



The Making of Elite Women. Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea

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AFRIKA-STUDIECENTRUM SERIES



Tanja R. Müller

The Making of Elite Women

Revolution and Nation Building in Eritrea

This book contains a thorough study of the upcoming of elite women in Eritrea, encompassing the time of the armed struggle for liberation and its aftermath, up to the tenth anniversary of Eritrean independence in 2001 and beyond. The study is multi-disciplinary, combining a comprehensive analysis of Eritrean history, society and political developments with extensive case study research of the lives of different groups of elite women. Modernisation processes created by the Eritrean revolution, fostered an environment in which women are regarded as equal and are encouraged to occupy positions of leadership. At the same time, the revolution's hegemonic ideology does not envisage women opting out of its version of modernity, thus new avenues open up only for those subscribing to the revolution's narrative of progress. Furthermore, it is argued that while the Eritrean revolution played a decisive role in opening up possibilities for women's emancipation, a failure to implement democratic structures of governance puts the revolution's societal achievements at risk – its legacy might well rest with possibilities of personal liberation in individual lives.

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The Making of Elite Women



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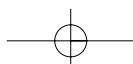
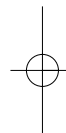
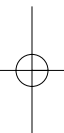
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by

Tanja R. Müller



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Contents

List of appendices *vii*

Acknowledgements *viii*

Glossary of foreign words *x*

List of acronyms *xi*

INTRODUCTION *1*

- 1 SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN A REVOLUTIONARY SOCIETY – THE CONTEXT *5*
 - The concept of revolution *8*
 - Women and revolution in the developing world – A history of unfulfilled promises? *16*
- 2 WITHIN THE ERITREAN REVOLUTION: NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE AND WOMEN'S LIBERATION – CONFLICTING OBJECTIVES OR COMPLEMENTARY AGENDA? *25*
 - Eritrean society and nationalist politics up to 1970 *26*
 - The EPLF and its national democratic revolution *37*
 - Within the Eritrean revolution: National independence and women's liberation *45*
- 3 METHODOLOGY *58*
 - Methodological choices *58*
 - Data sources *62*
- 4 OF FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND UNIVERSITY GRADUATES: THE STRUGGLE AS WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY – SOME HISTORIES *70*
 - Opening one: In the field and beyond *71*
 - Opening two: The road via education *87*
- 5 THE JOURNEY THROUGH SCHOOLING – SUCCESSES AND TRIBULATIONS OF YOUNG WOMEN IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS *120*
 - The exceptions – Stories of fulfilled ambitions *123*
 - From Tsabra to Barentu: Encounters with tomorrow's elite? *133*
 - The view from Asmara *152*

6	WOMEN IN THE ELITE I: CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT, EDUCATION FOR THE FUTURE	155
	After the struggle ... still fighting for the revolution?	155
	Different careers, different feelings?	162
	In search of a role model	166
	Education for an emancipated future?!	173
7	WOMEN IN THE ELITE II: AMBITIONS FOR THE FUTURE – THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE AND PERSONAL EMANCIPATION	181
	“Our future is trapped” – The individual versus the nation	183
	“I want a good job” – Ambitions for what kind of future?	190
8	THE STORY SO FAR – CONCLUSION	203
	Epilogue	221
	Appendices	229
	Bibliography	275
	Index	297

List of appendices

- 1 Timeline Eritrea – A brief historical overview 231
- 2 Texts on women’s rights in EPLF/PFDJ programmes 234
- 3.1 Overview of data sources 236
- 3.2 Background information on the UoA 238
- 3.3 Secondary schools in Eritrea, school year 2000/2001 240
- 3.4 Survey sampling frame and respondents 241
- 4.1 Overview of interviewees – Present elite women in Eritrea 242
- 4.2 Background characteristics of group of 29 female students
at the UoA and survey sample 248
- 5.1 School enrolment figures and percentages by level, *zoba* and sex 254
- 5.2 Visits to five secondary schools in Eritrea 257
- 5.3 Admittance to the UoA 263
- 6.1 Survey respondents’ future plans 264
- 6.2 Survey respondents’ problems at the UoA and beyond 265
- 6.3 Survey respondents’ gender attitudes 268
- 7 Maps 271

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Needless to say, all errors, factual or in interpretation, are mine.

Glossary of foreign words

<i>awat na hafash</i>	Victory to the masses
<i>baito</i>	traditional village council
<i>chador</i>	traditional black whole body veil for Muslim women
<i>derg</i>	government during Ethiopian revolution (1974 – 1991)
<i>enda</i>	kinship group in the highlands
<i>hafar</i>	shy
<i>hamade</i>	Eritrean expression for the NUEW
<i>kebessa</i>	Eritrean highlands; plateau
<i>mahber fikri hager ertra</i>	Association of love of the country of Eritrea
<i>makalai ailat</i>	new migrants to settled highland farming villages
<i>megza'ati</i>	colonialism; colonisation
<i>mehefar</i>	to be ashamed
<i>metahit</i>	Eritrean lowlands
<i>nabtab</i>	ruling clans
<i>restenyat</i>	landowning class in the highlands
<i>sewa</i>	local beer
<i>shifta</i>	bandit
<i>shumagulle</i>	ruling clans
<i>tigre</i>	serfs
<i>warsai</i>	new generation of women soldiers in Eritrea
<i>zibib</i>	local anis schnapps
<i>zoba</i>	administrative region in Eritrea
EPLF military hierarchy:	
<i>gujelle</i>	group of ten fighters
<i>ganta</i>	group of 30
<i>hailee</i>	group of 90
<i>bottolini</i>	group of 270
<i>brigade</i>	group of 810
<i>kefle-serawit</i>	group of 2430

