

# WOMEN IN THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION



PREPARED BY THE FOREIGN SECTION OF ISEANE  
(Ethiopian women revolutionary movement)

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## INTRODUCTION

After age-old oppression under an archaic feudo-bourgeois rule, the Ethiopian peoples rose in revolt in February 1974. Although of a spontaneous nature during its inception, the revolution involved millions of peasants, workers, and other democratic and patriotic elements and began to shake the old order at its foundation. As a result of the class struggle and sacrifices made by the Ethiopian peoples, far-reaching changes took place in this ancient land. The feudal monarchy which had stood as the symbol of oppression was abolished. Land, which, for many centuries was the source of political, social, economic and cultural oppression on the part of feudalist forces was turned over to its rightful owners: to the millions of landless peasants. Major industries, banks, insurance companies, etc., which, for the past 30 years, were sources of neo-colonial control were also nationalized. The toiling masses of Ethiopia who were denied basic and fundamental democratic freedoms in the past began to organize freely.

The Ethiopian women, who constitute more than half of the entire population, joined the revolutionary struggle early. As early as 1974, Ethiopian women joined the struggle in mass and fought against feudal and neo-colonial oppression. Previous to the revolution, Ethiopian women were humiliated and exploited not only on the basis of their class status but also because of the fact that they were women. Led by heroic and progressive women, the slogan "Equality of the sexes" was propagated. At the same time, Ethiopian women did not lose sight of the class alliance of women with other oppressed classes. As the struggle for equality and democracy waged by women gathered momentum, clandestine women groups and study circles, saw the need of uniting their forces and creating a mass-based organization capable of



coordinating and leading the struggle of women. In October 1975, groups and study circles gathered together and formed the Ethiopian Women's Revolutionary Movement: the first revolutionary and democratic women's organization in the country. At the same time, this organization, ISEANE started its publication, The Militant Ethiopian Woman or Tagay Ethiopawit. This journal is the first clandestine women's publication devoted to the problems of women in our society.

Using all the legal possibilities that obtained during the unfolding of the revolution and combining this legal work with clandestine struggle, militants of ISEANE and sympathizers were able to mobilize and provide direction to the millions of women that were being increasingly drawn into the revolutionary struggle. By closely identifying itself with the democratic aspirations of the masses and through sacrifices of members ( who shed their blood for the cause of women's emancipation), ISEANE was able to win the confidence of Ethiopian women and other progressive and democratic sections of the country.

The vanguard role played by the organization during the formative years of the revolution had made the organization one of the main targets of reactionary and counter-revolutionary organizations in the country. Starting in September 1976, members and sympathizers of the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (ME'ISONE) began to fall under the bullets of the so-called Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP). ISEANE members and sympathizers shared this brutal experience. Many leading members and cadres were assassinated in the streets of Addis Ababa and other regions of the country.

When after April 1977, the betrayal of the revolution by the military government and its alliance with the Soviet Block

countries brought a lot of repression and persecution, vanguard elements of the women's democratic movement were arrested and summarily executed.

Something that has gone unnoticed by progressive women the world over is the fact that this repression has resulted in the arrest of more than 3,000 ISEANE militants and sympathizers who are still languishing and undergoing inhuman torture in the over-crowded prisons of Ethiopia. Today, Ethiopia is perhaps the only country in the world with such a high figure of women political prisoners. But inspite of the tremendous setback that Ethiopian women have suffered as a result of 3 years of systematic harassment and executions, the reactionary and chauvenist forces did not succeed in their dream of silencing the voice of the democratic woman's movement in Ethiopia. ISEANE militants who have left their homes and families in order to continue the underground struggle have proved, by their heroic resistance to counter revolution and male chauvenism, that no amount of terror can destroy the cause of women's liberation. By closely coordinating their struggle with the overall battle for democracy, equality of nationalities and the national independence of Ethiopia, they are proving that women are a component and indispensable part of the revolutionary struggle that has set itself the task of creating a democratic and free Ethiopia on the ruins of feudalism and imperialism.

Since February 1974, the Ethiopian women have been present in all the decisive battles waged for the liberation of the country. At the various war fronts they have shed their blood in defense of the motherland. In the country side and the factories, in schools and government offices, in the army units and the democratic mass organizations they have put up no less



heroic battles in defense of their rights and that of their oppressed brothers.

This pamphlet has no pretention of covering all the aspects of the important role played by women in the Ethiopian revolution. Neither is it possible for us to record all the grim tales of torture and humiliation that filter out from Ethiopian prisons. It is intended to be but a modest contribution towards a better understanding of their role in the achievements of the revolution and their sufferings that have come along with its temporary setback.

But before doing that what should be told is the grim story of the conditions of women in feudal Ethiopia, for no real understanding of their struggle, its achievements and present problems could be obtained without a constant reference to the Ethiopian past. That is why we are giving a brief account of the conditions of women in pre-revolutionary Ethiopia which will be dealt with in the first part of the pamphlet. We also believe that an outline of the overall revolutionary developments that have taken place in the country will be indispensable to understand the problems of women's liberation in the post revolution years. That is why we will be constantly refering to the overall political situation in the country in the second part of the pamphlet which deals with the role of women in the Ethiopian revolution.

In presenting this pamphlet our intention is also to draw the attention of progressive women organizations to the horrible condition that prevail in today's Ethiopia. We feel that the struggle of the Ethiopian woman is part and parcel of

the worldwide battle for the economic, social and political emancipation of women. We earnestly hope that more and more women would come out in support of their besieged sisters in Ethiopia by openly condemning all the atrocities that are being committed against them and expressing full solidarity with ISEANE in its struggle for the triumph of a common cause: The Emancipation of Women.



## PART ONE

### WOMEN IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY ETHIOPIA

Feudalism constituted the characteristic feature of Ethiopia for a number of centuries. In feudal Ethiopia the land belonged to a handful of feudal lords while millions landless peasants were reduced to serfdom. Out of the total arable land of the country 65% was owned by the members of the royal family and the feudal nobility and 30% by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This left a mere 5% to the rest of the population and obliged millions of landless peasants to work for the landlords and surrender up to 75% of their harvests to the parasitic classes.

The primitive state of the Ethiopian economy could be seen by the fact that 90% of the country's population was engaged in agriculture. The handful of small manufacturing industries were mainly characterized by textiles, leather, shoes and food processing plants. Moreover, since these manufacturing industries were owned and controlled by foreigners the contribution of this sector to the overall development of the country's economy remained insignificant.

This socio economic order imposed on the Ethiopian people by the feudal oligarchy and imperialism accounted for the devastated economic and social life of the country. The effect of this overall underdevelopment of the country's economy has been the systematic subjugation of the millions of Ethiopians to the scourges of poverty, disease and ignorance.

The per capita income was as low as \$50 U.S. When allowance has been made in this figure for the incomes of the feudalists the peasants' income is barely at the subsistence level. This

Contributed to the fact that periodic famines were rampant throughout the country.

The situation in health was alarming by any standards that one may care to take. Government statistical figures as late as 1972 showed that a full one fifth of the children born alive, die before reaching one year of age. The child mortality rate was and still is 295 out of a thousand, i.e., 30% of the children born alive die before reaching the age of 5 years. In any given year, diseased infants constituted and still constitute more than one third and diseased children (0-4 years) about half of all deaths. The vast majority of the adult population was exposed to numerous health hazards such as yellow fever, malaria and small pox, the latter being eradicated from Ethiopia (and the world) only in September 1979! Since there was only one doctor for 350,000 people and one hospital bed for 3,500 people in the whole country, the majority died without receiving any kind of medical care.

In the field of education too, the Ethiopian people suffered the worst form of ignorance and superstition. A UNESCO study in the early 1970's showed that between 95-97% of the Ethiopian people were illiterate. Of the estimated 10 million school age children only 500,000 were in school. The Ethiopian Orthodox church which ran its own parallel "educational system" taught the down trodden peasants that they could not improve their socio-economic lot, because poverty, disease and serfdom had been ordained by destiny and therefore to rebel against their conditions as well as against their feudal lords was tantamount to rebellion against God.

Politically Ethiopia remained a "Prison of Nationalities" and despotism. Power was exclusively held by the absolute



monarch and the AMHARA-TIGRAY feudal nobility. No Political parties were allowed and the introduction of some modern institutions such as the rubberstamp parliament, a corrupt and exploitative bureaucracy and an organized military and security structure were only meant to strengthen the hand of feudal absolutism and to perpetuate the old order. The feudo-patriarchal political system based on the "Divine right of Kingship" gave so much free hand to the autocrat to rule as he wished that government lost its sense of responsibility and gave no attention whatsoever to the pressing social and economic problems of the country. The irresponsible and inhuman nature of this feudal political system was completely exposed in 1973-74 during the horrible famine of Wollo which brought death and devastation to over 200,000 peasants.

