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# The Role of Women in Post-Conflict Transformation in the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of Eritrea\*

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## I. Introduction

Poverty, vulnerability and virulent conflicts have been the hallmark of the Horn of Africa for several decades. Eritrea, ‘the troubled and turbulent country,’<sup>1</sup> is one of the five countries constituting the volatile region of Horn of Africa. This region is described by some experts as ‘the most conflicted region of the world since the end of the Second World War.’<sup>2</sup> And of late, Eritrea has become a major destabilising actor in the region, necessitating a stringent UN Security Council Resolution in December 2009 (Resolution 1907). Historically however, Eritrea is notably known for the exceptional role played by its female freedom fighters in the armed struggle for liberation. Eritrean Government sources indicate that throughout the struggle for self-determination female freedom fighters constituted one-third of the liberation forces in active combat.<sup>3</sup> The high level of mobilisation of female freedom fighters in the armed struggle has created a significant measure of equality between men and women, marking the beginning of awareness about gender disparity and the prioritisation of gender equality. For example, for the first time in the history of Eritrea, men and women freedom fighters were able to choose their marriage partners, contrary to the Eritrean tradition and culture of arranged marriages. The social mobilisation towards emancipation of women heralded by the liberation

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<sup>1</sup> Tricia Redeker Hepner & Daivid O’Kane, ‘Introduction,’ in David O’Kane & Tricia Redeker Hepner (eds), *Biopolitics, Militarism and Development: Eritrea in the Twenty-First Century* (2009), ix.

<sup>2</sup> David H Shinn, ‘Challenges to Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa,’ paper presented at the World Affairs Council of Northern California, 12 March 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *Statement of Ms. Luul Gebreab, Head of the Eritrean Government Delegation to the 34th Session of the CEDAW Committee*, 24 January 2006, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw34/statements/intstatements/eri.pdf> (accessed 6 June 2007).

struggle era should have served as a springboard for further achievements in the post-independence era. However, as will be seen later, the opportunity has not been captured effectively and Eritrea has now become one of the major spots of gender-based violations in the world.

This article examines how the relationship between gender and traditional and modern conceptions or expressions of gender identities developed during the war and will explain the subsequent regression to submissive gender roles for women in the period of independence. The changes in gender roles were generated within the context of a military liberation structure, with an administrative structure of governance that has not fundamentally changed since the end of military liberation struggle. The Eritrean state is based on a one party – one command system under martial rule, justified by the authorities in terms of the ongoing threats perceived of an invasion from neighbouring country and former coloniser Ethiopia. While military structures tend to emphasise stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, it can allow for new directives of gender-roles. However, if changes in gender-roles are not matched by supporting conceptions of masculinity and femininity, this may evolve to a conflicting and confusing social definition of gender-relations in the post-conflict era, and contribute to further conflict. In a ground-breaking article, R W Connell comments on the relationship between violence and masculinity:

The connection between violence and masculinity is a key contemporary issue. Recent research shows both institutional bases and situational triggers of gendered violence, which are important in understanding contemporary global conflict and developing strategies for peace.<sup>4</sup>

This paper identifies the relationship between the institutional military administration and gender-relations. The paper examines the factors that have led to a disheartening regression in the post-independence era, one of which is the abusive National Military Service Programme (NMSP) which has virtually kept the nation under a constant war-footing, at least since the outbreak of a new border conflict with Ethiopia in 1998. In this

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<sup>4</sup> Raewyn W Connell, 'Masculinities, Change and Conflict in Global Society: Thinking about the Future of Men's Studies', *The Journal of Men's Studies* 11(3) (2003): 249.

context Eritrean women are suffering the brunt of the crisis disproportionately, as they are particularly subject to (sexual) violence and vulnerability, and take care of children, sick, disabled and elderly people. However, the restrictive prescription of gender-roles victimises the society at large and the negative consequences are lived by victims as well as those resorting to violence and aggression. Women are also active agents in society's definition.<sup>5</sup> Women can play traditional auxiliary roles in provoking violence and expressing gender identities related to a situation of violence, cheering on their men, and therefore attribution of responsibility should not be implied without further detailed consideration.

The paper therefore specifically analyses the role of Eritrean women in providing leadership and their contribution in decision-making positions in the post-independence era and in conflict prevention and resolution processes during the 1998–2000 Eritrea-Ethiopia border conflict. In addition, the paper discusses efforts made or not made by the Eritrean government and the international community in terms of empowerment of women as peace builders, particularly as envisaged by Resolutions 1325 and 1820 of the UN Security Council and identifies recommendations that need to be taken into account by the international community to allow women to play leadership roles in conflict resolution in the region.

## **II. The role of women during the liberation struggle**

A discussion of the role of Eritrean women in post-conflict transformation would be incomplete without interrogating the remarkable achievement of Eritrean women in the making of an independent Eritrean state. The contribution of female freedom fighters in the success of the liberation struggle makes a major component of the Eritrean discourse on gender equality. In a previous contribution, one of the current authors writes about this as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> For example, on the participation of women in the killings in Rwanda, see generally Mahmood Mamdani *When Victims become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda*. (2001).

The Eritrean struggle for gender equality is as old as the underlying ideological transformations of the two major liberation fronts – the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). As in all other cases, the pioneering liberation front in the empowerment of women is the ELF. What has been achieved by the EPLF can only be seen as a continuation of what the ELF has initially pioneered. The EPLF, by continuing the struggle for self-determination and empowerment of women, assumed a notable role when it liberated the country in 1991.<sup>6</sup>

As Tanja Müller notes, the Eritrean revolution has created a dynamic process of modernization for the Eritrean society in general and for women in particular. This transformative process has ‘fostered an environment in which women are regarded as equal and are encouraged to occupy positions of leadership.’<sup>7</sup> It is also part of the reality of Eritrea coming into being ‘as the outcome of a national liberation struggle combined with a social revolution.’<sup>8</sup> Throughout the struggle for self-determination, women have played a very distinctive role. As noted before, official records of the Eritrean Government reveal that from the tens of thousands of EPLF combatants, female freedom fighters constituted one third of the liberation forces in active combat.<sup>9</sup>

According to Rachel Odede and Eden Asghedom, the mobilization of women in the armed struggle has created an attitude of equality between men and women, marking the beginning of awareness about gender disparity.<sup>10</sup> This was a breakthrough in the history of gender justice in Eritrea and it was one of the greatest achievements of the Eritrean revolution. A very important example discussed by Odede and Asghedom is the transformation of marriage among EPLF fighters as a paradigm shift resulting from a revolutionary approach. For the first time in the history of Eritrea, assert the authors, ‘men and women fighters were able to choose their marriage partners, contrary to the Eritrean tradition and culture of arranged marriages.’<sup>11</sup> During the armed struggle, the

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel R Mekonnen, ‘The Abolition of Female Circumcision in Eritrea: Inadequacies of New Legislation,’ *African Human Rights Law Journal* 7(2) (2007), 396.

