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Gender profile of the state of Eritrea

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ABBREVIATIONS

CDPs	Community Development Projects
CERA	Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs
CSN	Country Strategy Note
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPHP	Eritrean Public Health Programme
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ERRA	Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Agency
FFW	Food for work
FHH	Female headed household
NDP	National Democratic Programme
NUEWmn	National Union of Eritrean Women
PGE	Provisional Government of Eritrea
PHC	Primary health care
RRPE	Relief and Rehabilitation Programme for Eritrea
TBA	traditional birth attendant
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Fund for Children
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities

1. INTRODUCTION[1]

An overwhelming endorsement of Eritrean independence emerged as the outcome of the referendum held in Eritrea in April 1993. This referendum, supported and observed by the UN, marked the end of a thirty year long independence struggle against the Ethiopian regime of Emperor Haile Selassie and subsequently President Mengistu from 1974-1991. Women were active as combatants in the military struggle and in a variety of supporting roles. They also participated in the programme of political mobilisation and social reform which formed an integral part of the liberation struggle. These reforms to some degree challenged pre-existing institutions of gender subordination in Eritrean society and led to considerable gains for Eritrean women.

The Government of Eritrea currently faces the task of reconstructing a country which has been war-ridden for over 30 years. Industry is running well below capacity and agricultural production has been severely hampered by both war and drought (Africa Confidential: 30/4/93). Approximately 80 percent of the population relied on food aid in 1992 and this dependence will continue into 1994 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1993:22). By April 1993, over half a million refugees were still located in refugee camps in Sudan (Africa Confidential: 30/4/93) and the Government faces the enormous financial burden of repatriation. In mid-1993, the Government obtained commitments of around $100 million from a consortium of international donors led by the World Bank, under the Relief and Rehabilitation Programme for Eritrea (RRPE) to finance emergency imports for the agricultural and industrial sectors and for infrastructural rehabilitation. Further commitments of about $40 million are being processed by additional donors (Askwith, personal communication).

The drive for reconstruction, the increasingly pragmatic attitude taken by the Government of Eritrea and the likelihood that the collective spirit engendered during the liberation struggle will slowly wane, all point to the possibility that the impetus of social reform, including reforms aimed at redressing gender inequalities, will decelerate. Post liberation experiences from other countries also suggest that this is a likely scenario. It is therefore crucial at this stage that development interventions are informed by gender analysis.

Thirty years of war have had a devastating human impact on Eritrea, leaving thousands of people disabled and many families suffering the economic and psychological after-effects of war. Family separation and breakdown as well as shifts in gender roles and responsibilities are a legacy of the period of liberation struggle both for those remaining inside the country and for those forced into exile. Issues of family reunification, resettlement and reintegration, bereavement and associated traumas are high on the agenda of post-liberation Eritrea. A major dimension of these issues is the renegotiation of gender roles in the post-war situation. The terms on which this renegotiation occurs will be determined to a considerable degree by the policies and programmes adopted by the Government and by donors supporting reconstruction in Eritrea.

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[1] This report was written by Cathy Green with editorial guidance from Sally Baden. Comments and insights from Michael Askwith are gratefully acknowledged. Thanks also to the Consulate of the State of Eritrea to the UK for supplying information.

Gender divisions within Eritrean society are far from homogeneous. Diverse pre-revolutionary experiences of gender difference partly explain this heterogeneity. In addition, during the period of armed struggle (1962-1991),[2] significant changes occurred in social, including gender, relations, but to greatly varying degrees, reflecting the unevenness, both geographically and temporally, with which the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was able to extend its influence.[3] In particular, civilians (whether refugees, inhabitants of territories occupied by the Ethiopian army or as constituents of EPLF liberated zones) and members of the EPLF (whether as fighters or as non-combatant support staff) had different experiences of the period of liberation struggle. This division remains important in examining the issue of gender inequality in the contemporary period.

The analysis presented here is constrained, firstly, by the general lack of literature on gender issues in Eritrea, and, secondly, because such literature as is available on this subject mainly originates from within Eritrean political movements. Moreover, due to the fact that Eritrea, prior to 1991, had been on a war footing for 30 years, little base-line data of any kind, let alone gender disaggregated data, exists. In recognition of this deficiency, priority areas of future research are identified in the text.

Section 2 presents a brief overview of the main geographical and socioeconomic characteristics of Eritrean society and of the political processes which have shaped recent Eritrean history. Section 3 discusses the particular role of women in the EPLF. Section 4 sets the legal context of women's status with particular reference to marriage and family law. Sections 5 and 6 look at gender issues within rural and urban economies respectively. Sections 7-10 examine women's status vis-a-vis men in relation to education, health and political participation.

The penultimate section briefly examines the activities of various aid agencies currently operating in Eritrea. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the key findings of the report. On the basis of these findings, some tentative recommendations are made as to how gender interests may be both protected and promoted as Eritrea enters the post-Independence era.

[2] This culminated in the overthrow of the Mengistu government. The immediate overthrow of Mengistu was made possible by the military co-operation of the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) with the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). For an overview of the independence struggle see Sherman (1980); Cliffe & Davidson (1988) and Pateman (1990).

[3] In 1976 Eritrean liberation forces were in control of approximately 90 percent of the rural areas. In 1977 Ethiopian forces were confined primarily to five cities: Asmara, Adi-Keyih, Barentu, Assab and Massawa (Tseggai, 1988:78). From the late 1970s onwards, the country was divided roughly into two on a north-south basis. The northern and northwestern provinces of Sahel, Barka, and parts of Senhit were under EPLF control whilst Akele Guzai, Hamasien, Seraye (central and southern highland provinces) together with Danakil (south east), lower Barka, now called Gash-Setit, (south west) and Semhar (east) were under varying degrees of Ethiopian control. These occupied and semi-occupied regions were affected by outbreaks of guerilla activity (CDS, 1991:30).

2. OVERVIEW

2.1 Geographical, agro-ecological, demographic and socio-economic overview

Eritrea covers an area of approximately 130,000 km^2 and is bordered by Djibouti, Sudan and the highlands of Ethiopia. The country is divided into nine provinces. Akele Guzai, Semhar, Seraye, and Hamasien are highland provinces of over 2,000 metres altitude, whilst Danakil, Sahel, Barka, Gash-Setit and Senhit are midland and lowland areas of between 1,000-2,000 metres and less than 1,000 metres altitude respectively. (See Map 1.)

Eritrea is primarily an agrarian society. Approximately 80 percent of the population rely on some form of agricultural production for their livelihoods (Pateman, 1988:163). In 1987 the EPLF estimated the rural population at approximately 2.4 million and the urban population at around three quarters of a million, giving a total population of approximately 3.2 million (Woldemichael, 1992:172).

Throughout the period of conflict, there was a significant increase in the numbers of urban dwellers, particularly in the capital, Asmara, which had an estimated population of 430,000 in 1991 (*ibid*)[4]. The population data given here do not take into account the half a million refugees who fled to neighbouring countries during the conflict years. Donor finance was requested by the Government at a pledging conference in July 1993 to aid the repatriation and resettlement of refugees from the Sudan over the next four years (Economist Intelligence Unit, 1993:24; Askwith, personal communication). $32 million was pledged for pilot activities for the first 15,000 returnees, which are due to start in 1994 (Askwith, personal communication). In a survey undertaken by the Commission for Eritrean Refugee Affairs (CERA), of 380 households returning to Eritrea during 1990, 28 percent were female headed (Habte-Selassie, 1992). No data was found giving an overall gender breakdown of the refugee population, nor any indication of whether the planned resettlement activities contain any gender specific elements.

Agriculturalists are located primarily in Akele Guzai, Hamasien and Seraye provinces (highland areas); agro-pastoralists are located in Semhar, the central and south west of Gash-Setit, the west and north of Senhit, Barka and the south of Sahel; whilst pastoralists are located in the lowland areas in the north of Sahel and Danakil. (See Map 2 which delineates agricultural, agro-pastoral and pastoral zones.)

According to a 1991 survey of 401 Eritrean villages, 61 percent of the rural population live in villages in the agricultural zone; 25 percent live in villages in the agro-pastoral zone; and five percent in villages in the pastoral zone. A further nine percent of the population live in villages with 'mixed' farming[5] (CDS, 1991:8). 'Mixed' villages have increased in number

[4] This figure is based on ERA sources and could not be verified. Moreover, the opposing effects of movement of Ethiopian officials out of Asmara and the influx of returning exiles mean that the current population of Asmara and its likely future growth are very hard to project.

[5] Mixed villages are those where none of the three categories of primary occupation (agriculturalist; agropastoralist and pastoralist) are dominant.

since 1987 (CDS, 1991:7); diversification has been adopted as a coping strategy in the face of war and recurrent famine (Woldemichael, 1992:173). The number of communities relying solely on pastoralism has correspondingly decreased (CDS, 1991: 7).

Table 1: Ratio of adult males to adult females, rural Eritrea, 1991

Province	**Ratio males:females**
Akele Guzai	43:57
Barka	50:50
Gash-Setit	47:53
Hamasien	45:55
Sahel	49:51
Semhar	52:48
Senhit	48:52
Seraye	46:54
Total	47:53

Source: adapted from CDS (1991:70)

The average ratio of males to females within rural Eritrea has been estimated as 47:53 (CDS, 1991:70). Table 1 gives a breakdown of male:female population ratios by province. This imbalance in the ratio of men to women, caused primarily by male participation in the liberation struggle, has led to labour shortages in a range of vital agricultural tasks and thus left many female headed households (FHHs) vulnerable to food insecurity (see section 5.2).

Using criteria provided by the EPLF[6], a CDS study carried out in 1991 found that 78 percent of rural households were classified as poor, six percent were categorised as rich whilst the remainder, 16 percent, were found to be somewhere in the middle. Moreover, the number of households categorised as poor had increased significantly from 62 percent to 78 percent between 1987 and 1991 (CDS, 1991:11). Average household size in rural Eritrea was estimated at approximately four and rich households were found to be 30 percent bigger than poor households (CDS, 1991:38). It is not known whether female headed households represent a disproportionate number of poor households, although the smaller size of poor households and related problems of labour shortage suggests that this is the case.

