

Victoria Bernal
University of California

Equality to Die For?: Women Guerrilla Fighters and Eritrea's Cultural Revolution

“After all we did in the struggle. We contributed more than the men. Now women fighters have many problems. After all we did, it is like being thrown away.”

These words were spoken to me by Saba,¹ a woman who spent fourteen years in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) fighting for Eritrea's national independence. Her feelings echo those of many other women who risked their lives and gave their youth to achieve the goal of national liberation for Eritrea. An outstanding feature of the Eritrean struggle for independence was the heavy participation of women in the fighting force. By the end of the thirty-year long struggle, women comprised about one third of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, serving alongside men in all capacities except the top ranks of leadership (Rentmeesters 1993). The war ended in 1991, and independence was officially achieved in 1993. Since then, Eritrean women have confronted another equally monumental struggle to build secure economic, political, and social positions for themselves within the nation. Women fighters who spent much of their adult lives in the guerrilla movement face the challenges of reintegrating into civilian life.

Women ex-fighters lack resources, skills, and jobs. They feel that they are being devalued in the new society of independent Eritrea. Some women fighters have been divorced for civilian women. These heroes of the nationalist struggle are finding that the very qualities that made them good soldiers and comrades stigmatize them as wives and potential wives. Former women fighters are seen as having experienced independence, sexual freedom, and equality with men. They fought side by side with men and killed enemy men. Their morality is suspect, their femininity is doubtful, and their ability to behave as obedient wives is questionable. Although national liberation has been achieved, the emancipation of women is at best incomplete.

This essay investigates the intersections and contradictions of nationalist projects and women's emancipation through the case of Eritrean women fighters. It is based on field research I conducted in Eritrea in the winter of 1995–1996 and extensive archival research. Due to the war, little research has been conducted in Eritrea for the last thirty years. This absence of documentation and analysis poses a great obstacle. No comprehensive account of life within EPLF exists. The picture I have constructed is based on fragments from various scholarly sources, EPLF publications and documents, and interviews with former fighters. In this essay I draw heavily on my discussions with a woman fighter I call Saba in whose household I lived while in Asmara.

To understand the contemporary situation of women in Eritrea, I begin by analyzing the nature of women's participation in the EPLF and exploring the ways in which the EPLF defined the problem of gender and sought to implement gender equality among its members. It is my contention that the current situation of former women fighters stems in part from what I call the “repression of the domestic” and “the erasure of the feminine” by the EPLF. The EPLF's

policies and practices did not so much transform the organization of gender relations and domestic life, as repress the domestic, integrating women into the EPLF not simply as the equals of men, but as male equivalents. The EPLF's failure to address gender difference and the organization of domestic life left women and men fighters unprepared for the resurgence of the domestic after the war.

I start by offering a brief history of Eritrea's nationalist struggle. I then consider ideas about nationalism and theoretical perspectives on gender and citizenship, before returning to the contemporary situation of women ex-fighters in Asmara. The main body of the essay is an analysis of the participation of women as fighters in the liberation struggle and the revolutionary culture of the EPLF.

Eritrea's Nationalist Struggle

Eritrea came into being as a political entity when it was carved out of Ethiopia by the Italians who ruled it as their colony from 1886 until 1941. In 1942, Eritrea passed from the Italians into the hands of the British who administered it as a trusteeship until 1952. Eritrea was then federated to Ethiopia under an arrangement that left considerable local autonomy. In 1962, Ethiopia violated the terms of federation and annexed Eritrea which officially remained a province of Ethiopia until 1993. Eritrea and Ethiopia have much common cultural and religious heritage, and both regions are culturally diverse. Eritrea's experience of colonial rule laid the groundwork for forging a national identity separate from that of Ethiopia. The despotic rulers of Ethiopia made it appear, moreover, that Eritrea could not thrive in unity with Ethiopia. Eritrea's first major independence movement, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) began operating in 1960. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (which ultimately succeeded in winning independence for Eritrea) first emerged as a splinter group that broke away from the ELF in 1971. While the ELF had the goal of independence from Ethiopia, the EPLF's vision was revolutionary: it sought to transform Eritrea from within as well as to free it from Ethiopian rule. Through the early 1970s, the ELF and the EPLF fought their own civil war from which the EPLF emerged as the primary liberation movement in Eritrea. From 1974 until the definitive victory of 1991, EPLF led Eritrea's struggle for nationhood. During that time tens of thousands of Eritreans joined the forces of the EPLF as fighters. Many others lived as civilians in "liberated areas" of Eritrea under EPLF control. Other civilians, like those in Asmara, the capital city, remained living directly under Ethiopian rule.

The war of independence also gave rise to an Eritrean diaspora as about one million Eritreans fled to other countries where they lived as refugees and exiles (UNICEF 1994). Eritreans in diaspora played vital roles in the liberation struggle by organizing themselves politically wherever they were and by sending money to the EPLF and seeking to educate the world about the Eritrean cause. The armed struggle ended in 1991. More than 65,000 fighters died in the war (Woldegabriel 1993). Official independence was declared in 1993 after an internationally-supervised national referendum. Today the EPLF calls itself the PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice) and is in effect the ruling party² of a one-party state. Eritrea currently faces great tasks of reconstruction and economic development. It has a population of about three million; about 400,000 people live in Asmara, the capital city.

