimate them.

8.3 Education as the Panacea

Today’s NUEW’s senior staff is made up of educated, professional women who, previously convinced rural women that the path to liberation was through soldiering. But after independence their strategy has changed. It is no longer combat service that will set women free but education that will pave the path to modernity and equal rights. According to Tsegga Giam, head of the NUEW’s Social Services and Rehabilitation Department,

“The most disadvantaged in Eritrea are women with no education. We try to sensitize whole communities to the importance of girls having an education. We support these ideas with programs that make girls confident (author’s interview, July 13, 2004).”

Although there is truth in Giam’s statement, formal education campaigns aimed at Eritrean girls have had little success since independence⁴⁴. At the NUEW Conference in 1999 Hale argued that it was time to revive some of the informal pedagogical strategies used during the military struggle of consciousness-raising groups, special seminars on gender, class, ethnicity and religion, and the Zero Schools (2001, 128). But, the NUEW has paid little attention to the more informal means of empowering adults Hale suggests. This program shift, from encouraging women to enter combat roles to pursuing an education, ignores the cultural constraints placed on women and replicates the unrealistic expectations of empowerment fostered during the war. Female fighters experienced first hand that the education and skills they gained from the EPLF did not ensure their economic and social happiness. Thus, NUEW leaders have shown that they are not prioritizing most women’s needs by ignoring the combined forces of poverty and sexism that have always limited girls’ chances of entering and staying in the classroom. Class and gender posed few obstacles for women to enter combat roles, but to expect women to educate themselves after the war seems both idealistic and insensitive to their realities. And by

⁴⁴ According to Spring (2002), in the final years of the Liberation War an average of 50.2% of female students were attending government and non-government elementary schools was. Over the decade after independence the average dropped to 40.2% (quoted from Thomas Slayter and Kabutha. 2002. “Proposal for a Center for Gender research: UoA.” Asmara: USAID. Mimeo.) See Figure 11: *Participation in Education by School Level, 1995 and 1998--Disaggregated by Gender*.

focusing on girl's education and not on adult education programs several generations of female ex-combatants will continue to go unaided by the NUEW.

In my interview with Dr. Bissrat Ghebru, an Assistant professor at the UoA and Director of the University's Consultancy, Training and Testing Center (CTTC) I learned just how difficult it is for Eritrean girls to stay in school, be accepted into the only University in the country and avoid being militarized⁴⁵. When asked what she felt were the contributing factors to the University's abysmal female enrollment, which according to her was less than 12%⁴⁶ she expressed her frustration because her "hands are tied due to the National Service (NS) requirements⁴⁷." On the heels of administering University entrance exams at the Sawa military camp to the entire 12th grade class, Ghebru explained the educational futures of girls in Eritrea have become militarized.

"If girls make it to 12th grade they must pass the National Exam and score high enough to be admitted to the University. Many girls do not want to fulfill their National Service and are getting married...or they say they are getting married to avoid going to Sawa. If they do not take the exam or fulfill their National Service they cannot go to the University. We cannot bend these rules. The female students that do attend the University are very successful, but they are few in number (author's interview July 28, 2004)."

8.4 The Legacy of Militarized Women

Women and girls in Eritrea must therefore contend not only with traditional gender expectations, but also with the stigma associated with being connected to the military. When the Border War began, women and conflict were seen as a 'natural' combination in the minds of both the PFDJ and male soldiers. Daniel Gitensae, a young soldier spoke to Fisher (1999) about women's participation in the military saying,

"In the 30-year's struggle for freedom, there were ladies. So the ladies must be with us now."

In 2000, the Eritrean Government mounted a nation-wide campaign, to identify women and men who had not fulfilled their NS obligations⁴⁸. 'Married women'⁴⁹ could be excused from NS, but women who would qualify

⁴⁵ Enloe defines militarization as a change that happens over time in which an individual, group, object or place gains value from serving a military purpose (lecture, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, August 31, 2004).

⁴⁶ Joni Seager reports that in 2000 women comprised 13% of University students (Penguin Atlas of Women in The World 2003, 115).

⁴⁷ PFDJ Government announced in July 1994 that National Service (NS)—six months of military training and a year of work on national reconstruction projects such as building roads and planting trees—would be required of all women and men between the ages of 18 and 45 (Connell 1998, 41).

⁴⁸ As a result of the strict enforcement of NS requirements Eritrea's total armed forces per capita ranked the highest in the world at 45.8 people in the military per 1000 in the population in 2000. (NationMaster.com)

⁴⁹ But as my interview with Dr. Ghebru and several informal interviews revealed, young women of NS age (18+) don wedding bands to safely walk the streets of major villages and to ride public transportation so that they are not stopped at checkpoints and sent off to Sawa. Some young women are caving under family pressure to marry early or to go ahead with

for attending the University were not. Thus, choosing the ‘traditional route’ for women might mean more personal freedom and fulfillment. Muller feels that like traditional expectations, the EPLF’s gender ideology also leaves little room for women to make individual choices (2004, 6). Bereketeab (2003) uncovered more of the gendered dynamics of NS stating, “The sexual freedom leading to loss of virginity, extra-marital pregnancies, delay of marriages and HIV/AIDS transmission amongst women and men in NS added to the growing dissatisfaction and opposition.” Further allegations of sexual abuse, rapes, and exploitation of females as domestic workers for military commanders motivated the government to withdraw female draftees from active military duty and reassign them to ‘soft sector’ civilian tasks such as teaching, health care and office work. So, it appears that the military aspects of the EPLF have come to overshadow the movement’s gender-equal ideology after independence.

Representatives I interviewed from the NUEW and the UoA expressed uneasiness at challenging the NS requirements for women. They felt that both genders should have to complete their required duty despite claims of gender bias and gender-based violence towards females in NS. Nonetheless, both Gaim and Ghebru felt that the girls’ safety was more important than their service, but little was being done to make NS safe for women—a consequence of separating women’s issues from men’s behaviors in the post-conflict era. So in the end, females were seen as probable (or actual) victims of the masculinized military and in need of being removed from this unsafe environment. Just as female ex-combatants felt socially stigmatized upon returning to civilian life, women returning from NS encounter similar negative experiences. Greenberg notes the public often disdains these females for wearing trousers and they are rumored to have been sexually ‘used’ making them no longer fit for marriage and thus no longer valuable (2001, 20).

9 Women in Global Conflicts

Countries emerging from conflict are often seen as potential sites of positive change for women because war and its aftermath present opportunities to influence social and political structures that were not challenged during peacetime. Farr states “gender roles can be so deeply affected by the experience of war that reconfiguring them

arranged marriages so that serving NS will not tarnish their family’s honor. However, some families encourage their daughters to fulfill their NS as they see it as the only avenue females have to secure employment.

becomes a challenge during reconstruction (2002, 13). This implies that social relations and positions during conflict were in some way unusual and ‘unnatural,’ but a society need not equate reconstruction with putting former gender roles back in place. To ‘reconstruct’ means to rebuild, makeover or recreate from available information. The experiences of war are such that life as it was known cannot be rebuilt as an exact replica of the past, and such an attempt would nullify the reasons the war was waged. Reconstruction should be thought of as a makeover—an improvement on the past—and a recreation of a better society based on all accumulated experiences. Women’s participation in the EPLF’s armed forces was part of a larger plan deliberately created by those looking to gain from the armed conflict. Likewise, to pressure women to revert to the stereotypical gender roles they were previously encouraged to defy during reconstruction can only be thought of as a plan that would benefit some at the expense of others.