List of acronyms

AFP	Agence France Press
BA	Bachelor of Arts (used for Bachelor Degree in general)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BMA	British Military Administration
CCE	Constitutional Commission of Eritrea
EDF	Eritrean Defence Forces
EEBC	Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ELM	Eritrean Liberation Movement
EPLA	Eritrean People's Liberation Army
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ESA	Eritrean Studies Association
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FoE	Faculty of Education
FPC	Four Powers Commission
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberacion National
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPA	Grade Point Average
GSE	Government of the State of Eritrea
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
HRD	Human Resource Development
IDPs	Internally Displaced People
IDTs	International Development Targets
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IFIs	International Financial Institutions
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Network
IT	Information Technology
MA	Master of Arts
MITIAS	parastatal organisation founded by ERA to support reintegration and demobilisation, the name stands for a traditional social network for social solidarity
ML	Muslim League

MLG	Ministry of Local Government
MLHW	Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare
MLT	Medical-Laboratory Technician
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoH	Ministry of Health
MSc	Master of Science
NA	National Assembly
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NUEW	National Union of Eritrean Women
NUEYS	National Union of Eritrean Youths and Students
OAU	Organisation of African Unity (now: African Union)
ODA	Oversees Development Administration
OMM	Organização da Mulher Moçambicana
PAIGC	Partido Africano do Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy (used for doctoral degree in general)
RDC	Research and Documentation Centre
SST	Secondary School Teachers
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
TTI	Teacher Training Institute
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNMEE	United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea
UNOVER	United Nations Observer Mission to Verify the Referendum in Eritrea
UoA	University of Asmara
US	United States (of America)
WB	World Bank
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union

Angel of History

*My wing is ready for flight
I would like to turn back.
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck.*

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, 1973: 259

To Beraki Gebreselassie and those with him – their personal histories serving as symbols for the history of the Eritrean revolution.

Introduction

One of the major themes within the social sciences in the twentieth century was the collective attempt to improve the human condition in (socialist) revolutionary (mass) movements. At the beginning of the twenty-first century many of these attempts are considered to have failed, often piling wreckage upon wreckage in the course of their history. Nevertheless, the search remains for alternatives to the dominant doctrine of global neo-liberalism which emerged after the end of the Cold War, especially in the face of prevailing poverty in many countries in the developing world. Thus, particularly in the context of societies in the developing world, the potential inherent in revolutions to radically reshape those societies – a transformation commonly envisaged by the revolutionary movement of the day in terms of ‘modernisation’ coupled with notions of social justice – lets them remain intriguing and relevant objects of study.

The example chosen to discuss the relevance revolutions can still have in the globalised world of the twenty-first century is Eritrea, Africa’s youngest state. It came into being as the outcome of a national liberation struggle combined with a social revolution. The potential to reshape the world inherent in a revolutionary situation is examined through the lens of social change in the status of women in society. This is due to the fact that gender relations played an important part in the ideology of all revolutionary movements in the twentieth century in the developing world, and particularly so in Eritrea.

In judging revolutions as well as wider processes of modernisation in their wake, the individual is often neglected in favour of the broader picture of creating a new nation, a different society, a more just or modern or progressive social order. After all, revolutions usually involve ‘the masses’ or some form of popular movement, and thus they tend to be judged in terms of their impact on this collectivity, of which an important group are ‘women’. In this study, it will be individuals who come to the forefront. The Eritrean revolution will be judged in terms of its emancipatory effect and the transformations it brought to the lives of individual women who are in different ways part of the elite.

These ‘views from below’ which emerge in the life histories of this diverse sample of women will reveal what the revolution meant for them personally, how it changed their lives and opened up space for emancipation and liberation.

At the same time, it will place their personal histories into the broader social and cultural context of the Eritrean revolution and nation building process.

The focus is on the time of revolutionary institutionalisation and consolidation, the time after the revolutionary movement achieved state power and is in the position to put its political agenda into practice under the conditions of building a new nation. It was ten years in May 2001 since the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) marched into Asmara and became the de facto government of independent Eritrea. Thus, the 'honeymoon period' which usually follows national liberation can be regarded as over and time has come to take some stock of the revolution's wider objectives and their implementation – including changing gender relations within Eritrea.

The success of the Eritrean revolution relied to a large extent on the spread of its ideology among a sufficiently large part of the population via a programme of political education. Within this ideological framework, certain forms of traditional lifestyles were judged as backward and a modernist outlook propagated. An important part of this modernist agenda advocated the equality of women and men by virtue of their joint participation in the revolution.

The main focus in this study is on three generations of present and potential future elite women. It will be largely these elite women who will in the longer term shape the conditions for the majority of Eritrean women – particularly so in the light of the EPLF's ideological belief that the more female 'role models' exist as part of the elite, the easier it will be for 'ordinary' women to advance and for entrenched 'backward' attitudes towards women to be overcome. In the lives of present elite women contradictions within the revolution are particularly pronounced. The potential future elite women will be the cornerstone for the future of the revolutionary agenda in terms of fundamentally changing the status of women in Eritrean society.

These elite women comprise a group of ex-fighters who today occupy positions of political power. They were the female elite of the revolution, its "avant-garde" (LeHouérou, 2000: 604), and now find themselves in the position of being part of the female elite of the new nation, and, as will be revealed, consider themselves as the "éclairée" (ibid.: 612), the "enlightened vanguard" (Hale, 2000: 362). These are the women whose lives were shaped by the revolution and who now transport its ideology into the consolidation process. Their position is somewhere on a scale between the two poles of serving as "models of emancipated women within a liberated society" or being "symbols of a romantic era that passed, metaphors for and icons of the struggle" (ibid.: 349). Their histories will be contrasted with the experiences of women – partly from the same generation, partly younger – who chose a different route and, without direct involvement in the revolution, became part of the business and academic elite.