<sup>7</sup> See generally Tanja R Müller, *The Making of Elite Women: Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea* (2005).

<sup>8</sup> Müller, note \*\*above, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Statement of Ms. Luul Gebreab*, note \*\* above.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Odede and Eden Asghedom, ‘The Continuum of Violence against Women in Eritrea,’ *Development* 43 (2001), 69-70.

<sup>11</sup> Odede & Asghedom, note \*\* above, 69–70; Lyda Favali, ‘What is Missing? Female Genital Surgeries: Infibulations, Excision, Clitoridectomy in Eritrea’ *Global Jurist Frontiers* 1(2) (2001), 78–79.

EPLF has for the first time forbidden the practice of female genital cutting (FGM) by its members.<sup>12</sup>

An important question is the process through which these changes were achieved. While East Bloc official doctrine during the Cold War expanded into ideas on gender equality as part of the reconstruction of society, in ex-post assessments two major problems were identified. Firstly, changes on gender-relations were imposed and were not the result of demands for change or concerns identified by people themselves, which is also known as ‘directive emancipation.’<sup>13</sup> Secondly, women remained excluded from decision-making and were not integrated as leaders in the process of re-arranging social relations. Emancipation lacked institutional reform to include women in administrative structures. In East Bloc countries, given the superficial ‘cosmetic’ or directed nature of social change, the underlying conceptions associated with masculinity and femininity did not change, leading to a failure of real women’s emancipation. This has been well studied and examined in relation to the former East Bloc countries.<sup>14</sup> As many liberation movement leaders were trained in former East Bloc countries, their struggle reflected similar shortcomings, and deep patriarchal roots remain intact, even if the particular results varied from those in East Bloc countries, due to the contextual, cultural and historical differences.

In the Eritrean case, the social mobilization towards emancipation of women heralded by the liberation struggle era should have indeed served as a springboard for further planning and implementation after the liberation of the country in 1991. However, as will be seen in the following section, the opportunity was not captured momentarily in the post-independence era. Dishearteningly, the achievements of Eritrean female freedom fighters have been betrayed by the post-independence political elite of Eritrea. During the recent wave of internal repression prominent women freedom fighters have become the

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<sup>12</sup> See generally Mekonnen, note \*\* above.

<sup>13</sup> See generally Cheris Kramarae & Dale Spender, *Routledge International Encyclopaedia of Women: Global Women’s Issues and Knowledge* (2000).

<sup>14</sup> See generally Richard E Marland & Kathleen A Montgomery, *Women’s Access to Political Power in Post-Communist Europe* (2003).

victims of the prevailing political system described by social scientists and analysts as an exceptional example of a failed revolutionary experience.

### **III. The role of women in post-conflict transformation**

Many would agree in the statement that the emergence of Eritrea as an independent state in the last decade of the twentieth century has placed the nation in an extraordinary position in terms of learning from the successes and failures of other African countries in transforming themselves into democratic systems. Eritrea did not learn its lessons properly. One major cause for this problem is the hegemonic-monolithic political culture of the Eritrean Government which traces its roots to the early years of its formation as a liberation movement. Tekle Weldemikael laments that this type of perverted political culture has finally led to the fetishism of the nation (including the ruling party and its senior leaders) at the expense of all types of individual freedoms.<sup>15</sup>

Müller notes that the hegemonic ideology of the revolution does not envisage women opting out of its version of modernity, thus new avenues open up only for those subscribing to the revolution's narrative of progress.<sup>16</sup> While the Eritrean revolution played a decisive role in opening up possibilities for women's emancipation, in the post-independence era, there has been a stark deficit in terms of implementing democratic structures of governance and this failure has seriously compromised the revolution's landmark achievements in gender equality. The challenge has now become part of the over struggle for personal liberation in individual lives. To understand the challenge correctly, it is important to critically examine the post-independence policies of the Eritrean Government as related to the empowerment of women.

Since Eritrea's independence in 1991, the government has in principle and in broader terms demonstrated commitment to gender equality via several pronouncements and official documents of a binding and non-binding nature, such as the 1993 Interim

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<sup>15</sup> Tekle M Weldemikael, 'Pitfalls of Nationalism in Eritrea' in O'Kane & Hepner (eds), note \*\* above, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Müller, note \*\* above, 219–220.

Constitution,<sup>17</sup> the 1994 Macro Policy, the 1994 EPLF/PFDJ (People’s Front for Democracy and Justice) Charter and the 1997 Eritrean Constitution. As noted previously in another contribution by one of the current authors,<sup>18</sup> the 1997 Eritrean Constitution has little practical significance in terms of gender equality and human rights protection in Eritrea. This is so because in spite of its ratification in 1997 the Constitution has never been implemented and its provisions are not enforceable by courts. In principle, the 1997 Constitution (in articles 7(2) and 14) guarantees the equal rights of men and women and prohibits discrimination based on gender. Furthermore, noting the historical role of women in the struggle for independence, the Preamble of the 1997 Constitution commits the nation to basic equality and mutual respect between men and women. However, because of the exceptional deficit of constitutional law in Eritrea, none of these provisions are enforceable in a court of law.<sup>19</sup> As aptly noted by Tesfatsion Medhanie, Eritrea is therefore the only country in the world without a working constitution.<sup>20</sup>

For a limited period of time Eritrea had a transitional parliament called the National Assembly of Eritrea. The transitional parliament was first established by Proclamation No. 23/1992, as amended by Proclamation No. 37/1993. By Proclamation No. 86/1996 (*Local Government Proclamation*)<sup>21</sup> the Eritrean Government reserved a certain quota for women in regional assembly seats. This law does not specifically address the issue of seats for women in the transitional parliament or national assembly. But in practice, the law has been understood to be applicable also to the quota of seats reserved for women in the transitional parliament. Accordingly, it can be argued that article 10 of Proclamation No. 86/1996 enjoins both regional and national assemblies to ensure equal participation of citizens in elections, including by providing for affirmative action for women. In this

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<sup>17</sup> *Proclamation to Provide for the Establishment, Powers and Functions of the Government of Eritrea* (hereinafter ‘Interim Constitution’). This Proclamation together with Proclamations No. 23/1992 and No. 57/1994 constitute the Interim Constitution of Eritrea.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel R Mekonnen, ‘The Reply of the Eritrean Government to ACHPR’s Landmark Ruling on Eritrea: A Critical Appraisal,’ *Journal for Juridical Science* 31(2) (2006), 49–50.