McKay and Mazurana note that women veteran fighters from other African conflicts believe that empowerment and social reconstruction after the war stems from acceptance in their communities, love and support from their families and economic opportunities that reaffirm that they are useful and wanted in society (2004, 161.) Sadly, clear patterns of gender-based stigmatization can be seen in many countries emerging from wars in which women served as combatants. This reality prompted The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 to devote an entire strategic objective to women and armed conflict and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 urges the inclusion of women in demobilization and reintegration programs and in peace-building initiatives. Yet, women’s realities present barriers to their inclusion in most reconstruction activities. Exploring these realities will help women and their advocates realize that much more research is needed to learn about women (and girl) combatant’s experiences and circumstances so that gender sensitive policies and programs are designed to address their needs. The EPLF was unique in its recognition of its female fighters throughout the Liberation War, but, like other nations, women veterans have become a disempowered group in the post-war era. Comparing their situation to that of other female ex-combatants around the globe provides insights into how the social reconstruction of Eritrea and the reintegration of female fighters can be better supported.

9.1 Patterns of Disempowerment

In a comparison of female ex-combatants from Sierra Leone and Eritrea, we see striking similarities in the way women were treated after the conflict ended.

“No one ever raised the question of reintegration in Sierra Leone. Female ex-combatants had intended to return to their homes. But in many cases these women and their families could not return because of their actions during the conflict. They had broken sacred laws and were considered impure in terms of traditional values. They had little chance of earning a living due to this stigmatization (Eno 2000).”

This account could also apply to Eritrean female ex-combatants Hale describes:

“A great number of demobilized combatants were women, mostly from rural areas. They had changed so much that it was impossible for many of them to return to their villages. Of the 12,000 demobilized women fighters, half had divorced⁵⁰, a status that could have very negative social consequences. They did not have much money, no work and little or no education. Not only did they no longer have a place in their rural villages many also found themselves ‘unmarriageable’ (1999).”

In Gear’s (2002) study of the challenges facing ex-combatants in South Africa, ‘betrayal’ was the most recurrent theme that emerged from interviews. The majority of her subjects felt as though they had been “badly let down by those who propelled them into action and inspired their lives as combatants.” Another common sentiment was the sense of a disjuncture between the ideology that framed the wars and their identities as combatants and their present realities. One former female fighter described her post-war life this way:

“...I say that I am still in a struggle ... There is this thing emphasized in the Freedom Charter that there shall be houses, security and comfort here inside South Africa, and they expect it from us, the comrades, that we should make comfort for ourselves. But you find the resources for those securities are not available. That's why I say that I am still oppressed, even now, because I'm not employed. You'll notice that our cadres are suffering more than everybody in the country. They should have been the first preference of this government - but the government has thrown us away.”

Gear goes on to state that most South African female ex-combatants are chastised by their families and considered ‘unmarriageable’ due to their ‘masculine behavior’ during the war. As ex-fighters went increasingly unrecognized or openly stigmatized for their military service they became more detached and isolated from their communities. During the war female fighters say they developed hopeful expectations of life after conflict, but instead of reintegrating and prospering they found themselves unceremoniously cast aside.

McKay and Mazurana assert “war can simultaneously oppress women and expand their possibilities (2004, 20).”

Armed conflict and militarism both intensifies sexism and provides opportunities for women to achieve positions

⁵⁰ Hale’s estimate of ex-fighter divorce rates concurs with Kutschera’s but conflicts with the data found in Figure 8: *Marital Status of EPLF Ex-fighters—Disaggregated by Gender* gathered by Mehreteab while serving as DRP coordinator for Mitias.

of power and learn new skills not previously possible. Yet, in the aftermath of conflict they found that female ex-combatants are usually urged by government and community leaders to resume traditional gender roles instead of using the strengths they developed to make new choices and seek broader opportunities. The most common consequence of women serving combat roles is their subsequent 'unmarriageable' status linked to society's judgment of their behaviors as being 'masculine'. To be unfit for marriage is equal to banishment from a society that devalues women's wartime contributions during peace and values women primarily in their roles of wives and mothers. As long as women's combat roles are ignored or undervalued by governments, community leaders and NGOs, females will not be involved in planning demobilization and reintegration programs and they will be denied the necessary psychological and social aspects of reintegration (13-15).

9.2 Paths to Reintegration

Despite the many disappointments women have experienced during their 'reintegration,' all was not in vain. Before joining the military few female combatants neither possessed much education or skills nor were they valued beyond their reproductive roles. By simply expressing frustration and anger shows that these women have experienced and/or imagined better lives for themselves and are no longer content to return to the past. Unfortunately this conscientisation comes at a time when female ex-combatants are being marginalized in their communities, pushing them further away from employment, resources and vital social connections they need to resume the fight to make their lives better. Spurred by these feelings of anger and disappointment, women veterans in Zimbabwe, Vietnam and El Salvador have continued to use their agency, sometimes in unconventional ways, to facilitate their social reintegration and force society's recognition of their wartime contributions.

The liberation war in Zimbabwe became the subject of the film *Flame* in 1995 bringing to light the often unspoken experiences of female freedom fighters. Both Eritrea's and Zimbabwe's liberation armies attracted women, but conditions were very different in the two wars. The two Zimbabwean independence movements⁵¹ trained and housed women separately and gender equality was never a social or political goal (Lyons 2003). And,

⁵¹ The Zimbabwe African National Union and the Zimbabwe African People's Union

Meintjes reports that many former Zimbabwean women combatants admit to being abducted and abused before being forced into military service (2001, 66). Produced shortly after the demobilization of the female fighters, *Flame* explores the experiences of two young women from their arrival at a training camp, through their experiences in the war, to their suffering after independence as their war efforts go unrecognized. Many have criticized the film for not depicting anything positive about the liberation struggle and The Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association even denied that women were active combatants in the conflicts. Yet, the film's director, Ingrid Sinclair, and the ex-combatants she interviewed believe it is time that Zimbabwe accepts the truth and reveals what really happened to female fighters during and after the war (Lyons 2003).

Many female ex-combatants in Zimbabwe do not talk about the war at all. Upon returning from the fighting, females faced a society that did not welcome the 'masculinized' freedoms they had known. They were seen as too tough, too liberated and not good enough to be wives. Women ex-combatants found it difficult to marry or stay married, and family and community members were quick to label them 'murderers' or 'prostitutes', while their male comrades were considered heroes. Similar to the strategies of the NUEW, the women's movement in Zimbabwe has often used female guerrilla's experiences, fighting side by side with men, as the basis for arguments to gain gender equality through legislation. To some extent this has been realized, however also like the strategies of the NUEW, the Zimbabwean women's movement has yet to deal with the specific needs of female ex-combatants. Lyons reminds us that the Zimbabwe case also points to the importance of grassroots organizing. As long as women veterans remain unable to organize themselves as a vocal group with special needs, social disparities based on gender continue to widen (2003).