The majority of Eritreans belong to a variety of Orthodox Muslim and Christian sects. According to Silkin (1983:910): 'Historically, the primary division within Eritrean society has been between Christian settled cultivators in the highlands and Muslim nomadic pastoralists in the lowlands.' The latter group include Tigre speaking nomadic and semi-nomadic Muslims and some smaller ethnic groups including the Muslim Rashaidas who are also

[6] The EPLF criteria were devised 'on the rough basis of whether their productive assets were insufficient under any circumstances to provide a livelihood, were adequate, or were likely to enable a family to command a surplus and the labour or resources of others' (CDS, 1991:9). These productive resources included land, oxen, access to tools, seeds and livestock, and draught power for ploughing .

nomads; and the animist Kunamas and the Naras - recent converts to Islam - both of whom practice settled agriculture (Wilson, 1991:111). Eritrean society is thus multi-ethnic. Ten languages are spoken, although three quarters of the population speak Tigre and Tigrigna (Tseggai, 1991:25).

Agro-ecological variation, rural-urban, socio-economic, ethnic and other socio-cultural divisions clearly differentiate the Eritrean population. It is therefore imperative to view changing gender relations and possibilities for interventions in the interests of women, from a context specific perspective. Given the lack of available data, baseline research informed by gender concerns is a prerequisite for effective interventions at local level.

2.2 Historical overview

Eritrea has recently emerged from a long history of colonial occupation. Italian hegemony from 1896-1941 gave way to occupation by the British until 1952 when Eritrea was federated to Ethiopia under a United Nations Resolution. Following attempts by the Ethiopian regime over the next 10 years to undermine Eritrea's federal status (Sherman, 1980:28) the territory was finally annexed by Ethiopia in 1962. Armed resistance to the Ethiopian regime began in late 1961 under the auspices of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). In later years, dissatisfaction with the organisational structure and political orientation of the ELF (Sherman, 1980:40) led to factional infighting and the formation, in 1970, of a breakaway movement, the EPLF. By 1982, the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA), the armed wing of the EPLF, had superseded the ELF as the most effective armed resistance to the Ethiopian army (Tseggai, 1988:81).

Beyond achieving political independence from the Ethiopian regime, the EPLF aimed to bring about an internal social transformation 'to recast their nation into a more unified, egalitarian, and just one' (Connell, 1993:5). According to Selassie:

'The EPLF's plan involved integrating all nationals, regardless of gender, age and ethnic origin, into action to satisfy the demands of the ongoing struggle **and of the people themselves**. Efforts were then made to make participation more comprehensive...[this] included exploiting women's labour potential, recognizing and validating their role in the society (sic), and integrating them into fields previously regarded as out of women's reach.' (Selassie, 1992:68, emphasis added)

The EPLF outlined their comprehensive economic, political and social programme at the first National Congress in 1977 and this was later reiterated at a second Congress in 1987.

In line with this programme, between 1977 and 1988, the EPLF embarked on a programme of agrarian reform with the aim of improving agricultural productivity. A system of 'people's political power' was instituted allowing ordinary Eritreans access to political decision-making at local, regional and national levels (Leonard, 1988:112). Extensive educational, health and welfare services were implemented (*ibid*). An economic infrastructure based on small-scale production was created (*ibid*).

One of the most striking features of the EPLF's programme of social reform was the placing centre stage of women's rights. The National Democratic Programme (NDP), formulated in January 1977 and updated in March 1987, outlined the wide-ranging objectives of the EPLF 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 programme 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 right 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 programmes to increase the number and upgrade the quality of women leaders and public servants.'
>
> (NDP 1987, cited in Wilson, 1991:172)

The extent to which this political commitment was translated into actual improvements in the rights and status of women will be discussed in detail below.

3. WOMEN IN THE EPLF

Changes in gender relations in Eritrea have been most marked within the EPLF. In 1990, 40 percent of the total membership of the EPLF and 25 percent of front-line combatants were women (Pateman, 1990:465). Military training coupled with a programme of political education, literacy and vocational training was given to all members of the EPLF.

The process of allotting tasks to men and women within military units was theoretically free from sex bias. 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). Nevertheless, 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 were concerned to overturn sexual divisions of labour in domestic work (Silkin, 1983: 911). Some of the roles considered the preserve of women prior to the liberation struggle (i.e cooking, cleaning, fuelwood and water provision) became the duty of all combatants regardless of sex.

Non-combatant EPLF members were active as political organisers, mechanics, teachers, and medical staff. The training of EPLF members in these activities created a vital link between the Front and the civilian population. According to Silkin (1983:911) women's participation in outreach activities gave the civilian population an insight into alternative gender roles.

Because of gender differentials in skills training and educational levels prior to the liberation struggle (see section 8), the EPLF discriminated positively in favour of women in relation to training (Silkin, 1983:911). Membership of the EPLF opened up many new types of employment for women. However, in those occupations previously dominated entirely by men, women's representation was still very low in 1989 (Selassie, 1992: 70). For example, within the construction industry, only one percent of carpenters and seven percent of surveyors were women. Likewise, in agriculture, whilst 50 percent of dairy workers were female, women constituted only 5.8 percent of tractor drivers. In the health sector 98 percent of midwives were women, compared to only 8.3 percent of doctors. Although women were under-represented amongst qualified doctors within the EPLF, large numbers of women operating as barefoot doctors received training to an advanced level (Johnson, 1979:22). Tables 2 and 3, using NUEWmn statistics, indicate the level of participation of women in the various EPLF sectors.

Table 2: Women's participation in the EPLF by employment type (1989)

employment type	**% participation of women**
Combatants	23.0
Public administration	35.0
Industry	29.5
Transportation	25.9
Health	55.2
Construction	19.6
Agriculture	19.8
Electronics	25.0
National Guidance	1.7
Finance	9.5
Communication	33.1

Source: NUEWmn cited in Selassie (1992:69)

Table 3: Women's participation in EPLF departments (1989)

Industry	**% women**
Metalwork	21.5
Electrical shop	23.9
Woodwork	22.8
Leather shop	29.6
Tailors	38.5
Food factory	34.4
Shoe factory	26.6
Sanitary products factory	42.5
Health	**% women**
Doctors	8.3
Lab tech.	48.7
Midwives	96.7
Pharmacists	26.4
Dentists	88.8
Anaesthesia	77.7
X-ray	20.0
Barefoot doctors	43.0
OR tech.	87.5

National guidance	% women
Journalists	0.5
Teachers	11.0
Publishing	1.5
Artists	1.7
Handicrafts	0.5
Photography/video/film	1.5
Broadcasting	0.3
News writers	0.2
Documentation	0.2
Transportation	**% women**
Mechanics	25.0
Electricians	30.0
Drivers	1.3
Welders	18.0
Construction	**% women**
Auto mechanics	2.0
Surveyors	7.0
Carpenters	1.0

Table 3: Women's participation in EPLF departments (1989) (continued)

Electronics	**% women**
Researchers	20.0
Data	20.0
Comm.equip.repair	12.0
Watch repair	30.0
Finance	**% women**
Bookkeepers	12.4
Accountants	6.6
Agriculture	**% women**
Veterinary	30.0
Agricultural field workers	11.1
Tractor drivers	5.8
Dairy	50.0
Agricultural experts	2.3
Communication	**% women**
Communication workers	33.1
Communication experts	9.8

Source: NUEWmn cited in Selassie (1992:69)

The process of demobilization of EPLF fighters raises important challenges in relation to the future employment of ex-combatants, and in particular of women ex-combatants. If a standing army is retained by the Government (in 1991 the PGE decided to retain the army until the May 1993 referendum when its role was to be reassessed (Connell, 1993:6)) it is pertinent to question whether women will be given the option of remaining in the army if they choose to do so. Tegegn (1992:38) observes that in both Namibia and Zimbabwe female combatants have been deprived of this option.

The military and political involvement of women in the EPLF means that large numbers of women have undergone personal transformation and at the same time acquired invaluable technical and organisational skills. To avoid the disillusionment of former EPLF fighters and activists, retraining and re-employment efforts need to be made for former combatants, including women, with full recognition of the skills and experience they have acquired.

Moreover, the special needs of women who have been disabled as result of the conflict should be addressed (Tegegn, 1992:40).

The cadre of highly skilled women created within the EPLF (particularly in health but also in communication, transportation, public administration and various branches of manufacturing industry) sets a precedent which other Eritrean women could potentially follow. Such women could act as trainers/role models for other women, particularly those in formerly occupied areas.

There is a need to ensure that these accumulated skills are fully tapped in the reconstruction period, and to ensure that a tendency does not emerge for women to be displaced by men or discriminated against in scarce employment opportunities. This possibility needs to be closely monitored, particularly in relation to the restructuring of the political, social and economic infrastructure in the former liberated zones.

4. LEGAL STATUS

4.1 Gender equality and the law

The National Democratic Programme, updated in March 1987, in theory provided the platform from which challenges to the various manifestations of gender inequality could be made. The NDP aimed to: 'Assure women full rights of equality with men in politics, the economy and social life' (NDP, 1987 cited in Wilson, 1991:172). According to Selassie:

> 'Legally, women...are treated as equals. Old traditional marriage laws are being replaced with new democratic marriage laws that serve the interests and needs of both sexes, and women judges and implementers of the laws are already installed. New land tenure laws allow women to own plots of land, and labour laws which prescribe an equal labour market and equal wages for the same types of jobs are being adopted.' (Selassie, 1992:69)

However, in 1991, there was no evidence that the Provisional Government intended to give a legal basis to the social provisions of the NDP. According to Connell:

> 'In the newly liberated villages and towns, organizers worked with elected administrators to institutionalize popular participation as they transferred power over local affairs. To the surprise of some, the provisional government did not legislate the social transformation that had been so painstakingly achieved in the liberated zones over the previous two decades, but neither did it allow these gains to be rolled back in the localities where they had taken root. Instead, the reform process remained focused at the local level.' (Connell:1993:15)

The EPLF were motivated by the belief that a participatory approach to confronting social inequity, including gender discrimination, 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 - for example the 1977 Marriage Law - took effect within different localities at a different pace and to varying degrees, depending on local conditions.

4.2 Marriage Law[7]

One of the major challenges to the generally low status of women within Eritrean society was the commitment of the EPLF to: 'Promulgate marriage and family laws that safeguard the rights of women' (NDP 1987, cited in Wilson, 1991:172).

