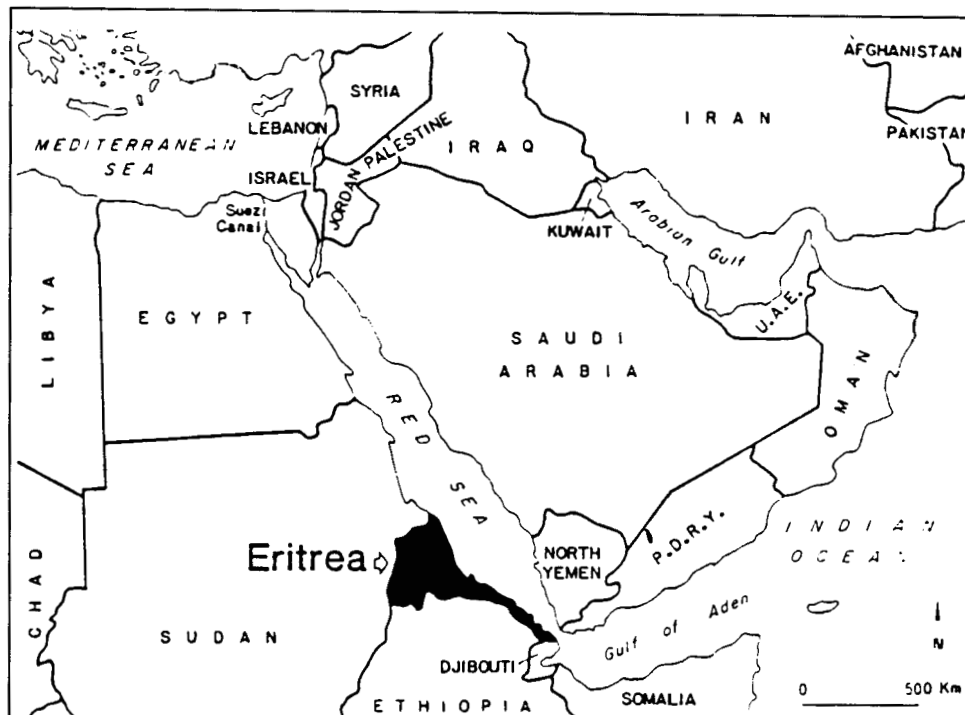


# Eritrean Women

## *Dual Struggle in the Horn of Africa*



### **New Roles for Women in Eritrea**

**C**anada became aware of the Horn of Africa in 1984 when searing images of famine were televised throughout the world. Many of these images simply portrayed Africans as victims and obscured the real causes of hunger in the region. Hidden by these images of suffering was the struggle of Africans, and especially African women, to transform the conditions of their lives.

In Eritrea, the former Italian colony on the Red Sea, the struggle has taken a dual character and has achieved remarkable success. On the one hand, Eritrean women are part of the general struggle for independence from foreign domination. But they are

also attempting to change the traditions which have relegated them to the status of second-class citizens. Twenty years ago, Eritrean women lived a miserable existence: illiterate, barred from education, denied the right to speak in public and to own property, women were confined to domestic chores and back-breaking agricultural labour.

Over the past two decades, in the context of Africa's longest war and devastating drought and famine, Eritrean women have begun to change their own lives. Literacy programs have been central to this change, for they have enabled women to meet together and articulate their common concerns. While women have taken up arms in the liberation struggle, they have also participated in educational programs geared towards the total transformation of the traditional patriarchal society in the Horn.

**BY JOHN SORENSON**

## Women in Traditional Society

To understand the extent of the changes in women's roles in Eritrea it is important to understand the nature of the traditional societies of the region. As in other countries of the Horn, women were believed to be inferior to men, a belief shared by both Christian and Muslim groups into which the society is almost equally divided. Until the mid-1970s 95% of Eritrean women were illiterate.

Women were not considered to have thoughts or opinions of any value, so there was no effort made to educate them. One traditional Eritrean proverb states: "Just as there is no donkey with horns, so there is no woman with brains." Such sentiments ensured that women were prevented from taking any political role or entering into discussions of village affairs.

