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Ensuring Equality Through Participation', the Armed Struggle and Social Justice

Ashiraf Mugalula

- *Research Fellow, Makerere University / Al-Mustafa Islamic College*

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Correspondence**Author:** Ashiraf
Mugalula

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Abstract

This study examines the Eritrean war of independence (1961–1991), highlighting the fact that females comprised 30% of the revolutionary forces. The uprising forged an environment promoting equal female involvement, operating on the premise that integrating women was essential for achieving true national liberation. By analyzing the transformation of gender dynamics during this conflict, the article illustrates the capacity of such uprisings to trigger female liberation. It investigates strategies and outcomes related to bridging the societal gender divide through revolutionary action. The central thesis posits that the Eritrean resistance movement was a primary catalyst for profound societal shifts within the nation. Furthermore, the enthusiastic involvement of females was a pivotal driver of this metamorphosis. To substantiate these claims, the study evaluates the liberating effects of the uprising and the resulting lifestyle improvements for diverse female demographics across the country.

Keywords: Eritrean Liberation Movement; Gender Dynamics in Warfare; Agrarian Reform EPLF; Feminist Revolutionary Models; Socio-Political Transformation; Horn of Africa Decolonization.

Introduction

The armed resistance in Eritrea commenced in 1961. While national awareness had been growing, it fully matured during the conflict, serving as the crucible where Eritrean women discovered their liberation. Consequently, the resistance provided an egalitarian platform for females, driven by the conviction that true nationhood required their full participation. The Eritrean uprising stands out distinctly within both the broader African anti-colonial movements and the global Third World quest for self-governance due to several historical factors. A paramount distinguishing factor is the profound involvement of Eritrean females. During the liberation war, women accounted for more than thirty percent of the combatants in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Their impact was undeniable, characterized not just by numbers but by the high caliber of their dedication. Beyond the

battlefield, women historically made massive contributions from within enemy territories and the diaspora, supplying critical resources for the resistance.

The conflict nurtured a collective identity by forging an all-encompassing national culture. Through this process, gender-based prejudice was nearly eliminated on the front lines. This achievement stemmed from the joint efforts of male and female combatants, with women asserting their rights under the banner of *'Maerinet b tesatfnet'*, translating to 'Equality by participation'. Therefore, the nationalist-driven independence movement actively facilitated women's advancement. Post-independence, females have maintained their involvement in state-building initiatives, such as the national service program. Although their role in the liberation movement laid a strong foundation for domestic gender parity, certain issues remain unresolved. Key areas requiring further attention include property ownership and marital laws.

During the conflict, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the EPLF governed substantial regional territories, implementing distinct administrative frameworks and legal codes. To foster socio-political steadiness in these liberated zones, both organizations sought to overhaul foundational elements of traditional land ownership. They launched transformative policies, albeit utilizing divergent strategies regarding agrarian reform. The EPLF maintained authority over northeastern Eritrea for nearly twenty years, operating akin to a sovereign government. Their primary objective was to supplant traditional agrarian systems with fairer, modernized structures. Outlined in their 1977 National Democratic Program, the EPLF's core agricultural strategy focused on establishing state-run and cooperative farming ventures. The reinstatement of the communal *Diesa/shehena* framework and the fair allocation of territory became pivotal elements of their agenda.

During this era, agrarian restructuring served intertwined economic and political functions. From an economic standpoint, leadership recognized that inequitable land division was a root cause of rural poverty. Politically, enacting these reforms served as a powerful tool for mobilizing civilian support. The EPLF's regulations modernized the *Diesa* system by dismantling elite privileges and expanding female property rights. This initiative aimed to rectify the historical prejudices of agrarian customs that marginalized women and non-locals. Consequently, females and the youth were granted equitable land access. Securing female property rights represented the most profound, progressive victory of the resistance, despite facing pushback from rural populations clinging to ancestral customs. This analysis evaluates the consequences of these structural changes, framing them within broader scholarly discourse on radical movements and female empowerment. It assesses the movement's gender ideology through the lenses of revolutionary feminism and the "women's emancipation model".

Land Reforms and Eritrean Armed Struggle / Revolution

Defining a revolution is crucial to comprehending the essence of the Eritrean conflict. The concept of revolution has been heavily debated by scholars, generally denoting a shift—though the nature of that shift varies across political, social, or cultural spectrums. While many radical movements originate with political grievances, they invariably intersect with broader socioeconomic and cultural transformations. Scholar Samuel Huntington characterizes a revolution as a swift, intense, and often forceful internal upheaval that alters

a society's core values, political frameworks, leadership paradigms, and institutional policies. He distinguishes these profound shifts from mere rebellions or independence wars, which do not inherently guarantee societal restructuring. Huntington links the genesis of revolutions to the push for modernization, whereas Theda Skocpol describes "great" revolutions as deep structural changes driven by lower-class uprisings. Skocpol argues that such movements are fueled by inherent class conflicts. From a structuralist viewpoint, true revolutions require concurrent, amplifying shifts in both societal frameworks and political governance.