The Marriage Law was introduced in 1977, alongside the EPLF Constitution. The Law was wide-ranging in content, covering divorce, children, relationships between the sexes, and marriage negotiations (Silkin, 1989:148). The Law stated the following:

> 'The feudal marriage norm based on the supremacy of men over women, arbitrary and coercive arrangements and which does not safeguard the welfare of children shall be banned.
> The new democratic marriage law based on the free choice of both partners, 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.'
>
> (EPLF Marriage Law, 1977 cited in Silkin, 1989:148)

The Marriage Law allowed women to initiate divorce. Moreover, it increased the likelihood that women would utilise this option by providing for the division of both conjugal property and the income of the male (Silkin, 1983:912). Women were entitled to retain any property acquired prior to marriage, whilst conjugal property was to be shared 'through the consent of both parties' (Article 22, cited in Wilson, 1991:191). If women became responsible for child rearing upon divorce, the father was required to contribute towards child maintenance. However, the Law allowed for payment to be made in kind, by tilling the land designated for the children, or through a financial contribution (*ibid:* 190). If any disagreement over the division of property or income arose, the matter was referred to a higher administrative authority, such as the EPLF Political Bureau[8].

A plethora of different customary marriage laws existed within Eritrea prior to 1977 (Wilson, 1991:122). Nevertheless, there are some common features of these laws (Silkin, 1989:149):

- male elders of extended families pursue marriage alliances;

- alliances are, in general, formulated between couples sharing the same religious, ethnic and linguistic background;

[7] This section draws heavily on the research of Trish Silkin (1989) who provides the only comprehensive account to date of the social changes brought about by the marriage laws.

[8] An executive authority charged with implementing the decisions of the EPLF National Congress and the Central Committee (Leonard, 1988:115).

- the betrothal of girls occurs between the ages of 8-14 years, whilst marriage takes place between 13-15 years;

- Christian marriages involve the transfer of gifts in the form of a dowry to the groom's family, whilst Muslim marriages involve the transfer of bride-wealth;

- the virginity of brides is highly prized and married women are expected to be monogamous.

The impact of urbanisation and female participation in education and employment in Eritrea has resulted in the emergence of more complex patterns of marriage than the simplified model above, reducing the influence of extended families in marriage contracts, allowing girls more choice over marriage partner, and delaying age at first marriage. (Silkin, 1989:150).

The 1977 Marriage Law constitutes a significant challenge to the gender inequalities institutionalized within customary marriage practices. However, implementation of the new law was limited and patchy during the war years as the drive towards social transformation periodically took a back seat to the concerns of basic survival (Silkin, 1989:150). Thus, by 1991, the reform process was at various stages of development within Eritrea.

According to Selassie (1992:69): 'A case study carried out by NUEWmn shows that reforming marriage laws in Sheeb took up to eight years, while avoiding (sic) the circumcision of women in Rora Habab[9] area took over four years.' Areas with a long history of occupation by the Ethiopian regime and heavily contested zones, were either unaffected by the Marriage Law or were forced to suspend the new provisions after only partial implementation.

In a study of Mid-East Eritrea between 1983 and 1987, Silkin (1989:56) found that although the region was considered one of the more politically advanced areas of Eritrea, the regional marriage law was less ambitious than that of the EPLF. The issue of polygyny was not dealt with because it was seen to compromise the teachings of the Qur'an, whilst dowry and bride-wealth were reduced rather than abolished. Furthermore, although the age of betrothal was raised to 15, the age of marriage remained unspecified, despite a minimum age of 18 set by the EPLF. The issue of free choice for girls and women in the selection of their marriage partners was replaced with that of 'mutual consent', thereby allowing fathers (who retained a right of involvement in the marriage negotiations at an advisory level only) more scope to pressurize females into unwanted alliances. Silkin (*ibid*) argues that these local adaptations of the 1977 law were favoured by many People's Assemblies throughout Eritrea.

In 1987, a new Civil Code, containing comprehensive provisions for family law, was introduced[10]. According to Silkin:

[9] Rora Habab is in the north of Sahel province.

[10] Silkin (1989:157) notes, however, that the Civil Code was considered to be transitory, pending Independence. Information on any changes made by the PGE or Government to the Civil Code was unavailable at the time of writing.

> 'Family law is divided into two sections, one dealing with civilians and the other with members of the EPLF.[11] ...In distinguishing between civil society and the EPLF in this way, the code acknowledges both the tenacity of customary values among civilians and the diverging development taking place within the ranks of the EPLF.' (Silkin, 1989:157)

Marriage reform within the EPLF was thus more far-reaching than that experienced within civil society.

Prior to 1977, marriage was prohibited within the EPLF. This created an opportunity for the organisation to introduce a programme of consciousness-raising designed to teach men and women to see one another as comrades and equals. (Silkin, 1989:151.) After 1977, members of the EPLF were free to marry again, but couples thinking of marrying were encouraged to spend a period of time, at least a year, reviewing their choice of partner. An integral part of this period of reflection was the assessment of sexual compatibility. Contraception was made available, although by 1980 the issue of abortion, hitherto prohibited, had not been settled. Silkin (1989:152) argues that: 'Promoting pre-marital sexual intimacy not only explicitly encourages responsible decision-making in marriage, it also implicitly undermines marriage as a family alliance for it uncouples female sexuality and family honour.'

Amongst EPLF members, the implementation of the Marriage Law and associated consciousness raising created the conditions in which fundamental changes in the relationship between men and women could occur, with a concomitant challenge to gender inequality. However, the conditions which allowed these changes to occur may not endure beyond Independence (Silkin, 1989:158). Fundamentally, the members of the EPLF operated outside of the cash economy and thus in isolation from the economic basis of the arranged marriage system. In 1987 Issaias Afwerki, the Secretary-General of the EPLF[12] stated that:

> '...we know what our realities are at the moment. We cannot do the job now without a cashless society (sic). But we are not expecting that future Eritrea will be egalitarian in 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.' (cited in Wilson, 1989:160)

[11] The former does not include any ban on polygyny - though this is given as grounds for divorce - and while the statutory age of marriage is given as 18 for women and 20 for men, the law does not prohibit a customary marriage from being contracted between two people of 15 years of age.

[12] Now President of the State of Eritrea

5. GENDER IN THE RURAL ECONOMY

5.1 Gender divisions of labour

To date, no comprehensive study of gender divisions of labour within Eritrean agrarian systems exists. The information that does exist is patchy and anecdotal and this is reflected in the discussion below. This constitutes a priority area for future research.

Cowan, whose research was carried out in 1983, contrasts the gender divisions of labour characteristic of two agrarian systems: settled agriculturalists, mainly Christians, in the central highlands; and semi-nomadic Muslim pastoralists located in Barka, in the western lowlands.[13] According to Cowan's observations, in the latter case, women were largely confined to their huts where they worked on small-scale production activities such as weaving mats and food processing for domestic use. Beyond food processing and preparation, women apparently took no part in agricultural activity. However, divisions of labour within households differed according to the stage of the life-cycle. Older women and younger girls had more mobility and were required to provision the household with water and fuel.

Women were primarily responsible for preparing the household for movement to new grazing lands at various times of the year. This involved the dismantling and re-erection of huts and the preparation of animals for the journey. Within the Muslim pastoralist agrarian system the form that gender divisions of labour took became more fluid when poverty overrode cultural constructions of appropriate behaviour for women. Indeed, poverty had forced some of the Tigre women of the eastern lowlands into agricultural labouring (Cowan, 1983:145-6).

The division of labour within Christian peasant households was found to be very different. In the central highlands both men and women worked in the fields and shared agricultural tasks, with the exception of ploughing which was a male preserve. Cowan does not elaborate on what the 'sharing' of agricultural tasks implies in terms of the relative time and energy inputs of men and women nor how this 'sharing' was determined.

A 1987 study of Band Aid funded seed distribution projects in Eritrea compiled a small number of case studies of female farmers. One women from the Tigray ethnic group in Nakfa, Sahel Province, reported that agricultural work - including weeding, harvesting and ploughing - was shared equally between herself and her husband (CDR, 1987:65). Another woman from Senhit Province in the northern highlands revealed that women in the area

[13] These findings are based on the observation of a small number of families. Moreover, by focusing on religious affiliation as a major determining factor in gender divisions of labour, Cowan's research tends to ignore other agro-ecological, socio-cultural and socio-economic variables which may underlie gender divisions of labour. Indeed, the portrayal of Muslim women as confined to the home and largely absent from agricultural activity in the fields is contradicted by the recognition that economic imperatives have forced **some** women from these communities into agricultural labouring.

generally shared agricultural tasks equally with men. However, cultural norms prevented women from ploughing (*ibid*).[14]

A 1991 case study of an agriculturalist family located in Akele Guzai revealed the following division of labour. Women worked together with their male kin on specific agricultural tasks such as weeding and harvesting. All other cultivation was carried out by men. Women were responsible for grain processing and for the provision of water, whereas the provision of fuelwood was a joint responsibility. Men controlled sales of larger livestock in local markets, whilst women were involved in the sale of smallstock such as chickens, as well as eggs, and small quantities of grain. The case study fails to mention whether women control the proceeds of their sales. Lastly, in keeping with practice in all other regions, women were generally responsible for all aspects of child care (CDS, 1991: Appendix B).

The case studies above suggest that gender divisions of labour differ considerably as a result of agro-ecological, socio-cultural and socio-economic factors. Possibly, in the former liberated zones, gender divisions are less marked, though this cannot be verified using existing sources. However, what women within all these farming systems have in common is the burden of the double day where they are expected to take control of most of the reproductive functions of the household. In the case of the Christian highlanders Cowan found that:

> 'the life of...peasant women...was one of continual back-breaking labour. They rose about 3 am to begin the laborious task of grinding grain by hand, using a stone, and then accompanied their husbands to the fields. There they joined in all work except ploughing, from which custom excluded them. On their return home at the end of the day, they prepared food for the family and carried out domestic chores - including washing their husband's feet - rarely sleeping before midnight' (Cowan, 1983:146)

Within EPLF controlled areas some efforts were made to lessen women's work burden by introducing appropriate technology such as grinding mills (Cowan, 1983:149). However, these provisions are unlikely to have been extended uniformly across the country, and especially not to the formerly occupied zones. In 1992, Almadom reported that 'the lack of provision of...labour-saving devices in the home is a critical problem in Eritrea. In theory, women are free to participate in the work force where they can contribute visibly to the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Eritrea. However, in practice, very little is done to ease their burden of domestic duties...This...may force some women to drift back to the 'traditional' roles of domestic labour and motherhood' (Almadom, 1992:9).