From the Zimbabwe example we can see how many of the same challenges Eritrean women ex-combatants face can be brought to light using the media. In Africa, as elsewhere in the world, the army, whether or not it is a liberation army, symbolizes force and power. To become part of it means that one belongs to a dominant group. The sense of power that goes with belonging to a dominant group has led women fighters to transform the way they perceive themselves, but this sense of power seems to go missing after demobilization to be replaced with a silencing fear. Having once belonged to the dominant group, women cannot forget the power they once felt because it has contributed to changing their traditional identities (Bop 2001, 21). The media may provide a

powerful tool for opening up dialogue in a post-war society especially if its messages reflect the current realities of women. Waiting too long after a conflict has ended may mean losing what Meintjes calls the “cusp moment”—the period between war and peace when wartime gains are usually lost and women veterans are silenced (2001, 64).

Sometimes women and girls in fighting forces may not know what they have got until it is gone. Such were the circumstances for Vietnam’s female ex-combatants who never abandoned their traditional roles when they entered the war, but inflated these identities in order to care for the whole of the nation. In doing so, women unknowingly sacrificed that which defined their place in society—the ability to bear and raise children. Turner’s account of North Vietnamese women who fought in the American war mirrors the two faces of Eritrean female ex-combatants—in their public wartime glory and in their private peacetime suffering. Near the center of Hanoi stands a large statue of a woman with a gun over her shoulder and a baby in her arms “reminding passersby that a woman can be both a warrior and a mother (1998, 5).” Exhibits in the Vietnam Women’s History Museum, paint a portrait of the ‘ideal Vietnamese woman, one “who can raise and nurture soldier sons, fight like a man in times of war, and act as a peacemaker when conflict ends (24)”. Thus, Vietnam’s women have become part of both national and popular culture, but they paid dearly for their wartime service.

Turner’s interviews with female ex-combatants reveal that many women lost their sexual health⁵² after years in the jungles and returned to their villages ‘unmarriageable’, and condemned to “life on the margins in a society that values family above all else (4).” But Vietnam’s women veterans had different aspirations after the war than Eritrean women have voiced. Instead of struggling to change traditional cultural norms they used their agency to return to their former roles of wives and mothers, never faltering in their belief that it was a woman’s duty to sacrifice her own needs for those of her husband and children. When asked whether it was difficult to return to domestic life after having been on equal terms with men during the war, one Vietnamese female ex-combatant answered,

“Why would I not treasure my home? Sure, my family would never be the same again. But the hope that I could raise children in a safe place one day kept me alive (1998, 16).”

⁵² They were either no longer able to bear children because of their age or their bodies had become so weakened by malaria, exposure to agent orange and other illnesses that they had become infertile.

Bop feels one of the reasons women have lost freedoms they have previously won through armed struggle is that they were unaware or unwilling to consider that their own interest in a group—as a means to struggle against inequalities between the genders and against patriarchal ideology—took second place to the struggle for national liberation (2001, 30). Although many would feel that this was the case for Vietnam’s female fighters, the women themselves maintained a clear vision of what they were fighting for—to make Vietnam a safe place for them to raise their families—and went to extreme measures to fulfill their reproductive roles even after they were considered unfit for marriage. Turner found that many female veterans remained single and childless and went unrecognized (socially and monetarily) for their service. Vietnamese society, women and men alike, overlooked traditional propriety when deciding it was important for single women veterans to have what was “rightfully theirs”—a child—believing they would otherwise become ‘unstable’ and less than fully functioning adults. To this end, society looked the other way when a woman “asked for a child,” or became pregnant outside of marriage, as compensation for what she had gone through during the war (1998, 159-162).

But Vietnamese female ex-combatants are not entirely different from their Eritrean counterparts. Believing that “men were better then.” Vietnamese women also longed for an “imagined past when a collective struggle had muted gender differences (Turner 1998, 120-121).” As in Eritrea, Vietnamese society did not so much erase conventional notions of male-female relations during the war, but bury them temporarily (136). Both instances then illustrate the Maoist concept of ‘principle and secondary contradictions’⁵³. According to this concept, the ‘principle contradiction’ is between the country and the foreign invader; all other antagonisms, including inequalities between genders, are ‘contradictions between people’ which, because they (according to Mao and his devotees at least) can be resolved more easily, may be put off (Tse-Tung 1937). Female members of liberation movements who accepted this system of ideas and practices may have committed a historical error by unknowingly agreeing that transforming social relations between the genders was second to military victory (Bop 2001, 31).

⁵³ Mao’s teachings influenced many African independence movements. See “Remembering the Chinese Revolution” at www.peoplesmarch.com and “The Influence of Ideology” at www.country_studies.com/china/.

As woman and men are drawn into war, the relations between them inevitably shift. Roles change and opportunities emerge to forge new social relationships and identities. The extent of this change varies from one war zone to another, but Meintjes claims that the ability to sustain new social relationships and identities depends on the way in which the transition from war to peace occurs. Postwar reconstruction “emerges as a critical moment in the shifting terrain of gender power” when gender relation transformation can be impeded or enhanced (2001, 64). Women ex-combatants from El Salvador’s conflicts realized the importance of banding together as women during post-war reconstruction to ensure their rights and provide for the needs of other vulnerable groups, which in turn motivated society to continue to value their contributions. They harbored no misconceptions of gender equality while fighting with the guerrilla forces, but used their empowering experiences to continue to mobilize for social reforms as their society transitioned from war to peace.

Nowhere in Central America were women more involved in a revolutionary struggle than in El Salvador.⁵⁴ Women ex-combatants spoke to Ibañez (2001) of experiencing liberation from social restrictions, a new sexual freedom and a release from conventional perceptions of motherhood while serving as fighters. Along with this feeling of emancipation came hopes of overcoming poverty and oppression they were unwilling to abandon after the conflict ended. El Salvadorian women remind us of the power of organized groups to fight opposition. Just as a military movement can wage war, an organized women’s group can create a louder voice for all women to oppose their stigmatization and marginalization. Unlike the NUEW, which is considered to be the only women’s organization in Eritrea, in 1991 more than 100 women’s organizations were active in El Salvador (Conaway 2004, 25) allowing Salvadoran women, ex-fighters and others alike, to be key agents in the reconstruction of communities. Such active participation in civil society was prompted by personal feelings of disempowerment after demobilization as well as blatant political omissions of women by male leaders in the aftermath of the war (Ibañez 2001, 117-120).

According to Conaway, female fighters felt lonely, isolated and in need of “emotional care and support” more than anything else after being separated from their comrades at demobilization. Although policy makers and

⁵⁴ Women were thought to have comprised up to 40% of the total membership of the Frente Faribundo Martí de Liberación Nacional (FMLN), the unified front of several left-wing guerilla groups that merged in the 1970’s.