Elbaki Hermassi further categorizes revolutions into three evolutionary types to highlight their changing objectives over time. The initial category encompasses democratic revolutions (e.g., France and England), which sought to free progressive societies from restrictive political regimes. The second involves developmental revolutions (e.g., Japan, Russia), occurring in stagnant nations utilizing state power to rapidly modernize and compete globally. The final category involves national revolutions, characterized by protracted, complex struggles within multifaceted societies. These movements aim to blend democratic and developmental goals, often stymied by their disadvantaged position in the global hierarchy. National revolutions thus integrate liberation from colonial rule with the cultural recovery of marginalized societies.

Amilcar Cabral introduces another layer, defining revolution as sudden changes in class dynamics resulting from shifts in productive forces and ownership models. He posits that culture—as the collective intellectual and material reality of a society—is vital to this process. For Cabral, cultural resistance is a profound ideological rejection of foreign subjugation. While history exposes the political and economic conflicts defining a society's trajectory, culture provides the adaptive mechanisms required to navigate these conflicts and ensure survival. He argues that liberation struggles represent a colonized population's deliberate reclamation of their historical narrative. Furthermore, Cabral insists that true liberation transcends mere decolonization; it necessitates authentic societal advancement. Because imperial dominance inherently erases a subjected people's cultural and historical identity, the fight for national liberation is fundamentally a cultural act. Cabral championed the idea that such struggles paved the path for African decolonization. Consequently, revolutions are deeply intertwined with the formation of national identity, economic restructuring, and the renegotiation of gender, class, and ethnic roles. Therefore, national revolutions must prioritize holistic cultural, social, and economic progression alongside political sovereignty.

Tanja R. Müller contextualizes the Eritrean uprising as a dual endeavor: a militant quest for sovereignty and a progressive, socialist-inspired campaign for societal renewal. Echoing Cabral's focus on culturally grounded transformation, the Eritrean resistance prioritized deep societal changes, encompassing agrarian reform, expanded healthcare and educational access, and the active socio-political integration of females both in rural communities and on the frontlines. This shared struggle forged a unifying national culture that was instrumental in securing liberty. The liberation forces cultivated an environment intolerant of sectarian divides—such as class, religion, or ethnicity—where combatants were recognized solely by their names. They reinforced this unified identity through secular governance, educational

initiatives, and ongoing reconstruction efforts within their territories. This commitment to secularism was a defining trait of the EPLF, fostering profound solidarity and a shared mission among both the fighters and the civilian populace.

Historical Development of the Eritrean Struggle

Following the British Military Administration's oversight, the U.N. mandated Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia in 1952 via resolution 390 A(V), designating it an autonomous entity under the Ethiopian monarchy. This federation initially granted Eritrea self-governing economic, social, and political institutions. The era's Eritrean Constitution safeguarded citizens' property rights and allowed for localized policy-making. However, by the mid-1950s, the Ethiopian Crown systematically dismantled this autonomy. The banning of the Eritrean flag and indigenous languages sparked widespread outrage, igniting protests among laborers and students. Ultimately, Ethiopia formally annexed Eritrea as its fourteenth province in 1962.

This forced assimilation triggered militant opposition to Ethiopian supremacy. Organized resistance emerged in November 1958 with the covert establishment of the *Harekat Tahrir Eritrea* (Eritrean Liberation Movement). Upon discovering the ELM, the Ethiopian regime resorted to lethal suppression, prompting intellectuals and workers to transition from secret organizing to overt rebellion. The demographic makeup of the resistance rapidly evolved, culminating in the 1961 launch of the armed struggle and the creation of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) in Cairo. Initially comprised of freed low-land serfs, the ELF's ranks swelled by late 1962 to include urban workers and scholars. Eventually, the overseas-based ELF leadership was ousted and replaced by commanders active on the battlefield.

By the early 1970s, ideological and strategic schisms led a faction of ELF veterans to establish the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). Subsequent internecine warfare resulted in the ELF's defeat in the 1980s. Between 1970 and 1977, both groups governed substantial territories, implementing their respective legal and administrative systems. To maintain order in these liberated zones, both the EPLF and ELF initiated overhauls of traditional land ownership norms. They executed distinct but highly impactful agrarian policies.

The Eritrean Revolution Social and Political Pillars and Land Reforms

The EPLF's National Democratic Program identified the working class and peasantry as the foundational pillars of the uprising. Published in 1977, this manifesto asserted that the revolution depended entirely on an alliance between these two demographics. The doctrine argued that successful liberation required the peasantry's mass support paired with the proletariat's strategic direction. This perspective aligned closely with established Marxist revolutionary theory. The EPLF maintained that achieving their ultimate goals required a two-phase process: a national democratic revolution followed by a socialist transformation. The initial transitional phase necessitated uniting all democratic factions—primarily workers and peasants—against imperialist, colonial, and feudal forces. This consolidation was deemed a mandatory prerequisite for the subsequent success of the socialist phase. Because the peasantry constituted the vast, impoverished majority of the population, they were recognized as the primary engine driving this first revolutionary stage. As scholar Jordan

Gebremdhin notes, this initial phase was dialectically linked to, and served as the groundwork for, the future socialist socioeconomic structure.