Women were drawn to the cause of Eritrean independence from the beginning. The ELF, however, limited women's participation to that of supporters, helping to supply the movement with provisions and with information. Like the ELF, the EPLF also began as an all-male organ-

ization. But in 1973 when three women attempted to join the rebels, they were allowed to stay and given military training (Zerai 1994). The EPLF began admitting women to its ranks and then openly recruited women as fighters. Many of the first women fighters came from urban and educated backgrounds. These women were quite successful in mobilizing other women from rural as well as urban areas. By 1993 when independence became official, women made up a third of the roughly 95,000 EPLF fighters (Iyob 1997). Some thirty thousand women fighters thus began new lives in independent Eritrea.³

Eritreans use the term 'fighter' (*tegadelti* in Tigrinya) to include all those who served in EPLF forces in Eritrea during the war. Fighters had many duties besides serving on the front lines, however. The EPLF maintained a base area with schools, hospitals, and repair shops. The EPLF also administered and provided services such as health care and education to populations in the areas liberated from direct Ethiopian control. Women fighters were not limited to support roles. They fought side by side with men in mixed units. According to Worku Zerai, one of the first three women to become fighters, the majority of women fighters were assigned to combat duty because they lacked any specialized skills that could contribute to support activities (Zerai 1994).

A superficial overview of the current situation in Eritrea suggests that, in the wake of the nationalist victory, the EPLF's commitment to the goal of gender equality has diminished. There is a tendency among Eritreans and in the scholarship now appearing to romanticize Eritrea's revolutionary period and to contrast it with what is emerging as a more conservative regime now that it holds the reins of national power (Hale 1997; Kutschera 1997). The story of women sent back to the kitchen after the revolution is, after all, a familiar one (see, for example, Chinchilla 1997 on Latin American movements). My research suggests, however, that we cannot understand gender relations in Eritrea simply in terms of before and after. A critical analysis of the EPLF's approach to gender equality during the period of struggle reveals the inherent contradictions that became overwhelming with the return to civilian life.

Nationalism, Gender, and Citizenship

Until recently much scholarship on nationalism treated it as a political rather than a cultural phenomenon. Perhaps as a consequence, scholarship on nationalism implicitly constructed nation-building as a male enterprise. Issues of gender and domestic relations have only lately been recognized as central to the construction of nations and nationalisms. Anderson's (1983) book *Imagined Communities* drew attention to nationalism as a cultural construct, but his own influential analysis ignores gender, even though he likens nationalism to kinship, and nations to communities. Although Anderson himself was not concerned with gender, viewing nationalism as a cultural construct nonetheless opens a way for integrating gender into the theoretical analysis of nationalism, since gender is a central organizing principle of culture.

Feminist scholarship has made significant progress in the past decade in accounting for nationalism in ways that break down the analytical barriers between "the political" and "the social," allowing for the systematic exploration of the interplay between gender, family, social reproduction, and political institutions and processes (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Parker, Russo et al. 1992; Williams 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997). This approach stands in contrast to conventional treatments of nationalism and gender within the restrictive terms defined by "the woman question" which implicitly cast issues of gender and women's rights as secondary in relation to nationalism and nationalist movements (Chatterjee 1989). In its crudest form, this view

suggests that post-colonial women must first help to emancipate their nations; only then can gender issues be addressed. Analyses of women's rights and citizenship that simply take the nation for granted as the arena in which struggles over definitions of rights and entitlements take place are inadequate as well. Such analyses have not completely broken free from the constraints of the so-called "woman question," which takes nationalism as a given and constructs gender as a problem to be resolved within the national context. Women and gender relations are not simply problems with which nation-builders must contend, rather gender is fundamental to constituting the identities, communities, and power relations that form the basis of nationhood (Hale 1996; Moghadam 1994; Pateman 1988; West 1996).

One feminist view of nationalism recently articulated eloquently by Taylor (1997) stresses the notion of the nation as a community of men, a "fraternity" in which woman is constructed as an outsider. In relation to nations women often have been cast as victims, dependents, spoils of war, and as guardians of hearth and home, symbols of harmony and continuity. These roles, I argue, can be seen as so many facets of women's position in the nation as outsiders upon whom power acts (to violate or protect) and upon whom the national image/identity is projected and reflected. From this perspective, the case of Eritrean women guerrilla fighters is particularly interesting. Indeed, the fascination with them stems partly from their apparent movement from outsiders to insiders of the nation.

As members of the EPLF, Eritrean women were an integral part of the nation-building machine. They carried and used the weapons of war. They marched to victory alongside men. Surely, their story presents a new vision of what the nation is or can be. The image of Eritrean women guerrillas suggests that the nation can be built on inclusion, rather than exclusion. But, in the aftermath of independence, contradictions are emerging. A central contradiction, I contend, lies in the nature of women's inclusion in the nationalist struggle. Women were included, but the cultural bases of womanhood (motherhood, familial roles, and domestic duties) were excluded. The EPLF's successful inclusion of women was abased in the repression of the domestic and the erasure of the feminine.

