

“Now We Can Die Like Men”¹: An Examination Women and War in Eritrea

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War is integral to shared national narratives of suffering as well as victory and liberation. In this article I examine the (re)creation of the Eritrean state and the internal gender differentiation that occurs within this context. Eritrea is significant since women comprised such a large proportion of the combat fighters in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) during the first struggle against Ethiopia. In the second border conflict with Ethiopia from 1997–2000 women continued to remain pivotal to the compulsory national military service program (NSP). This article, therefore examines why women joined the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front during the thirty year war and why women subsequently participated in the post-liberation NSP programme and the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict. This debate therefore draws out another issue as well: how and why Eritrean women have avoided these war zones during conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In Eritrea, as in many other states, war and militarisation are integral to shared national narratives of suffering as well as victory and liberation. It is not surprising, therefore, that the thirty-year Eritrean war for liberation from Ethiopia (1961–1991) and subsequent Ethio-Eritrean border war (1998–2000) are both central to the (re)creation of the Eritrean state and internal gender differentiation within this context. In Eritrea, women comprised a significant number of fighters in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) during the first struggle and in independent Eritrea women remain pivotal to the compulsory national military service program (NSP). This article examines why women joined the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front during the thirty-year war and why women subsequently participated in the post-liberation NSP programme and the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict. Integral to this analysis, additionally, is how and why Eritrean women have avoided these war zones during conflict.

This paper begins by probing the pertinent issues surrounding women and war in general and then proceeds to examine Eritrea specifically. For greater clarity, this research is divided into pre- and post- national liberation

experiences of women, gathered through field research from 1998–2000 in Eritrea, Egypt and Australia.²

WHERE WOMEN ARE

Despite the efforts of peace movements and stories of human atrocities passed from one generation to the next, war continues to dominate human relations. It is often unavoidable in the context of national liberation movements, and becomes central to national liberation ideology. One of the most pervasive symbols of war is that of “womenandchildren” (Enloe 1993, 166). It persists, in part, when a clear separation exists between the battle-front and the home front; facilitating the sexual division of labour (Yuval-Davis 1985). Women and children have traditionally remained at home, where they are perceived as creatures that are fragile and in need of protection from “men’s wars.” From this arises a dichotomy that assigns to men the role of the “protector,” leaving women and children as the “protected.” This dichotomy is inherently unequal, alienating women from the conditions of their own protection and frequently forcing them into passive and weak positions; this in turn can undermine their claims to women’s rights and depoliticise their actions (Pettman 1996, 99–100). This leads Runyan to argue that in order to ensure their protection, women must in turn trade their autonomy (Runyan, 1990).

Flowing from this division of “front” and “rear” is the construction of women as “naturally” linked to peace and the home front and men, likewise, to war and the war front. This often stems from notions concerning women’s biology and/or social conditioning, where arguments suggest that women are more inherently nurturing and caring than men (Marquit and Marquit 1991, 152). In the 1980s this was construed by some feminists as a superior quality, reinforcing notions of female difference (Gilligan 1982). At other times, women are perceived as “moral mothers” fundamentally connected to “Mother Earth” and opposing war and violence (Bromley 1982). Friedan’s argument derives from this position, maintaining that female militants would have more concern for life and a greater antipathy for violence in future wars due to their different nature, in contrast with their male counterparts (Friedan 1981). Conversely, Elshtain swiftly counters this stance by arguing that “such sentimentalism strains credulity. Women soldiers do not speak that way. They are soldiers. Period.” (Elshtain 1987, 243). Indeed, many studies of women in the military interrogate the notion of the “moral mother” (Di Leonardo 1985) arguing that women do not “feminise” the institution (Elia 1996, 167–169). Such literature also demonstrates that the female presence in the military-industrial complex has failed to overcome the sexual division of labour (Chapkis 1988).

I would argue that whether women are constructed as “naturally” supporting peace is predominantly an ideological issue. Furthermore, it is a national ideological issue that pertains to the particulars of a given war. A state

that is powerful enough to have a home front in addition to a surplus in order to supply a battle front may invoke a national narrative that presents women as natural keepers of the hearth during, and after, war. Women are linked to an absence of conflict, rather than peace per se, because they themselves cannot fight, due to their perceived physical and mental weakness in this regard. They can, however, support their sons and husbands at the battle front. In such a state, certain women and at times men may also oppose the war and violence associated with it, as occurred in the United States during the Vietnam War. Such behaviour will almost certainly result in military, and frequently national, condemnation and ostracism.