<sup>19</sup> For further on this, see Simon M Weldehaimanot, ‘The Status and Fate of the Eritrean Constitution,’ *African Human Rights Law Journal* 8(1) (2008), 108–137.

<sup>20</sup> Tesfatsion Medhanie, ‘Constitution-Making, Legitimacy and Regional Integration: An Approach to Eritrea’s Predicament and Relations with Ethiopia,’ DIIPER Working Paper No. 9 (2008).

<sup>21</sup> This law was amended by Proclamation No. 140/2004, *Proclamation to Provide for the Election of Regional Assemblies*, but the quota allocated to women remains the same.

sense, regional and national assemblies are obliged to reserve thirty per cent of all their seats for women. In addition to this, women are entitled to equal access in the remaining seventy per cent of the seats. According to article 2(3) of Proclamation No. 52/1994, the total number of seats in the transitional national assembly is 175. The thirty per cent quota reserved for women would therefore translate to mean a minimum of 52 seats in the national assembly. In letter and spirit, the quota system looks very progressive but in practice and relevance the reality is different as expounded in the following paragraphs.

In the case of regional assemblies, assembly members, including women, have no meaningful powers in terms of making any difference in the lives of ordinary people. This is true especially after 2001 when the country has fallen under the rule of a military junta whose accountability is only to the State President. Overriding the six regional civilian administrative structures envisaged by article 4 of Proclamation No. 86/1996, Eritrea is now divided into five military operational commands which are headed by five high-ranking army generals all of whom are males. The former six civilian regional governors and their structures are now subsumed under the five military operational commands which report directly to the State President and are also accountable only to the same person. The government maintained the six civilian regional governors and the six regional assemblies merely for purposes of lip service.

At the level of the national assembly or the transitional parliament, the picture is much more glimmer. In theory, from the main state institutions in Eritrea, the transitional parliament was the only state organ which had a considerable amount of women. As noted above, from a membership of 175 parliamentarians, the law requires a minimum representation of 52 women. This means that at the time when the national assembly was operational it might have, relatively speaking, a considerable number of women who could have been actively involved in important national deliberations such as in matters of peace and war as well as post-conflict transformation. The problem is however during and after the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia the national assembly remained either inactive or hibernate. In real sense, the parliament had no role to play in matters of peace building and conflict resolution even during those years when Eritrea was at war

with Ethiopia. Clearly, the role of women parliamentarians was severely constrained. In general democratic culture and participatory processes are severely lacking in Eritrea. Women cannot play any meaningful role in a situation which favours a stark deficit of democratic governance. Even during its brief existence from 1993 up to 2002, the Eritrean National Assembly was one which ‘does not even have the luxury of “rubberstamping.”’<sup>22</sup> Contrary to the requirements of article 4(3) of Proclamation No. 37/1993 that it be convened every six months, the Eritrean National Assembly has never convened and remained in hibernation since February 2002. Thus, Eritrea has become perhaps the only country in the world without a functioning parliament. It is widely believed that the parliament is unilaterally disbanded by the State President and replaced by a tripartite body comprising army generals, regional administrators and ministers whose accountability is only to the State President.<sup>23</sup> As a result, Eritrea now lacks rudimentary principles of the rule of law and legitimate political institutions. It is a state ruled by personal rule as opposed to the rule of the law.<sup>24</sup>

In general it can be argued that post-independence Eritrea has not nurtured a favourable atmosphere in terms of empowering women meaningfully and enabling them to play a role both in the political life of the nation and in post-conflict transformation. This can be gauged by assessing the distribution of political power in high and midlevel government offices across gender streams. Although every aspect of distribution of political power in relevant government organs cannot be adequately explored in a limited study such as this one, the following four examples offer insightful guidance for the issue at hand. Information in this regard is readily available from the official website of the Eritrean Government, [www.shabait.com](http://www.shabait.com), which contains a database of high and midlevel government officials in the country.<sup>25</sup> The case studies discuss the distribution of actual

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<sup>22</sup> Yohannes Gebremedhin, *The Challenges of a Society in Transition: Legal Development in Eritrea* (2004), 136. See also generally Simon M Weldehaimanot & Daniel R Mekonnen, ‘The Nebulous Law-making Process in Eritrea,’ *Journal of African Law* 53(2) (2009), 171–193.

<sup>23</sup> Weldehaimanot & Mekonnen, note \*\* above, 191.

<sup>24</sup> See generally Petros B Ogbazghi, ‘Personal Rule in Africa: The Case of Eritrea,’ *African Studies Quarterly* 12(2) (2011): 1–25.

<sup>25</sup> The information is available on the following webpage: <http://www.shabait.com/contacts/government-contact> (accessed 29 July 2011). Given that no official permits are allowed for independent and critical research in Eritrea, the authors have not been able to obtain an optimal amount of empirical data in this

political power across gender streams in seventeen government ministries, six regional administrations, thirty-nine diplomatic missions and at the central executive committee of the ruling party.

In seventeen government ministries there are a total of 159 top and midlevel officials in according to the website (excluding low level government employees in these ministries). These are some of the most important government positions with far-fetching implications on the lives of ordinary people. From this number, there are only fourteen positions assumed by women, representing only 8.8 per cent of the total figure. In the structures local government (provincial administrations), the database contains the names of twenty-eight high and midlevel officials, from which there are only three women. In terms of percentage women constitute ten per cent of the total number. In thirty-nine diplomatic missions around the world, the Eritrean Government has twenty-nine embassies and ten consulate offices. In these missions, the government has a total of fifty-four top and midlevel diplomats whose names are displayed in the official website of the government. In the entire list there is only female by the name Tegisty Nerayo, who is the Head of Finance and Administration at the Eritrean Embassy in France. In terms of percentage this translates into a very insignificant number which is 1.85 per cent of the total number. Remarkably, one section of the website contains the names of seven individuals who are apparently the de facto executive committee members of the ruling party. None of them is female.<sup>26</sup> The following table shows the overall representation of women in terms of actual distribution of political power in the four government sectors analyzed in this study.