Women with children within the EPLF militia were expected to care for their children until the weaning process was completed. Thereafter, children were placed in nurseries and received visits from their parents for approximately two weeks every half year (Cowan, 1984:151). In Cowan's view, the existence of comprehensive child care facilities within the EPLF and 'the sight of men changing nappies, bathing babies and feeding toddlers with

[14] It may be that these case studies from formerly liberated areas reflect some shift in practices in relation to gender divisions of labour as result of the social reforms introduced in EPLF controlled areas. It would be interesting to compare gender divisions of labour between areas held by EPLF for most of the war and the formerly occupied areas, but available data do not allow this at present.

obvious enjoyment' is evidence of a lasting commitment to women's emancipation and of a significant change in male attitudes towards child care (1984:151). However, such visible signs of social change are largely lacking within civilian society and thus the burden of child care is likely to remain the preserve of women in the near future. At present, care for sick, disabled, orphaned and abandoned children presents women with an enormous burden.

Almadom (1992:9) argues that there is little evidence of a practical commitment by the Government to freeing women from their domestic obligations. However, the NUEWmn outlined their commitment to fighting for improved child care facilities for women at their Fourth Congress held in September 1992 (*ibid*) (see section 9.1).

5.2 Agrarian reform under the EPLF[15]

Prior to the revolution, land tenure arrangements within Eritrea were complex and differed according to the type of agrarian system. However, one commonality was their lack of provision for women to own land or livestock. Inequalities in the control over means of production arose out of the patriarchal social structures and ideology where 'the male [was] considered the preserver and transmitter of the family line and property, and the female...a subordinate member of the family' (Selassie, 1992:67). Women's lack of property rights meant that they were economically dependent on male kin (Cowan,1983:145).

During the period of Italian colonial rule, feudal forms of production where peasants were forced to rent land from rich, often absentee, landlords became deeply entrenched in the social fabric of Eritrean society. By the 1970s, social divisions within Eritrean society were marked. A major component of the political project of the EPLF was to pursue a programme of agrarian reform. Land reform was central to this process.

The EPLF aimed to catalyse interest in land reform from the base of society upwards. Villagers were encouraged to embark on a process of politicization and then stand for election in village assemblies. This resulted in the election of poor peasants, including some women, into local administrations (Minority Rights Group, 1983:13). In those areas undergoing land reform, land was taken out of family ownership (i.e. the tsilmi system) and put under village or community control (i.e the diesa system) prior to redistribution.

The EPLF **policy** of land redistribution provided women with extensive rights of land ownership. The relevant articles of the EPLF Policy of Land redistribution are as follows:-

> '6. The right of women to own land is fully recognised and protected.
>
> 6.1 In the event of a divorce, the land is divided between the parties equitably.
>
> 6.2 Widows and their children receive full rights to land allocation.
>
> 6.3 A childless woman receives half of a family plot.

[15] This section draws extensively on CDS, 1991.

6.4 A woman past the age of marriage (a spinster) receives half of a family plot.

6.5 A woman past the age of 25 who is unfit for marriage and who may live with her family or relations receives half of a family plot.

6.6 A woman who comes back to her village upon being divorced, may according to choice receive land in her home or her husband's village.'

(cited in Wilson, 1991:180-181)

The Policy also states that land may not be sold or exchanged by the users, which renders the meaning of 'ownership' somewhat ambiguous. It is not clear whether parents (of either sex) are allowed to pass on land directly to their children.

These provisions provide unambiguously for independent land 'ownership' of widows, divorced women and single women past 'marrying age'. There may have been a considerable economic and moral imperative to redistribute land to the large number of women lacking male support due to war conditions. What is not clear is whether land ownership/use rights are independently vested in currently married women. Further investigation into currently prevailing patterns of land tenure across different regions - and their gender implications - is needed.

The degree to which these reforms have actually been implemented varies between regions. The 1991 CDS survey which covered over 400 villages located in all provinces except Danakil found that 40 percent of villages in the survey had experienced some measure of land reform (CDS, 1991:iii). 42 percent of land reform had been implemented by the EPLF (between 1976 and 1991), 28 percent by the ELF (in the late 1970s) and 25 percent by the Ethiopian regime. In the latter case, land reform measures may have acted more as an instrument of social control than of social reform (*ibid*: 94). This suggests that a large proportion of rural areas have yet to experience land reform. Most of the land reform was concentrated in the highland areas where land scarcity among agriculturalist populations was a serious problem (see Table 4).

Table 4: Villages in CDR survey reporting land reform by the EPLF and in total (total number of villages = 401).

Province	No of villages reporting EPLF land reform	% of villages surveyed in province	Total no of villages reporting land reform	% of villages surveyed in province
Akele Guzai	43	57	58	76
Hamasien	3	9	25	74
Seraye	7	7	57	61
Barka	6	12	6	12
Sahel	1	4	3	11
Semhar	2	29	2	29
Senhit	6	14	11	26
Total (of 401 villages)	68	17	162	40

Source: adapted from CDS (1991:94)

Where women have gained the right to own land, they may still lack the **means** of working it. Female heads of households may face specific difficulties, especially in those regions where cultural norms exclude women from ploughing and clearing land. In the 1991 CDS survey, 15 percent of households in Barka were reported as being 'at risk' because they were female headed whilst in Sahel Province the figure was seven percent; the figure for Barka reflects the percentage of vulnerable FHHs in Eritrea as a whole (CDS, 1991: Appendix F). FHHs are in a high risk category in relation to food security (*ibid*: 91):

> 'The reason that absent family members increase households' food insecurity is because it is usually an economically adult active person (sic), who would otherwise be contributing directly to food production, who is away. In rural economies which depend almost entirely on family labour, food security is enhanced where there is a high ratio of producers to dependants in the household. The absence of family members... increases vulnerability: fewer mouths to feed but even fewer hands to work.' (CDS, 1991:69).

The CDS survey concludes that training women to plough would seem a viable option for reducing the vulnerability of female headed households, although it is not an option for elderly women. Also, in many parts of Eritrea it is still not socially acceptable for women of any age to plough (*ibid*).

Some female heads of household may be able to draw on a variety of reciprocal arrangements with other villagers. One female farmer reported that:

> 'In our village, the EPLF land-reform programme has redistributed land and given it even to women without husbands...If a woman is rich she gets someone to work with her and pays him. Otherwise she gets someone to plough for her...and gives him a share of the harvest; or the village collectively helps her while she makes coffee...women take part in agriculture a lot more. I myself till the land and do some harvesting for others; in return they plough for me.' (cited in Wilson, 1991:120)

The CDS survey concludes that other male members of the community should be encouraged to plough for female heads of households. However, this depends, to some extent, on the distribution of draught livestock throughout the community (CDS, 1991:91) and the ability of women to reciprocate in kind.

Other possible development interventions suggested by the CDS include enabling women to expand their production of smallstock and their homestead vegetable production activities. These activities do not challenge existing gender divisions of labour and thus may appear more attractive or viable options to potential beneficiaries (and/or project implementors). CDS also propose that women should receive extensive agricultural training as a way of increasing their agricultural productivity (*ibid*).

However, future development initiatives should not overlook the fact that restrictions in women's access to and control over male-held productive resources, particularly livestock, constitute a major contributory factor to low female productivity.

Land reform has been relatively widespread and there are few landless households (CDS, 1991: 95); some women have benefited from this process (although the terms on which women who are not female heads of household are able to independently access land are unclear). Shortage of adult labour may constrain the ability of those FHHs with access to land to make full productive use of it. Moreover, the return of half a million refugees may raise conflicts in terms of rights to particular plots and possible localised land scarcity. Returnee men may exert pressure to take over plots acquired and cultivated by wives or other female family members from whom they have been separated. Furthermore, the promotion of private land ownership (as opposed to the maintenance and reform of existing systems of land tenure) may have negative implications for women's access to land in the longer term.

Moreover, land reform alone is insufficient as a strategy for agrarian reform in a country with a high proportion of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, or even in those agricultural provinces where land is not the scarce factor (CDS, 1991: 96). The depletion of livestock herds during the 1983-5 drought and as a result of the war means that many households are currently constrained in agricultural productivity (up to 57 percent of households have no oxen or camels for ploughing, among these, as suggested, probably a high proportion of female headed households). (CDS, 1991: 82.) Any future schemes for restocking need to pay close attention to issues of women's access to and/or ownership of livestock.

5.3 Women and rural employment

During the conflict, the rural employment opportunities available to women differed according to whether they were resident in liberated or occupied areas or in neighbouring countries as refugees. Eritrean girls within the occupied zones were required to register for army service at 16. Girls were seldom used in combat by the Ethiopians, but were often utilized as cooks and cleaners for the army (Dines, 1989:153). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that many of these girls were used as prostitutes by the soldiers (*ibid*).

Wage labour in agriculture

Under the Italian colonial administration the confiscation of large tracts of land from the indigenous population, coupled with large-scale conscription of men into the occupying army, left many women heading households to search out paid employment. Within the rural sector, women were drawn into plantation agriculture, an industry reliant on 'unskilled' labour (Selassie, 1992:67). Women's salaries were often only 50 percent those of men doing the same work (*ibid*).

Many plantations in Gash-Setit province ceased to function during the war (CDS, 1991:92). However, cotton, sorghum and sugar plantations located in the east of Sudan remain important sources of rural income for migrant labourers (*ibid*). It is not clear from the information available whether complete households or individuals migrate to work on plantations. Neither is the proportion of females to males engaged in this employment type known.

The NDP stipulated that there should be no gender-based differential in wages paid for similar work. However, these provisions should be viewed in the light of limited rural employment availability (CDS, 1991:92) and deeply ingrained divisions of labour in the agricultural sector. A case study of a poor FHH in Seraye province in 1991 revealed that the female members of the family were engaged in agricultural labouring where available. The income gained through this activity enabled the family to hire oxen with which to plough a small parcel of land. However, prevailing divisions of labour meant that women could only hire out their labour during the weeding season. (CDS, 1991: Appendix B).