Conversely, in a struggle where a nation has no state, usually in the form of a national liberation struggle, women are increasingly integrated into the battle as fighters or auxiliaries. At the same time, the closer the front comes to the rear, the more rapidly front/rear divisions of labour fade and other hierarchical stratifications arise. This is particularly evident in many struggles for national liberation, where, in short, the family is the front. Here, women are more prevalent as fighters—a fact perhaps too hastily applauded by many feminists and liberation front women's organisations. This integration occurs for a variety of reasons. In terms of the national liberation project, it is necessary and essential to have as many people fighting as possible, thus women become a resource. For many women, however, the battle front offers them an escape from marriage, patriarchal village life, drudgery. The liberation front is presented to them, frequently, as an opportunity to be revolutionised: education, equality with men, freedom, autonomy and politicisation. Many enter for various reasons, therefore, and are educated in the ideology of national liberation during the struggle. The national liberation ideology accommodates the shift from women as “mothers” to women as fighters: it often combines the two, with pervasive images of a woman with a gun in one hand and a baby in the other. In many cases, the movement builds its claims to modernity and statehood upon it: a modern struggle with equal participation of men and women deserves a modern nation-state.

In the context of fighting, women are frequently constructed as more deadly and ferocious than men. They are represented as “naturally” incandescent, both sexually and militarily, and determined to liberate themselves and their homeland. This is in contrast, in many respects, to the experience of many military women in the West who have suffered “lesbian-baiting” and “butch” representations (Enloe 1983). However, commonalities exist with regards to the military experience: inequalities, harassment, sexual abuse—but often for different reasons. Many third-world guerilla fighters are eroticised and sexualised as “fiery amazons” and sexually ferocious and dominant (Mason 2001a). Western military women, in contrast, are often presented as masculine and ridiculed as sexually abnormal compared to non-combatant (heterosexual) women.

Movements for national liberation are not the only voice of support for

the inclusion of women into the military. Liberal feminism addresses part of the dilemma of “womenandchildren” by insisting that women, as equal citizens of the state, should have equal access to the male monopoly on legitimate violence (Jones 1984). This is converse to studies that demonstrate that participation in the military does not guarantee automatic access to the rights of citizenship. Ethnicity and class, in particular, have always influenced which men made up these “monolithic” male armies (Peled 1992, 61–78; Enloe 1980). As Yuval-Davis asserts, “[c]itizenship rights have only very partially, if at all, corresponded with active service.” She then continues by pointing out that a reoccurring theme following the conclusion of wars is the complaint by returnees that those who stayed behind accumulated economic and political resources (Yuval-Davis 1991, 96–7).

Others argue that women’s participation in the military enhances their economic position in society (Addis 1994). Yet, this overlooks the fact that the military remains fundamentally gendered; and as Cohn discovered through her research “every person who enters this [military] world is also participating in a gendered discourse in which she or he must adopt the masculine position in order to be successful” (Cohn 1993, 238–9). This is not to say the “feminine” is lacking, on the contrary parts of it are presented “in a degraded and undeveloped form...named, delegitimated, and silenced all in one fell swoop” (Ibid.). The gendered discourse which controls and degrades the feminine is complemented by the practice on the ground which frequently condones sexual harassment and assault (O’Neill 1998).

Recent wars, such as the 1990–91 Gulf War against Iraq, have only highlighted the gendered nature of the military in the West even with women involved in combat roles. The home front was again redefined with a display of yellow ribbons symbolising support for the war. As Enloe explained, the women utilising these ribbons were “voluntarily constructing a ‘feminized’ home front to complement—28,000 American women soldiers notwithstanding—a masculinized battle front” (Enloe 1991, 370). Boose makes the ironic point that while America stormed in to avenge the rape of Kuwaiti women by Iraqi soldiers, more female American recruits were being raped by American soldiers on the bases (Boose 1993, 77–8).

WOMEN IN NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENTS: THE DILEMMAS OF PARTICIPATION.

