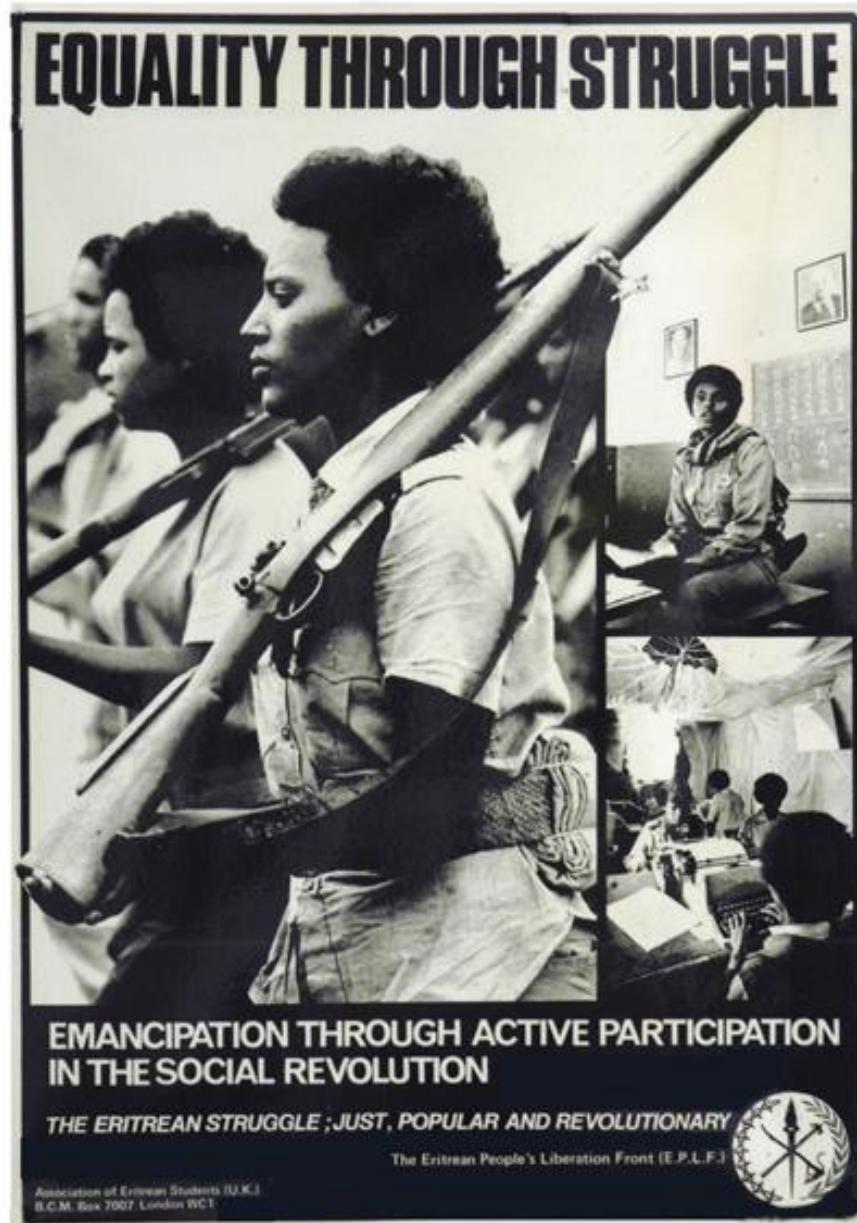


# A Fight Left Unfinished

A Case Study on the Female Fighters of the EPLF and Female Emancipation.



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Figure 1. Equality Through Struggle

Bachelor's Thesis Liberal Arts and Sciences

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# **A Fight left Unfinished. A Case Study on the Female Fighters of the EPLF and Female Emancipation.**

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## **Abstract**

This research paper addresses the underreported role of women as fighters in conflict. The aim of this thesis is to explore the influence of the role of female fighters on the emancipation of women both during and after the war and within the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Eritrean society. It addresses an empirical gape in both the academic world and policy development on women in conflict. During the 30 year war with Ethiopia the female fighters in Eritrea challenged the traditional gender roles and fought both for a liberated Eritrea and for female emancipation. Drawn from secondary literature on both the EPLF's female fighters and female fighters in general, this research project explicates the female fighters' motives and experiences as well as the challenges they faced when returning from war.

**Key words: EPLF, Female Emancipation, Female Fighters, Gender and Conflict**

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## List of acronyms

DDR	Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration
DRP	Demobilization and Reintegration Program
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERREC	The Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
LTTE	Liberation Tiger for Tamil Eelam
NCDRP	National Commission for Demobilization and Reintegration Programs
NDP	National Democratic Program
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PKK	The Kurdistan Worker's Party
ZAPU	Zimbabwe Africans People's Union

# 1. Introduction

Both in the academic world, the world of policy making and the media, women in conflict are often solely perceived as victims and peace builders. While this perception of women in conflict is not per se wrong, it is very incomplete and results in a gendered portrayal of war in which men are perpetrators, instigators and destructive and in which women are victims, keepers of the peace and constructive (Smeulers, 2015; Baaz & Stern, 2013). The assumption that women are inherently more peaceful than men leads to a neglect of the other roles that women and men have in conflict (Smeulers, 2015). It leaves out the fact that women in conflict can also take up arms and participate in the conflict and that these female participants are no rare phenomenon. Historically speaking women always have participated in intrastate conflicts and terrorist groups (Cunningham, 2003). And it is estimated that women make up 30% of all violent political organizations and movements (Gray, 2015).

## 1.1 Motivation

For my research I am especially interested in women that participate in a conflict as a combatant or fighter in liberation movements. Most research on women and war portrays women either as inherently more peaceful or solely as victims of war which reproduces the image of the war-affected female lacking any form of agency (Coulter, 2008). Because of this, the female fighter is an underreported and understudied aspect of contemporary warfare and this has resulted in an empirical gap in scholarly and policy knowledge about the female combatant in national armies (Baaz & Stern, 2013), guerrilla groups, liberations movements and terrorist organizations (Trisko Darden, 2015). This while women have fought as soldiers in conflicts in Colombia, Congo, Peru, Nicaragua, Algeria, Sri Lanka, Iran, Italy, Japan, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Palestine just to name a few (Cunningham, 2003; Trisko Darden, 2015). Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern state in their research on female Congolese soldiers that 'there seems to be collective amnesia' on a global level about the contribution of women in conflicts. This neglect of attention for female fighters and their experiences furthermore results in incompetent security reform policies (Baaz & Stern, 2013).

The role of the female fighter is particularly interesting as it challenges gender stereotypes and gender roles (Ali, 2006). Their involvement in liberation struggles breaks both their domestic responsibilities and roles down. Also, it moves them more into the male dominated 'sphere' of war and the military (Kusmallah, 2008). This opens up opportunities to reconstruct 'given' gender roles by challenging them (Kusmallah, 2008). Furthermore periods of mass violence often lead to a restructuring of society. These opportunities for social reform appeal to women and motivates them to join liberation movements with the hope that they can change the position of women in society (Smeulers, 2015).

This made me wonder whether participating as a female fighter in a conflict would influence the emancipation of the women in society. Especially as many liberation movements make promises of better gender equality to their female fighters.

In order to study this I focused my research on the female fighters in Eritrea and in particular the female fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). I picked the women in the EPLF as this is a very interesting case-study and is in a sense an outlier, as it differs in many ways from other liberation movements with high rates of female fighters. During the almost 30 year war with Ethiopia, the EPLF was an exemplary in regards to changing gender barriers in multiple respects. The Eritrean women in the EPLF participated alongside the men in the armed struggle extensively and intensively

(Bernal, 2001). Nearly 33% of the EPLF fighters were women (Bernal, 2000). And these female fighters seemed to transcend gender as both the male and female fighter got the same education, performed the same tasks and lived as comrades in mixed units. Furthermore the female combatants have played a decisive role in the success of the EPLF and in defeating Ethiopia and gaining independence for Eritrea (Bernal, 2001). The EPLF committed itself to a great extent to the case of female equality and gender empowerment, also compared to other liberation movements such as the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) which are also known for their efforts regarding female emancipation. Moreover the policy that the EPLF tried to implement and the way women were treated in the EPLF was progressive compared to again the LTTE and the FARC. The LTTE stayed closer to the traditional values of Sri Lankan society and maintained its conservative gender norms in regards to sex, honor and family, the female soldiers of the FARC experienced considerable sexual abuse and discrimination resulting from the machismo culture within the FARC (Jordan & Denov, 2007; Herrera & Porch, 2008). This level of sexual abuse and macho culture as well as very traditional gender norms were absent in the EPLF.

Furthermore I believe that the female combatants of the EPLF are important to study as there are very few to no cases of forced conscription within the EPLF which means that everybody who joined did so voluntarily (Krosch, 2005). As women joined out of their own choice it might be that this has also a positive influence on their emancipation. Another reason I study the female fighters in the EPLF is because the little attention scholars have paid to women in combat has been paid to already highly published cases such as the FARC and the LTTE (Trisko Darden, 2015). To broaden our knowledge about the female combatant and her participation in conflict we need to turn to less famous cases as well, such as the EPLF. This leads me directly to one of the biggest obstacles in my research on the women who fought for the EPLF. Because little research has been done on the EPLF and especially on the women involved in the EPLF, it is difficult to find enough suitable and reliable information and sources. Additionally, after the war Eritrea has developed into one of the most notorious dictator states in the world which minimizes the availability of literature about EPLF as it is impossible to research female fighters in Eritrea today. This means that some information is rather dated and some types of data simply do not exist.

## **1.2 Research question**

As mentioned above the female combatant contradicts the gender based portraits of war that exists in the world of policy making, academia and the media. The female fighter challenges the gender roles in society and how women in conflict are often perceived. Besides this, the prospect of gender equality motivates many women to fight in liberation movements. In this research project the main focus is to explore whether participation of the women as combatants in the EPLF has led to female emancipation in both the EPLF and in Eritrean society. Therefore the research question used in this paper is:

*Did the role of the female fighter participating in the EPLF lead to women's emancipation in the movement and in Eritrean society?*

To answer this question several sub-questions are addressed:

*R1 What motivated the women to join the EPLF and to become combatants?*

*R2 Why were women led into the EPLF military ranks?*

*R3 What changes have been brought about during the conflict for both the female fighters and the civilian women in the EPLF and in the broader society?*

*R4 How did life of the female combatants look after the war and how did life look for civilian women?*

### **1.3 Research objectives**

The aim of this research paper is to explore the influence of the role of female fighters on the emancipation of women both during and after the war and within the EPLF and Eritrean society. It tries to assess if and how the involvement of the Eritrean women as fighters in the EPLF has led to greater female emancipation, and how this female emancipation looked like in the EPLF and in Eritrean society. With this research, I hope to close the gap between on the one hand our scientific and policy understanding of women in conflict and on the other hand the reality of the female fighter's experiences, and with that to counter our gendered portrayal of war. This article explicates the female fighters' experiences, motives and presence as well as the challenges they faced when returning from war.

### **1.4 Structure**

The paper begins with offering a historical context of both the war itself and the position of women in Eritrean society. Chapter 1 addresses the questions of what kind of women became fighters for the EPLF, what their motives were to join and why and how the EPLF let women into the movement to fight. The second chapter describes the changes that took place during the war for both the female fighters and the female civilians in regards to female emancipation. The third chapter answers the question of what life looked like for the female fighters and female civilians after the war. It also aims to investigate how far the EPLF reached their goal of female emancipation after they gained independence and whether participation as fighters had led to women's emancipation. It is important to note here that female emancipation is no linear process and cannot be understood by a simple 'before and after'.

### **1.5 Data and research method**

This analysis is based on secondary data such as scientific articles, books and UN reports dating from 1989 to 2015. The reason for the use of secondary data is because of the current political state of Eritrea. As it is an isolated dictator state performing empirical research in Eritrea in the form of interviews or surveys is out of scope for the purpose of this research paper. Additionally, I decided not to conduct interviews with Eritrean refugees in The Netherlands for two reasons; Firstly, it is well known that refugees are often reluctant to tell their true views and are unlikely to tell anything that would jeopardize their position as refugees in anyway (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). Second, in refugee research there is the principle of 'doing no harm' (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). The Eritrean diaspora is very active in the Netherlands and by interviewing refugees I could actually bring the interviewees in danger. Although this might be a small risk I am not willing to take it. As the literature on the EPLF is limited I also made use of secondary sources concerning female fighters in general and in other countries, as well as general literature on female terrorists and the role of women in peacebuilding. Using only secondary literature does have its limitations. Many of the questions addressed in this paper have not been fully explored by other scholars and some of the most important sources are between 15 and 28 years old and might not be completely accurate anymore. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to study the case of Eritrea as there is great potential for finding new insights on women in conflict - and specifically on female fighters in liberation movements, as the case of Eritrea has not been fully explored yet.