If the conditions of the Ethiopian peasant were, to say the least, so difficult, that of the "tenant's tenant" i.e., his mother, wife and daughter were even more atrocious and defy imagination. Of course, Ethiopia being an Empire state inhabited by people of different nationalities the socio-cultural heterogeneity is reflected in some varying attitudes towards the question of the woman's place in society. But even when some allowances are made for these differences the overall picture remains more or less the same: for the Ethiopian woman oppression and humiliation start at the cradle and follow her to the grave.

The material basis for the oppression of women in Ethiopia and the subsequent social and ideological attitude that go to define her place in society -- lies in the fact that the vast majority do not own land or any other means of production. In the northern part of the country with the exception of some Amhara regions a woman does not inherit land unless her father

dies before giving her hand in marriage in which case she is entitled to a dowry. The only other time she inherits is in the absence of male offsprings. In the south, and specially some OROMO regions women do not inherit land. The Ethiopian peasant woman is therefore generally dependent on the income of her tenant husband. This inferior economic situation even in relation to her downthroned tenant father and husband exposes her to a "double oppression" which is justified and institutionalized in the feudal society.

The Ethiopian Orthodox church (which was a big landlord itself) and to some extent Islam provided the ideological basis justifying the oppression of women. The church's attitude towards women is intrinsically linked with its interest in the ignorance and obedience of the peasantry and the strict maintenance of the feudal hierarchy. Thus the woman submitted to the man, the children to the parents, the peasant father to the gentry landlord and the latter to the Emperor. The cardinal rule in the family is the domination of the aged over youth and male over female. The Ethiopian woman in the ISLAM dominated areas fared no better. Islam's view of women encourages the most barbaric treatment and discrimination against them. The customs that stem from these religious attitudes fundamentally agree with the woman's inferior place in society. The so-called "modern" laws enacted by the imperial regime do but confirm and institutionalize the inferior condition of women.

The general practical implications of these backward attitudes add up to all sorts of degradation and humiliations that accompany the Ethiopian woman throughout her prematurely aged and destroyed life: First at birth, childhood and puberty and then in her married life.



1. Birth, Childhood and Puberty

The Ethiopian girl is the eternal "unwanted child". The view that women are a burden is widely held in Ethiopia. This can be seen by the reaction of parents as soon as the sex of the newly born child is identified. "She delivered a boy" is supposed to be good news while on the other hand it is considered undesirable to have many female children. Among the Tigray nationality, this preference for male children is manifested by the way in which the news is heralded. If it is a boy, the midwife and all the other women around say the "ililtà" (cry of rejoicing) seven times whereas the birth of a female child is heralded by only three "ILILTAS". In the latter case friends try to console the "unfortunate" mother by pointing out that she is young and can still hope to have the so desired male child at the next try: Which usually comes in less than 18 months. There are cases where failure to give birth to a male child is considered as a legitimate reason for divorce!

Given the attitude of the feudo-patriarchal society towards sexual intercourse and the woman's role in it, the female child's ordeals start only a few weeks after her birth. To keep the woman passive and "decent" and to decrease her sexual urge -- so that she may be able to meet the requirement of virginity when she gets married -- the church and custom impose circumcision during early childhood. Some nationalities like the ISSAS in eastern Ethiopia even go further in their attempt to keep the woman "pure". The vagina is sewed by means of acacia thornes only allowing room for a small opening to let out the girl's urine and menses. After this inhuman and horrible "operation" the thighs of the small girl are immobilized by means of a rope and she is obliged to stay lying for 15 days in order to

facilitate the cicatrization. Years later, when the time comes for the woman to marry she is "reopened" with the help of a knife. One can easily imagine the psychological and moral consequences of such inhuman practices which constitute a flagrant violation of the integrity and dignity of the human being.

In the absence of any notions of child care, the conditions underwhich these operations take place are so primitive and hazardous that they contribute to the high infant mortality rate that we have noted already.

Starting from early childhood, the training that the girl undergoes is to prepare her for the kind of life that awaits her as a woman. The parents teach her how to be "a good wife" which in other words means submissive and obedient. During these crucial formative years she is neither allowed nor encouraged to develop her potential fully. The "education" is also insured by the child's early participation in the mother's hard labour, which nails her down to the kitchen and other "unproductive" activities. As early as 7-8 years young girls begin assisting their mothers in water portage, fuel gathering, in the kitchen and sometimes go out as shepherds with their young brothers.

Generally speaking these attitudes result in low educational standards for Ethiopian girls compared to that of boys. Of the limited educational opportunities that are offered girls are the last to get them. Moreover the percentage of girls tends to decrease as the level of education increases. In 1969-70 for example, girls constituted 31% of primary grades, 20% of secondary schools while at the university level they were only 8% of the



total student body. Government statistics showed that only 5% of school age children were enrolled in schools outside Addis Ababa and out of this only 0.2% were girls. Only 0.3% of rural women are literate as compared with 7.9% for men.

At the age of puberty another nightmare besieges the young girl. This again results from the attitudes of the feudo-patriarchal order towards sexual intercourse and the woman's role in it. The teachings of the Orthodox church are so backward that they even site menstruation and pain at childbirth as "proofs" of how God has cursed women. A woman cannot attend church services during her menstrual period and after childbirth the woman and her midwives are so "polluted" that they are not to go to church before a period of 40 days and even then not until the priest sprinkles "holy water" on all of them.'

In this connection, groups like the QUEMANTES and the MORETE in northern Ethiopia have developed a unique taboo: A QUEMANTE woman is not considered clean until she has entered menopause. During menstruation she is confined to a special hut where food is brought to her and she is not allowed to leave the hut for any reason. Following the birth of a child the woman goes with her child to the confinement hut for seven days after which the hut is considered so polluted that it has to be burnt together with the mothers old clothings and all objects that she used during her confinement period. Again, if a woman dies during menstruation she will not have ritual for the dead and will be buried outside the boundaries of the sacred burial place.

With puberty there also comes the worries about marriage.

As we have noted earlier the Ethiopian girl wastes away her life preparing for marriage which should come as soon as the age of puberty is reached. It is in fact considered a disgrace for a girl not to marry at an early age. The "KOMOKERE" or the girl which did not find a husband is almost an outcast and a serious embarrassment for her family. This "problem" obsesses the parents so much that some feed their girls special food so that they may not mature early (have breasts, develop hips etc.) and embarrass them if no husband is forthcoming.

## 2. Marriage and Family

The marriage customs in Ethiopia vary according to the nationality or the region in question. But generally speaking and especially in the rural areas girls may be promised to marriage at the age of 7 or 8 and in fact do marry as early as 13 years. The girl has, of course, no say whatsoever in the choice of her partner and once married she has very little rights in the household.

The first general characteristic of marriage especially in the rural areas is the fact that the woman is considered a property. Marriages are arranged by the respective parents when they have come to an agreement over the amount of bride price that is to be paid for the girl and the latter is never given the chance of knowing her husband before she is handed over to him as household slave.

Marriage thus becomes a transaction which differs from other business transactions in that in this case the commodity is a young girl who has no say in matters concerning her own life.



This "commodity" character is most evident with the GUELEBES and the OROMO nationalities. In the event of the death of the husband the widow is "inherited" by the husband's brother or his closest relative. This of course goes hand in hand with the complementary custom which requires that if a wife dies accidentally the surviving husband has the right to take one of her marriable sisters to replace her without paying any new bride-price.

The second main feature of the married woman in Ethiopia is the fact that she is considered a sex object and a reproducing machine. It is in fact on the wedding night that the woman's submission to the husband's sexual urge is symbolized by the crude custom of exhibiting her blood on a piece of cloth. In some cases like with the GURAGES, a few days before the wedding, the girl goes through the torture of finger nail cutting so deep that it bleeds. This is done in order to avoid her resistance towards the husband during her first sexual mating. Moreover, the woman is supposed to be a virgin at her wedding and absence of virginity is a legitimate cause for divorce.

The other main task of the woman is to produce as many children as possible. But here we see her caught in a vicious circle which constitutes a physical, psychological and moral burden that prematurely ages and destroys her. In fact as we have seen earlier the infant mortality rate in Ethiopia is exceptionally high. This makes it necessary for the Ethiopian woman to have numerous pregnancies in order to have a few of her children reach adolescence. It is very common for Ethiopia's rural woman to have as many as a dozen pregnancies. Each time she continues to work throughout her pregnancy and unless she is well-to-do her confinement lasts only a week or ten days.

These numerous pregnancies added to malaria, tuberculosis, venereal diseases etc. which are the lot of the people in general, sap the vitality of the woman and oftentimes provoke spontaneous abortion and still birth or sterility. We may note herethat the average life expectancy of the woman is 35 years whereas that of the man in Ethiopia is 37 years.

