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DISSERTATION

Titel der Dissertation

Gender Equality and the Political Representation
of Women in Contemporary Eritrea

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad
Doktorin der Philosophie (Dr. phil.)

Wien, 2012

Studienkennzahl Studienblatt:
Dissertationsgebiet lt. Studienblatt:
Betreuer:

A 092 390
Afrikanistik
Univ.-Prof. Dr. Walter Schicho

Acknowledgments

I began this research in the fall of 2008 with tremendous courage but no financial support on the horizon. However, my quests for financial support bore fruit in October 2009, when the Afro-Asian Institute (AAI) in Vienna awarded me with the One World Scholarship for the next two years. This was followed by the University of Vienna's grant, Kurzfristige Auslandsstipendien (KWA), Short-Term Grant Abroad, in the summer of 2010 covering my field research expenses for three months in Eritrea. In addition, in 2011-2012 the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) honored me with an Ida Smedley Maclean Fellowship. Without the much needed financial assistance of the AAI, the University of Vienna and the IFUW, it would have been practically impossible for me to carry out my research trips to Eritrea and complete my PhD studies. At the outset, therefore, I must express my sincere gratitude to these institutions for their vital financial assistance.

In addition to these institutions, there are several individuals, too many to mention, who have been incredibly generous towards me either providing advice or some form of material or moral support throughout the research process. Most of all, I am very thankful to Zemhret Yohannes, Head, Research and Documentation Center Eritrea, for facilitating a research trip to Nakfa in the summer of 2010, and providing me with a working space during my research stay in Eritrea; not to mention his readiness to write reference letters supporting my bid for financial assistance, all of which were very crucial in the completion of the research. I would also like to express my profound appreciation to Luul Gebreab, President of the NUEW, for allowing me to have access to both published and unpublished research materials at the library of the NUEW's headquarters in Asmara.

Equally, I am grateful to my supervisor in the African Studies Department at the University of Vienna, Univ.-Prof. Dr. Walter Schicho, for his guidance and support throughout the research project. I am also thankful to Univ.-Prof. Mag. Dr. Michael Zach, Vice Dean of the Faculty of Philological and Cultural Studies, at the University of Vienna, not only for his comments on the research, but also for his willingness to assist with administrative issues whenever necessary.

To my dear husband, an intellectual in his own field, I wish to thank him so much for commenting on earlier versions of the dissertation, for supporting me, and for his relentless efforts to keep me happy through it all. I certainly could not have done it without you! And of course, I cannot omit declaring my gratitude to my family and all my friends for their tremendous moral support. I hope to live up to all your expectations!

Finally, I would like to mention that although my supervisor and others mentioned here have made substantial contributions in different ways to this research, I am the only one responsible for any potential weaknesses.

TTH
Vienna

List of Acronyms

AI	Amnesty International
CEADW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
EDHS	Eritrea Demographic Health Survey
EIT	Eritrea Institute of Technology
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
FGM	Female genital mutilation
ICCPR	International Convent of Civil and Political Rights
MLHW	Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
NA	National Assembly
NCEW	National Confederation of Eritrean Workers
NDP	National Democratic Program
NIC	National Insurance Corporation
NPGAP	National Policy on Gender and Action Plan
NSSS	Nakfa Social Science School
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PGE	Provisional Government of Eritrea
PHC	Primary Health Care
RH	Reproductive Health
UoA	University of Asmara
UN	United Nations

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Introduction

Historically, the criterion for citizenship was based on gender and this privilege was only available to men as bearers of civil, political, and social rights. However, this concept has changed over time, first through women's unrelenting struggle for equality and later reinforced by the efforts of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the body of international law that was established with the entry into force of various treaties and conventions calling for uniform application of universal rights for all individuals including women (Ramirez et al. 1997: 735). These international norms and values became strongly linked to national independence, national development, and political citizenship within the third world (Ramirez et al. 1997: 735). Thus, as Ramirez et al. (1997: 735) argue, "In the case of South Africa no distinct struggle for women's suffrage, no debate questioning women's right to vote, and no celebrations of the simultaneous acquisition of the franchise by both women and men of color was deemed necessary, given that the right to universal suffrage was already both an established characteristic of the nation-state and a core element of an incorporative model of political citizenship." Thus, as with the South African experience, there was neither a distinct struggle for women's voting rights nor were there celebrations on the concurrent attainment of the franchise by both women and men in Eritrea.

Instead, the impetus behind increased political participation of women in Africa (see Appendix 5), which has been considered as conflict-induced—due to the liberation and civil wars—(Tripp et al. 2006: 119), has been the topic of considerable research. These studies have questioned whether the traditional theory that the high political representation of women depended on their high level of gainful employment, their high level of education in comparison with men, and

longer periods of enfranchisement is any more relevant. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to test whether these assumptions continue to hold, or are challenged by using the case study of Eritrea to investigate whether the “increased” political participation of women in Eritrea, in an environment where women have yet to have gainful employment and are struggling to achieve educational parity at all levels and where their roles in the society are largely circumscribed by social, cultural, and religious norms, is sustainable in the long run. In particular, this research aims to analyze how the political participation of women in Eritrea has evolved over time, in order to discover what the political representation of women would look like in a country where national elections are yet to take place; what representatives of women, if present at all, would represent in a political environment where only one sole political party, the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), has been governing since *de facto* independence in 1991.

When investigating the above issues, the research focuses more on the post-independence period, while briefly examining the status of women in pre-colonial and colonial Eritrea as a background history. In so doing it will apply both domestic and international theories to examine the factors that hinder or facilitate gender equality and the political representation and participation of women. It will build on theories that deal with why the political under-representation of women might matter and the theoretical arguments for parity between women and men in formal politics; and on theories of women in politics that emphasize domestic factors such as social, structural, and political considerations. In addition, this research explores how these factors relate to the theories of state formation; and how in turn such theories have been incorporated or cast off by states around the world, and in particular by Eritrea.

Background

The former Italian colony of Eritrea (1890-1941), is situated in the Horn of Africa and is home to a multi-ethnic population¹ estimated at 3,735,560 (MoE 2008: 2).² It is divided into six regions;³ and is bordered in the northeast and east by the Red Sea, on the west and northwest by Sudan, in the south by Ethiopia, and in the southeast by Djibouti. Italy's departure from Eritrea, which was hastened by its defeat in World War II, was followed by a United Nations-mandated British Administration lasting ten years. This, in turn, was followed by another ten-year federation (1952-1962) with Ethiopia, whose terms were systematically abrogated by Ethiopia's Emperor Haile-Selassie, igniting the thirty-year (1961-1991) struggle for independence (hereafter the revolution) by Eritreans. Up until this time Eritrea was generally categorized as a feudal or semi-feudal country demonstrating strict gender-differentiated roles with its multi-ethnic society respecting not only vastly different customary and civil codes, but also ascribing varying roles to females (Campbell 2005: 378). This protracted and bloody struggle for liberation eventually resulted in Eritrea's *de facto* independence on May 24, 1991; ending only with a 1993 UN-monitored referendum, where the Eritrean people overwhelmingly voted in favor of independence from Ethiopia. With that,

¹ These ethnic groups are Tigrinya, Tigre, Saho, Afar, Hedareb, Bilen, Kunama, Nara, and Rashaida.

² No official population census has been carried out in Eritrea since independence. The Ministry of Local Government estimated it to be around 3.2 million as of 2001, according to NSEO 2003 report. The figure cited here in the text is the most recent estimate by the MoE in calculating school-age population, enrolment, and other essential education indicators for the academic year of 2007-2008.

³ Previously Eritrea was divided into eight provinces (*awrajas*); however, with the government's Proclamation for the Establishment of Regional Administrations (No. 86/1996), gazetted on April 15, 1996, the country's administration system changed to Zones (*zobas*) dividing the country into six zones instead of the previous provinces. These are: Central (Ma'ekel), Southern (Debub), Anseba, Northern Red Sea Region (Semenawi Keyeh-Bahri), Southern Red Sea Region (Debubawi Keyeh-Bahri), and Gash-Barka.

the Eritrean people secured their *de jure* independence and earned long-awaited, official recognition from the international community, which deemed the referendum free and fair. It was during this thirty-year revolution, and in particular under the leadership of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), that women were said to have experienced extensive changes in their role, status, and perspectives. They participated actively throughout the revolution in all fields both as support personnel and frontline soldiers, making up 30-35 percent of the total EPLF army (Zerai 1994: WS64). The protracted nature of the revolution, and its inevitable dependence on women, also forced the EPLF to address concerns such as the land tenure system, education, marriage, and gender roles both within its administrative and military systems. Women fighters were also trained to work as mechanics, drivers, carpenters, and barefoot doctors, among other occupations. Furthermore, male fighters took part in food preparation and other tasks usually reserved for women in Eritrean society. This certainly stands in stark contrast to other revolutionary movements, where women's involvement was limited to their traditional roles. The Eritrean revolution, therefore, is among few revolutions that allowed women to play a central role beyond those traditionally reserved for women. For instance, Molyneux (1985: 227) argues, "Women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution, where women made up approximately 30 percent of the Sandinista National Liberation Front's combat forces, was probably greater than in any other recent revolution with the exception of Vietnam."

Soon after independence, the EPLF was renamed People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in February 1994 at the Front's Third Congress (Markakis 1995: 126);⁴ formed a provisional government; and

⁴ Therefore, the EPLF, the PFDJ, or the government might be used throughout this research to mean the same thing; and no confusion should arise from this usage: As

declared that during a four-year transition period it would draft and ratify a constitution, laws on political parties and the press, and carry out elections for a constitutional government. The constitution, drafted after four years of intensive consultations and deliberations, was ratified by the constituent assembly on May 23, 1997, and is considered by some as a “more progressive constitution vis-à-vis women” (Campbell 2005: 378), although it has yet to come into effect. A press law was promulgated and implemented, but private press existed only from September 2000-September 2001.⁵ This is despite the fact that the Constitution’s Article 7(7) clearly states, “The State shall create conditions necessary for developing a democratic political culture defined by free and critical thinking, tolerance and national consensus.” Elections for a constitutional government have been postponed indefinitely, initially because of the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, and later under the guise of no-war-no-peace situation with same country. Since Eritrea’s *de facto* independence, no elections for constituting national government have taken place. Despite this, the PFDJ claims to govern for the people, although opponents continue to question the legitimacy of such an assertion in the absence of any national elections.⁶

Under the leadership of the PFDJ, “Eritrea has a command economy and is one of the poorest countries in the world with GDP per capita of about US\$ 200, well below the average US\$ 270 for less developed countries;

the PFDJ is the same as the EPLF with almost the same leaders at the helm, and the only government that Eritrea has seen thus far is PFDJ’s government.

⁵ Currently, Eritrea despises freedom of the press, and no free press has been allowed to operate inside the country since 2001. For more information refer to the Human Rights Watch Report, Ten Long Years: A Briefing on Eritrea’s Missing Political Prisoners, September 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/eritrea0911WebForUpload.pdf>, accessed December 28, 2011.

⁶ The PFDJ and its officials expressly despise western democracy, in particular its emphasis on elections, arguing that procedural democracy will not bring about social justice.

agriculture and pastoralism are the main sources of livelihood for about 80 percent of the population.”⁷ Despite this lack of development, a not-too-distant and complicated colonial history, and the current totalitarian political atmosphere, where neither dissenting views nor opposition political parties are tolerated,⁸ it has been argued that the situation of women in Eritrea has shown considerable progress. Moreover, women’s situation has improved dramatically from that of a century or even decades ago by some assessments. This might undoubtedly be the case as the status of women around the world is different today from that of a century ago, where women had neither political nor economic nor social rights that could be compared to those of men.

Today, women in most countries have achieved legal and political rights, at least in principle if not in practice. So have Eritrean women. But beyond their endowment of legal and political rights in principle, to what extent have Eritrean women been able to exercise these rights and how has their political participation in the contemporary period improved? What are the reasons for their under-representation in decision-making positions? And what has been the role of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in promoting their political interests in the national arena? The focus of this research is, therefore, to analyze the concepts of gender equality and the political representation of women in contemporary Eritrea, while examining their participation as well. It provides an overview of the situation of women and investigates the policies issued by the PFDJ to date in an effort to scrutinize whether the

⁷ As quoted in the National Statistics and Evaluation Office (NSEO) Eritrea and ORC Marco’s 2003 *Report on Eritrea Demographic and Health Survey of 2002*:3.

⁸ For post-independence human rights and political developments covering the period 1991-2009 and the totalitarian nature of the PFDJ regime, see Kjetil Tronvoll’s analysis, *The Lasting Struggle for Freedom in Eritrea* at http://www.jus.uio.no/smr/forskning/publikasjoner/boker/2009/docs/Eritrea-the-lasting-struggle-for-freedom_2009.pdf, accessed January 16, 2012.

PFDJ has delivered on its often repeated promises of promoting gender equality; and also examines how accurate, and how beneficial to women, is the Eritrean national narrative that praises women's past achievements, while claiming that unlike in other African countries the situation of women in independent Eritrea has improved immensely over the past two decades.⁹

1. Organization of the Research

This research is divided into five sections. These include the current introductory section, outlining the main chapters, research questions, methodology and theoretical framework, and scope of the research. The second chapter presents the status of women in traditional and colonial Eritrea, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of their political participation during the revolution and its impact on the contemporary period. This chapter not only investigates the recent past *per se* but also provides analytical background vis-à-vis women, which is essential for a better understanding of the contemporary situation of women in the country. The third chapter primarily examines the discourses that emerged vis-à-vis women in the aftermath of independence, and how women fared during the transition to a new era, and what role the NUEW played therein. In addition, this chapter also analyzes the PFDJ policy (or policies) with regard to women. Chapter four investigates the current representation of women in decision-making positions: in higher

⁹ This is the official narrative often propagated by officials, affiliates, and supporters of the PFDJ inside and outside the country. These protagonists argue that unlike in other countries where women have to wait decades, Eritrean women were automatically awarded with their political rights as soon as independence was achieved. True, women had to wait not only decades but even centuries to achieve their hitherto status; and this is recorded in the annals of history. For instance, "French men gained suffrage rights in 1875, but women waited another 69 years, until 1948; Swiss men had the vote in 1848, but women waited another 123 years, until 1971" (Ramirez et al. 1997: 738). But what also needs to be remembered is the fact that "between 1890 and 1994 women in 96 percent of all nation-states acquired the right to vote and seek public office" (Ramirez et al 1997: 735).

governmental posts, in international affairs, and in regional assemblies. Themes of specific examination include the mechanism used to represent women in these levels; the effect of the government's institutionalization of quotas as an affirmative action measure and a means of promoting women to political posts; and the challenges and opportunities that women face in the political arena. Chapter five analyzes the role of the NUEW, in particular, and those of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) and the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW) in empowering women politically and bringing about gender equality in political representation, or even realizing their own organizations' visions of equality between women and men. The concluding section will attempt to draw the various themes covered in this thesis together, answer the main research questions raised, put forward conclusions in relation to the theories adopted in the research, and, most importantly, draw lessons from the case study of Eritrea and the political representation of women.

1.1. Research Questions

- 1) How has the political participation of women in Eritrea evolved over time?
- 2) Why are women under-represented in higher decision-making posts in Eritrea?
- 3) What has been the role of the NUEW, as the sole women's organization entrusted with representing women at the national level, and how effective has it been in advancing their political interests?

1.2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

I conducted field research in Eritrea from July to September 2010 and between May and October 2011. I carried out a total of thirty-three in-depth, qualitative, and open-ended interviews with men and women of diverse backgrounds. At the outset, I used a snowball sampling

technique making my initial contacts through the Nakfa Social Science School (NSSS), interviewing some of their (12th round) students in August 2010. In addition, I interviewed members and leaders of the NUEYS, the NUEW, the NCEW, a female member of the defunct National Assembly (NA),¹⁰ and held focus group discussions. Interviews were conducted in Tigrinya (one of Eritrea's nine languages), translated into English, and for accuracy purposes are recorded and documented.

1.2.1. The Political Representation of Women: Theoretical Explanations

There are various factors that determine gender parity in political representation in parliaments. Kenworthy and Malami (1999: 236), in their study of the determinants of variations in women's share in national legislatures in more than a hundred countries, found that political, socio-economic, and cultural factors account for the differences. Specifically, they argue that electoral system structure, leftist party government, the timing of women's suffrage, the share of women in professional occupations, and cultural attitudes toward the role of women in politics each play a part in accounting for the variation in the degree of gender inequality in political representation around the world. The main theories employed throughout this research include the theories that focus on why the political under-representation of women might matter and the theoretical arguments for parity between women and men in formal politics (Phillips 1995 and 1998; Squires 2008); and the theory that hypothesizes four types of changes that might be secured as a result of electing women (Lovenduski 2000). In addition, the following theories and perspectives will also be utilized. These are the theoretical

¹⁰ According to Shaebia.org, a website owned by the Government of Eritrea, the NA held its 14th and last session January 29-February 2, 2002, focusing on issues such as safeguarding national sovereignty and security, and not gender-related issues. For details see *Resolutions of the 14th Session of the Eritrean National Assembly* at http://www.shaebia.org/14th_session_resolution_english.html, accessed April 23, 2011.

distinction made between gender interests as practical and/or strategic; and the theory that the formulation of strategic interests can only be effective as a form of intervention when full account is taken of practical interests as developed by Molyneux (1985). However, what needs to be noted here is the fact that despite the popularity of Molyneux's conceptualization of interests into strategic and practical, the distinction remains troubling because it is likely to resonate with the assumptions about the divide between middle class and non-middle class women, and between first and third-world women as argued by Ray and Korteweg (1999: 49). This has led to criticism of Molyneux's prioritization of practical over strategic interests. Critics argue that what matters, rather, is how the interests are met and not their prioritization of one over the other (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 49f).

The theories put forward by the international women's movement place emphasis on different "policy scripts" over time, such as those focusing on suffrage in early years and high levels of political representation in later years; these hypotheses depend on when a country first encountered this international pressure and whether or not it was exposed to different messages from the international women's movement (Paxton et al. 2006: 902). The international women's movement's advocacy for gender quotas and other affirmative action measures for increasing women's political representation (Paxton et al. 2006: 902) will also be tested.

Despite the international women's movement's focus on gender quotas to bring about gender equality, the discussion over electoral quotas for women can be contentious. In spite of the supposed intentions behind its adoption—favoring women—not all women would support it. This is due to the effect that electoral quotas have on the notions of equality, representation, citizenship and rights, and the polarized debate surrounding them (Bacchi 2006: 32). In the context of contemporary

discourses, particularly in relation to the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*—agreed upon at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995—these notions have been used in such a way as to reinforce a specific discourse. Dahlerup (2006: 5f) argues that the platform marked a discursive shift in relation to women in politics. Defining discourse as an interlinked construction of meanings, which includes perceptions of possible actions (but not actual actions), she describes the language used in the *Platform* as a *discourse of exclusion*. Why so? Because it identifies “discriminatory attitudes and practices” and “unequal power relations” as the major problems for the under-representation of women in political decision-making positions, which is quite a departure from previously identified obstacles: lack of resources or lack of will on women’s side. More importantly, the *Platform* placed the responsibility for dealing with the under-representation of women and promoting change in the hands of political institutions. Thus, unlike previous demands such as a certain minimum level of representation for women, the *Platform* called for equal representation, often expressed by the term “gender balance,” to be realized by implementing affirmative action measures.

This research will also examine and test the theory of state formation that argues the timing of independence provides a “window of opportunity,” which increases the likelihood that suffrage rights will be extended towards women. This hypothesis, put forward by Ramirez et al., reveals the tendency by countries to adopt dominant models during the period that immediately follow the acquisition of their national independence, rather than after years of protracted debate and discussion (Ramirez et al. 1997: 736).

Although the specific arguments of the aforementioned theories will be used throughout the research, what follows is a brief overview of their fundamentals. The low political participation of women in many countries

around the world has been the subject of vigorous analyses and debates by feminist political scientists. Despite this, the fact remains, as Lovenduski (2000: 87) puts it, that, "The clearest finding of research on women and democratic politics in Western Europe is their under-representation in decision-making positions." Lovenduski also argues that, "Study after study indicates that there is extensive male resistance to women's political presence in political elites, and that the problems of reconciling the competing claims of personal life, working life, and civil or public life are everywhere more difficult for women than men." Despite these challenges, however, the need to increase the proportion of women in elected office has also been widely recognized in an era that seeks to normalize the notion of "gender balance."

Phillips (1995: 62f) contends that there are four distinct arguments for demanding equal political participation of women in formal politics. These are: (1) successful women politicians can be influential role models ; (2) the principle of justice between the sexes requires greater female participation; (3) women representatives can more effectively advocate for women's particular interests that would otherwise be overlooked; (4) women have a different approach to politics and their presence will enhance the quality of politics.

Building on Phillip's assertion, Lovenduski (2000: 88f) claims that, "Neither the normative nor the pragmatic arguments—principles of justice between sexes and women's particular interests—for the representation of women claim that increasing the representation of women will make a difference in the way politics has been conducted." Thus, she argues, "The difference argument assumes that there is a need for change and that an objective for electing women is to secure change. What kind of changes might we expect? There are at least four kinds of change that will make a difference to women: procedural/institutional, impact, representation, and discourse changes."

Chapter Four will investigate whether these changes have been desired when electing women in Eritrea and whether women have made any inroads in realizing all or some of these changes once elected.

The conception of “women’s interests” rests on various theories of gender inequality, and it is fiercely debated whether women have common interests that can be referred to as “women’s interests” and are best represented by women only. Molyneux (1985: 232ff) explores the difficulty of providing a generalized definition of women’s interests since “women” as a general demographic, are influenced by a number of social conditions—among them class, ethnicity, and gender; and hence the interests they have are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. At the abstract level, however, Molyneux identifies certain general interests that are called “gender interests,” which women (or men, for that matter) may develop by the virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes. These interests can be categorized either as strategic or practical. Strategic gender interests are those that are derived in the first instance deductively, that is, from the analysis of women’s subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist, states Molyneux. Moreover, she claims that these ethical and theoretical criteria assist in the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women’s subordination, such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of choice over childbearing and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. On the other hand, she states, practical gender interests are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women’s positioning within the gendered division of labor. In contrast to strategic gender interests, these are formulated by the women who are

themselves within these positions rather than through external interventions. Practical interests are usually a response to an immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality.

Ray and Korteweg (1999: 52f) argue that women's identities shape their interests, and these interests in turn inform mobilization. But since interests and identities themselves are formed within structural, political, and cultural contexts, their mobilization occurs in reaction to and is facilitated by these (pre-) conditions. In the current literature, they identified two conceptualizations under which women can mobilize; and these are either structural and universal or historically and spatially specific, with local variations obstructing or facilitating the specific forms of women's movements. Proponents of the first stance argue that an increase in the levels of urbanization, industrialization, and education results in an upsurge in women's mobilization; while supporters of the latter approach argue that the preconditions of mobilization – women's abilities to form collective identities and articulate their interests – are shaped by political, local, and historically contingent processes. Furthermore, Ray and Korteweg argue the second approach better explains women's mobilization against repressive military regimes, participation in colonial struggles or struggles of socialism, and support of religious/fundamentalist movements; and claim this approach enables them to identify specific constellations of factors known as “political opportunity structures,” which refer to changes in access to power or shifts in the ruling alignments that enable those outside the polity to gain access to it. Although most of the works that use this concept focused on the realignment of political parties, or the shifting alliances and coalitions between parties, Ray and Korteweg apply this concept to the Third World and expand it to include changes such as transition from colonialism to independence or from dictatorship to democracy.

1.3. Scope of the Research

This research analyzes the notions of gender equality and the political representation of women in contemporary Eritrea, while keeping in context their political participation.¹¹ While it focuses on the post-independence period, it briefly investigates the status of women in pre-colonial and colonial Eritrea as a background history. Specifically, this research focuses on the views of individuals (both men and women), and the role of the NUEW, in particular, in bringing about the realization of gender equality and equal political representation and participation of women in independent Eritrea.¹² The NUEW is chosen, among others, for two important reasons. Firstly, it is the only membership-based women's organization currently functioning and entrusted with implementing many of the policies of the government on gender equality. Secondly, because it represents, or at least claims to represent, a considerable number of women from diverse backgrounds and walks of life inside Eritrea and amongst the Eritrean diaspora.

2. Women in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Eritrea

Pre-colonial Eritrea had a hierarchal, patrilineal, and authoritarian family structure, with strict sexual division of labor (Stefanos 1997: 659). Prior to and during colonialism, the status of Eritrean women was severely subordinate in education, socio-economic, and political spheres. The history of women's education in traditional Eritrea, for instance,

¹¹ At the outset the themes of dissertation revolved around the notions of gender equality and the political participation of women in Eritrea but through the years that led to its completion, the researcher realized that the political participation of women in the current political climate might not reveal much *per se* in itself and even into the nature of their participation, without exploring and scrutinizing the nature of political representation vis-à-vis women in the country. Hence, the focus has shifted more in analyzing their political representation, while also dealing with their political participation.

¹² While examining the role of the NUEW, the research also briefly investigates the role of the other two mass associations, the NUEYS and the NCEW, as they claim to have made advancing gender equality as one of their goals.

demonstrates that the basic education that women would have acquired was accessible only within the religious realms of Christianity and Islam. Given that women were not expected to play any role within the religious domains and were excluded from non-religious worldly affairs, there was no need to allow them to be educated (Stefanos 1997: 660). Thus, they had neither access to formal education nor permission to participate in any public role. Parents viewed the education of girls as an unnecessary venture because they believed that a girl's main preoccupation and ambition should be to prepare and succeed in getting married, and not to acquire an education. Boys and girls usually underwent distinct socialization processes from an early age. They were treated differently and were socialized from childhood to undertake differentiated gender roles in the society. Thus, girls followed, and in most cases still continue to follow, in their mothers' footsteps and learned to assume domestic chores and behave in a "wifely" manner as they grew up. In addition, they were and often remain under considerable pressure to behave in accordance with what the patriarchal system prescribes as acceptable behavior for girls: docile, nurturing, virginal, *et cetera*. Fulfilling these criteria determined their chances of success, mostly defined as eligibility for marriage. Thus, women in pre-colonial Eritrea did not consider themselves to be individuals having their own distinct individual rights; instead, they understood their position in the society more as an extension of their families. They were told, and made to believe, that the public sphere, the arena where deliberations and decisions about political, socio-cultural, and economic issues takes place, was a man's and not a woman's world. Social myths such as women's purported lack of the psychosocial characteristics associated with political leadership and the concept of politics as men's work (Medoff 1986: 245) were inculcated into women through the socialization process to ensure that women naturally accepted the lifetime role of wife/mother. Moreover,

proverbs such as, "Asking a woman to rest is equivalent to hosting a donkey as a guest"¹³ were often used to perpetuate such myths. These myths continue to be invoked and perpetuated even today, to prevent women from entering the public sphere and taking up public responsibilities.

James Mill, in making his case for a representative government, famously argued that "Women had no separate interests not already included in those of their fathers and husbands and thus could 'be struck off without inconvenience' from the list of potential claimants for franchise and representation" (quoted in Phillips 1995: 66). Mill's argument is reminiscent of the commonly used pretext in Eritrea to prevent women from taking up public roles. According to Sapiro (1981: 701), the same justification was presented historically, even in the case of women's political participation in the Western world: "At the outset there was no problem of the political participation of women; this was not because everyone agreed that women should not be represented; rather, the argument was that women were represented. The justification for which was derived from the common law view that by marriage husband and wife are one person in law....and that the male is the head of the family or household and in him was invested the authority to rule his family and to represent its interests in the 'outside' world."

Up to the period of the Eritrean revolution, it was extremely hard for women to assert themselves as individuals or as members of a family with rights that would entitle them to public roles in Eritrea. With the exception of the Kunama ethnic group, all Eritrean ethnic groups trace their ancestry and lineage through a father. A man is recognized as the

¹³ Eritrea is full of prejudices against women as subsequent proverbs reveal. For instance,

- "Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with a brain."
- "Women and donkeys need the stick"
- "You must hit an ox at every turn and beat your wife every other day."

head of the family. Thus, he naturally represented the interests of the family in the public sphere. As the widespread practices of child marriage and dowry, violence against women (including female genital mutilation (FGM), rape, and domestic violence), and the limiting of women from public roles such as participating in political activities demonstrate, this culture provided the pretext and foundation for the dominance of men and subordination of women.¹⁴ These negative stereotypes, gender discrimination and inequality, the origins of which could be traced to traditional and colonial Eritrea, are still blamed for impeding women from making progress towards achieving economic progress and political participation in today's Eritrea. The President of the NUEW, Luul Ghebreab, reporting on Eritrea's compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is of similar view, stating that gender equality efforts in Eritrea are hindered by stereotypes, war, and poverty.¹⁵

Stefanos (1997: 662f) also argues that under both Italian colonial rule and British administration regimes there was no effort made to educate or develop the skills of women since their education was neither deemed necessary to secure economic exploitation nor political domination. If and when it was found necessary to educate women, western patriarchal conceptions of acceptable sex roles played a significant role. For

¹⁴ For instance, the Committee on CEDAW has expressed its concerns on its 2006 comments to the Government of Eritrea that thus far there was no legislation against domestic violence, including marital rape, and all forms of sexual abuse. In addition, it also urged the government to draft a legislation prohibiting FGM and to ensure that offenders are prosecuted and adequately punished. For details see concluding comments of *The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Eritrea*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html>. The first concern of the Committee has yet to be acted on. But the government belatedly heeded the advice of the Committee on the second issue, FGM, and came up with legislation (Proclamation 158/2007) criminalizing FGM. For more information on this visit the NUEW website at <http://www.nuew.org/resources>.

¹⁵ Eritrea acceded to the Convention on September 5, 1995. Luul made the statement on January 24, 2005 at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to the Committee on CEDAW.

instance, the few schools that were run by missionaries focused on general literacy education, and on themes that emphasized the stereotypical role of women such as sewing, embroidery and cooking. Indeed, Stefanos (1997: 662) asserts that in the transition from traditional to colonial education the two things that remained unchanged were the exclusion of females from access to formal schooling and the deliberate sponsorship of sex-differentiated roles, both of which were important to keep girls and women obedient and turn them into docile housewives. Italian colonizers did not make any attempt to create equally accessible educational opportunities for both men and women, but rather they institutionalized a separate program for women, which incorporated Victorian strictures (Berkman 1990: 143) of acceptable sex roles and capitalism's division of labor. Although some women were able to enter industrial sectors such as textiles, matches, and coffee factories where they received lower payment rates than men (Stefanos 1997: 664), which is a norm of the capitalist order, their status did not change much. It was not until 1934 that women were allowed to attend classes; however, the content of that education was geared towards reinforcing the sexual division of labor that traditionally prevailed in the country such as sewing clothes and domestic science (Zerai 1994: 65).

However, this colonial practice was not restricted to Eritrea and its women only. As soon as Uganda became a British protectorate in 1894, women's associations, led by Christian missionaries, the wives of colonial administrators and businessmen, flourished in the country (Bauer 2008: 30). Until the 1940s and 1950s Ugandan women had local-level women's community clubs that provided them with opportunities to learn different domestic skills (Bauer 2008: 30), which were hardly political in nature. Seen from this historical perspective, therefore, it is clear that promoting women's rights, in general, and their civic and political rights, in particular, was not in the best interest of colonial

powers in Africa. That being said, colonialism cannot be blamed for all the evils that have had befallen the African continent; what needs to be noted here is the fact that African women did not have considerable power in the public sphere during the pre-colonial era. While one can concede that colonialism had undermined and restricted women's implicit social, economic, and political power, it did not necessarily diminish their public roles. In pre-colonial Rwanda, for instance, it was argued that queen mothers had diverse ways of exercising implicit power in court intrigues such as in determining royal succession (Longman 2006: 134). However, with the arrival of colonialism and Christianity, their ability to access religious authority was hindered. In pre-colonial South Africa, women had no explicitly accepted public roles, but they were given certain powers and importance because their labor and fertility were considered the bedrock upon which society was built (Geisler 2000: 607).

Altogether, it can be said that colonialism as practiced across the entire continent, particularly as practiced by the Italians in Eritrea, underscored an already traditional and conservative environment with racist and subjugating colonial norms further diminishing the role of women in the society (Stefanos 1997: 664). Seen against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the majority of Eritrean women, even during the colonial period, did not have basic education.

Tsegereda (2004),¹⁶ in a paper she presented for the 25th anniversary of the NUEW, argues that there was no law during the Italian colonial rule or even British administration that stipulated either permitting or denying women their right to participate in the political arena. Indeed, one can argue the *status quo* of traditional society was kept. The discriminatory practices that had existed in traditional Eritrea, where women neither had

¹⁶ The original paper was written in Tigrinya. Unofficial translation from the original for relevant sections was carried out by the author.

the right to vote nor to be elected in a village council of elders or negotiate their cases in front of a council,¹⁷ continued until Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. Once the federal arrangement came into effect, a constitution was drafted for Eritrea in 1952. Article 20 of the new constitution stated that the “electorate shall consist of those persons possessing Eritrean citizenship who are of male sex...”¹⁸ This clause clearly reinforced the male-dominated, discriminatory, traditional system that had long existed and was maintained and perpetuated throughout both Italian colonial rule and British administration. Against this backdrop, therefore, it should not be surprising that colonialism only strengthened the existing indigenous systems of gender discrimination and inequality, which systematically put women in subordinate positions at all levels of the state (as voters, candidates, party leaders, and elected officials) and in society.¹⁹

¹⁷ Women were only allowed to present their cases through their male relatives.

¹⁸ For further information see the NUEW’s National Report on the Implementation of the African and Global Platform for Action for the Advancement of Eritrean Women, 1999.

¹⁹ Again, Eritrean women were not an exception in this case. If they were prevented from exercising their civic rights because of their gender, women in other parts of Africa were also denied of their political rights, including voting because of similar criteria. For instance, Ugandan women established their first association, the Uganda Council of Women (UCW), in 1946 in an attempt to promote their rights. Soon after its establishment, the UCW started to pressure the colonial administration—known as the Executive and Legislative Council (Legco)—to include women. During the first national Legco elections in 1958, women turned out in large numbers but their franchise was limited by their literacy, property, income or employment pre-qualifications (Bauer 2008: 31). As a result of these constraints, the unicameral National Assembly established in 1962 at independence had only two women members out of 90, and that was the biggest number of women in the National Assembly until 1989.

2.1. The Evolution of the Political Participation of Women during the Revolution

The status of women in Eritrean society entered a new phase in its evolution during the second half of the 20th century. This was a phase in which the exercise of political rights by Eritrean women evolved from their implicit role in socio-economic and cultural spheres during the pre-colonial era, to clearly restricted (if present at all) public roles during the colonial era, where stringent restrictions on their socio-economic, cultural, and political roles were imposed. After Italy's defeat in WWII, Eritrea was given to the British under a UN mandate for ten years. This lasted from 1941 through 1952, until the UN decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia for another ten years. As already mentioned, during the federal era women were deprived of their civic and political rights, and as a result, were not allowed to vote, as the constitution unequivocally provided that only male citizens were entitled to such rights.

It is perhaps for this reason that the point of departure for most political discourses concerned with the plight of women in Eritrea begins with the revolution. By the time the revolution was officially underway in 1961 under the leadership of Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), later out of which the EPLF splintered in 1970, women were able to exercise neither political nor economic rights that could be compared to that of men. However, that being said, there are concerns about the authenticity of the EPLF's narration of the role of women in the revolution during the ELF era.

Christine Mason (2001: 1) in her work entitled *Gender, Nationalism and Revolution: Re-Assessing Women's Relationship with the ELF*, states that, "The existing literature concerning gender relations within Eritrean nationalist movements and political parties focuses almost solely on the role of women within the EPLF, obscuring the role of women within the ELF." Moreover, she argues, the literature "reiterates the dominant EPLF

ideology, which positions women in the ELF as traditional, passive, and submissive while projecting women in the EPLF as unified, modern and active regarding their rights and responsibilities.” This is reminiscent of the perception that emerged in the aftermath of independence where women fighters were seen to be, or at least portrayed, as more progressive than civilian women, who did not participate in the liberation struggle. In replying to Mason’s claim, Luul (September 2010 int.) states the ELF was influenced by traditional, religious, and regional thinking and that it did not believe women could fight alongside their male counterparts by carrying guns in the struggle. To the assertion that the EPLF ideology obscures the role of women within the ELF by categorizing them as traditional, passive, and traditional, Luul counters that, “We do not hold such views, as women fighters of the EPLF followed in the footsteps of women ELF fighters. We believe our history is a continuation of the history of women fighters of the ELF since they were an integral part of the revolution from the onset; even though they did not join combat operations, but nevertheless they used their caring roles—preparing food, giving moral support to fighters, transmitting messages secretly from inside the enemy territory—to contribute to the revolution.”

The EPLF grew out of the ELF and succeeded, according to Luul, because it was able to rectify the shortcomings of the ELF, including allowing for gender theorizing and reforms. Amina Maleken (May 2011 int.)²⁰ agrees with the view that at the outset women fighters of the ELF used their caring role to contribute to the revolution, although she disagrees with the statement that the ELF did not allow its women fighters to carry guns and join combat operations alongside their male

²⁰ Amina Maleken was the first Chairwoman of the Eritrean Women's Association founded in Cairo, Egypt in 1969, which held its first congress in 1971 in the liberated area, under the auspices of the ELF, and remained its Chairwoman until the ELF disintegrated in 1981.

counterparts. However, Tsegerda (2004: 14), quoting a study carried out by the NUEW in 1984, claims that despite the fact that women were participating both by carrying guns and secretively using their caring role, the ELF failed to encourage them and create a strategy that would have strengthened their role and enabled them to march forward. In addition, Tsegerda asserts that the ELF was returning women who came to join their brothers-in-arms without showing due consideration to their role and contribution in the struggle. Both Tsegerda and Luul, while trying to depict an otherwise favorable version of the EPLF narrative of the ELF, indirectly admit that the EPLF considers the ELF as traditional and reactionary, while depicting itself as progressive and modern. Thus, it should not be difficult to decipher from where Mason's claim derived. In order to get a more accurate picture of reality on the ground, this analysis turns to examine how ELF women fighters see themselves and their relationship with their Front.