In my research I use the terms guerrilla organizations, terrorist groups and liberation and rebel movements interchangeably. This is because although there are in theory differences in definition, in reality these groups are all violent political movements and it is in the eye of the beholder how a particular group is qualified . While Cunningham (2003) sees the EPLF as a terrorist organization, other scholars (Thomas & Bond, 2015) call the EPLF a violent political organization, yet the EPLF saw itself as a liberation front.

## 2. Contextual background

Eritrea was formally established in 1993, and is one of Africa's youngest nation states (Kusmallah, 2008). The government of Eritrea recognizes nine different ethnic groups (Gruber & Garcetti 1998) making up its estimated population of about 4.9 million people in 2007, as a population census has never been conducted (Geisler, Ofori, & Teckie 2008). Since its declared independence Eritrea has developed into one of the most notorious dictatorships known in our contemporary world and is often called 'Africa's North Korea'. It has Africa's largest army (Sharlach, 2011). Eritrea has a strategic location in the North-east of Africa between Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti and the Red Sea (see Appendix A). Because of this strategic location Eritrea knows a longer history of being under the rule of other countries and empires. Additionally, Ethiopia has no direct access to the Red Sea if Eritrea is not part of Ethiopia and this results in constant tension between the two countries (Kusmallah, 2008). The centuries of experience as always being under the rule of other countries has led to a strong urge for independence and sense of nationalism in Eritrea (Bernal, 2000). In the years after the 30 year struggle for independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea has been at war with every bordering country and with Yemen (Sharlach, 2011). In 1998, just five years after gaining independence, armed hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea resumed (Stefanos, 2000). Eritrea is considered one of the poorest countries in the world (Geisler, Ofori, & Teckie 2008).

### 2.1 The 30 year struggle for independence

The Ottoman Turks were the first to claim Eritrea as being part of its empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1865, when Egypt declared Eritrea to be one of its provinces. The rule of Egypt over Eritrea did not last long because in 1882 the Italians took over and Eritrea became one of Italy's colonies. The rule of Italy over Eritrea came to an end in 1942 after Italy had to give up Eritrea because Italy had surrendered during WWII and from then on Eritrea came under Great Britain's British Military Administration. The desire of Eritrea to become its own independent state was ignored by the UN when in 1952 a resolution<sup>1</sup> was passed which resulted in Eritrea becoming part of the Ethiopian Federation. The Eritreans considered themselves to be an inherently different people from the Ethiopians and they gained considerable local autonomy and democratic rights with this resolution (Kusmallah, 2008; Bernal, 2001; Smith, 2001). The rights that were established started to erode as soon as the resolution was enacted (Kusmallah, 2008) as Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia ignored many of Britain's instructions (Gray, 2015). The Eritreans believed that Eritrea could never thrive as long it was under Ethiopian rule (Bernal, 2000). In 1962 Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia violated the resolution and dissolved Eritrea's parliament and annexed Eritrea as Ethiopia's 14<sup>th</sup> province (Kusmallah, 2008). The Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) offered some non-violent resistance but never became a major player in the struggle for independence. In 1960, before the violation of the resolution by Ethiopia a new Islamic resistance group had developed in Cairo, Egypt, the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), and it gained support of the Eritrean Muslims and of Muslim and Arabic neighboring states (Dorman, 2003). It was the ELF which started the struggle for Eritrea's independence and the war with Ethiopia in 1962 (Pateman, 1990). But it was not this group which led Eritrea to independence in 1993. During the sixties the ELF's pool of only Islamist and rural potential fighters proved to be too small and Christians were welcomed into the movement. By the end of the 1960's the ELF started to lose support both internally and externally after accusations of civilian abuses. This led to factions of the ELF taking

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<sup>1</sup> UN Resolution 390-A (V)

actions to reform the movement. These reformers were met with violence by the conservative members and while some reformers fled to neighboring countries, others formed new groups (Thomas & Bond, 2015). One of these was the EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front) which was more leftwing and egalitarian and not only wanted Eritrea to be independent from Ethiopia but also wanted to start a Marxist revolution. A civil war between the more conservative ELF and the newly formed EPLF broke out and was eventually won in 1974 by the EPLF (Bernal, 2000). It was the EPLF which gained the support of the Eritrean people and which defeated the Ethiopians in 1991 (Dorman, 2003).

## **2.2 War development**

The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea lasted from 1962 to 1991 (Krosch, 2005). As mentioned earlier, the war started when the Emperor of Ethiopia annexed Eritrea as a province of Ethiopia. The ELF took up arms and fought against the Ethiopian army with classic guerilla tactics, the ELF is said to have killed 5000 Ethiopian soldiers between 1962 and 1968. There are no numbers of Eritrean casualties of this period published by the ELF as they wanted to maintain a strong image. By the 1970's the ELF controlled most of the western and northern parts of Eritrea as well as big parts of the Eritrean coast (Pateman, 1990). In 1974 the EPLF took the ELF's place in the conflict after a bloody civil war between the two movements and continued the war with Ethiopia (Bernal, 2000). The defense line was located in the Northern part of Eritrea. The mountainous Northern part behind the defense, which was about 1/3 of Eritrea, was considered liberated by the EPLF. From here the EPLA (Eritrean People's Liberation Army), the military wing of the EPLF, started to move this defense line closer and closer to the Ethiopian border (Pateman, 1990). The military of the EPLF became one of Africa's largest armies and was highly equipped with weapons and vehicles that they took from the Ethiopians in battle and stole during guerilla raids, which they used to build highly mobile frontline units (Pateman, 1990). Ethiopia on the other hand, had send 25.000 troops (half of Ethiopia's total forces) to Eritrea, but the soldiers lacked morale due to the recent Ethiopian revolution, and the Eritreans took advantage of their weakness (Pateman, 1990). First the EPLF mainly liberated the countryside but further along the war the EPLF also started to capture major Eritrean urban areas. The fighters developed good relations with the local communities and offered medical aid, built hospitals, started education programs and shared their resources with the local people instead of demanding resources from these impoverished communities. With this they gained the support of the people (Dorman, 2003; Burgess, 1989). The EPLF proved to have a highly competent and effective army that was very capable of mobilizing people. At the end of the 80's the Ethiopian Duerge became closer and closer to losing the struggle. The EPLF controlled 85% of the countryside and had liberated many of the big cities (Burgess, 1989). In 1991 the EPLF captured Asmara, Eritrea's capital city which marked the Eritrean victory. By then most of the international community recognized the sovereignty of Eritrea over the captured territory and in 1993 during UN-supervised referendum its sovereignty was legitimized (Dorman, 2003).

More than 65.000 people have died during the Liberation struggle and it is estimated that about one million people fled from the war and became refugees (Bernal, 2001)

## **2.3 The role of religion in the conflict**

The role of religion in the Eritrean independence war was very limited. While the ELF initially received support from many Muslim states, about half of the Eritrean population belongs to a Christian

ideology.<sup>2</sup> All the various religious groups in Eritrea fought together against their common enemy, Ethiopia. Furthermore, as the EPLF adopted a more Marxist ideology I do not believe there was much space for religion in the conflict. This corroborated by my readings, as none of the sources I have researched point to a special influence of a religious group in the conflict.

#### **2.4 Women's participation in the conflict**

What is remarkable about the Eritrean struggle for independence is the mass involvement of women in the fighting force of the EPLF. From the beginning on, women participated in the ELF by offering support and supplying the ELF with information and provision, such as food and weapons (Bernal, 2000; Krosch, 2005). But it was within the EPLF that women became en masse members of the fighting forces. One of the reasons the EPLF broke away from the ELF was because of the disagreement on the inclusion of women in the movement (Krosch, 2005). According to Bernal, the starting point for the participation of women as soldiers was in 1973 when three women tried to join the movement and were allowed to participate in military training. After this the EPLF started to openly recruit women as combatants and allowed women into the military (Bernal, 2000). But Henshaw, another scholar, on the other hand believes that this is not a completely correct representation of how women were allowed into the fighting forces. Henshaw states in her research on 'Why Women rebel:

Understanding female participation in intrastate conflict' that there are records found from 1960 of the ELF in which male ELF fighters expressed that all Eritreans have a duty to fight Ethiopia, meaning that women had to fight just like the men. And in the same records a local commander explains that due to a lack of weapons they are not able to mobilize all people with an interest to fight and that if they had enough weapons even women could participate in the battle (Henshaw, 2013). In this case the lack of women fighting for the ELF is not explained by the conservative ideas of the ELF but that women were not participating in the fight due to a lack of resources. Furthermore according to Weldeghiorghis the ELF already admitted young women in 1967 into the fighting units of the Third Military Region (Kusmallah, 2008).

The EPLF was strongly committed to the goal of gender equality (Bernal, 2000) because of its Marxist and socialist ideology. They strongly believed that any form of liberation could be brought about by implementing a socialist mode of production which would lead to the abolition of class oppression. This would lead to the abolishment of other social inequalities based on religion, gender and ethnicity (Kusmallah, 2008; Gruber & Garcetti 1998). It was part of the EPLF's cornerstone policy that women needed to participate in all the spheres of military activity (Kusmallah, 2008). By the end of the conflict about 1/3 of the EPLF 98000 combatants were women (Stefanos, 2000).

Although female empowerment was an important point of the EPLF's agenda we should not forget that the issue was still subordinate to the goal of liberating Eritrea. Women's emancipation was for the EPLF a means to an end. This is then also strongly reflected in the EPLF's Slogans: "No Liberation Without Women's Participation" (Bernal, 2000) and 'Equality for Equal participation' (Bernal, 2001). Additionally, there was not a women's movement present in Eritrea, it was the male-led EPLF which took up the issue (Bernal, 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> Gruber & Garcetti suggest a 50 % Christian majority while Benninger- Budel & O'Hanlon speak of a 50 % Muslim majority. Then again Dan Connell suggest that the division between Christians and muslims was just 50/50. Either way neither ideology really dominated in Eritrea.

## **2.5 The position of women in Eritrean society**

To understand why it would be attractive for women to join a rebel movement and the EPLF and to see whether their participation as combatants has led to greater female emancipation we must first understand what society looked like for the women in Eritrea. It is necessary to be aware of their position in society, the opportunities they had and the rights they enjoyed. Therefore, following is a short description of the social structures, the perception of women in society and the harmful practices women experienced in Eritrea is offered.

As has been already mentioned above in this chapter, there are nine different ethnic groups living in Eritrea. Some of these ethnic groups are predominately orthodox Christians while others are predominantly Muslim or Catholic. The biggest ethnic group is the Tirginya, a Christian orthodox ethnicity to which about 50% of the population belongs to. The second largest ethnic group is the Tigre who are predominately Muslim. This group can also be subdivided into smaller ethnic groups of which some identify more with the Tigre identity than others. The other 7 ethnic groups form a small minority as they make up between 0.5 and 5 percent of the population. Some ethnicities live in the lowland of Eritrea as agropastoralist and pastoralist nomads while others are settled farmers in the highland. Notwithstanding the differences in religion, location and lifestyle all these ethnic groups share a strong patriarchal structure with each other (Gruber & Garcetti 1998; Silkin, 1983).

The position of women and the opportunities they have in society depends on several factors such as class, education, religion, ethnicity, location etc. Therefore it would be wrong to think that all women in a society enjoy the same status and have the same opportunities (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). This is also true for Eritrea. In general the position of women in Eritrea at the time offered very few opportunities, but this does not mean that there were no women in Eritrea who enjoyed education or were able to make their own choices. Nevertheless, Eritrea was and is a very traditional and conservative country and women in Eritrea enjoy in general very few rights (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

The traditional view in Eritrea of women was, and still is, that they are subordinate to the men in society. The birth of a girl is considered a huge disappointment (Krosch, 2005; Silkin, 1983). From birth on a great distinction is made in the upbringing of boys and girls. Girls are taught to be quiet, submissive and to respect a man's position and are rarely sent to school and are required to assist in the household from a very young age (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998; Krosch, 2005; Smith, 2001). Boys are brought up to be the head of the household and do enjoy formal education. Furthermore education for girls is often frowned upon and distrusted as families are afraid it would corrupt the girls and harm their purity (Smith, 2001). Besides this schooling for girls is often considered a waste of time (Smith, 2001).