DDR planners continue to stress economic reintegration, Salvadoran and Eritrean women veterans have similarly expressed that their reintegration has been largely arrested due to society's social reception of them after the war. However, because Salvadoran women formed grassroots organizations, their voices were not silenced during peace negotiations and reconstruction planning. The success of El Salvador's peace process and DDR efforts was, in many ways, the result of women being present in negotiations and active in implementing official civil society initiatives. Although women did not enter negotiations processes with a specific agenda of 'women's rights' or 'gender awareness, when they observed that women could be excluded⁵⁵ they quickly rectified the situation and secured equal access to benefits. (2004, 24-26).

Among the key findings of Conaway's study of women's contributions to reintegration and reconstruction efforts in El Salvador, "women have been most active, and gender roles most transformed, in communities that received continual and systematic support (2004, 6)" from the government, from NGOs or from society in general. In urban centers, a core of strong, well-known, and respected women's organizations developed; many led by former combatants and activists. These organizations, like the NUEW, claim to represent the needs and interests of (all) Salvadoran women at the national level. But it is in the rural areas that women are slowly changing gender relations and earning men's respect. Both men and women now recognize that many women sacrificed opportunities in order to support their husbands and families in the home after demobilization,⁵⁶ and women had a clear sense of responsibility for the livelihoods of thousands of landless peasants and female-headed households. This realization has led to men adapting new gender role activities. In focus groups, males said that the experience of working with women as equals during the war and witnessing what women's organizations have been capable of after the war challenged their assumptions about women's skills. Consequently, the men's perceptions of women's roles in society have changed dramatically. In the words of one male ex-combatant,

"The men of Sisignayo cannot say 'We have done all this,' because it would be a lie. I know many women here that were in the war. Sometimes we [men] make jokes that 'today I made tortillas and I had to do the

⁵⁵ Despite the widespread participation of women in the conflict, the FMLN did not include gender equality in its political platform and women were also not explicitly referenced in the Chapultepec Accords of 1992 that ended hostilities, so the majority of women ex-combatants did not receive demobilization and reintegration entitlements (Conaway 2004).

⁵⁶ Conaway notes that in the immediate post-war period, women's willingness to sacrifice their own ambitions and step back into traditional roles left the public, productive sphere open for male ex-combatants, giving them responsibilities and much needed self-esteem. But, women did not retreat completely. Alongside their domestic responsibilities, women took on key roles in reconstruction and peace building efforts.

laundry.' But I tell you, it's true...So, there are some things that have changed that before we would not do (Conaway 2004, 24)."

Despite the general social regression of women, their leadership roles and experiences during the war had exposed them to new possibilities. Describing this transformation, Ana Maria Alvarenga of the Asociación para la Reconstrucción y el Desarrollo Municipal says,

"After the war, women have never returned to be the same and to live in the same conditions as they were before. Their situation has changed. Yes, they do their household chores, but they are never absorbed only in this. There is another vision. They are participating in community activities. Women participate in groups and solidarity organizations...Their work is valued (Conaway 2004, 19)."

For women, demobilization not only means having to go back to traditional roles and be stigmatized in the process, it often involves being separated from the environment and cohort group that allowed new identities to emerge. The identity created by militant movements of the 'liberated woman' cannot be sustained when the 'woman-weapon' is no longer needed, unless women remobilize themselves to peacefully fight for their rights. It is vital, therefore, that women become conscious of the roles that have been manufactured for them and resist internalizing these views without question or critique and instead organize themselves into supportive units that can validate and advocate for their new liberated identities. Currently, very few Eritrean female ex-combatants are present in public leadership as the NUEW remains the sole women's organization in the country. However, international NGOs are discovering that empowering ex-fighters and alleviating their poverty begins with forming small women's organizations. Following the examples of Salvadoran women, rural Eritrean women can also organize themselves to act for local change and speak for societal reforms.

10 Gains and Losses

At the close of our discussion it is necessary to make some sense of just what has benefited the lives of Eritrea's female Liberation War fighters and what actions and conditions have disempowered and disconnected them from society in the post-war era. Although it seems as if each gain female fighters made was accompanied by a loss. Yet, each gain cannot be erased entirely and the losses women veterans have experienced need only be temporary.

To begin, allowing for women's full participation in combat roles allowed them to gain a new sense of power.

This empowerment came in many forms, through education and skills training, through belonging to the dominant authority in the country and especially by being a part of a movement that valued social unity and respect of one's comrades above all else. Women and men combatants alike learned that neither gender must remain constricted by their reproductive, traditional roles. The EPLF's ideal of self-reliance dictated that all members of the movement shed their old identities and socialized beliefs and behaviors to achieve victory and to envision a better Eritrea. And it was the symbolic character of the "liberated woman warrior" that captivated females and inspired them to risk stepping outside of the strict boundaries society had built around them. Believing they could fight alongside men and be treated as equals during and after the war motivated females to become more than just combatants, they truly became a new race of Eritrean woman. The EPLF's grand experiment with Eritrean culture happened within the confines of a total institution that allowed its followers the opportunity to redefine themselves and their relationships on their own terms. This reckless abandon for society's norms could only be fostered in the fatalistic environment of the trenches where fighters lived for the day and hoped for tomorrow. The EPLF's NDP thus became a manifesto of future aspirations that have yet to be realized in post-war Eritrea, offering the best chance women veterans have to become re-empowered and reconnected.

Much can be said about what didn't work to the advantage of female ex-combatants reentering civilian society after demobilization, all stemming from opposite natures of the liberations movement and traditional society. The dominant motivation for recruiting women into the military was to increase the manpower of the EPLF's fighting forces. But this was deftly masked by the Front's ideology of 'unity for liberty' and by the powerful symbol of the new Eritrean woman, the liberated, modern fighter actively asserting her equal rights—to kill and die for her country. But, the unity of the EPLF collapsed into empty expectations as women's liberated identities were decommissioned after independence proving that the equality women experienced during the war was a temporary fringe benefit of their service. Their participation in the war would not ensure their lasting empowerment. As the new government and society urged fighters to 'shed their war mentality' all focus was placed on the economic reintegration of ex-fighters. Believing this large workforce would aid the reconstruction

of the nation, DRP planners fatally ignored the fact that Front values and civilian values had little in common.

As a result of the prolonged conflict, the EPLF's total institution had effectively resocialized its fighters out of acceptable roles in society such that both female and male veterans felt pressured to abandon all aspirations of converting the whole of Eritrea to their way of thinking. The male EPLF leaders and the female NUEW leaders took on an elite status after the war and soon forgot about the special needs of fighters struggling to return to their families and communities. The leadership especially abandoned women when their challenges were felt to be holding the nation back from developing. Their husbands and their families cast Eritrea's female ex-fighters away, leaving them trapped between traditional roles they could no longer fulfill and liberated roles that no longer existed. Male fighters were praised for their military service while female fighters were accused of being too much like men. Thus, in the end, a new race of women has been left to navigate a new Eritrean territory somewhere between tradition and liberation and to search for the social support they need along the journey.