The program's second section detailed agricultural strategies (Article 3) and the protection of social rights (Article 4). Article 3 specifically targeted the peasantry, mandating the eradication of feudal land ownership and the implementation of fair land distribution. It aimed to modernize agricultural and pastoral practices by fostering cooperative farming networks and mutual aid systems, thereby elevating rural incomes. The initiative also sought to establish politically engaged agricultural associations. Concurrently, Article 4 prioritized the safeguarding of female and worker rights, while also guaranteeing support for the dependents of fallen soldiers and other vulnerable groups. Thus, true societal advancement required dismantling cultural barriers and identifying populations needing systemic protection.

Gebremedhin argues that the EPLF's crowning achievement during the anti-colonial war was successfully addressing agrarian inequalities and sparking a rural uprising. The organization analyzed rural class divisions by examining labor dynamics and the ownership of production means. In the *Kebessa* region, they categorized the populace into destitute peasants, middle-class peasants, affluent peasants, and feudal landowners. Operating effectively as a sovereign state for nearly twenty years in the northeast, the EPLF managed local governance, public administration, and judicial systems. Throughout its evolution, the movement actively reformed legal frameworks affecting both its combatants and civilian base populations. According to Roy Pateman and Lyda Favali, customary laws were accommodated provided they did not contradict EPLF ideology. The movement integrated acceptable traditional codes into its civilian judicial administration. They institutionalized mobile committees of local elders tasked with traversing villages to mediate disputes.

Ultimately, the EPLF aimed to supplant archaic land tenure traditions with equitable, modern institutions. As codified in 1977, their agricultural directive prioritized the formation of state and cooperative farms. The resurrection of the communal *Diesa/shehena* model alongside fair land reallocation became cornerstones of their governance. To achieve food independence for both the populace and the military, an agricultural commission was launched in 1975 to innovate and elevate farming output. Between 1976 and 1981, land was redistributed across 162 villages, strictly ignoring religious, ethnic, or gender biases. Consequently, 12,500 previously landless individuals received property, and almost 50,000 households secured supplemental acreage. While most of these areas already utilized *Diesa/shehena* tenure, twenty-four villages operating under the *demaniale* system were forcefully transitioned to *Diesa*. In 1981, 62 landless men and women in Mai-Zila acquired property through these initiatives. Furthermore, 1982 saw approximately 275 farmers across five Akele Guzai villages benefit from similar reallocations.

The EPLF actively dismantled historical prejudices that denied land to outsiders and women. While property remained collectively owned and managed by village assemblies, the equal access rights of youths and females were firmly established. Another highly contested and sensitive objective was transitioning nomadic herders into sedentary lifestyles. To encourage this shift to farming, the EPLF offered nomadic groups vital social services, including children's education and veterinary care for livestock. Officers from the Public

Administration Department (*Jemahir*) were tasked with evangelizing revolutionary ideals, integrating locals into the movement, and adjudicating land conflicts. These officials prioritized diplomatic, reconciliatory solutions to property disputes between communities and individuals.

Implementation often relied on "unity of armed propaganda" teams—composed of EPLF cadres—who facilitated the creation of ten-member village peasant assemblies. These assemblies, often organized by traditional leaders but monitored by the EPLF, managed land allocation. Post-distribution, the assembly formed a nine-member committee to oversee future allocations, and a twelve-member committee for general village administration. Notably, four specific groups were excluded from land benefits. These were absentee landowners (absent for 5+ years), individuals holding property in other jurisdictions, wealthy "compradors," and "Commandos" (Eritreans serving in specialized Ethiopian military units). The status of religious lands also sparked heavy debate. The eventual compromise permitted clergy to receive land, provided they personally farmed it and their plots did not exceed the size of a standard peasant's allocation.

Gebremedhin concludes that the EPLF's relative triumph stemmed directly from its rigorous class analysis of rural demographics and its subsequent agrarian strategies. This is a valid assessment; the EPLF garnered massive grassroots support precisely because its inclusive frameworks actively diagnosed and addressed societal and internal hurdles. As Cabral emphasized, revolutionaries must fight not just for abstract concepts, but for tangible improvements—better living conditions, material gains, and a secure future for the next generation. A successful uprising cannot blindly copy past movements; it must be custom-tailored to the unique realities of its specific environment.

The EPLF's land policies successfully married political strategy with economic necessity. Economically, dismantling unequal land distribution was recognized as the key to curing rural destitution. Politically, these reforms acted as a powerful magnet for civilian loyalty, though execution methods varied. The EPLF's regulations championed an updated *Diesa* system, eradicating elite monopolies and vastly expanding female property rights. They aggressively challenged the xenophobic and patriarchal aspects of historical land laws. Under this new paradigm, the youth and women were finally recognized as legitimate, equal stakeholders in land access. Securing these rights for women stands as the movement's most profoundly radical achievement, even as it faced significant pushback from traditionalist farmers.