For the husband and the feudo-patriarchal society all these considerations are without any importance whatsoever. Sterility is considered by the whole society as a "proof" of how the woman has been cursed by God and in any case a legitimate cause of divorce. A woman can be sent back to her parents for infertility and in some cases as with the GURAGES her marriage is legally binding and becomes permanent.....only after she gives birth to eight children.

The third main feature of the Ethiopian married woman is that she is a household slave. The division of labour requires women to do all the household work in addition to helping out in the field. A more or less typical day for the rural woman starts at around 6 in the morning and ends at 10 or 12 in the night. She will clean the house, carry water from usually distant rivers, with water vessels which may weigh up to 20 kilos when filled. Fuel, either wood or dung or both is fetched by women and small girls and is carried on their backs. She milks the cow, grinds grain, cleans and spins cotton, prepares food for the family, helps in farming and carrying to the market and selling food-crops, spices, butter and its products, baskets, wood etc. At night she prepares food, feeds the cattle, washes the feet of her husband or his guests, if any.

As for the treatment that the woman gets after all this,



it can be said by this Amharic saying "Women and donkeys need the stick". Women's work is referred to derogatorily by men and "woman's language" is the epithet for vulgar and trivial talk. About the ideal GURAGE wife an author has noted that she should walk a few paces behind her husband, serve him first at meal time and eat later with her kids, sleep on the floor along side his bed and should never contradict him. She must of course remain loyal and relations with other men are strictly out of the question.

Adultery on the part of the woman is strictly forbidden and severely punishable. It may result in her complete ostracisation from the society and can of course provide another legitimate cause for divorce. All this, notwithstanding the fact that the husband is entitled to have mistresses and concubines and even practice polygamy as in the Muslem regions.

As we have noted above, the modern legal system has only confirmed and institutionalized the woman's submission to her husband. By law, the man is the master of the household and the wife "owes him obedience in all lawful things that he orders". She has no right to the custody of her children unless approved by the father. She cannot name her child on her own and household work is her sole responsibility.

Since the woman's servility to the husband is taken as a matter of course, divorce which sometimes becomes the only way out, is made a very difficult issue for the woman. It is true that in theory the woman can divorce. But in almost all regions the woman who leaves her husband is considered indecent and almost an outcast. In the AMHARA-TIGRAY regions the term "FET"

or divorcee woman is almost an insult. But even more than the moral aspects, it is the economic consequences that discourage a woman from leaving her husband. In most regions the divorced woman has no right to property and in some regions like in TIGRAY she does not even have the right to take away her personal belongings when she leaves the household. All this, notwithstanding the fact that the husband can divorce and send back the woman to her parents for a multitude of reasons like not being virgin at the time of marriage, infertility, adultery etc. In the Muslim areas all that the man has to do is to pronounce three times "I divorce you" in order to get rid of his wife.

In spite of all these the woman may decide to divorce and in most cases divorced peasant women flee to the nearest urban centers with the illusion of leading a better life there. However to their dismay the towns do not offer them anything better. Illiterate and unskilled as they are become maids in the well-to-do families where hard work and humiliation are no less demoralising than in the rural areas. Some leave to look for work in the few factories but again for those who manage to get employed, even if this means a limited economic independence, conditions are no better. In most cases the only alternative open to these women becomes prostitution which not only during the hay days of feudal Ethiopia but even to this day remains a flourishing institution in the country.

### 3. Women in the Urban Centers

The first group in this category is constituted of working class women. Most of these are unskilled workers. Even when they perform various tasks ranging from light routine work to



that which is very heavy requiring handling of sophisticated machinery are the lowest paid and face constant threat of being fired.

They work in the coffee processing industry, textile and garment industries, shoe factories, food processing plants, meat canning and oil factories, etc. Most of these industries take a higher number of women because they can be forced into accepting lower wages. In addition to this, pregnant women are victims of tremendous pressure. No matter how dangerous a particular work might be to pregnancy the employers do not transfer a woman worker from her usual assignment. They are obliged to stay on their job until delivery time and after giving birth they are only entitled to a few days maternity leave at the discretion of the employer and with half pay. When we consider the fact that even by the horrible Ethiopian standards the woman is paid less than half the salary paid to the man for the same kind of work, "half pay" is like no pay at all. This forces the woman to cut short her confinement period to the strict minimum of 7 to 10 days.

To give the reader a correct view of the situation, we may cite here the case of a typical firm: THE SOLOMON MAHETEME SELASSIE, a haricot import-export firm. Out of a total of 1,650 workers in 1973 there were 1,500 women. They were made to work 13 hours a day and they were not entitled to any annual and sick leave. Women were paid \$0.35 U.S. a day while men were paid a little more than \$0.80 cents. As they were paid on a daily basis, there was no maternity leave even with half pay!

The factory woman oppressed and exploited at her place of work was also no less a household slave than her counterpart in the rural areas. At the end of the factory day she goes back home to prepare food for the family and performs all the other household work.

The second group of women in the urban centers is composed on middle class women who fare not much better in terms of equality and dignity. Of the limited educational opportunity in the urban centers women are the last to get a chance. The reason why there are so few literate women even in these areas where schools are available lies in the commonly held belief that girls do not need schooling. Consequently they are discouraged from continuing school beyond the sixth or eighth grade. Very few go on to higher education and often drop out during the first two years. As for vocational and technical schools the number of girls is far below that of men and rarely exceeds 20%. Since educational qualifications and vocational training are often determinant in employment, their loss in these areas affects their opportunity for employment and seriously hampers their economic independence.

Notwithstanding the semblance of voluntary union, it is clear that the couple are appraised financially by their respective parents. Dowry in the countryside is usually cattle but in the cities it takes the form of a house, a car or other expensive gifts. Once married the position of the middle class woman at home is not less difficult than that of the factory woman. Her work is now two fold: in the office and at home in the kitchen. At work she is discriminated in jobs and overworked. Back from work the household chores fall squarely on her shoulders.



The flourishing institution of prostitution comes into the picture as a "solution" to these numerous social and economic problems encountered by women. Prostitution affects almost all sectors of the female population of the country and is invariably caused by economic factors.

If we take the case of Addis Ababa we get the following overall picture which can apply equally to the other urban centers of the country. In 1973 there were an estimated 60,000 prostitutes in the city. Even if the vast majority of these were in the 25-34 age group, small girls from poor families and as young as 13 year olds were known to have engaged in prostitution.

Case studies among 300 prostitutes showed that 93% were engaged in prostitution in order to earn a living. They were mostly unemployed or divorced women who constituted a full 95% of the group. But school dropouts and office girls were becoming an increasingly important group within the institution. Given the fact that no medical facilities whatsoever were given to these women, more than 80% suffered from all sorts of venereal diseases.

Even if feudal oppression and imperialist exploitation did not go unchallenged, the role played by women in the revolutionary struggle was limited. The twenty years preceeding the February movement were marked by a host of rebellion against the regime. Peasants in Gojam, Tigray, Bale, Wollo etc, revolted time and again but were suppressed by the feudal army supported by various imperialist forces. The Eritrean nationalist movement led by the two liberation fronts constituted

a serious and constant challenge to the feudal regime, and contributed to the general crisis that paved the way for the February movement.

The Ethiopian student movement which embarked on an increasingly radical course after 1965 gathered momentum and in the absence of any political party it played a crucial role in exposing the feudal regime and mobilizing the masses against it. University and high school girls fully participated in the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle. But during these early years the woman question was not yet a central issue of their struggle.

But when in 1968 the vanguard elements within the student movement created MEISONE, progressive women who joined the organization were encouraged to establish women study groups and bring together activists within the student movement in order to study and popularize the basic revolutionary ideas on the woman question.

In 1970 the first women study circles were created by militants of the Ethiopian Student Unions in Europe and North America. Publications devoted to the question started coming out in 1971 and seminars on the woman question and on her role in the revolutionary struggle were held in all the branch unions of these organizations. Efforts to coordinate these women groups resulted in the creation of the "World Wide Ethiopian Women's Study Group" in 1972. But political differences within the student movement, especially after the creation of the ultra "left" EPRP in 1972, led to divisions among the vanguard elements of the women's movement which in



turn crippled all efforts to strengthen these groups and lay the foundations for a strong organization of women. The study circles in North America adhered to the ultra "left" positions of the EPRP and by refusing to accept non-EPRP women in their fold disrupted any independent development of the democratic women's movement. The study circles in Europe refused any systematic allegiance to any political group and instead argued that the movement should work towards the creation of a mass democratic women's organization open to all women who want to fight for equality. These women joined forces and in 1973 created the Ethiopian Women's Democratic Union in Europe (EWDUE).

Through its publication TAGEYE (struggle) the EDWUE played a crucial role in popularising revolutionary ideas on the woman question and when the popular movement broke out in the country in 1974, many of its militants went back to Ethiopia to participate in the revolutionary struggle.