Since the first national congress (1971) of the women's association in the field, Amina (an ELF fighter and official) was tasked with working both in the field and abroad to mobilize women to participate in the revolution. She states:

"In 1975 so many people were enlisted in the revolution, with women amongst them. So, the women's association [chaired by Amina] thought of organizing those women under its umbrella. Many amongst them proved good cadres and helpful in the fight for women's rights. For some, however, fighting for gender equality was not appealing at that time. They argued that they came to fight by carrying guns alongside their brothers. So, there was no obligation to believe in either one; rather the ELF allowed them to pursue what they believed in. Those who wanted to carry guns and join their brothers in the frontline did so; and those who wanted to remain within the women's association and contribute from there did so as well. Therefore, the ELF allowed women, few as they were, to carry guns and join frontline soldiers long before 1975" (Amina, May 2011 int.).

In addition, Amina states the ELF leadership was supportive in general, although there were conservative elements within its military branch who

had no confidence in women, let alone imagining the possibility of them brandishing a rifle. Despite this, the EPLF and its women fighters would not hesitate to categorize the whole ELF leadership as traditional and being consumed by religious and regional thinking. What this demonstrates is the contentious nature of gender and politics in Eritrea. Certainly, women who tried to join the ELF encountered problems for diverse reasons. But, gender narratives appear to continuously change in Eritrean political discourse to fit emerging circumstances and political realities of the day. The ELF might have its limitations in particular in addressing gender issues, but the controversies surrounding gender relations during the ELF era and the EPLF's view on them appear unfairly balanced, if Amina's perspective above is any indication. Perhaps Amina is right to state that the history of the ELF in general, and its relationship with its women fighters in particular, need to be told in its own context and not necessarily by the EPLF, as the ELF fighters are capable of narrating their own history if given an opportunity (Amina, May 2011 int.). Yet, Amina seems to be only too aware of the fact that if opportunities have not been given to them thus far, twenty years after independence, then they, the women fighters of the ELF, should not wait for approval and take initiative themselves, whenever possible, to narrate their own history in their own terms before it is too late.

Nevertheless, this seems to be quite a break from the previous narratives of the NUEW on ELF women fighters, as Luul appears to have provided a more conciliatory narrative, by arguing that the history of ELF women fighters is the history of the EPLF women fighters, as cited above. Putting these apparent contradictions aside, one needs to then explore how the EPLF integrated women into the revolution once it was established. Once the EPLF, whether viewed as an "independent Marxist-oriented guerrilla movement" (Hale 2001: 156) or "a professionally run and self-reliant nationalist movement, with formalized

and centralized leadership” (Woldemikeal 1991: 31), was born; it is argued that it allowed for reforms and accepted, in principle, the need to deal with gender inequality by employing a top-down approach to organizing women (Bernal 2001: 134). In this it proved capable of mobilizing women to join the revolution, and, perhaps could even be credited with eventually setting them on the path to emancipation. Although it must be noted that different studies indicate Marxist orientation is not a sufficient precondition for genuine emancipation of women. Barrett (1987: 44ff) argues that on the question of feminism—whose central conceptions are embedded in terms of morality, justice, or equal rights—even Marx, one of the greatest revolutionary thinkers of modern history, has failed to expand his vision and analysis to women’s issues. Marxism’s historical materialism and its scientific account of exploitation have yet to reconcile with feminism’s ethical or egalitarian political claims.²¹

The notion that the reforms and theorization and the commensurate top-down approach conceived and implemented by the male leadership of the EPLF (Bernal 2001: 124) have not subordinated women’s interest in favor of achieving the broader goal of dismantling Ethiopia’s colonial rule from Eritrea is questionable. As Luul (September 2010 int.) states, the priority of the participation of women in the revolution was for the liberation of the country; implicit in which was the struggle for social justice and gender equality. Luul’s statement reveals that women fighters accepted the priority set out for them by the EPLF leadership. However, at the beginning, as Amina (May 2011 int.) also recalls, the participation of women was not based on proper understanding or education, but

²¹ More importantly, this needs to be seen within Marx’s argument that only labor that produces a commodity for exchange and thus has surplus value leading to capital is productive (Disney 2008: 23). This clearly indicates that as Disney (2008: 23) states Marx failed to address the reproduction of everyday life at home, which provides support for the foundation of economic, socio-cultural, and political development in the state, the market, and civil society.

rather on tremendous nationalist passion for the liberation of their country. Thus, the EPLF might have thought it is not only preferable to provide leadership to women but also set their priorities as well. Nevertheless, under the leadership of the ELF and EPLF women provided important services by playing a supportive role and also by participating in areas traditionally reserved for men. They worked in the cities and provided fighters with clothing and food, transmitted messages secretly from within the enemy lines to the point of risking their lives, prepared food, and fetched water from far away to feed the fighters.

Rahnema's (1995: 16f) definition of participation can be extrapolated to entertain the fact that almost all Eritrean women had participated in the revolution, which had a transitive purpose and predefined goal (liberation of the country); a morally desirable outcome (also the liberation of the country as the righteous cause); and was guided by a center with a strong leadership (the EPLF). One can further deduce that the EPLF might have appealed for mass participation by carefully crafting its strategy to avoid negative connotations of manipulated participation and making it look more of a spontaneous participation. But once priorities were set for them, whether women had much of a say in the struggle for social justice and gender equality is debatable. This demonstrates that the wartime priority (liberating the country) might have resulted in wartime equality for women fighters. However, that raises the question of whether the almost all-male leadership of the EPLF, its women fighters, and the NUEW deliberated on how to maintain that wartime equality in peacetime, or in other words after liberation. The subordination of women's interests might have been a necessity during the revolution, and alternatives were either not explored or were found not viable enough to be implemented. However, after the realization of independence there were little, if any, efforts undertaken to recover those

subordinated interests, as discussions within the NUEW in the aftermath of independence revealed.

Despite the question of whether women's interests were subordinated, the EPLF's strategy achieved what it intended to, that is recruiting a large number of women into the rank-and-file of the revolution. Almost a third of the 95,000 EPLF's army, constituting up to 13 percent of its frontline fighters, were women (Connell 1998: 189). Considering these figures, one can argue that Eritrea's conservative society encountered for the first time dramatic change vis-à-vis women in the last quarter of the 20th century. And it appears the EPLF not only understood very well that patriarchy and traditional culture have impeded women from empowering themselves and partaking in their country's socio-economic and political processes but also utilized those to meet its ends. The EPLF, which saw itself as struggling against "backward," "reactionary," and "feudal" elements of traditional culture, as well as against colonialism, made women part of its cultural revolution (Bernal 2001: 135). As the revolution era slogan sums it up: "Equality through Equal Participation" was intended to bring about women's equality (Bernal 2001: 134). The EPLF thought gender barriers could be broken down only when women participated in social, economic and political activities. Although the EPLF policy on women since the beginning focused on promoting gender equality within the wider context of achieving equality for all Eritreans, the revolution was full of promises to support women's liberation. In particular, the EPLF in its January 31, 1977 (revised 1987) National Democratic Program (NDP) promised to: (1) develop an association through which women could participate in the struggle against colonial aggression and for social transformation; (2) outline a broad program to free women from domestic confinement, develop their participation in social production, and raise their political, cultural and technical levels; (3) assure women full rights of equality with men in

politics, economy, and social life as well as equal pay for equal work; (4) promulgate progressive marriage and family laws; (5) protect the right of women workers to two months of maternity leave with full pay; (6) protect the rights of mothers and children and provide delivery, nursery and kindergarten services; (7) fight to eradicate prostitution; (8) respect the right of women not to engage in work harmful to their health; and (9) design programs to increase the number and upgrade the quality of women leaders and public servants (Wilson 1991: 161).²² Many wondered and even sanguinely debated how the EPLF's commitment to women's equality would be realized if it triumphed. What needs to be remembered here is that although the revolution started in 1961, the NUEW, promising to give more weight to women's issues, at least in principle, was created after the upsurge of the "new feminism" of the late sixties when women were mobilizing around feminist demands. Moreover, beyond making the aforementioned declarations of intent towards women and expressing its support to the principle of gender equality as part of its vision for the establishment a people's democratic state, the EPLF also pledged to advance the interests of the masses of workers, peasants and other democratic forces, and to respect and protect people's democratic rights²³ (Wilson 1991: 155 & 166). Chapter Three will examine the extent to which the EPLF was able to achieve its ambitious agenda and its aspirations towards the advancement of women in the post-revolution society.

²² In its revised program adopted in its Second Congress in 1987, the EPLF adopted more or less similar points. For details see Wilson 1991: 172.

²³ In both the 1977 and 1988 NDPs, Eritreans were not only promised the protection of their basic democratic rights including freedom of the speech, the press, assembly, worship and peaceful demonstration; but also equality before the law without distinction of tribe, region, sex, culture, occupation, or faith. In addition, they were promised a free-and-fairly elected People's Assembly to be endowed with the rights of policy formulation and the powers to elect their popular executives and judicial organs, just to mention a few.

2.2. The Legacy: Liberated by or Patronized under the EPLF?

As the above section demonstrated, Eritrean women went from being individuals with almost no rights to being active participants in the revolutionary war, despite the differing connotations ascribed to either being an ELF or an EPLF woman fighter. And once the EPLF had established complete monopoly over the liberation war, it came up with progressive policies and NDPs regarding women. Thus, women became part and parcel of the revolution. The dramatic role undertaken by women fighters during the revolution and the assimilation to the male order that they underwent obliged supporters of the EPLF, in particular those who believed in its enlightened policy on women, to be optimistic about the status that women would enjoy in independent Eritrea:

“...a unique factor was emerging in the extensive areas which have been under the EPLF control for a decade and a half. Here a whole generation has grown up with the notion of women’s equality. Many of these youngsters cannot remember the days before 1973 when there were no women fighters, or before 1977 when there were no people’s assemblies, or when women did not defend their villages as people’s militia. They know that women’s emancipation is a priority taken on during the war and not shelved till after the revolution. The women of this generation are fully equipped to carry on the struggle for women’s emancipation...And, perhaps because of the sacrifices they have made and the scale of their military and political participation; they have a strong sense of their democratic rights: they will demand that any future leaders of Eritrea will be accountable to them” (Wilson 1991: 153).

As the above citation reveals optimism was, indeed, sky high not only amongst foreign observers of the EPLF like Wilson, who hoped their expectations would not be disappointed, but also in the entire nation with the dawning of the independence era. Unlike the first wave of the women’s movement, under which states were pressured to provide women with formal rights; and unlike the second wave, under which women having already learned that formal equality did not result in the necessary changes for them to be treated equally and thus contested

their status on broader range of issues including women's liberation, reproductive rights and abolition of patriarchy, after the 1990s the discourse of the Women's International Non-Governmental Organizations and the world polity changed to emphasize other discourses. The focus has since then shifted to concern specific thresholds for women in political decision-making positions,²⁴ while focusing on the discourses of "inclusion." Phrases such as "critical mass," "gender quotas," and "gender balance" became the buzzwords of the times (Paxton et al. 2006: 902). In particular, in relation to the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* these notions have been used in such a way to support a specific discourse. Dahlerup (2006: 5f) argues that the *Platform* marked a discursive shift in relation to women in politics by employing the discourse of exclusion, and identifying "discriminatory attitudes and practices" and "unequal power relations" as the major problems for women's under-representation in political decision-making positions. The identification of these obstacles is quite a departure in and of itself from previously identified obstacles, such as lack of resources or lack of will on women's side. Specifically, the *Platform* used the term "gender balance" in its seventh strategic objective on Women in Power and Decision Making.²⁵ In addition, it placed the responsibility for dealing with the under-representation of women, promoting change and bringing about gender balance through the implementation of affirmative action measures, squarely in the hands of political institutions (Dahlerup 2006: 5f). Many countries have picked up the language and endeavored to realize the call at the national level.

²⁴ It was argued that 30 percent presence of women in parliament is the critical mass or necessary threshold that countries needed for women to have a visible impact on the style and content of politics and policy.

²⁵ For further information see the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women's website at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>, accessed April 13, 2012.

Therefore, the hope for equal political representation in Eritrea was based on the belief that the “empowered women” of the liberation era would demand from not only the EPLF leaders, but also the future leadership of Eritrea, a level of accountability should they fail to live up to their promises. The path to transition, in general, coincided with favorable international declarations for the advancement of women, which placed an additional pressure on governments to implement changes in their policies toward women. It was left to be seen whether, given such a favorable international climate, the generation of young women in Eritrea lived up to expectations to affect similar change in their country.

International pressure for gender balance was instrumental in influencing the PFDJ to adopt gender quotas, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. However, post-independence realities soon revealed that beyond this, there has not been much progress made on the substantive issues, particularly in relation to expanding the representation and participation of women in power and decision-making positions. The women who joined the revolutionary army and those who pinned their hopes on them quickly realized that not only would gender and cultural barriers to their empowerment prove hard to dismantle but so would the unequal power relationships that had traditionally existed between the sexes in pre-colonial and colonial Eritrea. While these factors are important, another constraint was also due to how women were mobilized and integrated by the EPLF during the revolutionary period. As mentioned earlier, women surrendered their specific interests for the common good during the revolution, and their struggle for liberation and equality appeared to follow the strategy of the advocates for inclusion and the perspective of equality, although it had its own local variations. Drawing on Ray and Korteweg’s (1999: 53) analysis, it can be argued that Eritrean women’s mobilization for liberation and equality can best be explained by what

they refer to as locally specific political and historically contingent processes, which are categorized as the struggle against repressive military regimes, participation in colonial struggles, and so on.

Certainly the mobilization of women for the liberation of their country falls within these categories since as already stated their participation in the revolution was first and foremost for national liberation and then for social justice. More importantly, Ray and Korteweg (1999: 53) expanded this approach beyond its traditional boundaries to identify specific constellations of factors known as “political opportunity structures,” previously referred to changes in access to power or shifts in the ruling alignments that enable those outside the polity to gain access to it, which has been used to analyze the realignment of political parties, or the shifting alliances and coalitions between parties. Furthermore, Ray and Korteweg applied this concept to the Third World and identified the relationship of women’s movements to four historically contingent processes that involve shifts in regime type—democratization, anticolonial and nationalist struggles, socialist, and religious or fundamentalist movements. If their theories are applied to the Eritrean women’s movement, the findings demonstrate that the movement saw itself as mobilizing women to join the revolution, which was anti-colonial. And in that, women fighters and non-combatants under the guidance of the EPLF fared well in assimilating to the dominant norm, coming from the male leadership/order. In so doing, women pushed traditional boundaries and eventually achieved their liberation as a by-product of national liberation. The result of this has been that, rhetorically and even in practice, female fighters and now civilian women have to demonstrate their equality with male fighters by undertaking jobs that were traditionally reserved for men. Women fighters were trained to work as mechanics, drivers, carpenters, and barefoot doctors, among other

occupations. Furthermore, male fighters took part in food preparation and other tasks usually reserved for women in the society.

Despite this break with tradition it was left to be seen whether women fighters would use the “political opportunity structures,” such as the transition to a new phase and the political realignment within the EPLF itself, to advance their interests. Once independence was realized, women’s specific interests, which were subordinated to the common good of liberating the country during the revolution, were again subordinated to the nation-building process. An enduring legacy of the revolution therefore, is that after independence women’s specific interests were neither discussed nor rehabilitated, as will be shown in the last chapter. What skeptics had already cautioned—that it would be naïve to expect women’s emancipation and political empowerment once independence was achieved (Markakis 1995)—seemed to echo loud after liberation. Over the last twenty years since independence, Eritrea is still far from achieving sexual parity in the organs of political power, as is shown in Table 4.1.1, 4.2.1 and 4.3.1. This indicates that even the limited advances that were made by women during the days of the revolution, where women undertook roles traditionally played by men, were reversed in the aftermath of independence. According to Connell (1998: 193f), for instance, “During a series of workshops convened throughout the country in 1994, professional women and ex-woman guerrilla fighters expressed a growing impatience over the lack of a forum to press their grievances at a time when many men, including former liberation fighters, were reasserting traditional male prerogatives. The most urgent situation was that faced by demobilized women fighters who were finding it difficult to return to home villages where they were considered unmarriageable due to their self-assertiveness.”

These criticisms however, in no way intend to discount the efforts made by the EPLF to advance the interests of women. Rather, the intention is

to rigorously examine whether it remained steadfast in its commitment to keep the promises it made, and which won it widespread support and acclaim, once independence was achieved. Despite the many shortcomings the EPLF had created a favorable environment for women's full participation in society. This experience gives credence to proposition made by Wallace (1991: 16). that "in some cases war can open up new areas to women, where they were allowed to take over the responsibilities, work, and decision-making roles of men in their absence." Indeed, Eritrean women shared the responsibilities that were previously considered men's. Rejecting the notion that they should stay behind taking care of their families and communities, they fought and suffered equally along their male counterparts in the battle fields. More remarkable, was the ability of women to penetrate the highly insular ranks of the male-dominated military fraternity to become an integral part of it, making up 30-35 percent of the total EPLF army (Zerai 1994, WS64). Such a demonstration of revolutionary heroism by women was rare and as such, won them much admiration and acclaim both nationally and internationally and caught the attention of the academic community (see for instance, Wilson 1991, Hale 2001, Bernal 2001, Connell 1998, Campbell 2005, and Stefanos 1997). Moreover, it also made a huge impact on the post-independence constitution of the country's armed forces.²⁶ Despite this legacy of the revolution, where women witnessed changes in their roles and were able to gain considerable social and political experience, they have yet to enjoy the dividends of what

²⁶ Although in contemporary Eritrea women do not constitute as big a number as they did during the revolution, the Government of the State of Eritrea's *2004 CEDAW Combined Initial and Second Periodic Report* indicates that there is considerable participation of women in Eritrean Defense Forces both in the regular army, the reserve and amongst members of the national service recruits. They comprise 3.09 percent in the Ground-Force; 3.30 percent in the Naval Force; 8.92 percent in the Air force; 10.36 percent administration/support staff within the Ministry of Defense. In addition, women's presence in the Police Force reaches 19.6 percent and they comprise 7.9 percent of the total Police Officers category.

independence entails equally.²⁷ For instance, Eritrean women are still struggling to obtain access to gainful employment and quality educational at all levels (see Appendix 1). Wilson's assertion on the eve of Eritrea's independence, that Eritrean women will demand accountability from the future leaders of Eritrea, would prove unprophetic.

Again, the Eritrean revolution, in particular under the leadership of the EPLF, opened doors previously shut for women. This being said, the EPLF's legacy remains wholly inconclusive as to whether it had fully liberated women and created the necessary environment allowing them to participate in the post-independence period as it did during the revolution, as the following perspective suggests:

“Traditionally our society has confined women within the kitchen and the family; in addition women have also been expected to participate in productive activities such as tending farm lands and taking part in agricultural activities. All this while marginalizing them from taking part in public affairs and this was firmly solidified through strict patriarchal culture of the society. But thanks to the armed struggle for independence the issue of gender and emancipation of women were raised and discussed, leading to some changes in perspective. Although it needs to be remembered that women were encouraged to do more, this means adding to their already overloaded social, economic and political responsibilities. Instead, the revolution should have focused more on the role of men. Despite that their participation has helped women to understand that there are other perspectives, and at times, demand some rights. And the society has come to realize that there is another social outlook and that women should be allowed to participate and have a say. But this change has come to risk largely because most of the ex-revolutionaries have sort of abandoned the kind of enlightened

²⁷ Some might argue that not enjoying the dividends equally is not a problem that specifically concerns women only, as not even all men have enjoyed the shares of what independence entails equally. However, it needs to be remembered that such an argument is reminiscent of the bygone era, albeit leaving behind huge impact, such that women's issues cannot be separated from that of the society's/national issues, which has just made the subordination of women more entrenched and their issues of concern and perspectives on diverse issues marginal. Hence, the argument needs to, certainly, be challenged, as even solving national issues does not always result in addressing women's predicaments.

view they learned in the revolution by following a patriarchal organization in their families in the aftermath of liberation, and not much has been done to encourage women in the post-independence period” (‘H’ August 2010 int.).

For ‘H,’ the revolution not only triggered change vis-à-vis women but also it added to their burdens, while failing to focus on men and their roles. And, more exasperatingly, not much has been done since independence in the face of losing the gains achieved during that era. ‘F’ is of the view that much was achieved during the revolution and did not think that any burden was put on women during the revolution. Nevertheless, she also appears to agree with ‘H’ that not much has been done in the post-independence period to help women move forward:

“Assessing ourselves in relation to the experience that we had in the field [revolution], where we participated in all sectors, we have not progressed as much as we should. Personally, I am not satisfied with the result that we have at the moment because during the armed struggle we made up about 30 percent of the armed forces, and we had women who were leaders within the army, we had women participating in the parliament. So comparing against the participation that we had at the time, the participation that we now have is a lot less. I can say that we did not show a lot of progress as we started. Examining the participation of women in different fields at the grassroots, it might be assessed as satisfactory; however, it needs to be mentioned that at the management level women’s presence is very low. Now, the reason for such unequal representation is said to be lack of qualified women. Nevertheless, from experience we know that women are rarely selected for in proportion to their known availability” (‘F’ September 2010 int.).

Despite those divergent views, which were also echoed by foreign researchers as will be shown in the next chapter, politics is still regarded as the domain of men in Eritrea in perception and to a large extent in practice, as is in other parts of the world. This view emanates from the assumption that males are expected to play a dominant role in the world outside the family, which coincides with what Sapiro (1981) argues was the case in the Western world in the 18th and 19th centuries. Explaining

why this is so, Dehab Suleiman in a paper she presented in 2009²⁸ argues that the low political participation of women in Eritrea is due to three factors: their triple contributions in reproductive work (childbearing and rearing responsibilities), productive work, and community management, which account for 76 percent).²⁹ And also Dehab mentions cultural oppression; poverty including lack of time; lack of necessary educational qualifications; and inadequate financial means³⁰ as amongst the causes. The fact that 76 percent of Eritrean women are hindered from participating in politics largely due to their triple roles, according to Dehab, is direct evidence of the relationship between female roles in reproductive, productive, and community work. This fact is also corroborated by Wilson who quotes a former liberation fighter speaking about her mother's essential contribution to the maintenance of the household and the economy:

“My mother would get up early before anyone else. She would do all the housework, the cleaning and the cooking which takes hours, and the fetching of water from a long distance. And then she would work in the fields [owned by her husband] doing jobs which are not considered heavy but are very tiring like weeding,

²⁸ Dehab wrote a research paper titled “Women in Leadership,” which she presented during the 30th anniversary of the NUEW in Keren, Eritrea. Unofficial translation from the original in Tigrinya for relevant sections was carried out by the author.

²⁹ Dehab might have inferred the figure 76 percent from other sources (hence applicable elsewhere) that estimated the triple roles of women in general to account for such a huge impediment. It is imperative to mention here that no quantitative research has been undertaken in Eritrea to identify the exact percentage, although the figure could undoubtedly be large.

³⁰ Dehab's explanations must be seen contextually. Dehab is an ex-fighter, has long been affiliated to the NUEW, and is currently Head of its Research and Public Relations Department. There are concerns arising from the arguments put forward by the union's officials as they tend to toe the line with the government's views on the situation of and perspectives on women, compelling one to question their union's independence, effectiveness. And clearly Dehab, by failing to even mention let alone address other systemic obstacles, does confirm to the government's narrative, which canonizes Eritrean women as “Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs” for their past roles while defining their present roles primarily based on their liberation era achievements. The government narrative appears oblivious to women's current predicaments and challenges, which are more complex and complicated than those of the revolution era.

cleaning, cutting and so on. When my father came back from the fields she would wash his feet in a bowl of warm water. She would be the last to go to bed...” (Wilson 1991: 6).

The above citation puts in stark perspective the economic powerlessness of women in Eritrea until independence and also the burdens they endured in balancing the triple roles—reproduction, production, and community management—without due recognition or reward. It appears the EPLF understood this disadvantaged position of women. Hence, its efforts to empower women economically by passing progressive land reform legislation. Its core elements included equal land allocation between both parties in case of divorce, with a provision that a divorced woman could choose to have land either in her town or in her (former) husband’s town; widows and children were to receive full rights to land allocations. The land reform legislation also provided that a spinster past the age of marriage and a woman above the age of 25 and unfit for marriage for different reasons would receive half of the family’s plot (Zerai 1994: 67). One can argue that these land reforms were enacted with a genuine interest to empower women and transform the existing gender imbalances within Eritrean society. Although the EPLF seemed to be sympathetic towards the plight of women in traditional Eritrea, their efforts at land redistribution met with some resistance from men in the aftermath of independence. In addition, the EPLF also passed new marriage laws banning feudal marriage customs, such as child betrothal, polygamy, and concubines, which were based on the supremacy of men over women, as well as arbitrary and coercive procedures that did not take into account the welfare of children (Zerai 1994: 67; Wilson 1991: 195). When compared with these traditional marriage practices which even sanctioned early marriage for girls aged as young as ten to twelve years (Stefanos 1997: 660), the new marriage laws were a huge leap forward.

Also in stark contrast to the absence of educational opportunities for women in traditional Eritrea, the EPLF reformed the education system allowing girls to have unlimited participation. As mentioned earlier during the Italian colonial period, education was not only exclusionary but also racist in its essence. The effect of which was underpinning an already traditional and conservative environment with racist and subjugating colonial norms further constraining the status and role that women could play in Eritrea. Seen against this backdrop, it is not surprising that the majority of Eritrean women even during the colonial era did not have basic education. Figures from the 1970s indicate that 95 percent of Eritrean women remained illiterate (Zerai 1994: 65).

The EPLF, as indicated above, in the 1970s was working to encourage the full and active participation of women in the revolution. Different techniques like awareness raising campaigns were employed to educate its members and the public at large on the need to transform the feudal and backward practices that constrained women from being fully involved in public life. The establishment of the EPLF's Revolutionary School in 1980 in its base area was a major development in combating male chauvinism and sexual stereotyping (Stefanos 1997: 666). In the School, boys and girls were equally engaged in academics, construction work, and other household tasks traditionally reserved for girls and women. The new setting created an emancipatory environment for girls. According to a 1987 EPLF report, 40 percent of its Revolutionary School students were females (Stefanos 1997: 666). Although this report didn't include Eritrean territories under Ethiopian occupation, it was a huge development in a nation-state where women were completely excluded from having access to education.

When considering women's situation during the pre-colonial and colonial periods, one can conclude that socio-cultural oppression, economic incapacity, and lack of educational qualifications equally circumscribed

women's socio-economic mobility despite the favorable laws in place. Dehab, who acknowledges the structural and systemic obstacle of discriminatory attitudes and practices that were articulated at the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, failed to take account of another important obstacle: unequal power relations (also clearly articulated at the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*) and other factors such as the electoral system structure considered elsewhere very critical for the equal political representation of women. Although writing almost a decade and a half after the articulation of these obstacles, one wonders whether Dehab is either unaware of them or well aware but cognizant that discussing them would have displeased the patron of the NUEW, the PFDJ, to say the least. Moreover, no one – least of all Dehab, who had so much at stake – dared to criticize the system due to the totalitarian political climate that prevails in the country. But more troubling is the notion that rather than suggesting these barriers to female political roles might change through some sort of arrangement such as in childcare responsibilities or addressing of the unequal power relationships, Dehab resorted to reasoning such as cultural operation, eradication of poverty, and so forth, which is reminiscent of the socialist states' explanations.³¹ Molyneux (1985: 229) states, "The usual explanation in socialist states, especially in poorer ones, for not successfully institutionalizing sexual parity in the organs of political power is explained due to "resource scarcity, international pressure, underdevelopment or the weight of tradition." Although the impact of lack of resources, international pressure, and backward tradition cannot be underestimated on the road to nation-building and in the struggle to bring about sexual parity in the

³¹ Although the reasons put forward by Dehab echo that of socialist states, Eritrea cannot be categorized as a socialist state; rather it is a totalitarian state. See Tronvoll 2009 work titled "*The Lasting Struggle for Freedom in Eritrea: Human Rights and Political Development, 1991-2009*" on why this is so, although surely Eritrea is a poor state by economic standards.

organs political power, more often than not, countries around the world, including Eritrea, use such lame excuses to avoid getting to the bottom of the main issues.³² The other major arguments rest on physiological constraints such as the claim that women lack the psychosocial characteristics associated with political leadership; cultural constraints claiming politics is man's work; role constraints, which argues women have been socialized into the lifetime role of wife/mother; and male conspiracy, where men seek to preserve their power positions by imposing restraints barring women from access to positions of influence (Medoff 1986: 245). These arguments are hardly examined for relevance to the Eritrean case, despite the fact that the NUEW believes the fight for gender equality in political representation is pretty much the fight for equal share of resources and power.³³ Moreover, contemporary discourses have already shifted from those argued by Dehab to have led to low political participation of women in Eritrea: lack of resources, poverty or even lack of will on women's side. The *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* marked discursive shift in relation to women in politics, using a discourse of exclusion. It identified "discriminatory attitudes and practices" and "unequal power relations" as the major problems for women's under-representation in political decision-making positions, unlike what Dehab argues. More importantly, the *Platform* placed the responsibility for dealing with the under-representation of women and promoting change in the hands of political institutions (Dahlerup 2006: 5f).

³² Resource scarcity, international pressure in particular the United States Government's ill will against Eritrea since the 1950s, where it conspired to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, backward culture and poverty are some of the supposed reasons that are continuously mentioned as obstacles to addressing the current challenges that women and the country face.

³³ The NUEW's President admitted this in an informal discussion with the researcher in the context of other countries in May 2011.

The main question to be raised here, then, is whether women's sacrifices during revolution for a better society have been rewarded in independent Eritrea. At least implicit in the sacrifices women made during the revolution was that the gender equality experienced by men and women freedom fighters in revolution should not be replaced by *status quo ante* with men in the positions of power. The next chapter addressing the divergent discourses that emerged in the aftermath of independence tries to tackle that issue.

3. The Discourses in the Aftermath of Independence

3.1. Where Are All the Women?: Romanticism vis-à-vis Reality

At best the EPLF's legacy on women's empowerment can be described as a contested one, with its proponents claiming the EPLF/PFDJ has been doing more than enough vis-à-vis women while its detractors claim that, as a matter of fact, it has been adding burdens to women and in the process making them miserable. This chapter tries to address the discourses that emerged in the aftermath of independence.

Soon after independence Markakis (1995: 129) argued that, "Eritrean women face an uphill struggle on the political field, despite having come to the referendum polls of 1993 in equal numbers (50 percent) with men." He further stated that, "Though proud of its women fighters, the EPLF was slow to admit them into its decision-making bodies. It was not until the Second Congress in 1987 that women were given a token presence in the EPLF Central Committee. The Third Congress held in 1994 elected 12 women to the 75-member-body Central Council of the PFDJ and three women to its 19-member Executive Council, and two women ministers were appointed in a cabinet of 16."³⁴ Markakis was not alone in

³⁴ The Markakis' figures remained the same even a decade later. According to the Government's 2004 CEDAW report, "There are 3 women out of 19 members in the Politburo of the PFDJ, accounting for 15.7 percent and 12 women out of the 75 Central Committee members making up 16 percent. This figures despite the fact that almost 50 percent of the members of PFDJ within the country and in the diaspora are women."

his critical, even pessimistic, assessment of the road ahead for political participation and representation of women in independent Eritrea. A decade after Eritrea's *de facto* independence, Bernal echoed Markakis in a rather cynical assessment of what appears to be the reversal of fortunes for women ex-fighters:

“The Front (the EPLF) revolutionized the social position of women by making women over in men's image and by virtually eliminating the family as a social institution within its ranks. In some sense, domestic social patterns were not so much reorganized as suppressed by the EPLF. The EPLF included women by treating them like men and there was thus little need to reorganize anything for their inclusion. Seen from this perspective, it is easy to understand why the gains women made in the field were not easily translated into daily life once Eritrean independence was achieved” (Bernal 2001: 136).

Bernal makes this argument in her search for answers as to why the advances made towards gender equality within the EPLF before Eritrean independence were so difficult to maintain once it achieved victory and control of the state (Bernal 2001: 130). What is clear here is the argument that women ex-fighters have failed to cash in on their revolution era achievements once independence was achieved. This view is widely held throughout the country.

What Bernal is alluding to here is partly physical – “the image of a khaki-clad woman warrior brandishing a rifle” (Bernal 2001: 130). Perhaps the issue of making women over in men's image was not a matter of choice but a necessity that served well at the time. The EPLF and its women liberation fighters did not have the luxury of dressing in modern style clothes because their circumstances allowed them only basic living necessities. This notion of “combative motherhood,” a term commonly used to describe women of modern revolutions who hold a rifle on one arm, and a baby on the other, is used to show that if they are to care for their children, their country's “liberation” must come first (Berkman 1987: 142). “Combative motherhood” was the driving force behind women's

participation in the revolution and served well until Eritrea's independence. Eritrean women fighters were, indeed, real archetypes of "combative motherhood," but unlike what Bernal assumes it is unclear whether they thought gender equality would automatically be realized as a by-product of their participation in the revolution or they thought the road to genuine gender equality after independence would be less complicated and without contradictions. This was articulated by Askalu Mekerious, former President of the NUEW,³⁵ on the eve of independence. "We have a strong foundation," she told Wilson, "but there is still quite a long way to go" (Wilson 1991: 154). Perhaps Askalu was right in that she foresaw the road to gender parity in representation requires determination and that there would not be permanent demands as time goes by. Although Askalu's suggestion of strong foundation referred to the much praised dynamism, independence, and strength (to use Wilson's terminologies) of the NUEW, whether the NUEW remained so after independence is questionable, as will be shown in the last chapter.

The other factor Bernal mentions is the EPLF's elimination of the family as a social institution. Contrary to what she claims, family as a social institution has not been eliminated in Eritrea. Had it been the case, female ex-fighters would not have succumbed to familial values once independence was won. Bernal, rather than supporting her argument with empirical evidence that demonstrates the elimination of the family as a social institution, contradicts herself by stating, "Women ex-fighters have painfully been caught between the revolutionary aspirations they learned in the Front (inside the EPLF) and the more conventional values

³⁵ Askalu Menkerious is currently the Minister of Tourism. Whether rightly or based on exaggerated claims, Askalu was considered an outspoken advocate for women's equality during her presidency at the NUEW in the aftermath of independence. In October 2011 the researcher approached her for an interview, which she declined arguing she is tired of researchers coming to the country and wanting to interview women of her status.

and gendered expectations asserted by Eritreans in the civilian context” (Bernal 2001: 137). This argument begs the question: Do not the conventional values and gendered expectations constitute familial principles, and if as Bernal claims the family as a social institution has been eliminated, then how was it possible to have it reincarnated so quickly in independent Eritrea? To demonstrate what she calls reversals, Bernal brings issues of wide-spread divorce rates that took place in 1995-1996 in Asmara and argues that there were familial pressures from sisters and mothers towards men fighters to divorce their fighter wives in favor of civil brides (Bernal 2001: 137). The familial pressures she mentioned should have allowed her to shift some of the blame away from the EPLF, and analyze Eritrea’s post-independence reality contextually. Political, economic, and socio-cultural aspects were, and are, still at play. In addition to these obstacles, some of the women she interviewed had to grapple with a lack of resources, skills, and jobs. Indeed, some women ex-fighters were not even in a position to earn Nakfa 500 per month (less than \$30 dollars) holding petty jobs like public parking caretakers and office clerks or secretaries.³⁶

The EPLF might have made its fair share of mistakes with regards to women. For instance, its critics argue that, “Despite its enlightened ideology, the ruling party’s lack of attention to the constraining processes women were encountering in the post-liberation family life amounted to relinquishing some of the gains that EPLF women had experienced in the field; and others have had to be fought for –again” (Hale 2001: 158). Informed locals argue that it is the EPLF’s abandonment of its previous gains and lack of sustained measures against such rollbacks and focused strategy beyond policy statements targeting the main challenges

³⁶ Rena, Ravinder, The Women Employment in Eritrea – reflections from Pre and Post-independence Period, MPRA, Munich Personal RePEc, <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/10792/>, 2007, 9.

that women have been facing in independent Eritrea that is the major problem:

“The very organization that had come to be seen as encouraging women, both theoretically and practically, to push traditional boundaries during the revolution has become one of women’s biggest challenges after independence. The PFDJ had utterly failed to make tangible commitments beyond policy statements and drafts in ensuring that women are empowered to compete, assert, and to be able to depend on themselves. No question that it has endowed them with political and legal rights that did not exist previously, hence emancipation on theory. This means even if we cannot argue categorically that half of our population (which is women) is marginalized, we can certainly argue that this section has been burdened more than ever before to juggle the competing demands of private life, working life and civil or public life. It would not be unfair to argue that the government has other priorities than women’s equality or empowerment” (‘H’ August 2010 int.).