Eritrean Women and the Armed Struggle

Valentine M. Moghadam categorizes revolutions as distinct manifestations of collective mobilization and societal evolution, deliberately designed to forcefully realign economic, political, and cultural institutions with a specific ideological vision. Because gender dynamics are intrinsically tied to societal reproduction and production, they are foundational to any conceptualization of national identity and utopian society. Consequently, gender relations continually mold—and are concurrently molded by—radical political upheavals. The strategic agency demonstrated by women across various historical conflicts (such as the Mau Mau rebellion or the Algerian and Latin American uprisings) underscores their indispensable function in executing revolutionary objectives. Moghadam emphasizes that

these gender paradigms form a critical pillar of a radical society's political and ideological culture.

Every revolutionary event triggers simultaneous downward and upward social mobility, stripping influence from entrenched economic elites and transferring empowerment to newly mobilized demographics. These chaotic shifts impact women in disparate ways, heavily influenced by their ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. Nevertheless, sweeping legal modifications regarding familial structures, reproductive rights, and civilian status can exert a universally transformative effect across the entire female population.

Moghadam identifies two primary paradigms of womanhood that surfaced during twentieth-century political upheavals. The first is the "Woman's Emancipation model" (an egalitarian framework seen in the Bolshevik Revolution and explicitly socialist Third World movements like those in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and Yemen). Within this progressive framework, the liberation of females is an explicit, primary objective of the uprising. Conversely, uprisings driven primarily by intense nationalist or religious fervor generally yielded heavily patriarchal frameworks. The Iranian, Mexican, and French Revolutions exemplify this conservative trajectory. While the repercussions of radical change inevitably vary based on a woman's racial, ideological, and economic standing, historical revolutionary policies concerning female citizenship and familial duty almost universally align with one of these two models.

Under the "women's emancipation" framework, liberating females from the patriarchal constraints of their communities and households is deemed vital to the broader social crusade. This model actively recruits women into the public sphere as vital economic and political assets. Consequently, ideological emphasis is placed firmly on gender parity rather than inherent gender distinctions. This egalitarian model addresses immediate, practical gender needs based on available resources, while also championing long-term strategic interests by demanding total female integration into civic life. The earliest and most radical historical manifestation of this approach was Russia's Bolshevik Revolution, which remains unparalleled in its initial, aggressive dismantling of traditional gender norms.

In stark contrast, the "woman in the family" paradigm actively subverts women's long-term strategic interests by reinforcing domesticity and amplifying gender divides. Beyond marginalizing females from definitions of true independence and political liberty, this patriarchal model sometimes formally demotes women to the status of legal minors or subordinate citizens. Here, national identity is inextricably bound to patriarchal authority, religious doctrine, and traditional family hierarchies. A woman's societal value is strictly tethered to her cultural and religious duties as a mother and spouse. This framework deliberately weaves a tight ideological web connecting traditionalist beliefs, religious dogma, and nationalist pride. While such movements might seek to elevate the working class or improve general domestic conditions, they do so by hyper-idealizing the traditional family unit and rigidly enforcing the female domestic role. The French Revolution serves as the historical archetype for this patriarchal outcome; despite its numerous democratic triumphs, it concluded with deeply conservative restrictions on female autonomy.

Similarly, scholar Julie Shayne contends that insurgent movements multiply their effectiveness when they embed feminism directly into their revolutionary blueprints. She

argues that no societal upheaval achieves true success unless it actively deconstructs and rectifies the systemic subjugation of women. This requires profound structural integration, not just deploying female soldiers as tactical assets. Shayne introduces two critical frameworks: "gendered revolutionary bridges" and "revolutionary feminism". She defines "gendered revolutionary bridges" as the crucial intermediary roles women fulfill to connect militant forces with the civilian public. This encompasses female operatives smuggling intelligence in market baskets, or establishing community networks that ultimately secure vital medical supplies, refuge, and sustenance.

"Revolutionary feminism" is characterized as an independent, diverse grassroots mobilization that attacks sexism as a fundamental component of broader oppressive political architectures, recognizing that institutional tyranny is inherently reliant on female subjugation. In authoritarian contexts like Chile, the dictatorial regime was viewed as the ultimate, inescapable manifestation of systemic patriarchy. Shayne outlines five prerequisites for revolutionary feminism to flourish: First, a substantial cohort of females must perform unconventional, non-traditional duties within the militant movement ; second, women must secure tactical training enabling them to command ; third, the movement must feature an accessible "political opportunity structure" ; fourth, the revolution must retain a degree of "incompleteness" by failing to fully satisfy female demands, thereby sparking collective feminist awareness ; and finally, a distinct feminist consciousness must actively take root among the female populace.

Analyzing the mechanics of shifting gender relations and the catalysts of revolutionary social reform is paramount when evaluating the female experience within the Eritrean liberation forces. Consequently, it is vital to dissect how the Eritrean movement confronted entrenched patriarchal traditions to thrust women into the public revolutionary sphere.