11 Recommendations

In light of the gains and losses Eritrea's female ex-fighters have experienced, patterns seen in other conflicts where women have been combatants, their most immediate needs call for the recreation of meaningful social connections and effective group organization. This population has essentially without a role in today's society as they are no longer solely defined by their reproductive duties nor have they peacefully remobilized into a new movement that speaks to their experiences and addresses their needs. Keeping in mind the situations of individual women ex-combatants—as Rigbe's story inspired this research—and the universal goals of increasing gender awareness and women's participation in demobilization and reintegration efforts outlined in the United Nations Security Council's Resolution 1325, I offer two recommendations to aid the healthy reintegration of Eritrea's women veterans: approach development initiatives aimed at demobilized women with identity crisis intervention principles, and whenever possible, assist the formation of groups as a basis for a much-needed Eritrean civil society while the 'cusp' period after conflict exists.

11.1 Addressing the Identity Crisis of Female Ex-Combatants

This analysis has shown the dramatic role shifts women combatants often undergone. Demobilization and reintegration efforts focused on transitioning women back into traditional roles ignore their labor and leadership potentials and render female ex-combatants ‘victims’ of the struggle. Agreeing with McKay and Mazurana, rather than starting from a place of “healing the victim” to regain a norm that will never be regained, a holistic approach should be undertaken with attention to the physical, psychological and social aspects of reintegration. Because female fighters experienced profoundly different gender socialization under the ‘total institution’ of the EPLF, their changed identities were stigmatized and subsequently suppressed after the war. They have found themselves not only in economic and social crises but also in psychological flux. Female ex-fighters are experiencing an identity crisis under the patriarchal reconstruction of post-war Eritrea so reintegration efforts should structure their programs around the principles of crisis intervention.

Lee Ann Hoff (1989), coordinator of the International Crisis Network, proposes three different types of crisis: developmental, situational and social/cultural. And Brammer (1994) offers existential crisis as a forth type⁵⁷. *Developmental crises* are events that occur as part of normal human growth, and although these are considered to be ‘normal’ events, these turning points can often produce significant confusion, especially in people who do not have adequate social support. *Situational crises* are unanticipated events that are neither predictable nor controllable. These events are often random, sudden and shocking. *Social-cultural crises* are situations or events that arise out of cultural values and social structures and are related directly to gender, ethnicity, age, religion or class. Crises arising from the actions of others are related to values about women and social-cultural factors in the family. *Existential crises*, the forth type, are connected with inner conflicts and anxieties associated with human questions of freedom, meaning and responsibility. Thus, an existential crisis may arise when one wonders about the purpose and meaningfulness of one’s life (Gilliland 1997, 125-6).

⁵⁷ The ancient word Greek word for crisis comes from two root words, one meaning ‘decision’ and the other meaning ‘turning point.’ The Chinese word for crisis is made up of two characters, one representing ‘danger’ and the other representing ‘opportunity’. These examples provide historical evidence that crisis can either result in a breakthrough or a breakdown (Gilliland 1997, 128).

Often these types of crises are interrelated and each can be spotted in lives of Eritrea's female ex-fighters today. But each situation only became a crisis because the social structures and cultural values of Eritrean society did not change at the rate and scope that they did within the EPLF. How people cope in a crisis situation and how people help in a crisis situation both depend on their values and assumptions about who is responsible for the problem and who is responsible for the solution. Brickman has identified four different models of helping that differ in their assumptions of responsibility⁵⁸.

Table 4: Models of Helping and Coping with Crisis Source: Brickman 1982

Models of Helping	Responsible for the Problem	Responsible for the Solution
Moral Model	Self	Self
Medical Model	Other	Other
Enlightenment Model	Self	Other
Empowerment Model	Other	Self

The Empowerment Model posits that people are not to be blamed for their problems, but they are held responsible for the solution to these problems. People who assist others under this model are interested in providing aid and resources that individuals deserve but do not have. The typical response is to temporarily mobilize on behalf of the person or group until the missing resources have been supplied or skills have been acquired for people to be responsible for their own fates. Essentially, this model seeks to restore livelihoods and coping mechanisms to individuals dealing with a 'new normal' life. This model most closely resembles the original ideals of the EPLF—supporting gender equality, promoting self-reliance, consciousness-raising, and education and training as models for development—that improved women's situation and status during the war. Reintegration and development planners should model their programs by the Empowerment Model of crisis intervention, and current DDR programs should be evaluated in terms of how well they truly empower their recipients. In order to do this the core experiences of an identity crisis must be addressed—disempowerment and disconnection.

⁵⁸ From my interviews and experiences in Eritrea I did not encounter any ex-combatants or Eritrean citizens who supported the Moral Model of assistance; they did not believe that female ex-fighters were solely to blame for their economic and social marginalization after the war. Some international NGOs can easily fall into the Medical Model if they feel their development initiatives are necessary to save female fighters from their current plight. This line of thinking can lead to a codependence between NGOs and the women they target unless programs are designed to be self-sustaining beyond the help of the outside experts. And, the Government of the State of Eritrea appears to be fixated upon the Enlightenment model of helping themselves after the recent Border War with Ethiopia that prompted the United Nations to post a peacekeeping force along its southern border.

Disempowerment refers to a decreased sense of personal control over one's own life and environment.

Disconnection denotes a sense of difference or alienation from others. Thus, the goals of an identity crisis recovery effort must therefore be re-empowerment and reestablish new and meaningful relationships (Gilliland 1997, 129-130). Ideally, identity crisis interventions should be geared towards individuals in groups with the aim of facilitating growth through personal and social integration—a model I observed CARE International successfully employing in Eritrea. Taking what we know of the identity shifts of female EPLF ex-combatants and the principles of crisis intervention, CARE's practice of group formation becomes an example of laying the groundwork for effective re-empowerment, reconnection and reintegration—necessary foundations for women's social remobilization.

11.2 Fostering Civil Society

CARE International's Community-based Savings and Credit Associations (CSCA) in the Gash Barka Region have been among the most successful USAID-funded projects targeting female ex-combatants over the past four years. CSCA's are designed to assist vulnerable, often female-headed households, to create a group savings and interest collection fund in order to have resources in difficult times, and to take out loans to invest in IGAs. In interviews with CARE staff members I learned that the most important component of the CSCAs is the stages of group formation each Association progresses through.

There are four phases in the evolution of a CSCA. In the Introductory Phase target areas are researched to identify "poor, vulnerable households" in need of financial and technical support services. A public meeting is held with the village where the project is explained and the formation of groups is invited. Community members form their own groups and then approach CARE and VISION representatives to begin the Intensive Phase of their development. This phase focuses on training and organizing the group. The VISION Field Agent presents training topics over a seven-week period at Association meetings focusing on setting up a management committee, formulating internal rules, defining the group's objectives and beginning the savings and credit activities. Many times this is the first time women have handled money or had the responsibility of repaying a loan. But VISION Field Agent Alazar said just getting the women to talk is a bigger feat.

“The women are afraid to speak in public...actually I do not think they are afraid, but they have been taught to remain silent most of their lives. But I see a difference between the women who were fighters and the other peasant women. The fighters are often elected to be leaders of the CSCAs and they ask many questions. Other women look to them for advice and to settle disputes. They make my work easier...(laughs)...”(author’s interview July 24, 2004.)