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regard. It follows that some of the conclusions drawn in this study may be taken only as indicative assertions that could be improved with further research.

<sup>26</sup> The seven names are: Alamin Mohammed Said, Secretary of the PFDJ; Yemane Ghebreab, Head of the Department of Political Affairs; Abdella Jaber, Head of the Department of Organizational Affairs; Hagos Ghebrehiwet, Head of the Department Economic Affairs; Zemhret Yohannes, Head of the Department of Research and Documentation; Haile Tewoldebrhan Head of the Department of Administration; and Yussuf Saik, Chairman of the PFDJ Central Region.

**Table I: Actual Distribution of Political Power and Gender Breakdown in Four Government Sectors**

Government Sector	Total No. of Officials	Males	Females	% of Males	% of Females
Ministries	159	145	14	91.2	8.8
Local Government	28	26	3	90	10
Diplomatic Missions	54	53	1	98.25	1.85
PFDJ Ex. Co.	7	7	0	100	0
Total	248	241	18	92.8	7.2

As can be seen from the table above, the overall representation of women in the distribution of actual political power is a little more than seven per cent of the total number of positions analyzed in this study. From a total of 248 high and midlevel government positions, only eighteen are assumed by women. A brief contrastive analysis needs to be drawn here between what the Eritrean Government has formally committed itself to do and what it is doing in actual terms. In Proclamation No. 86/1996 the government has committed itself to ensure the representation of women in the national parliament by a minimum of thirty per cent. Taking this as an acceptable benchmark, the prevailing practice of distribution of political power, which shows only 7.2 per cent gender representation, is unpromising, to say the least. This shows that there has been a disheartening regression in the post-independence era in terms of empowerment of women and enhancing their role in national decision-making processes and post-conflict transformation. The sad part is that there has also been a growing trend of gender-based violations in the post-independence era as will be discussed in the following section.

#### **IV. Gender-based violence in Eritrea**

In spite of the role-models provided by female ex-freedom fighters in translating the ideals of women's rights into attainable goals, women have been the major victims of human rights violations during the post-independence era. There are two notorious government policies which have caused immense suffering to a large number of Eritrean women. The policies were drafted in a typical disdainful manner discrediting the historic achievement of Eritrean women. These are the hasty demobilisation programme of thousands of ex-freedom fighters and the unfeasible implementation of the same plan in mid 1990s; and the implementation and continuance of an indiscriminate national military service programme (NMSP) since early 1990's.

**a) The demobilisation of ex-freedom fighters**

Few years after the country's independence, the Eritrean Government demobilised 51 000 ex-freedom fighters from a total of 100 000; from this 12 000 were women.<sup>27</sup> Each received a small amount of monthly, a little less than US\$ 2000, in the form of severance pay to help them reintegrate into civilian life. The amount of money was not sufficient enough to support the demobilised combatants in their reintegration efforts. There was no comprehensive feasibility study on the implementation of the programme or other alternative plans. The dilemma was insurmountable to women.

As discussed earlier, female combatants constituted between one third and a quarter of the EPLF liberation army.<sup>28</sup> Many of them have left their villages and towns as teenagers and spent several years in the struggle for independence. One of the challenges they faced during the post-independence era was transitioning themselves from freedom fighters to wives and working mothers. Chris Kutschera recounts that 'settling back into a life of domesticity was more problematic' for many ex-freedom fighters.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, more than half of the demobilised women freedom fighters are reported to have divorced. This was a systematic abuse due to strong remnants of traditional gender identities. The implications on the well-being and human rights of women are repercussive. Reflecting on this experience, Kutschera cites Ruth Simon as having lamented:

[Male freedom fighters] have changed, they have become traditional again. In fact, this traditional male thinking has deep roots that go back many generations. When they went to the front, men were forced to accept EPLF policy of equality between the sexes. When they came back to the cities after liberation, the government had other priorities, it did not concern itself with the emancipation of women and men fell back into the old way of thinking ... The former male fighters are worse than the civilians ... At least, the civilians respect us. Today, not one [freedom] fighter wants to marry a woman [freedom] fighter. We are too strong.<sup>30</sup>

Ruth Simon is referring here to military instructions on behaviour of the combatants in which the idea of gender equality as imposed upon the military community to rid itself from traditionalism, but generating the same strong traditional military concepts of

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<sup>27</sup> Chris Kutschera, 'What Happened to the Eritrean Female Freedom-Fighters?,' available at <http://www.chris-kutschera.com/A/Eritrean%20Women.htm> (accessed 16 June 2007).

<sup>28</sup> *Statement of Ms. Luul Gebreab*, note \*\* above, and Kutschera, note \*\* above.

<sup>29</sup> Kutschera, note \*\* above.

<sup>30</sup> Kutschera, note \*\* above. On the issue of demobilization see generally, Amanuel Mehreteab, *Wake Up, Hanna! Reintegration and Reconstruction Challenges For Post-War Eritrea* (2004).

masculinity and femininity, and these subsequently define the household relations between combatants once they are demobilised. The real conceptualisation of what constitutes men and women also inform the institutions, once they are freed from the military ideology after the period of active war.

**b) *The National Military Service Programme (NMSP)***

The second unjust government policy with far-fetching implications on women's rights is the NMSP. Eritrean national service laws are typical examples of the draconian rule of PFDJ. Every adult member of the society is by law required to complete an 18-month national service programme which includes a harsh military training of six months in the notorious Sawa Military Training Camp. Initially, the law<sup>31</sup> exempted certain category of women, such as newly married women and mothers, from the requirement. For no clear reason, the exemption was withdrawn in 1995 by an amending law.<sup>32</sup> Another law, Proclamation No. 82/1995,<sup>33</sup> extended the initial age margin of 40 years to include people as old as 50 years of age. Women are accordingly indiscriminately obliged to fulfil the requirements of the NMSP. Some reports indicate that government authorities are at times lenient towards women who have approaching the age of 30 years but in practice the law has remained unchanged.<sup>34</sup>

Up to the time of writing, the government has implemented to twenty-four rounds of the NMSP.<sup>35</sup> Every round recruited tens of thousands of participants. The programme was intensified after the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia. The border conflict came to an official end in June 2000. Thirteen years after that and irrespective of the 18 months limit stipulated by law, the programme continues effectively with no end on the grossly abusive practices involved therein. Hundreds of thousands, including women, have been

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<sup>31</sup> Article 5(4)–5(9) of Proclamation No. 11/1991 (the '*First*' National Service Proclamation).