Eritrean Women in the Liberation Front

Historically, Eritrean society perceived women as fundamentally powerless, often treating them as familial burdens. In agrarian regions, females managed exhaustive domestic labor and worked alongside male relatives in the fields, yet received zero societal validation for their contributions. Prior to aligning with the independence forces, women possessed almost no voice or agency within their communities. It is crucial to recognize that Eritrean women do not represent a monolithic entity; their experiences are as diverse as the society itself. The onset of colonial rule introduced shifts in female lifestyles, though these alterations paled in comparison to the transformations ignited by the armed struggle. Under Italian occupation, females increasingly entered the workforce as factory laborers and domestic servants. This colonial-era economic integration inadvertently heightened their exposure to, and eventual participation in, broader political dynamics.

Life under foreign occupation was incredibly severe for all citizens, marked by constant humiliation and the oppressive weight of the occupying military. Despite these brutal conditions, a vast network of women covertly collaborated with the ELF and EPLF, placing their lives in constant jeopardy by sheltering fugitives, distributing illicit literature, smuggling messages, and gathering vital intelligence. Urban women endured the exact same brutal interrogations, incarcerations, and physical torments as their male counterparts. Driven by this oppression, many females—particularly the youth—fled city centers to enlist

directly with EPLF forces in liberated territories. As noted by Kirsty Wright, women who remained in urban areas typically secured employment in private enterprises or Ethiopian government offices. Some worked as educators. While the Ethiopian regime systematically violated the labor rights of all Eritreans, women suffered disproportionately. They endured severely depressed wages and were systematically denied equal compensation for equal labor. Avenues for advanced education were virtually nonexistent; societal pressure dictated that girls abandon their studies to embrace early marriage and domesticity. Consequently, most were forced into underage marriages, merely trading the absolute authority of their fathers for the absolute authority of their husbands.

Eritrean women fiercely desired to join the resistance, yet faced initial opposition from both their families and the movement's early leadership. Undeterred, they deeply embedded themselves in clandestine urban networks. Much like the ELF, the EPLF originated as an exclusively male vanguard. By the late 1960s, females were permitted entry, but were strictly barred from combat roles. Although the ELF eventually admitted women, they failed to offer the egalitarian combat integration subsequently championed by the EPLF. A pivotal shift occurred in 1973 when three women stubbornly refused to leave the frontlines; they were ultimately permitted to remain and undergo rigorous military training. Following this, the EPLF actively and publicly recruited female combatants. While early recruits were predominantly educated urbanites, they rapidly and successfully radicalized women across rural landscapes. Females from every socioeconomic and ethnic background flooded into the movement.

The EPLF set an extraordinary precedent by shattering deeply entrenched gender parameters. While women in other global uprisings were often relegated to auxiliary support, the EPLF fully assimilated females as legitimate, frontline warriors. Eritrean women engaged in armed combat with an intensity and scale virtually unmatched in regional history. Within the EPLF, gender distinctions seemingly dissolved as mixed-sex units lived communally and executed identical military objectives. Furthermore, the EPLF functioned not merely as a militia, but as a nascent government with sophisticated administrative departments overseeing comprehensive civilian functions.

Moghadam argues that a revolution's core ideology dictates its ultimate impact on gender dynamics. Movements steered by socialist and modernizing philosophies are inherently more likely to yield emancipatory outcomes for women. The EPLF was driven not just by a desire to sever ties with Ethiopia, but by a mandate to fundamentally restructure Eritrean social and power hierarchies. Female emancipation was a non-negotiable pillar of their cultural revolution, and the leadership actively institutionalized gender parity within its militant ranks. The front's diagnosis of gender inequality was rooted deeply in orthodox Marxist doctrine. As Worku Zerai notes, the EPLF believed that dismantling class tyranny was the strict prerequisite for eradicating female oppression, and that a socialist state was the only vehicle for true equality. They viewed themselves as combatting toxic, "feudal," and "backward" cultural traditions with the same intensity they fought foreign colonizers. Given this scientific, secular, and progressive orientation, female advancement naturally became a paramount priority.

The treatment of women frequently serves as the ultimate metric when contrasting progressive modernity against stagnant tradition. Women are routinely positioned as living symbols of a society's collective identity. Uprisings that specifically target tribalism or feudalism inevitably recognize that incorporating females is essential to their developmental agenda. According to Moghadam, revolutionary bodies that synthesize developmental strategies with explicit advocacy for women's rights are intrinsically egalitarian. Evaluated against these criteria, the Eritrean uprising undeniably aligns with the "women emancipation" framework.

To systematically address societal grievances, the EPLF organized diverse coalitions, including youth, agricultural, and women's unions. In 1979, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was launched as a primary mass mobilization arm of the EPLF. Throughout the war, NUEW successfully galvanized female participation to sustain the military campaign. This entity achieved massive popularity by elevating female political literacy and actively deploying healthcare and educational resources to women in liberated zones. NUEW fiercely lobbied to ensure agrarian reforms guaranteed women independent property rights, legally entitling divorcees, widows, and unmarried females to their fair share of familial land. The EPLF championed this parity, viewing the socio-political elevation of women in liberated territories as a monumental victory. As Victoria Bernal notes, official EPLF literature declared that the true metric of a social revolution is the tangible improvement it delivers to its most subjugated demographic: females.