The central focus, however, will be on a group of young women who were teenagers when Eritrea won its independence and are currently students at the University of Asmara (UoA). In being groomed to become part of the future elite they will be decisive for the process of revolutionary consolidation. In a further step back in time, the experiences of young women in secondary schools will be looked at. The focus here is on 'traditional' environments to get some insights into if and how the modernist agenda of the revolution might have modified these environments in terms of opening up opportunities for young women.

This focus on women successful within the system of formal education pays tribute to the fact that as the central tool for women's emancipation and modernisation – in general as well as in the specific context of the Eritrean revolution – education has been identified.

The challenges these women face and the ambitions they have for their future will reveal the possible openings (and closures) created for women in the aftermath of the Eritrean revolution in terms of enabling them to occupy positions of decision making in society as well as following their personal agenda of emancipation. In a further step, their personal experiences will allow wider conclusions to be drawn on the Eritrean revolution in general, in particular on how it treads the fine line between authoritarian rule and a democratic society – a balancing act in which so many revolutionary movements have failed.

The book consists of eight chapters.

Chapter one defines the concept of revolution as it is understood in this study. It identifies gender relations as an important part in the ideology of revolutionary movements in the twentieth century in the developing world and proceeds to examine how women fared in a number of such revolutions.

Chapter two starts with a brief introduction of Eritrean society and nationalist politics. It then introduces the EPLF as a revolutionary movement before looking in detail at the ideological framework of the Eritrean revolution and its practical implications for women within.

Chapter three briefly outlines the methodology followed to eventually arrive at coherent personal narratives of elite women within the Eritrean revolution.

The main data chapters are chapters four to seven. *Chapter four* starts with looking at the background of present elite women in Eritrea – namely former fighters who today occupy positions of authority, as well as women who successfully pursued an academic or business career. It then turns to a group of 29 female students at the UoA who are in the centre of this research and examines their personal histories. While the background of present elite women shows strong similarities – they come from urban and often semi-affluent families – the history of a number of current students at the UoA shows that the

Eritrean revolution did indeed create some openings via education for the present generation of young women.

Chapter five takes the reader one step further back: to the years of secondary schooling as a decisive stage in the lives of young women when the course is set for much of their future. The remembered experiences of the 29 main student participants during their years of secondary schooling are supplemented by observations and interviews in five secondary schools in present-day Eritrea. The lives of young women are shown to be located somewhere between being academically successful and have aspirations for a ‘modern’ future on one hand, and cultural traditions, the most prominent being early marriage, on the other.

Chapter six looks at present challenges and the future outlook of current elite women. It shows the lives of former fighters mainly determined by the collectivity of the nation, whereas individualised notions of success dominate among civilian professional women. Both groups regard themselves as role models for the future generation of Eritrean women. But they are regarded as such by the dominant political ideology only in so far as their individual ambitions comply with the perceived needs of the nation. For the future, it is envisaged that education will be decisive for women’s advancement. But in the way education is conceptualised the dichotomy between the individual and the wider society inherent in any educational system is largely ignored.

Chapter seven illustrates this dichotomy in returning to the core group of potential future elite women who at the time of the research were students at the UoA and taking a look at their future aspirations. These 29 women are shown to have ambitions common to young women the world over: a good job and a successful family life. Similar traits are reported among a wider sample of male and female university students who took part in a questionnaire survey. The majority are, however, prepared to pursue their individual aspirations in a way which at the same time benefits the nation.

Chapter eight shows the lives of the participants in this study determined by two pairs of opposite poles: individualism versus collectivism on one hand – the latter being a legacy of the revolution’s nationalist ideology and citizenship obligations arising from it; and a modernist outlook (visible most prominently in a culture of life-long career) versus cultural traditions (most prominent in early marriage traditions) on the other. It concludes that the Eritrean revolution established a process of modernisation which brought individual freedoms to and created openings for women. These possibilities of personal liberation might turn out to become its most important legacy.

The *epilogue*, with reference to recent political events, shows successes in revolutionary institutionalisation and consolidation at risk. It remains to be seen in which direction the storm will blow in the future, and whether it will allow the angel of history to turn its face forwards again.

Social change and the status of women in a revolutionary society – The context

The following two chapters set the theoretical context into which the subsequent case studies of Eritrean women are embedded. In this chapter, revolution and revolutionary society as understood in the context of this study are defined. In a further step the standing of women in revolutions in the developing world is being examined.

Revolution has been called a special case of social change (Moghadam, 1997), an attempt “to embody a set of values in a new or at least renovated social order” (Dunn, 1989: 12). Revolutions (at the outset) aim for a combination of social justice and improvement of society (Käufeler, 1988); the latter is commonly described in terms of what can be called modernisation. Nearly all revolutions which took place in the developing world in the twentieth century had such a modernist agenda. This agenda centred on, as Cabral put it, “the building of the people’s economic, social and cultural progress” (Cabral, 1980: 150).¹

Modernisation here is understood in its most basic sense: Having its roots in the humanist and secularist enlightenment philosophy of reason and progress (Green, 1997; Hobsbawm, 1962) modernisation is the hope for a better world

¹ Partly an exception was the Iranian (theocratic) revolution of 1979.

which will come about by “the growth of education (...) moral improvement and technical development” (Kolakowski, 1990: 221).²

These elements – the strive for social justice, ‘betterment’, modernity – are combined during the revolutionary struggle with an upsurge in the intrinsic ability of people to reassert a history of one’s own, recapture an identity of one’s own and ultimately recreate a society (often in tandem with a nation) of one’s own (Davidson, 1981a; Selbin, 1993).³ Above all, revolutions raise the question whether human and social conditions need to be as unequal and unjust as they are in a pre-revolutionary context (Dunn, 1989). Two emotions are thus at the centre of revolution: hope and despair (Kimmel, 1990).⁴

This characteristic of a revolutionary process – regardless of what the eventual outcome will be – as a situation in which “possibilities seem to abound” (Selbin, 1993: 1) does make these processes so intriguing. Here the potential of human agency to radically reshape the world suddenly can become reality. In the words of Arendt “what the revolutions brought to the fore was this experience of being free” (Arendt, 1963: 34). The process of revolution creates structural possibilities of transformation that were not present before (Kimmel, 1990).