On the optimistic side, however, there were those who thought that under the auspices of the EPLF women made genuine progress and laid the groundwork for their future political empowerment. Burgess (1989: 127) stated, “Women’s increased role in the struggle has brought some important advances. Thus, eight women were, in 1987 at the EPLF’s Second Congress elected to the Central Committee. This was no mere token gesture but evolved out of the democratic process of nomination and elections taking place in the grassroots-based ‘People’s Assemblies’.” And Stefanos (2000: 169) notes that the EPLF delivered immensely, as seen in contrast to Eritrea’s colonizers:

“Traditionally, all-male councils of elders had run Eritrean villages. Women had no formal role in public life—it was a male preserve. The EPLF’s opening of its ranks to women, without any limitation on the kind of activities that females could undertake, was thus a momentous event. Women’s involvement in the EPLF, politically and militarily, was unprecedented. They participated in local and regional political structures, both in liberated areas and behind enemy lines. They secured the right to vote and to be elected to public office. Many of them assumed positions in village councils and regional committees.”

What Markakis saw as tokenism during the Second EPLF Congress was described as a genuine progress by Burgess. Nevertheless, what can be deciphered from both authors' differing analyses of the same facts is the contentious nature of the political participation and representation of women in Eritrea. Was Eritrea's almost all-male leadership (Markakis 1995)³⁷ concerned about advancing women's interests? During the revolution era the leadership of the EPLF was indeed trusted, as Luul states, to respond to concerns about what might happen to women fighters in the aftermath of independence:

"To foreign researchers who were concerned about our fate once independence becomes a reality, we told them we [the NUEW] and the EPLF do not only believe in the principles of social justice and gender equality, but we are also working hard to realize them. The Front [the EPLF] has been trustworthy; and it believes this nation, Eritrea, will be developed by the advancement of both its male and female sections of the population and not one at the expense of other" (September 2010 int.).

Now, the issue is not whether the EPLF was trusted, or the PFDJ is trustworthy, regarding the principles of social justice and gender equality; but rather how these entities intend to realize these principles and whether they allow the NUEW³⁸ to theorize and articulate an independent or semi-independent strategy that would truly address gender issues. Has the PFDJ done much to demonstrate this in the last

³⁷ Currently, there are only four women ministers in a Cabinet of seventeen with none of them considered as a major political player. Thus, the researcher would be remiss not to mention that politics in Eritrea, behind the façade of what appears to be having a fair amount of women in cabinet positions, is still a man's domain and undoubtedly is run by an almost exclusive male leadership.

³⁸ In principle gender equality should be a concern of both male and female sections of the society. Therefore, gender equality is a national issue (rhetorically it is so in Eritrea). Thus, the NUEW should not have been the only organization permitted to experiment, draft, and implement strategies on it, if it does at all. However, the reality is that the NUEW is the only women's movement operating currently in Eritrea, which gives it near exclusive right (after the government) to do what it sees fit. And what is more, the gender debate is anything but strong.

20-years since independence? It would have made sense for the NUEW to argue the question of women's participation in the revolution should be kept separate from the question of what has befallen them after independence: unequal share of positions of power in the public arena, failure to address the constraining issues that appeared in the aftermath of independence and the role reversals, to mention just a few. This is a distinct issue from the statement that the EPLF, or the PFDJ for that matter, believed in social justice and gender equality and is struggling to realize it. No one disagrees on the notion that the PFDJ has been doing all it can from a theoretical perspective.

The revolution era continues to have a huge impact on Eritrea's contemporary political landscape and on the discourses of gender equality in political participation and representation. Asked about whether women have equal participation and representation in current Eritrean politics, respondents of diverse professions and backgrounds replied paradoxically, at best:

"The representation of women in Eritrean politics might not be satisfactory but we have progressed a lot. I think we need to work harder. We now have two generations of leadership. We have some ministers, who are older, and can be considered as the first generation and there are new entrants to the system, could be considered as young generation. But the challenge is how to keep the third and fourth generations interested in politics" (Sultan, September 2010 int.).

Sultan Said is the Chairman of the NUEYS. He believed that the current political representation of women is satisfactory, but there may come a time where the political interest amongst women may wane. Although the yardstick for that assessment is possibly the revolution era, where undoubtedly miracles were carried out by women fighters, but it is unclear if previous experience can be used to predict the future or address the challenge of how to keep the third and fourth generations of Eritrean women interested in politics. If, as Sultan believes, the current political representation of women is adequate because not only the

“older generation”³⁹ of women are represented but also of the “younger generation”⁴⁰ too, then there is presumably no worry about a future that has its foundation already set. Similar to Sultan’s assessment, Luul (September 2010 int.) remarked on the current political representation of women in Eritrea:

“In the NA we have 22 percent of women, in the regional assemblies there is 28 percent presence of women. One can ask even if we have positive discrimination we are not able to achieve 30 percent presence, which demonstrates the need to take more campaigning activities, supervision and control over the process in the future.”

Moreover, speaking on the category of women political enthusiasts in Eritrea, Luul observes that as it stands right now the traditional housewife rarely wants to compete or undertake a political job because she is concerned of the social stigma that she would face from the society for having supposedly undertaken an “unwifely” duty. And those who have so far dared to do so are either those who finished their national service or ex-fighters or those influenced by the tendencies of both. How should it be then interpreted that politics in Eritrea is not appealing to the traditional housewife, to the other sections of the society beyond women ex-fighters and national service recruits? The NUEW might find it easier to hold patriarchy responsible, which undoubtedly could be one of the causes; however, the prevailing political system itself deserves proper investigation. Mainstream political science, and also the patriarchal society in Eritrea, took it for granted that women are less politically interested than men. This perception is justified in Eritrea through the perpetuation of stereotypical myths that most women prefer to be mothers rather than get involved in the hurly-burly political world. For instance:

³⁹ This is used to refer to the women ministers who have a fighter pedigree.

⁴⁰ When Sultan alludes to younger generation being represented by new entrants to the system, he was referring to the current Minister of Labor and Human Welfare, Ms. Salma Hassen.

“If you randomly pick ten or twenty women up on the streets of Asmara and ask them whether they want to engage in politics, their answer is, ‘Why should I?’ Furthermore why ask people [women in this case] to participate in areas they do not want to? Certainly, everyone has their hobby but politics surely is not one for women in this country. Women are not even interested to mention it, let alone debate politics or be in leadership positions. Moreover, women have not reached a stage (for instance, there is no gender parity between women and men in colleges, there are not enough opportunities for them to participate in different spheres to garner the necessary experience in order to compete. Therefore, why all the talk about gender equality, when there are very few opportunities for women to be equal in practical terms” (field notes: Asmara, summer 2010 int.).

Elsewhere, feminist researchers argued that the gender gap regarding interest in and identification with mainstream party politics is constructed as leading to lower engagement in politics and hence to their under-representation. But Squires (2008: 196) argues that this less developed political interest of women should be seen as a “distinctive perspective on and conception of politics” (Squires 2008: 196). This can be expanded to include non-democratic countries, where there have neither been multi-party politics nor alliance building amongst political parties over decades. Politics at large is seen as something to avoid in Eritrea, there is so much apathy!

A different assessment of the current political representation of women was offered in a group discussion, where most of the discussants represented a generation that came of age in the post-independence period:

“To some extent there is political participation of women but it is not as it is supposed or we expect it to be. Although traditionally Eritrean women were not supposed to participate in the public sphere, their participation in the revolution brought some changes. But still only a few, four of them, are represented in political decision-making positions but that does not mean they represent other women in the country” (GD1 2010).⁴¹

⁴¹ This is an excerpt of the focus group discussion the researcher held with college students, recent graduates, and young professionals at the NCEW on September 9, 2010.

What is apparent from the above perspectives is the widening gap between gender narratives in Eritrean political discussion. Those in power (mostly ex-fighters) see things quite positively; while those not (mostly the youth) have a critical opinion and disapprove of the aforementioned official narrative articulated by government agencies or officials such as the President of the NUEW and the Chairman of the NUEYS. What needs to be taken into consideration here is the divergence of general perception and perspectives between Eritrea's "fighter generation," to borrow Reid's phrase, and the generation that came of age in post-1991 Eritrea. Reid argues, "While youth (broadly speaking, the 18–35 age group) feels cut off from the world, and the opportunities that it feels the world should offer them, an older generation, including veterans of the liberation struggle, arguably feels less anxious about such isolation. They, however, feel a deep sense of separation from their own past, and grieve for the loss of an Eritrea that they feel should be but is not" (Reid 2005: 472f). The post-1991 generation does not only feel alienated and deprived of the opportunities that independence should have heralded in but they are apathetic to any political discussion (whether it is about women or something else), as they assume, and to a large degree rightly so, that they are neither in a position nor have an enabling environment to introduce the reforms they think are necessary to institutionalize change. Moreover, the majority of the young generation is so frustrated that its usual reply to a political question (in this case the representation of women) is "why should I care?" They even sought of the researcher as to why, having studied overseas that she even cares about what happens in Eritrea. The fact that there is divergence in narratives and that it is feared (if Sultan's appraisal of the situation is taken at face value) that the coming generations of women may not show fervent political enthusiasm then this should be seen as a barometer to examine why. To begin with

Sultan's argument he does not support his assessment with factual evidence; instead he contradicts it simply because the presence of a proper foundation, which he believes is already in place, should not signal an alarm for the future. Although there needs to be an open gender debate to address the widening gap and face reality, it may be unlikely to expect such a discussion in the near future given the political atmosphere. However, what might receive some attention is women's political rights, albeit within the limits prescribed by the PFDJ in line with its traditional relationship with the NUEW. From the outset, the EPLF has had an influence on how the NUEW must identify itself with its parent front, deal with the other mass associations created by the EPLF, or for that matter to be founded in the future, and with the outside world.

3.2. The PFDJ Policy With Regard to Women

In the previous chapter, the researcher raised the question of whether the promises made by the EPLF were kept and that the question will be discussed in this section by analyzing the PFDJ's policies toward women in independent Eritrea. But before investigating the policies, it is essential to examine how these policies were conceived to begin with and how women have fared in getting their share of representation in local and regional public service positions.

The EPLF as a Marxist oriented organization sought to eliminate oppressive policies and practices as they proceeded towards establishing a new society. Therefore, the EPLF gave its unequivocal support to the principle of gender equality as a part of its endorsement of social equality for all in the establishment of a people's democratic state, as mentioned in its NDPs (Wilson 1999: 155 &166). In independent Eritrea, the PFDJ, as the incarnation of the EPLF, recognizes the quest for gender equality as a struggle to achieve equal opportunities for both men and women in social, cultural, economic and political spheres within the greater struggle to achieve the ideal of socio-economic development

for all. What this might entail, in principle, is that Eritrean women are recognized as individuals capable of rational thinking; and by virtue of this, are entitled to full human rights, respect and equal opportunity. The emphasis here is not on equality of results though, but rather on equality of opportunities. Proponents of this philosophy argue that biological differences between the two sexes are neither denied nor frowned upon:

“When we fight for gender equality in this country we do not deny that both sexes have biological differences; however, we struggle for the establishment of equal opportunities for all by narrowing the gap between, and the factors that influence the roles that both sexes play within the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the country. What this means, in essence, is that we try to address the perception, and hence understanding, created through decades of social processes within the society and fight for equal opportunities for all. Despite the biological differences, which obviously nothing can be done about, the pursuit for gender equality in Eritrea is associated with equally balancing the opportunities that exist within the society for all. For instance, we address whether all Eritreans of both sexes have equal political rights: the right to elect and be elected; have equal access to social provisions: such as equal access to education and health services; and have equal economic rights: such as owning land, property, and developing careers on equal grounds” (Luul September 2010 int.).

The above perspective is a reiteration of the principle of gender equality articulated in the National Policy on Gender and Action Plan (NPGAP), which states, “Eritrea’s gender policy is part of the national development goals,” (NPGAP 2003: 6), which is guided by “the principle of equality between men and women that has been forged through the collective struggle of the Eritrean people and the remarkable participation of women therein.” (NPGAP 2003: 5), In addition, the NPGAP (2003: 9f) states, “The State of Eritrea, commits to preserve the political gains already achieved by Eritrean women and to further their effective and meaningful participation in public life.” In particular, the government pledged to undertake the following measures

- “All necessary measures shall be taken to eliminate impediments to women's participation in the political life of their country,

- To remedy the disadvantaged socio-political base wherefrom Eritrean women have started, it will be necessary to take affirmative action at all levels aimed at encouraging their political participation,
- Adequate representation of women shall be ensured in judicial bodies including those of the community courts and other customary dispute resolution structures,
- Without jeopardizing merit considerations, all government ministries, commissions and authorities are urged to adopt gender-sensitive human resources policies and to take concrete action to promote equally qualified women to higher positions,
- The private and non-governmental sectors are likewise encouraged to adopt and implement gender-sensitive human resources policies and to encourage women to participate in their management and governing boards,
- All public, private and non-governmental entities are urged to provide the necessary training that women need in order to take up greater roles in decision-making.”

A review of the number of women in public service in the country reveals how much encouragement has been given to them by the government as per its promised policy. The following two tables⁴² provide statistical data which shows how women have fared in being represented in public administration positions after independence.

⁴² All the data in both tables is entirely taken from Tsegereda Wolde-georgis' 2004 paper on Women and Political Participation in Eritrea, which she presented at the 25th (Silver Jubilee) Conference Anniversary of the NUEW. Unofficial translation from the original in Tigrinya done by the researcher.

Number of Officials in the Ministry of Local Government (Public Administration) 2001⁴³

Sex	Total	Zone Admins	Zone MGRS	Sub Zone Admins	Sub Zone Secs	Dept. Heads	Branch Heads	Unit	City Mayors	City Secs	Village Admins	Village Secs
M	3885	6	4	51	50	25	127	185	6	7	628	576
F	1777	0	0	3	3	0	8	27	3	0	10	61
ST	5662	6	4	54	53	25	135	212	9	7	638	637

Source: Tsegereda Woldegioris 2004

According to the table above, the number of women represented in local administration amounts to 31.3 percent out of the total. However, what is perplexing is that women are not represented in key posts such as in zonal administration, secretarial and managerial positions. To compare these figures: out of 3885 men, 1665 are in official leadership positions. But out of the 1777 women, there are only 115 women in lower ranking official positions. In comparison to the positions held by men, this shows that only 6.4 percent of the posts are occupied by women.

Representation of Women in Zonal Administration 2004

Zones	Total Nr. in Zone		Zone-Admins		Zone Secs.		Dept. Heads		Branch Heads		Desk Heads		Desk Secs.		City Mayors	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Central	1062	403	1	-	1	-	7	-	19	2	3	-	3	-	-	-
South	719	277	1	-	-	-	3	-	5	1	3	-	-	-	8	-
Anseba	395	136	1	-	-	-	4	-	13	2	10	-	6	1	1	2
Gash Barka	584	156	1	-	-	-	3	-	26	1	11	-	11	-	3	-
N. R. Sea	190	44	-	-	1	-	4	-	6	-	10	-	7	-	2	-
S. R. Sea	274	57	1	-	-	-	3	-	5	2	1	-	-	-	-	-
Total	3224	1073	5	-	2	-	24	-	74	8	39	-	27	1	14	2

Source: Tsegereda Woldegioris 2004

The statistics above also shows that women have 24.9 percent representation of the total. Again women are not represented in key decision-making posts such as in Zonal administration, heads of department and desk heads. What is also remarkably an issue of concern is the fact that in comparison to the 2001 statistics, women have

⁴³ Although Tsegereda does not specify, the data provided in the table is most likely to be or a cumulative total since independence rather than a snapshot for 2001.

relinquished their positions, for instance, in zonal chairing, and in presiding over departments as heads and secretaries of zones and sub-zones (currently renamed desk). Even in the other remaining posts, they have only between 6 to 9.5 percent presence.

Why has not the government done better than that? Elsewhere, it has been argued that there are many factors that affect the nomination and election of women to public offices such as qualification requirements, which are a function of both ideology and organization, the structure of the political party, whether it is decentralized or highly centralized, and how potential women candidates present their status etcetera (Lovenduski 2000: 95). What the qualification factor implies is that the differences in women's and men's careers indicate that women face obstacles in their political ambitions. The argument is that in many systems women do not easily get nominated because they lack "appropriate" qualifications; although this varies from country to country (Lovenduski 2000: 94). However, Lovenduski (2000: 95) also states that nowadays ideology is not such an important factor. This is so because although previously parties of the left have been more prepared to, and more able to deliver on nominating women than parties of the Center and the Right, currently there is an increasing trend from parties across the political continuum to strive to nominate more women. Even when the traditional criterion, being on the left of the political spectrum, is taken into account, the PFDJ falls short of making good on its ideological philosophy. By its very ideological inclination it could nominate and appoint more women into positions of leadership.

The structure of the PFDJ, the sole governing party, also shows that its leadership presides over a highly centralized party structure, where decisions trickle from top-down (Tronvoll 2009: 59). Such a highly consolidated foundation according to Lovenduski (2000: 95) provides leadership at the helm of political parties with "the capacity to place

candidates in favorable places on lists or in winnable constituencies.” However, the data presented above demonstrates that the PFDJ needs to do more to deliver. It has not only an historical responsibility in relation to women’s issues but also due to its, thus far, uncontested monopoly on power; it could have easily slotted women into winnable elective positions or even appointed them with no opposition at all. The third factor, among many others, is how women present their status. For instance, according to Lovenduski (2000: 95), in times of party crisis women could use their outsider status as an advantage. This theory is not reflective of the Eritrean case. In the current political climate, it is extremely challenging, and even impossible, to get nominated or appointed based on an outsider credentials. Outsider credentials or identifications are not only undesirable but could be used as reasons for disqualification from seeking any public position. However, this theory could hold if there is ever a crisis in the party, where women’s representation could be incorporated into discussions about restructuring the system. Besides these factors, what needs to be mentioned is that since the aforementioned positions involve local and regional levels, women should have more opportunities to participate in and be represented. The geographic constraints that are usually blamed for hindering women’s mobility are less material in such settings than are in national politics and elections. In addition, the fact that women’s political concerns are most often centered on the local and community related issues should have worked in their favor. Given that elections are run on platforms and campaigning issues/policies strictly approved by the PFDJ, women might not have the opportunity to focus on issues related to their locality or community unsanctioned by the PFDJ.

Despite the slow progress already observed, whenever gender equality is discussed as an issue it either brings with it a wave of nostalgia for the bygone revolutionary era, which still has a tremendous influence on

contemporary Eritrea, although the resoluteness of the post-independence generation of women is often questioned amidst a tendency to romanticize events. The heroic role of women in Eritrea's revolution might have no, or if at all few, parallels around the world, as far as the official narrative goes. However, what needs to be remembered is that there were other revolutionary struggles around the world, where women played significant central roles just like women did in the Eritrean revolution. For instance, Molyneux (1985: 227) argued that "women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution, where women made up approximately 30 percent of the Sandinista National Liberation Front's combat forces, was probably greater than in any other recent revolution with the exception of Vietnam". Despite such recorded historical facts elsewhere around the world, the official narrative and its architects in Eritrea find it irresistible to nostalgically remember an era that they thought would herald in not only outright gender equality but fair share of what independence entails.

It has often been argued that "the PFDJ [the incarnation of the EPLF since 1994] is the EPLF in everything but in name" (Reid 2005) and, followed in the footsteps of the EPLF, with almost the same leaders at the helm, conceiving and implementing similar policies like that of the revolutionary era in promoting gender equality. During the revolutionary era, the EPLF was commended for attempting to tackle gender inequality within its own ranks, although it established its approach in Marxist ideas rather than feminism. However, what needs to be considered here is the well-known fact, "That Marxism as a philosophy is not a condition for the emancipation of women as Marx himself failed to address the role of women in the reproduction sphere, where women are the backbone of not only everyday life, but also represent the main pillar for the survival of the society" (Disney 2008). Nevertheless it was argued the EPLF conceived and implemented policies regarding gender issues in a top-

down fashion by the male leadership rather than by women themselves (Bernal 2001: 134). Thus, the EPLF slogan, “No Liberation without Women’s Participation,” accurately depicts the hierarchy of goals in which national liberation was central and women’s emancipation figured as one of the means to that end (Bernal 2001: 134). Although Luul is keen to emphasize that women joined the revolution to liberate their country and for social justice, which encompasses the struggle against gender inequality, critics argue that the male-led EPLF took up certain issues concerning the status of women and mobilized women to achieve the goal of national independence (Bernal 2001: 134).

If, therefore, during the revolution emancipation of the entire society was given priority over the emancipation of women for a legitimate reason (liberation of the country), the PFDJ’s vision of nation-building continues to rest on similar strategy giving priority to participation of the entire society in the socio-economic and political activities, and the anticipation that women would get equality through their participation in political activities and socially productive work. This in essence is reminiscent of the revolution era slogan, which summed the whole notion of gender equality into “Equality through Equal Participation.” Soon after independence, the EPLF articulated its vision for the country in its Third Congress in February 1994 in terms of national harmony, political democracy, economic and social development, social justice, cultural revival, and regional and international cooperation.

“Eritrea’s desired development can be realized only when society’s full potential is brought into the development process, and this means, among other things, effective and widespread participation of Eritrean women in the country’s economic, political, social and cultural life” (NPGPA 2003: 6).

This reinforces the point that gender equality in post-independent Eritrea is expected as a by-product of nation-building, which is envisioned in the EPLF’s “National Charter for Eritrea: For a Democratic, Just and Prosperous Future,” adopted at the Front’s Third Congress in 1994.

Here, the EPLF promised to safeguard the people's democratic rights articulated in the NDPs during the revolution the creation of political organizations were encouraged. However, Tronvoll (2009: 50) states that "it must be remembered, though, that the vocabulary of 'democracy' as used by the EPLF during the struggle and after independence implied a Marxist-Leninist understanding of the term, and not 'liberal democracy' as it is often understood or interpreted by diplomats, development aid workers and other foreign observers."

What also needs to be remembered is what has been mentioned earlier and that is that the participation of women in the revolution allowed them to improve their mobility beyond their traditionally ascribed roles, but since ultimately their concerns were relegated to a secondary position after the liberation, what they achieved remained a by-product of national liberation. During the 1980s and the 1990s the debates in feminist theorizing focused on the contentious issue of whether gender-neutrality can be realized by following the strategy of equality in a patriarchal society. While the proponents of equality were convinced that gender-neutrality can, of course, be realized by following the strategy of equality, the difference proponents thought it is unlikely to achieve gender-neutrality in a patriarchal society (Squires 2008: 115f). With the debates between the two—equality and difference theorists—continuing unabated, it has become clear to most feminist researchers that the struggle for women's equality will not coalesce in one perspective and strategy. Since the beginning, the struggle for women's liberation and equality has been seen to mean different things at different times as demonstrated by the continuous shifts in its demands and strategies throughout its history. Thus, in recognition of this, contemporary discourses on feminism have entered a new phase, where strategies of inclusion and reversal have been found inadequate in dealing with the contemporary challenges that women face. Squires (2008: 116) argues

that, The present moment of gender theorizing is characterized by the diversity perspective and the strategy of displacement, the aim of which is to explore and understand the complex negotiations of existing archetypes, rather than at resolving them.” But in the Eritrean case even as the discussion was raging throughout the 1980s and 1990s over which strategy and perspective to advocate and embrace, there was almost no discussion in problematizing what strategy might better serve the struggle for gender equality in Eritrea. As Askalu stated:

“We say they are not our issues (issues such as domestic violence) at the moment. It does not mean that we do not believe in them but that it is not our priority when Ethiopian soldiers are disemboweling Eritrean Women” (Wilson 1991: 88f).

Askalu, as head of the NUEW before Eritrea's independence and until the late 1990s, put forward her point of view at a critical time when Eritreans were battling Ethiopian forces. Then the NUEW could not prioritize fighting against domestic violence over fighting for national independence. Zerai (1994: 66) had similar views on this and states, “Emancipation of women was given secondary importance before Eritrea's independence because the question of survival was at stake.” What about now?

The presence of women in local and regional public positions discussed in this section clearly indicates that women's progress towards equal political representation has not only been slow but also at times regressive, at best. In addition, what these figures demonstrate is that in the last 20 years of independence, the government's promise of encouragement was more evident in theory than in practice. In an attempt to disregard that reality government officials and PFDJ loyalists prefer to assess the current political participation and representation of women from a theoretical perspective and delve into policies. Thus, it is essential to state and analyze these policies, and more importantly, investigate whether the hopes expressed on the eve of independence

and the promises made in the NDPs are met or disappointed in contemporary Eritrea. This section will focus on answering these questions by examining whether Eritrea's national policies and objectives articulate clear and strong gender equity perspectives, and whether the government has made good on its promises in implementing them. To examine these Molyneux's (1985) theoretical exploration of gender interests, as briefly discussed in Chapter Two, will be employed.

Gazette of Eritrean Laws Vol. 1/1991 No.1

The promise of equality between men and women made by the EPLF during the revolution was enshrined in the immediate aftermath of independence within the first Gazette of Eritrean Laws Vol. 1/1991 No.1, which proclaimed any laws that discriminate or adversely affect the rights of women as null and void. The Gazette issued laws pertaining to family, land, succession and so on to protect the rights of women. Furthermore, it either repealed in totality or amended the prejudiced civil laws inherited from the Ethiopian Civil Code. For example, those totally repealed include:

Art. 276 that stated the principles of exercise of authority of father and mother and specified that (1) where the father and the mother of the child are both vested with the functions of guardian, the father alone shall exercise such functions; and (2) the mother shall exercise them in his stead where the father is not in a position to manifest his will by reason of his being away or for any other cause.

Amongst those amended articles include:

- (i) Article 635 (1) that stipulated husband is the head of family, is replaced by the Eritrean civil law Article 45 that states husband and wife are the head of the family.
- (ii) Art. 560 providing the definition of a betrothal contract, which stated (1) A contract of betrothal is a contract whereby two members of two families agree that a marriage shall take place

between two persons, the fiancé and the fiancée, belonging to these two families. (2) Betrothal shall be of no effect unless the families of each of the future spouses consent thereto.

Again the contents of this article are entirely repealed as they gave due weight to the family of both partners than the volition and consent of the future spouses; and replaced by “betrothal is a contract whereby fiancé and fiancée undertake to marry by their consent.”

- (iii) Art. 581 specifying the minimum age limit of marriage (1) A man who has not attained the full age of eighteen years and a woman who has not attained the full age of fifteen years may not contract marriage. This sub article is amended specifying the age limit for both sexes to undertake marriage contract to be 18 years of age.
- (iv) Art. 656 stating for administration of common property (1) Common property other than the earnings, salaries and income of the wife shall be administered by the husband. This sub-article is repealed and amended clearly providing that husband and wife shall administer their common property. And another sub article of the same article, which stated the family arbitrators may, at the request of the wife, entrust to her, in the interest of the family, the administration of the common property or certain common property is totally repealed
- (v) Art. 852 which states in default of relatives, the inheritance of the deceased shall devolve upon the State is amended, as the state cannot inherit the estate of the husband while the wife is surviving. The state can only inherit the estate if the wife is dead.

These repealed or amended provisions of the Ethiopian Civil Code bear a distinct resemblance to the way in which women were treated a century ago all over the world. They were discriminated against and deprived of their economic, social and political rights because it was

argued they had no separate interests not already included in those of their fathers and husbands, hence men were endowed with an exclusive right in decision-making within the family and to represent the interests of their family within the public sphere. Thus, undoubtedly, the policies enshrined in this Gazette derive from consideration of the notion of equal rights, at least in principle, that should exist between the sexes in Eritrea. Despite those positive measures, however, that should have empowered and endowed women with equal decision-making rights within the family, underage marriage for girls remains rife, especially in rural areas, in the country; and men still have more than equal say in family issues, especially amongst lower income and less educated families.

The 1994 National Charter of the PFDJ

This Charter was adopted at the EPLF Third Congress in 1994 and provides the ideological guidelines for structuring politics and institutions in independent Eritrea. Moreover, the PFDJ articulated “its vision of Eritrea’s future in terms of six basic goals: national harmony, political democracy, economic and social development, social justice (termed ‘economic and social democracy’), cultural revival, and regional and international cooperation” (Tronvoll 2009: 50). These overarching goals are meant to be achieved through six main guidelines derived from the experience of the revolution. These are “national unity, broad based participation by the people, individual dedication of self-sacrifice, the philosophy of social justice, self-reliance, strong relationship between the people and the leadership of the organization” (Tronvoll 2009: 50). Thus, it is within the context of these basic goals, and the overarching guidelines set to realize them that the struggle for gender equality is meant to be pursued. Thus, one of the slogans utilized by the PFDJ and was sought to motivate women in their struggle and pursuit for equal rights, which they started during the revolution, was “in Eritrea there is no place reserved for men that cannot be reached by women.” In addition,

the PFDJ continued to express in principle its previous political commitments, for instance those made in the NDPs, and promised to maintain them by assuring women of their equal rights to participate in all fields; and to guarantee them equal pay for equal value of work; and allow them to defend their rights by organizing in unions. Some of these principles such as the right to equal pay for equal value of work might have been implemented, while others such as equal participation in all fields and organizing in unions have yet to be realized. For instance, in the political arena women have only limited participation, despite the PFDJ's slogan that states "in Eritrea there is no place reserved for men that cannot be reached by women." Although the official narrative for this has been that Eritrean society needs to be emancipated enough for women to have to more than their current representation, the fact that the PFDJ has more power and monopoly and certainly could have done a lot better in encouraging women is not discussed at all. And by the same token, there is only one union, the NUEW, where women can supposedly organize under to defend their rights. Having one union that literally functions as a mouthpiece of the government, in the eyes of most women interested in changing the *status-quo* is not only insufficient but also a huge obstacle. Many women believe the union does not only address the diverse issues that affect women across the spectrum of walks of life, but also think the union is inefficient, lacking sufficient funds, and subservient to the government. This has been echoed by the Committee on CEDAW, which recommended that the "State party [government] expeditiously strengthen the NUEW by providing it with a clear mandate for its functions, as regards gender mainstreaming in all policy areas, and with adequate human and financial resources."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See concluding comments of *the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Eritrea*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html>.

The 1994 Macro Policy of Eritrea

The need to advocate for the equal rights of women and to undertake awareness campaigns in educating the society on the crucial role of women in the socio-economic, political and cultural transformation of the country is also clearly stated in the Macro Policy of the State of Eritrea published in 1994. The document also promises that the participation of women in education, economic activities and employment will be expanded; while appropriate labor saving technologies will be introduced to reduce the labor of women in the household and reproductive sphere. In addition, the Macro Policy also states that women's right to land on an equal basis with men will be assured; and under the Social Welfare Policy children, youth, the aged and women will be provided with legal protection from economic, sexual and other forms of exploitation. Again, some of these promises might have already been met, while some others have not.

Moreover, the Macro Policy document also has a clause on gender issues, which provides that (1) all efforts will continue to be made to sensitize and enhance the awareness of society about the decisive role that women play in the socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country; (2) the equal rights of women will be upheld and all laws that detract from those rights will be changed; (3) the participation of women in education, economic activities, and employment will be expanded; (4) appropriate labor-saving technologies will be introduced to reduce the drudgery of women in the household and in other activities; (5) Mother-child health care services will be improved and expanded (Heyde 2001: 3-13).

Most of the gender clause was not new at the time the Macro Policy document was agreed: They were already promised in the 1977 (revised 1987) EPLF NDPs. However, addressing each of them would not only allow for an investigation of whether previously made promises are met

or disappointed, but also provides an insight into how far the government has gone to actually achieve them after reiterating them in the Macro Policy.

a) Sensitization Efforts

Given the oppressive culture and tradition that continues to prevail in Eritrea, the need to undertake sensitization programs in bringing about behavioral change in the society is very crucial. Eritrean society has changed from the condition of centuries and even decades ago, largely as a result of the participation of women in the revolution. The participation of women in substantial numbers and their boldness to undertake jobs traditionally reserved for men helped to change the public attitude toward them to a certain extent. But changing attitudes is not something that can be accomplished in a short time since cultural values and attitudes are deeply embedded in the society as a whole and in the household in particular. This means that the initial impetus provided by the revolution in bringing about change has to be reinforced by substantive, unrelenting efforts to maintain and expand on the gains made. But although more women are gaining access to education, more women are becoming professionals and more women are using the limited access that they have in participating in the public sphere in general, the public is not willing to dramatically change its attitude in favor of women. This shows that people are sensitive about their culture and however oppressive it may be they prefer to stick to it, even two decades after liberation. This also needs to be seen against the backdrop of embedded campaign to reinforce the importance of preserving sticking to culture, where women are seen as wives, bearers of children, and homemakers. Given that Eritrean culture in general is patriarchal and traditional perspectives remain strong, women as much as possible try to fulfill what is prescribed for them in the culture so that they can have husbands and build a family life. In a way this is how

women were seen in traditional and colonial Eritrea. From the government's side nothing is done to change this oppressive culture; in fact one can argue it is rather encouraged as long as the policies are not fully and effectively implemented. Of course, in the government's explicit political mantra this is supposedly expressed differently, despite the dynamics at work to instill this oppressive culture amongst the people. In this context, so far most of the sensitization initiatives in the country have been undertaken either by the NUEW or the NUEYS. And those sensitization programs focus primarily on cultural transformation, in line with the above context, and hardly on political participation and representation of women. Asked whether there have been any efforts undertaken by the government in carrying out its long promised sensitization programs aimed at improving the awareness of the society about women and gender issues in its media outlets, 'N' (October 2011 int.) responded:

"I have never seen or heard any discussion being carried out on media. If I get any such possibility, I would use International Women's Day as an occasion to carry a placard with my demands. Eritrean women are being asked by the PFDJ, through the NUEW, to provide entertainment services (dressing in the colorful traditional attire, singing and ululating on occasions found out to be necessary by the party). During the revolution those who promoted women were getting themselves promoted, but no such thing exists now. For this sensitization program to work, the president of the country needs to come out in public and force officials to undertake campaigning activities on women's issues at all levels. Women in our neighboring countries such as Kenya and Uganda are loud enough that their governments cannot afford to either ignore or silence them, although they do everything to obstruct them from standing up for their rights. We need to stand up and fight for our rights in order to release ourselves from our current situation, where we are literally handcuffed."

'N's perspective is reminiscent of how women were treated by authoritarian regimes in other African countries during second half of the 20th century. For instance, during the tumultuous post-independence

transition to and dictatorship eras of Obote's and Amin's in Uganda, where the constitution was suspended, a one party state was declared and political opponents were sent into exile, neither regime and their parties showed any interest in advancing women's rights. The two major political parties in post-colonial Uganda: the Democratic Party, established in 1956, and the Uganda People's Congress, founded in 1958 demonstrated no serious commitment to further women's interests in politics. On the contrary, both parties not only failed to challenge the constraints imposed on women's social, economic or political rights from conservative ethnic and religious circles, but also created women's wings through which women party members were expected to provide hostessing services for leaders (Goetz 2002: 552f). Thus, at the dawn the 21st century Eritrean women are finding themselves in a very similar situation to that of Ugandan women during the second half of the 20th century, where any initiative, if taken at all, address women in relation to the society from a traditional perspective, and the only women's organization that should supposedly stand up against that simply fails to live up to what is expected of it by aligning with the government and providing entertainment services, at best. This is not an embellishment. Suffice to mention that evidence of hostessing and entertainment services provided by women in Eritrea are plenty; for substantiation one just needs to watch any of the national holidays sanctioned by the PFDJ and celebrated in the country.

b) The Promise to Uphold the Equal Rights of Women

The second goal - the promise that the equal rights of women would be upheld and all laws that detract from those rights would be changed - became enshrined in the constitution and other legal documents such as the one on land proclamation provide for generic laws equalizing both sexes in principle. These laws formed the principal legal basis on which

more specific legislation on women's rights could be derived subsequently.

c) Access of Women to Education, Economic and Employment Opportunities

If there is any area where any progress has been made, it is to be found in the third goal outlined by the Macro, which is the expansion of the participation of women in education, economic activities and employment opportunities. Successes in some of these areas have been a source of major achievement and accomplishment of which the government, and also the NUEW, could boast and display as an example and best practice.

Documents from the MoE would prove instructive as to the extent of their success. Statistics for the academic year of 2003/2004 indicate that at elementary level, the enrollment for boys was 56 percent while for girls 44 percent. However, the gap widens between both sexes as they advance to the secondary and tertiary levels. At middle school, the enrollment rate of boys was 60 percent and that of girls was 40 percent while at secondary school the enrollment rate of boys was 67 percent and that of girls was 33 percent. Although the female enrollment rate has gradually been increasing over the years (until 2008), especially at the secondary level, their number is still comparatively less than that of the male enrollment rate, as can be seen in Appendix 1. Seen in comparison to the figures of the 1970s, which indicate that 95 percent of Eritrean women were illiterate (Zerai 1994: WS65), this can, indeed, be considered a significant advancement.

When research turns to examine how these improvements in access to education translated into economic and employment opportunities for women, the picture becomes less rosy. An examination of female participation in the teaching profession, for instance, reveals a wide gender gap in the ratio of male to female teachers. A quick analysis of

the number of female teachers in the academic year of 2007/2008 reveals that their number is much lower than that of their male counterparts, particularly at secondary schools. At the elementary level, 44 percent of the teachers were female, while at middle and secondary school levels female teachers represented only 9.5 percent and 11.6 percent respectively, of the total number of teachers (see Appendix 2). These figures indicate that there is still much work to be done to ensure that advances in education in the female population could translate into improved access to employment opportunities especially in the mid- and upper levels.