Women, in a variety of ways, have resisted invasions and colonial encroachment for a considerable period. This has varied from relative mass mobilisation, as with the “Women’s War” in Southern Nigeria in 1929 (Van Allen 1976), to small scale or individual acts of defiance (Tétrealt 1994). They have also been involved, in pre-dominantly non-combatant roles, in revolutionary movements in 1917 Russia, China, Vietnam and Cuba (Chaliand 1977). Such movements had a large impact on the ideologies of national liberation devel-

oped in the era of struggle from colonial oppression (Waylan 1996, 72–74). As such, women's voices have been more forcefully heard during the era of decolonisation following World War Two, in which women were central to national liberation movements in often contradictory ways. The ideology of national liberation could, on one hand, revere them as the keepers of the hearth, the mothers of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1996), the carers and nurturers. They were the reason to fight and liberate the nation. At the same time other movements, whilst maintaining this "woman-mother" ideological approach, also glorified its heroic women warriors as increasing numbers of women swelled the fighting ranks of the various movements (Leslie 2002). At the same time, many of the movements which "challenged" the sexual divisions of labour that traditionally excluded women from "the front" by including women as combatants undervalued alternative forms of resistance. Thus in ZANU in Zimbabwe, the EPLF in Eritrea and the armed wing of the ANC (*Umkhonto we Sizwe*) in South Africa (Mason *et al.* forthcoming 2002), combatant woman became the hierarchically superior woman in many cases to non-combat women. This obscures the vital roles that other women played as messengers, food providers, carers and shelter-givers. It creates a myopic definition of resistance that prioritises certain acts over others with little analysis of the interaction between the two or the variegated effects of such participation following the period of struggle (Cock 1991; Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998; Ranchod-Nilsson, and Tétrealt 2000; Moser and Clark 2001).

WOMEN AND AFRICAN LIBERATION

In Africa, many of the early liberation fronts were slow to include women or permitted only limited participation (Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998). However, the feminine was ever present as the woman-nation to be defended and woman-mother to be saved. Amílcar Calibar's rhetorical Preface to Basil Davidson's *The Liberation of Guine* is instructive in this sense:

No time, again: you didn't talk to Lebete the woman. But did you catch the colour of her eyes, the purity of her smile, the grace of her gestures? Can even the most just struggle, one like ours, have any right to monopolize time, to silence the voice of Lebete the woman?...Look at my eyes and you will see the past, present and future of the women of my country...of our nation in the womb. (Davidson 1980, 12)

Davidson's own work is also laced with gendered metaphors. In *Black Mother*, Africa is feminised as the "womb" from which all Africans sprang forth or were torn from by Europeans, who "fathered," the slave trade (Davidson 1980, 284). In the tradition of Césaire and Da Cruz, Africa is the "black mother," the grand matriarch of her stolen children who reside now as Afro-Americans or West Indians. These metaphors reinforce the notion that women, like the land of Africa, must be fought for and protected since they

are the life-givers and the source of one's African identity. Cabral, founder of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), is not speaking about female fighters or cadres, since there were very few in his movement. He too is referring to a symbolic "woman-nation" to be fought for and saved by struggle against Portuguese colonialism. Interestingly, women were originally trained as fighters in the liberation struggle but were almost totally phased out of the national army by 1974—with a few remaining as village militia and even fewer in local armed forces. The PAIGC ideology maintained it had enough men to fight—and therefore it did not need women in that capacity—rather, women were needed to bear and raise children for the nation (Enloe 1983, 163). More importantly, it maintained that any processes that may hinder the war, such as the challenging of traditional gender relations, should be expediently avoided. Such a change in ideology also occurred in the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in their fight, at times for independence although they chose eventually to stay part of Ethiopia, against the Amharic regime. At one point women had comprised nearly 30 per cent of the liberation army and established their own Women Fighters Association of Tigray. In 1986, the TPLF policy changed to allow cadres to marry and have children, a change welcomed by some female fighters at the time:

Being a mother will not make any difference to our role in the organisation, because taking care of the child is not only my responsibility but the responsibility of the organisation (TPLF fighter, Harnet, cited in Hammond and Druce 1990, 67–68).

Fighting to liberate ourselves from oppression is one kind of struggle, reproduction of society is another and we accept this, as everyone does (TPLF fighter, Laila, cited in *ibid.*, 68).

In fact everyone did not accept this last approach. Many female cadres objected to the push towards having children and their fears over phasing women out of the armed combat were raised at the Second Women Fighters Congress in 1987. Despite such resistance, women, like their PAIGC counterparts, were phased out of armed combat and encouraged to produce and raise children. This change in ideology, emphasising the revolutionary role of women as combatants to women as mothers appears time and again in the various liberation movements: full women's liberation is too dangerous and divisive during the national liberation struggle and must therefore be secondary to national priorities.

