

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, rumped
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.