The above figures also indicate that there are serious gender disparities in the MoE's structure, management and policy-making positions as stated by 'F' (September 2010 int.):⁴⁵

"Seen in retrospect to the role of women during the revolution, women in independent Eritrea failed to show considerable progress beyond at the grassroots level. There are few women in management positions in the entire country. In particular, in the MoE women who are heads of division posts are only three compared to about 33 men; those in charge of unit heads are around 6 women, while the rest of the 70 unit head positions are filled with men. Women also occupy only 20 percent of supervisors' position and the same, or even perhaps less, is the percentage of women holding posts of directorships. This is the reality at the moment although the fact is that there are women teachers and employees having higher degrees and deserving equal representation in the Ministry's management and policy-making posts. The usual argument put forward by the Ministry for not having more women in decision-making posts is women lack qualifications. But the fact of the matter is that even those who are qualified enough are not given the position they deserve. This phenomenon is prevalent in the country such as in the Ministries of Labor and Human Welfare (MLHW) and Ministry of Health (MoH), where there is also more representation of women at the grassroots level than at decision-making posts."

⁴⁵ 'F' is an ex-fighter and has considerable research experience and is familiar with how the MoE works.

This problem is not only prevalent in the MoE's higher echelons but also in lower positions such as in positions of directors in elementary schools.

As 'A' (August 11, 2010), a teacher employed by the MoE elucidates:

"When it comes to how decisions are taken in appointing people whether in positions of political leadership or other management areas, opportunities might be there in theory but not in practice. Furthermore, this needs to be seen in line with the prevailing context, where not even men, let alone women, are appointed in a very non-transparent way. For instance, where I teach, in Dekemhare, a new boss was appointed in 2006. As soon as he arrived, I told him I have worked there for 10 years, and I have seen many competent women; nevertheless, most of those who get promoted to positions of leadership are men, who are neither any better in qualification nor experience to those women teaching in the area. My suggestion was given the wrong interpretation, but despite that I kept on insisting to get answers, and eventually the new boss replied arguing that it is difficult to promote, for example women as directors, and send them to remote areas because of their family situation. This reason was a pure cover up for the systematic discrimination that takes place in the area where I have been teaching, as those promoted men actually get to work in main cities and not in remote areas. But be it as it may, that women have more responsibilities to handle in relation to their family situation, then the solution should have been to promote them in the areas where they have their families, rather than denying them equal opportunities of promotion."

Although from the above perspective one can see that even erudite women like 'F' cannot let go off their the revolution era experiences as a yard stick of assessment, the issue of lack qualification is often mentioned as an obstacle in representing women in key management positions. This despite the fact, as 'F' also states, that qualified women are not represented equally relative to men with equal qualifications. While recognizing that the progress made thus far are due, in large measure, to the commitment and efforts undertaken by the government and the MoE to provide educational opportunities for all, there is still much work to be done to address the widening gender gap in the educational system in a more targeted and effective way. This would entail, taking perspectives such as those described above into

consideration. The MoE should also make more effort to expand the level of access for women within the education system beyond pupils' enrollment rates.

Progress also needs to be accompanied by specific programs focusing on changing the culture. The MoE needs to understand culture as dynamic and, therefore, subject to change and that change can be facilitated by using the positive progress achieved vis-à-vis girls in education. On the positive side though, it must be mentioned here that the MoE is one of the Ministries that has a sound gender policy and a gender action plan on paper, but it has yet to implement the policy effectively and comprehensively ('F', September 2010 int.). Moreover, the MoE is also one of few Ministries in the country that prepares disaggregated data on gender in the education system on an annual basis. Therefore, the MoE should utilize these advantages to not only narrow the gender gap in school enrollment rates at the secondary and tertiary levels, but also to address the systematic discrimination that exists in representing women in key positions of management and decision-making within the education system on a whole.

When examining figures regarding the participation of women in tertiary education and the number of female graduates, one finds a bigger, even much wider gender disparity between the sexes than at secondary or primary levels. For example, it was seen that the percentage of female degree graduates of the nine Colleges of the University of Asmara (UoA) was 15.9 percent in the academic years for 2000 through 2007, a figure which dramatically plummeted to 8.6 percent at the Diploma level (see Appendix 3). These figures clearly reveal the gender disparity that exists in the number of male to female graduates. However, it has been stated that the female enrollment rates in the four colleges of the Eritrea Institute of Technology (EIT) has been steadily growing annually from

2004 through 2008 (refer to Appendix 4). Despite this, there is still a large gap when compared to male enrollment rates.

The above statistics need to be seen in the context of the discourses of the political representation and participation of women and the effect of education thereto. Asked about what needs to be done to have more women in decision-making posts at the national level, Sultan (September 2010 int.) replied that “education is the only way and we have to work on it”. Educating as many girls as possible would give aspiring girls the possibility for economic power, which in turn will provide them with political power. The role of education in empowering women economically and boosting their decision-making capacities within their families and in the public sphere in general is undeniable. However, the issue that deserves proper investigation here is how realistic is it to hope to bring more women into decision-making positions by only focusing on education in the absence of other enabling factors such as a democratic political climate? The experiences of other countries indicate that fulfillment of other criteria in addition to providing women with educational opportunities are equally important. For instance, the comparatively high progress achieved by women in getting represented in decision-making posts in Scandinavian countries is explained as a function of many factors including social change, changes in the structure of the family, the membership of women in workforces, education establishments, and so forth; and these changes were also a result of specific government policies and party initiatives directed at achieving equality of women’s and men’s political representation (Lovenduski 2000: 96f). Even if one accepts the argument that education will allow women to achieve the other factors necessary for their equal inclusion in public positions: the question that still needs to be asked is: education at what level would be enough? Sultan’s claim resonates with the structural and universal conceptualization which postulates that to

simply increase levels of urbanization, industrialization and education would result in women's mobilization to attain their goals (Ray and Korteweg 1999: 52). This might, undoubtedly, be the case in some countries where other necessary conditions in addition to education have already either been fulfilled or are in the process to be attained. But in the case of Eritrea, will education bring the necessary changes in women's representation in higher positions, if the local reality is ignored?⁴⁶

Kifleyesus and Abel (2003: 22) conducted a survey on the senior (4th and 5th year) students of all Colleges and Faculties of the UoA in 2001 examining the changing attitudes amongst women on various gender issues. The total number of surveyed students was 75, which was also the entire number of 4th and 5th year senior female students at UoA at the time. Asked about their future ambitions, 59 percent of those young female students replied they wanted to be professionals in their respective fields of study; 7 percent said they wanted to be managers of companies, 13 percent replied saying that they aspire to be top civil servants, while only 9 percent stated that they aimed at becoming politicians hoping to promote women's rights, and the remaining 11 percent hoped to do some other job. Another interesting result that Kifleyesus and Abel (2003: 23) found in their survey is that about 91 percent of the surveyed female students thought a woman has to get married before the age of 30, which means limiting her available career time between the ages of 18-30 years. This reveals how slow the creep was towards social change vis-à-vis the roles of women in the society, and also demonstrates how deeply entrenched were the cultural perceptions that continued to view a woman's value only in terms of her

⁴⁶ For instance, in the absence of measures, including legislation to eliminate cultural practices and stereotypes that discriminate against women, as noted by the Committee on CEDAW.

relationship to a man. Despite their education those women were inculcated with the same belief that no matter how educated or successful they were, the ultimate achievement in a woman's life is to get married and raise a family. This would mean that any woman aspiring for a political job, any other job, for that matter, would have to juggle the competing tasks of private and public life including child bearing and rearing responsibilities from very early in their careers. This balancing act is made more difficult and is further compounded by the absence of services such as childcare that could help to reduce their burdens.

The third aspect that deserves separate examination is the issue of employment. Since independence, employment opportunities for women have, indeed, been expanded but they remain restricted in size and number, as the following citation reveals:

"In 1996 women made up more than 40 percent of the total workforce in Eritrea. Women also own 46 percent of the businesses in the microenterprise sector, a figure that decreases as the size of the enterprise increases (for example, there is only 29 percent female ownership of medium-sized enterprises). Women also make a major part of the large-manufacturing workforce in particular, in the garments, leather, and tobacco industries. This participation probably increased during the [1998-2000] border war with Ethiopia as a result of the military mobilization of a large proportion of the male workforce. In addition, women make up 50 percent of the workforce in the public sector, compared with 22 percent in the private sector. Women are also engaged primarily as unskilled labor in the production process. Skilled women represent a very small percentage (7.4 percent) of employment in large enterprises. In both public and private sector offices, women do predominately secretarial work, with little participation in management" (Heyde 2001: 8).

Overall, women make up over 40 percent of the total workforce in the country. But they are largely engaged as unskilled workers and even those employed in skilled occupations are mainly occupied with secretarial work rather than holding management positions. In addition, it must be remembered that most Eritrean women continue to eke out a

living as petty commodity producers, house servants, or other menial jobs and thus occupy the bottom levels of the income structure. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that at a time of severe socio-economic difficulties and within a totalitarian political climate, many women appear to be apathetic, at best, towards becoming involved in politics in their country. In their view, the ruling administration is not concerned about addressing their problems, and being caught up in the daily drudgery of life they have neither the time nor energy to do something about it themselves.

What needs to be discussed in connection with women and employment is the provision of childcare facilities, which is very important for women employees. In fact, in its absence many women employees find balancing family responsibilities and work outside home very daunting. In most cases in Eritrea mothers—both in rural and urban areas—used to depend on family members or friends for childcare assistance. However, with the changing socio-economic situations and the growing rural-urban migration, many mothers can hardly find such relations closer by. Thus, it becomes necessary and incumbent upon the society, the government, and other stakeholders including local and international NGOs, to assist in the provision of childcare and daycare or nursery facilities if women employees are going to successfully juggle their three responsibilities – reproduction, production activity, and community services – successfully. How far has Eritrea progressed in this front?

There are ninety one existing pre-school facilities for age group 3-6 across the country (Eritrea CEDAW Report 2004: 32). This shows those pre-schools are over-subscribed, and the demand is very high in unserved areas. This clearly shows the massive scarcity of affordable community Kindergartens and total absence of daycare or nursery facilities at workplaces, which has really become an intimidating issue for most women employees across the country. To ameliorate the situation

the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW) has been involved in negotiations regarding the provision of daycare services. These negotiations are deemed necessary not only because of the dire shortage of Kindergartens and daycare services that prevails in the country; but also more importantly, because Labor Proclamation No. 118/ 2001 does not cover the provision of daycare services as a condition of work. However, Article 99 of the proclamation in general mentions the rights of employees and employers to bargain collectively, where sub-article (1) states an employees' association shall have the right to bargain a collective agreement with one or more employers or their associations in matters provided for in Article 102. And sub-article (2) provides that an employer or employers' association shall have the right to negotiate a collective agreement with an employers' association or representatives of employees. Given the generic nature of Article 99, Article 102 gives some details as the following may, *inter alia*, be determined by collective agreements, where sub-article (1) deals with matters left by the provisions of this proclamation or other laws to be regulated by collective agreement. This sub-article leaves some space for women to negotiate for daycare centers to be established in work place or in their work neighborhood. In sub-article (4) conditions of work and the procedure for making work rules and resolving grievances are articulated. This article also supports women to invoke their rights demanding an establishment of daycare center as a condition of work. And in sub-article (5) conditions for arrangement of working hours and break intervals during working hours are provided. Extra breaks, intervals between working hours, and departures from office before the regular working hours are subject to negotiation by the provision of this sub-article. These are important issues as women need extra for activities such as breast feeding and caring. Hence, the employees, in particular women employees, are expected to raise the issue of provision of

daycare facilities as an issue of collective bargaining, as it has a major impact in creating an encouraging work environment for them and their children. But since just raising it as an issue might not be enough to have it dealt with, it is necessary to create a strong lobby through the employers' association⁴⁷ and worker's confederation to convince employers of the importance of providing daycare facilities within the premises of a workplace. Indeed, this need for a continuous and strong lobby has been advocated by the NCEW, as the Chairwoman of its Women's Committee, Adhanet Andom (September 2010 int.) explains her Committee's endeavors and its achievements thus far:

"The situation in 1995-1997 was much more promising than it is now. 16 institutions were in favor of the notion [providing daycare services within the workplace]. Sites to build daycare services were chosen and many workers of these institutions, including those who did not have children promised to contribute monthly fee for the running costs of the promised facilities. However, this was interrupted because of the border war with Ethiopia and the privatization of many of the companies. Institutions such as the National Insurance Corporation (NIC), Ministry of Land Transport, and Dolce Vita and others promised to build daycare centers, provided that they find sites and their budget allows them. The only resistance encountered in our negotiations was from the owner of the Barako Textile Factory, who employees around 600 women, arguing that she can help to build one but not around the site of the factory. So far, there are 11 children in the daycare of the NIC; and the Telecommunication Corporation promised to open daycare center in their new building, which is under construction."⁴⁸

As can be understood from the above account, at the moment the provision of daycare services has benefitted only a very small proportion of the working class women. This needs to be seen against the EPLF's repeated promise to provide improved access to childcare services and

⁴⁷ There is only one employers' federation in the country, which is known as the Eritrean Employers Federation. It was established by the support of the NCEW and the government because it was primary criterion demanded by International Labor Organization to have a tripartite structure within the country.

⁴⁸ Adhanet Andom is also a member of Zoba Ma'ekel regional assembly and also a member of the now defunct NA.

Kindergartens, as articulated in both its 1977 (revised 1987) NDPs, and also reiterated in its post-independence policies. However, progress towards providing it, let alone improved access to it, has been extremely limited if the discussion above is anything to go by. There is really little to talk about in this area except the official support for the notion, which has been stalled by the lack of implementation of commitments. In addition, what is more daunting is the fact that the government is leaving this issue to negotiations between employers' federation and the employees confederation, and practically doing little about it. Moreover, this labor proclamation applies only to one-third of the employees in the country. The civil service proclamation that should cover civil service workers, judges, prosecutors, army, police, and security, who are not under the scope of the labor proclamation, took more than ten years to be drafted and has yet to be promulgated.

The reason for the government's provision of such general terms in the labor proclamation and failure to implement them is that any hortatory rights are subject to the capability of the state to provide services; that is why the issue of daycare services is left to negotiations by providing firm legal ground.⁴⁹ Therefore, the issue is once again whether the state is capable of providing such services. Some might find this quite easy to answer and retort to the general situation in the country as explained by the government, which is that the government is occupied with defending the country's sovereignty while building the nation. Disturbingly enough, the government adds that lack of childcare facilities would be resolved with time as part of the nation-building process. What this implies is that the issue would remain marginalized from the list of the government's priorities to be implemented; although the government would not mind if other stakeholders make efforts to sort it out.

⁴⁹ Berhane Kahsai, Legal Advisor of the NCEW, email message to the author, December 15, 2011.

d) Introducing Labor-Saving Technologies

As far as the fourth issue of the gender clause, which is the promise of introducing appropriate labor-saving technologies to reduce the drudgery of women in the household and in other activities is concerned, little to no progress has been made. The official promise is still repeated, but besides that the government has little evidence either that it has seriously deliberated this issue or that it has begun acting on it. Twenty years after independence, the talk in this sector is still dominated by discussion of the need for the provision of these services in order to lessen the household burdens on women; and moreover, what is stressed is also the need for campaigning to sensitize the society that household chores should be shared by both sexes. Thus, with almost no progress made in introducing the promised labor-saving technologies to reduce the drudgery of household work on women, and the increasing push for women to enter the labor force, perhaps against their interests in the absence of other alternatives, the burdens for wage-earning women has been increasing as they have to perform a double-day work inside and outside of the home.

e) Provision of Mother-Child Healthcare Services

The fifth promised gender issue included in the gender clause of the Macro Policy is the provision of mother-child healthcare services. The NUEW states some major improvements have been registered. These include efforts undertaken by the Reproductive Health (RH) unit within the Primary Health Care (PHC) Division of the MoH towards reducing maternal mortality. The coverage and quality of the services of the RH unit is said to have been on continuous improvement in providing RH information, services, and commodities up to the local level. Thus as a result of these efforts the maternal mortality rate has been reduced from 998/100,000 live births in 1995 to 486 in 2010. In addition, antenatal service coverage (measured in terms of at least one visit) in 2007 was

65.7 percent, which was an increase by 45 percent compared to that of 1998; emergency obstetric care functional health facilities also increased from 40 percent in 2004 to 82.3 percent in 2008 (NUEW: 2011). Although this 50 percent reduction shows the considerable efforts exerted, the fact that the rate is still high shows that continuous efforts are needed to be undertaken. The need for such efforts has also been noted, recommended, and communicated to the government by the CEDAW Committee. In particular the Committee “urged the State party [government] take measures to improve women’s access to health care, especially emergency obstetric care and health-related services and information, in accordance with article 12 of the Convention and the Committee’s general recommendation on women and health. It [also] calls on the State party [government] to improve the availability of sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, also with the aim of preventing early pregnancies and clandestine abortions. [Furthermore], it encourages the State party [government] to enhance such services especially for rural women.”⁵⁰

As can be extrapolated from the above an examination of the five issues that constitute the gender clause in the Macro Policy shows little progress. The policies, positive as they are, they have yet to be implemented in full force and comprehensively if the necessary change in women’s lives is going to be realized.

The Land Proclamation of 1994

According to Proclamation Number 58/1994 the ownership of land is held by the state. However, Eritrean citizens are guaranteed usufruct rights over farming land in equal measure. But they can neither sell nor bequeath it to their children, although children have first option on it after the death of their parents. Others, including foreigners and commercial

⁵⁰ For the Committee’s recommendations on Eritrea, visit <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html>.

enterprises, can acquire land through lease from the government for investment purposes, and the government can expropriate land upon payment of fair compensation. These provisions enable the state to designate land for commercial farming, and to implement policies for improved land use and conservation (Markakis 1995: 127). In addition, this proclamation also stipulates that any citizen (woman or man) who fulfills their national duty is entitled to usufruct rights. Right to land is stipulated in Articles 15 and 16, where references are clearly made to “married man, married woman, divorced man, and divorced woman” in order to guarantee the equal rights of women. Moreover, a divorced woman or man has the right to retain her or his previous entitlement of land after termination of marriage unless there is good cause to repatriate the land to the village administration.

Affirmative Action Measures

According to the Quota Project, which is a Global Database of Quotas for Women, today women comprise 19 percent of the members of parliaments around the world. Of late, Rwanda overtook Sweden as the number one country in the world in terms of having the highest number of women in parliamentary representation—with 56.3 percent against Sweden's 47.3 percent. Rwanda is a case in point of the new trend to use electoral gender quotas as a fast track to bring about gender balance in politics.

Currently, the provisions of electoral gender quotas practiced around the world include three types: “reserved seats (constitutional and/or legislative) that reserve a certain number of places for women; legal candidate quotas (constitutional and/or legislative), which require all parties to propose certain percentage for women on their electoral slates;

and political party quotas (voluntary), which aim to increase the proportion of women among party candidates.”⁵¹

Why have quotas become a phenomenon in recent years? The notion of quota laws for the selection of women to political offices may not be a new phenomenon. Krook (2008: 345f) states it was reported that in the 1930s political parties introduced voluntary quota laws but the trend picked up from the 1990s onwards, with many national legislatures amending constitutions or electoral codes to increase the nomination of women for local and national elections. This recent trend to introduce quotas for women's representation in politics needs to be seen in juxtaposition with the failure of liberal democracy both to incorporate women in positions of decision-making and also its limitations in being able to provide women the opportunities to include the representation of their interests in a meaningful and sustainable way. In addition, it is relevant here to mention the international women's movement message of the 1990s. The world polity theory argues a “country's approach to address women's issues depends on *when* that country first encountered international pressure and *what* message it gets exposed to—as the international women's movement emphasized different ‘policy scripts’ overtime, focusing on suffrage in early years and high levels of political representation in later years”(Paxton et al. 2006: 902). Thus, in recent years political parties and national legislatures in more than one hundred countries have adopted quotas for the selection of female candidates to political offices (Krook 2006: 304). Around 40 countries have introduced gender quotas in elections to national parliaments, either by amending their constitutions or by changing their electoral laws (legal quotas); and

⁵¹ For details on these provisions see *the Global Database of Quotas for Women* (2009) at <http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>, and Krook (2006) on *Reforming Representation: The Diffusion of Candidate Gender Quotas Worldwide* at <http://proxy.alumni.jhu.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.alumni.jhu.edu/docview/194688041?accountid=44369>.

in more than 50 other countries major political parties have voluntarily set out quota provisions in their own parties (Dahlerup 2006: 3). Therefore, the EPLF achieved the Eritrea's independence at a time when institutionalizing quotas to represent as many women as possible in politics was a trend, and could ill afford not to adopt one as an affirmative action measure. Thus, it joined the long list of countries, democratic or otherwise, to institutionalize quotas as an affirmative action measure. It made its support for the notion clear, declaring affirmative action in Proclamation 86/1996 for the formation of regional administrations. In chapter 4 of the proclamation the formation and mandate of assemblies is stated, and Article 2 specifically stipulated that, "In order to guarantee the rational participation of every citizen affirmative action is considered vital." Article 3 states that "according to Article 2 of this provision, where sub-section (a) provides that of the total seats of assembly 30 percent is reserved for women and their right is reserved to compete for the remaining 70 percent seats."

Quota was largely institutionalized in Eritrea as part of the prevailing international pressure in the early 1990s. Eritrea's longtime political observer in an interview stated, "The UN required its member states to institutionalize it, so Eritrea had no choice but to heed the call" ('N' October 2011 int.). In addition, the government might have thought the best way to reward women ex-fighters, in the face of ongoing criticism that it failed them in independent Eritrea, would be to introduce affirmative action measures. Therefore, the introduction of this affirmative proclamation should be seen both as a result of internal and external factors.

Once quotas was proclaimed, how was it taken? The perspectives could be summarized into three categories. There are those who strongly argue against affirmative action as they believe it would not benefit women in the long run and its presence would make them think that they

have it forever. Thus, women would not endeavor to educate themselves and be competitive. 'F' (September 2010 int.) states she is against affirmative action. The reason being that, she argues, despite the many women who have performed miracles and have been making a difference, people find it easier to associate those, thus far, represented in key positions with affirmative action and not with merit, even if the truth is that only few came via affirmative action and even then did a very good job. Therefore, what needs to be done according to 'F' is to use affirmative action as a strategy for bringing women into the political fold. Women need to be encouraged to become more competitive; educational opportunities should be provided to them in order to build their confidence and upgrade their skills. Once this is achieved, then affirmative action can be thrown out of the window.

In a similar tone to 'F', 'T' (September 2010 int.) reasons out that affirmative action, in particular seat reservations, might not be bad as a secondary mechanism. 'T' states that he thinks effective empowerment comes through real education rather than reserving certain positions for women. Thus, he suggests, given that real participation in politics comes with an ability to influence, women have to be provided with educational and other opportunities to be competitive and competent rather than just affirmative action, which may not help them to be influential in the political arena.

On the other hand, there are also those who support seat reservations as a temporary mechanism to help empower women to be politically active; although they do not want to draw a precise timeframe arguing it all depends on the consciousness of the society, which is hard to measure. This view is unreservedly supported by the NUEW, as its President states:

“We [the NUEW] believe that affirmative action is necessary because we are not yet in level playing field. In all sectors, be it in education, economy or politics men have already been ahead of women and amassed massive experiences. This has left women in a very unequal environment, where projects that would bring about equal opportunities need to be created. Moreover, this measure should be understood within the context of the historical inequalities that existed in our society. Because of historical inequalities girls were not able to compete with boys, thus receiving additional education to make them competitive should not be construed as a privilege. If women, who entered politics based on affirmative action, receive additional trainings to improve their communication and leadership skills, this should not also be interpreted as a privilege. Therefore, affirmative action, whether we like it or not, and other accompanying measures, will continue with us until we reach a stage where equal opportunities for all is realized” (Luul, September 2010 int.).

And the above is also reiterated by other sections of the society, who argue that

“Affirmative action must be used to represent women in political posts, at least for some time to come. Although at the moment those reserved seats are occupied by women who cannot read even if laws are passed against their interests, nevertheless we should have affirmative action as with time capable women will compete for these seats and strive forward” (‘N’ October 2011 int.).

And finally there are those who prefer to pursue a course of action midway neither opposing nor supporting it, but also would not mind taking advantage of it. ‘R’ (September 2010 int.) is a young journalist, who neither supports nor opposes affirmative action measures, or in her own words, “she is pro and against the notion simultaneously.” She argues that to say we need 30 percent seat reservation is tantamount to asking men to give us back the rights that they have already snatched. As long as nobody has told men this number of seats is allocated for you, nobody should also tell women that they have 30 percent seats reserved for them. In response to the question that her opinion on the issue does not seem to consider the reality that not only positions of power have always been occupied by men at the detriment of women,

but also the society's way of thinking is shaped in such a way to have faith in the competence of men as leaders and not that of women, she ripostes that there is no need to allocate 30 percent seats for women and all that was needed was to continuously educate the society that women are capable of doing anything that men can do. She adds that much work is needed in changing the perception and mindset of the society. But since we have the proclamation in place now, she states, women can utilize it as an opportunity until the perception of the society changes, while reminding themselves that they are capable of what men are capable of and use their untapped huge potential in influencing people, which they need to use it for their advantage.

What both advocates and opponents of affirmative action agree on is the conservative nature of the Eritrean society. Nevertheless, opponents of affirmative action say that women proved themselves capable of doing what men could do during the revolution, which is joining their male counterparts in arms, and therefore there is no need for affirmative action now. Advocates of affirmative action contend that in post-liberation societies the challenges are far more complicated than when fighting a liberation war. Moreover, wartime equality cannot be invoked in peacetime to justify that affirmative action is not needed in a society where a woman prefers to vote for a man rather than a woman, even though both sexes might have comparable educational background and experience.

Now, what is obvious is that the diverse opinions above are influenced by what the society perceives as an appropriate job for women. Quotas will not in themselves bring about any meaningful change beyond symbolic representation, unless they are supplemented by other measures that bring about substantive changes. In addition, one of the pitfalls of bringing about women in positions of politics via quota is, as witnessed in countries like Britain, appalling sexist and discriminatory

abuses by their male counterparts. In 1997 more than a hundred female MPs were elected to Parliament in Britain. A research team, under Professor Joni Lovenduski, set out to look at the achievements and experiences of these women at Westminster. Thus, they contacted some 83 MPs, who gave their answers in 100 hours of taped interviews for the study "Whose Secretary are You, Minister?". The findings showed that women MPs of all parties endured sexist barracking in the Chamber, sexist insults, and patronizing assumptions about their abilities ranging from "you have only succeeded because you are a woman" to "oh, you've had a very fast rise, who have you been sleeping with."⁵² Now, what the British example seems to illustrate is the fact that affirmative action and quotas can change the representation but not underlying attitudes.

Constitutional Commitments

In February 1994 the Eritrean NA elected a 50-member Constitutional Commission, of which 20 members were women (Heyde 2001: 3ff). These women members participated throughout the course of the writing up process until the finalization of the document, which was ratified by the Constituent Assembly on May 23, 1997. Thus, women were not only represented in the consultation process that led to the historic constitution-making, but also their past epic roles during revolution have been given due reverence within document:

"Noting the fact that the Eritrean women's heroic participation in the struggle for independence, human rights and solidarity, based on equality and mutual respect, generated by such struggle will serve as an unshakable foundation for our commitment to create a society in which women and men shall interact on the bases of mutual respect, solidarity and equality."

In addition to recognizing their past achievements, a specific clause on citizenship rights under Article 3 (1) stipulates that "any person born of

⁵² See the BBC's report on *Women MPs "endure sexist taunts,"* December 7, 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4074877.stm, accessed March 18, 2012.

an Eritrean father or mother is an Eritrean by birth.” Furthermore the PFDJ’s commitment in principle for gender equality is enshrined in this Constitution. Article 14 (2) guarantees the equality of all persons under the law; and that “no person may be discriminated against on account of race, ethnic origin, language, color, gender, religion, disability, age, political view, or social or economic status or any other improper factors.” The Constitution’s Article 14 (3) further pledges that, “The National Assembly shall enact laws that can assist in eliminating inequalities existing in the Eritrean Society.” Article 7 (2) states, “Any act that violates the human rights of women or limits or otherwise thwarts their role and participation is prohibited.” The importance of such clauses in the struggle to achieve gender equality is unquestionable, although they have yet to be implemented in full. At least they provide the legal context for future legislations and policy measures aimed at securing some of the factors necessary for equality between women and men to be realized. PFDJ officials consider the Constitution as one of the most-gender sensitive (Luul, September 2010 int.); this assessment has been echoed by outside researchers who described the document as a “forward-looking constitution” (Campbell 2005: 382). Forward looking to some and gender-sensitive to others it might be; however, criticisms abound as to why the Constitution is written in a masculine language. Those critics argue that Eritrean languages are gender disaggregated, and this was discussed by some members of the EPLF Central Committee in 1991, who suggested the wording of the upcoming Constitution should be made rather gender neutral. Yet, Article 5 contained a statement regarding how the constitution should apply (‘N’ October 2011 int.):

“Without consideration to the wording of any provision in this Constitution with reference to gender, all of its articles shall apply equally to both genders.”

What needs to be remembered here is that most contemporary states have enshrined in their constitutions some phrases that oppose

discrimination on the grounds of sex, religion, or ethnicity. Then what might distinguish Eritrea is not the inclusion of such phrases in its Constitution, but its recognition, at least in principle, that women are oppressed and its desire to propose measures that concern the promotion of equality while aiming to remove some of the obstacles. Eritrea is also amongst the many countries that still have extreme imbalance between the sexes, regardless of what their laws state.

Legal Reforms

Soon after Eritrea's *de jure* independence, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) has initiated a series of legal reforms aimed at women, which resulted in adoption of provisions in the Constitution. In the Ministry of Justice's Law Reform Committee, it was argued that Eritrean women had the opportunity to make their voice heard and advocate for their rights. They helped reform the Civil & Criminal Codes that, *inter alia*, repealed all prejudiced clauses (The State of Eritrea and the NUEW 2004: 4).

International Commitments

In addition to the Constitution, Eritrea is bound to observe international conventions and treaties to address discrimination against women and protect the rule of law in general. So far Eritrea has ratified several international conventions and human rights treaties to that end. Among those are the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, acceded August 3, 1994); the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, acceded September 5, 1995); the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (2001) and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, acceded January 23, 2003); the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, both ratified in January 1999 (Tronvoll 2009: 35; AI 2004: 36); and

the *Beijing Declaration and Global Platform for Action* (adopted September 15, 1995).

According to the State of Eritrea's and the NUEW's report on the implementation of the *Beijing Platform for Action* (2004: 6), soon after its adoption the CEDAW was subsequently translated into a local language and widely disseminated, particularly among women.⁵³ And its implementation is going in tandem with the implementation of the *Beijing Platform for Action*. Furthermore, the report states, "There is strong commitment and political will on the part of the government, which provides for a supportive environment for the implementation of the Convention." However, international researchers and observers evaluate the government's self-assessed strong commitment and goodwill otherwise. For instance (Tronvoll 2009: 35) states that, "After independence the Government of Eritrea was not keen enough to ratify international human rights instruments; but it changed its strategy due to the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia, in order to use its accession to international instruments as a part of its propaganda war against Ethiopia." This should also, at least, be seen against the fact that Eritrea has not acceded to the two optional protocols to the ICCPR, and also to the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW.

Furthermore, even though the government and the NUEW claim in their report that there is strong commitment and political will on the side of the government, the Committee on CEDAW raises series issues of concern

⁵³ For obvious reasons the Convention could only have been translated into Tigrinya. However, the CEDAW Committee, although welcoming it "expressed concerns that the provisions of the Convention are not widely known by judges, lawyers and prosecutors. Thus, the Committee calls on the State party [the government] to ensure that the Convention and related domestic legislation are made an integral part of legal education and the training of judicial officers, including judges, lawyers and prosecutors, so as to establish firmly in the country a legal culture supportive of women's equality and non-discrimination. In addition, the Committee urges the State party [the government] to translate the Convention into other local languages so as to make it widely known among all ethnic groups."

and reservations with the government's pace in implementing the Convention. Having read the initial, second, and third periodic reports, in its 2006 concluding comments on Eritrea, the Committee on CEDAW called on the government to "take immediate measures to ensure that the Convention and its provisions are incorporated into national law and become fully applicable in the domestic legal system. As part of its [the government's] current law reform process, to undertake a comprehensive national dialogue on women's rights to equality and non-discrimination and to enshrine in the Constitution, or other appropriate legislation, a definition of equality and discrimination against women, in line with Article 1 of the Convention." Also, the Committee encouraged the government "to establish concrete goals and timetables to increase the number of women in political and public life and in decision-making positions by inviting it to use the successful example of increasing the number of women in regional assemblies to achieve similar results in other areas, including the parliament and the Foreign Service."⁵⁴

Thus, what the Committee is in essence demanding is not only some major strategic issues that need to be addressed by government to overcome women's subordination, including but not limited to the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women; but also that the Convention become part of Eritrean law and thus that its provisions become enforceable in domestic courts.

An analysis of the post-independence policies of the PFDJ toward women revealed that Eritrea certainly has generic national policies and objectives that upheld the equal rights of women and provide for strong

⁵⁴ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), *Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Eritrea*, February 3, 2006, CEDAW/C/ERI/CO/3, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html>, accessed April 11, 2012.

gender equity perspectives. However, the same cannot be said about the implementation of these policies. There is official support for these programs to be fully implemented. What is happening on the ground is that only a few of these guidelines have been translated into policy and implemented with limited effect. And it is this fact, and lack of evidence to the contrary, that compels interviewees (in particular high-ranking officials) to resort to the mantra that the government has shown tremendous political will and politically did all possible in promoting gender equality. These officials bring examples such as of land allocation, arguing, "In comparison to other African countries, Eritrea has a fair land distribution system. More than 30 percent of women have already been allotted *Tiesa* (settlement or residential land)"⁵⁵ (Luul, September 2010 int.). Obviously credit should go where it is due, and thus it is true that the greatest benefit that women might have received in independent Eritrea could be from that of legal reform in relation to land allocation. But that should not be used as a justification to cover other fiascoes. But what need not be forgotten are paramount issues such as (1) women have yet to feel the impact of a positive change in the realm of political mobilization, in which they played a greater active part since the second half of the 20th century; (2) the effort to provide childcare services has affected only a tiny section of the population and any programs envisaging it exclude the main stakeholder, the government, and rely on the benevolence of employees, employers' associations, and the strength of the employee confederation to be able to lobby effectively - despite the fact that government has made repeated promises to deliver on childcare; and (3) even if employment opportunities might have increased since independence in comparison with the pre-independence period, women might have made only limited inroads in

⁵⁵ This is not to disparage this major achievement but rather to criticize the use of progress in one issue/ sector to defend weaknesses in other areas.

the formal sector; while the rest continue to eke out a living as street vendors, small traders or house servants, trapped at the bottom of the income ladder.

Nevertheless, it should also be recalled that implementing the aforementioned promises and goals would go some way in the direction of reducing the fundamental inequalities that have existed between the sexes in Eritrean society. However, it cannot be argued that their achievement will result in complete gender equality, as they are based on narrow definitions of gender interest embodying only some strategic interests. Moreover, the bases of the PFDJ's theoretical approach to women's emancipation show similarity with those of many socialist states, which adopt Marxist theory, linking gender oppression to class oppression and believing that women's emancipation can only be achieved with the creation of a new, socialist society and with further development of the productive capacity of the economy (Molyneux 1985: 239). Given the absence of freedom to come up with an alternative approach one might accept the PFDJ's conceptualization, but even then, Eritrea's progress towards achieving them has been uneven and very slow, with some aspects such as women's political participation and representation falling off the agenda.

When arguing as above, one needs to keep in mind the state's capacity for transformation, the general political conditions, and the nature of the policies themselves. The policies *per se* cannot be criticized, but what can be criticized is the fact that the PFDJ failed to take substantive action when it comes to gender equality in independent Eritrea. In its defense some might argue this was because of the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia but even long before that, as will be discussed in the last chapter, it failed to address some major constraining issues that women were facing.

4. Representation of Women in Decision-Making Posts

4.1. In Higher Governmental Posts

The previous chapter examined the PFDJ's policies toward women and how they are conceived and are meant to be implemented. Building on that, this section investigates whether the PFDJ has embarked on advancing women's interests and their political representation once independence was realized, based on statistics of women's representation in higher decision-making posts. In addition, this section is to test whether the traditional theoretical assumption that the high political representation of women depended on their high level of gainful employment, high level of education in comparison with men, and longer periods of enfranchisement holds true or is challenged by using the case study of Eritrea; whose women, as discussed in the previous section, have yet to have gainful employment; are struggling to achieve educational parity at all levels, with their roles in the society largely circumscribed by social, cultural, and religious norms; and are largely inhibited by the government's heavy handiness in constraining their political freedom to organize and rally around issues and perspectives they consider paramount. Before embarking on examination of these details, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the history of the political participation of women in the African continent, and where the continent ranks today in the world.

In the 20th century, only few empresses and queen-regents had ruled in Africa. Africa's first female Prime Minister, Elizabeth Domitien, was appointed in the Central African Republic in 1975 (Tripp 2001: 141). Apart from these instances, it was unheard of for an African woman to run for the presidency of her country up until the 1990s (Tripp 2001: 141). In 1960, for instance, the number of women legislators was only one percent in the entire continent. This number reached 14.3 percent in 2003; with the largest surge having been taken place between 1990 and

2003 (Tripp 2003). And Africa's first woman vice president, Dr. Speciosa Wandira Kazibwe, served in Uganda from 1994 through 2003, following Amin's and Obote's dictatorial rule in the country (Tripp 2006: 113f). Despite such figures, which were largely achieved as a result of gender-based electoral quotas,⁵⁶ the percentage of women in national parliaments remains still small in comparison with men. Currently, those countries that have achieved the critical mass considered necessary for women to have an impact are only eight⁵⁷, as can be seen in Appendix 5. How about Africa, where does it rank? According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union database, the current regional average of women in Lower House of Parliament in the Nordic countries is 42 percent; Europe-OSCE member countries including Nordic countries is 22.6 percent; for Americas it is 22.6 percent; for Europe-OSCE member countries excluding Nordic countries it is 20.8; followed by Sub-Saharan Africa with 20.4 percent; Asia 18.3 percent, the Pacific 12.4 percent, and the Arab countries 11.3 percent.⁵⁸ These figures indicate Sub-Saharan Africa is trailing Nordic, European countries and the Americas. But in retrospect to its own past, the continent is indeed, making considerable progress. Since the 1990s, several African countries have rushed to increase the number of women in their parliaments. What took an *incremental track* of 60 years from women's enfranchisement in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, and Sweden) to achieve 20 percent of women in their parliaments, and 70 years to attain 30 percent

⁵⁶ Unlike the contentious issues of democracy and human rights, which would have raised a lot of eyebrows due to the connotation that they are being used as instruments of intervention by advanced Western countries in the internal affairs of African countries, gender-based electoral quotas are widely accepted.