Revolution has thus been regarded as crucial to the process of modernisation (Huntington, 1968; Moore, 1967).⁵ Moore argues that Western scholars are unjustified advocates of gradual change instead of violent revolution (Moore, 1967). The conditions in some developing countries he describes as “the suffering of those who have not revolted” (ibid.: 506). Even though Moore acknowledges that the Russian or Chinese revolutions did not bring “higher forms of freedom” to its peoples than Western democratic capitalism, these revolutions nevertheless created what he refers to as “the possibility of libera-

² It goes beyond the focus of this research to engage in a debate on the tribulations of modernity. In general the author agrees with Kolakowski that “it would be silly (...) to be either ‘for’ or ‘against’ modernity *tout court* (...) because both, modernity and antimodernity may be expressed in barbarous and antihuman forms” (Kolakowski, 1990: 12). For many people in the developing world, the promises of modernity mean things as simple as clean water, enough food, a roof over their head and an education for their children.

³ The concept of creating a space of one’s own was adopted from the following line (echoing Virginia Woolf and) written by Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah: “A room of one’s own. A country of one’s own. A century in which one was not a guest” (quoted from Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 149). Even though Farah was referring to his native country, his imagery captures one of the essences of any revolutionary process.

⁴ Arendt remarks in this context that the October Revolution in Russia had for her contemporaries “the same profound meaningfulness of first crystallizing the best of men’s hope and then realizing the full measure of their despair that the French Revolution had for its contemporaries” (Arendt, 1963: 57).

⁵ This link has been disputed by other scholars, one of the most prominent of whom is Tilly, who regards political factors as decisive in explaining revolutions (see Tilly, 1973).

tion” (ibid.: 506).⁶ In a similar spirit, Dunn (1989) argues that revolutions must be taken seriously because they represent “profoundly important and in some ways distinctively successful attempts to improve the human social condition” (ibid.: 20).⁷

In the context of this study, the potential to reshape the world inherent in a revolutionary situation will be examined through the lens of social change in the status of women in society. It has been suggested that “gender relations constitute an important part of the culture, ideology, and politics of revolutionary societies” (Moghadam, 1997: 137). Or, to look at it from the other angle, that “the most striking changes” in the status of women have come about “in the context of developmentalist socialist revolutions and regimes” (Moghadam, 1992: 228).⁸

Moghadam defines two models of womanhood which emerged in the context of revolutionary change in the twentieth century. These are what she calls the “Woman’s Emancipation model” (where women’s emancipation is a major goal or outcome of a revolution) and the “Woman-in-the-Family model” (where the family attachment of women is a major goal or outcome of a revolution) (Moghadam, 1993).⁹

Even though this definition is analytically too broad in the sense that one can conceive of a revolution which has women’s emancipation initially as a goal but changes its course and thus has a different outcome (Algeria could be a possible

⁶ In a wider sense Moore argues that in Western democratic countries revolutionary (and other) forms of violence were part of a historical process that laid the conditions for subsequently peaceful processes of social change; in a similar way, in ‘communist’ countries revolutionary violence has been part of a break with an repressive past and an effort to construct a less repressive future (Moore, 1967: 506).

⁷ A paradigmatic example here is the Cuban revolution. It is widely acknowledged that in its course a legacy of underdevelopment and social deprivation was overcome – as witnessed for example in the human development indicators published yearly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (for a discussion of the Cuban experience see Müller, 1993; Selbin, 1993). However, the Cuban revolution failed to provide “higher forms of freedom” to its people.

⁸ Moghadam cites the Bolshevik revolution in Russia as providing “the first historic example of sweeping legal reform in favour of women” (Moghadam, 1993: 69), soon to be followed by China. In both cases, it was a mixture of principle (a believe in gender equality) and pragmatism (the needs of the revolution) combined that led to vast improvements in the status of women (Moghadam, 1992: 229) – not unlike in Eritrea as will be shown as this study unfolds.

⁹ Moghadam regards as the historical precursor for the “Woman-in-the-Family model” the French Revolution (for a discussion see Moghadam, 1993: 74f). Among the socialist or populist revolutions of the twentieth century which fall into this category she identifies the Mexican, Algerian and Iranian revolutions (Moghadam, 1993: 97). Examples cited for the “Woman’s Emancipation model” include (in addition to Russia 1917 and China): Cuba, Vietnam, Democratic Yemen, Afghanistan (Saur Revolution), Nicaragua, El Salvador and as a bourgeois revolution Kemalism in Turkey (Moghadam 1993; 1997). No African revolution is among the examples as Moghadam states (wrongly, as will be seen in more detail in the following sections) that very little information is available on gender dynamics of African revolutions (Moghadam, 1993: 97).

case in point here), it is useful in the context of this study to clarify its focus: It centres on revolutions which follow the “Woman’s Emancipation model”: Revolutions whose protagonists “target feudalism, tribalism, or backwardness and recognise the need to integrate women into programmes for development and progress” (Moghadam, 1993: 95) – in short, revolutionary movements which combine a developmentalist orientation with a concept of women’s rights.

The following will define the concept of revolution and revolutionary society in more detail. In a further step, the content of some revolutions in the developing world will be looked at in order to analyse how a change in the status of women became integrated into revolutionary practice.