There is a growing body of work on Eritrean nationalism (Cliffe and Davidson 1988; Habte Selassie 1980; Iyob 1995; Lewis 1983; Markakis 1988; Pateman 1990, among others). Despite the significant roles played by women in Eritrea's nationalist struggle, however, this scholarship is characterized by conventional approaches which conceptualize nationalism as politics, and politics as a realm distinct from culture, gender, and domestic relations. Women's involvement in the nationalist struggle is treated as an EPLF achievement—another testimony to the goodness and justice of the Eritrean cause and its EPLF representatives (Frankland and Noble 1996). The literature is partisan, paternalistic, and male-centered. In these accounts, nationalism is a male project, and women are essentially constructed as beneficiaries. My analysis of the situation of Eritrean women guerrilla fighters makes clear that national regimes are always also gender regimes.

Eritrean Women: From the Battlefield to the Homefront

A 1993 article depicts former women fighters in peacetime Eritrea as follows: "women with long afros and black rubber sandals walk the streets. They have a masculine swagger and their gaze is intense and serious" (Gauch 1993). The image conjured up suggests that, in the period immediately following the war, women fighters stood out from the general population and that perhaps they were even proud to do so. By the end of 1995 when I arrived in Asmara,⁴ such

women were nowhere to be seen. Former fighters were there, of course, but they were camouflaged in nail polish, fashionable hairdos, and ordinary street clothes. They were no longer distinguishable from civilian women. These women, who had once transformed themselves from peasant wives and schoolgirls into revolutionary soldiers, had undergone another metamorphosis.

Ann, an expatriate from the United States, who has spent several years in Eritrea employed by a United Nations agency, remarked,

You used to see [women] fighters walking around with natural hairdos, but not many any more. My driver is so glamorous, you would never know she had been a fighter. The young girls weren't saying, "I want to look like that, be like them, walk like them." And you can bet men are not seeking out former fighters to marry them.

The marriage prospects of women fighters, and their divorces, were popular issues of discussion in Asmara during my stay. The first problem Saba (the former fighter quoted earlier) mentioned in relation to women fighters was that their husbands were leaving them for civilian women. This topic came up in many conversations with both men and women. Girmay, a man fighter who spent twelve years in the field as a member of the EPLF and remains married to the woman fighter he met and married during the war, told me, "It is not fair. We wish they didn't do it. But it is their free will." When I asked Girmay why former fighters would be considered undesirable as wives, he explained that, "A man thinks, 'She has fought and killed. She is more man than me'. He thinks he won't be able to control her. She is strong." The very qualities that made women heroes in the Front are defined as undesirable qualities in a wife. Men fighters, civilians, and Eritrean men who return or visit from abroad choose civilian women for their brides.

There is a renewed focus on child-bearing among fighters. This is raising problems of infertility for some women, who spent their peak child-bearing years in the struggle, and raising problems of balancing work and family for those women fighters who do have children. Issues of marriage and family loom large for former women fighters for economic as well as social reasons. In Eritrea, as elsewhere, female-headed households tend to be among the poorest (UNICEF 1994).

In the field, young revolutionaries were conforming to the culture of the EPLF; now they are pressured to conform to civilian society, and many do. But for men fighters, this means reclaiming positions of authority within their families and enjoying male privileges such as freedom from domestic work. For women fighters, civilian culture means a burden of domestic labor and familial responsibilities for which their life in the field did not prepare them. Their sense of frustration is palpable even when left unspoken.

Feminism and Nationalism: Can this Marriage be Saved?

The nationalist movement had as its goal not only breaking away from Ethiopia, but transforming power relations within Eritrea. The emancipation of women was central to the cultural revolution advocated by the EPLF, and within its own ranks the Front attempted to put gender equality into practice. There may be a problem, however, with assuming that feminism ever had anything to do with Eritrean nationalism despite the EPLF's rhetoric of women's emancipation. There was no independent feminist movement in Eritrea or Ethiopia, but rather the

male-led, male-dominated EPLF which took up certain issues concerning the status of women and mobilized women to achieve its predetermined goal of national independence. The EPLF's analysis of society and gender issues was heavily based in conventional Marxist theory. As Zerai summarizes it, "According to the EPLF, to end women's oppression the creation of socialist Eritrea was a precondition," and the elimination of class oppression would eliminate all other forms of social inequality (Zerai 1994:6).

A key document, *Women and Revolution in Eritrea*, published by the Eritrean Women's Association (the mass organization of women in the EPLF, later called the National Union of Eritrean Women) states that the Eritrean Women's Association in Europe came out of "years of struggle and consistent efforts by the EPLF and militant members to raise the political consciousness of women" and adds that, "Perhaps one of the most remarkable revolutionary achievements of the EPLF in the field of social transformation has been the considerable victory already scaled towards the total social emancipation of women" (1979:2-3). Such statements link the advancement of women to women's support for the EPLF and constitute women's advances as EPLF achievements. The document goes on to state that feudal and bourgeois ideologies inculcate false consciousness thus "deluding" women "to accept male supremacy" (1979:11). Women, themselves, are accorded little agency.

The EPLF saw itself as struggling against "backward," "reactionary," and "feudal" elements of traditional culture as well as against colonialism. The EPLF's orientation was secular, scientific, and socialist. Given this modernist orientation it is not surprising that women's status assumed importance in their agenda. Gender relations and the treatment of women figure in the ways modernity and progress are constructed in contrast to tradition. Women are often used as symbols of group identity (Moghadam 1994). The treatment of women, moreover, is often used by the West in its assertion of superiority to Africans and others (Bernal 1994, 1997).