⁵⁷ These include Rwanda, Seychelles, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi.

⁵⁸ See Inter-Parliamentary Union's website at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>, accessed April 11, 2012.

(Dahlerup 2006: 7) has been dramatically overtaken by a new trend, the *fast track* in several African countries. If percentages are of any indication, Africa has then quite a number of trailblazers amongst the top ranking countries around the world in terms of women's representation in national parliaments. In autumn 2003, for instance, Rwanda surprisingly took over Sweden as the number one country in the world with the highest number of women in parliament, with 48.8 percent as opposed to Sweden's 45.3 percent (Dahlerup 2006: 3). That number propelled to 56.3 percent in 2008, making Rwanda a leader in women's political representation. And other countries worth mentioning for their efforts are South Africa with 42.3 percent; Mozambique with 39.2 percent; Angola with 38.2 percent; Tanzania with 36 percent; Uganda with 35 percent; and Burundi with 30.5 percent (see Appendix 5).

One cannot avoid asking about Eritrea, which is the main focus of this research. Eritrea ranks 18th in Africa with 22 percent of women present in its NA, which might be achieved either as a result of their sacrifices during the revolution or as a result of the PFDJ's benevolence in independent Eritrea, and 56th in the world rank.⁵⁹ Depending on one's view this could be considered as either encouraging or depressing, just like the divergent views that exist on so many political, social, and economic issues in the country.

Overall, such increase in the political representation of women in Africa has been considered as conflict-induced change (Tripp et al. 2006: 119), although it nevertheless has greatly boosted the global image of Africa in terms of bringing a considerable number of women into the political fold. Since the last decade of the 20th century, the political participation of women in the African continent has risen. As such, the rising political

⁵⁹ See Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of December 31, 2011*, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, accessed April 11, 2012.

participation of women in the last decade of the 20th century has triggered considerable research interest.

As already discussed, some might argue that, irrespective of the wording, Eritrea has a gender-sensitive and progressive Constitution and that the government has shown tremendous political will and strong commitment to protecting and advancing women's rights by ratifying the necessary international conventions (although it has yet to fully implement them). Others not only abhor the government's human rights abuses but even deduce that, "International and regional human rights treaty safeguards seem to mean nothing in Eritrea, as in practice human rights abuses have been committed by the security forces with total impunity" (AI 2004: 36). Despite such contradictory assessments, the troubling facts regarding the human rights situation in the country, and the "rollbacks" that women ex-fighters witnessed in the aftermath of independence and the uphill battles that women in general have been fighting in their quest for equality; despite the fact that Eritrean women did not have a long history of political participation, how did they then fare in getting representation in decision-making positions?

As already discussed, constitutional and legislative provisions might have generically provided for the equal participation and representation of women in decision-making positions. But it is important to examine the representation of women in government as this is one indication of the opportunities given to women. More importantly, women's representation needs to be seen against the long and often repeated promises made by the EPLF/PFDJ to encourage women to participate equally in the socio-economic and political affairs of the country. Since persons in government in Eritrea are mostly appointed, the following section discusses how women have fared in being represented by the PFDJ in both higher governmental posts and in international affairs.

Table 4.1.1: Gender Breakdown in Higher Government Posts

Government Post	1998				2002				2009			
	M	F	Total	%F	M	F	Total	% F	M	F	Total	%F
National Assembly	117	33	150	22	117	33	150	22	117	33	150	22
Ministers	15	2	17	11.7	14	3	17	17.6	13	4	17	23.53
Regional⁶⁰ Governors	6	0	6	0	6	0	6	0	5	1	6	16.67
Sub-Regional Governors	50	3	53	5.7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Director Generals⁶¹	39	2	41	4.9	39	2	41	4.9	82	6	88	5.67
Directors	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	222	58	280	20.7
Unit heads	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	950	447	1397	31.9
High Court Judges	75	14	89	16	22	3	25	12	31	4	35	11.4
Regional Court Judges	-	-	-	-	36	5	41	12	102	12	114	10.5
Attorneys	-	-	-	-	45	9	54	16.6	-	-	-	-

Source: CEDAW/C/ERI/1-2 and the NUEW's 30th Anniversary Conference Papers (2009).

To reiterate, Eritrea is divided into six administrative zones (*zobas*). Currently there is only one woman regional governor, and only three of 53 (5.7 percent) sub-regional administrators are women. In the NA composed of seventy-five Central Committee members of the PFDJ, as well as sixty representatives elected from the regional assemblies, with another fifteen representatives elected from the Eritrean diaspora, women make up 22 percent, which is 33 of 150 members in total.

Have these women's representatives specifically raised issues of particular concern to women? Adhanet Andom (September 2010 int.), who was one of the women who constituted amongst the 22 percent of women in the NA, says:

⁶⁰ With the declaration of Proclamation 86/1996 it was decided to divide the country into six zones (regions). These are Central (Ma'ekel), Southern (Debub), Anseba, Northern Red Sea Region (Semenawi Keyeh-Bahri), Southern Red Sea Region (Debubawi Keyeh-Bahri), and Gash-Barka.

⁶¹ The data on director generals for 1998-2002 was taken from Heyde (2001: 3-13).

“Discussions at the NA were not women specific instead general concerns of the time related to economic conditions, workers issues, and the market. Women issues might be raised in the cabinet. However, given that the government was privatizing its plants, members of the NA voiced their concern with regard to workers’ conditions once the privatization of the plants is over. And also how to deal with issues of nepotism that might arise once those plants have been transferred. The response of the government was that it cannot manage all these plants by disregarding other important issues. So many critical issues that concern the society as a whole were raised and there were many intelligent women in the NA. Nevertheless, in the course of these events the border war with Ethiopia ensued, which forced the government to focus its attention to the war suspending activities of the NA.”

This 22 percent presence of women parliamentarians in the NA remained unchanged over the years as can be noticed from the above table; while the number of women holding ministerial positions rose to four in 2009 from two in 1998, with “neither being perceived as a major political player” (Campbell 2005: 386). Campbell’s view has been reiterated in an interview, where:

“The capacity of these women Ministers to influence and draft policies or even promote and defend their views is completely absent. Of course, they are formally heading key political posts and are officially in key decision-making posts, but their impact in the political arena has yet to be felt. Women in this country, in general, and these women, in particular, despite the name that they have, are just encouraged to have jobs and not careers. They do not have the freedom that would allow them to change the society’s attitude toward women, and address the many challenges that fall in the category of women’s issues or perspectives” (‘H’ August 2010 int.).

The four women, who are present in the cabinet of 17, hold the positions of Minister of Justice, Labor and Human Welfare, Health, and Tourism.⁶²

⁶² One of the government of Eritrea’s outspoken critics, Saleh AA Younis, states in his article titled: *Isaias Afewerki’s Five Stages of Dealing with Crisis*, posted on awate.com on March 8, 2012, that he “gave the PFDJ credits for being advocates of women’s rights—despite the fact that they were the last country in sub-Saharan Africa to, for example, make female genital mutilation illegal; and they have no independent advocacy group for women’s rights; they have made many mothers, wives and sisters miserable, they treat young girls as concubines, etc. But, by golly, they have “high representation of females” in the government.” And that high representation is meant to

Even now despite their slightly increased number none of them is thought to have any major political clout. The other development that might be considered noteworthy is the appointment of a woman governor,⁶³ six director generals and fifty-eight directors, which did not exist in both 1998 and 2002. However, compared to the number of men holding equivalent positions, these numbers are trivial. The number of women high court judges decreased dramatically from 14 in 1998 to 4 in 2009, while the number of women regional court judges increased to 12 in 2009 from 5 in 2002. What also needs to be taken into consideration in this context is the dramatic increase in the number of men regional court judges from 36 in 2002 to 102 in 2009, and their decrease in high court positions from 75 in 1998 to 31 in 2009. Seen in that context, it appears there is no significant progress made in the representation of women. What can be concluded from the above is that despite the constitutional and legislative provisions, there exists huge gender disparity in higher governmental posts. This shows that implementation of the supposedly gender favorable policies is stalled not only because of socio-cultural barriers but also because of the PFDJ's unwillingness to appoint more women. In this case it would make sense for the party to openly acknowledge that although certain advances have been made, it has not confronted the struggle for women liberation and gender equality with the same courage that it did during the revolution. That would, then, pave the way for further discussions on how to incorporate women's specific interests in PFDJ policies.

The following table displays the representation of women in international affairs, in particular in the country's Foreign Service. This challenges the

refer to the four. For further details on the article see <http://awate.com/isaias-afwerkis-five-stages-of-dealing-with-crisis/>, accessed March 17, 2012.

⁶³ Currently, Eritrea has only one woman governor.

PFDJ's supposed strong political will and commitment to empower women politically.

4.2. In International Affairs

Table 4.2.1: Representation of Women in International Affairs

Post	1998			2002			2006			2009		
	M	F	%F	M	F	%F	M	F	% F	M	F	% F
Minister	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Director Generals	-	-	-	8	0	0	7	0	0	5	2	28.6
Directors	-	-	-	13	1	7	13	2	13	9	3	25
Unit Heads				29	1	3	0	0	0	21	4	16
Ambassadors	16	2	11.1	29	1	3.3	29	1	3	30	0	0
Counselors	12	1	8	8	1	11						
Consul Generals	5	1	10.7	4	1	20	5	1	16	14	0	0
1st Secretaries	19	0	0	24	2	7.6	24	2	7.6	27	3	10
2nd Secretaries	30	1	3.12	35	2	5.4	35	2	5	24	0	0
3rd Secretaries	21	2	8.0	4	5	55.5	4	5	55	2	2	50
Attaches				4	1	20	4	1	20	2	0	0
Total	104	7	6.7	159	15	9.4	122	13	10.6	135	14	10.3

Sources: CEDAW/C/ERI/1-2, the NUEW 30th Anniversary Conference Papers (2009), and III CEDAW Draft 2011.

The statistics show a slight increase in representation of women from 1998 to 2009. However, a closer analysis of the data clearly demonstrates that the top echelons of the Foreign Ministry and its foreign missions abroad are still occupied by men; although female two director generals have been appointed in 2009, for the first time in the Ministry's history. The number of women directors rose to three in 2009 from two in 2006. What needs to be noted here is the fact that with the slight increase in the number of women, for instance directors, the number of men holding the same positions also slightly decreases. Although this requires further corroboration, it could be seen as a positive progress

since women are not appointed after new positions of directorship have been created.⁶⁴

There are two unsubstantiated reasons put forward for the lack of significant change in the number of women appointed to undertake international affairs jobs. Firstly, it has been argued that there are not many women who have acquired qualifications or the necessary experience in the field of international relations to undertake jobs related to international affairs. This was stated in the question and answer session of a Conference, organized by the NUEW in preparation of the III CEDAW Report on May 31, 2011, at the NUEW's Headquarters in Asmara.⁶⁵ This reasoning was not automatically accepted by some participants as a judicious answer, as they thought it is unfair to argue so while there are only few men who are qualified in international relations. The rejoinder put to that argument by the organizers and presenters of the draft was that the argument needs to be seen in relative terms, and that relative assessment still shows that men seem to either have more experience or qualification to be represented in higher numbers than women in the Foreign Service. Now, the question that deserves examination is why women are not acquiring qualification and experience in international relations.

The preliminary research carried out by Kifleyesus and Abel (2003: 23) mentioned earlier provides an insight to the situation. The research found out that 91 percent of the young UoA female students thought a woman has to get married before the age of 30. Women are not only expected to get married before the age of 30 but also develop the necessary qualification and experience within that period of time; otherwise they risk being looked down upon for presumably not having the right

⁶⁴ If that happens to be the case, then women are well on the way to compete against men for high-ranking decision-making positions.

⁶⁵ Having being invited, the researcher attended the conference.

“qualification” to undertake international affairs and political jobs. The crux of the matter is not only to be found in how far the PDFJ goes to address that issue but also in how far Eritrean society has progressed in bringing about change in its perceptions of women’s roles in the society. Some argue that the revolution had a huge impact in changing the perception of the society; while realists see the revolution as triggering a positive change which either was not followed upon after independence by the PFDJ or disappeared after being submerged in the society that was not as “progressive” measured through EPLF’s culture, as articulated by a participant in group discussion, who is an official of the NUEW:

“During the war for independence we fought a double-struggle: fighting the enemy, Ethiopia, and male supremacy. We did not only help liberate Eritrea but we managed to change the behavior of our male comrades in practice. However, after independence we were submerged in big ocean [the society with backward attitudes towards women]. The credit for behavioral change during the struggle goes to both women and men fighters. Men fighters used to tease us remember ‘equality only up to the corridors of Asmara.’ We [NUEW] have struggle yet to come, and that struggle is with EPLF [PFDJ] for it was saying ‘no victory without women’s participation during the revolution.’ We knew EPLF while it had nothing and it also knew us while we had nothing” (GD2 notes: Nakfa, August 2010).

From the above perspective two major issues stand out: the aphorism that “equality only up to the corridors of Asmara,” which was used by male fighters to remind female fighters that their liberation era equality would not be sustainable after independence; and the notion that it is clear women have to fight for their equality, but that is to be sorted out between the NUEW and the EPLF. Perhaps, male fighters of the EPLF were right in that the equality experienced by men and women during the revolution is not going to be automatically guaranteed after independence. However, women fighters failed to understand the implication of this notion beyond its cliché. And the cliché might have been forgotten but the truth remains that practical equality between the

sexes has yet to be fully realized. On the second issue, where the discussant clearly articulated that the struggle for gender equality continues but it will be sorted out between the NUEW, representing women, and the PFDJ, as a trustworthy vanguard that expounded on the mantra of “no victory without women’s participation during the revolution.” If this has not been sorted out in the last twenty-years of independence, when will it be addressed?

Secondly, it has been stated, albeit often unofficially, that women have different priorities and that even qualified women would forgo waiting long in the line for less paid political positions in favor of other better paid jobs outside the public service. Now, at the outset what is important to recall is the fact that it is the PFDJ and not voters who determines the composition of the Foreign Ministry personnel and persons appointed in Foreign Service. This resonates with the notion that it is parties and not voters who determine the composition of elective offices, for instance in Western Europe; and that party decisions about political contenders are based on formal and informal sets of rules and practices that vary within and between countries, has been well studied. Those studies have led to the notion of the process of selecting candidates in terms of interacting dimensions of supply and demand. What this in essence means is that identifying the factors that influence the supply side of the equation, which is what factors influence the decision of the candidates who come forward in contending for political offices; and equally identifying the factors that influence the demand side, which is on what bases do party selectors choose the different type of candidates that they do (Lovenduski 2000: 93). It is obvious that both sides of the question have an influence on the outcome. Thus, when both sides of the equation—supply and demand factors—are taken into account in the nomination of women candidates, decision-makers in parties discriminate against women; but, also in many parties fewer women than men come forward

as prospective candidates, although women seldom get chosen in proportion to their known availability (Lovenduski 2000: 94).

Now, in this context, the first reason mentioned above that there is a shortage of qualified women in Eritrea for such undertaking, does not seem to hold true in its entirety. To begin with there is no public evidence on whether women are offered positions but declined them.

Even if it might be the case that fewer “politically experienced and qualified” women come forward for positions in the Foreign Ministry, which is the supply side of the equation; it is not even informally mentioned the fact that selectors within the PFDJ do not only discriminate against such women potential aspirants but also hardly choose in proportion from the pool of women that are available. Moreover, and this perspective is hardly discussed given the political climate in the country; and even those women who are aware that there is systematic discrimination against them going on at the highest levels will never put forward their concerns directly to those responsible for fear of reprisals. This should be understandable enough in a country where the right to freedom of speech and expression is recognized in the Constitution Article 19 (2) but has never been allowed in practice; and it can have dire consequences if any such constitutional right is invoked to criticize the sole ruling party, the PFDJ.

Even though one takes the official argument at a face value accepting that there are not enough qualified women, evidently the question that should follow is what needs to be done in order to have more qualified women as political aspirants; albeit this contradicts the reality in the country that it is not merit that counts rather loyalty to the PFDJ. This outlook of the researcher is opposed by ‘N’ in an interview (October 2011), who argued loyalty or merit: “There are a lot of women who are more loyal than the men to the PFDJ. But those women are not wanted to be in the system. Educated women are not needed.” This observation

suggests that the government, which bestowed in itself all rights, is not ready to give up some of these rights. Equally women who feel marginalized have to thrust and push for an enabling environment which does not exist at the moment.

Leaving that argument aside for a moment, it can be discussed about what needs to be done to address the shortage of qualified women in the country, as their number is still small in comparison to those supposedly qualified men. What lessons can be deduced from the experience of other countries on such issues? In other regions of the world, pressure from feminists can help to alter party rules. This happened through the adoption of quotas for women candidates in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), where exceptional efforts needed to qualify as a candidate were sharply reduced resulting in eligibility for candidacy of many women (Lovenduski 2000: 94). But as will be seen in the next section, since the adoption of quotas for the election of women to regional and national assemblies in Eritrea, much progress has not been made. And even then, there appear neither alternative apprenticeship mechanisms nor other alternatives to prepare women for political careers in the country.

Another successful example is that of South Africa. South African women began their resistance against the apartheid state at the turn of the 20th century (Geisler 2000: 607f) and continued to do so until the collapse of the system. Nevertheless, they acquired membership to the African National Congress⁶⁶ from 1943 onwards (Britton 2006: 63), a date which coincided with the establishment of the ANC Women's League (Geisler 2000: 608). The African National Congress and the African National Congress Women's League were banned by the apartheid state in 1960. Consequently, South African women in exile actively provided the

⁶⁶ The ANC was one of the main political parties that fought for South Africa's liberation from apartheid, founded in 1912 on a philosophy of multiracialism.

foundation for the exiled wing of the struggle against the apartheid state. Along with it, they received military training in Africa and the Soviet Union, pursued advanced academic degrees in Europe and in Africa, and strengthened their international network with women at international conferences (Britton 2006: 63). Thus, by the end of the 1980s South African women in exile and at home had learned lessons from the discussions and debates of the United Nations Conference of Women held in Nairobi and clearly articulated that women's emancipation was not just a social issue but also included political and economic rights. Using one of the buzzwords of the Nairobi Conference—participation in decision-making—women of the African National Congress demanded greater representation in the executive bodies of their party. The Women's Section of the African National Congress exerted persistent pressure in ensuring the African National Congress' constitutional guidelines of 1989 addressed gender equality (Geisler 2000: 610ff). Acceding to that demand, the African National Congress leadership agreed 'in principle' on an internal gender quota of 30 percent. Following that, and as a first step, the African National Congress Women's Section was mandated to initiate a national movement to formulate a Charter of Women's Rights so that women could define issues of greatest concern to them. The African National Congress Women's League was officially re-launched in Durban in August 1990. Even though the League members at the time believed that male comrades were still inclined to subsume women's interests under the broader national agenda, the exiled African National Congress Women's League returned with the recognition of duty to ensure that the mistakes of their African sisters elsewhere were not repeated (Geisler 2000: 610ff). Having already understood that women's participation in liberation struggles for example in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe did not guarantee them a place

in formal politics, South African women organized themselves and their arguments before the first elections (Britton 2006: 63).

South African women's political involvement might be rooted in the liberation struggle against apartheid but unlike women in other African liberation movements, who either thought or expected emancipation as a by-product of national liberation, they knew they had to act quickly during the transitional period or else risk being sidelined. Although in 1980 women's emancipation was considered a contentious subject and feminism was rejected as a western bourgeoisie concept within the struggle, the African National Congress in 1990 declared that women's emancipation needed to be addressed in its own right within the African National Congress itself, the mass democratic process and in the society as a whole (Geisler 2000: 605f). Geisler observes that this statement opened a significant political space for women in the transition period and was exceptional in the Southern African context and it gave rise to exceptional outcomes. In the 1994 elections 111 women entered parliament, a considerable change from previous history of parliaments in South African, where the total number of women never exceeded eight and often was lower (Geisler 200: 606).

What makes South Africa an exception? In an era of gender balance, South Africa might not be hailed as exceptional, remarkable as it is, for just having 42.3 percent of women in its parliament (refer to Appendix 5). What is rather extraordinary is how the Women's National Coalition used the post-conflict climate to demand more rights and representations for women, and for the adoption of various affirmative action measures taken by different political parties. South African women demanded more rights and representations in the transition period arguing for their contribution in the fight against the apartheid system. In addition, the new international trends obviously were on their side. Again, this is consistent with what happened elsewhere, for instance, in the Ugandan case,

where women asked for similar things citing similar arguments. Conflict situations do disrupt static gender roles that restrict women to the domestic sphere, and allow them to take part in guerrilla war and bush life; and having done so women always ask for more rights once conflicts are over. But not all women succeed in getting their demands met.

In the South African case what is exceptional is the focus of the Women's National Coalition, which was launched in 1991 and unified over one hundred women's groups, including representatives of all major political parties (Britton 2006: 64). Soon one of the key goals of the Women's Charter became to advance women's equality in the constitution. They did manage to get a place at the negotiating table and even incorporate a clause that expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and aimed for their strategy of assisting women leaders (Britton 2006: 65). Being aware that women's representation in political office would not become a reality by citing their past contributions only, they researched extensively about global political systems in an effort to find an electoral system that would minimize not only ideological cleavages but also ethnic tensions and facilitate the election to political offices of subordinated groups. Without their knowledge of the international network of women's activities, the scholarship on feminism, and the lessons they gained from other freedom fighters in the region (Britton 2008: 118), they might not have achieved their current political status. Thus, South Africa adopted a List Proportional Representation system in 1994. The South African National Assembly is elected through a multimember district electoral system with a closed party list-PR. The 400 members of the National Assembly are chosen every five years through a fixed-term direct elections—200 of them drawn from regional lists and 200 from national lists (Britton 2008: 118). Thus, once the system was in place, the Women's National Coalition members pressured the male leadership in their respective

parties to advance women in their party lists. Most parties were able to increase women's place on party lists through some sort of affirmative action measure, including the active recruitment of women candidates into the party. However, the African National Congress took the most visible action by institutionalizing a 30 percent quota for women candidates, which was a target African National Congress Women's League had been fighting for so long (Britton 2006: 66).

In the Eritrean case, unlike that of the South African case, the EPLF never declared women's emancipation needs to be addressed in its own right either within EPLF itself, or the transition period, or even in the society as a whole. Instead, in the aftermath of independence 'N' (October 2011 int.) recalls the president of the country in a meeting with leaders and members of the NUEW declaring the NUEW "as a free union and it could do as it pleases, while advising its leaders and members to get tough though, and know more about their rights mentioning that underground movements against women, in particular, in relation to their rights of land ownership were emerging."⁶⁷ Using that opportunity 'N' (October 2011 int.) advised the NUEW to take a middle path and advised the NUEW not to declare complete autonomy, as by doing so union might lose its representatives within the EPLF; of course the EPLF would also lose its crucial support of women in the peoples assemblies (*baitos*). Thus, 'N' urged the NUEW to implement its programs with the backing of the EPLF but the union just kept quiet. What this reveals is that despite the possibility to learn from the South African and Ugandan experiences happening at similar points in history, women fighters of the EPLF and the NUEW both missed a crucial window of opportunity.

⁶⁷ It is very likely that the President was referring to "the 1992 clandestine postwar men's mobilization aimed at blocking women from gaining land, which resulted in women marching to his office and asking for intervention, which led to imprisonment of several of the members of the clandestine group" (Connell 1998: 191).

4.3. In Regional Assemblies and Community Courts

As the following table indicates the first local (then called provincial) elections were held in 1992, where women scored an average of 16 percent representation. According to Tsegereda (2004: 23f)⁶⁸ these elections were considered as a positive experience given that women for the first time exercised their political rights to vote and be elected in a society that had no such prior experience. It is, however, important to note that international observers do not describe these elections as formal simply because they did not fulfill the criteria that would have categorized them as such. In these transitional elections, Tronvoll (2009: 48f) states, “Political parties were prohibited and individual candidates were not allowed to communicate any political program or platform to their constituency. Furthermore, there were no secret ballots and the EPLF changed the ‘electoral procedures’ during the process due to a lot of confusion on registration/nomination of candidates.” The prohibition of candidates from communicating their political programs and the lack of platform to discuss with the electorate issues considered paramount would be the hallmark of the elections that followed. These transitional elections, thus, certainly left negative antecedence, besides giving women the right to exercise their political rights. And these constraints should have been fought off as early as possible; but unfortunately, the majority electorate was ecstatic by the euphoria of independence and failed to understand the impact of such constraints on future elections. Those that might have understood the negative effects could have been prohibited from participating in the transitional elections, as political parties were not allowed to contest the elections.

⁶⁸ Unofficial translation from the original in Tigrinya done by the author.

Provincial Assembly Elections, 1992

Assembly	Number	Members of Assembly		Total	%F
		M	F		
Region	10	542	110	652	17
Province	184	2796	446	3342	14
Village	1065	8748	941	9689	10
Town	11	242	68	310	22
Total	1270	12,328	1565	13,893	16

Source: Tsegereda Woldegioris 2004

Before examining the results of the two other elections that followed the 1992 provincial elections, it is imperative to discuss the election procedures and the electoral system employed in these elections.

According to Tronvoll (2009: 53) the mandate of the 1997 elections was not properly communicated to voters, who believed that ballot was to elect regional assembly members. In fact, the vote had a threefold mandate. First, electing candidates for regional (*zoba*) assemblies; secondly, electing candidates for the Constituent Assembly; and thirdly, electing members for the NA (Tronvoll 2009: 53). As if this is not confusing already, a parallel election was held with a separate ballot for female representatives. Therefore, a double ballot was used instead of a single one, whereby one was used to fill the reserved seats for women with a pink ballot paper, and another one for open seats with a blue ballot paper (Tronvoll 2009: 54). Moreover, it becomes even more difficult to discuss women's issues in general, let alone to press for the inclusion of specific women's rights, in the absence of platforms where political agendas of candidates could be discussed. The electoral system employed was a multiple-member constituency with a majority vote; and within this system the election for reserved seats was delimited differently from that of an open one, where female representatives in the reserved seats had an electorate of between 8,000 and 10,000 people,

whereas those in the open election had an electorate of approximately 4,000 to 5,000 people in the *Maekel Zoba* (Tronvoll 2009: 54). In addition, in response to the 1992 provincial elections, candidates were given only five days of campaigning to display their posters showing their photos, express their background and experience, and state what they recognized as political issues, which were in line with the government's development policy (Tronvoll 2009: 54).

Table 4.3.1 Results of the 2nd (1997) and 3rd (2004) Zoba Assembly Elections in Comparison⁶⁹

Region/ Zoba	Term	Number of Assembly Members			Female			% of Female
		M	F	Total	Compt.	Quota	Total	
Central	3 rd	42	22	64	1	21	22	34
	2 nd	46	28	74	6	22	28	37
Anseba	3 rd	41	13	54	1	12	13	24
	2 nd	48	19	67	0	19	19	28
Debub	3 rd	54	19	73	0	19	19	26
	2 nd	56	23	79	1	22	23	30
Gash Barka	3 rd	44	19	63	3	16	19	30
	2 nd	52	22	74	1	21	22	29.7
N. Red Sea	3 rd	43	16	59	2	14	16	27.7
	2 nd	48	20	68	0	20	20	29.5
S. Red Sea	3 rd	26	9	35	0	9	9	25.7
	2 nd	27	10	37	0	10	10	27
Total	3 rd	250	98	348	7	91	98	28
	2 nd	277	122	399	8	114	122	30.5

Source: Tsegereda Woldegioris 2004, and the NUEW 30th Anniversary Conference Papers (2009).

⁶⁹ Although Tsegereda Woldegioris in her 2004 paper and the NUEW's research papers for its 30th anniversary show that the 2nd round of *zoba* elections were held in 1996, Tronvoll (2009: 53) states the first elections - since he does not count the 1992 local elections as a major elections that deserve to be called the first official because they did not fulfill the criteria that should have characterized them as such - for new *zoba* assemblies were held in the first two months of 1997, ending with the capital region, *Ma'ekel*, on March 1, 1997. Perhaps, then the NUEW is referring the 1997 elections as if being held in 1996 simply either because the preparations and even elections in some *zobas* might have taken place by late 1996 or that it just might have been mistaken, or that there is a reason for that, which the researcher is not aware of.

Table 4.3.1 demonstrates that as of 2004 women had an average of 28 percent representation in the *zoba* assemblies of the country; with highest presence being scored in the Central (*Ma'ekel*) region at 34 percent; and the lowest being 24 percent in the *Anseba zoba*. In all the *zobas*, the number of women elected in 2004 as parliamentarians showed a slight decrease from that of 1997. In the *Ma'ekel* and *Anseba zobas* the total number of women elected in 2004 decreased almost more than 5 numbers in comparison with that of 1997; whereas in *Zobas Debub, Gash-Barka, Northern Red Sea and Southern Red Sea* their number dropped by less than 5. In addition, a near majority of the women who made it to the *zoba* assemblies in all the six *zobas* were elected through quota, by competing amongst themselves, while only a very few or just 8 of them were elected in an open competition against men. This number dwindled to 7 in the third round of *zoba* elections. In addition in most *zobas*, with the exception of *Gash-Barka* and *Northern Red Sea*, the number of women elected through non-reserved seats also decreased. In addition, in the second round of *zoba* assembly elections no woman was successfully elected as a *zoba* chairperson or secretary (see Appendix 6), although in the third round of elections, two women—one in the *Anseba zoba* as a chairwoman, and the other in *Northern Red Sea zoba* as a secretary—were elected. This can be seen as a positive development in the face Eritrea's male dominated political arena.

Thus far, what has been dealt with is the descriptive analysis of the political representation of women, which demonstrated the huge disparity in the number of women and men holding political (appointed or elected) posts. Clearly the gap between intention (policies) and realization (implementation) is wide. But it is also fundamentally important to move beyond descriptive analysis and address some pertinent substantive issues as well. Thus, there are two major issues of concern that deserve to be addressed here. These are how the overall slight decline in the

number of women who made it to NA from the second to the third round of elections should be addressed; and why have women not yet even filled the 30 percent seats reserved for them.

Experiences of other countries, for instance Sweden, demonstrates that the high progress of women attained in leadership positions was a result of diverse factors ranging from social change, to high educational attainment, to increased membership of women in workforce, and to change in the family structure supplemented by specific government policies. In addition, since the 1970s organized women also had played a huge impact in bringing about change vis-à-vis women's political representation. These women used many tactics. They pressed their parties to propose women candidates and place them in favorable positions to win elections. Furthermore, they campaigned relentlessly, promoting women while making proposals to their parties to put women into better positions on party lists. Ultimately they acted as watchdogs protesting when reversals occurred (Lovenduski 2000: 97). So, what Eritrea is missing is typically these types of measures. There need to be not only discussions on the importance of increasing the representation of women in decision-making positions and recommendations on how to go about implementing certain measures for the promotion of women; but also the NUEW, by the virtue of its status and the monopoly of power it wields as women's representative at the national level, must use credible threats against its patron, the PFDJ, to force it to initiate certain measures and implement them in promoting women. This is incumbent upon the NUEW, in the absence of other organized women's advocacy groups in the country, which the NUEW does not appear to consider. Had the NUEW not been oblivious to this reality, even the slightest drop in figures, as noticed above, should have been enough for it to resort to these actions. However, that has yet to happen. Asked about why even women have not been able to fill the 30 percent seats reserved for them

Luul (September 2010 int.) replies, “Errors were made in nominating the right number of women to fill these reserved seats. That being said, we have learned from the past elections on how to get the necessary and adequate number of women get nominated in order to fill the 30 percent reserved seats in future elections.”

Technical errors might have happened, but the NUEW also needs to seriously deliberate on whether the kind of electoral system adopted in earlier elections—which is a multiple-member constituency system with majority vote—is favorable to increase the representation of women. Experiences from many other countries show that this is the least favorable electoral system. The leading countries in women’s political representation such as Rwanda, to quote one example close to home, use List Proportional Representation electoral systems. This in combination with its quota system has resulted in more than 50 percent representation of women in Rwanda’s parliament. Whether the NUEW will consider support for LPR in the future remains to be seen.

Replying to question why women haven’t even filled the 30 percent seats reserved for them, Adhanet argues it was due to lack of awareness. Women need to be made aware and be encouraged so that they can demand to be elected rather than waiting to be requested to run. Also encouragement needs to come in the appropriate form. For instance, initially there were no incentives or salary for regional and NA members; however, in the second round of NA and *zoba* assembly elections salary was allocated for each Member of Parliament and as a result many women flocked to run for positions in *zoba* assemblies by justifying their financial difficulties and personal problems. Unfortunately this diluted the essence of parliamentary merit. One should not run for the quest of money if not ready to assume responsibility on public service (Adhanet September 2010 int.).

A sort of comprehensive rejoinder encompassing the above perspectives is also given by N' (October 2011 int.), who states:

“The issue of women not being able to fill the seats reserved for them at the national levels needs to be seen from different angles and levels. These are including whether women are organized to claim their rights? The answer obviously is no. Sadly, women are extremely passive, as they are not claiming their rights at all. Some women know what the laws say about this issue, but they prefer to remain silent. Moreover, those women who know what the laws say regarding this issue do not take the initiative to inform the majority of other women with no clues. This largely is happening due the lack a favorable political atmosphere to organize and discuss issues of common interest. The major obstacle, of course, is the system being a male structure.”

Nevertheless, the question here is whose job it is to undertake awareness measures. What should these awareness measures focus on? Why is running for *zoba* assemblies associated with solving one's financial problems?

These questions compel one to address the purpose of elections, at least those held thus far, in Eritrea and how they were administered. According to Yemane Gebreab, head of the Department of Political Affairs in the EPLF/PFDJ (quoted in Tronvoll 2009:55):

“The purpose of the election [the 1997 one] was threefold: first, to secure people's participation along the line of government priorities and to let them know the importance of elections; secondly, to make sure that the people do not look at ethnicity, kinship, village candidates, or narrow regionalism, but for the national issues; and lastly to enhance the role of women, youth and 'minorities' in national processes.”

One can conclude, then, that elections are meant to provide an educational platform for women to exercise their political rights along the guidelines provided by the government and not expect anything beyond that. Perhaps, then, those women who run during the second round of *zoba* assembly elections citing their financial and personal problems understood very well that they would neither have the platform to raise issues of concern to them as a group nor the freedom necessary to influence policies. It is, indeed, a contradiction that the purpose of

elections held in the country to date would be nothing more than procedural in nature, if the above explanation by Yemane is anything to go by. This, indeed, is an irony given the fact the government and its PFDJ officials made it a habit of criticizing other countries that hold regular elections as practicing procedural rather than substantive democracy.

Local Administration Elections (2002)

In the 2002 local administration elections a substantial number of women were elected as area or village administrators or deputies. For instance, out of the 395 administrators and deputies elected in the Southern *zoba* 47 (11 percent) were women. Out of these, four are administrators and the remaining 43 are deputies. Although this figure is still very small, it marks a considerable step forward from the situation before 2002, when only three women—one administrator and two deputies—were serving as local administrators in the entire Southern *zoba*.⁷⁰

Table 4.3.2: Results of the First (2003) Community Court Magistrate Elections

Region	M	F	T	%F
Central	127	47	174	27.0
Southern	440	179	619	28.9
Anseba	273	54	327	16.5
N. R. Sea Region	69	30	99	30.3
S. R. Sea Region	67	23	90	25.6
Gash-Barka	399	66	465	14.2
Total	1,375	399	1,774	22.5

Source: Eritrea: Country Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, March 2004.

As can be understood from the above table, nationwide 399 women, making up 22.5 percent of the total, were elected as community court judges in the 2003 community court magistrate elections.⁷¹ More than 90

⁷⁰ Data on this section is entirely taken the 2004 Eritrea Country Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁷¹ This was the first-ever nationwide community court magistrate elections to take place.

of them were elected as middle magistrates in the three-judge courts. Moreover, in order to improve the capacity of women in legal matters, the Ministry of Justice opened a Paralegal Training Center for Women in 2000. In its first round, the training center graduated 90 women drawn from all ethnic groups, who were given a three-year legal training. In 2003 they were assigned to their communities to work as staff of regional courts, interpreters, and advisers on gender issues. What is encouraging is in both the 2002 local administration elections and in the 2003 community court magistrate elections, women were elected by directly competing against men, without having to resort to the quota system. One example of such successful women directly elected by the people through an open competition without having to resort to an affirmative action is currently presiding in the community court in Nakfa. This, certainly, should be seen as a positive development. However, are these judges aware of international conventions and laws against discrimination of women? The Committee on CEDAW expressed its concern that, "The provisions of the Convention are not widely known by judges, lawyers and prosecutors...and hence called an integral part of legal education and the training of judicial officers, including judges, lawyers and prosecutors, so as to establish firmly in the country a legal culture supportive of women's equality and non-discrimination."⁷²

Having provided descriptive analyses, revealing the considerable gender gap that exists between the sexes, and some of the major questions that arose in relation to that, it is imperative to extend the investigation and examine the injustices of such a situation. Why are women under-represented in political power and decision-making positions in Eritrea; and why should they be represented in any greater number than they are now?