Fathers and husbands have immense power in the family, they decide what happens with the family resources, who marries whom and determine the future of the children and the spouse(s) (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998; Smith, 2001). Elder men are responsible for the decision making at local and national level (Sium, 2010).

Although women work around 14 to 16 hours a day by working in the household, cooking, cleaning, getting water and taking care of the children while often also assisting in agricultural and pastoral labor this work is not considered real work in Eritrean society, it is 'just what women do'. Only men do the 'real' work. Women in the lowlands or those part of the pastoral and agropastoral communities

face even more limitations as it is often considered inappropriate for them to participate in activities outside of the house (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

A woman's status within the private sphere is not any different. Mothers are often under-fed as they are the last ones to eat and girls are considered 'burdens on the family' because they leave the family as soon as they get married. It is not uncommon in Eritrea for girls to get married before the age of 12 with men much older than they are (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). Marriage is in general arranged, involves dowries and fathers take little note of the desires of the bride or groom (Smith, 2001). As the daughter has been sold off she goes to live with the family of her husband (with exception for the Kunama people in which matrilineal residence is most common). Because of this, the Bilen community call girls 'evening shadows' because they are only in the family for a very short time (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

As women are considered the protectors of the family's honor, a girl's virginity is of great importance and her sexuality is controlled by others (Krosch, 2005). The smallest suspicion of impurity can lead to divorce and the girl/woman would be publicly shamed and sent back to her family (Smith, 2001). Additionally, in Eritrean society it is considered a woman's own fault if she experiences sexual assault. Female genital mutilation is also a widespread practice in Eritrea within all ethnic groups. Furthermore girls and women are often stopped from seeking medical attention as this would expose them to the scrutiny of strangers (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

Domestic violence in Eritrea is common and considered part of the relationship between a man and a woman, a good wife would never object and girls are taught to be submissive and subordinate (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998) so they are well prepared for marriage. No matter how horrible the marriage, women cannot return to their families unless their families are willing and capable of paying back the bride-price (Silkin, 1983).

Because of all these different practices and patterns women are considered property of the husband or father. This means that in pre-war Eritrea women were not able to inherit or own any land (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998; Silkin, 1983). Women were completely economically dependent on their fathers and husbands (Silkin, 1983).

It is important to note though, as I have mentioned above, that not all women in Eritrea have the same opportunities and status. In Eritrea there are also women who receive higher education, who can do work outside of the household and who have parents who do respect the wishes of their daughters when it comes to marriage. Furthermore all the above mentioned does not mean that there are no men in Eritrea who disagree with the common practices that put women in subordinate positions (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

After centuries of colonial rule a war for an independent Eritrea broke out in 1962 when the Ethiopian Emperor disregarded the UN resolution and annexed Eritrea. The highly diverse population of Eritrea was unified in their shared goal of liberated state. The ELF initiated the war but it was the EPLF, which had defeated the ELF in a civil war, that won the Eritrean war in 1991. In this fight thousands of women had fought alongside men for both the liberation of Eritrea and female emancipation and the victory of the EPLF could not have happened without their contributions as fighters. During the liberation struggle 65,000 people died and a million people fled the country.

Women in pre-war Eritrea were in a subordinate position. All of the ethnicities living in Eritrea knew a strong patriarchal structure in their culture. The birth of a daughter was considered a disappointment. Women were supposed to be submissive and quiet and were taught to always respect a man's authority. Most girls did not enjoy an education while boys often did. While women in Eritrea performed 14 to 16 hours of labor a day, their work was not considered actual work in Eritrean society. As women were not allowed to do 'actual' work the women were economically dependent on their husbands or fathers . Besides, women were not allowed to inherit land, had few rights and domestic abuse was high spread. Males made all the important decisions both in the public sphere and the private sphere.

### 3. The women in the EPLF

In this chapter attention will be paid to who the women were that joined the EPLF to become fighters. Furthermore the question of what motives the women had to join the EPLF to fight is addressed as well as the motives of the EPLF to admit women to the military.

#### **Who joined, why did they join and how were they received?**

There is no agreement in the literature as to when exactly women started to contribute as fighters to the struggle for independence in Eritrea. Some scholars say that the EPL had the intention to also let women fight but due to logistical constraints, such as a lack of weapons, this was not possible (Henshaw, 2013). Others like Weldeghiorgis state that there were in fact already women fighting for the EPL since 1967 (Kusmallah, 2008). Then again scholars like Bernal believe that the first female combatants emerged in 1973 on the women's own initiative in the EPLF (Bernal, 2000). What we do know for sure is that women since the start of the struggle for independence have been contributing in all sorts of forms such as providing food, transporting materials, providing information, providing care and aid. Regardless whether the EPL or the EPLF first started to admit women into the military ranks, it was under the EPLF that many women became fighters. The EPLF strongly propagated this message and dedicated itself to the cause of gender equality by developing laws and implementing policy to enhance a woman's position both in Eritrean society and within the EPLF itself (Krosch, 2005).

Interestingly, there is also an issue with the word 'fighter' and with the fact that women in the struggle had many different roles (Bernal, 2000; Krosch, 2005). The Tigrinya word for fighter applied to everyone participating in the EPLF, so some female fighters were fighters in the narrow sense of the word while other female fighters were fighters in the broader meaning of the term (Bernal, 2000). Because of the difference in meaning it is sometimes hard to distinguish who did what in the literature. Compounding this complexity, as previously mentioned, many women had multiple roles in the conflict, some women fought while they also served as nurses and doctors, while others initially helped by offering shelter and support and later became combatants. This also means that it is hard to develop a good profile of who the women were that fought.

The first three women that Bernal (2000) describes in her research on the female Eritrean fighters who she believes to be the first women to receive military training and to be admitted to the military ranks of the EPLF in 1973 came from urban regions and had educated backgrounds. These women in turn managed to attract many more female fighters from both rural and urban regions, both with and without much education. Eventually women of all different ethnic groups and different ages participated in the EPLF (Bernal, 2001). Young girls would even recruit their own mothers (Thomas & Bond, 2015). Interesting is that it seems that the first female combatants had in general received good education while the female combatants who joined later did not. According to Worku Zerai, who was one of the first 3 women to receive military training within the EPLF, the reason why many of the women who joined the movement became combatants was because the women lacked other skills to offer other forms of support (Bernal, 2000).

While women from all different ages were present in the EPLF, most of the women who joined the movement were young girls who often did so without parental permission (Coulter, Persson, & Utas,



2008). Young girls also lied about their age to be able to join the EPLF (Burgess, 1989). Female terrorists, rebels and African soldiers are often young as the reasons and factors that make people join such politically violent organizations are in general more prevalent among young people (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). This young age is then also a common trait for female fighters in all different liberation movements, rebel organization and terrorist groups. Cunningham in her research on trends in female terrorism, states that the revolutionary features of the FARC in Colombia and the Shining Path in Peru show the same characteristics found in the movements present in Sri Lanka, South Africa and Eritrea. Female fighters in liberation movements are young and often come from poor backgrounds (Cunningham, 2003). This is because many people join politically violent organizations to escape poverty (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). In the literature on the combatants in the ELF and EPLF little attention is paid to poverty experienced by the people. But it is quite likely that the disadvantaged economic background might have had a predominant role in the profile of the female combatants of Eritrea, as Eritrea, just like Colombia, Peru, Sri Lanka and the Gaza strip, experienced a low GDP during the War and many of the Eritreans lived under the poverty line (Cunningham, 2003). As mentioned in the previous chapter, after many years of colonial rule Eritrea was left with a weak economy (Bernal, 2000; Krosch, 2005) and even for sub-Saharan standards the people of Eritrea were (and still are) very poor (Bernal, 2001).

### **3.1 Motives to fight**

In the following section several types of motives to join the EPLF as fighters are discussed such as the opportunity for gender equality, the political ideology of the EPLF, the independence of Eritrea, the opportunity for education, the desire to revenge the loss of family and community members, and escaping marriage.

#### **3.1.1 Political Ideology and gender equality**

In much of the literature attention in relation to the motives of Eritrean women to fight, is devoted to the national political ideology and the opportunity for gender equality. So the participation of women in the conflict is explained by the notion that the Eritrean women wanted to fight for the liberation of Eritrea and its people and joined because of the ideology of the EPLF which propagated issues of gender emancipation (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008; Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002; Thomas & Bond, 2015). It should be noted that the EPLF prioritized the independence of Eritrea over women's emancipation and it seems that the female fighters prioritized the independence of Eritrea over women's emancipation as well when it came to expressing their motivations (Burgess, 1989; Krosch, 2005).

It seems that more than in other African wars and liberation movements with large numbers of female combatants, the women of Eritrea were empowered by the ideology of the revolutionary movement. The Eritrean female combatants of the EPLF often expressed a sense of freedom and comradeship in terms of gender struggles and the social injustice they experienced (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). Furthermore the Eritrean women volunteering for the ELF also did so because they believed that by participating in the revolution they might gain more social rights (Thomas & Bond, 2015). This is clearly different from the motivations the female fighters of Sierra Leone, Uganda and Liberia had, as they often express to have joined the organizations for personal gain and protection far more than for political reasons and the struggle for gender equality (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). The Eritrean women and their motives also differ from the motives of the female fighters of LTTE. The Sri Lankan fighters expressed to have joined to protect their culture and to fight for an independent Tamil Sri

Lanka. They admitted that their political awareness and their motivation to fight for women equality only developed during participating in the war (Alison, 2003).

### **3.1.2 Other motives**

Besides fighting for independence of Eritrea and for women's equality, female fighters might have had other motives to participate in the Eritrean struggle, which are mentioned far less frequently in research. Additionally, some motives that are commonly found in the research on other liberation movements, do not appear in the literature on Eritrea at all. Such as the motives to join for adventure or to join to restore one's dignity after being sexually assaulted. Yet, that the women in the EPLF solely fought for the cause of female emancipation and the liberation of Eritrea is not a realistic understanding of the motivations the women had and the situation the women found themselves in.

Besides the EPLF ideology and the national case of independence the Eritrean women had other reasons to fight. The Eritrean women were not only motivated to fight for the political goals of the organization. Research on female perpetrators states that women often are motivated to fight because of the opportunity to receive education and the new career options fighting in a movement provides (Smeulers, 2015). This motive to fight to gain access to education and new career options is then also expressed by the female fighters in the EPLF (Thomas & Bond, 2015). Some Eritrean women joined to live different lives from their mothers and to work on a different future for newer generations (Dalton & Asal, 2011; Krosch, 2005; Thomas & Bond, 2015). Research on female perpetrators also shows that many women are attracted to the adventure, the independence, the status and the image that comes with membership (Smeulers, 2015). As fighting for the EPLF offered the opportunity to experience independence and joining the EPLF would boost the status of the women (Krosch, 2005), it is not unlikely that female fighters of the EPLF were motivated to fight because of the chance to gain more independence and status. In many cases of female participation in violent political movements women state that they wanted to fight out of revenge: They experienced the murder and mistreatment of family and community members and now want to take action against the oppressor. These motives are, for example, strongly expressed by the female fighters of the LTTE (Alison, 2003) and many EPLF fighters have expressed these motives as well (Burgess, 1989; Cunningham, 2003; Dalton & Asal, 2011). Simultaneously, other Eritrean women joined to escape marriage and domestic abuse and joined for a matter of survival so they could protect themselves, (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008; Dalton & Asal, 2011; Kusmallah, 2008; Thomas & Bond, 2015). According to Wilson many Eritrean women from arranged marriages and women who clashed with their husbands on female emancipation joined the EPLF. For them the EPLF had a position of authority far above their own families and husbands (Krosch, 2005). Worku Zerai mentions in Kusmallah's research that women in Eritrea did join to escape 'arranged marriage' and the 'first night of marriage' (Kusmallah, 2008). Other motives mentioned by Eritrean women are that they wanted to join because their access to school had been blocked and that they have been displaced many times because of the conflict (Burgess, 1989). It is known from research on female terrorists that some women join movements to fight after they have been raped and as a consequence thereof were rejected by the traditional society and fighting in a liberation movement offers them a way to save face and to restore their dignity by sacrificing themselves for higher goals (Cunningham, 2003) but this motive to fight is not present in the literature on the EPLF.