The concept of revolution

A useful starting point to approach revolution and clarify what is meant by revolutionary society is Huntington’s definition, as he clearly distinguishes revolution from other means of change in political power. For Huntington a revolution is “a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the *dominant values and myths* of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership and government activity and policies” (Huntington, 1968: 264; *my emphasis*). Revolutions are thus different from rebellions, revolts, coups and wars of independence, as all of these do not necessarily involve a change in social structures and values (*ibid.*).¹⁰

Huntington argues from a structural perspective in which modernisation is the cause of revolution. Skocpol – while sharing this structural perspective – in her study of the three ‘great’ social revolutions (France in 1789, Russia in 1917, China in 1911 and 1949) extends the focus to include the revolutionary process. She defines the ‘great’ revolutions as events where structural transformation occurred together with a class breakthrough from below. The latter is based on Marxist understanding which defines revolutions as class-based movements driven by inherent contradictions in society (Skocpol, 1979; Skocpol, 1994).

Remaining for the moment with this structural perspective, part of the essence of revolution can thus be defined as a coincidence of radical political transformation and fundamental change in political and social structures in a mutually reinforcing fashion (Skocpol, 1979). Alternatively if a national libera-

¹⁰ Unless this distinction is made, the concept of revolution is in danger of losing much of its utility. As Selbin (1993) points out, revolution is at times invoked as a rhetorical device to lend drama to far less dramatic occasions and used synonymously with ‘watershed’, ‘turning point’, or simply uprising. In this context, for example the Palestinian Intifada in the West Bank and Gaza and the Zapatista movement in Mexico have been referred to as revolutions (see Foran, 1997).

tion war is characterised by these features, it is considered to be a revolution.¹¹ Throughout this study when referring to the Eritrean liberation war or “the struggle”, as it is usually referred to among Eritreans, what is implied is a revolution in the full sense of the word.¹²

Revolutions in the late twentieth century took place in different circumstances from the ‘great’ revolutions in France, Russia and China. In the context of this study – and with the Eritrean revolution in mind – the typology suggested by Hermassi (1976) is worth some elaboration. Hermassi distinguishes between three types of revolutions: The first he calls “democratic revolutions” (referring to England¹³ and France), where the revolutionary agenda was one of “liberating a dynamic society and growing economy from an inhibiting political framework” (Hermassi, 1976: 219). The second type he calls “developmental revolutions”, referring to revolutions which “occurred in societies marked by relative stagnation and backwardness, and their aim has been to employ a massive apparatus of state power in order to catch up with developments abroad” (ibid.). The prototype here is the Russian revolution (later reappearing in Eastern Europe and partly China), whose significance Hermassi sees in

the establishment of political control over social and economic affairs, the obliteration of distinctions between state and society, and the conception of state power as something to be mobilised at will for the purpose of changing societal relations (ibid.: 221).

The third type he calls “national revolutions” (ibid.: 226). These are revolutions which occurred in developing societies. Because of these societies’ structural position in the global world system, national revolutions could neither carry out the programme of the early democratic revolutions nor fulfil the aims

¹¹ This is not to deny but rather support the distinction Chabal makes between a national liberation war and revolution. While the former is mainly a military conflict between a nationalist movement and a colonial power, the latter, in addition to the overthrow of an existing political state by a counter elite, requires “the *ability* by the new political masters to establish a radically distinct social, political and economic order” (Chabal, 1983: 188, my emphasis). Especially the issue of ability is crucial here: Revolution implies not only having won power and perhaps already administered part of the country in a ‘revolutionary’ way in that process, but the ability to carry this qualitatively different system through to the post-independence area.

¹² In a broader context it has been argued that a mere violent overthrow of an unpopular or colonial government could never justify the sufferings armed struggle involves; therefore a liberation struggle worth being called that always involves establishing a new socio-economic framework (and therewith a revolutionary element): “If there had to be warfare, it was to be for revolutionary ends” (Davidson, 1981a: 20; referring to the liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde).

¹³ The so called Glorious Revolution in England in 1688/89 could be called an ancestor of revolution, as here the establishment of a constitutional form of government was introduced. The Bill of Rights of 1689 was subsequently used as a point of reference in the American War of Independence, which qualifies as another ancestor.

of the developmental ones, but aimed to create societies characterised by a synthesis of both agendas (*ibid.*). The Chinese revolution occupies a linking position between developmental and national revolutions. It was on one hand highly influenced by the Marxist-Leninist agenda of the Russian revolution. On the other hand, it shared many of the features of national revolutions in developing societies which were to come afterwards – not least the need for national consolidation in geographic and military terms and a unifying ideology (which was to become symbolised in Mao’s ‘little red book’), as it was the only of the ‘great’ revolutions which required a long drawn-out military struggle for the revolutionaries to come to power (see Dunn, 1989: 70f).

Revolutions do occur in situations where any road towards reform seems blocked (though they do not always occur).¹⁴ Or to look at it from the other side: Legitimacy of a revolutionary movement requires a state of near total disillusionment among the wider population with the ruling authority and prevailing power structures (Turok, 1980: 13). There can be no revolution “except where the previous regime, whether by its weakness or by its viciousness, has lost the right to rule” (Dunn, 1989: 246).

To turn this disillusionment into a revolution needs, however, a further element: a radical ideological break with what was before. Dunn characterises a revolutionary as somebody who is engaged in creating a better future in being committed not only to changes in the tenure of positions of power, but equally to changes in social stratification (or even the eventual disappearance of it), to improvements in social welfare and to decisive changes in ideology. The latter is not merely consisting of ritual proclamations of certain political and social values that might appeal to the wider masses, but of a transformation in the way in which people’s “experience of living in their society leads them to perceive and to feel about that society” (Dunn, 1989: 229). This last aspect will be shown in due course as having been one of the decisive factors in the success of the Eritrean revolution.

The ‘great’ revolutions provided all subsequent revolutions with an ideological discourse of revolution. The ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’ of the French revolution symbolised above all a demand for a just political order (Dunn, 1989). ‘All power to the Soviets’ in the Russian revolution symbolised the (in reality short-lived) experiment to set up a revolutionary leadership of proletariat and peasantry (*ibid.*). Lenin’s dictum that socialism means ‘electrification plus the Soviets’ can be described as the “inauguration of a developmental revolution”

¹⁴ The question why revolutions occurred in some countries and not in others is, however, beyond the focus of this research. For further discussion see for example Clapham, 1990; Dunn, 1989; Foran, 1997; Selbin, 1993.