Currently there are regional differentials in the availability of agricultural employment within Eritrea, not least because some agricultural areas suffered massive destruction during the war. As rural rehabilitation proceeds and agricultural activity expands, there may be increased opportunities for waged agricultural employment. However, the return of refugees from abroad may soak up any increased demand for labour. Moreover, even if increased opportunities for wage labour are available, gender divisions of labour which restrict the range of tasks women perform, or the demands of 'family' labour, may prevent women from gaining access to these opportunities.

In 1987, approximately 5,600 Eritrean refugees were located in the village of Wad el Hileau in eastern Sudan (Bascom, 1989: 404). A quarter of the total number of refugees within the village (94 percent of whom were Eritrean), were categorised as landless (*ibid*: 409). They depended on agricultural labouring on large mechanised mushrooah farms where varieties of

sesame and sorghum were grown. These farms required high inputs of manual labour at specific points of the agricultural cycle. In 1987-1988, Bascom (1989:415) found that women supplied a large proportion of daily wage labour to these farms. This marked a significant change from previous divisions of labour where mushrooah labour was supplied largely by male refugees. Bascom notes that the refugee women active in day labouring were employed because of their pre-existing 'familiarity with agriculture' (*ibid*). The contribution that this cash income made to household economies was highly seasonal. During the dry season from February to May, landless households were forced to rely on other strategies, particularly loans and credit from traders (*ibid:* 413). In the case of FHHs, reliance on debt accumulation as a survival strategy would have served to reinforce their position of dependency.

By contrast, an earlier study of an (unspecified) refugee camp in Sudan in 1979 finds that Eritrean women had few income earning opportunities; even their 'traditional' tasks of fetching firewood and water had been taken over by men (Johnson, 1979).

Food for work schemes

Three decades of conflict, coupled with the frequent occurrence of drought and famine, have resulted in widespread reliance on food aid throughout Eritrea. According to Connell (1993:10), in November 1992, crop failure for 1992-3 had been estimated at 80 percent (compared with a 95 percent failure in 1990-1) and over two million people were reliant on food aid. In 1991, the CDS recommended that female heads of households, in particular, should be encouraged to take part in food for work (FFW) programmes as a means of improving household food security. However, it was noted that women's participation in these schemes could be hampered by the time constraints generated by their domestic responsibilities and that supporting childcare initiatives may be necessary (CDS, 1991:91).

Currently, Community Development Projects (CDPs) are being implemented within Eritrea under the auspices of the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme. In a visit to Akele Guzai Province, Almadom, a representative of OXFAM UK, observed that women were active in afforestation and terracing projects. However, it was noted that: 'The mood is one of exhaustion and uncertainty of how to revive the enthusiasm of the first year of independence. It is evident that post-war trauma may have taken its toll on the people's energy.' In order to ensure that these CDPs are designed in order to meet the specific needs of women, Almadom recommends that OXFAM should work in close partnership with the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEWmn) at the local level (Almadom, 1992:14).

5.4 Non-agricultural rural production

There is a dearth of information on women's participation in non-agricultural rural production. The CDS survey indicates that mat and basket-making using raffia is a common income-earning venture. In the CDS survey women from both poor FHHs and households with male heads in Semhar and Senhit were reportedly engaged in this activity (CDS, 1991: Appendix B). However, it is probable that markets for these products have been disrupted as a result of the war.

5.5 Effects of war on the rural economy

War has impacted on the rural environment both directly and indirectly. During the conflict, crops were destroyed by Ethiopian shells and napalm, particularly in the contested zones (Jones, 1991:55). The occupied and semi-occupied regions in the south of the country experienced intense guerilla activity (Cliffe, 1989:376). Agricultural production was affected indirectly by the disruption of markets, social relations and declining asset pools. Recurrence of drought and famine has further disrupted the rural economy. In addition, labour shortages resulted in a severe reduction in conservation activities such as the construction and maintenance of terraces to offset soil erosion (*ibid*).

In a survey of the effects of war on agricultural production from 1986-1989, Cliffe (1989:376) found that villagers in liberated and semi-liberated regions considered the following factors important reasons for the decline in agricultural activity: loss of land to mines; fields disrupted by trenches; villages and fields abandoned; villages burned by the Ethiopians; land left idle because farmers were too scared to work it; harassment by Ethiopian soldiers and a lack of resources such as tools, seeds, and livestock.

In particular, the problem of restricted mobility severely curtailed the activities of women. Fear of harassment by Ethiopian soldiers was a major issue. In Cliffe's 1989 study, almost 200 rapes were reported by villages located in the contested zones (1989:377). Since the contested zones were not comprehensively covered by this study, the incidence of rape for these areas as a whole was probably much higher. Villagers in Akele Guzai reported that 'Mothers move seldom, and then in a group; however, most of the time they stay at home, away from their daily activities such as agriculture' (*ibid:* 392).

This finding is supported by Dines who, writing in 1989, argued that harassment and even multiple rape of both girls and women 'is an everyday event in the occupied zones' (1989:147). The fear of such attacks meant that tasks such as water provision or fuelwood collection were extremely risky for women. In some cases, men took over these roles. A case study of a poor FHH in an agricultural district of Seraye in 1991 revealed the following:

> ‘The source of drinking water is about half km (sic) from the village. The younger sister fetches water twice daily. Firewood is found only at a substantial distance and was a risky venture during the Ethiopian Army presence in the village, so it is mostly the brother who collects it once a week when he is not working. Occasionally, they will purchase a donkey load...However, most of the time they use animal dung which the young family members collect from the fields surrounding the village.’
>
> (CDS, 1991: Appendix B)

Experience of actual attacks and the continuous **fear** of attack over the last three decades will have taken a severe psychological toll on many women living in the newly liberated zones.

Cliffe (1989:386) argues that the reduction in the availability of pack animals as a result of the overall decline in livestock within rural Eritrea means that women who use donkeys and other animals to fetch water now substitute their own carrying power. Between 1987-1991, the herd sizes of pastoralists and agro-pastoralists continued to diminish, with the exception of Akele Guzai and Seraye provinces (CDS, 1991:ii). Considering the likely benefits to women, attempts should be made to reprovision households with smallstock.

Very little data currently exists on the availability of wells, handpumps and boreholes in Eritrea (Almadom, 1992:16). The infrastructure in rural areas is, in general, run down and inadequate. Although some water supply projects were operative in 1992, women’s participation was noticeably low (*ibid*). A case study of ‘Adi Gered village in Seraye Province, where water shortages have been particularly acute, revealed the following:

> ‘We spoke to the care-taker of the only source of water where the handpump had broken two days earlier. This man was not trained to maintain the handpump. He did not have even the basic tools such as spanners or even oil to lubricate the bearing and chain.’
> (Almadom, 1992:21)

Almadom concludes that, as a priority, women should be included on the staff of the Government Water Resources Department as a means of introducing a gender focus into policy-making at the macro level. Likewise, women should be recruited to work at the village level as a way of ensuring that the concerns of women affected by poor water infrastructure are taken into account in future development initiatives (*ibid:* 18). Involving women in water resource management as members of user committees or in pump maintenance can be an effective way of increasing their decision making role and status, providing that steps are taken to ensure that they are adequately supported (with training, spare parts and technical assistance) and remunerated (recognising the opportunity costs of their time) and that genuine participation of women is facilitated in the structure and organisation of management bodies (BRIDGE, 1993).

6. GENDER IN THE URBAN ECONOMY

Statistical information on the gender distribution of urban wage employment and on the occupational and sectoral distribution of women in the urban sector is non-existent at present. What little information exists is largely anecdotal.

The Italian colonial administration established a number of large and small-scale factories throughout urban Eritrea. Women, in particular female heads of households, worked in these factories in a variety of positions, the majority of which were considered unskilled. There was a marked division of labour in that higher level technical or administrative positions were held by men. Even where men worked alongside women in unskilled occupations, they consistently received wages 50 percent higher than their female counterparts (Selassie, 1992:67).

During the independence struggle, there were few opportunities for women in urban employment within the occupied territories. According to Dines (1989:147) prostitution was a growth industry in these zones. Many female heads of households fell into the trade, viewing it as their only means of economic survival:

> 'The soldiers [in the occupied zones] frequent bars, which are often little more than huts where women make *sewa* (beer) in order to get money to feed their children. In many cases the soldiers run up credit and then leave the area without paying. The Ethiopian army also use the women who work for them in some capacity, such as cooks and cleaners, as prostitutes'. (Dines, 1989:147)

Many industries ceased to function during the 1980s, mainly due to lack of supplies, although by 1991 there was some evidence of increased capacity utilisation. Moreover, there were also signs of improvement within the informal sector, as petty traders and small-scale manufacturing industries increased their activity. (CDS, 1991.)

Significant numbers of returnees from both organized refugee camps and spontaneous settlements within Sudan are likely to return to Eritrea within the next few years. Of these, a high proportion (up to 30 percent) may be female headed (Habte-Selassie, 1992). Moreover, 70 percent of the returnees specified that they preferred to resettle within urban areas, particularly in Barka and Gash-Setit. This was in spite of the fact that 85 percent had resided within rural areas prior to their flight (Habte-Selassie, 1992:28). In 1979, Johnson wrote the following of women in a Sudanese refugee camp: 'All the women to whom I spoke, even the older ones, expect to be engaged in economic production in an independent Eritrea' (1979:22).

If these findings are indicative of the composition and preferences of the returnee population in general, then future development initiatives must make provisions for Eritreans who wish to undertake economic activity within the urban sector. Moreover, the specific needs of female returnees, especially female heads of households, must be addressed, e.g. by improving access to start up capital, skills training and other productive resources.

7. GENDER AND HEALTH

Gender disaggregated health statistics are largely unavailable within Eritrea. There is thus a pressing need for gender-specific research into the current state of health of the population in order that future health care delivery systems can be designed appropriately.

7.1 Fertility, maternal mortality, morbidity and malnutrition

According to one source, it is not unusual for women to have up to eight pregnancies before the age of 40 (Teklemichael, 1985:9).[16] This reportedly high fertility may be attributed, to some extent, to the prevalence of son preference. However, this is not universal; for example, the Kunamas, who are lowland pastoralists, prefer to have girl children, albeit after a first boy child has been born (Wilson, 1991:126-127).

Maternal mortality rates are thought to be high although no data are available (Teklemichael, 1985:9). A major health problem of Eritrean women is anaemia during pregnancy (Wilson, 1991:145) and vitamin deficiency, often associated also with chronic malnutrition. The latter leaves women highly susceptible to other commonly occurring diseases, including malaria, typhoid, dysentery, bilharzia and measles (Sabo & Kibirige, 1991:680).