Inside Ethiopia itself, due to the fascistic repression prevailing in the country, the study circles were very limited in number and their membership was mostly limited to intellectuals and students. The strict secrecy under which they were forced to operate hindered their development and by the time the upheaval started in early 1974, only a handful of study circles, run by MEISONE militants operated in Addis Ababa.

Compared to this very low stage of development of the democratic women's movement in the country, the ruling classes, conscious of the tremendous force that women represented, had a number of organizations whose purpose was to divert women from their horrible conditions and prevent their participation in the growing opposition movement. Most

notorious among these organizations was "The Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association" whose president was none other than the eldest daughter of Emperor Haile Selassie. Another important organization was "The Service Men's Wives Association" run by the wife of the Minister of Defense.

As it may be expected, these two reactionary groups were to play a negative role during the early days of the revolutionary struggle by concocting various intrigues and plots against the popular movement.



PART TWO

WOMEN IN THE REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE

One of the most important weaknesses of the revolutionary struggle in Ethiopia, and the reason that led to its subsequent defeat was the absence of a strong organization capable of leading it to final victory. This handicap was even more serious in the case of Ethiopian women who had no democratic organization to coordinate and lead their struggle for emancipation. In spite of this handicap, however, women spontaneously joined the revolution and small underground women groups seized the opportunities offered by the unfolding revolution to give an organized leadership to the movement

But before that, revolutionary women had to undertake very intensive educational work among the masses in order that women might understand the causes of their double oppression. This constituted the main task of revolutionary women during the eventful months that followed February 1974. Once the oppressed women were won over to the cause of "equality of women" and were drawn into the revolutionary struggle, progressive women paid more attention to organizational problems. The year 1975 was thus a period during which the struggle to create a nationwide democratic women's movement was one of the burning issues of the women's movement. These efforts were crowned with success when late in 1975 the first democratic women's organization in the country, the ISEANE was created by the vanguard elements of the movement. But before giving an outline of the role played by ISEANE, we think that it would be appropriate to deal with the spontaneous upsurge that marked the year 1974 and the struggle to create a revolutionary organization during the year 1975.

1. 1974: The Spontaneous Upsurge

The February upheaval in Ethiopia was a great mass revolutionary movement which brought into action all the classes and strata of the Ethiopian Society. It was a spontaneous upsurge directed against the feudo-facist regime of Emperor Haile Selassie. Its immediate causes were the unbearable conditions of life in Ethiopia's large towns, the rise in the cost of living, the scarcity of daily necessities and the great famine in the Wollo and Tigray regions that claimed the lives of 200,000 poor peasants.

Early in the struggle, units of the army joined the movement thus seriously undermining the hold of the feudalists on the country. This led to the resignation of the AKLILU Cabinet who was in power during the previous 13 years. But his replacement by another member of the ruling classes, ENDALKATCHEW MEKONNEN touched off a series of mass demonstrations and protests which intensified during the months that followed.

Women joined the mass movement early in the struggle. On the 17th of March 1974, 3,000 women staged a mass demonstration to support their demands for equality. On the same day, 1,500 women of the MAHETEME SELASSIE Haricot exporting plant went on strike to demand equal pay for equal work and better working conditions. As we have noted earlier these women got a bare \$0.35 U.S. for a 13 hour work day as compared with men who were paid \$0.80 U.S. for the same amount of work. These mass actions, the first of their kind to be undertaken by women were followed by more demonstrations as more and more women were drawn into the revolutionary struggle.



A few days later, on the 29th of March 1974, MEISONE issued the first comprehensive guideline and coherent program for the revolutionary movement. In this six page document entitled "The Voice of the People" it outlined the age old grievances of the Ethiopian people against the feudal order and imperialism and put forward specific demands like "Democratic Liberties", "Land to the Tiller", "Equality of Nationalities", "National Independence" etc. This issue of the "Voice of the People" was also important in that in the absence of any democratic women's organization, it was the first document to raise the problem of women's liberation and to show the path for the struggle. Among other things, MEISONE demanded:

An end to discrimination and the double oppression of women in education, marriage, work and participation in the administration of public affairs. The abolition of all laws, customs and ideology that institutionalise these practices and full equality of the sexes guarded by law and consistently applied among all religions and nationalities.

The following eventful months saw the intensification of the struggle as more and more sections of the population were drawn into the movement and put forward specific demands. In April members of the low clergy, representing 200,000 priests went on strike to demand higher pay and better working conditions and to protest against the corrupt practices of the leaders of the Orthodox Church. Workers staged a 4-day general strike putting forward similar demands as well as demand for democratic rights. The oppressed muslims supported by all the democratic sections

of the population staged huge demonstrations to support their demand for equality. Muslim women joined these mass actions to demand an end to oppressive religious beliefs that were responsible for their humiliations. Students and intellectuals played a very important vanguard role by consistently struggling to radicalise the movement and by engaging in intensive agitational work.

Given the intrigues and machinations concocted by the ruling circles to diffuse the movement and especially to divide the armed forces, some democratic soldiers and officers initiated the idea of the formation of a coordinating committee of the armed forces. It was as a result of this initiative that the coordinating committee of the armed forces, police and territorial army later known as the "Derg" was created in June 1974. This step taken by the armed forces and the continuing popular pressure led to the resignation of the ENDALKATCHEW Cabinet and to the arrest of some leading members of the feudal aristocracy in July 1974.

By this time, combining agitational and organizational work, MEISONE and the EPRP which later betrayed the revolution, intensified their struggle for the deposition of the Emperor and the creation of a provisional popular government. MEISON militants created clandestine popular committees in factories, government offices and other work places which worked secretly to radicalise the movement. Under increasing pressure from the popular masses, the DERG finally moved to depose Emperor Haile Selassie on the 12th of September 1974. The same day a provisional Military Government was established in Ethiopia.



During the following months as the struggle for land and democratic rights intensified progressive women accelerated their organizational efforts. In December 1974, some women intellectuals of the capital announced that they were creating a women's league and demanded recognition by the government. But the Ministry of the Interior refused to recognize this group and instead encouraged women "leaders" of the former regime to get together and form a new pro-government women's organization. This attempt by the reactionary bureaucracy failed following popular pressure and the idea of resurrecting the former "Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association" was definitively dropped.

The intellectuals then proposed the idea of a seminar to be held in early 1975 in order to discuss issues pertaining to the woman question. They also proposed that the participants to this seminar be elected from the various factories and government offices, and that issues be discussed democratically without any pressure on the part of the Derg. Progressive Derg members endorsed the idea and preparations were made for an early call of the seminar.

Meanwhile the proclamation by the Derg of "Ethiopian Socialism" as the guiding ideology of the revolution and the launching of the mass literacy and political education campaign known as the ZEMETCHA, opened new possibilities for the revolutionary endeavors of women and all other progressives.

Concerning "Ethiopian Socialism" the EPRP categorically rejected this ideology arguing that it was not Marxist-Leninist and refused to use the tremendous legal opportunities that it offered. MEISONE and other progressives including

women who a year later founded ISEANE criticised the shortcomings of this proclamation. Women protested against the absence of a clear commitment to the idea of equality and the pretensions of the Derg to protect the family against what it called "harmful foreign influences". This was correctly perceived as a disguised attempt to perpetuate the feudo-patriarchal family values and practices and thus an obstacle to the struggle for emancipation. But in spite of these serious shortcomings, the vast legal opportunities that these proclamations offered was not overlooked and progressive women set out to use these possibilities in order to fight the decadent feudo-patriarchal ideology and to popularise the idea of the equality of women.

The ZEMETCHA, which mobilized 60,000 youth including more than 12,000 girls from the university and the senior high schools in the country, was supported by progressive women. They argued that the very presence and participation of women in the campaign and the agitational and organizational work that they can accomplish among peasant women could contribute a lot to the cause of their emancipation. The correctness of this assessment was proved during the following year when ZEMETCHA girls integrated with peasant women and set-up thousands of women's associations in the Ethiopian countryside.

## 2. 1975: The Struggle to Organize

The year 1975 witnessed the proclamation of all the great revolutionary decrees which were to transform the old Ethiopian society and to launch the country on the road of democracy and national independence. Among these we find the proclamation to nationalize the major industries, banks, insurance and financial institutions (13th January 1975)



the land reform bill (March 1975), the proclamation which nationalized Urban land and extra houses (July 1975), the Labor Law Proclamation (December 1975) etc.

If it was not easy to have these decrees proclaimed, development during the year showed that their correct implementation was an even more ardent task. In fact the second half of 1975 saw the spread of armed counter-revolution in all Ethiopia's regions. This led progressives to intensify their efforts to organize peasants and workers and to demand the immediate arming of revolutionary defense committees in order to defend gains already registered.