The movement's recruitment was astoundingly effective, drawing females from all walks of life. The visual of the female guerrilla—often depicted bearing both an infant and a rifle—became the globally recognized emblem of the conflict. These visuals functioned as profound educational propaganda, showcasing the transformed, modern citizen the EPLF intended to forge. In essence, the front was engineering a new paradigm of womanhood. The leadership utilized female military service as undeniable proof of their liberation, simultaneously deploying this emancipation to validate the moral righteousness of the entire nationalist war.

However, critics argue this perspective risks ignoring how women themselves personally defined their own emancipation. A rigorous feminist critique demands that we view female subjugation not as unavoidable history, but as a deliberate mechanism of power intersecting with shifting definitions of citizenship. As Berte Siim notes, feminist scholarship must pivot from broad theoretical complaints about patriarchy to analyzing the nuanced realities of women's direct political engagement. Scholars such as Ravinder Rena and Victoria Bernal hotly debate whether the EPLF's mobilization was a genuine feminist triumph or merely a tactical nationalist maneuver. Bernal argues that while integrating females into combat was extraordinary, the EPLF achieved this "equality" inadequately—primarily by erasing feminine identity and suppressing the domestic sphere. This systematic erasure is evident in historical photographs where combatants are utterly indistinguishable; both genders wore identical rubber sandals, khaki uniforms, and Afro hairstyles. Foreign observers frequently noted their inability to visually differentiate male and female troops.

This visual homogenization sparks intense debate: Does assimilating women into a distinctly male-coded military framework represent true liberation, or is it simply

"patriarchy in drag"?. Conversely, the undeniable reality that women successfully executed grueling, traditionally male duties violently disrupted Eritrean gender norms and flooded women with unprecedented confidence. Zerai points out that some recruits were initially drawn simply by the allure of bearing arms and donning military attire. Ultimately, the catalyst for joining is less critical than the outcome: Did these combatants successfully alter their internal consciousness and dismantle their external cultural barriers?.

Christine Mason adds that the front hyper-glorified the gun-toting female while minimizing the indispensable, yet "unexciting," contributions of women managing healthcare, communications, and logistics. This imbalance in historical narrative likely stems from a biased focus on frontline combat, but the reality remains that civilian and military women alike bled for the cause, cementing them as indispensable architects of Eritrean nationalism. While EPLF doctrines aimed to obliterate gender hierarchy, they practically executed this by attempting to eliminate the female gender altogether. Notably, there was no reciprocal demand to erase masculinity. Seeking parity through the destruction of femininity is deeply flawed, as it conditions equality on a woman's ability to seamlessly mimic a man.

Worku Zerai furthers this critique by observing that NUEW failed to establish objectives independent of the EPLF's nationalist agenda, leading women to subordinate their unique gender interests to become mere "implementers" of male-dictated directives. Asgedet Stefanos argues the front never genuinely interrogated inherent male privilege; instead, they demanded women shed their "false consciousness" and earn their status via martial heroics. The EPLF's international fundraising literature frequently patronized women, demanding they abandon their "backwardness," inadvertently framing females as the architects of their own inequality. Mason concurs that female emancipation was strictly handcuffed to the superseding goal of national sovereignty. This hierarchy was explicitly confirmed by NUEW itself, which declared its primary mission was mobilizing females to ensure national survival against Ethiopian extermination tactics, with gender issues taking a backseat until independence was secured.

In this militarized environment, driving tanks or commanding troops was deemed the absolute pinnacle of female contribution. So-called "traditional" female war efforts—such as child-rearing, cooking, and nursing—were demoted to the status of passive, secondary participation. Mason poses a vital question: Why is foundational survival work categorically dismissed as insignificant?. The answer lies in entrenched patriarchy, which arbitrarily assigns low societal value to culturally feminized labor. This dilemma feeds into a broader global debate regarding whether integration into violent, militarized hierarchies genuinely empowers women. Many activists celebrate military inclusion as a critical milestone for equality. Yet, the EPLF's narrative, much like broader global discourse, frequently avoids critically analyzing the toxic intersection of militarization and gender.

Despite these valid critiques, the EPLF undeniably shattered historical precedents by utilizing women in vast, equal capacities. Even if the front attempted to mute gender differences rather than evolving them, this environment provided the vital spark. The war for sovereignty catalyzed a multitude of social awakenings. By allowing women to conceptually view themselves as equals, the battlefield became a brutal but effective classroom for self-discovery. Women adapted their appearances not out of a desire to abandon their gender, but

out of the harsh logistical, health, and economic necessities of guerrilla warfare. Beyond aesthetics, they discovered their political voices and bled for their convictions. Their presence was overwhelmingly active.