Many women's associations linked to the fronts reinforced this view since they primarily supported the revolution and women's emancipation through national liberation but not separate from it. They extolled the virtue of women's participation in the struggle as inherently liberating for both the nation and women. The Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), for example, relied on the participation of women in the struggle and endorsed their presence in its socialist/nationalist rhetoric (Seidman 1984, 419). This was re-

inforced by the Zimbabwe Women's League who argued that the revolution must emancipate women in order to "triumph in its totality" (Zimbabwe Women's League 1978, 6–7). Teurai Ropa Nhonga, who held the post of secretary for women's affairs in ZANU argued the following in 1978:

[T]he revolutionary armed struggle has been the biggest blessing for Zimbabwean women. Within a few years it opened doors which would probably have taken decades to loosen. The struggle for national independence has opened our womenfolk to a world even they would not of dreamt of...their involvement is total (Nhonga cited in Israel and Lyons 2000).

Lapchick and Urdang were equally supportive in their report on the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women in Copenhagen, 1980. They posited that Zimbabwean women's "role in the struggle is in many ways responsible for the increased acceptance of women as equals in all areas by Zimbabwean men" (Lapchick and Urdang 1982, 101). What these approaches fail to explore is that the incorporation of women into the armed forces and struggles generally led to increased tensions and problems. Teurai Ropa Nhonga argued at another juncture that much of this stemmed from female misbehaviour and lack of discipline—all of which was "bad for the revolution" (Teurai Ropa Nhonga cited in Qunta 1987, 148). However, equally pressing was the sexual harassment and assault of female cadres, their lower ranking in the hierarchy and inequalities following liberation (Lyons 2000). How can all these disadvantages stem from female misbehaviour?

The South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) also emphasised the role of women in its liberation struggle, especially in the People's Liberation Army where it argued "women cadres function at all levels in the war of liberation as political commissars, commanders and soldiers" (SWAPO Women's Council cited in Lapchick and Urdang 1982, 114). In this movement, the first objective of SWAPO and the SWAPO Women's Council was to attain national independence and it argued that women's emancipation would flow from this process (Lapchick and Urdang 1982, 117). The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) has also consistently stressed that women's liberation can only be achieved within a nationalist framework (Klein 1997, 346). Various Palestinian women's movements have also traditionally supported the strategy of "nation first, women after." In 1995, for example, Suhu Barghouti of the General Union of Palestinian Women argued that:

[t]he historical prevalence of the political agenda over the feminist agenda within the women's movement is something which I consider legitimate, understandable and natural [...] I cannot separate myself as a woman from myself as a Palestinian under occupation (*News from Within*, 1995, 4).

The fundamental issue is that these women's organisations were rarely autonomous and therefore integral for the recruitment of women into the liberation front. Women's liberation is therefore fundamentally tied to national

liberation with the later being prioritised.

The post-liberation disappointment of many women recorded in some independent states indicates that this prioritisation of national over gender issues served to subordinate women in the post-independence era. However, as Lazreg instructively points out, the failure of the nationalist project for women in Algeria, where the new state greatly reduced the scope of its policies relating to women, led to a new activism. It was the catalyst for the creation of an independent women's movement and a challenge to prevailing nation-state narratives (Lazreg 1994). It is this alternative and often dissenting approach that is vital to addressing women's rights outside of the project of national liberation and its attendant ideology. What is required is internal and external self-reflection on national liberation movements and recognition that the systematic use and abuse of women for national liberation is *not* women's liberation.

The writing of Hélié-Lucas in respect of the Algerian liberation struggle she supported is instructive. She later critiqued the "myths" of national liberation and the liberated Algerian woman by examining war-time and post-independence experience and subjugation of women's interests (Hélié-Lucas 1988). Hélié-Lucas argues, contrary to Fanon's mythology of the "liberated Algerian woman," that the liberation struggle tasks of women were symbolic. They were the keepers of an identity under siege by French colonialism and "they paid the heaviest price for accepting (but were there choices?) to play this role." (Hélié-Lucas 1988, 176) As such, Hélié-Lucas was one of the first activists to openly write and protest against the masculinist national liberation ideology and the prioritising of national liberation over female liberation:

Defending women's rights "now"—this now being any historical movement is always a betrayal of the people, of the nation, of the revolution, of Islam, of national identity, of cultural roots, and so on, according to the terminology . . . (Hélié-Lucas 1988, 185)