The most specific account of the motives of the female EPLF probably comes from research conducted by Doris Burgess. Burgess interviewed several fighters during the conflict. One of these fighters was

Philomena, who joined the EPLF and at the time of the interview she was still in training. She states that she came to Eritrea after living in Italy for a couple of years to visit family and friends and to travel around. Philomena tells that after she had seen the revolution with her own eyes she believed that it was irresponsible for her to go back to Italy while her friends and family were fighting for independence. She decided to join the movement. Philomena first states that she enjoyed the training she receives and that she wants to go to the front line if she were to be assigned to that position. She expresses that she believes she could kill another person not just for self-defense but also for 'our' cause (Burgess, 1989). But she also mentions that she does not like the men back in Italy who she believes are traditional and want wives to clean and cook for them. She states that as a wife of these men a woman is not free. According to Philomena 'here in the field there is a big difference'. Another female combatant, Adasher, mentions several of the earlier motives described above as well. Platoon leader Adasher states that it was made impossible for her to go to school by the 'Dergue' (Ethiopians) as they destroyed villages and killed the people and that she experienced her friends getting beaten up by them and that was when she decided to join the 'mass movement' by offering support and later joined the army. Interesting is that Adasher also states that she 'hid' her age to join the movement (Burgess, 1989).

To answer the question of why women would join a political organization to fight, we also have to look beyond what motivates the women. Attention should be paid to the makeup of the organization and the context in which the organization operates.

Insight in this is offered by Cunningham. She states in her research that left-wing and Marxist political groups attract far more female combatants than rightwing organizations in which female participation is underrepresented. According to Cunningham the message of social and political change of the left-orientated groups draw women into the movements while this same message influences the leadership structures within such movements. This makes women wanting to join and having the opportunity to join and it opens up the opportunity for the structure of the movement to let women in. This may explain partly why so many women joined the EPLF (Cunningham, 2003).

Some scholars criticize the emphasis on personal motives to explain why women would join politically violent organizations. Cunningham for example believes that the explanation of women participation through personal motives, such as rape, the loss of a family member, escaping economic dependence, make it seem as if women join not because it is a conscious choice but because of situational factors, as if they are reluctantly drawn into the conflict. According to her this 'personalism' of motives seems to diminish the authenticity of a woman's role in liberation movements. She is concerned that because of this women will be viewed as victims and not as full and authentic participants who have full agency, like men are considered to be (Cunningham, 2003). At the same time Cunningham and other researchers like Smeulers point out that men and women join political violent movements for similar reasons (Cunningham, 2003; Smeulers, 2015). Additionally, many scholars would disagree with the idea that female fighters do not join based on a conscious choice. As participating in political violence is a far more obvious choice for men to make, it is very plausible that because women meet more constraints to join and because it is less obvious for women to pick up arms, such a choice for a woman has to be far more consciously made than for men (Smeulers, 2015). The research further indicates that women in Eritrea were encouraged to fight by the EPLF but they were not forced to: none of the female fighters had to do what they did - they chose to do it.

### **3.2 Motives to recruit**

In many ways the EPLF looks like many other liberation movements that were active in Africa and other places around the world. But one thing that makes the Eritrean liberation movement and the conflict special is that there seems to be little to no cases of forced recruitment or abduction. This is extra ordinary, as practices such as abduction and forced conscription are normally very common in organizations similar to the EPLF. The FARC is known for its abduction practices (Herrera & Porch 2008) and also many of the female fighters in conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Uganda were abducted and forced to fight (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). The fact that forced conscription and abduction weren't present in the EPLF means that all men and women who became fighters for the ELF and later the EPLF did so voluntarily (Israel, Lyons, & Mason 2002; Krosch, 2005; Pateman, 1990; Smeulers, 2015). Moreover, after 1973 the EPLF started to recruit women for the position of combatant on a large scale (Bernal, 2000). The EPLF was obviously successful in doing so as 1/3 of the military troops and 13% percent of front line soldiers were women (Pool, 1997). The women fought side by side with the men and could be found in all the different positions and facets of the EPLF with exception of the highest ranks. (Bernal, 2001; Pateman, 1990).

As mentioned earlier there is some disagreement on the whole story of when and by who women were first recruited. I went with the account of Bernal, whose description I found most often represented in the literature. Nevertheless I do not believe that the who and when (as in, was it the EPL or the EPLF who used female combatants first and in which year this exactly happened) is crucial to the understanding of why women joined, as the EPLF and EPL had very different ideological ideas on women's emancipation. One of the reasons the EPLF developed and separated itself from the ELF was because the EPLF was committed to women participation and equality while the ELF was very clearly not committed to these issues (Thomas & Bond, 2015).

Earlier in this chapter an account is offered for why women would participate as combatants in the EPLF. Equally important is to understand why the EPLF would use and recruit women as fighters in their fight for an independent Eritrea and why they believed this was appropriate and necessary. There are many theories of why the EPLF and other rebel or terrorist organizations more broadly speaking would admit women into the movement and into the battlefield: some of them are more idealistic, while others are more pessimistic as some theories doubt the EPLF's and other liberation movements commitment to women's equality and states that the movements recruited women as fighters for practical reasons only.

#### **3.2.1 Ideology**

As said before, the ideology of the EPLF gave room to more opportunities for women in the organization. The EPLF openly advocated equality for women and was striving for big social changes that would enhance the opportunities for women in Eritrean society. Furthermore they believed that the liberation of Eritrea could only be achieved if women would actively participate in the conflict itself and if there was women's equality (Bernal, 2000, 2001). Liberation through participation was one of EPLF central ideas. The ideology both allowed for women to join and for the EPLF to openly recruit women into all the facets of the organization.

#### **3.2.2 Need for manpower**

On the other hand it is most likely that the EPLF also had other more practical reasons to admit women in the military ranks. In conflicts like these there is usually a constant need for manpower. The leaders of the EPLF knew they needed to out-number the Ethiopian army to make the liberation of

Eritrea possible (Kusmallah, 2008) and by allowing women to fight they could draw from a larger pool of potential fighters, and women proved to be fit for the job (Thomas & Bond, 2015). This has very little to do with any political or ideological beliefs and is more a matter of surviving and winning a war. According to Doris Burgess the EPLF had the pragmatic view on women's emancipation that without the women's physical support to the conflict the independence of Eritrea was impossible to bring about (Burgess, 1989).

### **3.2.3 Strategic advantages**

Using women in conflict as fighters can have strategic advantages for liberation and terrorist movements. For example, women are often not recognized as fighters or terrorists and are considered non-threatening so they can avoid detection (Cunningham, 2003). This makes it very handy to deploy women as suicide bombers. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka for example had an elite suicide squad. It was for instance, a young Sri Lankan girl who killed the India prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 (Cunningham, 2003). Also the PKK and the Palestinian Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade used women for suicide missions (Bloom, 2005; Cunningham, 2003). But while other liberation movements make use of suicide tactics in their guerrilla war (Cunningham, 2003) the EPLF did not: they fought more openly with Ethiopia. The Eritrean war with Ethiopia was fought in a more traditional sense where the (female) combatants carried their weapons openly and dressed very differently from their civilian counterparts. There are even stories of Eritrean female combatants who were asked to disguise their femininity so the enemy would not recognize that they were women and would take them seriously as combatants (Burgess, 1989). It appears that in the case of Eritrea women were not recruited for these strategic advantages which makes it an outlier compared to other liberation movements.

### **3.2.4 Symbolic value**

As with many other movements that also deploy women as fighters there is a symbolic value to using women as female fighters. Often female fighters symbolize the tradition and culture of the movement and symbolize the sacrifice the movement make in war. This again has been found to be true for the Tamil Tigers, but also for the Zimbabwe Africans People's Union (ZAPU) (Alison, 2003; Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002; Jordan & Denov, 2007). In the case of the EPLF the female combatants were a symbol of the modernity of the EPLF and the liberation of Eritrea and a symbol of how the Eritreans were an inherently different people and needed to be independent from Ethiopia (Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002). The EPLF also encouraged journalists, photographers and scholars to focus on the female combatants. The EPLF glorified the position of the female fighters and portrayed them as playing similar and an equally important role as the men. Furthermore individual acts of bravery that emphasized strong, spirited women who did not let themselves be held back by tradition were well documented and used as propaganda for the civilians (Bernal, 2000; Burgess, 1989).

Furthermore the EPLF needed to convince both the male soldiers to accept the female fighters and to encourage Eritrean women to join the EPLF. For this powerful propaganda messages were developed in which the female fighter stood symbol for the modern, liberated, politically conscious woman as the new essence of femininity in independent Eritrea. This form of propaganda also worked well to attract more men to the movement as the men felt the need to join to maintain their manhood (Krosch, 2005).

Next to this there was an element of symbolic power. The female fighter served as a symbol to Ethiopia that everybody in Eritrea was willing to fight to the end, including the women (Krosch, 2005).

Another element to the symbolic value of the female Eritrean fighter may have been its value in fund raising. This element is underrepresented in the research. However, as with other liberation movements and terrorist groups, the EPLF depended financially on support from outside the country (Bernal, 2000). The use of the female fighters as the EPLF's sign of modernity was also meant to attract the support from other countries and to secure financial aid. Mark Israel, Tanya Lyons and Christine Mason state in their research that some writers believe that liberation movements have a tendency to use the fiction of gender equity to attract and obtain international legitimacy as a modern force (2002). Bernal expresses in her research that the Eritrean diaspora was vital for the funding of the war and for the education of the rest of the world about the war (Bernal, 2000) and I get the impression that the female fighter was an essential element in the education of the rest of the world by the Eritrean diaspora to get funding.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

The women who fought for the EPLF came from all different backgrounds, but the majority of them were young, poor and had little education. The EPLF was highly successful in mobilizing women to fight. The women who joined the movement to fight were strongly motivated by the prospect of a liberated Eritrea, the political ideology of the EPLF, and by the opportunities for women's emancipation that the EPLF promised them (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008; Israel, Lyons, & Mason 2002; Thomas & Bond, 2015). For both the EPLF and the female fighters within the movement there was a hierarchy in the importance of achieving the goals. The independence of Eritrea in which society was built on ideas of equality came first, to which the issue of women's emancipation was subordinate (Krosch, 2005). The extent and the strength of the motivation to fight for female emancipation of the Eritrean women is quite exceptional compared to other (African) female fighters in other liberation movements (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). This might be, partly, due to the fact that all women and men fighting for the EPLF joined voluntarily, which is rarely the case in other liberation movements.

While the women in the EPLF were not solely motivated by these motives, other motives are less commonly found in the literature on the female fighters. There are several explanations for why the information on the motives of the Eritrean female fighters of the EPLF is limited. First of all, the question what motivated the Eritrean women to fight is rarely extensively addressed in the literature and in the interviews. Secondly, there also appears to be the a bit of an assumption that if the women and the EPLF said that the women were fighting because they wanted to liberate Eritrea and to bring about female emancipation then that was it, and no further questions needed to be asked. Thirdly, as Eritrea is now a dictator state, it is very complicated to fill any of the gaps in the knowledge we have on the motivations of the female fighters by doing new research.

That being said, many Eritrean women joined the EPLF as well to get more career and education opportunities, to escape marriage and to revenge the loss of family and community members.

Additionally, there is a wide range of motives for the EPLF to let women into the movement as combatants. The ideology of the EPLF strongly advocated women's emancipation and the idea was present that female emancipation could only be achieved through the participation of women in the struggle (Bernal, 2000). Another motive for the EPLF to let women into the military ranks was the need for manpower and the awareness of the movement that the liberation of Eritrea was only possible with the physical support of women (Burgess, 1989). Furthermore, there was a strong symbolic value for the EPLF in the fighting women. The female fighter stood symbol for the modernity of the movement (Bernal, 2000), it encouraged both women and men to join (Krosch, 2005) and it was used

to gain the necessary monetary funds from outside (Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002). Besides, the female fighter served as a message to Ethiopia, as everybody in Eritrea was willing to fight against Ethiopia, including the women (Krosch, 2005).

The following chapter explores female emancipation during the conflict.

## **4. Female emancipation during the war**

This chapter addresses the question which changes have been brought forward regarding women's emancipation during the conflict for both the female fighters and the civilian women. To assess this, we will look at both legal and social changes and to the different aspects of female emancipation such as relationships between men and women, family, educational access and career opportunities, politics and economical independence. We assess female emancipation through these particular elements simply because most scholars have focused on these topics and therefore more information is available to draw conclusions from.