The Development Phase follows with the goal of Association independence and it ends in the Maturity Phase where final evaluations are done and the group separates from the NGOs entirely. By this time all participants will have gotten over their timidity and lack of experience working in a group and feelings of powerlessness have all but disappeared over the year or so of gradually expanding upon IGAs. According to CSCA Project Manager, Michael Tecle,

“We have Associations in Gash Barka that have been functioning for almost two years now and the members have been quite successful in their IGAs. We see the confidence of the women growing. They have been given the knowledge and the skills they need to succeed and when times get tough they have other members to turn to. The women do not feel alone and being in a group gives them courage to make choices...to take risks,” says CSCA Project Manager, Michael Tecle (author’s interview July 9, 2004).

All participants are taught to plan, coordinate, take responsibility, organize, manage and make decisions as a group and independently. This civil society building methodology teaches participants that united they are stronger and more capable of resolving their problems. The CARE CSCAs also use methods are focused on the expression of feelings and ideas to solve problems within a limited time so that skills can be acquired in order to avoid crises in the future or to cope more effectively—what Gilliland would describe as crisis intervention strategies (1997, 130).

Strong female identities are reaffirmed in the ex-fighters that belong to the associations and new self-assured identities emerge in the other members. Just as women’s roles and identities are gendered from birth, so too did the EPLF assign them new roles and identities as liberated fighters. CARE’s CSCAs allow members to assert their independence economically, socially and even politically in the decision-making procedures of the group for the first time, without requiring them to entirely give up their traditional identities in the name of development. The CSCA structure allows for new group formations based on like-situated individuals who validate and stabilize each other, lessening feelings of alienation. The true acceptance of fellow Association members mirrors the EPLF’s practice and promise of equality and restores the capabilities of participants searching for a safe place

to express their identities. Crisis survivors recognize that their experiences exist within a social-cultural context, and improve their situations by sharing experiences with others who can relate.

Probably the most surprising positive development in the Gash Barka CSCA's that CARE and VISION have witnessed are the formation of "Women's Health Forums" during the Development Phase of some Associations. Many of the members of these groups had not known each other well before joining the group because of their diverse they had ethnic and religious backgrounds. The weekly Association meetings allowed members a venue discuss health concerns related to FGM, HIV-AIDS and domestic abuse. Taking these issues to the next level, Association members approached the NGOs and asked for education and assertiveness training in these areas.

"These women share many of the same problems and the longer Associations are together the more confident they become to speak about their problems and find ways to solve them," says Awet Tseggai, CARE Project representative for Akordat, Gash Barka.

Most inequalities are social constructions that arise from gender roles society assigns to women and men.

According to UNICEF, the process of overcoming gender inequality occurs at five levels: (1) material welfare, (2) access to resources, (3) self-understanding, (4) participation in decision-making, and (5) control over factors of production (Gebremedhin 2002, 22). Most development activities and DDR programs aimed at supporting IGAs cover levels 1,2,4, and 5 but ignore the importance of 'self-understanding'—analysis of life problems and their root causes. Gebremedhin tells us that 'self-understanding' is the "rejection of the erroneous discriminatory belief that women's lower socio-economic condition and traditional gender division of labor is 'natural or 'God-given' (22)." In this sense, self-understanding means reflecting upon the components that make up one's identity and deciding which of those parts the individual agrees with or not. This self-defining step leads to empowerment and it was the missing step in the EPLF's DRP.

The CARE CSCA and Women's Health Forum model is also very effective means of mobilizing women's post-war participation in reconstruction activities. According to a 2000 Oxfam funded study, women's top reasons for being active in organizations include:

- The opportunity to gain skills and knowledge that would advance their situation and that of their families.
- The possibility to work with other women to support and improve their lives and experiences,
- And, an "interest and conviction" in the necessity of actively participating in the lives of their communities (cited in Conaway 2004, 26).

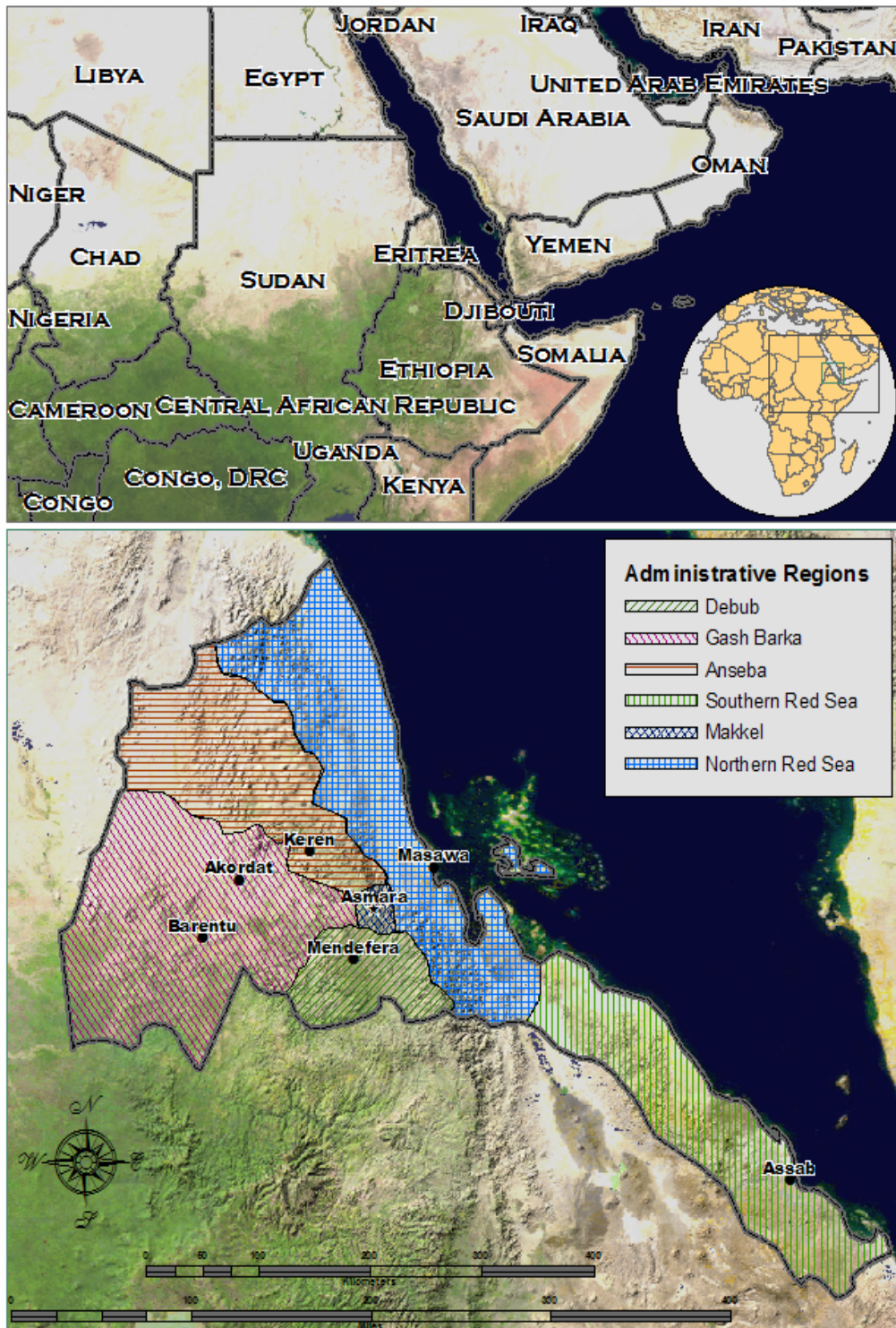
Each of these grounds for women's involvement in civil society is fulfilled through membership in a CSCA—a model that can be duplicated around the country and the world⁵⁹. But the best evidence of its success comes from the testimonials of members themselves. As Rigbe told me,

“The Association has given me hope. After I lost my husband and had to move with my children, they became the family I lost. I am independent now (author’s interview July 24, 2004.)”