National liberation ideology frequently situates women's emancipation as vital to national liberation and often specifies that women should be active participants in the struggle. As such, many wars for liberation have heralded large female fighting forces, which, on the face of it, may appear to overcome the "womenandchildren" dilemma. However, we have to assess at what cost this dilemma is challenged and if, in the long term, it is truly emancipatory for women. In this context, it is hoped that women in on-going liberation struggles will recognise that "liberation armies are *not* automatically non-sexist merely because they are non-statist, de-centralised and reliant on women" (Enloe 1983, 168). Indeed, we need also to address the continuing issue arising in those post-independence states that continue to include women in their militaries, such as Eritrea and Zimbabwe, and Israel. Pettman makes an important statement in this regard:

Disrupting the usual men-military and women-protected binary might open up more space to challenge patriarchal power. There are arguments in terms of military women's challenging gender stereotypes, and dem-

onstrating that women can do anything that men can do. We might respond by asking why women would wish to do everything that men currently do; and try to shift the arguments back to when, if ever, anyone should be conscripted or directed by the state to kill on its behalf. (Pettman 1996, 147)

VOICES AND SILENCES FROM ERITREA

The Eritrean case interrogates many of the issues discussed above, although the main focus of this paper is why women join and leave armed forces. Interviews conducted with Eritrean women fell into two broadly definable groups. The first comprised older female ex-combatants from the two main liberation Fronts that fought during the thirty-year struggle for national self-determination from Ethiopia. They were the women of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), a Front with fewer female cadres but an undoubtedly important role (Mason 2001a) and the women from the larger Front, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), which grew out of and splintered away from the ELF.

The second group of informants targeted for this research were largely younger women who had completed or were completing compulsory military service in independent Eritrea since 1991. They were also the main female force during the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia, which was at its height when the interviews for this research were conducted in Eritrea. This section is therefore divided according to these two groupings and the contrast between them is apparent, as are the similarities in some instances.

Women constituted the ranks of both the ELF and the EPLF. The ELF, founded in 1961, had fewer female cadres and was a smaller, more disparate group of guerillas aiming to gain Eritrean independence. Women were primarily employed in roles such as water and wood collection, shelter provision, message conveyance and in limited numbers, combatants. Under the EPLF, with more women seeking alternatives to Ethiopian aggression, the roles women occupied expanded. By the late 1970s, women fulfilled tasks that varied from positions as mechanics, medics, teachers and nurses to front-line fighters and, rarely, platoon leaders. As participants in both fronts women were proud of their involvement:

I had virtually never left my village before the war, let alone held a gun and lived in close quarters with men who were not my immediate family. I had the chance to educate myself a bit when I was not fighting, but fighting was an amazing experience. It gave me confidence and a feeling of self-worth I had never had in the village. I still work as a mechanic today and I am happy with my life – though I no longer live in - - -, I moved to Keren.

The reasons why women joined the Fronts varied. Some had heard whispers about the EPLF in particular and the freedom that women experienced there. Others actively took it upon themselves to join in order to avoid situations in

their own lives. Common situations included female circumcision, domestic violence, unwanted marriages and sexual expectations and hard, unrewarded labour. As Meheret explained:

My daughter was reaching the age for cutting [female circumcision] and my own memories of my sisters, friends and myself having this procedure done frightened me. I heard that the Front outlawed it, that we would be safe. So I took my daughter and found the EPLF.

Although female circumcision is a complex and varied act in Eritrea and elsewhere (Mason 2001b), several informants mentioned it as a reason for joining the EPLF in particular.

Conversely, some informants were kidnapped, by both the ELF and the EPLF. One fighter described how she and her friend were walking back to their village when

... [EPLF] fighters came and told us we had to go with them. They were not angry or fierce but they had guns and would not accept any excuses as an answer. We had no choice and over the next few months I learned to live with them. After I joined the fighting life, I could never go back to the village life.

Thus, it is evident that women joined the resistance to Ethiopian rule for many reasons and as a result they have diverse experiences of the war effort. This is an important contrast to the next group of women, who were given little option due to mandatory national service and many expressed far more angst about the experience of war and fighting for Eritrea.