In a 1998 interview, former NUEW president Luul Gebre-ab illustrated this complex reality. Within the nationalist narrative, women functioned dually as modern trailblazers and sacrificial icons. They achieved "modernity" by bleeding for the right to fight, proving their patriotism by literally allowing their bodies to be destroyed for the state. The female combatant sheds her "passivity" only through the extreme violence of her own annihilation. A woman transcends restrictive gender boundaries and accesses the revered, male-dominated realm of martyrdom only through horrific disfigurement or death. One female cadre noted that male peers only truly respected women as equals after witnessing them lose limbs or eyes in combat. This implies that migrating from a passive symbol to an active political agent requires the literal, physical destruction of the female form. But does adapting to utilitarian military dress truly equate to abandoning one's bodily identity?.

The EPLF rigorously enforced its mandate that females could only seize equality through aggressive public administration and grueling physical labor. This was immortalized in their rallying cry: "Equality through Equal Participation". Practically, the front aggressively shattered glass ceilings, expanding the horizon of acceptable female labor. Women were extensively trained as field medics, carpenters, combat drivers, and heavy mechanics. Conversely, men were forced to manage food preparation and other historically feminized communal duties. However, because this equality was born of rigid Marxist strategy rather than organic feminist organizing, it was entirely orchestrated and enforced top-down by male commanders. Female liberation was merely one gear in the broader cultural war against "feudal" colonialism. Pragmatically, integrating women was an absolute mathematical necessity to sustain a viable army against a vastly larger Ethiopian force. The popular slogan "No Liberation Without Women's Participation" perfectly distills this reality: female empowerment was a crucial tactical weapon deployed to achieve the ultimate prize of national sovereignty.

Because the EPLF absorbed all civil organizing, Eritrea lacked an autonomous, independent feminist movement. Yet, even if their liberation was tethered to a nationalist agenda, didn't these women successfully permanently shatter oppressive cultural chains?. They emerged highly conscious of their civil rights, capable of navigating complex societal issues with fierce independence. Prior to the war, village governance was the exclusive, fiercely guarded domain of male elders. The EPLF's radical decision to obliterate all restrictions on female civic engagement was a historic shockwave. The scale of female integration was utterly unprecedented. They directed covert operations behind enemy lines and commanded regional political hubs. They secured universal suffrage and the right to hold elected office , aggressively occupying leadership roles on regional councils. Excluding the absolute highest echelons of military high command, women served seamlessly alongside men throughout the entire apparatus. This proved beyond doubt that Eritrean females possessed the exact same capacity to drive economic and political triumph as their male counterparts. They bled, marched, and ultimately secured victory shoulder-to-shoulder in fully integrated combat units.

Revolutionary personnel were meticulously deployed across various administrative sectors based on their linguistic, academic, and technical proficiencies. The public administration wing, locally termed *Jemahir*, was a critical apparatus. Their mission was to cultivate fierce national unity and elevate civic consciousness across fractured ethnic lines. They aggressively recruited local assets to further the uprising's geopolitical goals. Within rural communities, they launched expansive training initiatives and organized localized unions to modernize daily life. Dan Connell explains that *Jemahir* operatives cleverly utilized basic social services—such as sanitation education, crop rotation techniques, and rudimentary healthcare—as Trojan horses to infiltrate village politics without violently shocking traditional sensibilities. These tangible improvements convinced hesitant villagers to embrace the concept of radical change and align their loyalties with the EPLF. Operating in highly contested "semi-liberated" zones, *Jemahir* cadres faced constant threat of enemy ambushes. The front strategically deployed vast numbers of female operatives into these administrative roles, rapidly earning the deep trust of rural populations.

A prime example is Abrehet Haile, an elite female *Jemahir* stationed near Ala in the Southern Region (Zoba Debub). Facing a volatile, multi-village land dispute (involving deqi Nazo, Sesah, and Weqerti), Abrehet decisively intervened and successfully mediated a peaceful resolution. Her diplomatic brilliance was so highly respected that local elders awarded her the titles *Bashay* or *Shambel*—honorifics historically strictly reserved for elite, powerful men. This highlights the dual nature of social transformation during the war: it occurred simultaneously among active female combatants and among civilian populations covertly resisting Ethiopian rule. Witnessing a female commander authoritatively adjudicate a tribal land dispute was an incredibly shocking, paradigm-shifting event for traditional villagers.

With women comprising 15% of active frontline troops and 30% of the total EPLF infrastructure, the institutionalization of female-led organizations vastly accelerated literacy and political modernization. Revolutionary icons like Mama Zeinab Yassin Suleiman became legendary. Her fiery rhetoric—"The Ethiopians came, they bombed our villages... Even the stones are burning"—became the defining title of historical literature. She fearlessly mobilized massive crowds, urging her peers to violently reject the submissive roles assigned to older women. Lamenting her age, she repeatedly declared her intense desire to be young enough to physically wage war alongside the youth, embodying the generational fury that fueled the movement. This exemplifies the EPLF's profound success in weaponizing political awareness to reprogram societal mind-sets.