Maternal mortality and morbidity is affected by factors such as access to health care services, to food supplies and water resources and these will differ on a regional, temporal and socio-economic basis, including within the household.

According to Cowan (1984:146), among the semi-nomadic populations of Barka province women show their respect for male kin by eating only once the men have finished their meals. It is possible that this custom may lead to gender biases in calorie intake and thus contribute to the incidence of malnutrition amongst women in this region. However, no firm evidence exists to support this supposition.

In 1985, the infant mortality rate in Eritrea was 520 per 1,000 children (Teklemichael, 1985:2)[17]. One nutritional survey undertaken by March and Tool (1984, cited in El Nagar, 1992:17) found that 67 percent of children had anaemia, 43 percent suffered from protein deficiency, 23 percent were in an advanced stage of undernourishment, and a high level of disease incidence was apparent, resulting in low mental and physical agility. No gender disaggregated data was found on infant and child malnutrition.

Cowan (in NUEWmn, 198-:18), in a visit to a village in Barka province in 1980, where health facilities were then minimal, reported that: 'An EPLF nurse...estimated the entire female

[16] There appears to be a discrepancy between the average household size of four persons (as estimated by CDS, 1991) and Teklemichael's estimate of eight pregnancies per woman. It is not clear whether this is a result of decreasing fertility since the mid-eighties; high infant or general mortality; or decreasing household size due to migration or participation in the war.

[17] This figure seems extremely high and could not be confirmed from any other source.

population of the area to be anemic (sic), a result of the combined effects of malnutrition, pregnancy and excessive blood loss during childbirth....' In addition, the numbers of women suffering from venereal disease was particularly high in Barka in 1984. According to Cowan:

> 'In Barka, infertility among women is particularly common, invariably following infection with venereal disease. This is contracted by their menfolk on their travels - selling animals to neighbouring Sudan. It never strikes the man that it could be he and not his wife who is infertile. The standard response is to bring a new wife into the household, following which the first wife is either ignored or divorced'. (Cowan, 1984:147.)

The reportedly high rate of STD infection among women, associated with labour migration and related sexual exchange, raises serious questions about the extent of HIV/AIDS infection within Eritrea. The reportedly high incidence of prostitution and of sexual assault and rape by members of the armed forces, under war conditions, also suggests that STDs, including HIV/AIDS, may be widespread. The use of force in rape increases the risk of infection for women. Evidence from elsewhere (e.g. Uganda) shows that patterns of HIV transmission often follow routes of military movement (BRIDGE, 1992). Other STDs are an important co-factor in HIV infection (ibid). Contact with contaminated blood or instruments in the practice of female genital mutilation (see below) may be another gender specific risk factor. Clearly, further investigation is needed into the social epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in Eritrea, with a view to introduction of gender sensitive prevention activities as well as care and support for those affected.

On the positive side, the encouragement of responsible sexual intimacy by the EPLF (see section 4) may provide a useful context for promoting safe sex.

7.2 Female genital mutilation

Prior to the liberation struggle, various forms of female genital mutilation were widespread in Eritrea (Sabo & Kibirige, 1989:680). These ranged from circumcision to excision or clitoridectomy to infibulation (see Abdalla, 1982 for a comprehensive account these practices). However, there were regional variations in the occurrence of such practices. Non-muslim Kunamas, for example, rarely practised genital mutilation (Wilson, 1991:127).

The extensive literature available on the subject of female circumcision stresses the way in which the practice is utilized as a means of enforcing female subordination and, more specifically, a means of controlling female sexuality (Pereira, 1989:11). Female circumcision is closely tied to a girl's suitability for marriage. In societies where women are universally expected to marry, this puts enormous pressure on women, or their parents, to carry out the practice.

A variety of short and long-term physical and psychological consequences from circumcision, excision and infibulation are possible (Pereira, 1989:11-12). In the former case, severe blood loss, tetanus arising out of the use of unsterilised equipment, infection, and the mutilation of organs such as the bladder and urethra are common occurrences. Longer term consequences

include the retention of menstrual blood resulting in painful menstruation; frequent infections of the vagina and uterus which may lead to sterility, and pain on intercourse. Moreover, infibulation may lead to serious complications during pregnancy, not least the breaking of scar tissue to allow for childbirth and subsequent reinfibulation once delivery has taken place (*ibid*).

Throughout the liberation struggle, attempts were made by the EPLF to abolish female genital mutilation. To date, many regional marriage by-laws have banned infibulation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that attitudes towards the practice have changed significantly in certain areas. The following extract from an interview with an Eritrean women in Rora district, an EPLF-held area during the conflict, is suggestive of local attitudes towards infibulation:

> 'Now people have stopped infibulation. It is bad to be infibulated because a lot of women die while giving birth. I used to be infibulated but I stopped about ten years ago. Before that I had six children and I was restitched each time...I was a member of the EPLF's mass organization - the Women's Union - and when I was pregnant I went to the midwife to give birth...After the birth the midwife...advised me to stop being infibulated...my husband said nothing about it.' (cited in Wilson, 1991:146)

In contrast, clitoridectomy and circumcision have not been formally banned. Silkin (1990, cited in Wilson, 1991:138) argues that 'this would take the argument beyond women's health and into the sphere of women's rights to and capacity for sexual pleasure which would alienate the people from the more moderate reform.'

Significant advances have been made by the EPLF in challenging the practices of female genital mutilation, particularly in their more extreme form. However, it is not known what current campaigns or activity, if any, are being conducted by the government in relation to the practice. The imperatives of reconstruction and particularly, the general lack of health facilities, mean that this is unlikely to be a priority. The current position of the NUEWmn on this issue is also not known either, though none of the sources reviewed here identify it as a major area of campaigning for the Union. Clearly, any intervention around this issue would have to be sensitive both to the priorities of the Government and of NUEWmn, as well as to perceptions of the various forms of female genital mutilation and of related issues of marriageability and social stigma, in any given locality. One possible mechanism of intervention may be through awareness raising among the large numbers of female midwives, nurses, Traditional Birth Attendants (TBAs) and paramedics trained by the EPLF (see section 7.4). Indeed, the quotation above suggests that such personnel may have been instrumental in discouraging infibulation.

7.3 Effects of war on health

The effect of 30 years of war in Eritrea have taken an enormous physical and psychological toll on the population, especially in southern areas subjected to frequent bombardment by Ethiopian planes and to guerilla activity. Dines (1988:150-151) reports women undergoing torture within Ethiopian occupied territories throughout the war years, especially when suspected of supporting or sympathising with the EPLF.

Health care provision in independent Eritrea should take into account the various manifestations of post-war trauma experienced by civilian populations. UNICEF, currently operating within Eritrea, plan to train teachers in the counselling of war-traumatized children (UNICEF, 1992:14). There is scope for extending this provision to adults, taking into account the gender-specific manifestations and experiences of trauma.

Likewise, considering women's participation within the militia, it is likely that many female combatants received injuries leading to long-term disability during the conflict. However, no gender disaggregated data exists to indicate the extent of these casualties. Literature emanating from within the EPLF suggests that, during the conflict, extensive provision, in the form of employment opportunities, was made for disabled fighters in schools, in factories and other EPLF sectors (Connell, 1993:9). It is not yet clear what provision will be made for these disabled ex-combatants in the future.

7.4 Health provision

The Eritrean Public Health Programme (EPHP), introduced in 1981, aimed to establish a comprehensive programme of primary health care (PHC) throughout EPLF controlled zones. This was to be achieved through the provision of adequate water supplies; the improvement of the nutritional status of the population through health education, feeding programmes, and the promotion of breastfeeding; the provision of health services for women and children, including family planning and immunization services; and the provision of a range of curative services (Teklemichael, 1985:10-11).

The EPHP operated at three levels: a community health service at village level and based on the services of a village health worker and TBA, both of whom received intensive training; health stations at sub-district level servicing populations of approximately 10,000 people; and health centres which supported the health stations and serviced up to 50,000 people. The health centres were, in turn, supported by a number of regional hospitals and one central hospital in Orota (Teklemichael, 1985:11-13). The latter provided major surgery for the numerous war casualties. A number of EPLF factories were set up to manufacture basic medicines. By 1989, inaccessible rural areas within the liberated zones were serviced by 40 mobile health clinics (Burgess, 1991:216).

In other areas, health care provision is minimal. For example, Barka province, under ELF jurisdiction from 1961-1980, had experienced minimal infrastructural development prior to 1980. Health care provision was meagre compared to that in EPLF controlled areas. (Cowan, 1984.)

Within the EPLF, approximately 60 percent of health workers were women in 1989, although, as noted above, predominantly as midwives and paramedics. Training of hundreds[18] of civilian women as TBAs was also undertaken by the EPLF in the mid-late eighties (Selassie, 1992:68).

[18] Selassie cites 354 women being trained in four districts in 1985-9.

8. GENDER AND EDUCATION

8.1 Pre-liberation educational provision

During the colonial period education was available only to a small number of girls from rich families generally resident within urban areas. The illiteracy rate amongst women prior to the revolution was extremely high - a commonly cited figure is 90 percent of the female population (Wilson, 1991; Teklemichael, 1985). Selassie (1992:68) reports an illiteracy rate of 100 percent for women in Agraa in Sahel province and Maria-Tselam in Senhit province.

Access to education was seen by the EPLF as a vital constituent of social reform. A large-scale literacy campaign was introduced in the liberated zones in the early 1980s. By 1989, illiteracy rates fell on average by between 50-70 percent in these areas (*ibid*). Leonard (1988:127) argues that the attempts of the EPLF to encourage equality in access to education represent an advance in women's status.

EPLF literacy classes ran in parallel with a programme of political education. These classes focused on topics 'such as elementary class analysis of Eritrean society, agrarian reform, status and role of women...organs of people's power' (Leonard,1988:129) . In 1983-84, the first year of the adult literacy campaign run by the EPLF, 13,704 women registered for classes and 67 percent completed the course. Table 5 details the participation of women, peasants and youth in the first two years of the literacy campaign (1983-1985). Unfortunately, these figures do not indicate the **proportion** of women from the various regions taking part in these classes, nor the overall ratio of men to women participants.