(Hermassi, 1976: 221). The Long March¹⁵ during the Chinese revolution gave birth to the strategy of protracted war. All later revolutionary movements made reference to this discourse in one way or another and adopted, combined and partly expanded its different languages in positioning themselves within a broader ideological framework. Most visible are these pieces of discourse in a revolution's popular slogans. In the case of Eritrea, the slogan *awat na hafash* (Victory to the Masses) to this day is written under every official document as the sign-off line.¹⁶

The adaptation of a particular discourse became strongly related to concrete revolutionary practice. As Dunn states,

revolutions belong to a tradition of *historical action* in the strong sense that virtually all revolutions in the present century have imitated – or at least set out to imitate as best they could – other revolutions of an earlier date (Dunn, 1989: 232, *my emphasis*).¹⁷

About revolutions in the developing world it has been generally said that successful revolutionaries had – at least until the end of the Cold War and the collapse of many socialist states – remarkably similar ideas about how to remake and modernise their societies, all somehow related to socialism (Colburn, 1994). Socialism was albeit defined differently in the concrete context of each revolution, whose course was shaped by what Kirchheimer calls “‘confining conditions’ – the particular social and intellectual conditions present at the birth of these regimes” (Kirchheimer, 1965: 964).¹⁸

Revolutions in different cultural settings were thus inspired by certain common, universal values. These values included notions of liberation and emancipation (often from colonial rule), a right to basic social services, and last but not

¹⁵ The epic withdrawal of the Chinese Communists after having been close to collapse between 1934-35, during which Mao took over the leadership and led the regrouping and eventual success of the revolutionary struggle.

¹⁶ More broadly, the EPLF adopted certain parts of various revolutionary discourses and experiences in very pragmatic fashion. Particularly the Front's propaganda pamphlets revealed that they had been inspired by Chinese, Cuban and Soviet theory and practice. Based on these forerunners the EPLF developed an ideological framework taking account of and corresponding to the particular condition of Eritrea (see Ruth Iyob, 1997b: 659).

¹⁷ Looking at Eritrea, the village councils introduced by the EPLF in the liberated areas provide a good example. With strict rules of representation according to class and status, they on one hand draw on the traditional *baitos* as structures of running village affairs but equally and arguably more so on the concept of the ‘Soviets’ as known from the Russian revolution (even though this term was not used by the EPLF's leadership). The EPLF's military strategy, on the other hand, was strongly influenced by Chinese experiences.

¹⁸ Some examples include such geographically and culturally diverse cases as Algeria 1954-62; Vietnam 1945-75; Cuba, 1953-59; Mozambique in the 1970s; Nicaragua 1977-79 (for a broader discussion see Foran, 1997).

least changes in the status of former disadvantaged groups – in short, what one could call promises of (socialist) modernisation.¹⁹ At the same time, each revolutionary movement presents a specific case, and a successful ideology of liberation had to develop from the “living reality of living people” (Davidson, 1981b: 160).

The concept of revolution used in this research can thus be summarised as follows: It incorporates the structural conditions which provide the terrain for revolutions to happen, but centres equally on the revolutionary ideology – and ultimately the human agency of the revolutionaries (Selbin, 1993; Selbin, 1997). As MacPherson points out, revolutions in developing countries depend to a much higher degree on ideology than the ‘great’ revolutions, not least because in most cases these revolutions must virtually create new collective identities.²⁰

Ideology in this context is used with MacPherson in a neutral sense, as a “systematic set of ideas about [people’s] place in nature, in society, and in history (...) which can elicit the commitment of significant numbers of people to (or against) political change” (MacPherson, 1966: 140). As such, ideologies contain elements of explanation of the past, justification of present demands and faith in the ultimate rightness of one’s cause (ibid.).

Revolution thus viewed follows Selbin’s concept of social revolution. It entails the “the successful overthrow of a ruling elite by a revolutionary vanguard that has mobilized broad popular support and undertaken the transformation of a society’s political, economic and social structures” (Selbin, 1993: 11).²¹ This definition makes revolution contingent on an attempt to fundamentally transform society and stresses the importance of the revolutionary leadership to mobilise broad popular support. Dunn remarks in this context that all revolu-

¹⁹ These notions are all present in spirit if not in words in the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which after its adaptation in 1948 sparked a debate not resolved to this day between advocates of human rights as a universal concept or a culturally defined, relativist notion. The author would argue for a stance which embraces the universal values of human rights while acknowledging aspects of cultural diversity (see Fox & Hasci, 1999).

²⁰ In the case of Eritrea, it has been argued by some scholars that an Eritrean identity had to be carved out of a previously shared Ethiopian identity, see for example Triulzi (2002). While the author does not agree with this interpretation of Eritrean nation building (as will become clear in due course), it is nevertheless the case that in Eritrea (as well as in other countries in which national revolutions occurred) pre-existing collective identities needed to be transformed in the process. An interesting discussion of part of the history of different collective identities in what is now Eritrea can be found in Trivelli (1998) as well as Tronvoll (1999); for a discussion of religion as the main building block of collective identities in Eritrea see Hussien (1998).