The EPLF advocated gender equality and regarded the advancement of women in its own ranks and in the liberated areas of the country as a significant achievement. As the EPLF stated in one of its many publications: "A precise measure of the progress of any social revolution is the extent of the positive changes that it brings in the role and the position of the most oppressed half of society—the women" (Dimtsi Hafash 1981). The EPLF was extremely successful in mobilizing women politically for the nationalist cause. Women from all ethnic backgrounds and walks of life joined the movement. Indeed the image of a woman fighter with a gun (occasionally with a baby and a gun) is almost emblematic of the movement. Such images adorn many EPLF publications (not just those of the women's mass organization) and EPLF posters. Apparently, these images were meant among other things to serve as educational tools, promoting the new person that the EPLF was trying to create. But the EPLF's construction of the woman fighter is a little like Adam making a bride out of his own rib. There is a sense in which the EPLF was creating woman in its own image. The EPLF used women's participation in the Front as a measure of their emancipation, while using women's emancipation to symbolize the liberation struggle and its achievements. This approach fails to recognize that women might have their own voices and their own visions of what emancipation might mean.

Contrary to EPLF rhetoric, women's interests and those of the Front cannot be assumed to be identical. An interview with a woman fighter in *Voice of Eritrean Women*, an English-language publication of the National Union of Eritrean Women⁵ is revealing (VOEW 1989). The woman fighter is asked to recount acts of heroism by women fighters. What she chooses to tell is

significant since it suggests women fighters struggling on two fronts. She describes a battle where mainly women Eritrean fighters were left to fight against the Ethiopian troops. Their male EPLF commander asked them to disguise their voices and pretend to be men so that the Ethiopians would not think they could gain advantage since they were only up against women. The Eritrean women fighters refused and routed the Ethiopians in their own right as women.

The construction of gender equality as the erasure of the feminine is reflected in the photographs of fighters that illustrate news articles and EPLF publications: women and men dress alike in khaki and rubber sandals and wear their hair Afro style. Indeed one foreign visitor to the field reported difficulty distinguishing women from men (Delenze and Leloup circa 1982). The pictures of women fighters in the unisex dress of EPLF fighters raise questions about the limitations of achieving gender equality through women assuming male roles. Do these images represent the liberation of women or merely a form of "patriarchy in drag"? (to use Taylor's (1997) expression for my own purposes). The very fact that women could successfully perform male roles did challenge conventional Eritrean notions of gender and give women a feeling of empowerment. According to Zerai, "some women joined just to be dressed in the military uniform and to carry guns" (Zerai 1994:18). Other women saw the EPLF as protection against arranged marriage and unhappy domestic circumstances (Wilson 1991). But the limits of the EPLF's vision of liberation became clear once fighters resumed civilian life.

While the EPLF's policies and practices ostensibly were aimed at eliminating social inequality between men and women, they accomplished this largely through eliminating gender difference, in effect by eliminating female gender. There was no comparable erasure of masculinity. The pursuit of women's liberation through the erasure of the feminine is inherently problematic because it means that women's equality is contingent on them being able to behave as if they were men. The fact remains, moreover, that it was also liberation under male auspices, defined by and dependent upon male sponsorship. Thus, Zerai argues that the NUEW never articulated its own goals as distinct from the nationalist goals of the EPLF, so that women tended to "overlook their needs and interests" and "to be simple implementers of programs that come from the top" (Zerai 1994:35). Attempts to legislate equality through universalist policies, such as gender-neutral constructions of citizenship, have often served to camouflage inequality rather than eradicate it (Bock and James 1992; Joseph 1996; Ruksztó 1997). To the extent that this applies to the Eritrean case it is because, I contend, in the broad schema of nationalist leaders, women were essentially female manpower.

The realities of interpersonal relations among fighters belied the construction of women as male equivalents, however. For one thing, fighters had sexual relationships and even married. A foreign visitor to the field from Spain states (apparently without irony) "Relationships among comrades is [sic] based on friendship and solidarity [sic], but they also fall in love and get married" (Gil circa 1982:14). Nevertheless, the construction of women as not only equal to men, but in effect as male-equivalents meant that some profound issues of gender relations in society were not so much transformed by the EPLF's cultural revolution as repressed and rendered invisible. This is particularly the case with the domestic division of labor. Within the EPLF no work was assigned on the basis of sex. But this collective arrangement left women and men unprepared for the resurgence of the domestic after the war when fighters rejoined civilian society and once again lived as members of families.

Because of the war, we know all too little about the everyday lives of Eritreans. Thus, we do not have the ethnographic studies that would provide the basis for a comparative and historicizing account of "the domestic" in Eritrea. The cultural landscape of Eritrea is roughly divided among pastoral, agricultural, and urban populations belonging to nine ethnic groups. The urban population, especially that of Asmara, bears the influence of Italian and Euro-American constructions of bourgeois domesticity where ideally the males of the household generate income and the women manage consumption and various domestic displays of status through cleanliness, feasting, etc. Among Eritrean pastoralists, who tend to be Muslim, various degrees of female seclusion are practiced, and women are restricted in their mobility. In addition to the domestic work of food preparation and caring for children, Muslim women may generate income through producing things at home for sale. Among the agricultural population, women are active participants in farming, carrying out tasks such as weeding and winnowing and taking part in the harvest, while also remaining responsible for cooking, laundry, childcare, and carrying water and firewood (UNICEF 1994). The women and men who joined the Front came from all of these backgrounds and thus brought with them a range of understandings about gender and the division of labor.