The front's agrarian reforms fundamentally altered female economic reality, granting them the unprecedented ability to independently hold titles to land. This life-saving legislation prevented older, divorced females from sliding into catastrophic destitution. Through democratized village assemblies, women legally voted to install their own female representatives. EPLF-sanctioned community centres provided safe havens for women to openly debate their unique socio-political grievances. These mass organizations systematically eradicated female illiteracy and integrated women deeply into the political machine. Sweeping EPLF marriage legislation enacted in 1978 formally outlawed non-consensual arranged marriages and child brides.

As Moghadam insists, liberating rural women requires a monumental collision: a total overhaul of economic production models combined with a massive disruption of social norms. The Eritrean conflict delivered exactly this, forcing both male and female peasants to completely redefine the boundaries of gender. This seismic shift was orchestrated by a coalition of frontline female troops and the vast network of civilian women managing clandestine operations. Comrade Fana Tezare Oqubagabr is a shining example of a civilian who shattered gender expectations to become a revolutionary pillar. Relocating to Zager in the 1970s following her marriage, she found herself at the epicentre of the Karneshim resistance. Between 1975 and 1979, Zager functioned as the hyper-critical nerve centre for the EPLF's Northern Command. Throughout this gruelling era, her modest home became a sanctuary and operational base for elite military commanders and intelligence units. She harbored them with immense courage and logistical brilliance.

The geographical corridor stretching from the Rift Valley plateaus down to the Zula coastal lowlands became the undisputed crucible of the revolution, experiencing explosive insurgent growth over a decade. Ambassador Estifanos Afewerqi noted that the front bestowed the revered title of "Comrade" upon the most vital civilian mothers, with Comrade Fana standing among the most legendary. She, alongside other matriarchs, spearheaded the EPLF's agricultural modernization programs, teaching locals advanced poultry farming and high-yield crop techniques. Tsemaynesh Kiros (Tirindad), an EPLF operative in the Maekel Region, heralded Comrade Fana as a visionary who dedicated her life to the total transformation of female existence. Comrade Fana led by fierce example; when the local women's union sought to launch a cooperative poultry enterprise to secure economic independence, she was the first to donate her personal livestock.

Remarkably, Comrade Fana belonged to the wealthy agrarian elite. She and her husband operated a lucrative retail shop and owned substantial property. The core thesis of the EPLF's agrarian reform was explicitly designed to strip massive landholdings from wealthy peasants exactly like her. Yet, driven by an unshakeable belief in social justice and equity, she actively campaigned for the very land reforms that diminished her own personal wealth. She relentlessly drove EPLF literacy campaigns and constructed powerful coalitions for farmers and women. Her legacy perfectly encapsulates the dual nature of the Eritrean transformation, which revolutionized both the militant vanguard and the civilian underbelly.

Naturally, this overhaul triggered fierce friction. Wealthy landowners fiercely defended their ancestral *Risti* (property rights). Former *Jemahir* Brhane Abraham recounted intense pushback in regions like Germe when equal land laws were introduced. This traditionalist resistance aggressively targeted policies granting land to women and the sons of daughters (*wedi-gual*). The EPLF predominantly neutralized this hostility through exhaustive political education, referencing successful implementations in neighbouring districts to slowly erode traditional bigotry. However, when diplomacy failed, they did not hesitate to employ punitive measures and incarcerations to enforce equality.

Ultimately, establishing social equity during wartime was a gruelling, incremental battle fought through relentless political education. The revolution successfully rewrote gender dynamics, though progress in civilian sectors dragged heavily against the anchor of village elders desperately protecting archaic customs. While the EPLF's supreme, non-negotiable

directive was to eject the Ethiopians, their leadership astutely recognized that military victory was mathematically impossible without the fanatical backing of the rural majority. Consequently, mobilizing peasants and women was a life-or-death necessity. Crucially, they didn't just extract labour from the populace; they built an egalitarian political arena that allowed the citizens to truly take ownership of their own liberation.

Conclusion

The thirty-year crucible of the Eritrean independence war fundamentally and permanently re-engineered the nation, driven in massive part by the sacrifices of its female population. Evaluating the trajectory of female insurgents reveals the intricate mechanisms by which national identity is forged, explicitly demonstrating how the chaos of warfare can permanently dismantle and reconstruct gender roles. Although historical narratives frequently dismiss women as passive victims and paint nationalism as a strictly male enterprise, the Eritrean reality violently refutes this, proving female combatants were the prime architects who shattered societal patriarchy.

The degree to which a political upheaval empowers its female citizens is almost entirely dictated by the foundational ideology of its orchestrators. Anchored firmly in socialist principles prioritizing mass civic elevation, the Eritrean uprising deliberately engineered an emancipatory environment. It forcibly carved out spaces for women to transcend passive support, propelling them into command roles as educators, administrators, medics, advanced engineers, mechanics, and lethal combatants. The vast majority of these women mastered their highly technical disciplines directly within the brutal theater of war. Ultimately, through relentless political education and sheer combative grit, these women violently severed the cultural chains that had marginalized them for centuries.

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