Progressive women who were conscious of these developments and of their role in the defense of the revolution intensified their drive to form a nation-wide revolutionary organization. But differences on the nature and tasks of such an organization first between the women "leaders" of the former regime and the progressives and then among the progressives themselves retarded the process.

In February 1975, a seminar on the woman question, the first of its kind in the country's history was held in Addis Ababa. 54 women mostly from the government offices and agencies participated in the week long debate in which all aspects of the question of women's liberation were democratically discussed. A series of confrontations occurred between the two trends that emerged in the course of these debates.

On the one hand there were those remnants of the former regime. These women who were leaders of the pro-government

"Women Organizations" refused to see any relationships between the socio-economic order and the conditions of women in the country. They agitated for the formation of a nationwide women's organization on the lines of the defunct "Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association" divorced from any political action and the overall revolutionary struggle of the masses.

Progressive women strongly challenged these views and pushed forward the following basic principals which they argued should govern all actions undertaken to help oppressed women in their fight for emancipation:

1. Given the fact that the oppression of women has its fundamental causes in the socio-economic system imposed upon the people by feudalism and imperialism, no liberation can be envisaged outside the revolutionary struggle of the popular masses against these twin-enemies.

2. The revolution cannot achieve its objectives if it does not draw into its ranks the millions of oppressed women who constitute more than half of the entire population.

3. In order to participate in the revolutionary struggle and achieve their emancipation women must organize in a broad democratic organization that could coordinate their efforts and defend their specific rights.

These principles were accepted by the participants and on the 24th of February an 18-member "Women's Coordinating Committee" (WCC) was elected in order to coordinate efforts that would be undertaken to popularize these ideas among



women and to help them in their efforts to organize. The WCC which was divided into 4 sub-committees (political education, organization, research and public relations) was mandated to establish branch offices in the administrative regions, as soon as it consolidated itself in Addis Ababa.

A week later, on the 4th of March 1975, the land reform bill which liberated millions of peasant households from the bondage of feudalism was proclaimed. For women this proclamation is of a tremendous importance in that it seriously undermined the economic basis of their oppression.

Article 410 of the proclamation states that "without differentiation of the sexes any person who is willing to personally cultivate land shall be allotted rural land sufficient for his maintenance and that of his family." The proclamation further provides that "no person may use hired labor to cultivate his holding provided that the foregoing prohibition shall not apply to women with no other adequate means of livelihood, or where the holder is sick or old, to the wife or the husband or to his or her children who have attained majority."

The next day, on the 5th of March millions of Ethiopians showed their support to the proclamation by staging huge demonstrations in all the cities and villages of the country. In Addis Ababa alone hundreds of thousands of the City's women joined the huge demonstration staged in support of the proclamation. The WCC and other women progressives tried to give an organized direction to the movement and came out with demands such as democratic rights, the right to organize freely, the creation of women sections within the peasant

association that were to be created for the implementation of the proclamation, etc.

Acting in line with the provisions of the proclamation the ZEMETCHA youth and other progressives in the rural areas immediately set out to organize peasant associations in Ethiopian villages. Within a few months 18,000 such associations were created. Each peasant association had its own elected executive committee, people's tribunal and militia. However, the participation of women in these peasant associations was very low. This was because of the fact that inspite of the tremendous educational efforts already undertaken by the ZEMETCHA girls and the WCC, the peasants both men and women were not yet won over to the idea of the equality of women and the necessity of their participation in public life. This coupled with the fact that no provisions for the cration of peasant women's associations were contained in the proclamation hindered any systematized organizational work. But inspite of these difficulties, young girls were able to organize 400,000 peasant women in 3,000 associations by the end of the year 1975.

In addis Ababa itself, inspite of some political differences that started to manifest themselves within its ranks, the WCC managed to popularize revolutionary ideas on the woman question. The mass media were used effeciently to denounce the feudo-patriarchal ideology, to expose the causes for women's oppression and to show the path towards liberation.

On the 13th of April 1975 another important seminar was organized by the WCC. 300 women elected from the



factories and government offices attended this seminar devoted to the question of organization. This second seminar was different from the one held two months earlier. The number of the participants was higher and its composition was much more democratic than the March seminar in that working women from the factories in and around Addis Ababa constituted more than half the participants.

Perhaps more important is the fact that this conference saw a bitter confrontation between the ultra "left" women, regrouped around the EPRP and progressives among whom some were members or sympathisers of MEISONE. This confrontation was but a reflection of the divisions that prevailed among the vanguard forces and revolved around some important issues of the revolution. Most important among these was the question of the nature of the Derg and the tactical attitudes that progressives should have towards it.

The EPRP group refused to see any differences between the Derg on the one hand and the feudalists and imperialists on the other. Arguing that the Derg was fascistic and more dangerous to the Ethiopian people than feudalism and imperialism it constantly called for its overthrow and together with these twin enemies of the Ethiopian people effectively struggled to achieve this objective. It rejected the idea of any tactical alliance with the military and shunned any meaningful legal work to educate and organize the people.

MEISONE argued that there were very sharp contradictions between progressives and reactionaries within the Derg itself and some contradictions between the latter on the one hand and the feudalists and imperialists on the other. Therefore, MEISONE argued, revolutionaries must come out in support of

all the progressive measures taken by the government and should temporarily ally with its progressive elements in order to defend the revolution. Therefore instead of calling for the immediate overthrow of the Derg and playing into the hands of the feudalists and imperialists, MEISONE mobilized and organized the people to struggle for democratic rights, equality of nationalities, the correct implementation of the revolutionary decrees, etc. This position of "critical support" also meant an unflinching denunciation of any anti-democratic moves taken by the Derg, a systematic utilization of all the legal possibilities offered by the revolution without for a moment relaxing the efforts to continue the struggle once the Derg terminates its progressive historical role.

As we noted earlier, these differences among the vanguard forces had their repercussions on the general attitudes and tactics of vanguard women and led to serious confrontations on the issue of the nature and the immediate tasks of a women's organization.

The EPRP women wanted a "revolutionary" organization whose membership should be strictly limited to women adhering to the ideology of the working class and accepting the leadership of the "working class party" which was no other than the EPRP itself. As to the present tasks of the women's struggle, they denounced all legal and clandestine efforts to mobilise women on day to day issues as "reformist" and instead argued that the present "revolutionary" task is the intensification of the struggle to overthrow the Derg. Once the Derg is overthrown and a "Peoples Government" is formed, they argued, then women can focus their attention to more "vulgar" tasks such as the struggle for equality,



maternity leave, child care center, etc.....

The progressive group led among others by ATNAF ALEM YEMANE, a veteran of the revolutionary struggle and a founding member and leader of ISEANE and who was summarily executed by the Derg two years later, put up a determined battle against these ultra "left" stands. For these progressives, the adoption of "adherence to Marxism-Leninism" as the criterion for membership was tantamount to reducing the women's organization to an insignificant club of self proclaimed "revolutionaries" divorced from any revolutionary practice and unable to play any meaningful role in the battle for women's liberation. They reiterated their already known stand according to which the organization should be open to all women who want to fight inequality regardless of their ideology and political views. As to the immediate tasks of the movement, they argued that progressive women must participate in the struggle to lighten the burden and to solve the problems encountered by women in their day to day life. These tasks, they said, should be undertaken simultaneously with that of drawing women into the revolutionary struggle. They also clearly underscored the necessity of using all the legal avenues offered by the situation; at the same time they pointed out that progressives should work towards the reinforcement and unity of clandestine women groups.

The debates between the representatives of the two lines showed that the EPRP women were completely isolated. They were thus forced to make a tactical retreat and accepted the democratic line forwarded by the progressive forces. The 10 day seminar ended by electing 7 additional members to WCC which was now enlarged to include working class women.

But, before the enlarged committee could settle down and implement the directives given by the seminar, developments in the country's overall political situation crippled the WCC. In fact, the following months witnessed the spread of armed counter-revolution throughout the country. Feudalists organized by EDU massacred hundreds of peasant leaders, youth and progressives engaged in organizing the masses in the countryside. The EPRP also joined hands with the feudalists and engaged in a systematic sabotage against the effort to organize the peasants. It also intensified its call for the withdrawal of the youth from the ZEMECHA, the dismantlement of the democratic peasant organizations, which it argued, were nothing but instruments for the Derg's rule and finally it called for the immediate overthrow of the derg.

In line with this EPRP policy, its members and sympathisers in the WCC not only stopped any meaningful participation in politicising and organizing women but also sabotaged and crippled all the activities of the WCC. They came back to their April positions and demanded that membership be restricted to "Marxist Leninists" and pompously reaffirmed their former position by declaring that "the Committee is not established to defend the rights of women or to provide them with food and clothings. This is reform. But what the committee stands for is revolution." (ADDIS ZEMENE 11 NOVEMBER 1975).