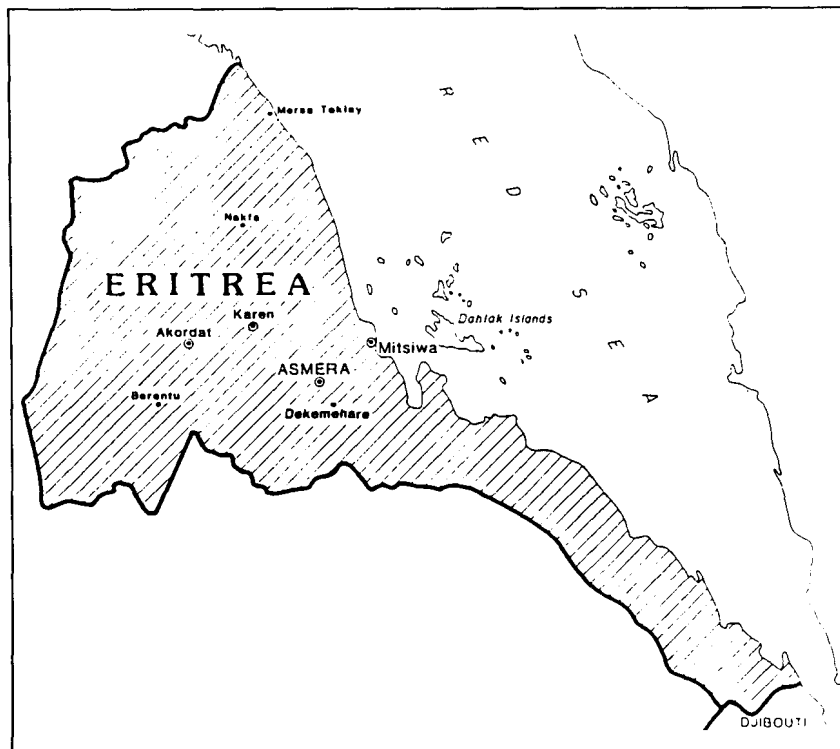
These sentiments also ensured that women lived a precarious existence, subject to the whims of their husbands. Women bore many children to avoid the risk of divorce and received inferior health care. Improper nutrition also resulted from the traditional practice of eating only whatever food was left from a husband's meal. Women were expected to carry on all the domestic duties as well as working in the fields.

## Italian Colonialism

Eritrea was an Italian colony from 1890 to 1941, a period which brought extensive changes to Eritrean society. The influx of Italian settlers resulted in the widespread appropriation of the best farm land and the consequent urbanization and proletarianization of Eritrean society. Again, women experienced particular hardship and prostitution emerged among the most impoverished.

After 1941, Eritrea was administered by Britain for a decade. During this period, political activity was intense as

Eritrea was breaking free of both feudal and colonial rule. The processes of industrialization and urbanization required new relationships and meant that old roles were now dysfunctional. Women's suffrage now became an issue but there was no organized body that could articulate women's concerns. Some attention to the specific problems faced by women was given by the trade union organization and the incipient liberation movement but real changes did not come until later.



## Women in the Liberation Struggle

While the other Italian colonies attained independence, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1951. The federation was imposed by the United Nations, against the wishes of most Eritreans, in order to satisfy Ethiopia's desire for access to the sea and U.S. aims to establish a strategic communications base near Eritrea's capital, Asmara. The federation was unworkable from the start in its attempt to merge a democratizing Eritrea with the semi-feudal monarchy of Ethiopia. Violations of the Federation Act were consistent and ultimately resulted in Ethiopia's 1962 annexation of Eritrea, a violation of international law. Since that time, Eritrea has been fighting for its right to self-determination.

Particularly since 1974, the liberation

movement has brought extensive changes to women in Eritrea. Previously women had supported the liberation struggle by providing food, shelter and information but with the emergence of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) as the main independence group, women's participation has become more direct.

Women have now taken up arms and are said to comprise 15% of the combatants. They also form 35% of the EPLF in other capacities such as doctors, teachers, administrators, mechanics, technicians and organizers. In 1987 six women were elected to the seventy-one member Central Committee of the EPLF.

There is general agreement that changes to traditional women's roles have been slower outside the EPLF and much work still needs to be done. Much of the impetus for change has come from the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), founded in 1979, and composed of women inside Eritrea and abroad. Its goals include the emancipation of women through education, equality in health care and employment

and the protection of women's rights within marriage. NUEW works with groups such as the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) to establish literacy programs inside the EPLF-controlled territory.