⁷² Please refer to <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html>, for the Committee's recommendations to Eritrea.

As already mentioned, the problem of the political representation of women is historical. Women had been denied full political rights in Eritrea, and, thus, excluded from participating in political affairs. Beginning in the late 18th century when military duty, property ownership, and political citizenship were extended to all male members of the society, gender automatically became a political issue. And since that time the male has become recognized as the head of the family or household, and by that virtue the authority to rule his family and to represent its interests in the “outside” world was endowed upon him (Sapiro 1981: 701). Even when political reform was called for in the 19th century, it failed to incorporate women, as it focused only on how to make men who did not own a substantial amount of property politically significant members of the society and thereby grant them with political rights, including the right to representation (Sapiro 1981: 701). Therefore, beginning at that time proponents of equal political rights for women had to demonstrate that women did not only have separate interests from those of their fathers, brothers, and husbands, and also demanded the right to own property and other conditions deemed necessary for their equal political treatment on equal footing with men. To realize this, Humm (2003: 98) states that women in the United States and in England began mobilizing for suffrage movements that later resulted in the creation of a new political identity for women with legal advances and public emancipation. This was followed in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, an era commonly referred to as the first-wave of feminism, by women’s struggles directed towards eliminating barriers in education, in employment and property ownership, and in achieving suffrage rights (Paxton et al. 2006: 902). However, even after women demanded and relentlessly struggled for formal political rights and successfully achieved those, representative democracy proved neither inclusive nor responsive to their demands. By and large, Phillips (1995:

66) argues, representative democracy failed to address the distinct position of women within the gendered division of labor that compels them to undertake lower paid jobs and unpaid tasks of caring for others. Thus, the recognition of these and other challenges posed by both patriarchy and their unprivileged position within the society has led to continuous struggles, and also equally contentious debates. Thus, during the second-wave feminism, which began in the late 1960s, women's movements were not only skeptical of representative democracy's ability to integrate women into the political arena but were also hesitant of parliaments, parties, and elections with regards to their capacity to bringing about the equal representation of women in the political arena. Therefore, women around the world, in particular in the U.S., campaigned for more liberty, reproductive rights, and the elimination of patriarchy. This resulted in the introduction of new forms of participatory and radical democracy within women's groups, where consciousness-raising, rotating responsibilities and non-hierarchical dialogue and deliberative forms of decision-making were considered as the best way to bring about the necessary change (Squires 2008: 198). From this focus in civil society in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the apparent distancing of women's movements from representative democracy, a new form of state feminism emerged. This state feminism has since the 1980s focused more on the need for gender equality in political representation. As of the 1990s it has gained considerable consensus and momentum from across different corners. Soon after, international and national women's movements called for policies of "inclusion" in order to facilitate the entry of more women into high-ranking political decision-making positions; and this call has been accompanied by the discourses of "critical mass," "gender quotas," and "gender balance" (Paxton et al. 2006: 902). While these debates range from the threshold needed to bring about the equal representation of women to what

women should represent and whether the notion of “women” as such should be taken as a category continue to be debated, contemporary gender theorizing has entered a new era.

Despite the emergence of state feminism, and its impact on representative democracy and on the perception of feminist movements in western countries, women’s movements’ critique of liberal democracy today continues to focus on two aspects. Firstly, proponents of equality argue gender-neutrality can be realized by following the strategy of equality in a patriarchal society. And that is what the NUEW appears to advocate in Eritrea. But the argument that the liberal equality approach to integrate women into politics by making them formally equal under the same conditions as men has already been rejected by difference proponents, who claim and criticize this liberal equality approach as having already failed to bring about the necessary change vis-à-vis women. Secondly, critiques of the strategy of equality, otherwise known as those difference proponents, argue that for equality between the sexes to be realized the institutions of representative democracy and its principle of representation need to be transformed and re-defined. While the proponents of equality were convinced that gender-neutrality can, of course, be realized by following the strategy of equality, the difference proponents believe that it is unlikely to achieve gender-neutrality in a patriarchal society (Squires 2008: 115f). With these debates between the two—equality and difference theorists—continuing unabated, the importance of displacing the dichotomous options of representative or participatory politics has become relevant (Squires 2008: 214). Will the struggle for women’s equality, then, coalesce in one perspective and strategy? Most probably it will not. Since the beginning, the struggle for women’s liberation and equality has been seen to mean different things at different times, as demonstrated by the continuous shifts in its demands and strategies throughout its history. However, that has been

recognized and contemporary discourses on feminism have entered a new era, where strategies of inclusion and reversal have been found inadequate in dealing with the contemporary challenges that women face (Squires 2008: 116). And it is this reality that convinced Squires (2008: 116) to assert that the present moment of gender theorizing is characterized by the diversity perspective and the strategy of displacement, the aim of which is to explore and understand the complex negotiations of existing archetypes, rather than resolve them.

As might be understood from the above analyses, thus far, the struggle for gender equality in Eritrea has yet to find its place within these trajectories of history. And any initiative to put it into an international perspective is likely to be considered as undesirable as Western feminism, which is associated in the eyes of the NUEW as mischaracterization of the particular lived experiences of Third World women. This could be seen in the context of Mohanty's (1991: 55f) elaboration on the pitfalls and problems associated with the universal application of certain notions without due consideration to local cultures. She queries, and calls for others to do so, when "the notion of gender or sexual difference is being applied universally and cross-culturally. And the methodological approach used in providing such validity is an assumed homogenous notion of the oppression of women as a group, which in turn produces the image of an 'average Third World woman' who leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being 'Third World' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etcetera)."

Even though the perspectives on and strategies needed to bring about gender equality across countries vary, and the struggle undoubtedly continues. Women almost all over the world have been granted equal political rights, at least in principle, after over more than a century of

struggle. In 1890 women did not have the right to vote anywhere in the world; but currently they do with the exception of those living in only one country, Saudi Arabia.⁷³ In 1907, Finland became the first country to elect a female member of parliament, and presently, women make up more than 50 percent of the national legislature in Rwanda, and closer to 50 percent in Sweden.⁷⁴ The first country to reach 10 percent women in its national legislature was the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1946, and in 2005, 60 percent of countries in the world had at least 10 percent of women representation in their national legislatures (Paxton et al. 2006: 898). These figures are quite a far cry from the reality that existed a century ago, although it still needs to be noted that women are substantially underrepresented in the political arena in most countries around the world. Also, it is equally important to remember that the provisions made and the progress achieved thus far have not proved effective enough in addressing issues that particularly affect women in society. Even now in the 21st century in many countries around the world, amongst which Eritrea is a case in point, women have not achieved the critical mass representation needed to bring about the necessary change in politics and decision-making. In Eritrea the initial impetus and context for the weakening of traditional stereotypes and cultures, which have negatively impacted and impeded women from gaining equal political rights, was undoubtedly provided by the revolutionary war for liberation.

⁷³ Saudi Arabia was the only exception until recently. However, it announced in September 2011 that it would grant women the right to vote and contest in municipal elections in 2015. This has been considered as a welcome step towards making women equal to their male counterparts. For more analysis on the decree see Neil MacFarquhar's article on the New York Times, *Saudi Monarch Grants Women Right to Vote*, September 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/26/world/middleeast/women-to-vote-in-saudi-arabia-king-says.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed January 16, 2012.

⁷⁴ Refer to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Classification Database on *Women in National Parliaments* situation as of December 31, 2011, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>, accessed March 31, 2012.

But despite that it has been argued that after independence considerable rollbacks have been witnessed in comparison to the progress women fighters achieved during the revolution era. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the seven hypotheses that have been developed to explain the female political under-representation in general and by contextualizing them vis-à-vis the Eritrean context, in particular.

The Deficit Hypothesis

This notion emanates from the perception that women are less interested in politics than men, and consequently under-represented in the political sphere. Squires (2008: 196) argues, "If women are more undecided, less interested and less knowledgeable about parliamentary politics than men, this could be read not as failing, but as positive statement of disillusionment and discontent. Women find the current form of party politics particularly unappealing, since it fails to represent their concerns or priorities." This is particularly true in poor and developing countries where issues that mainly affect women and their perspectives on socio-economic and political issues are either relegated or marginalized. Thus, the argument that women are under-represented in politics because they are not interested or concerned thereof should not be taken at face value. As has already been mentioned earlier, and reiterated here by Squires, in general the current system of politics is found to be less and less responsive and accommodating of the challenges that women face in their daily lives. Does this hypothesis also hold true in Eritrea? Although the premise still needs to be substantiated that indeed women are less interested in politics, many people (ordinary and officials alike) ostensibly believe, and want others to accept as factual, that women in Eritrea too are less interested in politics. This is despite the fact that empirical research needs to be carried out to substantiate the claim.

The Electorate's Decision

The second premise asserts that it is the electorate's decision why women continue to be under-represented. Voters in general and female voters who hold conservative gender images in particular are guilty of not voting women into political position is the premise behind the electorate's decision. The NUEW (2008: 19) affirms that this hypothesis holds true in the case of Eritrea. The two main reasons for this, according to the NUEW, are: first, some women are concerned that if they vote for fellow women, they will be hampering the caring roles of aspiring political women. And others believe that the public sphere is not best performed and served by women and thus, they prefer to vote for men. The foundations for these arguments can certainly be traced back to history, where a man is not only accepted and celebrated as the head of the family, but also automatically endowed with all the due rights to represent its interests in the public sphere. This also rests on how people are socialized to think about politics and what is considered appropriate or inappropriate role for women, which according to the majority politics definitely is not. What is even bewildering about this in the case of Eritrea is the fact that the NUEW, the sole women's movement in the country, admits through its own research that such arguments based on myth rather than factual evidence are used to thwart women from having equal political representation. The NUEW does little to fight against such arguments that stem from wrong perceptions. In addition, this also needs to be seen against the repeated promises made by the EPLF/PFDJ to undertake all the necessary efforts to sensitize and enhance the awareness of society about the decisive role that women play in the socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country; and hence address any obstacles that they may face. But, as indicated earlier, the sensitization programs so far focused on cultural transformation, whose implicit messages either send the signal that

entrenches the traditional roles of women or that women aspiring for public roles could try if they are capable of juggling both private and public life on their own. Such messages are hardly sensitizing society to either see or accept the concept of a political woman and her participation in politics in positive light.

The Social Structural Theory

The social structure theory is the third theory that states the division of labor prevents women from becoming successful in politics. This, certainly, is true. The division of labor does not only prevent women from becoming successful in politics but also forces them to undertake all the low-paid and unpaid jobs necessary for the reproduction of daily life and the running of the society as it exists today. Then, how does this argument apply in Eritrea? If representative democracy failed to find a satisfactory solution to this quandary, then the totalitarian system is nowhere even near to address it either. Traditionally girls and women are not supposed to dream of, let alone have, a public (political) job in Eritrea. In traditional Eritrea, it is shame for a man to stay at home while a woman is being elected in a people's assembly; and in contemporary Eritrea, "entering politics for some women is [tantamount] to calling an end to their marriage relationship" (NUEW 2008: 19). Again, rather than addressing the real issues that have been preventing women from entering into politics, old hackneyed clichés are being recalled to defend the current unjustifiable and untenable realities.

The Political Structure

The fourth proposition focuses on the political structure. It supposes that state institutions and their mechanisms of representation such as the electoral system, the political culture, and media are institutionally masculine. As a result of this women are being systematically excluded from successfully running for elected office. The fact that state

institutions in Eritrea are typically masculine has been clear to any observer of Eritrean political institutions and political discourse. During the revolution era there was unspoken quota for women to be represented ('N' October 2011 int.). This was in a time when women ex-fighters thought they had more freedom to stand up for their political rights than they do now. Moreover, the fact that the higher echelons of the Eritrean government are dominated by men reveals that institutional masculinity is at work in Eritrea.

Political Parties as Gatekeepers

The fifth theory, political parties as gatekeepers, postulates that the problem of the under-representation of women is not the lack of "supply" of women but a problem of "demand" for women. Lovenduski (2000: 94) states parties do not select and recruit women as candidates for election in their known availability. The sole governing political party in Eritrea is the PFDJ; and the aforementioned analyses on both appointed and elected positions showed that the PFDJ is in practice no different from the other parties (in democratic countries or otherwise) when it comes to recruiting women as candidates for elections. Although some might argue that as long as no genuine elections have taken place, this cannot be substantiated. But it needs to be remembered that it is, undoubtedly, less complicated for sole governing parties, in the absence of competing political parties, to appoint or put women in favorable slates for election. Despite its mantra of portraying itself as a women-friendly, the PFDJ and its top officials have shown more than a fair dose of misogyny by their deeds; and it is obvious that the PFDJ needs to do more than it did so far if it is genuinely interested in narrowing the apparent gender gap that prevails in the country.

The last two hypotheses focus on the notions of direct and indirect discrimination.

Direct Discrimination Proposition

Lovenduski (2000: 87) asserts “research findings on women and democratic politics in Western Europe demonstrate that women are not only under-represented in decision-making positions but also there is pervasive male resistance to women’s presence amongst political elites.” In other words, this means that men politicians do not only discriminate against women politicians but also disparage their very presence in parliament houses. This, for instance, happened in the UK, where a study by researchers from Birkbeck College found out that, “Male MPs pretended to juggle imaginary breasts and jeered ‘melons’ as women made Commons speeches.”⁷⁵ How about in Eritrea? In Eritrea this notion of direct discrimination, male bonding, and resistance to women’s inclusion in political positions takes many forms. The NUEW (2008: 19) claims that, “Some have the perception that the public sphere [politics] is an intriguing male job and as long as women have secure paid job, they should not add much fatigue and jeopardize their stable family life.” Although Eritrean women parliamentarians have yet to experience the kind of mockery that women members of parliaments in other regions of the world face in practice, partly due to the absence of a democratic climate in the country, the direct discrimination that they endure comes informally from men under the guise of “good Samaritans.” Those “good Samaritans” campaign that for their own good women should stay at home and that men should have a monopoly over the hurly-burly world of politics. And in so doing they make women believe that it is for their good, and not because men are resisting their presence in the politics arena.

⁷⁵ See the BBC’s report on Women MPs titled “endure sexist taunts,” December 7, 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4074877.stm, accessed April 4, 2012.

Indirect Discrimination Theory

The indirect discrimination premise focuses on gender images and in particular on images of female politicians as less capable than men in political leadership. In Eritrea this has often been expressed as women's lack of confidence. The NUEW (2008: 19) states that, "Even for those enlightened women it takes considerable time to overcome their inferiority complex,⁷⁶ emanating from the perception that male parliamentarians are better acquainted with politics." Therefore, women are reluctant to contemplate, let alone work, in the male-dominated political arena of the country is the conclusion of the NUEW. But there is a different rejoinder to this perspective. Adhanet (September 2010 int.), who is a member of the *zoba* Ma'ekel assembly and the NA, states:

"It should be made clear that participation in parliament is not only uneasy for women but also for men due to the fact that in our history people had no sound parliamentary experience. She further adds those who can claim to have political exposure, or are capable of reflecting some sort of political experience are either those who were abroad or those who participated in the revolution. The other section of the society, in particular men in politics, who had neither foreign experience nor a fighter pedigree, also participate just for the sake participation. They are incapable of raising their voices and making their point across."

Thus, what this means is that the propagation that women have a collective inferiority complex and are therefore incompetent, if it exists at all beyond being prejudice, then applies to sections of both sexes in the society equally. If women had no exposure due to the oppressive system and culture that prevailed in Eritrea until liberation, then it is just naïve to expect them to fit in the system instantly. How about men? Even without

⁷⁶ It is extremely puzzling, not only unwarrantable, for the NUEW to state that it takes time for women to overcome their inferiority complex if they are going to undertake political jobs. It is obvious to any logical person that women anywhere in the world, including Eritrean women, are not born with inferiority complex. If it exists, it must have been inculcated in them through centuries of patriarchal culture that has socialized them to think that they belong to the private sphere and not the political world; and this has been done for the benefit of men to continue maintaining unbridled monopoly on political power.

being oppressed, Adhanet (September 2010 int.) states, most men parliamentarians in the country are not eloquent and to the point simply because of lack of experience. Thus, it is understandable that being a member of a parliament needs more experience and educational background

The unequal political representation of women can be explained through a combination of the aforementioned theories, but why should there be more representation of women in political institutions; or in this particular case, why should there be more representation of women in both appointed and elective political positions in Eritrea? There are four theoretical arguments invoked for the equal representation of women in formal politics. These are the arguments about role models, the notion concerning justice, the assertion regarding women's interests, and the claim for the revitalization of democracy (Phillips 1995: 62f, Phillips 1998: 229ff). The first argument, which is the argument about role models, argues Squires (2008: 204) "is based on the belief that the existence of women representatives will encourage others to gain the confidence that they too can aspire to this role." Put simply, "This means the more women role models are brought into positions of political leadership, the more others will be aspired to follow on their footsteps." This model could be described as a road map to demographic representation rather than substantive one, at best. More aptly, Phillips (1995: 63) describes it as, "The least interesting model of all, as it has no purchase on politics *per se*."

Despite that, this notion has repeatedly been invoked in Eritrea for increasing the political representation of women, albeit without seeking to examine what is needed for more women politicians to be represented in an environment where decisions are vested in the hands of one man in most cases. Thus far, it has been clear that those who have climbed into the echelons of political power by supposedly breaking barriers have

proved not to hold any political power, as mentioned earlier. Yet, interviewees (mostly officials) argue that using such a model involving successful women models will be helpful in dislodging deep-rooted assumptions about what women should and should not do. This strategy is in the end expected to bring about an increased self-esteem for aspiring young women politicians. For instance, according to Sultan (September 2010 int.) one of the strategies employed by the NUEYS for empowering women politically is by organizing them. Within the NUEYS there is a department that oversees women's issues in all the six *zobas* in addition to the one at the headquarters. As part of its job, this department brings together 30 girls and 5 boys to engage in different activities and share ideas as team members. From these activities girls are expected to develop confidence in themselves, which will eventually help them to speak with confidence when they interact with other clubs and core groups within the NUEYS and in the public sphere (Sultan September 2010 int.).

Not many would deny the idea that role models with an experience of breaking barriers of all sorts might have considerable impact in dislodging deep-rooted negative assumptions about women's roles in the society. In the past, in particular during the revolution era, this strategy might have served well. However, today's role models in Eritrea are not only required, and expected, to break barriers through being equal comrades-in-arms with their male counterparts as in the past, but also prove that they are equals in practical terms. They have to influence people around them, clearly articulate their opinions on diverse issues that concern not only women but also the entire society, be capable in drafting policies, and if need be, defend their principles, among other things. However, it is important to note that this ability to influence and articulate comes with education and real experience in the political world.

Thus far, there are not many steps taken to talk big about providing these opportunities for women politicians in the country.

Asked about whether any programs have been devised for women members of parliament either at the regional or national level to upgrade their capacity, Adhanet (September 2010 int.) responds a few programs of such nature have been implemented thus far. For instance, she mentions that she travelled to UK in 2002 representing *Zoba Ma'ekel* Assembly, through an opportunity provided by British Council Eritrea, aimed at exchanging of experiences amongst women parliamentarians. In her trip, Adhanet claims to have learned how parliamentarians in the UK carry out their duties. For instance, she accompanied a woman parliamentarian of northern London, who visited her regional office to address the grievances of her constituency, to a one-day practical experience. In that one day, the UK parliamentarian has to address 60 cases accumulated over the previous week and give her response to those that fall within her jurisdiction, and pass over those that either are beyond her authority or concern to other appropriate bodies to deal with them, says Adhanet in a surprised tone as to the sheer magnitude of work required of women parliamentarians in the Western world (September 2010 int.). But Adhanet also did not miss the opportunity to notice that the offices of these parliamentarians are well institutionalized and equipped with fulltime staff and other professional employees to assist them with clerical and other professional work deemed necessary, which is not only desperately needed but absolutely missing in Eritrea. In addition to her UK trip, Adhanet also travelled to Uganda, again through the assistance and facilitation of British Council Eritrea, to exchange experiences with women parliamentarians in the country and examine whether women are present in higher political positions of decision-making and they do actually participate. Her assessment of Ugandan women in those positions is unfavorable, perhaps having seen how the

UK women parliamentarians work. She states there were not many women in higher decision-making positions at the time of her visit, and if there were any, they were just a few, and worse not very challenging and tough. Adhanet's evaluation might not be devoid of some truth when it comes to Uganda vis-à-vis women politicians. However, what is equally important to put in context here is the fact that those women formally represented in higher decision-making in Eritrea are not also very challenging, to say the least. Adhanet, having the fighter pedigree, might disagree with the researcher on this because of the aura that is associated with being an ex-fighter woman and with being independent, articulate, and very challenging. However, those women represented in higher echelons in Eritrea do not only lack political clout, but also the capacity to challenge their male counterparts. Due to the lack of a democratic political atmosphere, this might neither be uttered nor discussed inside the country, but foreign researchers have already made a clear note of it.

Now the problem with invoking this model is that to begin with it is assumed that women in Eritrea lack self-esteem to participate in politics. This is symptomatic of the situation in the country whereby rather than focusing on real causes of problems side issues are insinuated for cover up. It should rather be argued women are not actively participating in politics not because of lack of self-esteem but rather because they found the current politics in the country unappealing to them, which should not be considered as negative *per se*, rather it should be used to investigate why they found it uninteresting, as Squires argues.

According to Phillips (1995: 63), "The most compelling argument of all [the four arguments mentioned above] is the principle of justice between the sexes." And, that she adds, "It is disturbingly unfair for men to monopolize political representation." The researcher could not express it better, and completely agrees with Phillips that it is certainly unfair for

any system that preaches about social justice not to take any major steps to put it into practice. The Eritrean revolution, according to Luul, was a revolution whose professed principles were social justice and gender equality. To believe in social justice first and foremost requires the elimination of discrimination of any sort. The under-representation of women in decision-making posts in Eritrea demonstrates that it is not only unfair for men to monopolize political power but also a default on the promises of the revolution. Also Squires (2008: 205) argues both role model and justice arguments relate to positions of just distribution of social resources, where political positions are considered to be one of these; and therefore, need to be distributed equally. The presence of unequal distribution of these positions of influence shows that there are structural barriers preventing social groups from having access to these scarce resources. In Eritrea, the excuses for such an unequal distribution of positions of political influence are often alleged to include the weight of tradition, poverty, and absence of women political enthusiasts, just to mention a few. These might sound compelling arguments on the surface. However, the real substantive reasons can be located somewhere else, such as the status of women in the sexual division of labor, and the inequitable and unnatural arrangement in sharing resources etcetera, which the public debate on gender, if it exists at all, has yet to grapple with.

The other two arguments focus directly on the political process. The argument for women's interests is a pragmatic one, which is based on the notion that "women occupy a distinct position within the society and share common experiences that gives them specific needs and interests. These needs and interests peculiar of women will be better represented by other women" (Squires 2008: 205). In other words, it is claimed that women have distinct and separate interests and that these interests cannot be adequately represented by men; and that the election of

women ensures their representation (Phillips 1998: 234). This claim is contentious among feminists, as the trajectories in the history of feminism show that there have been constant moves from the strategies of equality to difference and currently to diversity. In particular, it is problematic to argue so in the context of Eritrea, where discussions on whether any social group, for that matter women, have separate interests aside from what has been prescribed, as for the good of the nation, in the name of national unity, by the PFDJ. So, the researcher leaves this to one side as it has no purchase on the current political situation.

The fourth argument focuses on the notion that women's different relationship to politics and the way their presence will enhance the quality of the political life, which neither the normative nor the pragmatic arguments claim to bring about, and more importantly enthusiastic supporters of this argument speak from a difference perspective arguing that political institutions are masculine in construction and operation, and that the presence of women will change their character (Lovenduski 2000: 88). According to Lovenduski (2000: 89) the difference argument assumes that there is a need for change and an objective for electing women is to secure that change. And the changes that can be expected as a result of electing women are categorized into four, with the first being procedural/institutional. This refers to methods and processes that would be undertaken to modify the nature of an institution in order to make it more woman-friendly. This involves instilling cultural change making legislatures gender aware, which also needs to be accompanied by procedural change to incorporate women members. The second change refers to impact, where the effects of changing the balance between men and women need to be exhibited in terms of legislation and policy outputs. This includes not only making women's issues part of the agenda, but also making sure that all legislation is woman-friendly or gender-sensitive. The third change that can be anticipated is

representation change, which includes specific measures and actions to secure women's continued and enhanced access to legislature, including encouragement of women candidates, the explicit use of women role models, the promotion of sex equality legislation, and action to place women in important political positions. Finally, a change in discourse, which is both internal and external to political institutions, can be expected as a result of electing women. This includes not only efforts that will be made to alter parliamentary language in order to make women's perspectives normalize, but also the use of platforms to alter public opinion to accept political woman as a normal concept as that of political man (Lovenduski 2000: 89).

Could those changes be anticipated in Eritrea? At the moment, it is very unlikely given that the election of women is not meant to facilitate these changes rather for them to learn how to vote, and nothing beyond that.

Furthermore, the argument for increasing the number of female representatives is based on the belief that such representatives will not only change the masculine nature of political institutions by their very presence but also by practically participating in the political process differently, operating across party lines to establish alliances demanding for improvements such as in childcare provisions or changes in abortion laws (Phillips 1998: 237). Undoubtedly, this also is an interesting argument. In fact, Phillips (1998: 237) proposes this argument as a way of dealing with the deficiencies that emerge in dealing with the other two - the argument for justice and argument for women's interests. However, to contemplate how this argument would have applied to women in Eritrean politics requires the presence of seasoned women politicians working across party lines in dealing with issues that matter to women, in particular, and society, in general, and studies carried out on them. Currently, there are neither experienced women politicians nor even political parties other than the PFDJ, let alone the habit of working across

party lines in the political affairs of the country. In addition, to argue that women have peculiar qualities and experiences such as their morals, ethics, and their different political style that should be taken into consideration might also be considered as an extreme version of feminism; and given the apathy towards it in the male-centered politics of the country, it can have extremely unfavorable reactions from the ruling elites.

5. The Role of Mass Associations in Empowering Women Politically

5.1. The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW)

Thus far the research has addressed the historical evolution of the political participation and representation of women, and the trajectories of the struggle for gender equality in Eritrea from a national and also an international perspective, by situating it within contemporary theories and narratives of women's political representation. By building up on the analyses and arguments of the previous sections, this chapter focuses on the role of the NUEW in broadly representing and advancing the political interests of women in Eritrea. In examining that it will address the origins and organizational structure of the NUEW, and how it is perceived in the society; and that will be followed with an analysis of its relationship with the EPLF/PFDJ and how it goes about implementing its goals. Finally, the NUEW's relationship with the other mass associations founded by the EPLF will also be investigated.

The NUEW, as the sole women's movement in Eritrea, boasts 200,000 members as of 2012,⁷⁷ and focuses more on project-oriented service provision programs rather than on advocacy and policy-oriented programs. Before contemplating on why this is so, it is imperative to examine how and under what conditions was the union established, to

⁷⁷ Refer to the NUEW's website at <http://www.nuew.org/about-nuew>, accessed April 5, 2012.

begin with. Information posted on the NUEW's website states that it was founded in 1979 as one of the mass organizations of the EPLF, then fighting to liberate the country. Why did the EPLF embark on establishing mass associations, or in this specific case, why establish a women's movement? Early on founding the union the EPLF began with consciousness-raising programs whose first targets happened to be the EPLF's own armed fighters, out of whom were later formed armed propaganda units. Those armed propaganda units included both men and women taking the role of itinerants in educating the general public about the revolution and women's issues. However, Eritrea's conservative society was not eagerly receptive of the EPLF's initiatives regarding women's issues (Zerai 1994: WS 65). This can be understood more accurately in retrospect to the status and role accorded to women in traditional Eritrea. Eritrean society is composed of nine different ethnic groups, roughly divided as half Christian and half Muslim. Like religion, Eritrea's socio-economic system can also be divided between sedentary agriculture and semi-nomadic pastoralism. For so long, the religious values and practices sanctioned by Christianity and Islam and the dual systems of production dictated the status and role that women could take up in traditional Eritrea. Generally speaking, Eritreans—Muslims or Christians—agree on the family structure, which is “hierarchal, patrilineal, authoritarian and strict in sexual and generational division of labor and is a crucial unit of learning and cultural activities” (Stefanos 1997: 659). This type of family structure privileged man over woman in Eritrea as elsewhere in the world. For instance, in the Western World as of the late 18th century with male members of the society being endowed with the right to property ownership, and hence the right to political citizenship, women became excluded from claiming any civic rights. Since that time the male members of the society were given the privilege not only to head their families but also became responsible for their families'

external affairs. And even when women tried to establish a separate identity for themselves based on the claim of separate interests, they had been denied such a status as it was argued that women had no separate interests not already included in those of their fathers and husbands. Thus, it was argued they can easily be struck off from the list of potential claimants for equal political representation, as already stated. A similar instance, which took place in the second half of the 20th century, can be found closer to home in the African continent. For instance, Ugandan women established their first association, the Uganda Council of Women, in 1946 in an attempt to promote their rights. Soon after its establishment, the Uganda Council of Women started to pressure the colonial administration known as the Executive and Legislative Council to incorporate women. However, during the first national Executive and Legislative Council elections, which took place in 1958, women turned out in large numbers but their franchise was limited by their literacy, property, income, or employment pre-qualifications (Bauer 2008: 31).

Thus, it can be argued either the EPLF might have understood women's subordination to men, or by extension their overall disadvantaged position within the conservative socio-cultural and political environment, or might have just embarked on establishing the NUEW to attract more women to its rank-and-file. Either way, seen against such a backdrop, the EPLF's systematic approach which started with consciousness-raising could be considered as a shrewd strategy. Thus it helped the organization to steadily maneuver against backlashes from conservative circles that were not used even to entertain the idea, let alone treat women equally. The awareness campaigns and processes of setting up cells continued both in the rural and urban areas, although using different techniques. In the cities, which were under Ethiopian occupation, the process was done secretly around people's work places once reliable people were identified; whereas in the countryside, far away from

Ethiopia's control, the EPLF's cadres had less to worry about becoming targets of Ethiopian soldiers. Outside Eritrea, Eritrean immigrant workers in the Middle East, Europe, and North America were also organized in women's associations through similar methods used inside Eritrea (Zerai 1994: WS65f). Eventually, the awareness campaigns gave way to the formation of cells inside and outside of the country, which finally evolved into mass organizations and national unions (Wilson 1991: 49). Thus, from November 25-28, 1979, this process culminated in the first congress of women representatives under the slogan "emancipation through equal participation in the struggle" and "a revolution cannot triumph without the conscious participation of women." And that very congress heralded in the formation of the NUEW. Upon its formation, it became responsible for the political representation of women on the national and regional levels (Wilson 1991: 49 and 183). What can be noted is these slogans pretty much indicated that women had to participate for the success of the revolution first and foremost. However, with hindsight one can argue that the very slogan which says "emancipation through equal participation in the struggle" might have been the beginning of how the NUEW's unclear strategy of empowering women began and even carried out after the revolution succeeded. This is not to criticize the huge impact that it had in attracting women to join the revolution rather the precondition that it put on women: the notion that unless they participate equally in the struggle, they would not be emancipated, is very problematic, at best. Thus far, women were oppressed not because they failed to participate but rather their participation and contribution in all spheres of life had not been given due recognition and credits.

How the union sees itself vis-à-vis the ruling party, its patron, and envisages to empower women is similarly preconditioned by post-independence situations articulated not by itself rather by the

government. Again in its second congress, which took place in January 17-19, 1983, the slogan of the union was articulated as, "The EPLF is our capable democratic vanguard and understanding of the aims of our union. [Thus], striving wholeheartedly for its consolidation are important components of our struggle." This motto makes it clear that the union did not only have confidence in the EPLF but also thought it should endeavor to assist it [the Front] in meeting its goal of national liberation, which was righteous cause in its era. However, is the capable democratic vanguard still understanding of women's issues or their perspectives after independence? Does the union imagine of /contemplate in asking that?

The third congress of the NUEW, which took place from January 16-25, 1988, was also dominated by the ideals of "reinforcing the role of women in the revolution, as their conscious participation is considered decisive for the victory of the revolution." This basically is a reiteration of its 1979 mantra, "A revolution cannot succeed without the conscious participation of women." After having had three congresses and numerous slogans loaded with calls for more responsibilities, more aptly can be described as burdens for women, on the eve of Eritrea's independence the union claimed to have a membership of 100,000 women from across different sections of the Eritrean society (Zerai 1994: WS66). In just two decades, the figure of its signed-up member has shoot up to 200,000.

As the grassroots mobilization of people inside and outside the country during its establishment might appear to indicate, theoretically the NUEW was supposed to be accessible for every member to participate in its activities. In reality, however, Zerai (1994: WS66) argues information flows from top-down, rendering the notion of bottom-up exchange of ideas impractical. Some of the reasons for this can be traced to the nature of the Eritrean society and the EPLF. Zerai (1994: WS66) explains, "The poor democratic culture of women, [where] they have only

to do what the elders and males in the family think is right,” and “[Women’s] fear, blind obedience to authority and as the EPLF is an armed body, women do not feel at ease airing their needs.” Zerai’s arguments are plausible seen against the backdrop of how the union was established and also considering the impact of its organizational structure on its daily operations.

The NUEW’s highest authority, the Congress, elects its Central Committee that in turn elects the President and the Executive Committee of the union. The Executive Committee also appoints members of union’s administration for the regions, with at least one person being a member of its Central Committee (Zerai 1994: WS67).⁷⁸ Although this structure might imply that the NUEW has its own independent organizational structure, one should not forget the fact that it was founded under the auspices of the EPLF. Thus, despite the union’s organizational structure, which does not appear to indicate that it has a deferential relationship to the EPLF/PFDJ, it has not been an autonomous organization from the outset. It was purposely accommodated under the direct control of the EPLF’s department of public administration until 1987, and afterwards came under the President’s [of the country’s] direct control (Zerai 1994: WS67) and remained so until Eritrea’s *de facto* independence.

From September 19-24, 1992, the union held its fourth congress, under the motto of “through our martyrdom we opened a new phase,” and was re-launched as a semi-autonomous movement (Connell 1998: 192) or “autonomous but nominal” because its President is a member of the parliament [NA] and the EPLF, and is more accountable to the parliament and the EPLF (Zerai 1994: WS67) than to its signed-up members or constituencies. Despite these facts, substantiated by its

⁷⁸ And also for details reference can be made to the latest Constitution of the NUEW, approved in its 6th Congress in February 2003, Asmara, Eritrea.

long-time observers and researchers both from within and outside the country, the NUEW claims to be an officially registered non-governmental organization.⁷⁹

Despite those ambiguities with regards to its status, soon after independence, the NUEW did not only become the only women's organization allowed to operate with monopoly on women's issues, but has also been delegated in 1995 as a national machinery to oversee women's issues, represent and speak on their behalf by the government (Luul September 2010 int.). The delegation of the NUEW as the sole women's machinery should be seen against the backdrop of the discussions that took place in 1991 within the EPLF Central Committee. The members discussed on establishing a Ministry for Women's Affairs, but this was not accepted. Instead, the government nominated the NUEW as national machinery to oversee gender issues ('N' October 2011 int.). Although this should not be unanticipated, it certainly is bewildering that the government, despite its supposed "enlightened" ideology on women, appoints a non-governmental organization, to use the union's reference to itself, with no equivalent status to the other ministries in the country to be called on behalf of women and to oversee their issues. But such disregard to women's issues and relegation of them to women's association, or an NGO in this case, is not unheard of in the African continent. For instance, following the 1967 elections in Uganda, where no women managed to get elected (Bauer 2008: 31), the Uganda Association of Women's Organization decided to help ten women candidates stand for the next scheduled National Assembly election; which never took place, as the government was overthrown in a military coup in 1971. What followed was Idi Amin's eight-year reign of terror. Amin proscribed all sources of opposition. He banned women's

⁷⁹ See Chapter 8 (Art. 28) of the 2003 NUEW Constitution in original. Unofficial translation from the original version in Tigrinya carried out by the author.

organizations in 1978 and replaced them by state-sponsored National Council of Women (Bauer 2008: 32). In the 1980 election, women won only one seat (Tripp 2006: 111). However, in the mid-1980s they demanded a full-fledged ministry for women to be established, but their demands were not fulfilled. After having been emasculated by both Amin's and Obote's dictatorial regimes, Ugandan women had no option but to keep ashes of their struggle fiery until the arrival of a benevolent dictator, President Yoweri Museveni, to power in 1986. Now, from this similar experience it can be argued that Eritrean women might have also to keep the ashes of their struggle fiery either until the arrival of a less brutal dictator or a democratic leadership.

Soon after being nominated by the government as a women's machinery, the union held its fifth congress from February 10-12, 1998, under the slogan "women's all sided development is a guarantee for their equality," and its sixth congress took place from February 27-March 1, 2003, under the theme of "women make a difference!" Time and again proving that even as a non-governmental organization it could not come up with any realizable slogans, beyond those that were deemed appropriate enough to mobilize women for the causes identified by the PFDJ.