The EPLF first required its members to be celibate, forbidding fighters to have sexual relations with civilians and, after women joined the Front, forbidding sex between fighters. This suggests a failure on the part of the EPLF's leadership to see issues of sexual relations and gender as integral to their struggle. They attempted instead to simply suppress them. The EPLF is rumored to have killed people for violating its strict sexual code. Worku Zerai reports personal knowledge of fighters sentenced to three months prison followed by six months hard labor for having sex. She states, furthermore, that rape was considered a capital crime under EPLF law (Zerai 1994). On the other hand, one former fighter told me "there was sex from day one, because it is human," and references to "hidden relationships" in EPLF documents (in Wilson 1991) suggest that this was an open secret. According to Zerai, the prohibition on sex among fighters was to protect the much smaller number of women in the Front from male advances. She also states that Ethiopia was believed to be sending women with venereal disease to the Front to infect them. This gives a hint of the underlying suspicion with which women were initially regarded by the EPLF, as both sexually dangerous and politically treacherous.

The EPLF's military victories from 1975 to 1979 increased the territory under their control and attracted many new recruits including large numbers of women (Silkin 1989). The reality of sexual relationships among fighters could not be denied. In 1977, the EPLF introduced its own marriage law and permitted marriage among fighters. The marital relationships and families formed in the field were officially recognized but accorded little social status in practice. There was little distinction between public and private in the field, and there was thus no domestic space or familial social unit as such. Even private conversations were monitored and self-monitored—stray remarks could be brought up at criticism/self-criticism sessions which were held weekly, making people wary and blurring the lines between private and public.

Fighters report that family attachments were regarded as "bourgeois." Allegiance to the EPLF was to be uncompromised by other loyalties and attachments. In the Front fighters had little or no contact with their families of origin, and such contacts were actively discouraged. Fighters were not supposed to treat their relatives any differently than other fighters. When one considers the association of women, in particular, with the familial and the domestic in Eritrean cultures as in so many others, the EPLF's critique of family relations may have

worked in contradictory ways that both empowered women (as male equivalents) and devalued the domestic sphere and familial roles that are key elements of feminine identity in civilian life.

The EPLF attempted to put gender equality into practice in the context of a diverse cultural landscape in which values of male supremacy and patriarchal institutions were well-established. For example, women's rights to own land were negligible under Eritrea's customary land tenure systems. Women also were excluded from participation in village councils. The EPLF's analysis of women's oppression located it largely in the realm of tradition and the EPLF operated under the modernist assumption that gender inequalities (and ethnic tensions) could be erased by "progress."

In the liberated areas, the EPLF attempted to reform certain marriage practices, such as arranged marriage, forced marriage, child marriage, the payment of dowry, and the repudiation of nonvirgin brides. Once the Front decided to condone marriages among fighters, such marriages took a very different form than the practices that characterized rural Eritrean communities. The EPLF conceptualized marriage as the partnership of a man and a woman who are each free individuals exercising choice. In the EPLF's words this was described as "democratic marriage" (Silkin 1989:148) and as "marriages based solely on comradesly love" (Eritrean Women's Association 1979:18). In keeping with the Front's Marxist ideology, the marriage law was based on China's 1950 marriage law (Zerai 1994:49). The EPLF provided fighters with contraceptives, although it forbade abortion (as does the present government). In the field, the standard marriage practice, as described to me by some former fighters, was that the couple was required to first get permission from the heads of their departments and then, "you sign a paper and that is it. Usually your unit cooks better food and you feast and dance." According to Silkin (1989), couples had to apply to the EPLF's Department of Social Affairs for permission to marry.⁶

It seems that women in the EPLF exercised choice both in starting relationships and ending them. Fighters report that divorce was easy and quite common and often initiated by a woman when she fell in love with someone else. What would be regarded as scandalous promiscuity in Eritrean society-at-large was apparently tolerated in the field. Discussing women and divorce, Saba remarked, "she would start another flirt. When you have been denied everything and suddenly you have everything, how do you balance it?" "It was a free society" commented her husband Kidane, also a former fighter. Since the Front organized fighters' lives and provided for their needs, and since many fighters delayed child-bearing, and children in any case were raised communally, women were not threatened by the specter of divorce, but could use it to assert their own autonomy.

In the early years of the marriage law, fighters often chose to marry on the basis of very brief relationships (Silkin 1989), another factor contributing to divorce. In response to this, beginning in 1980, the EPLF held seminars in the base area to educate fighters about issues such as the difference between infatuation and love (Silkin 1989; Wilson 1991). Not only did the Front forbid the repudiation of nonvirgin brides, it even encouraged premarital sex among its members and made contraceptives available. Most fighter couples engaged in sex before marriage (Silkin 1989). As Zerai (1994:50) astutely observes, "This has had the important consequence of making sexuality an attribute of the person rather than the family. This has a liberating effect because in Eritrea female chastity has been traditionally associated with the honour of the family." This policy did not necessarily lead to great promiscuity, however. According to the EPLF's Department of Social Affairs, three fourths of those applying to

marry said they had had no other prior relationship (Silkin 1989). It is possible, however, that fighters were less constrained in their behavior than they were willing to admit publicly. The figures nonetheless suggest that informal constraints on sexual behavior continued to operate and one can well imagine that such constraints weighed more heavily on women. Men were reportedly the most vocal opponents of premarital sex in the 1980 seminars (Silkin 1989).