The CARE model does what other micro-credit and IGA interventions do not do. It emphasizes the understanding of the interpretations and judgments individuals make about their own economic and social crises. “Reactions to any crisis are heavily influenced by what people say to themselves and holding negative views of their situation can interfere with coping efforts and worsen the situation (Gilliland 1997, 131). By changing their thinking—becoming more confident in their abilities and more assertive in expressing their needs and wishes—CSCA ex-combatant participants can respond more effectively to their identity crises. The psycho-social response of the CARE program allows participants an opportunity to become aware of the internal and external factors that have contributed to their crisis and with the support of a group individuals can begin to gain control over their lives, their futures and their identities.

⁵⁹ CARE states that this methodology has been successful around the world and particularly in Niger and Tanzania. The Niger program, Mata Masu Dubara, began in 1991 and ten years later had over 80,000 participants. The strategy has recently been employed in post-conflict Uganda with results similar to those in Eritrea because there is no need for outside funds.

Appendix A: Continent/Region/Country Map (authored by Scott Sweet, 2005)



Appendix B: Photographs from Akordat, Gash Barka, Eritrea (photo credit: Sara Krosch July 2004)



Rigbe was my inspiration for conducting this research. As a young mother, an EPLF ex-combatant, and a CSCA member, her life story followed the cycle of many former fighters in Eritrea.



Rigbe's home and goat shelter



Members of a CSCA, half of which were former combatants from the Liberation War and Border War

Appendix C: EPLF Propaganda Photographs and Posters

Photo credit: www.ertra.com

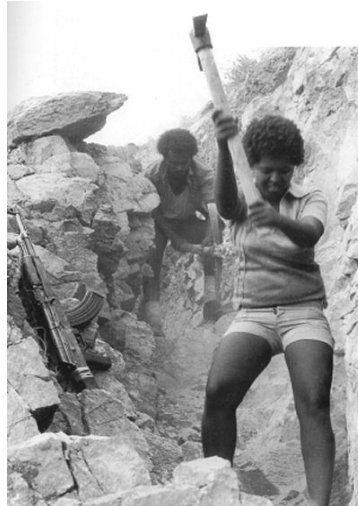


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Photo credit: www.ertra.com

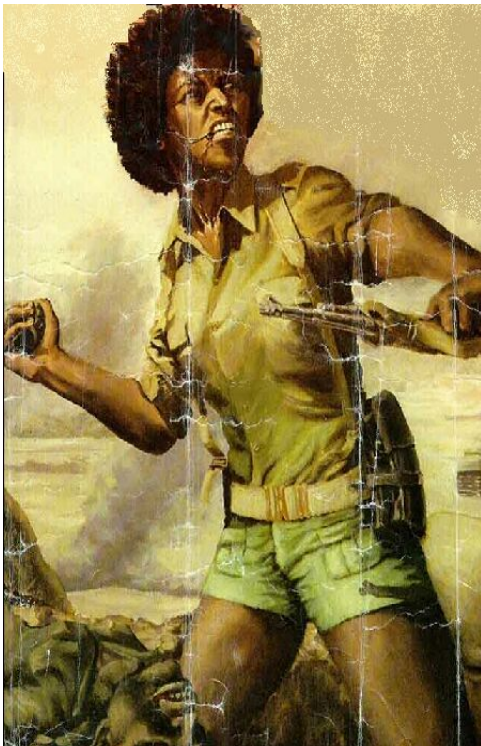


Photo credit: www.ertra.com



Photo credit: www.eritrea.be

Figures 1-4

Figure 1: Time of Skill Acquisition of Ex-fighters-
Disaggregated by Gender

Source: Mehreteab 2001 cited in Mehreteab 2002

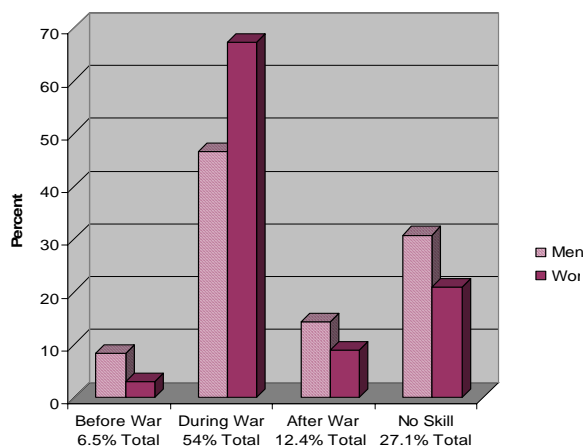
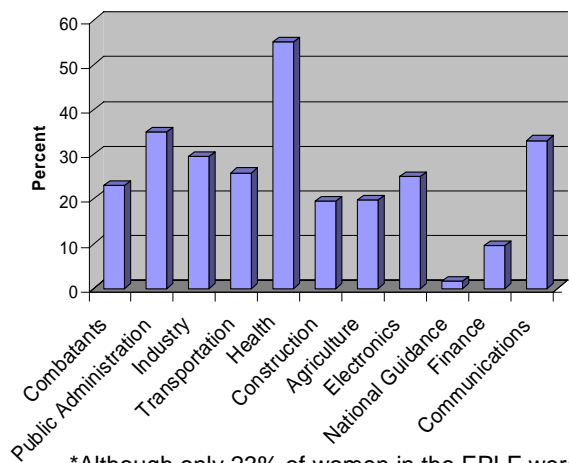


Figure 2*: Women's Participation in the
EPLF by Employment Type – 1989

Source: NUEW cited in Green 1994



*Although only 23% of women in the EPLF were combatants, they comprised 30-40% of the total fighting forces. All women combatants were also trained in an employment area.