## Colonialism and Literacy

Literacy and education in Eritrea suffered under colonial occupation. During the first phase of the Italian period, education was restricted to the mission schools and only in the 1920s were primary schools opened for Eritrean children, who were even then not allowed to progress beyond the fourth grade. The curriculum taught only basic skills and emphasized the glory of Italian history. Girls were almost completely excluded from any process of formal education under Italian rule.

During the period of British administration, the number of primary schools increased but they were segregated according to religion. Muslim schools taught in Arabic and concentrated mainly on studies of the Quran, while instruction in the Christian schools was in the Tigrinya language. This strategy also contributed to a division which the British would emphasize in their unsuccessful attempt to partition Eritrea between Sudan and Ethiopia.

Under Ethiopian rule, Amharic was imposed as the official language of Eritrea. This directly contravened the terms of the UN Resolution which had federated the two countries and presented great difficulties to Eritrean students who had to learn a new language in order to attend university (today, similar problems exist at every level of study). Books in Arabic and Tigrinya were burnt and the Ethiopian educational system mirrored the Italian attempts to establish cultural hegemony by emphasizing the grandeur of the Ethiopian state.

Despite the overthrow of the monarchy in 1974 and the ascension to power of a military junta (known as the Dergue in Amharic) led by Mengistu Haile Mariam and which professes to be Marxist-Leninist, Ethiopia's policy towards Eritrea remains unchanged. While U.S. interests determined that the Eritreans were denied independence, Soviet arms now flow to the Dergue in its campaign to bomb Eritrea into submission.

### Literacy Campaigns in Eritrea

The EPLF places great emphasis on literacy in order to carry out its political education work; it stresses that every fighter must become literate. Women also have now

gained the right to full education. Emancipation will not be achieved by an illiterate society and in recognition of this NUEW and ERA have worked together to bring literacy campaigns to the remote areas of the Eritrean countryside. Under the cover of trees or in camouflaged dug-outs where they can avoid being seen by Ethiopian war-planes which patrol the skies and restrict much activity in Eritrea to the hours of darkness, women gather to study how to read and write.

At the First International Conference on Eritrean Women held in Bergen, Netherlands, during March 1985, NUEW described the efforts it had made in bringing literacy to the women of Eritrea. A 1983 literacy campaign launched in 103 rural areas had reached 9,000 women. NUEM announced that its 1986 program was targeted towards 15,000 women in the provinces of Sahel and Barka. Frequently, the literacy campaigns involve the activities of cultural groups which enact dramatic presentations representing the aims and nature of the campaigns.

Much of the literacy training, of course, has not gone past basic levels. However, in the Solomuna camp for those displaced

by drought and war, some of the women have now reached the sixth grade level. Comments from the women involved in the literacy campaigns are enthusiastic. One woman said, "There is great joy in being able to read and write — in being part of the changes." Another said, "It was like being in the darkness and now I am beginning to see the light." One of the women who had fled her village when it was attacked by Ethiopian troops said, "Now I have learned to read and I understand the problems of my country. I can communicate in a way I could not before. I can do things like our cultural shows and handicrafts. Once you get educated, you fight things, and you tell others how to fight."

Because Eritrean society consists of nine separate ethnic groups which speak mutually unintelligible languages, there are special problems in attempting to mount literacy campaigns. Books are being printed in all the written languages, but because a number of these do not have their own script it has been decided to transliterate material into Latin script.

Additionally, literacy campaigns must be adapted to the circumstances of different

modes of production. The basic division is between highland farmers and lowland pastoralists but there are numerous combinations of both forms of livelihood. Literacy campaigns in general must be geared towards the exigencies of various ways of life. For example, shorter courses have been designed to meet the needs of semi-nomadic groups. In agricultural areas, literacy classes have been timed according to the seasonal activities. There have also been longer and more comprehensive courses held in which women would be away from their



Photo by Beate Müller-Blattau



**These are the words of Mama Zeineb, national poet of Eritrea:**

**“I do not have much education. I was not taught by my father. I can only write my name and my father’s name. I started my poetry in 1978 after the strategic withdrawal. I was in the town and when the Dergue came I had to leave. I left to the mountains. I was crying and crying, things were burning me inside. My poems are about the suffering of the Eritrean people.”**

homes and duties there for two to three months. After completion of the course, the women then return to their village to educate other women. Among the different ethnic groups there have been varying degrees of acceptance of the need for educational classes for women.