But even before the "leftists" exposed their anti-woman's liberation attitudes the progressive women within the WCC were convinced that nothing good could come out of this



committee which became more and more dominated by the EPRP faction. As early as September 1975, they had decided to leave the ranks of the WCC and to continue the revolutionary struggle from without. Soon after leaving this committee progressive women opposed to the ultra left policies of the WCC and representing women groups - both legal and clandestine - in the factories, schools and government offices decided to join their forces in order to create a revolutionary women's organization. This led to the creation of ISEANE or the Ethiopian Revolutionary Women's Movement in October 1975.

The organization operated secretly but soon its influence started to be felt within the women's movement. On the 17th of November it came out with a long statement denouncing the political bankruptcy of the WCC and called upon women to accelerate their organizational efforts outside it. Two months later on the 7th of January 1976, the first issue of ISEANE's underground paper "TAGAYE ETHIOPIAWIT" started to circulate among the democratic elements of the women's movement. The paper played a crucial role not only in propagating revolutionary ideas pertaining to the woman question but also became a tremendous organizing force to broaden the democratic basis of ISEANE.

Meanwhile other important developments in the overall political situation in the country gave a new momentum to the women's movement. To face the challenge of mounting counter-revolution, MEISONE called upon all progressives to join forces and struggle under the banner of a common democratic program. To this effect, together with the progressives within the Derg, it prepared the National Democratic Revolution Program (NDRP) which in April 1976 became the common platform for all Ethiopia's progressive

forces and the comprehensive guiding document of the Ethiopian Revolution.

This comprehensive document which is close to the political program of MEISONE itself proclaimed that the recognition of democratic rights including the right to organize freely in political parties and other organizations was a matter of urgent necessity to the Ethiopian Revolution. It discarded the chauvenist policies of the military government and recognized the right to self determination for all Ethiopian nationalities. It laid down the principles of the New Ethiopia's foreign policy which was to be based on consistent non-alignment. It also provided for the full equality of women and prohibits all discrimination on the basis of sex. Article 4(c) of the program also declares that "Every necessary effort will be undertaken to allow women to participate fully in the productive process and thereby eliminate prostitution."

As the government accepted the principles contained in the program MEISONE formed an alliance with the Derg taking care to make it clear both to the latter and the Ethiopian people that this alliance would hold only as long as the government respects these provisions. This led to the creation, in December 1975 of the Provisional Office for Mass Organizational Affairs (POMOA) and the YEKATIT '66 (February 1974 ) ideological school, which were staffed by about 850 MEISONE cadres and some other militants. ISEANE also declared its support for this program and accepted to send some of its militants to the POMOA. DR. NEGISTE ADANE a veteran of the revolutionary movement and a founding member and leader of ISEANE who was one of the 15 members of the central Committee of POMOA was elected



to chair the Women's Affairs Committee (WAC) of the office. The ultra lefts of the WCC not only refused to participate in these efforts but also denounced those who joined the POMOA as "right opportunists" for having chosen to use the tremendous legal possibilities offered to them. While still maintaining the clandestine organizational network intact, ISEANE militants moved in to staff the WAC. During the following year, by combining legal work with their clandestine activities they were able to give a tremendous momentum to the cause of women's liberation in Ethiopia.

PART THREE

1976-77: ISEANE LEADS THE STRUGGLE

Once the POMOA was established the WAC which took over the tasks of the WCC following its dissolution quickly moved to create a MOBILE WOMEN'S TEAM for Addis Ababa and its regions. About a dozen young girls from the University and the senior high schools and some women from the factories and government offices staffed the mobile team. Its immediate task was to initiate and coordinate political education programs for women and to help them create grassroot organizations. With the establishment of POMOA branch offices, other progressive women were assigned to the administrative regions of the country. However, the lack of women cadres in sufficient number made it impossible for the teams to be formed at the provincial and district levels.

To cope with the problem of cadres the WAC proposed two solutions which were accepted by the POMOA central committee. It was decided that at least a third of all trainees at the ideological school were to be women activists drawn from the factories, schools, government offices, etc... These women attended courses on ideology and organizational techniques. The duration of the course ranged from one to three months. Then they went back to their respective areas to politicise women and organize them at the grassroots level. In addition the popular POMOA bi-monthly "Revolutionary Ethiopia" opened a special women's column, which under the editorship of WONGELAWIT TEFFERA, now in one of the Dergs prisons, made a considerable contribution to a better understanding of the woman question.



In the meantime male POMOA cadres at the provincial and district levels assumed the responsibility to educate and organize women until such time that women cadres were able to take over.

Concerning the political education of women, study circles were systematically created in the factories and government offices. These discussion forums run by POMOA cadres met twice a week and basing themselves on materials provided by the WAC held free and lively discussions not only on theoretical aspects of the woman question but also on the solutions of concrete problems encountered by women in their work and daily lives. The cadre took care to study these problems and worked towards their solution. But at the same time they tried to show the link between these concrete problems and the feudo-patriarchal order which engendered them. The necessity of a separate women's organization as an indispensable instrument in the fight for equality and emancipation was one of the central topics discussed in these study circles.

Periodicals, books and pamphlets dealing with the woman question were imported along with other revolutionary works and some were translated into the local languages. In May 1976, Dr. Negeste Adane published her book entitled "Women and Social Development". This popular work which had several successive editions gave a vivid description of the conditions of women in Ethiopia, denounced the beliefs, customs, laws and the entire feudo-patriarchal order that institutionalised the double oppression to which women were subjected. In her book Dr. Negeste Adane

summarized and systematized the results of the debates that took place within the women's movement during the preceding two years and popularized the basic revolutionary ideas pertaining to the woman question. Given the servile mentality of women that has been inherited from age old oppression and humiliation Dr. Negeste also called upon women to struggle on two fronts, i.e., to fight not only against male chauvinism but also to revolt against their own servile and defeatist mentality that accepts their inferiority and oppression.

The result of all this educational work was that the idea of the equality of women and that of their indispensable participation in the revolutionary process which only two years earlier was limited to the intellectual cadres, was assimilated by the millions of Ethiopia's peasants and working women and became one of the driving forces of the revolution. In all the massive demonstrations that were held during this period, slogans like "Equal pay for equal work", "paid maternity leave before delivery", "equal opportunities", "right to organize freely", "No revolution without women's participation," "forward with TAGAYE ETHIOPIAWIT" etc....had their place along with other revolutionary slogans.

Moreover this educational work paved the way for the acceleration of the organization of women and during the year 1976 the gains registered in this field were no less impressive.

In the countryside, the proclamation to consolidate the peasant associations issued in December 1975 provided for the creation of women sections in every peasant



association. These Women's Associations were given legal personality and had broad powers " To do everything necessary to secure the rights of its members, to establish mobile teams which will closely follow the political, economic and social problems of its members, to establish professional associations, to sue and be sued, to enter into contract and to acquire property and to draw up its internal regulations." Basing themselves on this proclamation POMOA cadres undertook a systematic work of creating peasant women's associations in all Ethiopia's villages.

These peasant women's associations had democratically elected executive committees who coordinated the efforts of their members to improve their conditions and lighten the burdens of their heaviest daily tasks. To improve their economic conditions and foster their independence members were trained in income generating skills and small scale industries. The problems of water supply and grinding grain which were the burdens that fell on women's shoulders were given highest priority. Inexpensive means of well drilling were devised to bring waterwells nearer to the villages, and where conditions allowed small scale mills were created. Marketing problems were dealt with by setting up consumers' cooperatives in the villages.

In addition to this, the associations engaged in literacy campaigns aimed at raising the educational standards of adult peasant women as well as persuading them to send their daughters to school. Political education to fight the servile mentality inherited from the feudal order and aimed at increasing their participation in the overall

revolutionary struggle was a component part of the associations activities. These grass roots organizations were also intended to constitute the solid democratic foundation for an all Ethiopia women's organization. In fact by August 1977, when repression against ISEANE put an end to its legal activities, women under the leadership of ISEANE militants and sympathisers had already started to regroup these grass roots organizations at district and even provincial levels.

In the towns also efforts to organize women was undertaken by ISEANE militants and sympathisers in the POMOA. The result was no less impressive. In Addis Ababa and its region, the mobile women's team which as we have seen earlier run the discussion groups in the factories, government offices and the neighbourhood associations also worked to organize grass root committees in these places. By the end of 1976, practically all factories in and around Addis Ababa as well as in the other urban centers like Dire Dawa, Baherdar etc.... had their own women's association led by democratically elected militants.

The task of these factory women's associations were not much different from those in the rural areas. They had the double task of coordinating the struggle of women to improve their conditions at work and of raising their level of consciousness and organization in order that they may participate fully in the liberation struggle.