Prior to Independence, an educational programme providing for five years of primary education, two years of middle schooling and three years of secondary education was in operation within the liberated areas (Gebregiorgis, 1992:13). The NDP made provisions for the various ethnic groups within Eritrea by allowing elementary education to be taught in indigenous languages. Beyond elementary education, English is used as the teaching medium (Leonard, 1988:114). In 1986, 25,000 students attended 125 schools run by the EPLF (Pateman, 1990:220). However, the relative participation rates of boy and girl children at each level is not known.

Table 5: Participation of women, peasants and youth
in the first two years of the adult literacy campaign (1983-85)

1983-1984		
Social status	**no.registered**	**% completed**
peasants	7,067	61
youth	3,529	80
women	13,704	67
1984-1985		
Social status	**no.registered**	**% completed**
peasants	8,143	75
youth	5,471	64
women	15,215	79

Source: adapted from Leonard (1988:129)

In the highland areas occupied by the Ethiopian army during the conflict, Tigrinya speaking children were forced to learn Amharic, one of the major Ethiopian languages. Children often avoided political indoctrination by the Ethiopian authorities by playing truant from school (Dines, 1989:154). Adult literacy classes were available within these zones, but, again, the only language taught was Amharic. Moreover, the classes were strongly oriented towards political education 'usually based on the supremacy of the Ethiopian state ... as well as the idea of "one Ethiopia"'(*ibid*).

Although there is no evidence that girls and women were specifically disadvantaged vis-a-vis men in access to education in the occupied zones, women (and men) within the occupied zones had fewer opportunities for educational advancement than their counterparts in the liberated zones. This was due to frequent school closures, the poor quality of education available and the use of an alien language for instruction (Tesfaldet, 1992:19).

8.2 Refugee Education

Information on educational opportunities available to refugee men and women is patchy. During the war, access to education was dependent on a number of criteria, not least whether men and women were occupants of official refugee camps - where the EPLF or the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) were operational - or settled spontaneously with no formal aid provision. In the former case, some access to education was available.

However, Tesfaldet (1992:18) notes the low attendance of both women and men in both ERA- run and other evening classes in Sudan. Various reasons are given, including the distance to the schools from residential areas and poor transport facilities. Lack of personal security in travelling to classes was a central concern of women. Attendance figures for adult literacy classes for 1989 reveal significant gender differentials. For example, women made up only 13 percent of adult students in Port-Sudan, and 17 percent of students in Kassala. However, in ERA-run schools within central eastern Eritrea 47 percent of students were women (see Table 6).

Table 6: Enrolment of adult students in ERA schools (1989)

Regions	**Numbers of adult students**		**female students**
	male	**female**	**as % of total**
Port-Sudan	2257	343	13
Kassala	1497	315	17
Gedaref	1807	250	12
Medani	350	-	-
Khartoum	280	320	53
E.Eritrea	504	250	33
C.E.Eritrea	283	250	47
Barka	243	11	4
Total	7221	1739	19

Source: adapted from Tesfaldet (1992:19)

8.3 Gender gaps in education

In 1991, the PGE launched a further rural literacy programme using university students as tutors, in recognition of the disparities in educational attainment and opportunity throughout Eritrea. This represented one component of a nationwide 'national service' whereby all unemployed young adults aged from 18-40 were required to complete between 12-18 months of service (Connell, 1993:6). Participation in literacy classes is open to both sexes but the relative proportions of men and women enroling is not known. By 1993, primary education

had been made compulsory for all children to the fifth grade, potentially improving educational provision for and attendance of girls.

The design of future education programmes would benefit from studies into the differentials in educational attainment and school attendance by gender as well as by different class, ethnic and/or religious groupings. Female: male enrolment ratios in predominantly Muslim areas may be lower than those in non-Muslim areas, for example. A case study of a rich Muslim family from Semhar province revealed that the female children were not encouraged to attend school (CDS, 1991: Appendix B).

A number of barriers to female participation in education have been broken down by the EPLF. Educational facilities are more widely available and women have been encouraged to utilise these facilities. However, the gender gap in education is still persistent within specific regions, particularly Barka province, which remained in the hands of the ELF until 1980. Table 6 indicates that female representation in ERA adult education classes in Barka was extremely low at four percent. Literacy and political education programmes were only introduced into Barka province in 1984 and, in the first instance, only men attended classes.

Despite the Government commitment to free compulsory primary education for all children, it is doubtful whether disparities in male and female school attendance will disappear in the near future. The need for many children to participate in FFW programmes and other livelihood strategies means that education is likely to be seen as a luxury by some poor families. Moreover, deeply ingrained sexual divisions of labour within civilian society mean that female children are more likely than boys to shoulder any excess burden arising out of their mothers' heavy domestic responsibilities.

Pateman (1990:220) argues that both the number and quality of teachers in Eritrea are insufficient. To ensure that children receive education to a high standard, investment in teacher training programmes is imperative. Even in the EPLF, women were highly under-represented among teachers in 1989, forming only 11 percent of the total (see Table 3). Emphasis should thus be placed on increasing the recruitment of women into teacher training overall and specifically in 'non-traditional' subject areas. This may necessitate some relaxation of entrance requirements in the case of women candidates.

Expansion of the educational infrastructure as a whole would have the effect of increasing the enrolment of girls in those areas where school provision is currently inadequate. Where single sex schools are the norm, adequate supply of places for girls must be ensured. Issues of safety of female students travelling to school also need to be addressed.

9. POLITICAL STATUS

Before 1970, formal women's political organisations did not exist in Eritrea (Burgess, 1991:214). During the liberation struggle, ordinary Eritreans were organised into a number of National Unions which, together, formed the base of the EPLF organisational structure i.e unions of women, peasants, youth (male and females aged 18-25), workers, professionals and students. Members of the National Unions elected representatives to sit on the EPLF Central Committee. The Central Committee formulated policy in relation to all EPLF zones, with a mandate to oversee all local-level implementation (Leonard, 1988:114).

People's Assemblies, charged with the responsibility for local administration, were made up of delegates from the various local mass associations of peasants, workers, youth, and women. Representatives of the various local mass associations to the People's Assemblies were selected according to the relative size the associations. Representation was 'inevitably tilted in favour of women and poor peasants, because the number of poor peasants and women was inevitably much larger than the number of rich and powerful men in the village' (Wilson, 1991:50).

According to Silkin (1983:912), women's mass associations allowed their members political representation from village to national level. Locally-based branches provided a platform on which the concerns of women could be discussed with a view to influencing local policy. In theory, local concerns would, in turn, eventually feed into national-level policy formulation. Prior to 1987, women were allowed to join one other union besides the NUEWmn (Wilson, 1991:50).

9.1 The National Union of Eritrean Women

The NUEWmn was founded in 1979 and, before 1991, was operational only in the liberated zones. Its main aim was to increase the overall participation of women within the liberation struggle. Specifically, the NUEWmn campaigned for increased female participation in education, for the implementation of family law at a local level and for equal pay for equal work. (Connell, 1993:17.)

Throughout the conflict, NUEWmn coordinated the activities of the local-level mass women's associations. Through a process of grass-roots organisation and politicization, many women were encouraged to participate in the various processes of social transformation within the villages, including land reform and the introduction of local marriage by-laws.

By 1991, women's mass organisations were being set up throughout the formerly occupied zones. However, in these areas their activities were focused on the challenges of reconstruction and the initiation of self-help projects to rebuild houses, schools, and other community services, rather than political education (Connell, 1993:13).

The National Unions were closed down in 1991 when the PGE took office, pending reorganisation (Africa Confidential 30/4/93). However, by 1992, the NUEWmn had

embarked on a process of restructuring, reflecting the new political environment in which it was to operate. According to Connell, the Union

> 'did not have to be radically restructured, but it did have to grapple with the redefinition of its mission and with dramatic changes in its membership. The NUEWmn had encouraged women not only to participate in the liberation struggle but to take part in the country's economic and social life for the first time...This dual identity - between that of a popular movement and that of a service organization - always contained an inherent tension.' (Connell, 1993:17)

At the Fourth Congress of the NUEWmn, held in September 1992, female combatants, who had been excluded by the EPLF from joining any other political organisation for 20 years, were invited by the head of state, Issaias Afwerki, to join the NUEWmn. This represents an enormous challenge for the Union. According to Almadom (1992:6), throughout the conflict '...the NUEWmn had been seen to be almost irrelevant to the women fighters who could not benefit from what it had to offer. Serious misgivings and a sense of bitterness had persisted which are now beginning to be aired'. Indeed, a tension between the interests of highly politicised ex-combatants and civilian women is inevitable, considering the different expectations of gender equality fostered within each group (Connell, 1993:17).

A further challenge for the Union is the influx of large numbers of new members from the recently liberated zones. Women joining the NUEWmn from the newly liberated urban areas are much less radical in their view of gender issues than their counterparts in the liberated countryside, having not experienced the revolution directly (Connell, 1993: 18).

A new constitution was approved at the Fourth Congress of the NUEWmn. It provided for independence of NUEWmn from the EPLF and a reformulation of the NUEWmn's role as a non-governmental campaigning body. The Union's statement of intent regarding future campaigns was to continue pursuing improvements in female literacy rates, to improve vocational training opportunities, to campaign for increased child-care facilities and for wider provision of labour-saving technologies for women (Almadom, 1992:9).

Whether the NUEWmn is able to pursue its programme of fighting for improvements in women's status in the light of its new membership, the challenges of reconstruction and rehabilitation, and having lost its direct link with the centre of political power, remains to be seen. The NUEWmn now intends to embark on a programme of institution-building as a means of strengthening its operational capacity and increasing country-wide mobilisation on gender issues. Support for this process may be one way in which donors can ensure that NUEWmn is effective in promoting development activities to benefit women and in campaigning and/or lobbying on gender issues in the future.

9.2 Political Representation

In 1984, none of the 37 members of the EPLF Central Committee were women (Cowan, 1984:152). At this time the NUEWmn argued that gestures of placing women in selected high profile positions were not appropriate and smacked of tokenism. Instead, it was reasoned that women should only enter high public office when they had the qualities and experience to do so. By 1991 eight percent (six out of 71) members of the Central Committee were female (Wilson, 1991:184). Approximately 20-30 percent of the delegates to the Second National Congress of the EPLF in 1987 were women (Leonard, 1988:123). In 1992, the mayor of the provincial capital of Akele Guzai, and the deputy mayors of two provincial towns were women, whilst various Government administrative departments, for example social affairs, boasted women in high office (Selassie, 1992:71).