While the EPLF condoned marriage among fighters it made little effort to acknowledge couples or families as a unit, regarding the liberation struggle as individuals' primary commitment. Spouses were routinely assigned work duties apart, being permitted one month vacation together each year. Fighters say such separations were a contributing factor to divorce, as might be expected. Mothers were permitted to spend the first six months with their new infants, after which children were raised communally. Initially, the children of fighters were all raised in one institution along with orphans. The children apparently did not develop properly under this system, however. The EPLF subsequently allowed children to be raised collectively by the unit of their parent(s), if their parents were not on the frontlines. Fighters were encouraged to marry someone in their unit or assigned nearby (Silkin 1989).

One indication of the EPLF's expectation that fighters' commitment to the nationalist struggle override all other concerns comes in a report by Europeans who visited the EPLF's base area in the early 1980s (Delenze and Leloup c.1982). They describe a conversation with a fighter nursing her one-month-old infant. The mother is quoted as saying that she would return to active duty that same day if there were other food for her child. I take this mother's statement as reflective of the context in which she lives—the revolutionary culture of the Front. Her statement suggests that caring for a newborn was not accorded great importance by the EPLF. The attitude expressed by this mother is particularly striking in a culture where the common practice is to nurse a child for two years or more. Furthermore, the reduction of mothering to the role of food-supplier/lactator can be taken as another reflection of the EPLF's repression and devaluation of the domestic. Zerai reports that most mothers were upset to leave their babies and would have preferred to stay with their children if given a choice, but they had "to conform to the culture of putting the struggle first" (1994:24, fn).

From discussions with former fighters one gets the sense that there was little scope for domestic or familial life in the field. Tasks such as making *enjera* (the staple bread eaten with most meals) and carrying water were assigned as collective work. These tasks, significantly, were also used as punishment (assigned to individuals as retribution for some infraction), thus reflecting the devalued status of this work even within the EPLF. Zerai quotes verses of a song sung by women fighters that goes, "*Dahan kuni wushate, Mokuhki tihise.*" It translates as "Farewell kitchen, I have broken your shackles" (1994:21). Ironically, women ex-fighters now perform at home these tasks that were regarded as punishment in the liberation movement.

Zerai reports that until 1976 combat was the only activity considered work and that those doing supportive tasks "were seen as cowards, not committed to the cause" (1994:24). She says, "Even those women who joined the armed struggle to contribute by cooking or taking care of the wounded came to feel after they had finished the military training, that combat was the only really important work" (1994:24). The EPLF's successful integration of women into all areas including armed combat is remarkable. But, the EPLF's construction of gender equality through the repression of the domestic and the erasure of the feminine was inadequate. This point was made clear by Saba who remarked wryly, "In the struggle, they had a slogan—

'Equality Through Equal Participation'—you work like men and that's it. But there is only so far you can go with that."

Even within the EPLF, the official ideology of gender equality did not describe reality. For example, Saba reported that, "In the field, men cook, they do everything. On vacation [during the yearly one month's leave from EPLF service], the women cook and take care of everything and the men sit all day and play cards." Zerai describes the same behavior, arguing that it reveals the changes achieved by the EPLF to be "superficial" since the "traditional sexual division of labour" so easily manifested itself again under certain conditions. Thus it seems that the domestic and its associated social patterns of gender inequality were not reorganized so much as suppressed by the EPLF. A visitor to the field from a Belgian NGO reports:

I could not help noticing that the women were in general more timid than the men, that while I had met women working in all fields, the people with whom I had spoken, as those responsible were always men and I had seen women washing clothes, cooking and looking after children. The food in the guests' house was usually prepared by women (Delenze and Leloup c.1982:27).

The EPLF slogan "No Liberation Without Women's Participation" was perhaps unconsciously accurate in depicting the hierarchy of goals in which national liberation was central and women's emancipation figured pragmatically as one of the means to that end. According to the EPLF, women were to gain equality through participation in socially productive labor and political activities. To the extent that some women themselves believed this, they may have been fighting for their own liberation as much as for that of their nation.

Stefanos' (1988:294) insightful critique of the EPLF's treatment of gender argues that they failed to address male privilege, but instead beseeched women to cast away their "false consciousness" and "prove their equality through 'heroic deeds'." The Front's own literature (which was used to spread EPLF views among Eritreans in diaspora and to raise funds abroad) exhorts women to get rid of their false consciousness and backwardness (as if gender inequality was primarily caused by women themselves). An issue of *Harnet* (Liberation), a publication of Eritreans for Liberation in North America, states that the EPLF's slogan 'Equality through Equal Participation' "clearly explains to the women that their equality and liberation can only come about as a result of their own effort" (1977:18). Whether this statement reflects a North American Eritrean view or not, it suggests a perception of the EPLF as both male and as standing in a certain authority relation to "the women." The published translation of a piece in *Spark*, a monthly EPLF journal, states "Lenin firmly opposed bougeois [sic] women's organizations which divert women from the class struggle to the struggle between the sexes." It goes on to say, "On the occasion of March 8, International Women's Day, EPLF calls on all women around the world to correctly grasp the answer to the woman question, and to intensify and unify their struggles" (*Spark* 1977). The patronizing tone is hard to miss. In fact, no woman served on the executive committee of the EPLF during the war and, as Zerai (1994) points out, the Front's use of seniority in allocating positions of authority worked against women since none of the earliest members of EPLF were women. Pierce's (1996:228) analysis of the experience of women in African-American political organizations seems apt here; she writes: "to merely include women in the existing structures . . . without directly challenging the male-biased set of assumptions which underlay the supposedly impersonal rules, roles, and practices of modern social organization is a sad hoax."