Discussions about the diversity of women's issues and decentralizing the union's activities and, as such, the need for establishing other organization based on membership and issue-oriented bases such as for instance trade unions affiliated to but autonomous from the NUEW were deliberated on the run up to the its 1997⁸⁰ Congress. However, the organization rejected this model opting to reorganize its management

⁸⁰ Connell states that the organization opted instead for streamlining of its operations at its 1997 Congress...However, information provided to the author by the NUEW indicates that there was no Congress in 1997. The NUEW held its fifth Congress in February 1998 as stated above. Therefore, it would be save to state that the discussions about what models to introduce and whether to decentralize or not could have been held in the run up to the February 1998 Congress.

structures so as to make it more efficient instead of decentralizing it (Connell 1998: 194).

The union having already opted for efficiency instead of decentralizing, one wonders how efficient is the NUEW? To answer that the official mission of the NUEW, its main activities of focus; and how it is perceived by the general public will be examined here.

The NUEW claims that its mission is to ensure that all Eritrean women confidently stand for their rights; and equally participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres of the country. Moreover, it lists among the goals it advocates for (1) The development of women's confidence in themselves and respect for one another, and the raising of consciousness to ensure their rights in the political and legal systems; (2) Laws that protect women's rights in the family: entitlement rights and other civil laws; (3) Equal access to education and employment opportunities: equal pay for equal work and equal rights to skills development to promotion; (4) Improved access to adequate health care, paid maternity leave, and childcare services; (5) The eradication of harmful traditional practices that endanger women's health and well-being; and (6) The reduction of poverty for Eritrean women and their families.⁸¹ What needs to be recalled here is the fact that some of these guidelines have already been mentioned in the NDPs of the EPLF. And the views expressed here resonate with principles of classic socialist guidelines for the emancipation of women as formulated by the Bolsheviks and broadly adhered to ever since by socialist states (Molyneux 1985: 239). The NUEW's main areas of focus are on seminars and workshops covering gender awareness, training, and income generation. Gender awareness dealing with communication and leadership skills, counseling, legal rights literacy, women and land rights;

⁸¹ The NUEW website, about NUEW, <http://www.nuew.org/about-nuew>, accessed March 10, 2012.

and training focusing with literacy programs, reproductive health, vocational training, academic crash courses, and income generation emphasizing on credit programs, horticulture projects, water [water container “*jirba*”] and donkey project [donkey provision project] and handicrafts project.⁸² If there is anything that can easily be observed from the mission and activities that meant to help the union meet its prophesied goals, the NUEW is scattered all over the place without any focus at all. It tries to cover many areas and issues that should traditionally fall within the jurisdiction of almost all the ministries in the country. This did not go unnoticed even by international observers and researchers. Connell (1998: 193), for instance, states:

“It [the union] was spread far too thin and that its mandate was too diffuse, that it tried to do too much for too many distinct constituencies. As a result, certain key constituencies, the former fighters, fell through the cracks. This arose from the fact that the government, and the PFDJ, asked the NUEW to take responsibility for program such as adult literacy, job training, income generation and health care provision that it should run itself.”

If in the early 1990s such diffusions in its mandate led to constituencies such as ex-fighters falling through the cracks, leaving the perception that the union failed them in the immediate transition after independence, now many professional and career women equally feel disgruntled as the union focuses on poor rural and urban women. Moreover, the union has a diffuse mandate and that the government needs to strengthen it by providing the necessary human and financial resources and grant it with clear mandate with regards to gender mainstreaming in all policy areas is also stated by the CEDAW Committee.⁸³

⁸² For additional information see also the NUEW’s website at <http://www.nuew.org/about-nuew>.

⁸³ For the Committee’s recommendations visit <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/44118344c1.html>.

The next points that need to be investigated are the NUEW's relationship with the PFDJ and how it goes about implementing its goals. Clearly, there are identity and policy issues that need to be dealt with between the NUEW and the PFDJ. The fact that the NUEW was created by the EPLF to help mobilize women for the revolution indicates that the Front might as well have integrated women's interests—practical or strategic—into its revolutionary ideals that are still guiding the nation-building process. This makes it debatable whether the NUEW has had the space and time to develop analyses of women's oppression let alone link them to the revolution, and right now to the nation-building process. The President of the NUEW, however, argues the union has been attempting to construct and implement a holistic approach in campaigning for gender equality in political representation. A holistic approach would require a comprehensive strategy to include not only the concerns of poor rural and urban women, but also middle and working-class and professional women, to mention just a few. But Luul (September 2010 int.) contradicts herself by stating that, "For poor and rural women who are concerned with daily survival, who neither have the time nor the energy nor even the savings, the union cannot prioritize politicization over other immediate interests such as having access to basic education, clean water etcetera." Then it is only fitting to state that the NUEW is neither creating nor implementing a holistic approach rather rendering its mantra of holistic approach unpractical as its focus has primarily been on poor rural and urban women. Instead of resorting to such simple prioritization of one aspect of oppression (lack of economic power) at the exclusion of others, the union would have done much better by introducing a system that would allow for the synthesis of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. Instead it seems to follow, at least on the surface, the distinction between strategic and practical interests as set out by Molyneux (1985: 234), which states, "The formulation of strategic interests can only be

effective as a form of intervention when full account is taken of these practical interests.” What appears to drive the NUEW, at least in principle, are the grassroots issues, which the union considers to be practical, and concrete daily issues that affect many rural and urban poor women. For instance, according to information posted on its website, the NUEW’s main activities focus on seminars and workshops covering gender awareness, training, income generation, as already stated. Although these areas of focus are certainly important for some sections of Eritrean women, they certainly are less appealing to some others, whose interests lie somewhere else. Thus, no wonder then many young girls and professional/career women feel alienated and marginalized with their concerns being left unaddressed and prefer either to withdraw, if they already joined it, or not join at all, as they consider the union not as a campaigning organization/ movement but rather just “an organization for women, not a women’s movement” (quoted in Connell 1998: 194). Why is the NUEW perceived as an organization for “old” women in the society, Luu’s retort to the assertion that her union is an organization for women?

“If people who want to repeat this way of thinking they can keep on repeating it. However, the reality on the ground demonstrates that the age range of our members is between 16-40 years. If 80 percent of our society depends on farming and pastoralism, and if the NUEW is mostly based in the rural areas where underage marriage is pervasive due to our backward tradition, then certainly our young members who clad traditionally and wear headscarves can be considered old. And hence the connotation that the NUEW is an organization for “old” women! This is a big problem. Why are they considered mothers, despite being young? Is it because they lack extensive access to education? In that case, the NUEW in collaboration with the MoE is campaigning and encouraging them to get educated. In addition, since 5 years ago a gender and fertility group has been established in almost all high schools. This group is made up of parents, teachers and students. Its aim is to inculcate gender concepts in the school curriculum and to empower girls. This program also encourages those outstanding young students to visit rural areas and campaign there. Now, despite the

challenges and the perception that the NUEW is an organization for “old” women, the number of its young members is more than 50 percent, but their continuity is questionable, as most of them want to go abroad” (September 2010 int.).

But empathy for the union, although with undercurrent of criticism, is not completely lost as ‘D’ (Ausgut 2010 int.) explains that the organization is trying its best cannot be denied, and that it is also the responsibility of the society and the government to assist it in performing better and being able to encompass different sections of women in the country. That being said, ‘D,’ also states, “I cannot reach the conclusion that the organization is doing a satisfactory job.”

In a similar tone ‘D’ is reiterated by another interviewee, when assessing the perception of the society on the NUEW:

“I had opportunities to observe and compare the NUEW with women’s associations in countries like Sudan, Kenya, Nigeria; and even countries like the UK, the U.S. Seen against these countries, it could be argued that the NUEW is doing a lot. For example, just last March 8 I was in Sudan, where not much attention was given to the day despite it being an international women’s day. So, seeing such things you can say that the union in Eritrea is doing much better in comparison with women’s movement in our neighboring countries. Nevertheless, we need to assess ourselves, given our history and vision, and not against others only. Doing so shows that yes the NUEW works more effectively at the grassroots level with women in the villages and rural areas, also with needy women in the cities, but all these women are mothers. They teach them to be politically aware, try to make them conscious of their health situations and sometimes they provide those that are in need with some sort of economic assistance. However, outside these circles, the union has yet to make an effort to be involved in all women’s lives. For instance, the union has yet to start working with the youth, students—female students—female workers, government or civil servants or even those who work with non-governmental employees. The union claims to have started working with female students, female civil servants in different ministries but all is not as the union claims to be. Sometimes there are a lot of women who do not really understand what the role of the union is. If you talk with for example, some women ex-fighters, they say what have union done for us, they see it from an economic point of view. But the blame that they are not economically

supported is not only to be put on the union, but also on the government" ('F' September 2010 int.)

Perhaps, Luul (September 2010 int.) is right that more than 50 percent of her organization's members are young women, but it is not clear whether these young members constitute at least 50 percent of the union's central committee.

But the connotation that the NUEW is an organization for "old" women emanated not from the fact that the union has few young members rather from its inability to go beyond the traditional housewife and appeal to more young and career women, and also to women who seriously think the organization needs to focus more on campaigning and policy issues rather than on wasting time on becoming a mouth-piece of the government on women's issues.

What have been sidelined are issues that concern other sections of women. And also what needs to be remembered is that such prioritization by the NUEW has led to the further entrenching of women's subordination. This is so because the NUEW has never managed to politicize these practical interests it claims to advance and transform them into strategic interests, which would have constituted rallying issues for many women in the country. When Molyneux (1985: 234) was prioritizing practical over gender interests, her expectation was that politicization of practical gender interests and their transformation into strategic gender interests would follow and that many women would identify with and support it as a feminist political practice. Therefore, it should not be startling that the NUEW did not include politicization (political campaign) as one of its priorities in its 2011-2015 Strategic Plan.⁸⁴ The NUEW can only consider politicizing against cultural obstacles, as Luul reporting on Eritrea's compliance to the Committee on

⁸⁴ This strategic plan was drafted in December 2010 by the NUEW to enhance its internal and external working capabilities.

CEADW stated that gender equality efforts in Eritrea are hindered by stereotypes, war, and poverty. Not to say that these are not thwarting the struggle for gender equality but to argue that there are equally important political and systemic issues that deserve mentioning, if not investigation, too.

Why is it difficult for the NUEW to address political issues that might link the PFDJ not necessarily in a positive light in the struggle for gender equality? This question goes back to the NUEW's relationship with the EPLF/PFDJ and the general political climate in the country. First, the nature of the relationship built up between the NUEW and the EPLF/PFDJ.

It is important to underscore the subordinate nature of the union. It was set up against the backdrop of a conservative culture with the help of the EPLF. Thus, its subordination might have not been by choice at the outset. However, the fact that the NUEW has failed to chart its own way and create separate programs or policies that it wants to implement with regards to women after independence, despite its subservient relationship to the PFDJ, is an issue of a serious concern. While complete autonomy does not necessarily guarantee that the union will either find it easier to fight for or achieve gender equality, not having it certainly creates problems for its effectiveness and image. That being said, indeed it has been the only women's organization championing the status of women and their interests in the wider society. However, it implements all of the EPLF/PFDJ's policies on women because either, "It has adopted these policies as they are" (Zerai 1994: WS67) or, "The EPLF continued to exert strong behind-the-scenes influence, if not day-to-day control, over both the program and the composition of the NUEW's leadership" (Connell 1998: 192). What is relevant here to reiterate is the EPLF/PFDJ has had no clearly spelled strategy on how to empower women, although it portrays itself otherwise because of the

generic legislative and legal provisions it issued. The EPLF sought to emancipate women as part of its general mission of emancipating the entire society during the revolution. Thus, in pre-independent Eritrea, the primary goal of the NUEW was to mobilize women to participate in the revolution, and in post-independent Eritrea its objective is to mobilize women in the national reconstruction and struggle for the emancipation of women (Zerai 1994: WS66).

How is national reconstruction or nation-building to be pursued? As discussed earlier, and established in the National Charter of the PFDJ, the central ideological guidelines for nation-building are to be anchored in the PFDJ's articulated six basic goals of national harmony, political democracy, economic and social development, social justice, cultural revival, and regional and international cooperation, which goals are meant to be achieved through the guidelines of national unity, broad based participation by the people, individual dedication of self-sacrifice, the philosophy of social justice, self-reliance, strong relationship between the people and the leadership of the organization (Tronvoll 2009: 50). Given that the current political climate in the country is absolute totalitarian, and as Connell (1998: 195) states, "Despite the lack of institutional pluralism, Eritreans as whole, men and women, continue to be remarkably united in their wish to present a solid front to the rest of the world and to work out their differences on this [referring to the organizational rivalry between the union, and Eritrean Women War Veterans Association and Tesfa Association] and others within the national 'family'," the NUEW is unlikely to differ with the PFDJ on strategy to empower women.

Since twenty years of totalitarian dictatorship has certainly done much damage to EPLF/PFDJ's carefully cultivated image, Eritreans might no more be united-and-one against the outside world and have already started to expose their differences in public but rather sort them out in

the national family. But the NUEW is too emasculated by its backer (EPLF/PFDJ) to stand up against it and air its differences even inside the national family. Even if it knows that emancipation of women is not given priority over other more or equally pressing national issues, it should be remembered that the EPLF and the NUEW have been working hand in glove, as the NUEW would like to inform us, in advocating for women's equality. But at least one would expect emancipation of women to be given equal weight, if not more, to other supposedly more pressing national issues. In a recent article posted on its website, the NUEW announced what appears to hint that it would not change its strategy at least for the near future, and in essence it would continue its past approach on women's issues. Praising the courage and heroism of Eritrean women fighters in the revolution, which resulted in Eritrea's existence as a sovereign nation, the article reads, "Eritreans have a unique and proud political experience and history as regards to women's rights. However, this experience should not be limited to being only a shining moment in our history." His Excellency President Isaias had in one occasion reminded that, "In Eritrea, women's participation in the development drive and in the economic, political and cultural sectors goes beyond the issue of equal rights. It is by all measurements an issue of national welfare."⁸⁵ This statement, gracious to women as it is, fails to address many of the substantive issues that are obstructing women from advancing forward. If women's participation is by all measurements an issue of national welfare, would not that welfare include at least a discussion on women's issues such as the acute shortage of daycare provisions in the country or even the unspoken systematic discrimination at work? The crux of the message lies, nevertheless, in its implication that the NUEW will continue to implement policies devised by the

⁸⁵ The NUEW, <http://www.nuew.org/aboutnuew> <http://www.nuew.org/aboutnuew>, accessed July 6, 2009.

government and even if it does implement its own, it will make sure that these policies do not fall outside the overarching government programs for women. Whether relegated to secondary position, or given equal weight with other national policies, less people will disagree with the fact that emancipation of women and gender equality are issues awaiting discussion in Eritrean politics. Before Eritrea's independence, they were clearly relegated to secondary position. But still the EPLF did intervene on behalf of women by helping the NUEW to spearhead a number of substantial reforms—landownership, marriage laws and education—which would have been unlikely to take place without the EPLF's recognition of the role of women in the society and in particular the stamina and resilience that they had demonstrated in the revolution. One can argue that these reforms were enacted with a genuine interest to empower women and transform the prevailing unfair gender relationships. However, the bygone revolution era that allowed for a discussion of these issues and resulted in such legislation is melancholically remembered by many women ex-fighters. One of whom recalled there was an enabling environment then that does not exist now ('N' October 2011 int.).

However, positive legislation such as in land distribution did not easily go down the throats of some men. Connell (1998: 191) mentions that in 1992 a clandestine postwar men's mobilization aimed at blocking women from gaining land was discovered. The incident led women to protest and march to the President's office asking for intervention, which led to imprisonment of several of the members of the clandestine group (Connell 1998: 191). But what that incident meant for Eritrean women is that they have to continue fighting against backward cultural practices and people who are not willing to accommodate the reforms enacted by the EPLF.

The formation, organizational structure and objectives of the NUEW have already been analyzed contextually. However, the major issue that the researcher wants to address is why the NUEW could not prioritize fighting for instance, against domestic violence over fighting for national independence. Zerai (1994: WS66) states, "Emancipation of women was given secondary importance before Eritrea's independence because the question of survival was at stake." Despite accepting the relegation of the emancipation of women to a secondary position before Eritrea's independence, Zerai seems to query it afterwards, only to find a plausible answer herself, "If women continue to put all their efforts in the struggle for the reconstruction of their country, they will not get time to invest in the struggle that concerns them. But on the other hand, can women's lives be improved if the institutions that are supposed to serve their need, the economy, and health etc...are not rehabilitated? Is it possible to claim that women's issues should be given importance when more than 75 percent of the people depend on food aid and where women make the majority of the poor?" These were and are not easy questions to answer because they incorporate issues of nation-building. The complexities in this are far deeper than one can imagine, especially in societies like that of Eritrea, where socio-cultural aspects continue to put limits on what women can achieve. As Zerai(1994: WS63) explains:

"There are many contradictions in the third world countries, between the people and the colonizers, between the different liberation movements that led the national liberation front, between the different classes in society etc...Hence national liberation does not mean that all contradictions are going to be solved at one go."

What this means is that Eritrean women must grapple with their post-independence contradictions, which include intricate socio-cultural issues, while fighting for their economic and political rights, aiming at recovering their already subordinated rights. Critics argue that the NUEW and the EPLF failed to prioritize women's issues in the aftermath of

independence. Hale (2001: 158) thinks the EPLF could have done better with regards to promoting gender norms in post-independent Eritrea, but gives it credit for certain issues:

“Despite EPLF’s enlightened gender ideology, the ruling party’s lack of attention to the constraining processes that Eritrean women were encountering in post-liberation family life amounted to the relinquishing of some of the gains that EPLF women had experienced in the field; others have had to be fought for-again. The new gender norms invented in the field were both minor and cosmetic, such as dress and hairstyles and freer social relations with men, and highly significant including the lack of social pressure toward marriage and childbearing, the collapse of the conventional gender division of labor, the recognition of the need for women to share political power, and the projection of the rights to land ownership for women after liberation.”

The challenge for the NUEW, as its critics including Hale argue, is viability, which undoubtedly will require it to reform if it is going to sustain itself. Hale states the NUEW’s staff complain about being overloaded, and having to deal with issues that belong to the common good, but still there is no discussion either from the government side or from the union about clarifying what belongs to the “common good,” “national interests,” and “gender interest” (Hale 2001: 169). Even if concerned people want to raise these issues they are not encouraged due to the lack of an enabling environment, where such discussions are not allowed to be even thought about. Connell (1998: 193) quoting former NUEW members and outside evaluators, makes similar statements. The NUEW is spread all over the place and covers too many constituents. It does not have clear mandate on what it should exactly focus, which leads to its ineffectiveness. This is so because the government asked it to take responsibility in programs, such as adult literacy, job training, income generation and health care provision that it should have run itself, and let the union focus on experimentation, mobilization and advocacy. In addition, the NUEW is criticized for wanting to dominate the Eritrean political arena vis-à-vis women’s issues and its intolerance to other rival

organizations. For instance, the Eritrean Women War Veterans Association established in 1995 and shut down in 1996 (Connell 1998: 193) was a good case in point.

These criticisms—constructive or otherwise—should be taken seriously. How far did the union go to consider them? Would it come up with any reforms? Thus far, the NUEW seems to be antagonistic, at best, to the notion of having any other associations (professional or otherwise) being established.

“There are so many professional women's associations in countries like Kenya and Egypt, which exist for the sake of having an office. When we meet with these elite women and their associations in East Africa we exchange experiences. These elite women's associations learn from us because we are a grassroots movement. If there is an NGO that does not work for the society then there is no reason for its existence. If it is thought a necessity to create any professional association; it will be under the umbrella of the NUEW. This is our vision. Presently there are a lot of women working in the public sector in Asmara; however, there are few of them as professionals in ministries” (Luul September 2010 int.).

From the above stance it is clear that professional women's associations are undesirable in Eritrea because of the supposed elite status that they will have, which presumably would not serve the interests of the society, according to Luul. Thus, it is only a fact to state that the union still remains intolerant to any rival organizations, and it would do all what it can to stifle any initiatives, if lessons of the past, for instance how Eritrean Women War Veterans Association and Tesfa Association were handled. Nevertheless, it is very unlikely that the union would admit that it abominates any organizations that might share some of the activities it focuses on. This would obviously be the case given that the union is scattered all over the place claiming to cover many areas of concern for women. Or it could be the case that it is simply blocking the establishment of rival organizations under the license of its backer, the PFDJ. But instead of admitting either of these reasons, it would rather

hide under the often repeated mantra in the country, which is our current situation does not allow us to do any better than we are doing now even if on women's issues. What does seem to go with the current situation perfectly well is partnering with the other two mass associations created and sanctioned by the EPLF/PFDJ to operate in the country. These are the National Union of Eritrean Youth Students (NUEYS) and National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW).

The National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students

The NUEYS was originally established in the 1950s as the National Union of Eritrean Youth by students protesting against Ethiopian colonial occupation of Eritrea. Ethiopia's brutal response, which claimed the lives of hundreds of young people, gave the protesting students an impetus to mobilize in a nation-wide anti-colonial demonstration in 1958. Those protesting students at home, and other students in the diaspora, then became part of the group of Eritreans who planned and declared the launching of the armed struggle for independence. In the aftermath of Eritrea's independence, in particular the time period between May 1992 and August 1994, the union was reorganized, after having had temporarily suspended its activities in 1990 with the entire leadership and the youth taking part in bringing an end to Ethiopia's colonial rule in Eritrea. During its Second Congress in August 1994, National Union of Eritrean Youth revised its priorities and objectives to meet the post-independence challenges. This Congress also saw the formation of the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students from National Union of Eritrean Youth, as an independent, non-governmental youth and students' organization.⁸⁶ The union has strong membership both inside Eritrea and amongst the Eritrean diaspora.

⁸⁶ For more information on the mission, activities and programs of the NUEYS refer to <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpaysubmissions/eritrea.pdf>, accessed May 2, 2012.

It has been argued that the NUEYS, unlike the other institutions intimidated by the NUEW, was one of the active organizations with regard to its approach on gender issues; and was also considered as one of the most campaign-oriented seen against either the NUEW or the NCEW (Connell 1998: 194). It had, for instance, campaigned actively against female genital mutilation and other harmful practices (Connell 1998: 194). As will be shown later, the NUEYS, undoubtedly, capitalized on this image as more vibrant and feistier in advocating for women's rights, even at times claiming to have been more involved on women's issues than the women's association itself. Gender issues⁸⁷ are one of the program areas of operations of the NUEYS. Having claimed to understand that the majority of the Eritrean society remains trapped in shackles of traditional and patriarchal notions; and that most women enjoy an underprivileged status to men at home and their communities; the NUEYS aims to improve that lot by empowering young women through diverse strategies. In particular, its gender awareness objective focuses mainly on campaigning and sensitizing against domestic violence, early marriage, and female genital mutilation.⁸⁸

Before examining how the NUEYS tries to pursue the promotion of gender equality as part of its proclaimed areas of activities, it is important to briefly overview of how gender-equal and gender sensitive or women friendly the NUEYS itself is.

⁸⁷ The other programs of operation include health; HIV/AIDS awareness, FGM awareness; education and training; campaigns, seminars, and meetings; value transfer program; youth empowerment; girls education; media activities; human resource development; organizational development; foreign branches and international relations; recreational activities and sports; clubs and cultural groups; environment and community services.

⁸⁸ For details of the objectives and initiatives that the union aims to undertake in addressing gender issues see <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/wpaysubmissions/eritrea.pdf>, accessed May 2, 2012.

Out of the 39 members of its Central Committee, women make up 30.7 percent, with one woman serving in the Executive Board (Eritrea: Country Report 2004). “We hold elections in selecting representatives of both the Central Committee and the Executive Board,” replied Sultan, in an interview in September 2010, when asked about the mechanisms utilized in bringing about people to the union’s higher echelons. Sultan believes Eritrean society has brought so much attitudinal change on its perspectives on the roles that women can take up. However, what is apparent from the representation of women within the union is that Sultan’s assessment, true as it rings, might have been a bit exaggerated. The NUEYS, whose active members include people from diverse backgrounds, both male and female, has yet to be ready to elect more than one woman into its executive board. Not only that but also there are criticisms directed at it for being an androcentric organization.

“The NUEYS is the most patriarchal organization in this country. I have worked a lot with them. They are the most backward, the most oppressive union. They have one woman in their structure, which was brought with a lot of force from the government. The male members of the union create a lot of hurdles for her, hindering her efficiency at what she does. They can bring in white girls from abroad calling them gender experts; they say they have gender unit, which does not exist in reality. The union does all this to just get money. As a matter of fact, they do not have women in positions of leadership within the organizations. When I have tried to teach them about gender, they did all their best to disprove me” (‘N’ October 2011 int.).

Cognizant of the fact that the NUEYS has yet to deliver tangible results in genuinely representing women and live up to the expectations of many of its young female members, Sultan admits that the union has a serious problem and it is working to address the issue of representation of women at higher levels.

Either having genuinely regarded itself as one of the main stakeholders of the NUEW and using the considerable leverage it has amongst the youth of the country as Sultan (September 2010 int.) stated, or

capitalizing on its supposedly more feisty and active image in addressing gender issues, the NUEYS claims to promote gender equality and the political participation of women in the country by utilizing three strategies. These are affirmative action, education, and political socialization.

Since its reorganization in 1994, and since the declaration of affirmative action for women by the government of Eritrea, the NUEYS has been practicing affirmative action at different levels within itself as well. But how is affirmative action understood at the union, leaving aside the government's support for it? Sultan (September 2010 int.) states affirmative action is seen as a means and not an end in itself. While it is in place, he states, the country needs to invest in education, in general and in girls' education, in particular, to eventually bring about the necessary change in women's lives and also an equal representation in the political arena. However, with 30.7 percent representation of women in its central committee and only one woman serving amongst its executive board members, the union has yet to demonstrate that affirmative action has produced the desired results in bringing about a fair representation of women within itself. Leaving aside the image and the aura of an active institution, it will be seen how the union will go about addressing the gender gap that prevails in its own higher echelons, before claiming to honor itself with the trophy of gender sensitivity.

The second method through which the NUEW and the NUEYS cooperate to bring about societal change vis-à-vis women and promote gender equality is education. As such, the NUEYS has been involved in helping girls with lower educational attainments in high schools by providing them with extra-tutorial classes, books and using "model girls" to encourage them to aspire to be high achievers. These techniques are expected to boost girls' confidence and bring about attitudinal change in the society. This project started ten years ago and has produced tangible

results for young girls who were underperforming. Once they joined the programs their promotion rate increased by about 85 percent, and that this has brought huge impact in changing the attitudes of the society towards girls and women (Sultan, September 2010 int.). How far has this impacted the social construction and perceptions of gender and family? And how did this effect on the public discourse regarding gender? The impact of education in changing societies is understandably positive. However, while the above initiatives, certainly, have positive effect at the grassroots level in improving female enrollment rate, their effect on the public discourse about gender has only been limited, if any at all.

The third strategy employed is political socialization. The NUEYS has a department overseeing women's issues in all *zobas* as well as at the headquarters. As part of its political socialization activities, the department brings in together 30 girls and 5 boys interacting and dealing with different activities. This is primarily meant to help young girls build up their confidence, while taking up public roles.

The premise behind these strategies is to make women politically active, and thus they can seek representation, and once represented the hope is they can participate passionately in politics. But if these initiatives are not also equally applied beyond the grassroots level targeting other sections of women beyond students in schools, there is little chance that the political participation of women will be improved in the near future.

What the NUEYS and the NUEW are trying to do is implement the policy of the PFDJ that emanates from a belief that societal change on the role and status of women can be brought about by creating role models, while investing in their education and socializing them with politics. However, the question of what kind of political participation and representation of women is sought after by the PFDJ, and whether women have the right to demand a different sort of representation other than that prescribed by the PFDJ, seems not to matter at the moment.

The National Confederation of Eritrean Workers

The origins of the current workers confederation in Eritrea can be traced to the 1930s; where a group of 40 workers in Elabered went on strike demanding wage increments, although without a success. This was followed by a big organized worker's movement after a dock workers' strike in Massawa in early 1949. Thus, by 1952 the Eritrean workers' organization was an increasingly powerful and respected organization, and through Weldeab Weldemariam's⁸⁹ leadership it had become the bastion for a non-sectarian, pan-Eritrean labor confederation. This confederation had been expected to have positive influence on the struggle to preserve and to enlarge not only workers' but all Eritrean democratic rights. In November 1952 the labor confederation held its first general assembly in a rent hall in the *Geza Kenisha* quarter of Asmara, attended by over 300 representatives from every part of Asmara; and in that assembly it drafted a Constitution that contained 28 Articles. What needs to be recalled here is that there is still trace of labor regulation dating back to the Italian era, though its contents have been redrafted and consolidated in the Eritrean Employment Act of 1958. More importantly, the Eritrean workers' organization was accepted as legal entity by the International Labor Organization in 1952; long before, to be exact 10 years, before Ethiopia became a member of the International Labor Organization. Even most African countries gained their independence late in the 1950s and early 1960s, long after Eritrea became a legally recognized member of the International Labor Organization. Also Eritrea is said to be amongst the countries with the earliest trade union in Africa (Eritrean Gazette, supp No.5.23/May 1958).

⁸⁹Weldeab Weldemariam was one of the first proponents of the Eritrean Independence movement and worked closely with Ibrahim Sultan Ali, who was also one of the first proponents of the Eritrean Independence movement and founder of the Eritrean Moslem League.

Article 84 of the the 1958 Employment/ Labor Act created workers' most serious objection, as it empowered the then Chief Executive of Eritrea to withdraw legal recognition of unions upon almost any pretext, including any hint of engagement in political activities. The confederation leaders lobbied for the removal of Article 84, which later became the main cause of the general strike of 1958. Having failed on that in 1958 the confederation organized several mass demonstrations, where Ethiopian troops openly attacked many of its members, shooting and killing many more workers. The 1958 events effectively ended the existence of the trade union until the late 1970s. Thus, after a little over a decade the EPLF organized the National Union of Eritrean Workers founding congress in November 21-25, 1979 in liberated area, to support its war efforts for liberation, which the union did carry out with great enthusiasm by operating clandestinely inside Eritrea and more openly abroad. The union held its second congress in 1983; and its third congress in 1988. Soon after independence, between 1991 and 1993, the union was transformed into a formal trade union organization, starting with "base unions" and proceeding to the establishment of five industrial federations. Eventually the NCEW was established in Asmara on September 11, 1994, by a national congress of the workers' federation and professional associations with 20,000 members.

Having organized its workforce, the confederation began to aim at advancing the skills of workers through trade union, education programs, engaging working women more actively in the unions through a confederation-wide Women's Committee, and mobilizing peasant producers into cooperatives and other new forms of self-organization. Although what is particularly relevant for the research at hand is the task of the Women's Committee, established in 1995 to research the position of women in work place and design a program of education and advocacy to address inequities (Connell 1998: 194), before delving into

that it is imperative to investigate how the representation of women in the NCEW itself is.

Women make up 27 percent of the NCEW's Central Committee and are said to also be represented in confederation's Executive Board (Eritrea: Country Report 2004). Asked about how women are represented in decision-making organs of the NCEW; and whether having only 27 percent representation of women makes the NCEW an exemplary organization in speaking about gender equality, Roma Ghebreyesus⁹⁰ (September 2010 int.) replies:

"Of the 45 members of the General Assembly 17 are women, out of whom 10 came through quota. Out of these 10, there are two women represented in the Executive Board. Clearly this is not equal, one cannot avoid asking why not even a quarter of the total figure if not half? Quota is also implemented in the base unions, where there are seven leaders one of whom is a representative of the Women's Committee. Again this number is not adequate. Furthermore, it shows that more efforts should be made to compete in the remaining six posts, given that the one post will always be filled with a woman, competent or not. Now, the problems that the confederation is facing are less to do with sensitization measures to empower women, although these measures might be inadequate, or lack of qualified women, but rather most of the time suggestions are forwarded that the one reserved post to represent women is enough. To compound that problem, some women are reluctant to hold leadership positions by alluding family responsibilities and so on. In general, the major problem within the NCEW is that women are not willing to hold leadership positions."

Obviously, if there are no measures in place to lessen the burdens that women have in dispensing family responsibilities and care to their children, then they would have to forgo public in favor of private roles. Anyway, the NCEW is not only gender-unequal, to say the least, but has to genuinely embark on addressing the gender imbalance in its key leadership positions. That being said, it is imperative to analyse its relationship with NUEW and how it intends to bring about gender equality

⁹⁰ Roma is Head of the Finance and Administration Department of the NCEW and a member of its Central and Executive bodies.

at work place. To do this it is crucial to look at the work of the confederation's Women's Committee. (Connell 1998: 194) states:

“Not much progress has been made by the Women's Committee a year after its establishment, as it failed to both produce any research on the work conditions of women and also on its advocacy and education programs.” This happened “in part because all but one of the committee members doubled as office secretaries and had to fit attention to gender issues into otherwise crowded work schedules.” In addition, “independent initiatives were also met with resistance by the NUEW, as when NCEW leaders quietly floated a proposal to the women's union to jointly convene a forum on women's issues that would bring together women from the three sectoral associations [the NUEW, NUEYS and the NCEW] and others from government departments and non-governmental organizations, which as an idea was quickly vetoed.”

Had these forums been accepted and that all the sectoral organizations, government agencies and other non-governmental organizations came together, perhaps women, in particular those marginalized, would have not only a bigger platform to address their issues and air their grievances and perspectives, but also the gender debate would have been more vigorous than it is now. Unfortunately, the NUEW does not want to give up its monopoly, even if it meant weakening its capacity to perform effectively at the end of the day.

Again, Adhanet Andom asked on her job:

“The task has been very uneasy for two reasons. Firstly, most of the women have low consciousness. Secondly, they are engaged in menial jobs in factories. Hence, they are not aware of their rights and duties. Working with such kind of women to bring about change of attitudes is extremely difficult. These women are even reluctant to assemble and sit on the front rows, let alone consider about getting involved in political activities such as to elect and be elected. It was only after long relentless efforts that we have started seeing change. In the first founding congress there were only nine women who got elected, and in the second congress 18 women followed. At last the office of federations, which were dominated by men, witnessed an incursion of women to what they thought was their domain. Despite lack of funding, the Committee established in every work place base unions, and continues to supervise the conditions of women and listen to their grievances” (Adhanet September 2010 int.).

Systematic discrimination is one of the issues that campaigners of women's rights and women's associations around the world fight against. Eritrean working women are, certainly, not free from that. Although equal opportunities for all is the official policy of the government and it is clearly stated in all its documents, Eritrean women continue to face considerable challenges in the work environment. Despite the stipulations in international agreements and national laws against systematic discrimination, the existence of fraudulent practices against employing women that are uneasy to trace are often rumored. Adhanet (September 2010 int.) says employers do not discriminate explicitly because they know they will be in trouble should they practice contrary to what the law stipulates. However, complaints such that employers prefer to employ men rather than women because of issues related to pregnancy and maternity leaves are often repeated. This shows that discrimination starts during hiring and screening processes. The labor law gives the right to employers to directly hire by themselves. Once preferred employees are hired, extensive investment in training and promotion is given to men rather than women. And there are even rumors that in some enterprises women are paid less than men, but so far no woman has come forward pressing charges against such supposedly discriminatory instances. Women might find the confidentiality during the screening process, and the fact that no employer would admit that they discriminated them very intimidating.

Even if these three institutions are sectorial in that they each have their own constituencies – the NUEW deals with women's issues; the NUEYS with youth issues, and the NCEW with workers issues – they all claim to have made the promotion of gender equality in the country their centerpiece. But the irony is that the NUEYS and the NCEW, certainly, are not gender-equal, or even closer to it, in their own respective leadership posts. So, why would anyone take any of these organizations

seriously when they speak about promoting gender equality and working together in helping about to bring equal political participation and representation in the country? Moreover, from their relationship with one another it can be argued they clearly suffer from lack of coordination and are also consumed by organizational rivalry. These drawbacks are hardly helpful in forging a common front and let alone achieving or furthering a common goal.

Conclusion

Although national elections have yet to take place, the PFDJ claims to govern for the people. While it remains to be seen whether the PFDJ, as it claims, has the confidence of the Eritrean people, this research found that its claims to legitimacy, particularly amongst Eritrea's female population, are bound up in various national policies and plans that purportedly support strong gender equity perspectives. However, there is a wide gap between the ambitions and aspirations set out by such plans and the ability to implement and realize actual programs for action that would genuinely impact and improve the lives of women in the society. Many informed women agree that is not for lack of policies or the policies themselves that is at the heart of the issue, although some of the policies can still be criticized for their generic nature, but a chronic lack of enforcing mechanisms that continues to hinder progress towards the advancement of women's social, economic and political rights in Eritrea. There is a felt need amongst women in Eritrea that the time has come for the government to move beyond rhetorical promises of social justice and gender equality and to begin to enforce the laws and policies that have been enacted.

Some might argue that having four women in a cabinet of 17 ministers is a good start. But it is important to recall that, two decades after independence, it is time to consolidate the gains made and demand more. If this is not sufficiently compelling an argument for change, one

only has to look at the current plight of women in Eritrean society who continue to be disempowered and subordinated so long as no action is taken. Women still occupy the bottom levels of the socio-economic ladder and there have been very few who have been able to break the glass ceiling that separates them from the seats of power and many who have been relegated to such occupations as clerks, secretaries, and serving tea in order to make ends meet. Despite these facts, which clearly should have provided the impetus for vigorous implementation and appraisal of the policies, it is clear, based on local debates on gender issues, whenever such issues chance to be discussed in first place, that the general perceptions on gender have a very narrow conception of the struggle for women's rights. It is a widely held myth that Eritrea is one of few countries in Africa where women's rights are upheld and many point to the fact that Eritrean women did not have to wait decades to achieve their enfranchisement, but were endowed with their civic and political rights as soon as independence was realized.