²¹ Vanguard here does not strictly refer to the Leninist concept of a vanguard party, but more broadly to the revolutionary leadership (which can take different forms) – and indeed a common feature in the revolutions of the twentieth century was a leadership with a vision which then gained (or failed to gain) popular support. This was for example the case in such different scenarios as the top-down Ethiopian revolution of 1974 as well as the nationalist revolutions in Algeria, Angola, Mozambique or Guinea-Bissau (Davidson, 1978; Isaacman & Isaacman, 1983; Ottaway & Ottaway, 1978; Rudebeck, 1974).

tions are elitist in the short run. Even if the longer term implications are explicitly egalitarian, “the process of revolutionary change is one of instruction of the many by the few” (Dunn, 1989: 7).²² He traces this back to the French revolution which epitomised for the first time a fundamental characteristic of the process of revolution: the anticipation of a future of increasing economic, political and social equality “generated above all by the expansion of educational opportunity and by a steady diminution in the hold of superstition at all levels of society” (ibid.: 6). This quote could indeed have been taken straight from one of the EPLF’s programmatic publications. Above all, it shows the rationalist worldview which underlines modernising revolutionary ideology – relying on the emancipation of secular reasoning from revelation – and ties revolution to the “transformations wrought on the consciousness of ‘the people’” (Lazarus, 1999: 138). What is implied here is the idea of a movement in popular consciousness from “local knowledge to knowledge of the principles of national and social revolution” (ibid.). And, as Lazarus points out, within the modern era it is the nation which has been the site for forging “this articulation between universalist intellectualism and popular consciousness” (ibid.) – so it should come as no surprise that the majority of revolutions in the twentieth century were endeavours in which modernising revolutionary change was combined with nation building.²³

Eventually, however, for revolutions to succeed, revolutionary agency needs to refer only on one hand to the revolutionary leaders and their ability to present the population with a vocabulary or framework that channels popular vision. On the other hand it needs to refer to the population itself, as people have their own independent context and revolutionary leaders can go no further then the population is prepared to follow (Selbin, 1997). Indeed, as will be discussed further below, what made the EPLF one of the “most formidable liberation movements in contemporary history” (Pool, 2001: xv) was its “capacity to penetrate society” (ibid.) and its determination “not to reflect its indigenous social base, but instead to displace it with an ideology of ‘Eritreanness’” (Clapham, 1998: 13).

²² A similar picture is painted by Hobsbawm in relation to the revolutions of the nineteenth century, when he writes: “All revolutionaries regard themselves, with some justification, as small élites of the emancipated and progressive operating among, and for the eventual benefit of, a vast and inert mass of the ignorant and misled common people, which would no doubt welcome liberation when it came, but could not be expected to take much part in preparing it” (Hobsbawm, 1962: 144).

²³ Within the EPLF’s ideology, an Eritrean past as a nation was established with the advent of Italian colonialism (see Tronvoll, 1999: 1054) and imagined as a “modernised” community north of the Mereb river (see Alemseged Abbay, 1998: 223); in this context, some authors speak about a second wave of modernisation (“zweiter Modernisierungsschub”) brought about by the EPLF, the first having occurred during Italian colonial rule (see Fengler, 2001: 212); for further discussion see the chapter on the EPLF below.

It is in that sense that revolution has been defined by the late Alimicabral, a revolutionary leader himself, as “the inalienable right of every people to have their own history” (Cabral, 1980: 143). In a similar spirit, Wertheim points out that revolutions, whether successful or not, always have a major effect on the freedom of people, and

the most significant emancipation generally occurs in the psychological sector. The heightened sense of human dignity and a fresh belief in new social values may produce such a transformation of mentality that this, in itself, may forebode a fundamental transformation of society. The mental forces released through a revolution may embody its most important effect on a society (Wertheim, 1974: 220).

Within the context of this research, the focus of revolution is moved away from the acquisition of state power towards the commitment to the creation of a new society guided by new values (Selbin, 1993). This makes what comes after the successful overthrow of the old system by the revolutionary movement the arguably much more central task: the countrywide consolidation and institutionalisation of the promises of radical change under which these revolutions set out, and the legitimacy of new values and the new state in the eyes of the population at large.

Consolidation and institutionalisation are regarded as two different things: Institutionalisation refers to the establishment of state structures by the revolutionary movement which are domestically and internationally recognised. Consolidation refers to what Selbin describes as “winning the people’s heart and soul” (Selbin, 1993: 22). It is the process by which the majority of the population comes to support the social revolutionary project and make it their vision for the future (MacPherson, 1966; Selbin, 1993). In contrast to the common judgement which regards a revolution as successful with its political victory – visible in the assigned dates, for example the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, or the 1959 Cuban Revolution – it is not easy to define when the consolidation process is over. This research – whose central concern is with revolutionary consolidation – will consider the revolution to extend “as long as ideological zeal is needed” (MacPherson, 1966: 140) to bring about the originally envisaged fundamental change.

One can broadly distinguish three phases (see Selbin, 1993) in the way social revolutions develop: the phase of insurrection or the actual armed revolutionary struggle; the phase of political victory (when the transition from the old to the new, revolutionary government takes place); and as the third phase the transformation of society and its people (within which the processes of institutionalisation and consolidation fall).

In many of the national revolutions of the twentieth century these phases partly overlapped. They tended to follow a common pattern, which can be characterised as follows:²⁴ The phase of insurrection is a prolonged period of dual power structures, during which simultaneously and gradually the revolutionaries expand political participation and build their own institutions (mostly in some part of the country under their control), while they are at the same time engaged in the actual military struggle.²⁵ Geographically, these revolutions start in the countryside, usually in some remote area well suited to guerrilla warfare but difficult to re-conquer by regular armies. After an often prolonged period of struggle – and in most cases aided by a favourable shift in external conditions²⁶ – the final collapse of the old regime, the occupation of the capital and the coming to state power of the revolutionary movement take place.

During the revolutionary struggle itself, the revolutionary movement thus concentrates as much or even more on “outadministering” the government as on “outfighting” the regular troops (Ahmad, 1971: 145). As a successful revolution relies on popular support, the revolutionary leaders must in practice demonstrate qualitatively different arrangements which satisfy popular demands for a better society (Miller & Aya, 1971).