There are also problems involved with the attempt to bring literacy to the number of Eritrean refugee women living in camps in Sudan. Because the numerous wars in the Horn have generated the highest refugee population in the world, Sudan is now overburdened with new arrivals. The life in these camps is extremely harsh and literacy work must often be subordinate to the sheer struggle to survive. However, ERA is supporting a number of schools in Sudan.

In addition to problems stemming from oppressive traditions, the literacy programs have also been slowed by the lack of even the most basic materials. Paper, notebooks, pencils, chalk and blackboards are all in short supply. A library has been established and books are being printed in the written languages of Eritrea but progress has been very slow due to the lack of materials.

Some support has come from outside. NUEW's programs in literacy have been supported by Canadian organizations such as Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE), OXFAM, Development and Peace, and the Eritrean Relief Association in Canada. Corso of New Zealand and Trocaire of Ireland have also contributed to women's literacy campaigns in Eritrea. Much of the support stems from NUEW's own activities in Europe and North America, however.

NUEW's work in the area of literacy is tied to its activities in other aspects of women's lives. One of NUEW's major projects was the construction of a factory

in Eritrea for the production of sanitary towels for women. It also operated programs in agricultural training for women, sewing and handicraft production, and medical education regarding general problems as well as training for midwives and addressing dangerous specific practices such as infibulation and clitoridectomy. These latter practices are considered to be among the major health threats to women in Eritrea but health workers prefer to deal with the issue through educational methods rather than through imposing strict prohibitions. Most opposition from religious leaders has been provoked when a 'head-on' approach had been taken.

NUEW's projects in women's literacy are in accord with the motto of the Education Department: "All knowledge to the people." The aim of education in Eritrea is to link theory and practice to effect positive changes. To bring education to all areas of the country, students from middle-school are sent to remote areas to conduct basic classes at the community level. Education is linked with practical concerns in agriculture, health and technical training. During one training course directed specifically at women, for example, literacy was linked with participation in village activities, increasing productive work and provision of basic health information.

**Mama Zeineb — Eritrea's National Poet**

NUEW and ERA have found that one of the main problems encountered in attempting to bring literacy to women in Eritrea has been the shyness and reticent behaviour which had traditionally been expected from them. But even older women are now speaking out against the oppression they face:

*I do not have much education. I was not taught by my father. I can only write my name and my father's name. I started my poetry in 1978 after the strategic withdrawal. I was in the town and when the Dergue came I had to leave. I left to the mountains. I was crying and crying, things were burning me inside. My poems are about the suffering of the Eritrean people.*

These are the words of Mama Zeineb, the national poet of Eritrea. When I met her in 1978 she was living in a small refugee camp hidden in a rocky valley. She discussed the hardship women had faced in traditional Eritrean society and how they had been isolated through a lack of education. Although she is illiterate herself, she is a strong advocate of literacy programs for women and a powerful symbol of Eritrean resistance:

*Women participate equally in the struggle. They work in the garages, as doctors, they are in the front lines. Women are oppressed but our main priority is the struggle against colonialism. Since the women of Eritrea have seen their children shot in front of them it is no problem for us to join the struggle. I go to many meetings and give speeches. Whenever I think about Mengistu and colonialism I get angry. It burns me inside.*

*It has been twenty-five years since our struggle began. Even the unborn will continue this struggle until we win our independence. If peace comes everyone will have the chance for education and a good life. But if there is no peace we will continue to fight.*

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**KATHY FRETWELL**

**Poetry Society**

Poetry's reeve invades my dream,  
her truth well-paved,  
mine slanted through evergreens.

She raps ideas to order  
on upright pews,

time for tea, manna pressed into  
squares.

I close the door  
on my poems ripped from journals —  
ink bleeding on her fingers.

My solo keens into the wind's  
Precambrian tales whispered  
long before she triple-tested feelings.

I awaken to mint sheets, ruffled  
pillow.  
No philistines march to my defec-  
tion;  
the woods — my quilt, books intact.

Still, our friendship flickers.  
Childhood needles her seventy  
years,  
she pines to write.