### **The changes in the lives of the civilian women and the female fighters of the EPLF that were brought about during the conflict**

As has been expressed in the previous chapters the EPLF made many promises to change the situation for the women of Eritrea. One of the reasons the EPLF developed and separated itself from the ELF was their ideological difference regarding the place women had in the conflict and society and their vision on the revolution itself. In this chapter attention will be paid to the changes the EPLF brought about in the different areas of life for the female fighters as well as for the women in the wider Eritrean society during the time the conflict took place.

In its first political program, which was written in 1971, the EPLF did not address women equality. However, they did state that the EPLF would not discriminate based on gender and that it dedicated itself to stop all forms of political and economic oppression. In 1977 the political program of the EPLF contained 8 different objectives in which it would dedicate itself to women's emancipation (Appendix B). The goal was to offer opportunities to get rid of the barriers that women experienced and that left women in subordinate positions in Eritrean society. A strong maxim of the EPLF was for instance 'Farewell kitchen, I have broken your shackles' (Krosch, 2005).

The changes the EPLF brought into being and the policies and laws the EPLF developed of course only applied to the liberated areas and the EPLF movement itself.

### **4.1 Relationships, family and womanhood**

#### **4.1.1 Relationships**

In the first years of the EPLF (sexual) relationships and marriages between combatants and between combatants and civilians were prohibited; the fighters were supposed to live a celibate life (Rena, 2007). Heavy punishments for disobeying this strict sexual code could be given to the fighters in the form of several months's prison terms or even in the form of the death penalty. One of the arguments the EPLF had for having such a strict policy on sexual relationships was that the EPLF wanted to protect the then still smaller number of female combatants from the men. Rape became a capital crime and sexual harassment by male fighters often led to the EPLF taking action against the offenders, such as warnings and punishment (Bernal, 2000). Rape still occurred in the EPLF's military though (Thomas & Bond, 2015) but many women did not dare to come forward with their stories (Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002). The sexual abuse of women is however not nearly as present in the EPLF as it is in many other African wars with high rates of female combatants and other liberation movements and revolutions. There appears to be no account for example of the EPLF bringing in women for the entertainment of men. And it does not seem to be the case that there were forced



marriages or that there were sex slaves in the EPLF while this is very much present in the research on, for example, FARC (Herrera & Porch, 2008) or the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) of Northern Uganda (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008).

The EPLF was forced to change its strict sexual codes because relationships between combatants happened anyway. Therefore, in 1977, the EPLF came with a new marriage law which considered men and women equal, free partners in marriage and it started to condone relationships and marriages between the fighters, if they were consensual (Bernal, 2000). This marriage law was very different from the old customs in Eritrea as it was a democratic law based on free choice of both partners; monogamy; equal rights, and guaranteed the interests of the women and the children (Silkin, 1983). Furthermore there was no parental permission needed (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). From then on it was easy to get married and almost just as easy to get divorced. The divorce rate in the EPLF was extremely high in the first years of the new policy as many of the couples in the EPLF married very quickly so their marriages were based on very brief contact. The EPLF tried to counter this high divorce rate by promoting premarital sex and relationships hoping this would lead to better informed marriages (Krosch, 2005). To encourage premarital sexual intimacy the EPLF provided contraception and also prohibited the repudiation of non-virgin brides (Bernal, 2000; Rena, 2007). Abortion was forbidden, though (Bernal, 2000). An important consequence of this for women is that sexuality became an attribute of the person and not of the family. This was very different from the traditional view in which a woman's sexuality was family business and a case of family honor. This new sexual freedom did not per se lead to greater promiscuity. According to the EPLF's department of social affairs about 75 percent of the female fighters applying for marriage stated that they did not have any relationships prior to their marriage. It could be that their actual behavior had been less constrained than they had been willing to admit to the department of social affairs. Interestingly, it were mostly men who opposed to premarital relationships (Bernal, 2000).

Though marriage was condoned within the EPLF, not much social status could be derived from being married and couples were not recognized as a social unit. Partners often had to work separately and would only really be together during their annual 1 month vacation. This was then also another reason for the high divorce rates. Within the EPLF the traditional domestic tasks of getting water, cooking and cleaning was done by both sexes and the tasks were not given based on gender. The domestic tasks were considered inferior to 'real' combat. And these tasks were often used as a punishment for the soldiers. Interesting is to see that when couples went on their annual vacation these progressive roles did not last. Women could be found in the kitchen preparing meals while their partners were playing card games outside with other men. Hence, the new division of labor seems to have been superficial and only really been practiced on duty. Outside of the EPLF men and women seemed to fall back in their traditional roles (Bernal, 2000).

The policy the EPLF had in regards to relationships and sexuality in the movement seems to be exceptional. The LTTE for example maintained strict rules that prohibited any physical contact between male and female fighters and encouraged couples to get married. With this the LTTE reformed the existing gender constructs of Tamil society and constricted the opportunity for the female fighters to redefine their female sexuality (Jordan & Denov, 2007). It also differs greatly from the policy of the FARC. Women were partly brought into the movement as sexual partners for the otherwise celibate living men. While under the FARC female fighters gained some sexual freedom,

there were also many cases of sex slaves and of female combatants having been sexually exploited by male fighters (Herrera & Porch, 2008)

#### *Civilian women*

The new marriage law - which later changed name to Family law - did not only apply to the female fighters but also to the civilian women living in the areas under the control of the EPLF. The Family law was a significant reform from the old Ethiopian laws. The new family law prohibited many of the traditional Eritrean practices such as bride kidnapping, dowries and bride wealth. The legal age to get married was raised from 15 to 18 (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998; Silkin, 1983). As the marriage had to be with the woman's consent, male heads of the family were no longer in total control of the woman's marriage as she did not need their permission but they would need hers. Furthermore with the new family law women did no longer need to obey their husbands and therefore could get a divorce as the new law stated in article 45: "Marriage is a partnership which gives the husband and wife equal rights as heads of their households" (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

The reality was that even though there were new laws to improve the position of many women in society, the laws were in many cases not respected. Many communities were not willing to implement these changes so it is hard to assess if life really changed for many women in Eritrea with these new laws. Sarah Krosch mentions that it were mostly the EPLF members who lived by the new reforms, according to her similar social changes could not be found in the main society (Krosch, 2005)

#### **4.1.2 Family**

Many of the combatants had little to no contact with their families, this contact was actively discouraged by the EPLF. The new families that were built were not a main concern for the EPLF as couples and families were not considered real social units. Combatants were not supposed to have any other loyalties and attachments than to the EPLF itself and family members were not to be treated any different from non-relatives. The EPLF strongly criticized the family relations and down played the domestic sphere and family roles which are normally key to the feminine identity in civilian life (Bernal, 2000).

This also meant that there was little room for motherhood within the EPLF, the greatest contribution was to fight, both for men and women, and women only received 6 months to take care of their babies. After that women were supposed to go back to the front while the children were raised collectively by the unit of their parents. The EPLF experimented initially even with raising the babies in one institution along with orphans. It comes as no surprise that this experiment was a total disaster as the children did not develop properly. Motherhood was by the EPLF down played to more or less the role of food-supplier. A nursing combatant states that if it was not for the case of having to feed her one month old she would return to active duty immediately (Bernal, 2000). Worku Zerai states though that many women actually became very upset when they had to leave their children behind and had to return to combat and that if they would have been given a choice they would have stayed longer. But due to the pressure to contribute to the struggle they did not do so. Furthermore many women delayed having children during the struggle while they were in their peak of fertility (Bernal, 2000).

#### *Civilian women*

In many other liberation movements and revolutionary groups women are appreciated for their role as producers of new (male) fighters for the struggle and much attention is paid to women contributing in this way. The EPLF did recognize the importance of the role of women as producers of soldiers and

there was much propaganda on this topic. One of the most famous examples of propaganda on this is the story of Mother Eritrea, a woman who had lost her husband and her sons to the war and claimed that if she would have been younger she would have given the movement many more fighters (Israel, Lyons & Mason, 2002). On the other hand, the EPLF clearly considered non-combatant roles and auxiliary roles as subordinate to the role of fighter. Contributing in other ways was in a sense considered cowardly (Bernal, 2000). Although this is not stated in the literature I get the impression that the role of producers of fighters was more for the civilian women than for the fighting women as contraception was widely offered to the female fighters by the EPLF, and fighting was always the greatest sacrifice you could make for the EPLF.

#### **4.1.3 Womanhood**

According to Bernal the way the EPLF dealt with women's emancipation was through the suppression of the domestic and the erasure of the feminine. Bernal believes that the policies and practices of the EPLF did not result in the transformation of the organization of gender relations and domestic life as it repressed the domestic life and integrated women not as equals of men but to male equivalents. She believes the EPLF failed to address gender differences (Bernal, 2000, 2001).

The lack of space for womanhood within the EPLF comes from the way women are included into the struggle. Women are included but not their cultural bases of womanhood such as family roles, domestic roles and motherhood. The EPLF considered nationalism to be politics and according to them politics was distinct from culture, gender and domestic roles. In a sense nationalism was a male project with women as beneficiaries (Bernal, 2000).

The erasure of the feminine is reflected in the way female combatants would dress themselves. They were said to have big afro's and to wear black rubber sandals, they were described to have a serious gaze and to have masculine swagger. The fighting women stood out from the civilian women and the general population in this way and the fighters are believed to be proud of this. According to a visitor it was hard to distinguish the men from the women. Bernal wonders how much this image represents liberation or whether it is more a form of patriarchy in drag (Bernal, 2000).

#### **4.2 Access to Education**

The EPLF paid great attention to the education of women in their policy making to enhance female emancipation and to gain the support of the public. Many of the female fighters joined the movement also for the prospect of education and the EPLF succeeded in offering this. The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was brought to life in 1979 during the first EPLF congress. As the female sectoral association of the EPLF (Connell, 2007) the main goal of the NUEW was to increase the access to health care for women, to mobilize women for their campaigns, to increase political awareness and to offer women education. An estimate of about 100.000 women participated in literacy programs and other types of projects and political awareness campaigns offered by the NUEW (Guber & Garcetti, 1998). The EPLF offered both basic and extensive military training and basic education to the female fighters. There are plenty of anecdotes about pictures of female combatants sitting in the grass taking exams while carrying their weapons on their backs (Burgers, 1989). But the EPLF also offered more than basic education: often women were trained to become barefoot doctors, engineers, mechanics, commanders, tank drivers, electricians; all jobs that previously had been a predominantly male domain (Burgers, 1989; Campbell, 2005; Krosch, 2005; Thomas & Bond, 2015). Chris Coulter furthermore mentions in her research on women in African wars that the Eritrean fighters also could

hold jobs and receive education in regards to public administration, construction and communication with the front line. (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008)

As has been expressed in the first chapter, women in Eritrea before the war had few educational and economic opportunities. It is not surprising that the prospect of education, employment, skills acquisition and the fulfillment of a national duty attracted women to join the EPLF (Krosch, 2005). Sara Krosch states in her research on the female combatants in the EPLF that the women were trained to be fighters just like the men and they were trained in all skill men were trained in. To combat the lack of education of the Eritrean women, the women experienced positive discrimination within the EPLF. (Krosch, 2005). On the other hand, Sara Krosch states that even though the women could be trained in all the same disciplines as the men, the number of women in traditionally male trades was still relatively low. All fighters of the EPLF were supposed to follow military training together with a program of political education, literacy and vocational training. Supposedly the EPLF did not accept any one as a real combatant unless he or she was literate in one of Eritrea's 9 official languages. The philosophy behind this was that all fighters had to learn how to read and write so they could have a better understanding of why they were fighting and of the history of the cause. It is slightly strange though that this is mentioned in "A new race of women " as one of the ex-combatants who is interviewed is actually illiterate (Krosch, 2005). The education and the health care the fighters received were free of charge (Krosch, 2005)

In 1983 a five year literacy campaign was started by the EPLF, during which the Zero-school teenage graduates were sent behind the enemy lines to teach about mathematics, writing, reading, health and sanitation in the newly liberated areas. For many female fighters this was the first time they received any education (Krosch, 2005).

#### *Civilian women*

Education was not solely for the fighting forces; civilian women in the liberated areas too were offered several education programs to enhance their literacy and to increase their political awareness as it was not the EPLF's goal to enhance the position of the fighters but to 'free all women from domestic confinement, to develop their participation in social production and to raise their technical levels and political culture'(Thomas & Bond, 2015). The NUEW offered information on the political struggles and education on job skills. Civilian girls in liberated areas were the majority of the beneficiaries of the EPLF literacy and educational campaigns. In the first year of the implementation of the campaign 13.704 women and girls enrolled in courses of which 67% completed the courses (Krosch, 2005).