In this respect the first important task tackled by these associations was the struggle for the correct implementation of the rights recognized to women by the labor law of December 1975. In fact notwithstanding some serious shortcomings, the labor law had some very important provisions regarding the rights of women. For the first time in the country's history it recognized the principle of equal pay for equal work. Article 43 declared that "The same initial wage shall be paid for similar jobs in an undertaking" and article 107 prohibited any discrimination "on the grounds of race, tribe religion or sex."

The Labor Law allowed for a 45 consecutive days maternity leave with full pay. It prohibited work by pregnant women after 10 pm and any overtime obligations.

It is clear that these and the other provisions contained in the labor law were considerable gains especially when compared to conditions of women workers in pre-revolutionary Ethiopia. As such ISEANE supported them and called upon women to struggle for their implementation. But ISEANE also stressed the shortcomings of the decree. In a special issue devoted to the Labor Law, TAGAYE ETHIOPIAWITE" criticised the absence of any provision allowing for the creation of separate and legally recognized women's organizations in the factories on the line already existing in the rural areas. As maternity leave was allowed only after delivery and that any absence before delivery had to be justified by "certification of a medical doctor" ISEANE denounced this provision as tantamount to no maternity leave before

delivery. It pointed out that the pre-requisite of a medical certificate in a country where there are only 400 doctors for 28 million people and where only a handful of factories had their own medical facilities would penalize working class women who had little access to such facilities. The provision concerning equal pay was also criticised because it only dealt with problems of equal wage and left out other issues such as promotion, salary increases, etc..... TAGAYE also criticised the absence of any provision concerning health services, nurseries, kindergartens etc. and called upon women to struggle for the following demands: creation of nurseries and health services in the factories, equal opportunity for women in promotion and salary increments; a 20 day maternity leave before delivery, prohibition of any night work at least during the first four months after delivery and finally for the recognition of the right of women to organize themselves freely and legally.

The Women's Affairs Committee of the POMOA also undertook similar organizational tasks within the neighborhood associations or KEBELES. The year 1976 saw progressive women play an increasingly important role both in the overall activities of the KEBELE and the establishment of KEBELE Women's associations. In the 1975 elections for the KEBELE offices in Addis Ababa, out of 3,985 elected KEBELE leaders only 192 or 5% were women. The next year 689 women were elected and this represented 16% of the total of KEBELE leaders which numbered 4,341. The same trend was observed in the other urban centers and women scored even higher results in factory towns like AKAKI and BISHOFTU where they represented 24% and 22% of the KEBELE leadership respectively.



Women in the KEBELE leaderships undertook the overall tasks on equal footing with men but also coordinated and encouraged efforts to form KEBELE women's association. To facilitate the formation of these associations, the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing prepared a model statute defining the organizational set-ups, the tasks and working procedures of the association. ISEANE militants helped KEBELE women to organize themselves according to this statute and by March 1977, 185 KEBELE women's associations were formed in Addis Ababa alone. There were also similar developments in the country's other urban centers and by May 1977 the vast majority of the 2,000 KEBELES in the whole country had their women's associations.

Given the nature of the problems faced by its members who were mostly housewives, the KEBELE women's associations tasks were a little different from that of the factory or peasant women's associations. In addition to the women political education forums run by the POMOA cadres and the literacy programs, elementary notions of home economics and child care were taught to members of these associations. They also helped in the creation of consumers' cooperatives and cottage industries to provide for small additional and independent income for housewives.

On the same line women committees were created in the ministries and other government agencies where office women organized to defend their rights to equality in pay, promotion, educational opportunities, etc.... These committees also organized bi-weekly political education

programs in which problems pertaining to the woman question and the overall revolutionary struggle were thoroughly discussed.

All this agitational and organizational work went hand in hand with the clandestine efforts undertaken to consolidate the ranks of ISEANE. In fact the overwhelming majority of the vanguard elements in the POMOA, the women associations in the rural areas, the factories, the KEBELES etc. joined or sympathized with the organization and supported the political stands propagated by TAGAYE ETHIOPIAWIT.

The impressive results of the years work were demonstrated on "International Women's Day" on March 8, 1977. On this occasion more than 400,000 women from Addis Ababa and the surrounding areas, responding to the call of POMOA and "TAGAYE ETHIOPIAWIT" took to the streets and staged what was to become the most impressive mass action ever to be taken by Ethiopian women. Carrying slogans like "equal pay for equal work", "democratic rights" "maternity leave before delivery" "progressive women of the world unite", etc., they converged at Revolution Square. There, representatives of factory women, peasant women's associations, the KEBELES, the POMOA etc., made speeches outlining the aims and perspectives of the struggle for the liberation of women.

The March 8 demonstrations, which under the leadership of POMOA cadres were staged in all the regions, clearly showed that ISEANE militants constituted a formidable force within the revolutionary camp. This democratic base



that ISEANE has been able to mobilize and the thousands of women's committees that have been created showed the country needed a clear and coordinated revolutionary leadership. The next month, after a year and half of clandestine existence and struggle ISEANE made public its program and called upon the women masses to join its ranks and struggle for the realisation of these objectives defined in the program. However, given the refusal of the military regime to proclaim democratic rights ISEANE's members and leaders maintained strict clandestinity.

After analyzing the developments on the Ethiopian political scene and the role played by women in the revolutionary process the program of ISEANE outlined the fundamental tasks of the women's movement in Ethiopia. The program reaffirmed that the objective of the organization is the implementation of the National Democratic Revolution Program of April 1976 as a first step towards the construction of socialism without which it asserted, the total liberation of women could not be attained. To achieve this noble objective ISEANE vowed to integrate the struggle of the oppressed women with that of the broad masses of Ethiopia.

But in addition to the general and long term objectives ISEANE also declared that it would fully participate in the struggle directed towards alleviating the day to day problems encountered by women at work or at home.

In its program, ISEANE declared that it will consistently struggle for the unconditional and immediate

release of democratic rights including freedom of speech, press, assembly, demonstration and strike, freedom to organize and to agitate for the fundamental rights of the masses. It vowed to struggle for the unconditional and total equality of women and an end to all discrimination in economic, social and political activities.

It also outlined a series of immediate and long term objectives specifically concerning women. It reaffirmed ISEANE's commitment to the elimination of reactionary laws and customs that degrade women and to the legislation of progressive laws governing marriage, divorce and the treatment of children. It stated its opposition to the feudo-imperialist cultural practices and the backward socio-cultural norms among certain nationalities and called for their elimination. It stood for the abolition of the shameful and degrading social ill in prostitution and declared that it will intensify the struggle towards the creation of jobs in agriculture and industry in order to integrate women in productive and useful activities.

Concerning the conditions of working women ISEANE stood for an 8 hour working day and the prohibition of night work for pregnant women and those who have children of less than a year. It demanded a 24 day maternity leave before delivery and 35 days leave after child birth. The program stood for retirement of women at 55 years allowing for earlier retirement depending on the number of children that a working woman has and the kind of job that she is handling, etc....



In a section which deals with the role of women in the defense of the revolution and the motherland it called for full participation of women in the revolutionary defense committees, the peoples' militia and the armed forces.

The declaration of ISEANE's program received an enthusiastic support from the masses of women and indeed from all the progressive sectors of the Ethiopian society. By giving it clear objectives and a revolutionary orientation, ISEANE gave a new momentum to the struggle of women. But the rightist forces also got into a panic and unable to contain by other means the advance of Ethiopian women towards their liberation, they soon resorted to naked violence and assassinations against members and sympathisers of ISEANE. The months that followed April 1977 were thus months of untold sacrifices for revolutionary women and indeed the whole progressive camp.

PART FOUR

COUNTER REVOLUTION AND FOREIGN  
INTERVENTION (MID 1977-79)

Even if the early months of 1977 witnessed these considerable developments they also marked an unprecedented growth of counter revolution which intensified with increasing Soviet Bloc intervention in the country's internal affairs. The counter revolutionary developments and the inhuman repression on the women's struggle in general and ISEANE in particular. Since a clear understanding of the situation of women and the repression unleashed against them cannot be obtained without an overall view of the political situation in the country, we shall give a brief account of developments that led to the temporary defeat of the Ethiopian revolution and the reversal of the gains obtained during the years 1974-76.

By the end of 1976, there existed in Ethiopia a situation of "dual power" and a decisive struggle was waged between the newly constituted democratic organizations of peoples power and the old state bureaucracy. The revolutionary camp had a dense network of democratic mass organizations which were not only precious tools for the revolutionary struggle but also organizations of democratic local administration. The POMOA, MEISONE and other progressive organizations gave a coordinated leadership to these mass organizations which mobilized millions of Ethiopians behind them. To the camp of the counter revolution the development of these democratic organizations represented a mortal danger. This camp was led by the old state bureaucracy, the EDU and the ultra left EPRP who showed by their concerted counter



revolutionary endeavours that they were ready to go to any length and to use any means in their fight for survival.