According to Connell (1993:17), after complaints by the NUEWmn about the small number of women in high-level positions within the PGE, in 1992, four women were appointed as heads of administrative departments. This pressure represents a recognition by the NUEWmn that institutional bias against women is pervasive, regardless of the women's suitability for office. Moreover, two women were appointed to cabinet-level positions (*ibid*). A woman - Foazia Hashim - is currently Minister of Justice. In future, however, the delinking of the NUEWmn from the Government will weaken the Union's ability to influence policy so directly.

The Government has pledged to pursue the introduction of a multi-party system, and elections are planned for 1997 (Africa Confidential, 30/4/93). The transition to a multiparty system may provide opportunities for wider participation of women in the democratic process. The relatively long period prior to the transition does provide an opportunity for NUEWmn and other emergent women's organisations to encourage women's political participation and train women for leadership positions. However, the increased political participation of women cannot be assumed, as illustrated above, nor are the social reforms benefitting women which have been achieved to date invulnerable. It is conceivable, for example, that contenders from the Government may choose to build a political platform by soliciting the support of more conservative sections of society and compromising some of their more progressive policies.

10. AID AGENCIES IN ERITREA

Since liberation in May 1991, many donors have been planning and starting to implement development activities in Eritrea and in some cases, local offices have been established. Among the UN agencies, UNICEF is the lead agency for programmes aimed at women.

At present, UNICEF is engaged in a three year programme within Eritrea, focusing on health, nutrition, water, sanitation and education. In co-operation with the Government, UNICEF has initiated a programme of strengthening the PHC services in seven of the 10 Eritrean provinces. UNICEF is also currently supporting 30 feeding centres in lowland regions where returnees are beginning to settle and, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, is attempting to reactivate elementary schooling throughout the country (UNICEF, 1993:2). A Situation Analysis of women and children in Eritrea will shortly be published by the Eritrea office of UNICEF. This will provide data to inform follow up activities.

In addition, the United Nations have mobilised resources to implement initial activities of a four year Programme for Refugee Reintegration and Rehabilitation of Resettlement Areas in Eritrea (PROFERI). It is estimated that 88 percent of returnees will resettle in the provinces of Gash-Setit, Sahel, Barka, Senhit and Semhar whilst 10 percent will settle in Asmara. In addition to providing infrastructural improvements and relief aid, it is argued that the programme will provide opportunities for FFW and waged labour. However, it is not guaranteed that the benefits of these activities will accrue equally to all returnees and members of resident populations. It is vital that the various components of these programmes are gender-sensitive.

In the context of a future Country Strategy Note (CSN) for UN system co-operation, the need for support to a comprehensive and multi-sectoral national programme for women has been identified. Such a programme, which could be prepared under the auspices of the NUEWmn would constitute an overall framework for the advancement of women and serve as a policy and coordinating tool for both national agencies and international support. UN agencies including UNICEF, UNDP, UNIFEM, UNFPA and WFP could provide potential inputs to such a programme. A national workshop, building on the recommendations of the UNICEF Situation Analysis, could be useful for the formulation of a future national programme for women. Other donors (multilateral, bilateral, NGO) could potentially support components of such a programme. The World Bank in its Country Economic Memorandum (CEM) currently being finalised will no doubt also make references to the situation of women. Relevant aspects should be followed up, including in the context of a future Policy Framework Paper, to ensure that the social and gender consequences of macro-economic and sectoral policy changes are not overlooked. [19]

NGOs such as OXFAM, ACCORD, Christian Aid, Save the Children Fund (UK) and World Vision (Australia) are already beginning to operate within Eritrea. OXFAM is contributing to the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme, with particular emphasis on water supply and sanitation projects. In late 1992, it was drawing up a plan of action regarding its contribution

[19] Michael Askwith, former UNDP Representative in Eritrea, supplied this information.

to community development projects. Emphasis was placed on planning village level interventions jointly with local branches of NUEWmn (Almadom, 1992).

The likely increase in bilateral, multi-lateral and NGO development activity in Eritrea over the next few years suggests several areas of concern in relation to gender issues. It is important that debate and activity around gender issues is not confined to a narrow programme, mainly focused on social sectors, and divorced from wider macroeconomic and sectoral changes. The gender implications of wider changes also need to be taken up. Investment in sectors likely to increase women's incomes, productivity or reduce the demands on their time should be prioritised.

Co-operation and dialogue with the NUEWmn is also vital, at both national and local levels, and co-ordination between donor agencies themselves, possibly in the context of a national programme, in order to build on existing institutional structures and to avoid replication of efforts. It is also important, however, that the NUEWmn is enabled to become an effective lobbying force in relation to the wider policy making environment, through upgrading of its own structures, resources and analytical capacity.

Throughout the war period, considerable organisational as well as technical skills were acquired by both men and women, which need to be mobilised and utilised as fully as possible in the reconstruction period. In particular, the skills and experience of women ex-combatants and other former EPLF support staff, particularly those in non-traditional areas, need to be drawn on by development agencies. This would provide ongoing role models of women working in non-traditional areas. Transfer of skills could be further encouraged by using such women as trainers.

Female headed households and returnees may be particularly vulnerable to poverty and in need of support through public works and other programmes. Resettlement programmes for returnees should address gender specific needs.

11. CONCLUSION

During the 30 year long liberation struggle which culminated in the establishment of the Independent State of Eritrea in 1993, gender roles and relations have undergone rapid change. However, the process of social transformation initiated by the EPLF has been uneven within Eritrea, for example, in relation to land reform and the introduction of the 1977 Marriage Law. Changes in gender relations have thus been far from homogenous. To date, local level changes brought about through processes of social and political reform in liberated zones have not been formalised by the introduction of national level legislation.

The tension between the radical policies adopted within the EPLF and the socio-cultural norms and expectations within the more conservative parts of civilian society is an ongoing challenge to the women's movement in Eritrea. Moreover, these divisions may widen as the collective spirit engendered by the liberation struggle wanes. It remains to be seen whether the NUEWmn can diffuse this tension by developing an action plan which will forge common interests across the newly broadened base of its membership.

Independence presaged a change in the emphasis of the Government away from political and social change towards a more pragmatic stance focused on rehabilitation and reconstruction. The issue of gender equality may become less of a priority for the Government, particularly now that the necessity of women's involvement in the military and political struggle is no longer an issue. There are many precedents for a return to more conservative values on gender issues following a successful liberation struggle. It is thus vital that attention is paid to gender interests at this juncture to ensure that earlier gains can be protected and promoted in the newly liberated areas. Women cadres from the EPLF could play a vital role as trainers and organisers in these areas.

The shift from a military to a new economic arena brings many challenges. The 1987 NDP emphasized the benefits of pursuing a mixed economy with a role for the private sector and encouragement given to foreign and domestic investment. Many questions of economic and social strategy are only now being resolved. The gender and wider social implications of macro-economic and sectoral policies need careful examination. In this regard, outside agencies should support NUEWmn in developing its capacity to influence the policy making process. Given the lack of baseline data, the development of a gender disaggregated database will be a vital tool to inform future policy making.

The impending shift to a multi-party democracy and the delinking of NUEWmn from the EPLF/Government imply both the potential for increased political participation of women and the possibility of reduced influence of women's organisations over the political process. Support to the NUEWmn in developing its analytical, organisational, administrative and campaigning capacity, in the light of its new role and relationship with the Government, would assist in keeping gender interests high on the political agenda. The proposed UN sponsored national programme for women may be a useful focus for NUEWmn and donor coordinated activity, providing it does not become a ghettoised separate programme with limited funds, divorced from mainstream policy making processes.

The quality of human resources within Eritrea is very high. Indeed, a cadre of female ex-combatant and non-combatant EPLF support staff who have a variety of organisational, military, management, technical and political skills now exists. The challenge is how to best utilise these skills in a civilian context. Development agencies can assist in the utilisation of this human resource base by retraining and employing such personnel, particularly women who have 'non-traditional' skills. There is a need to ensure that employment practices in the post liberation context do not discriminate against women. The specific needs of women returnees need to be addressed within resettlement programmes.

Progress made in education in the liberated zones prior to Independence and the commitment of the Government to compulsory free primary education are considerable advances in terms of gender equality. However, there is little hard information about male: female enrolment ratios and their variation by education level or other variables (region, ethnicity etc), which would inform a more concerted programme to address gender inequalities.

Specific sectors (e.g. education) where expansion of provision is needed should actively promote the training and recruitment of female personnel. Expansion of the water infrastructure also provides an opportunity to train and support women and increase their involvement in decision making at the local level. However, adequate training, remuneration and support from water authorities are required to ensure women are properly rewarded for their work and that facilities run efficiently. The employment of women in the management of the water authorities, as well as at local level, would assist in introducing a gender focus in policy making on water.

Within areas controlled by the EPLF during the liberation struggle, a well organised, PHC oriented system of health care was set up and considerable numbers of health personnel, particularly paramedics were trained, including a high proportion of women. Future expansion and development of health care provision should build on this model, extending it to other areas.

The physical and psychological, as well as material, consequences of war on the population demand urgent attention. Gender specific counselling and support services are required for women disabled or bereaved as a result of the war and, particularly, for those who have suffered torture and/or rape. More generally, there is an urgent need for investigation of gender differentials in health status and the collection of data on specific women's health problems, disaggregated by province. The sensitive issue of female genital mutilation needs to be approached with caution and in close consultation with NUEWmn and other relevant institutions. The existing cadre of TBAs and midwives trained under the EPLF may be an important conduit for affecting change in this area.

In the drive for agricultural rehabilitation, the particular constraints faced by women producers should be given high priority. There is currently a lack of detailed information about gender divisions within Eritrean agrarian systems. Such information would be a necessary prerequisite to interventions in this sector. The considerable number of female headed households, in particular, may lack the means (in some instances land, but more generally labour power and draught animals) to sustain themselves without additional support. In the short term, FFW and other public works schemes will be necessary for such households. In the longer term, measure to improve agricultural productivity are needed,

such as: restocking of draught animals with attention to women's ownership and access; the support of women's smallstock and vegetable production; and providing women with agricultural training. Rural credit facilities which address the specific constraints of women producers would be a necessary corollary to this.

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