<sup>32</sup> Article 2 of Proclamation No. 71/1995 (*Proclamation to Amend the 'First' National Service Proclamation*).

<sup>33</sup> Articles 3 and 6 of the '*Second*' National Service Proclamation. See also article 13(2) on the duration of the national service programme. This law repeals the two previous proclamations.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Hepner and O'Kane, note \*\*, xxviii, footnote 10.

<sup>35</sup> Shabait.com, 'Participants Of 24th Round National Service Graduate in Sawa,' available at <http://www.shabait.com/news/local-news/6367-participants-of-24th-round-national-service-graduate-in-sawa> (accessed on 16 July 2011)

conscripted for years, some of them now for more than ten years without a formal salary and pay. Many have fled to neighbouring countries in unprecedented numbers. In their escape, many continue to face violations including death and in the case of women rape and sexual violence. The injustices associated with this programme are beyond imagination.<sup>36</sup>

An eyewitness account<sup>37</sup> narrated to one of the current authors, by a surgeon who worked at the biggest military hospital, indicates that appalling stories of torture and crimes against humanity<sup>38</sup> remain untold among several national service conscripts. Army commanders have full discretion to implement whatever type of punishment, including extra-judicial execution, against national service conscripts. According to the eyewitness account, brute methods of punishment which led to amputation of arms and other forms of permanent bodily injury are common among conscripts. Degrading and inhuman punishment is utilised indiscriminately against all conscripts who demonstrate the slightest sign of defiance against the draconian rules of PFDJ. A report by the Human Rights Watch, for example, indicates that Eritreans fleeing conscription are granted asylum elsewhere ‘on the grounds that national service is used as a measure of political repression and that anyone forcibly returned to Eritrea is likely to be tortured.’<sup>39</sup>

Virtually, all foot soldiers of the regular army are national service conscripts. The total number of Eritrean soldiers is invariably estimated. In October 2001, a senior official of the National Commission for Demobilisation and Reintegration indicated that ‘by mid-2000, Eritrea [had] 300,000 army personnel, more than any other time in the history of

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<sup>36</sup> See generally Gaim Kibreab, ‘Forced Labour in Eritrea,’ *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47(1) (2009), 41–72.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel R Mekonnen, ‘Piercing the Veil of Impunity: An Account of an Eyewitness,’ available at <http://zete9.asmarino.com/?itemid=855> (accessed 15 March 2007). The narrator is Dr. Yosief Fessehaye, who served as a national service conscript at the Gilas Military Hospital between 2001 and 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Mekonnen 2007b, note \*\* above. Dr. Fessehaye mentions a person by the name Habtom [last name unknown] whose arms were amputated at Gilas Military Hospital as a result of torturous punishment. The victim was treated by the same doctor.

<sup>39</sup> See Human Rights Watch, ‘2006 World Report: Eritrea,’ available at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/eritre12307.htm> (accessed 18 January 2006). See also the court cases cited in the same report: the United States (*Nuru v. Gonzales*, 404 F.3d 1207 (9th Cir.)), the European Court of Human Rights (*Said v. the Netherlands*, Application no. 2345/02) and the United Kingdom Immigration Appeal Tribunal (Appeal No. Eritrea CG [2005] UKIAT 00106).

liberation struggle.’<sup>40</sup> In an aggregated form, women constituted 45.27% of the total number of army, including those in the ‘civilian’ police force. The percentage, as indicated by the report<sup>41</sup> of the Eritrean Government to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), is close to half of the total number of the national army.<sup>42</sup> The vulnerability of women members of the army is proportional to their numbers. There are reports that women have been sexually abused, raped and tortured by army commanders in the infamous Sawa Military Training Camp and elsewhere. Sara Rich Dorman, for example, quotes two foreign newspapers which have interviewed women who claim to have been raped in the military training camp.<sup>43</sup> In a society, where patriarchal conservatism is so pervasive, women do not go public and report sexual violence and rape. Problems of underreported gender-based violence in the army are very common. As indicated by the Director of Human Rights Concern–Eritrean (HRC–E): ‘There are so many female victims of torture and rape, but ... they are not willing to share their experiences due to fear, insecurity and culture.’<sup>44</sup>

Although in a different context, the Eritrean Government has also stated in its report<sup>45</sup> to the Committee on the Rights of the Child that Eritrean women normally do not report incidents of rape and sexual violence due to cultural reasons. This was reported in the context of the atrocities perpetrated by the occupying forces of Ethiopia during the 1998–

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<sup>40</sup> Amanuel Mehreteab, ‘Renewed Demobilization in Eritrea,’ *Bonn International Centre for Conversion Bulletin* 21 (2001).

<sup>41</sup> See also *Combined Initial, Second and Third Periodic Report of the Eritrean Government to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*, UN Doc CEDAW/C/ERI/1-3/2004 (hereinafter ‘*Report to the CEDAW Committee*’), 16.

<sup>42</sup> The disaggregated data provided by the *Report to the CEDAW Committee* is as follows: 3.09% in the ground-force; 3.30% in the naval force; 8.92% in the air force; 10.36% administration/support staff within the Ministry of Defence; and 19.6% in the police force.

<sup>43</sup> The two newspapers cited by Dorman are *Sette Corriere della Sera*, ‘Eritrea, Gioivane e Arruolata,’ 26 September 2002; and *The Age*, ‘When Rape is a Requirement of Military Service,’ 5 December 2002. See Sara Rich Dorman, ‘Past the Kalashnikov: Youth and the State in Eritrea,’ in Jon Abbink and Ineke van Kessel (eds) *Vanguard or Vandals? Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, 2004. See also Saba and Giday from Asmara, ‘Rape, Torture and Cover-up of Innocent Girls in Sawa,’ available at [http://news.asmarino.com/Information/2002/05/SabaGiday\\_5\\_5.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/Information/2002/05/SabaGiday_5_5.asp) (accessed on 19 May 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Elisabeth Chyrum, email message to one of the authors, 8 June 2007.