Thus in September 1976 they launched a campaign of assassinations and terror whose declared objective was the physical elimination of the elected representatives of these mass organizations and the members and sympathisers of MEISONE, ISEANE, ERYM, etc.... This marked the beginning of the "white terror" period which claimed the lives of thousands of Ethiopians progressive men and women both in Addis Ababa and the other regions of the country. Parallel to these criminal actions, the reactionaries supported by their sympathisers within the Derg itself blocked the proclamation of democratic rights in order to cripple the mass organizations and ensure the supremacy of the old state apparatus.

Faced with this dangerous situation, the progressive forces led by MEISONE demanded the immediate creation of Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) and the proclamation of full democratic rights as already promised by the Derg. The limited arming of the CDR, subsequent to the temporary and short lived defeat of the counter revolutionaries within the Derg in February 1977, led to a lull in the "white terror" campaign. But the betrayal of the Derg which again went over to the rightists in April 1977 and the subsequent intervention of the Soviet Bloc countries in Ethiopia's internal affairs led to the resumption of the white terror campaign which again started to take a heavy toll of the democratic forces.

ISEANE joined the mass struggle against the rightist alliance and mobilised women by the thousands in support of the legitimate demands for democracy, equality and

national independence defended by MEISONE. Mass demonstrations and opposition to the Derg's anti-democratic and chauvenist positions and the sell out of the country's national independence reached a climax on May Day in 1977. In Addis Ababa alone 800,000 people staged an impressive demonstration at Revolution Square and supported MEISONE's stand on the burning issues of the Ethiopian Revolution. Hundreds of thousands of women took part in these demonstrations carrying placards which read "ISEANE is our vanguard" "long live ISEANE", "forward with TAGAYE ETHIOPIAWIT", "immediate proclamation of full democratic rights", "halt the repression against progressives" etc... This massive show of popular force and determination only sharpened the contradictions between the Derg and progressives and led to mass arrests and even more assassinations during the months of May and June.

Among the militants that were assassinated during these months we find the following leaders and sympathisers of ISEANE: YESHEWALUL MENGISTU, AMELMAL DEMESSIE, EMKIDMEALEM GETACHEW, ITALEMAHU ARAYA, HANNA GUENETE, etc..... who were all dedicated revolutionaries and young militants of the woman's cause. Unabated by this growing harassment ISEANE, like the other progressive organizations continued the struggle. When the country was invaded by the Somali army in July 1977, ISEANE mobilised women under the slogan the "Revolutionary Motherland or Death" and demanded their full participation in the defense of the country and the revolution. Thousands of working class women and peasants effectively joined the people's militia and heroically shed their blood at the various war fronts during the subsequent months.



By August 1977, in addition to the intensified harassment of the progressive forces, it also became clear that the Derg was no more ready to honor its commitments undertaken in the NDRP of 1976. It categorically refused to enact the bill prepared by MEISONNE and providing for the exercise of full democratic rights to the Ethiopian people. In lieu of the respect, of the right to self determination recognized to all Ethiopia's nationalities, the country became the scene of a most vicious and barbaric repression against the oppressed nationalities. The soviet bloc countries. What is more, a systematic campaign of arrests and assassinations was launched against all those forces who denounced the Derg's betrayal and demanded the respect of the NDRP. This made all legal struggle something next to impossible.

These developments led MEISONNE, ISEANE and ERYM to break with the Derg and given Ethiopia's conditions where no legal opposition is tolerated the choice left for the known militants of these organizations was to go back to full clandestinity. Therefore, on the 20th of August 1977 exposed ISEANE members, intellectuals, working class women, elected leaders of the KEBELE women associations, cadres of the POMOA women's affairs committee, etc. joined the hundreds of progressives that went underground to continue the struggle.

This courageous action was received with great enthusiasm by the Ethiopian people but also marked the beginning of the most ruthless repression campaign in the country's history. Starting from September 1977, ISEANE leaders and sympathisers along with other progressives were hunted down, arrested and were summarily executed. In November Dr. Negest Adane was arrested along with other

ISEANE militants and at the end of December Atnaf Alem Yemane, a veteran of the revolutionary struggle and a leading member of ISEANE was arrested and summarily executed with her husband and 11 other members of MEISONNE and ERYM. In January 1978 the Derg unleashed what it called the "Red Terror Campaign" in which thousands of progressives perished. During the months that followed, all the democratic organizations were dismantled as the Derg arrested their elected leaders and appointed its own men and women to be "leaders" of these organizations. The Women's Affairs Committee of the POMOA was disbanded and the women's committee in the factories ceased all democratic existence. The elected leaders of the KEBELE women's associations accused of being 'Rightists' were rounded up, arrested and inhumanly tortured. The same persecution was unleashed against the peasant women's associations where vanguard leaders were thrown into the Derg's jails.

By the end of 1978, unnoticed by democratic women the world over, the number of women political prisoners reached the staggering figure of 3,000. These militants who are for the most part young intellectuals, factory women and KEBELE Leaders were subjected to the most barbaric tortures and humiliation. In addition to the ISEANE militants this figure also includes hundreds of women who are arrested just because they happened to be the wives, sisters, or mothers of progressives in the Derg's "wanted list."

This repression, which resulted in 20,000 arrests among the members and sympathisers of MEISONNE alone has brought along with its lots of economic, social and psychological problems that have affected the whole Ethiopian society.

First we have the dislocation of families not only as a result of arrests and executions but also due to the



fact that hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians (over a million according to figures of the UNHCR) have been forced into exile and thousands of others are still forced into exile and thousands of others are still forced to live under ground in order to escape the Derg's repression. These factors, coupled with the fact that hundreds of thousands of peasants have been forcibly enrolled in the Derg's "peoples militia" have left many women as heads of households with all the economic and social repercussions that such a situation entails.

Second, with increasing arrests, exile, execution, assassinations, etc... many women, who are often unemployed, are left on their own to provide a living for families with an average of 5 children under 6 yrs of age. This has caused a very deep economic crisis where the problem is often that of sheer survival of the mother and her children. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that, these women are expected to provide food for their imprisoned spouses and relatives as the Derg does not feed most of them.

Third, the repression has also been accompanied by the reversal of gains registered during the revolutionary years concerning the rights of factory women and the application of the labor law of 1975 has been left to the discretion of the counter revolutionary managers and factory owners who have again imposed a system of inhuman exploitation on the lines of the former regime.

FART FIVE

The Struggle Continues

In spite of the ups and downs and the great sacrifices that have characterized the revolutionary struggle during the last five years and the most ruthless repression ever unleashed against the democratic forces in the country, the Ethiopian people, under the banner of the National Democratic Revolution Program are still continuing the struggle. The Derg's outright betrayal of the revolution has totally exposed its true nature and resulted, in an ever deepening social, political and economic crisis, and in growing opposition from all the progressive and patriotic sectors of the Ethiopian population.

Ethiopia's peasants and workers, militants of the oppressed nationalities, important sectors of the urban population i.e., students, merchants, intellectuals, government employees, patriotic soldiers and officers and other democrats angered by the Derg's anti-democratic and chauvenist rule and the sell-out of Ethiopia's national independence and honor are stepping up their resistance which is gathering momentum with every passing day.

The women's movement for democracy and emancipation is an integral component of this rising tide of popular resistance. Ethiopia's oppressed women under the leadership of ISEANE, who has drawn the appropriate lessons from past experience and errors and has reinforced its underground organizational set-up, are again rising in mass to defend their revolutionary gains and advance on the path of emancipation. The blood of its martyrs, the sufferings of thousands of its members and sympathisers languishing in the



Derg's jails, the courage and struggle along with the other democratic forces in the country have won to ISEANE the sympathy of all oppressed women and indeed that of all democratic forces of the country.

To face the new challenge and continue the struggle for democracy, self determination, national independence and the emancipation of women, it is now working towards strengthening its clandestine apparatuses that have successfully survived the most barbaric repression that Ethiopian women have ever known. At the same time it is strengthening its unity with all the other democratic forces in the country. In this respect ISEANE has responded positively to the unity call made by MEISONE to all democratic and patriotic forces in Ethiopia.

In the International field, ISEANE intends to give more attention to its relations with other progressive women's organizations and groups and towards the creation of a vast current of solidarity with the struggle of Ethiopia's women. This struggle is part and parcel of the world wide movement for the emancipation of women. That is why we call upon all democratic women and progressive forces to support our struggle and condemn the atrocities being committed by the military regime against Ethiopia's women. We are sure that no matter how long it may take or how great the sacrifices may be, Ethiopia's women, with the support and solidarity of their progressive sisters the world over will triumph in this struggle for the common cause: The total political, economic and social emancipation of women.