### **4.3 Career, Politics and landownership reforms**

#### **4.3.1 Career and Politics**

As mentioned above in 1979 the National Union of Eritrean Women was founded and would function as the women's arm of the EPLF. The formation of this organization provided new opportunities for leadership to the women as women organized and directed the NUEW and reached out to the female combatants (Henshaw, 2013). The NUEW arranged political awareness and health campaigns and literacy programs and projects to enhance job skills for women. The NUEW furthermore coordinated the activities of local-level women associations, provided information about the struggle and encouraged the participation of the women of these associations in wider activities. The local level women associations enabled the political representation of their members from local to international

levels (Guber & Garcetti, 1998). Under the lead of the EPLF women earned the right to vote and to be elected (Rena, 2007).

Women could now also hold posts in the People's assemblies established by the EPLF and civilian women were encouraged to participate (Thomas & Bond, 2015). According to Chris Coulter women in the EPLF could hold very high status positions (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). Kusmallah mentions in her research that the most active association of the EPLF was the Women's association (Kusmallah, 2008).

According to Alexis Henshaw, membership of local assemblies were tilted in favor of women and due to quotas more women were allowed into leadership positions (Henshaw, 2013). Following this research by the end of the struggle more than half of the positions within the EPLF Constitutional committees were held by women. The article suggests that many women in the EPLF were in leadership positions as does the research of Sara Krosch. This information goes completely against what is known from research done by Bernal and others. Bernal and Gruber & Garcetti (Bernal, 2000; Gruber & Garcetti, 1998) both state that a disproportionately small group of women held leadership positions and that there were actually no women to be found in the highest ranks and in high positions of authority due to the fact that the EPLF allocated these positions based on seniority. As women were only allowed into the movement at a much later stage than men women could simply not move up to such ranks as fast as men could (Bernal, 2000).

The line of argument provided by Bernal and Gruber is, in my opinion, stronger and more reliable than the information provided in other scientific articles as those sketch romanticized ideas of the EPLF. Besides, the tone in Bernal's research matches with my idea of the more general consent on this topic: Women were not present in the highest positions and ranks (Bernal, 2000; Gruber & Garcetti, 1998; Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002); and female emancipation was subordinate to the liberation of Eritrea (Bernal, 2000). Bernal furthermore points out that there were no women in the Executive committee during the conflict. Worku Zerai stated that the NUEW never formulated its own objectives but implemented the programs that came from the top of the EPLF, of which the members were still all male. (Bernal, 2001)

It is furthermore important to say that the incorporation of women in education and in the military did not pass by without any resistance. Jakana Thomas and Kanisha Bond (2015) mention that the male fighters did not immediately accept the new female combatants. The men were afraid to lose their privileges and that the arrival of women would mean that their prospect to make themselves a career within the organization would diminish. Also, disapproving voices came from within civil society. Some priests threatened to excommunicate the families of female combatants and there are even cases reported in which EPLF propaganda unit members who tried to recruit women were assassinated (Thomas & Bond, 2015). Additionally, Islamic leaders forbade Muslim women to leave their homes and to fight along with the men (Krosch, 2005; Thomas & Bond, 2015). Many civilians believed that the women in the ELF and EPLF would be used as prostitutes (Krosch, 2005; Thomas & Bond, 2015) and also thought that women were incapable of fighting (Krosch, 2005). Eventually the civilians came around as they realized the war with Ethiopia could not be won without the help of the female fighters (Krosch, 2005)

### **4.3.2 Landownership reforms**

In 1982 The EPLF implemented its most economic emancipatory policy, the “Policy of Land Redistribution” (Waller & Rycenga, 2004). In the liberated areas the EPLF instituted the agrarian reforms which had the main aim to abolish customary forms of land ownership, tenure and usufruct which all were discriminating against women (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). The new reforms were meant to make it possible for women to own property which would enhance their economic independence (Rena & Narayana, 2006). The EPLF also redistributed recourses and land to women and to other disadvantaged groups (Bernal, 2001; Kusmallah, 2008). Women were also encouraged to participate in local assemblies in which the decision on the land use would be taken (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). Furthermore another reform was implemented to make it possible for women to inherit land (Kusmallah, 2008).

In the National Democratic Programme (NDP) developed by the EPLF they furthermore state women should be equal to men in politics, social life and economics and that that women should receive equal pay for equal work (Waller & Rycenga, 2004).

## **4.4 Status and agency**

### **4.4.1 Status**

Several sources mention that through the EPLF’s policies and the opportunity to participate in the military the status of the fighting women enhanced. The transformation of the social structures of the Eritrean society supposed to have changed the status of the Eritrean women (Bernal, 2001). Even the fighting women in non-leading positions were said to have gained power, self-esteem, status and control by taking up arms as the participation of the women in the struggle was seen as strengthening the overall aim of the EPLF and therefore gained higher status (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008).

### **4.4.2 Agency**

In regards to agency, an interesting observation can be made: With slogans such as ‘emancipation through participation’ a woman’s emancipation is said to come through a woman’s own effort. At the same time in much of the literature on the EPLF it is the EPLF which is credited for the achievement of the social emancipation and not the women in the EPLF. This is also mentioned by Kusmallah, she says the opinion is that it is due to the struggle of the movement that the women are liberated, it is not the result of their own struggle, which denies real agency for women. In a sense the EPLF presents itself as if it liberated the Eritrean women by saving them from the repression that they were experiencing (Kusmallah, 2008). This same contradiction is also noted by Bernal (Bernal, 2000).

## **4.5 EPLF policy failure**

Even during the conflict the EPLF was not able to bring about all their policies regarding female emancipation (Thomas & Bond, 2015). Initially the EPLF intended to end the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), but the EPLF could only abolish the most extreme form of infibulation (the removal of the external genitalia and the stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening (World Health Organization, 2000, p. 10) under the argument that it would be too dangerous for a woman’s health. The EPLF did not dare to also prohibit other forms of female circumcision as they were scared to receive too much resistance of the civilians and lose their support for the EPLF’s more moderate reform on FGM (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

#### **4.6 Limitations of EPLF's gender emancipation**

Another point to note is that while the gender roles of women were challenged by the EPLF and the female fighters this does not seem to have been the case for the gender roles of men. The mode of production is changed for the women, they now can have jobs in the public sphere, men did not seem to have more responsibility towards the domestic sphere and other elements that are often seen as a woman's job. Furthermore many of the privileges the men enjoyed stayed untouched by the female fighters presence and the ideology of the movement. The men in the EPLF did not have to make room for women when it came to the highest positions within the EPLF. Several authors suggest that EPLF was blind for its patriarchal structure and furthermore paid too little attentions to the private realms of life when it came to gender emancipation (Bernal 2000).

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

Both female fighters and civilian women gained new opportunities and gender equality in many different ways during the conflict. The EPLF developed new laws that would strengthen a woman's position in marriage and that would make her more economically independent. The EPLF made room for women in politics and also actively stimulated women to become politically active with educational programs. Furthermore schooling programs for both civilian women and female soldiers were set up. Especially the female fighters experienced great changes. In the army they were equal to their male colleagues, experienced new sexual freedom, were schooled in male disciplines and were independent from their families. At the same time the EPLF down played an important part of the female fighters life, Motherhood. And it failed to incorporate women in positions of high power. Besides, many of the policies and laws that the EPLF created were made for women but not by women. This is problematic as it resulted in policies and laws which were often blind for the problems women faced as the policies and laws were informed by a male view on the issues and did not include the actual experiences of women.

## 5. Life after the war

### **How did the life of the female combatants look after the war and how did life look like for civilian women?**

In 1991 the EPLF defeated the Ethiopian army. Though the EPLF had won the war and gained the independence of Eritrea, many of the promises that the EPLF had made were not kept and many of the accomplishments that had changed the lives of many different women did not withstand the new times of peace. This experience of peacetime backlash was especially bitter knowing that the EPLF would not have won without the huge contribution of thousands of women who saw themselves losing almost everything they had worked for during the last couple of decades.

This experience of peacetime backlash in Eritrea is a familiar phenomenon (Bernal, 2001). Research on the experiences of the female fighters of Zimbabwe, El Salvador, and Vietnam shows common patterns of disempowerment as well as problems with reintegration as many of the female veterans are not able to remobilize themselves into civil society as the civilian groups do not recognize nor reaffirm their proven abilities (Krosch, 2005). Rarely do women and girls who join rebel movements to gain equal rights and gender equality see their expectations fulfilled after the war (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). In most instances the female combatant finds herself after the revolutionary war marginalized in post-conflict society and this has definitely been the case for the Eritrean women (Campbell, 2005). Many of them who fought for gender equality and a free country in a revolutionary group found themselves sent back to the kitchen with the same rights and opportunities their grandmothers and mothers had enjoyed many years ago. The women are stigmatized and rejected by society and changed from war heroes to outcasts (Krosch, 2005).

In a referendum in April, 1993, 99,8 % of the Eritrean people endorsed the national independence of Eritrea. In the same year, Isaias Afewerki, the former secretary-general of the EPLF was elected as Eritrea's president. The EPLF changed into the People's Front of Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and gave the hope that the social revolution that the EPLF had started would be further spread into the Eritrean society. But there were no women present with the creation of the DRP (Eritrea's Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) program) and only very few women were appointed into the new government of the PFDJ. The first four years after gaining independence the PFDJ sought to implement EPLF-like policies and laws in Eritrea. For example, the new constitution was based on the National Democratic Program which the EPLF had developed many years before. Some of the goals the NDP had set were achieved by the PFDJ but the reintegration of the female combatants became a tough issue as the traditional norms and values on gender of the civil society clashed with the values the female combatants had developed for themselves (Krosch, 2005).

### **5.1 Demobilization**

The PFDJ decided that as the war was over, all resources should be focussed on the rebuilding of Eritrea's society, as any economic development and reconstruction had been neglected for 30 years (Bernal, 2001). Water systems and sewage systems barely worked, while roads, ports and railways had been destroyed. The average income per capita was not even half of the income of other Sub-Saharan countries (Connell, 1998). This reallocation of resources also meant that the PFDJ had to downsize the EPLF forces and had to start demobilizing the former fighters, sometimes against the will of the fighters themselves (Bernal, 2001). While the PFDJ succeeded in reducing the size of the army



drastically, many of the initial DDR plans were either never implemented or only to a very limited extent due to lack of donor support. The PFDJ insisted on staying self-reliant but faced therefore great difficulties with the reintegration of the veterans due to financial constraints. These constraints compounded the greater challenges of reintegrating the female veterans as a result of cultural constraints (Krosch, 2005). About 20.000 to 30.000 women were combatants by the end of the war of which 3.000 had become disabled (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998)

Chris Coulter notes in her research on African wars that women and girls rarely are registered for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs and that the rates almost never accurately represent the amount of women who were involved (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). The female veterans experience severe difficulties in regards to adapting to civilian life. Besides the fact that they were often excluded from the DDR programs they also face the rejection from their own communities and find themselves stigmatized by the civil society due to the fact that they had transgressed the traditional gender roles. According to Coulter, female fighters are in theory included in the DDR processes but the reality is that these programs are far more effective in reaching out to men than to female veterans who are constantly underrepresented. The assumption is that women do not participate in demobilization programs unless special measures are taken to include them. Women are often unable to join because of, for example, a lack of day care for their children. The lack of women in DDR programs is a common feature in African peacetime building (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008).

It was initially decided that the female combatants would be treated like the male combatants and that about 1/3 of the trainees of the DDR programs had to be women. This was not helpful for the reintegration of the female fighters as the culture they went back to was largely unaffected by the EPLF's ideology (Krosch, 2005). In the larger Eritrean society gender equality and female emancipation were not taken over as important values from the EPLF (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). This led to a situation in which women were often misunderstood and under-supported in their reintegration into Eritrea's traditional society. Shonda Hale writes that while the female combatants in the liberated areas were conducting social, political and economic transformations, the rest of the Eritrean society still lived according to local tradition and culture, far away from the impact of the revolution on gender roles. She describes that in a sense the Eritrean civilian society was frozen during the war and that it is for this reason that female combatants had such a difficult reintegration into a society which had stayed very conservative and did not develop at the same pace (Puechguirbal, 2005). Sabe, a female ex-fighter interviewed by Bernal, states 'we changed, but society had not changed'. Most of the female ex-combatants moved to the urban areas as they found it even harder to return to their old villages than to reintegrate into the city (Bernal, 2001). Furthermore, it should also be noted that it seems that many female fighters refused to accept their (new) subordinate positions as they were not willing to give up their former rights (Bernal, 2001; Gruber & Garcetti, 1998), which did not make their reintegration easier.