Figure 3: Origin of EPLF Fighters

Source: Mitias 1993 cited in Mehreteab 2002

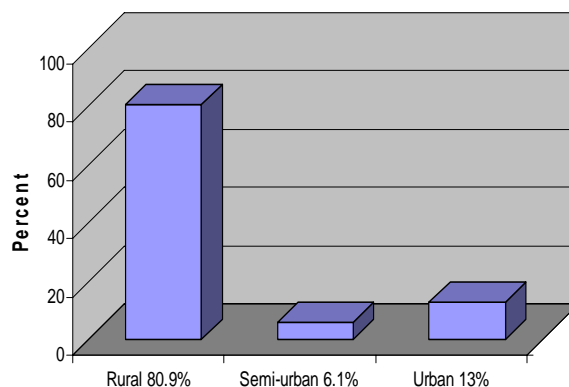
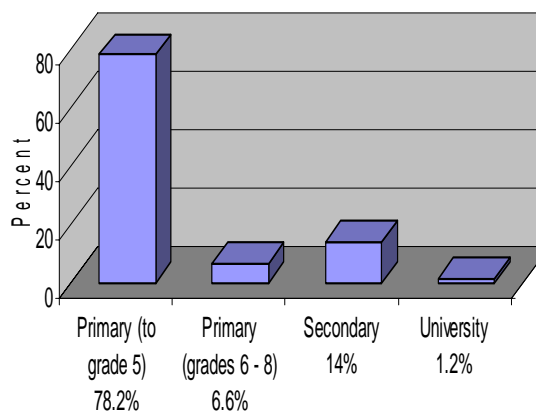


Figure 4: Educational Background of EPLF Fighters

Source: Mitias 1993 cited in Mehreteab 2002



Figures 5-8

Figure 5: Years of EPLF Military Service-
Disaggregated by Gender

Source: Mehreteab 2001 cited in Mehreteab 2002

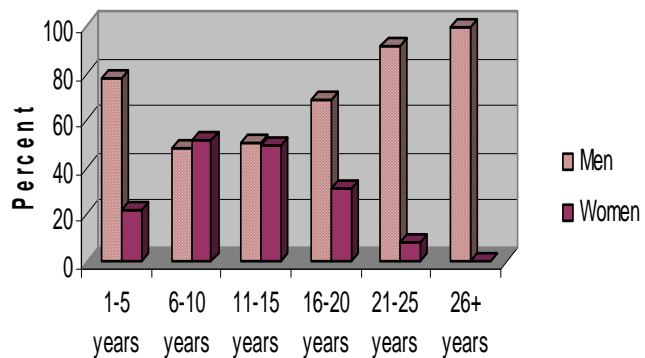


Figure 6: Ex-Fighter Origin of Education-
Disaggregated by Gender

Source: Mehreteab 2001 cited in Mehreteab 2002

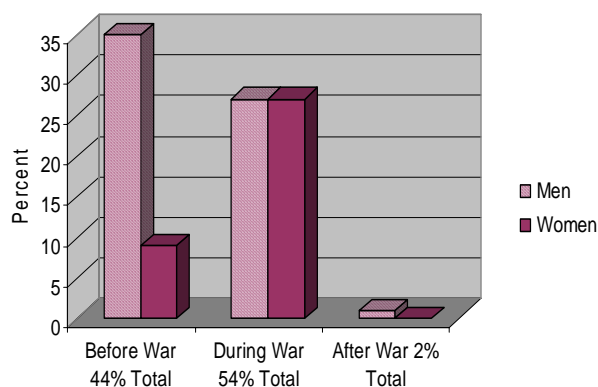


Figure 7: Age Groups at Demobilization

Source: Mehreteab 2001 cited in Mehreteab 2002

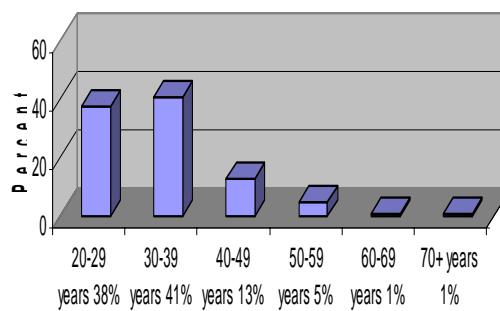
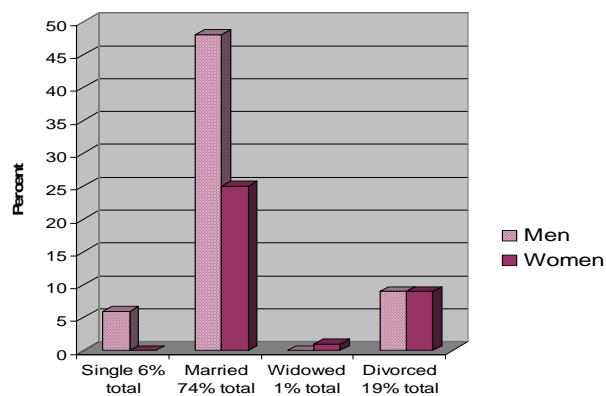


Figure 8: Marital Status of EPLF Ex-Fighters
Disaggregated by Gender

Source: Mehreteab 2001 cited in Mehreteab 2002



Figures 9-11

Figure 9: Ex-fighters Expectations Matching Reality-
Disaggregated by Gender

Source: Mehreteab 2001 cited in Mehreteab 2002

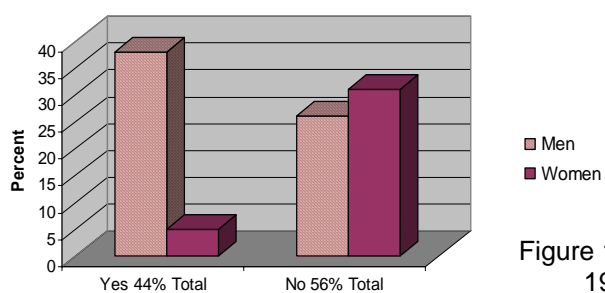


Figure 11: Participation in Education by School level,
1995 and 1998-Disaggregated by Gender
EPLF Fighters after Demobilization

Source: Eritrean Ministry of Education 1997
and NUEW 1999 cited in Gebremedhin 2002

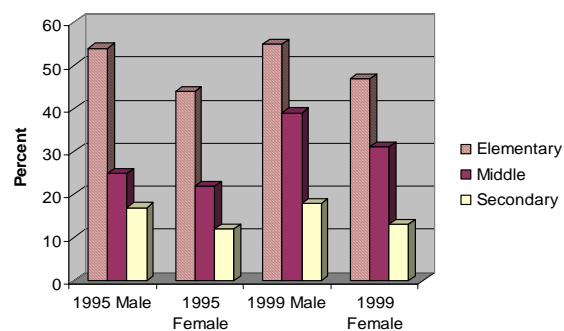
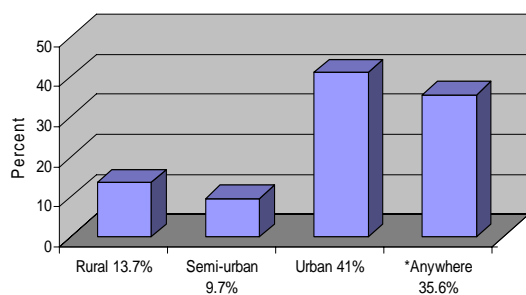


Figure 10: Geographic Preference of
EPLF Fighters after Demobilization

Source: Mitias 1993 cited in Mehreteab 2002



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