These sentiments disregard the fact that in the post-World War II era, it became standard to include women's rights into conventions, treaties and constitutions leading up to national independence, national development and political citizenship. By the time Eritrea won its independence, women in most countries around the world had acquired the right to vote and were on a fast track, supported by favorable international calls, towards equal representation in higher decision-making posts and public offices. At the time, Eritrea could ill afford to deviate from this standard, at least in the immediate aftermath of its independence. Local narratives on the struggle for gender equality appear oblivious to this international context, considering Eritrea a unique case-in-point where women's rights are concerned. However, the lived reality of most Eritrean women as described throughout this research, calls such claims into question. Moreover, international

narratives on the path to gender equality in Eritrea debunked the notion that the “unparalleled” participation of women during the revolution provided them with more political clout in the post-independence period.

Despite the divergent local and international narratives, what has, at least, been achieved at the society level is change in perspectives. Since the beginning of the revolution, the notions of gender equality and empowerment of women have been terminologies commonly heard or spoken of even if they have yet to fully be implemented at all levels. However, it would take considerable time for the basic socio-cultural foundation of the society either to change in favor of women or accommodate these concepts fully. The manifestation of how entrenched these values have come to be noticed in the post-independence period when ex-revolutionaries were not ready to deliver on their revolution era commitments to gender equality, and demonstrated that despite the rhetoric, they were not immune to what they considered non-progressive societal values. The patriarchal system is still greatly evident in the family dynamics of most Eritreans and still deeply institutionalized at the national level. Unfortunately very little has been done to seriously and meaningfully tackle these issues at the national level.

Research Questions Answered

1) How has the political participation of women evolved over time?

The revolution represented a turning point in the political participation of women and the struggle for gender equality in Eritrea. Prior to the revolution, in traditional Eritrea, women occupied subordinate positions in the society and had no distinct individual rights. The arrival of colonialism only entrenched their condition. The revolution opened new avenues of participation for women in the public life of the country. However, it should also be remembered that the EPLF’s theorization regarding women issues, such as their political participation, having been conceived and implemented by the male leadership in a top-down

fashion, subordinated women's interests to a secondary position, since its main priority was to liberate the country from Ethiopian colonization. Thus, women fighters and non-combatants, under the guidance of the EPLF fared well in assimilating to the dominant norm, coming from the male order and in so doing pushed traditional boundaries, and eventually achieving their hitherto emancipation as a by-product of national liberation. The effect of which and what has since then, rhetorically and even in practice, been transpiring is that female fighters, and now civilian women, have to demonstrate their equality with male fighters, and men in general, by undertaking jobs that were traditionally reserved for them. If, therefore, during the revolution emancipation of the entire society was given priority over the emancipation of women, the PFDJ's vision of nation-building continues to rest on a similar strategy giving priority to participation of the entire society in the socio-economic and political activities, and the anticipation that women would achieve equality through their participation in political activities and socially productive work.

However, their current political participation is limited not only by the lack of political freedoms in the country in general, but also by the government's unwillingness to address the constraining issues that women face. Beyond putting in place generic laws that support the participation of women in all spheres, the government has yet to implement these laws or even tackle the limiting factors that women face both in private and public life to expand their political participation and address issues that matter to them. Furthermore, this is compounded by backward socio-cultural practices, which the government has yet to fight with full force.

- 2) Why are women under-represented in higher decision-making posts?

The government of Eritrea claims to believe in and commit itself to the principles of social justice and gender equality. However, 20 years after independence it has yet to achieve gender parity in the higher organs of political power. Although it utterly failed to bring about parity between women and men in higher decision-making political positions, it would not criticize itself on its failures; rather, it hides behind excuses of resource scarcity, international pressure, underdevelopment or the weight of tradition etcetera, as if it is not its responsibility to solve these predicaments as well.

While the government might be proud of its ex-women fighters, and even perhaps its civilian women, for their contribution during the revolution and nation-building process, it has been very slow to create an enabling environment and implement the necessary policies that would allow them access into its decision-making bodies. Thus, the challenges that women face in the political front are not only related to their country's backward tradition or underdevelopment but equally to the totalitarian system that has been curtailing their rights at every level.

3) What has been the role of the NUEW, as the sole women's machinery entrusted with representing women at the national level, in advancing their political interests?

Since its inception the NUEW argued that gender oppression cannot be separated from national, class or racial oppression, however its commitment to fighting all forms of gender discrimination appears to have waned in the post-independence era of Eritrea. Since this time, all indications are that the union has been caught in the middle between its close relationship with parent front, the PFDJ, on the one hand, and the general public and women, on the other. Its main dilemma has been the need to appear to be independent of the PFDJ, while at the same time being subservient to it. In addition, its efforts to link the post-independence struggle for gender equality with the revolution era

trajectories have led many to question the past achievements of women. Thus, it would have made more sense for the NUEW to argue for a separate narrative between the question and role of women during the revolution; and what has been happening since independence. This does not necessarily mean introducing a dichotomy between the two, as the legacy of the revolution has huge impact everywhere in the country. But doing so would have allowed the NUEW to seek for more avenues to reinvigorate itself, admitting that it and the EPLF/PFDJ might have committed a fair share of their mistakes. This might have prompted women to demand the establishment of more independent women's advocacy organizations, as has happened in other post-revolution countries as well. However, the NUEW, unlike for instance the women's movement in South Africa, which used the transition from apartheid to multi-party democracy to its advantage, has failed to use the window of opportunity that opened during the transition from colonialism to independence in the early 1990s. The NUEW wasted time citing the achievements of women ex-fighters' and its own past accomplishments, perhaps not knowing that that would not be enough to guarantee them equality on the ground, rather than researching as to what system, for instance, would serve them better in the post-independence era. Or even better, to learn the rules of their patron, use them and eventually change them for its benefit.

In the contemporary period the role of the NUEW, as the sole women's machinery entrusted with representing women at the national level, can be best described as serving a totalitarian state rather than either struggling to achieve gender equality or furthering women's interests in general. Nevertheless, the NUEW is very much aware of this and also its current predicament, which largely stems from the totalitarian climate, which it helped to solidify. Thus, it is unlikely that the NUEW would either publicly denounce the government's failures on women's issues, or

demand change, although it could still choose to lobby its parent front to increase the representation of women through the effective implementation of remedial policies and laws that are already in place. If, by some miracle it chooses to do so, it could draw on lessons and best practices documented across the advanced world on the various strategies and methods by which women have achieved increased representation. In addition, it could also learn from what has been well researched and documented about political parties. Political parties act to bring about gender equality when their voters and constituencies demand it. This might sound impractical in contemporary Eritrea. But the notion can be expanded to include totalitarian systems, where elections are not usually a habit, besides assuming stable state structures and political parties. The only political party operating in the country is the PFDJ and in the absence of any national elections hitherto neither constituents nor voters can force it to bring about change, in particular vis-à-vis women's issues and perspectives. Thus, the only available option in this scenario is for the NUEW to exert pressure on the PFDJ. Since it is very unlikely that the NUEW will reform itself in the foreseeable future or allow for the establishment of other competing advocacy groups on women, it needs to create strategies that would allow it to request the government to carry out more advocacy work, uncensored discussions and above all to launch a platform to raise and address issues that the public generally considers taboo, such as the political participation and representation of women, sexual violence against women, abortion etcetera. If the NUEW chooses to act now, even within its present limitations, it may be able to redeem itself from the crisis of legitimacy and credibility that it presently faces and regain some of the trust of its female constituents who are desperate for change.

Recommendations

As has been documented elsewhere, and confirmed by this research, women on their own can do very little to make substantial changes to the *status quo* and attain equal political representation and participation. Even in countries which have been exemplary in creating an enabling environment for improved political representation and participation of women, the ability of women to attain positions of leadership has always been a result of diverse factors involving social and family structure change, high levels of education and increased employment, and these has been supplemented by both specific government policies and concerted action by organized women's advocacy groups. The following recommendations, while seeking to prescribe comprehensive solutions to the problem, should be seen in this context.

General

The Government of Eritrea should:

- Improve its efforts to implement measures to encourage and increase the representation and participation of women in leadership positions. The government, and its officials, should also seek to emulate the best practices implemented by other countries that are making genuine progress in elevating the status of women in society.
- Commission an extensive appraisal of its gender policy in order to ensure their effective and systematic implementation.
- Implement gender mainstreaming initiatives that continually assess the implications for women of any policy action and making their concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and social spheres.

- Provide women from all walks of life and professions, the platforms and freedoms to organize, raise their concerns and address them.

The NUEW should:

- Utilize the current data at its disposal regarding the disparity in representation between women and men in decision-making positions in various areas of public life to lobby for these issues to be treated frontally on the political agenda in order to bring change.
- Collaborate with the female members of the PFDJ to aggressively advocate for changes in approach by the current administration in dealing with gender issues.
- Undertake to raise awareness about women's issues amongst the general populace by utilizing the media.
- Encourage female members of the PFDJ and within the wider community to organize themselves to demand that the PFDJ implement the necessary reforms that would effectively address their problems and to support and facilitate the election of female candidates to executive positions.
- Request that the government modify its institutional status from being a subsidiary body designated to oversee women's issues to one that allows it to become a full-fledged Ministry of Gender Affairs that would exercise equal status, authority and influence with other government ministries.
- Address the controversies surrounding its lack of a clear mandate regarding issues under its remit and discuss the related subject of decentralization in order to make sure that this remains part of the equation for effective change.

- Request that the government provide it with adequate human and financial resources for it to carry on its work with vigor and efficiency.
- Augment its lobbying activities and gender mainstreaming efforts with disaggregated data collection to form the basis for evidence-based decision-making.
- Facilitate the establishment of professional women's associations and other advocacy groups for women either under its auspices or as independent agencies in order to effectively address the various challenges that different groups of women have to grapple with.

Specific

Awareness Raising

- The government, the NUEW, the NUEYS, the NCEW, media, religious leaders and other concerned parties should intensify awareness raising efforts both locally and at the national level regarding the role of women in the society. It is important to ensure that such programs undertaken should not perpetuate existing social myths and misconceptions that limit a woman's role and purpose to mainly care-giving and should emphasize the vast potential and productivity that would be unlocked if women were given the opportunity to participate equally with men in the public sphere.

Education

- The MoE, in particular, and the government, in general, should intensify their efforts to level the playing field between males and females in terms of their access to education by first narrowing the gender gap in male and female enrollment rates.
- Work in concert to address systemic discrimination against women in employment at the MoE at all levels.

- The MoE should seek to incorporate courses on gender issues in its curriculum.

Employment

- The government should put in place mechanisms to address overt and covert discrimination faced by women who are employed or who are seeking employment in order to expand their participation in economic activities.
- The government should address the dire shortage of childcare services in the country. The government should not force women to rely on negotiations and the benevolence of employers. Addressing this issue at the national level would spare working women from intimidation and manipulation by employers and relieve them of the burdens associated with juggling their private and public roles on a daily basis.

Labor-Saving Technologies

- The government should seriously embark on introducing labor-saving technologies, in accordance with its repeated promises of doing so, to not only reduce the drudgery of household work on women, but also free them time for public roles. This also needs to be accompanied by a widespread campaign of making aware the entire society, in general, and males, in particular, that household work should be shared equally.

Equal Rights of Women

- The general laws that provide for equal rights of women should be accompanied by specific policies and legislation addressing systemic discrimination, complete with clear definitions and mechanisms for enforcement to ensure compliance as well as addressing violence against women.
- Monitoring and inspection mechanisms should also put in place to guarantee compliance of these policies and laws.

Affirmative Action

- If affirmative action measures such as seat reservations at the regional and national assembly levels are to be effective, they need to be accompanied by other measures addressing the challenges that women face at different levels. Thus, the government, the NUEW and other concerned bodies should devise appropriate measures and strategies to address these challenges as part of a multi-pronged approach to achieving gender parity within Eritrean society.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Enrolment by level and gender 2000/2001-2007/2008⁹¹

Year	Elementary		Middle		Secondary		TTI		Tech. & Voc.		Total	
	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T
2000/01	134,168	298,691	35,107	76,564	23,596	63,951	197	961	464	1,866	193,532	442,033
2001/02	146,218	330,278	34,667	80,882	25,054	70,183	169	1,022	393	1,992	206,501	484,357
2002/03	159,563	359,423	36,881	87,019	26,185	72,818	61	874	429	1,965	223,119	522,099
2003/04	165,954	374,997	49,224	122,966	22,952	69,401	474	474	531	1,917	569,755	347,058
2004/05	167,451	377,512	53,996	139,029	26,041	76,051	365	492	675	1,152	248,528	594,236
2005/06	161,875	364,263	57,448	148,082	27,293	77,644	0	0	881	2,060	247,497	592,049
2006/07	149,755	331,855	59,342	141,081	30,329	75,800	102	646	685	1,488	240,213	550,870
2007/08	140,792	314,034	60,265	144,031	34,088	83,411	177	631	2,581	6,094	237,903	548,201

Source: MoE: Essential education indicators 2007/2008, 5.

Appendix 2: Number of Teachers by Level and Gender 2000/2001-2007/2008

Year	Elementary		Middle		Secondary		TTI		Tech. & Voc.		Total	
	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F	T
2000/01	2,710	6,668	160	1,377	115	1,188	11	37	9	173	3,005	9,443
2001/02	2,873	7,498	177	1,529	145	1,419	6	47	17	174	3,218	10,667
2002/03	2,756	7,692	178	1,614	140	1,277	5	46	69	265	3,148	10,894
2003/04	2,887	8,033	216	2,241	215	1,645	11	23	78	326	3,407	12,268
2004/05	3,166	7,942	245	2,449	215	1,609	4	25	16	169	3,646	12,194
2005/06	3,296	7,711	257	2,491	188	1,552	0	0	15	145	3,756	11,899
2006/07	3,305	6,933	245	2,478	208	1,778	12	41	10	169	3,780	11,399
2007/08	3,241	7,311	258	2,704	210	1,811	10	39	39	376	3,758	12,241

Source: MoE, Eritrea: Essential education indicators 2007/2008, 6.

⁹¹ The latest data available that the researcher can have access to from the MoE documents is that of the academic year of 2007/2008.

Appendix 3: Female University Graduates, 2000-2007

Colleges and Departments	Degree			Diploma			Grand Total	
	M	F	Total	M	F	T	T	F
1. College of Agriculture	492	76	568	60	8	68	636	84
2. Faculty of Arts	209	94	303	-	-	-	303	94
English	120	50	170	-	-	-	170	50
Journalism & Mass Communication	89	44	133	-	-	-	133	44
3. College of Business & Economics	650	184	834	-	-	-	834	184
Accounting	204	79	283	-	-	-	283	79
Business Management	178	41	219	-	-	-	219	41
Economics & Finance	179	32	211	-	-	-	211	32
Public Administration	89	32	121	-	-	-	121	32
4. Faculty of Education	1,228	209	1,437	764	40	804	2,241	249
5. Faculty of Engineering	572	23	595	133	8	141	736	31
6. College of Health Science	342	61	403	41	8	49	452	69
7. Faculty of Law	214	30	244	-	-	-	244	30
Law	214	30	244	-	-	-	244	30
8. College of Science	721	94	815	-	-	-	815	94
9. College of Social Science	843	139	982	-	-	-	982	139
Anthropology and Archaeology	90	16	106	-	-	-	106	16
Geography	158	18	176	-	-	-	176	18
History	102	13	115	-	-	-	115	13
Political Science	122	18	140	-	-	-	140	18
Sociology & Anthropology	33	14	47	-	-	-	47	14
Sociology & Social Works	136	34	170	-	-	-	170	34
Statistics & Demography	202	26	228	-	-	-	228	26
10. Advanced Diploma	-	-	-	277	56	333	333	56
Total	7,187	1,357	8,544	1,275	120	1,395	9,939	1,477
%	84.1%	15.9%	100.0	91.4%	8.6%	100.0%		

Source: The NUEW

Appendix 4: Enrollment at Eritrean Institute of Technology (EIT)

Year	Arts and Social Science				Education				Engineering				Science			
	% F	F	% M	M	%F	F	M	M	% F	F	% M	F	% F	F	% M	F
2004	8.8	19	91.2	196	11.5	44	88.5	340	8.6	59	91.4	627	32.9	48	67.1	98
2005	24.1	60	74.7	186	18.4	77	81.6	324	12.6	78	87.4	543	13.7	53	86.3	335
2006	21.1	42	78.9	157	18.5	108	81.5	476	17.6	142	82.4	667	30.0	149	70.0	347
2007	26.7	27	73.3	74	38.7	135	61.3	214	12.6	69	87.4	480	32.6	97	67.4	201
2008	36.2	42	63.8	74	39.9	215	60.1	324	22.1	186	77.9	654	44.0	198	56.0	252

Sources: III CEDAW Draft 2011

Appendix 5: Ranking of Women in African Parliamentary Assemblies

Rank	Country	Lower or Single House				Upper House or Senate			
		Elections	Seats*	Women	% W	Elections	Seats*	Women	% W
1	Rwanda	9/2008	80	45	56.3%	9 2011	26	10	38.5%
2	Seychelles	9/2011	32	14	43.8%	---	---	---	---
3	South Africa*	4/2009	400	169	42.3%	4 2009	53	17	32.1%
4	Mozambique	10/2009	250	98	39.2%	---	---	---	---
5	Angola	9/2008	220	84	38.2%	---	---	---	---
6	United Republic of Tanzania	10/2010	350	126	36.0%	---	---	---	---
7	Uganda	2/2011	386	135	35.0%	---	---	---	---
8	Burundi	7/2010	105	32	30.5%	7 2010	41	19	46.3%
9	Ethiopia	5/2010	547	152	27.8%	5 2010	135	22	16.3%
10	Tunisia	10/2011	217	58	26.7%	---	---	---	---
11	South Sudan	8/2011	332	88	26.5%	8 2011	50	5	10.0%
12	Sudan	4/2010	354	87	24.6%	5 2010	28	5	17.9%
13	Namibia	11/2009	78	19	24.4%	11 2010	26	7	26.9%
14	Lesotho	2/2007	120	29	24.2%	3 2007	33	7	21.2%
15	Senegal	6/2007	150	34	22.7%	8 2007	100	40	40.0%
16	Malawi	5/2009	193	43	22.3%	---	---	---	---
17	Mauritania	11/2006	95	21	22.1%	11 2009	56	8	14.3%
18	Eritrea	2/1994	150	33	22.0%	---	---	---	---
19	Cape Verde	2/2011	72	15	20.8%	---	---	---	---
20	Mauritius	5/2010	69	13	18.8%	---	---	---	---
21	Sao Tome and Principe	8/2010	55	10	18.2%	---	---	---	---
22	Morocco	11/2011	395	67	17.0%	10 2009	270	6	2.2%
23	Burkina Faso	5/2007	111	17	15.3%	---	---	---	---
24	Zimbabwe	3/2008	214	32	15.0%	3 2008	99	24	24.2%
25	Gabon	12/2011	120	17	14.2%	1 2009	102	18	17.6%
26	Cameroon	7/2007	180	25	13.9%	---	---	---	---
27	Djibouti	2/2008	65	9	13.8%	---	---	---	---
28	Swaziland	9/2008	66	9	13.6%	10 2008	30	12	40.0%
29	Niger	1/2011	113	15	13.3%	---	---	---	---
30	Sierra Leone	8/2007	124	16	12.9%	---	---	---	---
31	Chad	2/2011	188	24	12.8%	---	---	---	---
32	Central African	1/2011	104	13	12.5%	---	---	---	---

33	Republic Madagascar	10/2010	256	32	12.5%	10 2010	90	10	11.1%
34	Zambia	9/2011	157	18	11.5%	---	---	---	---
35	Togo	10/2007	81	9	11.1%	---	---	---	---
36	Cote d'Ivoire	12/2011	254	28	11.0%	---	---	---	---
37	Mali	7/2007	147	15	10.2%	---	---	---	---
38	Equatorial Guinea	5/2008	100	10	10.0%	---	---	---	---
39	Guinea- Bissau	11/2008	100	10	10.0%	---	---	---	---
40	Kenya	12/2007	224	22	9.8%	---	---	---	---
41	Liberia	10/2011	73	7	9.6%	10 2011	30	4	13.3%
42	Benin	4/2011	83	7	8.4%	---	---	---	---
43	Ghana	12/2008	230	19	8.3%	---	---	---	---
44	Algeria	5/2007	389	31	8.0%	12 2009	136	7	5.1%
45	Botswana	10/2009	63	5	7.9%	---	---	---	---
46	Libya	3/2009	468	36	7.7%	---	---	---	---
47	Gambia	1/2007	53	4	7.5%	---	---	---	---
48	Congo	6/2007	137	10	7.3%	10 2011	72	10	13.9%
49	Nigeria	4/2011	352	24	6.8%	4 2011	109	7	6.4%
50	Somalia	8/2004	546	37	6.8%	---	---	---	---
51	Comoros	12/2009	33	1	3.0%	---	---	---	---
52	Egypt**	11/2011	508	10	2.0%	6 2010	270	?	?
53	Yemen	4/2003	301	1	0.3%	4 2001	111	2	1.8%
?	Democratic Republic of the Congo	11/2011	500	?	?	1 2007	108	5	4.6%

*South Africa: The figures on the distribution of seats do not include the 36 special rotating delegates appointed on an ad hoc basis, and all percentages given are therefore calculated on the basis of the 54 permanent seats.

**Egypt: Figures correspond to the results of elections to the Lower House completed in January 2012. Elections to the Upper House will be completed in early 2012.

Source: Extracted from data compiled by Inter-parliamentary Union on World Classification of Women in National Parliaments, situation as of December 31, 2011

Appendix 6: 2nd Zoba Assembly Elections

Zoba	Chair-Person		Secretaries			Members			Sum Total			Total	NA Members	
	M	F	M	F	M	F		%	M	F			M	F
						Q.*	C.**							
Central	1	0	1	0	44	22	6	37.8	46		28	74	7	4
Debub	1	0	1	0	54	22	1	29.1	56		23	79	8	4
Anseba	1	0	1	0	46	19	0	28.3	48		19	67	8	2
Gash-Barka	1	0	1	0	50	21	1	29.7	52		22	74	9	2
N.R. Sea	1	0	1	0	46	20	0	29.4	48		20	68	7	3
S. R. Sea	1	0	1	0	25	10	0	27	27		10	37	4	2
Diaspora	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	11	4
Total	6	0	6	0	265	114	8	30.5	277		122	399	54	21 (28%)

Source: Tsegereda Woldegiorgis 2004

*. Q. Stands for quota

**.. C. Stands for competition

Appendix 7: 3rd Zone Assembly Elections

Zoba	Chairperson		Secretary		Members		Total			Sum Total	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	%		
Central	1	0	1	0	40	22	42	22	34.3	64	
Debub	1	0	1	0	52	19	54	19	26	73	
Anseba	0	1	1	0	39	12	40	13	24.5	53	
Gash Barka	1	0	1	0	42	19	44	19	30.1	63	
N. Red Sea	1	0	0	1	41	15	42	16	27.58	58	
S. Red Sea	1	0	1	0	24	9	26	9	25.71	35	
Total	5	1	5	1	238	96	248	98	28.03	346	

Source: Tsegereda Woldegiorgis 2004

Abstract

Scholars studying revolutionary movements, women and their struggle for gender equality and political representation agree that once revolutionary movements achieve their wider aims, women's expanded roles during periods of liberation struggle will no longer be carried on in post-conflict societies, or if they do at all, it would be in their diminished forms. Eritrea, as a country that endured thirty-years of revolution, offered women an opportunity to expand their roles in realms traditionally reserved for men by allowing them to participate both as support personnel and frontline soldiers and in doing so, allowed for national discourses about the notions of women's emancipation, gender equality and their public participation to be revisited. As a result, these notions have since become part of the political discourses in Eritrea although the debate on these issues are still very limited. In the process of participating in the revolution, Eritrean women experienced a dramatic shift in perspective regarding the traditional roles of women in social and political life in Eritrea. During the revolution they took over military roles that were previously considered men's, they established their own movement, and participated in diverse socio-political activities. Whether as a result of these changes that took place during the revolution or as a result of more enlightened government policies, today, women constitute approximately 22 percent of the seats in the National Assembly in post-independence Eritrea, giving the country a rank of 18th in the African continent in terms of female representation in parliament. Although the increased political participation of women in Africa has stimulated significant research interest, the causality and sustainability of this trend continues to be debated given that such dramatic developments vis-à-vis women and politics has been considered as conflict triggered. This dramatic development has called into question the traditional theoretical understanding that the high political representation of women depends

on their high level of gainful employment, their high level of education in comparison with men, and longer periods of enfranchisement. Within this context, and given the fact that recent evidence suggests that Eritrea is no longer any different from other countries that have experienced liberation struggles and, especially given the absence of a political environment that would allow for public organizing, and expression of diverse perspectives, this study investigated whether the “increased political participation of women” in Eritrea, a country where women have to contend with several debilitating factors such as lack of quality education (accompanied by gender disparity at all levels), gainful employment and social equality, is sustainable in the long run. This research also explored the causal roots that determine how the political participation of women would evolve over time. The author also examined why women are under-represented in the top echelons of power and executive posts. The role of the National Union of Eritrean Women as the sole women’s organization entrusted with representing women at the national level and advancing their political interests, had also been examined and analyzed.

The findings of the research show that the current political representation and participation of women is limited not only by the lack of political freedoms in the country in general, but also by the government’s unwillingness to address the constraining issues that women face. Beyond putting in place generic laws that purportedly support the participation of women in all spheres, the government has yet to fully and efficiently implement these laws or even tackle the limiting factors that women face both in private and public spheres to expand their participation. Moreover, the research also discovered that the NUEW, as the sole women’s organization, which is supposed to advance the interest of women at the national level, is more concerned with defending and promulgating the specious policies of a totalitarian state rather than

struggling to achieve gender equality or further the interests of women in general.

Zusammenfassung

WissenschaftlerInnen, welche sich insbesondere mit der Rolle und Position von Frauen und deren Kampf für die Gleichberechtigung der Geschlechter und für die politische Repräsentation in revolutionären Bewegungen beschäftigen, sind sich einig, dass deren – während der Revolutionsbemühungen – erweiterte Rollen nach Durchsetzung der Forderungen und Ziele in der Post-Konflikt-Gesellschaft oftmals wieder herabgesetzt oder gar ignoriert würden. Eritrea, als ein Land, das einen 30-jährigen Kampf für die Befreiung ausgehalten hat, bot Frauen die Möglichkeit, ihre Rollen in Bereichen, die traditionell den Männern vorbehalten waren, zu erweitern, indem ihnen die Teilnahme sowohl als Hilfspersonal als auch als Frontsoldatinnen erlaubt wurde. Dies ermöglichte nationalen Diskursen die Begriffe bzw. Auffassungen der Emanzipation der Frauen und der Gleichstellung der Geschlechter und ihre Beteiligung in der Öffentlichkeit neu zu überdenken. Infolgedessen wurden in Eritrea diese Begriffe ein Teil der politischen Diskurse, obwohl die Debatte über diese Themen noch sehr begrenzt ist. Im Prozess der Beteiligung an der Revolution erlebten eritreische Frauen eine drastische Veränderung in Bezug auf die traditionelle Rollenverteilung von Frauen im gesellschaftlichen und politischen Leben in Eritrea. Während der Revolution übernahmen sie militärische Aufgaben, die bisher Männern zugeschrieben waren, gründeten ihre eigene Bewegung und nahmen an diversen gesellschaftspolitischen Aktivitäten teil. Ob als Ergebnis dieser Veränderungen während der Revolution oder als Folge der aufgeklärten Politik der Regierung, stellen heute Frauen etwa 22 Prozent der Sitze in der Nationalversammlung im heute unabhängigen Eritrea. Damit liegt Eritrea in Bezug auf die Vertretung der Frauen im Parlament auf Rang

18 auf dem afrikanischen Kontinent. Das steigende Forschungsinteresse an der verstärkten politischen Partizipation von Frauen in Afrika, generiert vor allem Debatten über die Zusammenhänge und die Nachhaltigkeit dieses Trends, nicht zuletzt auch aufgrund der Annahme, dass solch dramatische Entwicklungen weitere Konflikte auslösen würden. Diese dramatische Entwicklung hat das traditionelle theoretische Verständnis, dass die breite politische Vertretung von Frauen von ihrem Grad der Erwerbstätigkeit, von ihrem im Vergleich zu Männern hohen Bildungsniveau und der längeren Befreiung abhängt, in Frage gestellt. Neuere Annahmen gehen davon aus, dass sich Eritrea nach den Freiheitsbemühungen nicht von anderen Ländern mit einer Geschichte von Befreiungsbewegungen unterscheide. Im Kontext dieser Annahme und weiteren Faktoren wie eines fehlenden politischen Umfeldes, welches öffentliche Veranstaltungen oder eine freie und heterogene Meinungsäußerung erlaube, untersucht diese Studie, ob die "verstärkte politische Partizipation von Frauen" in Eritrea – ein Land, wo Frauen mit mehreren lähmenden Faktoren wie der mangelnden Qualität der Ausbildung (in Begleitung von Ungleichheit zwischen den Geschlechtern auf allen Ebenen), der Erwerbsarbeit und der sozialen Gleichheit zu kämpfen haben – auf lange Sicht nachhaltig ist. Diese Forschung untersucht auch die ursächlichen Wurzeln, die bestimmen, wie die politische Partizipation von Frauen sich mit der Zeit entwickelt. Die Autorin untersuchte auch, warum Frauen in den obersten Etagen der Macht- und Führungspositionen unterrepräsentiert sind. Ebenfalls untersucht und analysiert wurde die Rolle der Nationalen Union der eritreischen Frauen (National Union of Eritrean Women - NUEW). Sie ist als einzige Frauenorganisation auf nationaler Ebene, die mit der Repräsentation der Frauen und der Förderung ihrer politischen Interessen beauftragt ist.

Die Ergebnisse der Forschung zeigen, dass die gegenwärtige politische Vertretung und Beteiligung von Frauen nicht nur durch den Mangel an politischen Freiheiten begrenzt ist, sondern auch durch den Widerwillen der Regierung, die nicht bereit ist, Themen, die Frauen einschränken, anzusprechen. Über die Formulierung von generischen Gesetzen hinaus, die angeblich die Beteiligung von Frauen in allen Bereichen unterstützen, muss die Regierung diese Gesetze noch vollständig und effizient umsetzen oder gar die einschränkenden Faktoren, denen Frauen sowohl im privaten als auch im öffentlichen Bereich begegnen, bekämpfen, um ihre Partizipation auszubauen. Außerdem fand die Untersuchung heraus, dass die NUEW, als alleinige Frauenorganisation, die vermeintlich das Interesse von Frauen auf nationaler Ebene ausbauen sollte, mehr mit der Verteidigung und der öffentlichen Verbreitung der fadenscheinigen Politik eines totalitären Staates beschäftigt ist als für die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter zu kämpfen oder die Interessen von Frauen zu fördern.

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Tsegereda Wolde-georgis. 2004. *Women and Political Participation in Eritrea*. Paper Presented at the 25th (Silver Jubilee) Conference Anniversary of the NUEW. Asmara, Eritrea

Interviews⁹³

Amina Maleken (Former Chairwoman of the First Eritrean Women's Association and currently Coordinator of the Horn of Africa Senior Women's Program Inc. in Australia), interview by author, Asmara, May 29, 2011.

Adhanet Andom (Chairwoman of the Women's Committee at the NCEW and member of the NA), interview by author, Asmara, September 28, 2010.

Dehab Suleiman (Head, Public Relations and Research Department, the NUEW), interview by author, Asmara, September 7, 2010.

GD1 (Group Discussion 1), author's discussion with college students, recent graduates, and young professionals, Asmara, September 9, 2010.

GD2 (Group Discussion 2), author's discussion with civil servants, government officials, members of the defense forces and researchers, Nakfa, August 11, 2010.

Luul Gebreab (Chairwoman, the NUEW), interview by author, Asmara, September 13, 2010.

⁹³ Traditionally, Eritreans are referenced by their personal (first) name, followed by their father's name and that is the format of citation followed here for Eritrean names. In addition, the researcher would like to state that except government officials or affiliates, all other interviewees are here given pseudonyms. This is necessary to do so since all interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and that interviewees were assured that their names will be withheld by mutual consent given the current political climate in the country.

Roma Ghebreyesus (Head, Finance and Administration, the NCEW),
interview by author, Asmara, September 3, 2010.

Said Sultan (Chairman, the NUEYS), interview by author, Asmara,
September 9, 2010.

Author's Interview with journalist 'R,' UoA graduate at the NCEW,
Asmara, Eritrea, September 9, 2010.

Author's interview with researcher 'D' UoA, Asmara, August 31, 2010.

Author's interview with an ex-fighter and MoE employee 'F' Asmara,
September 21, 2010.

Author's interview with an ex-fighter and researcher 'N' Asmara, October
3, 2011.

Author's interview with UoA graduate and researcher at RDC 'H'
Asmara, August 4, 2010.

Author's interview with research expert at the Civil Service Administration
(CSA) 'T' Asmara, September 4, 2010.

Author's interview with college student at Health Sciences 'Y' Asmara,
September 9, 2010.

Author's interview with Hal-Hale Business School Graduate Assistant 'Z'
Nakfa, August 11, 2010.

Author's interview with teacher 'A' an MoE Employee, Nakfa August 11,
2010.

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Education

2008- 2012	Doctoral Candidate, Department of African Studies, University of Vienna. <u>PhD Thesis Title:</u> <i>Gender Equality and the Political Representation of Women in Contemporary Eritrea.</i>
2007-2008	Master of Advanced International Studies (M.A.I.S.) The Diplomatic Academy of Vienna. <u>M.A.I.S. Thesis Title:</u> <i>The Role of Personal Rule and Authoritarianism in State Collapse: A Case Study of Muhammad Siyad Barre and the Collapse of the Somali State (1980-1995).</i>
2006-2007	MA Diploma in International Studies The Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University, Bologna Center.
1998-2003	Bachelor of Arts in Political Science (With <i>Great Distinction</i>), University of Asmara, <u>Senior Thesis Title:</u> <i>A Comparative Study of the Decolonization Process between Eritrea and Namibia: A Case Study of the EPLF and SWAPO.</i>
1991-1998	Certificate, Keren Secondary School, Keren, Eritrea.

1985-1991 Certificate, Eden Elementary School,
Elabered, Eritrea.

Work Experience

European Network Against Racism (ENAR) Brussels, Belgium

May 2011-November 2011

Responsibilities

- o In charge of authoring ENAR Shadow Report for Austria titled: Racism and Related Discriminatory Practices in 2010-2011 in Austria.

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW)

May 2011-October 2011

Asmara, Eritrea

Responsibilities

- o Team Leader and researcher: drafted a five year (2012-2015) National Gender Action Plan for Eritrea.

University of Asmara

2004-2006

Asmara, Eritrea

Responsibilities

Administrative

Tasks

- o Student-professor liaison, responsible for essay submissions, course reading material advice, evaluation and grade submission.

2004-2005

Teaching Assistant

- o Created and implemented program for undergraduate course in International Relations.
- o Co-taught introductory course in Political Science at the Hal- hale Campus.

2003-2004

Staff member/Writer

Office of Public Relations and Communications

- o Chosen by the University president to help launch new Office of Public Relations and Communications for the University.
- o Responsible for interviewing University faculty/staff, writing articles for the

University newsletter and other publications.

- o Conducted internet study of website design and content as contributor to new University website.

Research Projects

Sustainable Land Management Program
2005-2006

Asmara, Eritrea
Responsibilities

Field Researcher, Translator and Survey Enumerator to Multi-disciplinary Research Team

Project: Resource Use and Livelihoods in Akurdet Town and its Surroundings

- o Duties included collection of urban and rural livelihood data through participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques, group discussions and interviews.

University of Asmara
2004-2005

Asmara, Eritrea
Responsibilities

Assistant Field Researcher to Multi-disciplinary Research Team.

Project: Continuity and Transformation in Agrarian Eritrea

- o Duties included collection of urban marketing data, rural survey administration and data analysis.

Awards

2011-2012

Ida Smedley Maclean International Fellowship,

International Federation of University Women (IFUW)

2009-2011

One World Scholarship,
Afro-Asian Institute (AAI)

2007-2008

International Fellowship,
American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW)

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 2006-2007 | African Fellowship Award,
The Johns Hopkins University, Bologna
Center |
| October 9, 2005 | Certificate of Recognition for Completing
Higher Education with Great Distinction,
The National Union of Eritrean Women
(NUEW) |
| July 17, 2004 | Medal for Academic Excellence,
College of Social Sciences, The University of
Asmara |

Languages

- o English (fluent), Tigrinya (native), Bilen (basic), Tigre (good)
- o German (good), French (basic).

Skills

- o Ability to establish priorities and to plan, coordinate and monitor own work plan and the work schedules of others and meet deadlines.
- o Good computer skills including proficiency in word processing and presentation software, eg. MS PowerPoint.
- o Excellent oral skills and ability to draft clearly and concisely.
- o Proven analytical, research skills, and excellent interpersonal skills.
- o Ability to develop and maintain effective work relationships with different national and cultural backgrounds with a sensitivity and respect for diversity.

Published Articles and Reports

2011. Racism and Related Discriminatory Practices in Austria in 2010-2011. Published by ENAR. Available at <http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/publications/shadow%20report%202010-11/1.%20Austria.pdf>.

2010. *The State of Eritrea's Women's Association Revisited: An Analysis of its Past and Present Roles, and Future Challenges*. Occasional Paper

Nr. 09, Occasional Papers Series, Department of African Studies,
University of Vienna, 16 pages. Available at
http://www.univie.ac.at/afrika/Occasional/HABTU_Occasional_09_Mai_2010.pdf.

References

Available on request.