The public's inability to accept the female ex-fighters is in stark contrast with how the same women were perceived during the war. The difficulties the ex-combatants experienced were often explained by the civilian society as the women's own failure. The female combatants were from 'bad' families or were said not to be really Eritreans. (Israel, Lyons, & Mason, 2002). Overall, the civil society considered the women too radicalized to function in society (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

The liberation War DRP consisted of two different phases; the first phase targeting fighters who had been fighting since 1990 and a second phase targeting fighters who had been fighting before 1990. The main object of this DDR was to offer economic and social support to the ex-combatants. Mitias a semi-independent agency of the Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (ERREC) collected data on the participants and discovered that 83% of the combatants participation in the phase 1 program were male while 64% of the participants of the second phase were male. The PFDJ expected that the phase one participants would easily integrate into the civilian society as the ex-combatants only had been part of the fighting force for a short period. The PFDJ had not taken in account however that the phase one combatants were often from rural and poor areas who had not received the education the EPLF had offered to the phase two combatants as during the last years of the war more and more education programs were brought to a halt (Krosch, 2005). Additionally, due to time constraints, the new fighters could not optimally benefit from the EPLF literacy and training programs (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998; Krosch, 2005). Many of the women of phase two did enjoy education during their time in the EPLF but found themselves nevertheless not able to compete with the education and the skills training that the civilians had enjoyed (Krosch, 2005). The women in the second phase also were promised to receive 'sustained assistance and service pay' depending on how long they had served in the military and whether they had gotten disabled during the fight. The maximum amount of this pay was around 30 dollars a month. It was Mitias' responsibility to collect the data on the ex-fighters so they could later be contacted for extra services such as psychosocial counselling and educational programs. But it is not known whether Mitias actually had offered these services extensively. Mitias was different from other institution that were also responsible for the DDR process, in so far that Mitias realized that the female ex-combatants were an extra vulnerable group and therefore a special gender-unit was set up to increase the women's self-help potential. But this initiative lasted for only two years as the issue of the demobilization of the female veterans was passed on to the NUEW. This change actually allowed for the further marginalization of the female ex-combatants as unlike Mitias the NUEW was not part of the development of the DDR program for women. Furthermore there were no individual women part of the DDR development and implementation so the women's needs were overlooked and left out of the programs. Some economical support programs were set up to support the ex-combatants but the developers of the DDR programs failed to understand the challenges the female veterans were experiencing with their reintegration into civil society (Krosch, 2005).

## **5.2 Relations, family and womanhood**

The war and the EPLF had disrupted many family ties. The women who managed to return to their families often found themselves to be under the rule of brothers, fathers and the elder male community members (Bernal, 2001). While others were not able to return to their families or to the family of their husbands (Krosch, 2005).

One of the biggest blows the Eritrean ex-combatants received was in regard to their marriageability, fertility and overall relationships. Many of the female fighters discovered after that the war men did not want to marry them because they had, according to the men, lost their 'femininity' (Bernal, 2000). And many male fighters divorced their combatant wives to marry civilian women. According to Barth female ex-combatants in Eritrea generally married male ex-combatants while male ex-combatants mostly married civilian women and female ex-combatants rarely married civilian men (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). While the women were highly respected during war-time in the armed forces they experienced some serious stigmatization as they were not considered favourable marriage partners in the aftermath of the war due to their participation in the struggle. (Coulter, Persson, &

Utas, 2008) (Bernal, 2001) The traits that made the women great combatants like independence, freedom, courage and critical thinking now worked against the women as these characteristics were believed to make bad wives. Men have said that the fighters were too independent and assertive for their liking and that they preferred a woman who had not been sexually active with other men (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). The divorce rate for female fighters after the war was 60%. Husbands were often pressured by their families to divorce from their veteran wives (Bernal, 2000; Gruber & Garcetti, 1998) and to remarry civilian wives (Bernal, 2001). According to Sabe and her ex-husband it were especially the sisters and the mothers who pressured the men into remarrying by pointing out that the female-fighter had not given them any children and that their veteran wives were not from the same ethnic group as they were, and saying that the veteran wives were neither women nor men (Bernal, 2001). According to Bernal the female ex-fighters had experienced independence, equality with men, and freedom in regards to sex and relationships, which led to the fact that in the post-war society their femininity was questioned; their ability to be obedient and good spouses was doubted and that their morality was questionable as well (Bernal, 2000). Furthermore a renewed focus on childbearing came to the front in Eritrea. This was a huge problem for many female combatants as they had fought during their child-bearing peak and the female fighters had low fertility rates. The women were blamed for their own infertility and many men divorced their wives because of fertility issues. Worku Zerai states that women in post-war Eritrea are valued on their fertility. The focus on marriage, divorce and fertility redefined the identity of the Eritrean women as sisters and wives. Women were again not considered as individuals 'as they had experienced as fighters - but were defined on the basis of their relationship with men (Bernal, 2001). The fertility problems also made the femininity of the ex-fighters even more questionable in the eyes of the civilians (Bernal, 2001). Dr. Belainesh Araya from the university of Asmara claims that the domestic abuse rate after the war had risen to 65 % for women in urban and semi-urban areas and had become 73% for women in rural areas (Krosch, 2005)<sup>3</sup>. Another study from 2001 reports that about 40 % of Eritrean women experienced domestic abuse. The report also claims that while women can report domestic abuse, there is no legal aid to help them support their cases and that prosecution only is pursued if the violence has been life-threatening (Benninger- Budel & O'Hanlon, 2003). Yet another regional study claims that the domestic abuse rate could be closer to 90%. There is a strong taboo in Eritrea to talk about domestic violence and sexual abuse so domestic violence is extremely under reported (Benninger- Budel & O'Hanlon, 2003). Furthermore many of the victims do not believe they can leave their abusive partners as women had become economically dependent on their partners again. Besides the women felt betrayed by their male comrades who they accused of having become traditional again (Krosch, 2005).

Today in Eritrea's one-party state all men and women are required to complete 18 months of military training and community services. Pregnant and married women as well as women with children are exempt from this military duty. In this way women are pushed back to traditional domestic roles if they want to avoid fighting for Eritrea (Bernal, 2001; Krosch, 2005; Müller, 2005). In 1997 the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea resumed near the southern border of Eritrea. This time the Eritrean women were asked to fight again for Eritrea but none of the women held the illusion that fighting for Eritrea would lead to more gender equality. Seinat Teaklab a nineteen year old combatant whose parents both had fought in the independence war stated that her mother said to her during the new

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<sup>3</sup> I cannot find for any of these reports on what kind of study they are based on as I am not able to get access to the studies themselves only to more articles also citing the same source.

border conflict 'I am proud of you' but also 'fighting does not make us equal, it is only a start' (Fisher, 1999 August 26).

### **5.3 Education, career and politics**

#### **5.3.1 Education and career**

The women who did participate in the DDR programs were trained into traditionally female trades and skills such as mat-weaving, basket-making, embroidery, tailoring and typing (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008; Krosch, 2005). The problem with this was that these female trades did not render nearly enough income opportunities for the women as it only qualified them for the lowest paying jobs and so in 1995 this program was cancelled (Krosch, 2005). Additionally, it was discovered that women who had received training into male trades and skills were also not automatically employable (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). Even women who had been nurses, doctors and engineers had a hard time finding jobs. The useful skills the Eritrean women had learned during the war such as administrative, teaching, constructing, health and communication skills were often not acknowledged in the post war society as their skills were not formally confirmed. Ex-fighter Sameria expressed her frustration in Bernal's research, according to her there was very little work for women and many women did not have the certifications to work for ministries. (Bernal, 2001). This was very tragic as many of these skills could have been of great help with the process of peacebuilding. This also meant that the DDR program caused huge losses in social capital and left the female ex-combatants feel like they were stripped from their sense of dignity and their ability to control their own lives (Bernal, 2001; Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). In post-war Eritrea, a strict division of labour based on gender was present again. Despite the contribution of the women in the EPLF a major part of the Eritrean society believed that women did not have the proper abilities to do male work (Greenberg & Zuckerman 2006; Krosch, 2005). As before the war, women were once again viewed as only fit for domestic responsibilities and considered too weak and emotional to hold any position of authority. The female ex-fighters were thus required to forget all the freedom they had experienced as combatants (Krosch, 2005). Barth found in her research that many female ex-fighters preferred war time over peace, as the women found themselves pushed towards the traditional gender roles and status again, while they had experienced respect, equality and gender empowerment within the EPLF (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008). Nuria Mohammed Saleh, an ex-fighter who was interviewed by the New York Times reporter James Mckinley, stated that she 'missed being treated like a man'. Nuria had fought for the EPLF for 6 years and found herself in 1996 sweeping the floors of a factory as employers did not want to hire her for skilled work despite her EPLF training (Krosch, 2005).

Meintjes (Krosch, 2005) notes that while men and women had received the same education within the EPLF, the male fighters tended to find jobs quicker than the female fighters. The gender stereotypes in the Eritrean society led to a situation in which male veterans were hired over female veterans (Greenberg & Zuckerman 2006; Krosch, 2005). Women's mobility and income generating opportunities were further limited because they often carried the burden of child raising alone. This also meant that two of the EPLF's biggest social reforms, the marriage reform and the educational reform, did not result in more economic independence for women after the war (Krosch, 2005).

In 1995 the NGO ACORD conducted a survey in order to create a profile of the female ex-fighters. This survey showed that many female veterans had very few opportunities and lacked education and overall skills that could easily be translated into jobs. The women furthermore were often heads of households as their husbands had either died or left them. Many of the women were between the

ages of 25 to 35, and often had multiple children from different fathers. The women appeared to lack important business skills and had no experience with a monetary economy (Krosch, 2005). Some of the female fighters had lived their entire lives in the bush and had never handled money before. Many of the single mothers who started their own enterprises on micro-credits had ended up in poverty due to a lack of guidance and training (Greenberg & Zuckerman, 2006). The former female fighters clearly did not have the education, skills and social support to reintegrate into civil society and did not know what to do about their situation (Krosch, 2005).

After the war a clear gender gap in literacy became visible. The World Bank (1991) states that 60,1 of the Eritrean women were illiterate while the illiteracy rate for men was 33,5. This while there were slightly more women in Eritrea than men (Smith, 2001). The educational program the EPLF offered did not seem to have closed the educational gap between men and women and Worku Zerai notes that many former fighters lost their literacy skills as they did not get the opportunity to actually use them. Azieb, another ex-fighter interviewed by Bernal, expressed her frustration about Asmara University, as only between 1 out of 8 and 1 out of 10 students at the university was female even though the university was a public institution (Bernal, 2001).

### **5.3.2 Politics**

As soon as the war ended in 1991 the Eritrean women found themselves banned from politics. In different towns and villages men had formed secret committees which now tried to block the women from participating in the redistribution of land for agriculture and housing and which tried to prevent women from establishing their rights (Connell, 1998). This change took many women and men by surprise. In 1992 a protest march by the Eritrean women was held to demand from the new president the access to land and to combat these secret committees. Some men were jailed for this but it was clear real action needed to take place. In 1994 new land reforms were supposed to allocate land to both men and women (Connell, 1998). But many women did not dare to claim the land they were rightfully entitled to as they experienced threats and social pressure if they did so and many women did not have the education to defend their own cases (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

On the other hand, the PFDJ did take measures to combat sex discrimination. Additionally, nearly the majority of the Constitution Committee were female members and 30 seats in the People's assembly were reserved for women. Both the NUEW and the Ministry for Women were run by women (Connell, 1998; Krosch, 2005) and a woman attorney general was appointed for the enforcement of laws against discrimination based on gender (Connell, 1998). But this did not counter the set back the women experienced due to the deeply traditional society (Connell, 1998). The PFDJ did not take measures for private issues like the domestic setbacks that the women experienced, and the family with its patriarchal structure once again became the most powerful institution in Eritrea (Connell, 1998).