<sup>45</sup> *Initial Report of the Eritrean Government to the Committee on the Rights of the Child*, UN Doc CRC/C/41/Add.12/2002, para 450.

2000 war. The challenge is insurmountable in the case of atrocities committed by Eritrean army commanders.

**c) *Other forms of violations***

In addition to the two pervasive government policies discussed above, there are also a number of individual case studies which portray serious violations against Eritrean women. Because of the high profile of some of the victims and the nature of the injustices, the following seven case studies of ex-freedom fighters have been selected as fairly representative examples of gender-based violations of the post-independence era.

**i) *Ruth Simon: The first victim journalist***

The case of Ruth Simon, the first imprisoned journalist in independent Eritrea, is one of the earliest violations received with amplified international attention.<sup>46</sup> This is so not only because of the popularity of the victim but also because of the severity of the matter she has divulged in her capacity as a correspondent for the Agence France-Presse (AFP). According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the order for her arrest was personally given by President Isaias Afwerki after she reported that the President had told a closed meeting of ruling party cadres that Eritrean soldiers were fighting alongside rebels in neighbouring Sudan in the mid-1990s. The statement was denied by the President and Simon was detained arbitrarily. Arrested on 25 April 1997 and kept in prison without a court order, she was released in December 1998. She served a 20-month detention without trial, leaving her two children behind. The younger child was only 6 months old at the time of her arrest.

Simon was finally prosecuted at the notorious Special Court of the country which tries suspects without the right to defence and counsel. Initially, the government claimed that she was arrested for publishing false information. Astoundingly, none of the five major counts included an indictment on falsified publication. Simon was acquitted of all but one indictment. The only conviction was on account of possession of equipment imported

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<sup>46</sup> CPJ 'Ruth Simon, Agence France-Presse Correspondent, Imprisoned Journalist,' available at [http://www.cpj.org/awards98/1998/simon\\_bio.html](http://www.cpj.org/awards98/1998/simon_bio.html) (accessed 14 June 2007).

without import duty. The alleged equipment was a transmission radio she received from AFP for purposes of journalistic correspondence.<sup>47</sup> On this count, Simon was fined with Nakfa 5000.00, roughly equivalent to US\$ 600 at that time. In sentencing, the court did not even take into consideration the detention without trial she served before conviction. The other indictments, on which no conviction was secured, included abuse of power,<sup>48</sup> breach of official duty<sup>49</sup> and embezzlement of public funds.<sup>50</sup>

In what seemed a sustained resoluteness to the defence of one's own right, Simon fought another fierce legal battle with Bana Share Company, an enterprise she chaired before her arbitrary arrest. The litigation was of a purely civil matter. As the sole judge who presided over the case in a court of first instance,<sup>51</sup> one of the current authors clearly remembers how the matter was politicised by unwarranted government interference associated with other allegations against Simon. Eventually, however, the case was decided in favour of Simon up to the level of the appellate division in the High Court.<sup>52</sup>

In spite of the formal closure of the allegations with regard to her controversial report, Simon continued to live a difficult life under routine security surveillance; and for some time she was not allowed to leave the capital city, Asmara. A winner of CPJ's 1998 International Press Freedom Award,<sup>53</sup> Simon is a prominent ex-freedom fighter and journalist whose own siblings have passed away in the liberation struggle. Her husband is a senior diplomat with a maintained official status. It seems that he had no role to play in alleviating the injustices against his own wife. Information to indicate any disingenuous character on the part of the husband is however hardly available. Yet, the story designates

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<sup>47</sup> See judgment of the Special Court of Eritrea in *Public Prosecutor v Ruth Simon*, Case No. 159/2001, judgment rendered on 6 May 2002 (on file with authors). The only conviction was based on article 363 of the Transitional Penal Code of Eritrea (hereinafter 'Penal Code').

<sup>48</sup> Article 414(1)(a) of the Penal Code.

<sup>49</sup> Article 412 of the Penal Code. See also *Public Prosecutor v Ruth Simon*, note \*\* above, para 1–4.

<sup>50</sup> No Penal Code provision was cited by the court, and perhaps also by the public prosecutor, for this particular indictment.

<sup>51</sup> See judgment of the Zoba Maekel Provincial Court in *Ruth Simon v Bana Share Company*, Civil Case No. 1564/2001, judgment rendered on 2 July 2001 (on file with authors).

<sup>52</sup> See judgment of the High Court of Eritrea, Appellate Division, in *Bana Share Company v Ruth Simon*, Civil Case No. 363/2001, judgment rendered on 29 May 2002 (on file with authors).

<sup>53</sup> See CPJ 'Country Report 1998: Eritrea,' available at <http://www.cpj.org/attacks98/1998/Africa/Eritrea.html> (accessed 14 June 2007).

the intensity of the Eritrean repression which is unconquerable even by familial bondages.<sup>54</sup>

**ii) Saedia Ammed of EriTV**

Saedia Ahmed, a 24-year old reporter of the state television, is one of the most notable victims of detention without trial. According to Amnesty International, she was detained in February 2002 with two other reporters as a result of her questioning the subordinate status of the Arabic language in Eritrea.<sup>55</sup> She was released only after about three years of detention without trial. Eritrea is broadly described as evenly divided between Christian and Muslim communities. The issue of the Arabic language and its official status is most contentious.

**iii) Aster Fessehatsion: The liberator<sup>56</sup>**

Aster Fessehatsion is one of the most senior and prominent freedom fighters of EPLF/PFDJ. She joined the liberation army in 1974 and served as a political and military training commissioner. In 1994, she was popularly elected as a member of the Central Committee of PFDJ. For several years, she has been a victim of the notorious punishment - *mdskal* (freezing), an Eritrean term for suspension from official position with no active duty but with a pay. The method is a typical psychologically torturous punishment of the State President against senior government officials believed to be 'disobedient' to his draconian rule.

Fessehatsion, estimated to be in her 50s, is one of the signatories of the acclaimed document, the Open Letter,<sup>57</sup> which criticised the State President's undemocratic rule. In

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<sup>54</sup> Another typical example in this regard is the Minister of Information, Mr. Ali Abdu, who had nothing to do about the arbitrary arrest of his own father upon the order of the State President.

<sup>55</sup> Amnesty International, *Appeal for the Release of Six Women Prisoners of Conscience on the Occasion of Eritrean Independence Day* (AI Index: AFR 64/007/2005, 25 May 2005).