Following liberation in 1991, the new Provisional Government of Eritrea began demobilising its troops. In 1995 the government institutionalised compulsory national service for both men and women aged between eighteen and forty. This action created a new aspect to the military overall: it was no longer voluntary and optional. Although some women spoke of being “kidnapped” during the liberation war, few expressed regret about the experience of membership of the army overall. The new government made, ostensibly, no exceptions. The furore surrounding the refusal of the Jehovah’s Witnesses to join on religious grounds was evidence of this (Calhoun and DeLargy 1996, 130). However, the Jehovah’s represent a miniscule proportion of the population and are viewed as “un-Eritrean” by many due to their refusal to fight in the liberation war (Mason, field notes). The government has faced larger problems in respect of bigger ethnic groups with whom good relations are necessary to keep the diverse state cohesive. In practice, many women, especially from the more conservative Muslim groups, are prohibited by their group from completing national service and the government does not force them (Author’s Interview with the Head of the National Union of Eritrean Women, 1999). This leaves a large number of women outside the militarisation process that is existent in Eritrea. It is this militarisation, many commentators assert, that contributes so forcefully to “nation-building” overall. Tesfai lauds the:

[a]bsolutely vital role that this particular programme [national service] is

playing in bringing Eritrean youth together, in getting them to know each other and their country better, and imprinting upon them the zeal and enthusiasm of the revolutionary days (Tsfai 1997, 20).

It is this zeal that is, in many way, vital to the post-revolutionary Eritrean state, since its fading has the potential to foster unwanted ethnic and religious tension. Thus national service serves as another token of nation-building, along with a new currency (complete with different ethnic groups represented on various notes), stamps, uniform curriculum, constitution, national anthem and flag (See Smith 1991; Anderson 1991; Billig 1995; Brown 2000). All combined, the ideological stratagems transmit new “pan-Eritrean” values and are “designed to consolidate national unity and nurture socio-cultural diversity” (Iyob 1997, 669). Yet, consolidation brings with it experiences of illness and suffering, sexual harassment and assault and, rarely, death. As one informant, Sawa, explained of her time in the military training camp:

I had repeated fevers and sickness. Others with me had malaria, I was lucky as I wasn't as sick as that. It was such a hot and barren area, so far from home (Asmara) and so isolated. The other girls were nice to me there, especially when I was sick. But since I've come back I have never seen them again. I have nothing in common with them and would rather forget the whole experience.

The informant above did not go to the front lines during the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict (1998–2000), but many who did described the experience in terms different from those women who fought during the liberation struggle. The government enforced compulsory enlistment and raided houses, hotels and established check-points to search buses and people on the streets at night in order to find conscripts. Feelings towards the war varied as a result:

I cannot believe this government who I fought with for years to liberate our country would take my only child by force. He does not want to fight, he does not believe the war is justified and will not die for it. I am beginning to feel that way myself. Lots of my friends have felt that way for months.

With the war becoming increasingly unpopular, women took it upon themselves to avoid the front lines with any means available to them. In this sense, a subtle transcript of resistance developed, where women utilised traditional means to resist conscription and war (compare Scott 1990; Bleiker, 2000). The Eritrean state continued to protect the “women and children,” maintaining a home front that had not been a distinct feature of the liberation war. In order to maintain this status quo, the majority of women who were pregnant or nursing children, and at times married women with children were not rounded up to fight. Due to this, some informants explained how they deliberately fell pregnant at the front lines in order to be allowed to return to their home or more commonly Asmara.

I knew if I got pregnant down there [the front at Zelambessa] I could leave. It was quite easy and free [to have sexual relations] and I was with a few men until I came to Asmara on leave. I found out during that time that I was pregnant and so I did not have to return to the front. I haven't

told my family yet, I know they will be furious. I am not married, I am not even sure who the father is but they were not men I would marry anyway. Right now, I am just happy to be home and alive, it was worth it. I didn't want to die down there. Why should I? This war should never have happened, we were already free (Author transcripts).

These transcripts are significant since they indicate an interesting shift from the liberation discourse of the EPLF and National Union of Eritrean Women, which reviled domesticity and motherhood as disempowering and submissive. In the post liberation era, it is clear that to some women, these "traditional" acts have metamorphasised into powerful acts of resistance and means for change (Mason 2002; Lyons 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

This article challenges the dominant narratives of the Eritrean state and EPLF, which maintain that women fought in the Eritrean wars and completed the NSP due to national fervor and patriotism. At the same time, it also challenges the largely liberal as well as national liberationist approach that maintains that female participation in the military enhances gender equality. National liberation movements have often claimed to overcome the "womenandchildren" and home front/frontline conundrums. However, it is necessary to assess at what cost these dilemmas are truly challenged and if, in the long term, it is truly emancipatory for women. In this context, it is hoped that women in on-going war situations will question the inclusion of women in the armed forces of post-independent states, such as Eritrea.

NOTES

1. Author's Interview, female fighter, Senafe, Eritrea, January 11, 1999.
2. The names of all informants have been changed in order to protect their privacy. In addition some village names, referred to by informants in interviews, have been deleted from the text in order to ensure that anonymity is preserved.

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