At the same time, in 1991, the NUEW became an organisation on its own separate from the EPLF and it gained the freedom to define their own programs and formalizing their own budget. Its primary objective was to protect and further develop the rights the Eritrean women had gained during the war (Krosch, 2005). In 1997 the NUEW was with its 200.000 members the largest sectorial association in Eritrea and managed to offer a wide set of educational and self-empowerment programs. Furthermore, it also brought about some of the most important post-war reforms for women, such as the recognition for both men and women as heads of the household, extending paid maternity leave, extending the sentence for rape to 15 years and making abortion legal in cases of rape and incest (Connell, 1998). But there were also some serious points of critique that can be mentioned in relation

to the NUEW. It was over-centralised and over-extended and it did not manage to represent the issues the female combatants were experiencing and which also had caused a huge division between the women in Eritrea (Connell, 2008). There were the elite women working for the NUEW while many other women suffered in poverty and deprivation (Krosch, 2005).

It is clear that the Eritrean society was not ready to allow the women real liberation in civil society even though they did support the same women and their liberation during the war. According to Barth men and women were encouraged to have similar roles as soldiers in war time while during peace time men and women were expected to have different gender roles. The difference to Barth is that men do not challenge gender roles and do not break from their gender socialization by going to war while women do. She found in her research that the Eritrean male ex-combatants were extremely popular after the war as their behavior only reinforced traditional ideas of masculinity, while the female combatants were not considered feminine anymore (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008).

#### **5.4 Reforms**

With regards to the political and legal level, the Eritrean women were officially equal while in practice the patriarchal traditions were deeply rooted in Eritrea's civilian society (Coulter, Persson, & Utas, 2008).

Janet Gruber and Eric Garcetti state that with the PFDJ a significant shift in regards to the execution of initiatives which would enhance gender equality has taken place. There is still a real commitment to the case of gender equity but the approach to it is significantly different from the EPLF. The government seems to avoid any dogma, policy or practice in this regard as they believe that a top-down approach does not work. It expects the people themselves to be proactive on the issue of gender equality. Only to a community generated desire for change could a change in gender roles and relations be brought about (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998).

Many elements of the land reform and the marriage reform have been carried forth in the PFDJ's "the proclamation of land" of 1994 and "the Family law" of 1994, but never did the PFDJ take any initiatives in post war Eritrea as radical as, for example, the promotion of premarital sex. The civilian society received the EPLF initiatives with great suspicion. Research indicates that the Eritrean people are and were very reluctant to change their behavior (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). Illustrative is that while the PFDJ did create the Family law, which is supposed to enhance women's position within marriage and to eradicate harmful cultural practices, in reality, due to generations of customary behavior of a very traditional society these reforms were rejected and ignored by civil society and many of the prohibited practices continued to take place. Similarly, with the land proclamation, customary laws among the many ethnic groups prohibit women to own land and entire communities refuse to accept the PFDJ reforms. According to Janet Gruber and Eric Garcetti women in post-war Eritrea still suffer great disadvantages. This is especially true for female headed households, which are amongst the poorest households in Eritrea (Bernal, 2001; Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). Furthermore, many of the communities in Eritrea are Muslim and some live according to the sharia law, which is often manipulated to resist any female entitlement. There are plenty of cases in which Eritrean women were rendered from claiming the land that they were entitled to (Gruber & Garcetti, 1998). Yet at the same time, there was nor is any evidence that the Eritrean government has abandoned its dedication to the land reforms.

Ex-fighter Samira pointed out that with just laws you do not create equality. She expressed that the laws made by the PFDJ were excellent but that there was no point to them when they are being

ignored. She believed that the women needed more economic independence so social independence would follow (Bernal, 2001).

### **5.5 Status**

Not much is left of the female fighters' status gain, as in post-war Eritrea the status of a woman is derived from her marital-status (Bernal, 2001). The female ex-combatants now have in regard to the social, the economical and the political a second class status (Connell, 2005).

### **5.6 Conclusion**

While the EPLF strived to gain gender equality and actively was trying to bring about massive social changes the reality is that they only partially succeeded. The failure of the EPLF to realize female emancipation is said to be due to the traditional society, customary behavior and the lack of any prior formal education of the women. The EPLF was unable to break away entirely from Eritrea's tradition and its past (Gruber & Garcetti). At the same time, the women who fought for the EPLF had developed a new sense of political awareness and self-confidence which no post-conflict outcome could take away (Campbell, 2005).

## 6. Conclusion

The EPLF was a movement with a high percentage of women fighting at the front line. In 1991 the EPLF won the 30 year war with Ethiopia and gained independence for Eritrea, which they could not have done without the many women participating in the movement. With the ideological message of the EPLF which stated that through participation in the struggle women could achieve emancipation in society, the EPLF was able to mobilize female fighters for the movement in historically large numbers. The women in Eritrea were motivated to fight for the liberation of their nation and to bring about political, social, economic and legal changes in regards to gender equality and women rights and by the opportunity to transform Eritrea into a modern country in which they were equal to men. During the war the EPLF was proved capable of bringing many of these changes into being. Civilian women were offered educational programs which many women were not allowed to enjoy before the war, were encouraged to become politically active and gained marriage equality and more economic independence with new laws. The female fighters experienced the biggest effect of their participation in the movement. Within the EPLF they were able to leave behind many of the constrictive practices of pre-war Eritrean society. Within the movement they were equal to men, got the same education and held the same jobs, and no longer did their families decide about their sexual behavior and relationships. They became independent and politically conscious war heroes.

At the same time the EPLF failed to recognize many of the specific problems of the women within and outside of the movement and was blind to the patriarchal structure it maintained. There was no independent women movement, no woman could obtain high positions of responsibility and the EPLF developed its own idea of female emancipation without involving women in this process. The EPLF downplayed some of the most important aspects of womanhood, such as being a mother, and it is questionable whether the women in the EPLF could define their own femininity for themselves. Besides, the EPLF focused on the mode of production in which women could do what was previously considered 'male-domain' but there was no mentioning of the EPLF about men doing what was previously considered a 'woman's job'. The traditional roles of the man and his privileges were not challenged. Bernal critiques the EPLF and states that within the EPLF women were doing as men and therefore were treated as men but the woman was not as a gender equal to man.

After the war the female fighters were left disappointed. Their participation had not led to the gender equality they were promised, and much of that that was established appeared to have been only temporary. Furthermore, female fighters experienced many problems with returning to civil society which the EPLF had not taken into account. Often, they were unable to return to their families. The PFDJ's DDR programs and projects did not deal with gender specific barriers and the issues that women encountered. That what had made the women good soldiers, such as their independence, now made them bad wives and distrusted by society. Besides, life in the fields had not prepared the women for life in the ordinary world.

Moreover, the ideas of the EPLF did not resonate in Eritrea's conservative civil society. Eritrea had a diverse cultural landscape in which the values of male supremacy and patriarchal institutes were strongly established. In this context the EPLF tried to put gender equality into practice, but not with much success, as many of the EPLF's and later of the PFDJ's laws were considered inferior and negligible by the civilians who still practiced customary laws that oppress women. The EPLF's ideas clearly had not penetrated traditional society.



It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the female fighter with her gender challenging role participating in the war has left Eritrean society completely untouched. The fight for independence made the Eritrean women politically conscious and they proved to be able to do whatever men can do. The NUEW became in 1991 independent and developed into the biggest union in Eritrea. In 1997, in a country with 3,5 million people, about 200.000 women were members of the NUEW. The NUEW continued to offer educational and self-empowerment programs. Women furthermore took up more than half of the seats of the committee that developed Eritrea's constitution. Two ministries, the NUEW and the Ministry of Women, were run by women. The PFDJ also did not abandon their commitment to gender equality. In 1994 'the proclamation of land' and the 'family law' were both passed with the intention to make the position of women in Eritrea better.

The insights of this research sheds light on female empowerment and the role of fighter for women in Eritrea and offers a path for future research in relation to gender and conflict. The data suggests that the female fighters of the EPLF achieved different forms of gender equality and empowerment in the movement and society which was not witnessed in Eritrea before. Participating in acts of violence has been empowering for the Eritrean women. Though, this empowerment seems to be largely temporary of nature and furthermore was constructed by the men dominating the political structures.

## 7. Discussion

### Limitations

There have been some issues with researching the female fighters of the EPLF. Due to Eritrea's current state, information is very incomplete and there are for many simple things no official numbers and dates, only estimates. This seemed to result in conflicting findings in the literature available on this topic. And the deeper my research sometimes progressed, the more different narratives, interpretations and numbers I would encounter. Furthermore, to my surprise, not all academics draw the same conclusions from the same sources. Besides, not all research appeared to be completely bias-free. Some research seemed to be less critical towards the EPLF and romanticized the war and the EPLF compared to other accounts. We should not forget that the EPLF deliberately pushed certain images of the conflict whenever academics and journalists from outside were around and I think that the influence of this could be found back in some of the research materials. But at the same time, some of these documents which appeared to be a bit biased were also the most important and complete sources for the female fighters own account on their experiences in the EPLF. I believe that the contradicting findings and statements from different academics are probably caused by the incomplete information on this topic, depending on who's research you use, you can get small differences in the interpretations. It should be mentioned though, that even though there is no complete consensus on what has happened, when, who has done it and why, all the scholars come with a final conclusion that is similar to the conclusion of this research project.

### Recommendations

As mentioned throughout this research paper, some information on the female fighters of the EPLF is rather limited. This is especially the case in regards to what motivated the women to fight. Often in the research on the female combatants in Eritrea they are said to fight for women equality and for the independence of Eritrea. I believe that this is a very limited understanding of why the women are fighting and other scholars like Sarala Emmanuel (Krosch, 2005) have also stressed that these constructions do not help us in understanding why individual women were fighting and what they believed to get out of their participation in the struggle. Additionally, only a few of the interviews conducted with female (ex)fighters addressed the topic of motivations to fight at all. If we want to have a complete understanding of the women who take up arms in conflict, further research needs to be done on the motives and expectations of female fighters in general and of the female fighters of the EPLF.

Although I addressed the motivations of the female fighters in this research, I am not able to say anything about the relationship between the motivations the women have and the level of female emancipation brought about, let alone the causality of this relationship, as it is beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, research on the relationship between different types of motivations and the outcome of war in regards to women's emancipation could give us more insight on how and what influences warfare, the outcome of war and civil society.

Moreover, many scholars mentioned in this research paper, for example Miranda Alison, argue that the pattern of women's participation in liberations struggles in Algeria, Eritrea, Nicaragua, Palestine, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and other countries are similar to each other as the liberation movements in these countries like the EPLF fought for both the independence of the country and female emancipation. And in all these cases the emancipation of women was considered secondary to the

liberation of the country (Alison, 2003). While similarities are often drawn, I have not found any research that actually brought all these liberation movements together and compared them. I believe this would be important research to conduct as it would not only offer us a better understanding of how a movement and conflict is impacted by women participation, but it would also give us the opportunity to pinpoint what factors of the female fighters and their participation influence the movement they are I part of, the warfare and the outcome and aftermath of the war.

Not only would I recommend for more research on female fighters in other liberation movements to develop a complete understanding on war and conflict situations, I also highly recommend policy makers and media to include the knowledge derived from this research in their work. As is obvious from the case of Eritrea, the female fighter is more often than not excluded from the peace building and DDR programs which results in strongly marginalized groups of female veterans. This could be prevented by better informed policy development. Media needs to adapt its portrayal of women in conflict as well, as its contemporary portrayal is not only far from the reality of women in conflict but also maintains sexist ideas on men and women.

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### **figure list**

Figure 1. n.d. (n.d). Equality Through Struggle. Retrieved April, 9, 2017 from <http://www.worldpulse.com/en/community/users/rahel-weldeab/posts/20092>

Figure 2. One World - Nations Online (n.d.). Political Map of Eritrea. Retrieved April 23, 2017, from <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/eritrea-political-map.htm>

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Political Map of Eritrea



Figure 2. Political Map of Eritrea

## **Appendix B: NDP objectives**

The National Democratic Program (NDP) which was formulated by the EPLF in 1977 and rewritten in 1987, and later became part of the Eritrean constitution, outlined the following objectives in relations to women's emancipation and rights as followed:

- Develop a union through which women can participate in the struggle for national liberation and for social transformation.
- Outline a broad program to free women from domestic confinement and raise their political, cultural and productive levels.
- Assure women full rights of equality with men in politics, the economy and social life as well as equal pay for similar work.
- Promulgate marriage and family laws that safeguard the rights of women.
- Protect the rights of women to two months maternity leave with full pay.
- Protect the rights of mothers and children and provide delivery, nursery and kindergarten services.
- Struggle to eradicate prostitution.
- Respect the right of women not to engage in work harmful to their health.
- Design programs to increase the number and upgrade the quality of women leaders and public servants .

(NDP 1987, cited in Green & Baden, 1994: 6)