<sup>56</sup> The story of the four women in the following paragraphs heavily relies on Human Rights Concern – Eritrea (HRC-E), 'Their Voice is Ours ... Their Suffering Too,' available at <http://cs.asmarino.com/hrce.php?itemid=258> (accessed on 14 June 2007) and Amnesty International, note \*\* above.

<sup>57</sup> An Open Letter to all Members of PFDJ: A Call for Peaceful and Democratic Dialogue [English version], available at [http://news.asmarino.com/PFDJ\\_Membership/Introduction.asp](http://news.asmarino.com/PFDJ_Membership/Introduction.asp) (accessed 14 June 2006) (hereinafter 'the Open Letter'). The letter was authored in May 2001 by a group of fifteen senior government officials, who are known as the Group of 15 (the G-15) or the reformers.

consequence thereof, she was arbitrarily detained in September 2001. She has never been visited by anyone, including her only son whose father, Mr. Mahmud Ahmed Sheriffo, was also arrested for the same reason. At the time of arrest, Sherriffo was just frozen from his official duty as the Minister of Local Government and Vice-President. Fessehatsion and Sherriffo have allegedly died while in prison on 6 and 13 June 2003, respectively, possibly as a result of illness or ill treatment.<sup>58</sup>

*iv) Aster Yohannes: The caring mother*

The case of Aster Yohannes is somehow different from others in that she was imprisoned, according to Amnesty International,<sup>59</sup> for her husband's political dissent. Petros Solomon, the husband, is one of the authors of the Open Letter and at the time of arrest in September 2001, he was just frozen from his ministerial position. An association established on her cause, Friends of Aster,<sup>60</sup> indicates that at the time of detentions she was aged 46. Before the arrest, she was at the University of Phoenix for a postgraduate study. She decided to return to Eritrea on 13 December 2003 '[w]hen the Government of Eritrea refused to allow [her] to bring her [four] children to the US.'

Amnesty International reports that Yohannes was given 'assurances of safety on her return to Eritrea but was arrested on arrival at the airport in Asmara.'<sup>61</sup> Security forces abducted her before she could even greet her children, whom she had not seen for nearly four years and were eagerly waiting for her arrival at the airport. The authorities have given no reason for the arrest of Aster Yohannes who suffers from a heart condition and asthma.<sup>62</sup> This is true with all other political prisoners in Eritrea. In a very sweeping manner, the Eritrean Government claims that some prisoners, for example the authors of the Open Letter, are 'traitors' who have collaborated with the Ethiopian Government during the 1998–2000 border conflict. None of such claims has, however, been proven by a court of law.

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<sup>58</sup> Awate Team, 'The Obscure and Tragic End of the G-15,' available at <http://www.awate.com/portal/content/view/4336/9/> (accessed 31 August 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Amnesty International, 'Detained for Husband's Opinions,' available at <http://web.amnesty.org/appeals/index/eri-010705-wwa-eng> (accessed 14 June 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Friends of Aster, <http://www.friendsofaster.org/>.

<sup>61</sup> Amnesty International, note \*\* above.

<sup>62</sup> Friends of Aster, note \*\* above.

v) ***Miriam Hagos: The indomitable woman***

When Miriam Hagos decided to join the Eritrean liberation struggle in the summer of 1977, her dream was not only to liberate the land but also the people of Eritrea. Undoubtedly, the eradication of violence against women, inequality and oppression were top of the reasons for the radical decision she took then. Before she joined EPLF, Hagos was a prominent member of the Association of Eritrean Students in North America. Her earliest travels to Sweden and USA were meant doors of opportunities for a better life. However, she was determined to see a liberated Eritrea. The prominent human rights activist, Elisabeth Chyrum, describes Hagos as a ‘person who speaks her mind.’ Hagos persistently challenged the secretive culture of EPLF during the liberation struggle. As a result, she has been accused of ‘harbouring petty bourgeois tendencies’ and was imprisoned repeatedly.<sup>63</sup> In this regard, Chyrum writes:

Between the years 1979 and 1981, she was put in prison for two years. She suffered kidney problems and had difficulties with her eye-sight. Having served her sentence, she was asked (by one of the superiors) how she found her *revolutionary training*. She replied ... by saying that she was in prison and not, as he intended her to feel, in training. He said that she has not learned a lesson yet, and he [sent her back] to prison for some more months. When she was released and asked the same old question, she replied ... by saying, ‘I was in training.’<sup>64</sup>

This tragedy was not limited to the pre-independence era. The spill over is pervasive in post-independence Eritrea with a resultant effect of the brute iron grip of PFDJ and its draconian decrees and military edicts. In post-independence Eritrea, prisoners or their family members cannot even ask as to why and where people are arrested, thus prompting Amnesty International to entitle one of its reports on Eritrea: ‘You Have No Right to Ask.’<sup>65</sup> Hagos was again arrested by the same party-turned liberation front in October 2001. Aged in her 50s, she was allegedly detained on account of her support to the cause of the authors of the Open Letter. According to the Director of HRC-E, Hagos’ own husband, who had a personal grudge and axe to grind, was sadly instrumental in the arrest.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> HRC-E, note \*\* above; Amnesty International, note \*\* above.

<sup>64</sup> HRC-E, note \*\* above (emphasis added).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Amnesty International, *You Have No Right to Ask: Government Resists Scrutiny on Human Rights* (AI Index: AFR 64/003/2004, 19 May 2004).

<sup>66</sup> HRC-E, note \*\* above; Amnesty International, note \*\* above.

vi) ***Senait Debesai: The popular artist***

Senait Debesai is one of the most recognized musicians in Eritrea. At the time of arrest, she was in her 40s. She is most known by her popular song *kuluntenay nAki* (my everything). The role of arts and culture in the liberation struggle was so popular that many Eritreans believe that half of the credit of the liberation struggle is attributable to Eritrean artists. Debesai's role in this regard is noticeable. Her fate is extraordinarily unique. There is no clear political motive for her detention, except a matrimonial dispute with her husband. Reportedly, she has suffered for so long from an abusive husband, who at last orchestrated the detention through his circles of influence. It is submitted that Debessai was arrested on 15 November 2003, five days before a decisive court hearing in which she could have won the custody of their three children over her husband.<sup>67</sup> Her brother, ex-freedom fighter and a long time personal friend of President Isaias Afwerki, is also detained without trial for several years.

vii) ***Letedawit of Hagaz: Eta nay jebha***

Weletedawit Abraha Medhin is a former freedom fighter of ELF, the forerunner to EPLF. Woldeyesus Ammar refers to her as Letedawit of Hagaz.<sup>68</sup> Former ELF freedom fighters are always seen suspiciously by the government even after voluntarily repatriation to Eritrea. As reported by Ammar, Letedawit of Hagaz was allegedly killed by a government security officer with whose girlfriend the victim had a fight on purely personal grounds. The victim was commonly referred to as *eta nay jebha* (that of ELF) by her adversary. Taken to prison immediately after the fight, she was allegedly killed the next day or the same night. Authorities claimed that she has committed suicide. However, according to Ammar, autopsy results revealed that she 'died because of beatings, and that her neck bones were broken severely.' Ammar also reports that individuals who asked for further investigation were detained and intimidated not to take the matter any further. Particularly, family members of the victim were forced to sign a document which stated admission on their part on the fact that the victim has committed suicide and that no investigation should continue on the matter.