Perhaps the astounding success of the EPLF in incorporating women as equals in many capacities is due to the fact that it repressed gender difference, rather than attempting to confront and transform it. Women EPLF fighters were simply treated like men, which implied little need to reorganize anything for their inclusion. In Saba's own astute analysis, however, "It was not real. There were no differences, but it was not real life. It was pretending the differences don't exist." Great strides were made in a comparatively short time; but the equality thus achieved cannot be maintained now that the EPLF does not organize all of fighters' lives for them. The significance of this is only now emerging as fighters struggle to reintegrate into civilian life.

Conclusion

The Eritrean constitution seems to suggest that Eritrean women have earned equality with their blood when it states in its preamble:

Noting the fact that the Eritrean women's heroic participation in the struggle for independence and solidarity based on equality and mutual respect generated by such struggle will serve as an unshakable foundation for our commitment and struggle to create a society in which women and men shall interact on the bases of mutual respect, fraternity, and equality (Eritrean Constitution 1996). i

Some recent feminist research suggests that war and militarism reinforce notions of male supremacy (Enloe 1990); other research indicates that such crises create new spaces for women's political and economic activity (Badran 1996; Tetreault 1994). It is likely that contradictions within the EPLF and contemporary Eritrean society arise from the simultaneous operation of both these processes. The experiences of women fighters in Eritrea also exhibit interesting parallels with those of women under socialist regimes whose policies regarding gender have been labeled "state feminism" (Einhorn 1993; Yang 1999). State feminism failed to achieve gender equality in part because it was top-down and male-led, rather than rooted in the empowerment of women themselves, and because it relied heavily upon enforced compliance rather than voluntary change.⁷ Furthermore, as Einhorn (1993) points out in her analysis of gender in East Central Europe, the success of policies promoting women's emancipation is likely to be limited if the aim is not to enhance women's rights per se, but rather to pursue a "larger" national goal.

Eritrean women, as members of the Constitution Commission, helped to write their nation's constitution. The wording quoted above seems to recognize the fact that gender equality was not automatically achieved through national independence, but remains a part of the national project for the future. The battle to liberate Eritrea took thirty years of armed struggle. For some, the struggle is not yet over. Paradoxically in the Eritrean case, just when the official political institutions are turning away from state-feminism (in practice if not in rhetoric), the experiences of women as fighters in EPLF (and as heads of civilian households and managers of family affairs as a result of men's absence) may have produced a base for building a different female conception of self and perhaps a new kind of Eritrean feminism emerging from women themselves.

Women fighters, in particular, have developed various kinds of collective consciousness, reflected in their concerns around issues as they affect women. The years they spent as revolutionaries in the field endow them with critical perspectives toward Eritrean society. Through participation in the EPLF, women learned the possibilities of collective action and they got a

certain taste of what equality could be like; they learned the power of grassroots struggle and the techniques and tactics of mobilization. Within the EPLF these skills were focussed on national liberation. Now women can put these skills to work as they take on Eritrean society and its governing institutions in their demands to be included in Eritrean nationhood in even more profound ways. These women revolutionaries may well become revolutionary women whose demands cannot be answered in terms of "the woman question." As Saba boldly asserted, "I can only understand the problem of Eritrean women as the problem of democracy in Eritrea."

Notes

1. Saba's name, like those of most of the people quoted in this paper, has been changed to protect her privacy.
2. PFDJ explicitly calls itself a Front and not a party. In that sense, and perhaps only that sense, it can be asserted that Eritrea is not a one-party state.
3. In 1998, a border conflict escalated into war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and women once again served in the fighting force. But this participation was relatively short-lived and circumscribed, whereas EPLF was not simply an army, but an entire way of life.
4. Over the winter of 1995-96 I spent six weeks conducting research in Eritrea.
5. Currently NUEW operates as an NGO in Eritrea and is not officially part of the government.
6. Perhaps permission from department heads was the first step in this process.
7. EPLF's publications draw heavily on the classic works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and a number of key texts were translated into Tigrinya. The limits of the EPLF's attempts to promote gender equality may in part be traced to the limits of 1970s Marxist analyses in this respect.

References Cited

Anderson, Benedict

1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Alexander, M. Jacqui and Chandra Mohanty, eds.

1977 *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies Democratic Futures*. New York and London: Routledge.

Badran, Margot

1996 *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bernal, Victoria

1994 "Gender, Culture, and Capitalism: Women and the Remaking of Islamic 'Tradition' in a Sudanese Village." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36 (1):36-67.

1997 "Islam, Transnational Culture, and Modernity in Rural Sudan." In *Gendered Encounters: Challenging Cultural Boundaries and Social Hierarchies in Africa*. Maria Grosz-Ngate and Omari Kokole, eds. Pp. 131-151. New York and London: Routledge.

- Bock, Gisela and Susan James, eds.
1992 *Beyond Equality and Difference*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Chatterjee, Partha
1989 "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." In *Recasting Women*. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. Pp. 233-253. New Delhi: Kali and the Book Review Literary Trust.
- Chinchilla, Norma
1997 "Nationalism, Feminism, and Revolution in Central America." In *Feminist Nationalism*. Lois West, ed. Pp. 201-219. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cliffe, Lionel and Basil Davidson, eds.
1988 *The Long Struggle of Eritrea*. Trenton: Red Sea Press.
- Delenze, Olivier and Claire Leloup
1982 Report. In *Women in the Eritrean Revolution: Eyewitness Reports and Testimonies*. Pp. 23-29. National Union of Eritrean Women Pamphlet.
- Dimtsi Hafash* (bi-monthly bulletin of the EPLF)
1981 March 1, 2 (23).
- Einhorn, Barbara
1993 *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender and Women's Movements in East Central Europe*. London and New York: Verso.
- Enloe, Cynthia
1990 *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Eritrean Women's Association
1979 *Women and Revolution in Eritrea*. Pamphlet.
- Frankland, Erich and Tammy Noble
1996 "A Case of National Liberation with Feminist Undertones: The Secession of Eritrea." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 7(3):401-424.
- Gauch, Sarah
1993 "Women Get Role in New Eritrea." *New African*. March, p.20.
- Gil, Pilar
1982 Report. In *Women in the Eritrean Revolution: Eyewitness Reports and Testimonies*. Pp. 9-16. National Union of Eritrean Women Pamphlet.
- Habte Selassie, Bereket
1980 *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa*. New York and London. Monthly Review Press.
- Hale, Sondra
1996 *Gender Politics in Sudan*. Boulder: Westview Press.
1997 "Gender Concerns After the Liberation Front Becomes the State: The Case of Eritrean Women." Paper for Knowledge-Based Virtual Workshop, DEHAI [Eritrean Internet list].

Harnet (Liberation)

1977 Newsletter published by Eritreans of North America.

Iyob, Ruth

1995 *The Eritrean Struggle for Independence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joseph, Suad

1996 "Gender and Citizenship." *Middle East Report* 198, 26(1):4-10.

Kutschera, Chris

1997 "A Time of Reckoning." *The Middle East* 268(3):35-38.

Lewis, I.M., ed.

1983 *Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*. London: Ithaca Press.

Markakis, John

1988 "The Nationalist Revolution in Eritrea." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 26 (1):51-70.

Moghadam, Valentine, ed.

1994 *Identity Politics and Women*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Parker, A. and M. Russo, eds.,

1992 *Nationalities and Sexualities*. New York and London: Routledge.

Pateman, Carol

1988 *The Sexual Contract*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Pateman, Roy

1990 *Eritrea: Even the Stones are Burning*. Trenton: Red Sea Press.

Pierce, Paulette

1996 "Boudoir Politics and the Birthing of the Nation: Sex, Marriage, and Structural Deflection in the National Black Independent Political Party." In *Women out of Place: The Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality*, Brackette Williams, ed. Pp. 216-244. New York and London: Routledge.

Rentmeesters, Veronica

1993 "Women and Development Planning," In *Emergent Eritrea*. Gebre Hiwet Tesfagiorgis, ed. Pp. 72-85. Trenton: Red Sea Press.

Rukszto, Katarzyna

1997 "Making her into a 'Woman': The Creation of Citizen-Entrepreneur in Capitalist Poland." *Women's Studies International Forum* 20(1):103-112.

Silkin, Trish

1989 "'Women Can Only Be Free When the Power of Kin Groups is Smashed': New Marriage Laws and Social Change in the Liberated Zones of Eritrea." *International Journal of Sociology of Law* 17:147-163.

- Spark*
1972 (1) Feb/March.
- Sorenson, John
1991 "Discourses on Eritrean Nationalism and Identity." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 29(2):301-317.
- Stefanos, Asegedetch
1988 An Encounter With Revolutionary Change: A Portrait of Contemporary Eritrean Women. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University.
- Taylor, Diana
1997 *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Tetreault, Mary Ann, ed.
1994 *Women and Revolution in Africa, Asia, and the New World*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- UNICEF
1994 Children and Women in Eritrea.
Voice of Eritrean Women.
- 1989 Quarterly Publication of the National Union of Eritrean Women.
- West, Lois, ed.
1997 *Feminist Nationalism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Williams, Brackette, ed.
1996 *Women Out of Place: The Gender of Agency and the Race of Nationality*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Wilson, Amrit
1991 *Women and the Eritrean Revolution: The Challenge Road*. Trenton: Red Sea Press.
- Woldegabriel, Berhane
1993 "Demobilising Eritrea's Army." *Review of African Political Economy* 58:134-135.
- Yang, Mayfair
1999 "From Gender Erasure to Gender Difference: State Feminism, Consumer Sexuality, and Women's Public Sphere in China." In *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*. Mayfair Yang, ed. Pp. 35-67. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira
1997 *Gender and Nation*. London: Sage Publications.
- Zerai, Worku
1994 "Participation of Women in the Eritrean National Liberation Struggle." M.A. Thesis, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.