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<sup>67</sup> HRC-E, note \*\* above; Amnesty International, note \*\* above.

<sup>68</sup> Woldeyesus Ammar, 'The Tragic Death of Letedawit of Hagaz,' available at [http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article\\_3323.shtml](http://www.awate.com/artman/publish/article_3323.shtml) (accessed 18 May 2004).

Most of the violations discussed in the preceding paragraphs are recognised as such by leading human rights groups. These cases are only those which are widely known to the general public and on which information is readily available. Based on that, they have been selected as the fairly representative examples of individualised gender-based violations. It is evident that there are many horrendous stories which can only be told after the demise of the brute dictatorship in Eritrea. Generally, the number of political prisoners and victims of human rights violations of the post-independence era is estimated in tens of thousands.<sup>69</sup> In this context, it is difficult to imagine a proactive role of women both in terms democratic political process and post-conflict transformation in Eritrea.

## **V Concluding remarks**

Eritrea is notably known for the exceptional role played by its female freedom fighters in the armed struggle for liberation. Throughout the struggle for self-determination, female freedom fighters constituted between one-third and one-fourth of the liberation forces in active combat and many of them were encouraged to assume senior and mid level military leadership positions. The high level of mobilisation of female freedom fighters in the armed struggle has created a measure of equality between men and women, marking the beginning of awareness about gender disparity and the prioritisation of gender equality and challenging of old practices such as FGM. However the heavy ideological and dogmatic imposition of new behavioural rules for gender roles in the context of a military hierarchy has created obstacles and set-backs for gender equality as concepts of masculinity and femininity have not changed, or have been stereotyped around conservative traditional concepts set in a context of war and violence. The administrative institutionalisation of subordination of women is demonstrated by the limited number of women in leadership positions.

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<sup>69</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Service for Life: State Repression and Indefinite Conscriptioin in Eritrea* (2009), 9, citing Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

Like most nationalist movements, the Eritrean Government valorises military life above all potential ways of contributing to the nation, thus creating one of the most militarised states in the world.<sup>70</sup> This has resulted in a stark deficit of democratic structures of governance and high levels of human rights violations, including gender-based violence. In terms of actual distribution of political power, the prevailing gender breakdown in high and midlevel government positions is disheartening. From a total of 248 high and midlevel government positions analyzed in this study, only eighteen are assumed by women. This gives only 7.2 per cent of gender representation, which does not reflect in any way the participation of female freedom fighters in the liberation war. The Eritrean Government has formally committed itself to ensure representation of women in the political process by a minimum of a thirty per cent quota. Seen against this official commitment, the prevailing practice is again disheartening.

Eritrea's legacy of armed struggle is replete with authoritarian tendency of leadership which manifested in its worst form in the aftermath of the 1998–2000 border conflict with Ethiopia. In terms of empowerment of women, the post-independence era has seen disheartening regression. Some case studies discussed in this paper show how women are victimised in relation to their husband's or friends' husbands grudges (Miriam Hagos, Senait Debesai and Letedawit of Hagaz) or their husband's political engagement (Aster Yohannes). The case studies are illustrative of women's vulnerability, with their life and security being in the hands of relatives, with the family unit being part of a political system over which they have no influence. The examples in these prominent cases set by the authorities provide strong narratives in which violence against women can be orchestrated or committed with impunity and in which definitions of masculinity and femininity are created around the notion of the all powerful male and a submissive female. The narrative permits the severe and violent punishment of a non-submissive wife in cases where the husband is unsatisfied with the behaviour. By setting these examples, the state provides the narrative as well as the promise of impunity.

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<sup>70</sup> Hepner & O'Kane, note \*\* above, xxviii.

Other women detained for their political views were so barred from leadership positions and were imprisoned (Ruth Simon, Aster Fessehatsion, Saedia Ammed, Miriam Hagos, Senait Debesai). With these cases the state authorities send a strong message that any dissenting views publicly expressed are punished by imprisonment. Described by Hepner and O’Kane as ‘far from a terra incognita,’ an unexplored field of knowledge, the legacies of the armed struggle have continued to haunt the Eritrean society by inculcating one of the most repressive systems of governance Eritreans have ever since in their history. Building on the concept of biopolitics,<sup>71</sup> Hepner and O’Kane exemplify the post-independence political-economic and human rights crisis in Eritrea as an outcome of ‘the pursuit of modernisation by an elite leadership [which] has often produced perversions of governance and power.’<sup>72</sup>

UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 and 1820 seek to promote the involvement of women in conflict and post-conflict situations. A regional approach that demilitarizes the region and the state authorities requires a revisiting of gender-related concepts defining masculinity and femininity on the basis of a non-violent pursuit of the organization of society and its institutions. The agents of such definitions need to come from and be appropriated by the people themselves, while role models and leadership can contribute to this process. As the liberation war itself was much advanced by culture, poems and songs, this tradition provides possibilities for change from within the Eritrean communities.

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<sup>71</sup> Based on the work of Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Hepner & O’Kane offer similar but a number of versions of the concept of biopolitics elsewhere in their work. For purposes of this study, we prefer the following descriptions of biopolitics: the violent penetration of state power into the most intimate spaces of human life and consciousness in the name of development, national security and sovereignty; or a state-led deployment of disciplinary technologies on individuals and population groups. Hepner & O’Kane, note \*\* above, ix and cover page.

<sup>72</sup> Hepner & O’Kane, note \*\* above, ix–x. The authors’ observation is based on the work of James Scott *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998).