To sum up the discussion in this section, a revolutionary society is defined as: A society in which a revolutionary movement came to power with an ideology based on two sets of values: notions of freedom and liberation on one hand, and notions of social justice – based on a socialist-modernist outlook – on the other. In the process of institutionalisation and consolidation the revolutionary movement is following a holistic agenda of economic change to benefit the whole population and especially the poor; political change towards greater participation of the population and accountability of the government; and social change towards more equality, especially for former excluded or marginalized groups. Revolutionary society is a fluid concept, as no clear boundary exists between where a revolutionary society ends and bureaucratic ossification of once dynamic revolutionary institutions begins (Miller & Aya, 1971). The main challenge for the revolutionary leadership lies in maintaining a high degree of political mobilisation and social egalitarianism when the concrete task of direct

²⁴ Exceptions from this pattern include Ethiopia (see Dawit Woldegiorgis, 1989; Ottaway & Ottaway, 1978; Thomson, 1975), Cuba (see Müller, 1993; Foran, 1997; Selbin, 1993), Iran (see Käufeler, 1988), Nicaragua (see Selbin, 1993).

²⁵ Davidson provides a schematic overview of what he describes as a five stage military strategy by successful liberation movements in their tactics of recruitment and warfare (see Davidson, 1981b: 174).

²⁶ These conditions have included for example in the case of the former Portuguese colonies in Africa the collapse of the Portuguese military dictatorship; in the case of Eritrea the collapse of the Cold War world order.

struggle for liberation has given way to peaceful economic and social development (Davidson, 1978; Rudebeck, 1974).

In the introduction to this chapter it has been pointed out that gender relations play an important part in revolutionary ideology (see Moghadam, 1997). Therefore, the concrete example that was chosen as an indicator to what degree revolutionary momentum is maintained or abandoned after political victory within the process of revolutionary consolidation is the status of women in society. The majority of societies in which social revolutions took place in the twentieth century were characterised by great gender inequalities. In turn, most revolutionary movements had the emancipation of women high on their agenda. That was equally the case for Eritrea. But before turning to the concrete example of the status of women within the Eritrean revolution, in a next step an assessment will be given on if and how women benefited from revolutionary processes in the developing world. This assessment will later be used as the ideological background upon which the experiences of Eritrean women unfold.

Women and revolution in the developing world – A history of unfulfilled promises?

One of the most fundamental changes in “dominant values and myths” (to take Huntington’s definition of revolution literally, 1968: 264) a revolution could bring (or fail to bring) about in developing societies was a change in the status of women in the direction of freeing women from gender oppression.

This was acknowledged by various revolutionary movements which mobilised women with the promise of freedom – only to reimpose controls over women’s productivity and reproductivity once the revolutionary leadership gained power.²⁷

A revolution’s triumph (unless it managed to overthrow the old regime in a very short period of time) ultimately depended on successful appeals to women “to supply resources to nourish it” (Tétreault, 1994: 4), especially as women were often primary producers of essential goods in the respective countries

²⁷ Examples include – to name just a few (and more examples will be discussed in the main text): the mobilisation of women into the early nationalist movement in present day Tanzania, the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU), only to be sidelined in the nation-building process after Tanzanian independence (Geiger, 1987); the Algerian revolution, where women did participate in combat roles only to be exposed to an supposedly ‘Islamist’ agenda of exclusion afterwards, all in the name of a nationalism that expressed itself as ‘going back to tradition’ (Helie-Lucas, 1992: 112); a similar phenomenon could be observed in the context of the Iranian revolution (see Moghissi, 1993; Reeves, 1989; Shahri, 2000).

(Boserup, 1970) and thus crucial to the material and ideological struggles of the revolution.

Revolutions are as much struggles over symbols as struggles over political and economic power. During times of revolutionary warfare one can often see posters or murals of women with a rifle in one, a baby in the other hand – symbolising a kind of ‘superwomen’ who combined her traditional nurturing role with her new role as a fighter (Enloe, 1988: 164). But after the war is over, will she be left only holding the baby?

To answer that question one needs to look at the rationale behind the effort of revolutionary movements to mobilise women into the struggle: Was it mainly instrumental because women were seen as highly sympathetic to a revolutionary agenda promising more social equality and because of the need for women’s support, be it as providers of basic necessities like food and clothing or as fighters? Or was there a genuine drive for gender equality in society? Part of an answer lies in the kind of revolutionary society that is being built after a revolutionary movement comes to power and how (and if) the promises for gender equality become consolidated.

In looking at various revolutionary struggles of the past in different parts of the developing world, some general conclusions on how women fare in revolutionary societies can be drawn. These are bound to have some relevance to the struggle for gender equality in present day Eritrea.

On the African continent, two revolutionary movements stand out in claiming to put an emphasis on women’s liberation: the movement for the national liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, and the Front for National Liberation in Mozambique.

In the 1960s, the most successful liberation movement in sub-Saharan Africa was the Partido Africano do Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) in the former Portuguese colony of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, and in 1974 Guinea-Bissau achieved independence as the outcome of an eleven year long armed struggle. What was remarkable about the PAIGC was not so much the armed struggle itself, but the social and political achievements in the early liberated areas of the country (very similar to the case of Eritrea). This made its leader, Amílcar Cabral, held in high regard and gave the movement its strong appeal, support and legitimacy among the population (Chabal, 1983). The wider ideology of the PAIGC, “simultaneously to pick up arms and to build a new, *nonexploitative* society” (Urdang, 1979: 15; *my emphasis*) included to promote the liberation of women, as this was regarded as essential for the advancement of society as a whole (ibid.). The basic line taken by the PAIGC in this rather instrumentalist approach towards women’s liberation came down to proclaim gender equality as a right which however needed to be taken up by the women themselves (ibid.). Overall, it has been observed that the PAIGC used rather

than upset the traditional sexual division of labour. Whereas on one hand women were given military training, they were on the other hand primarily employed in support roles while at the same time the importance of child rearing and nurturing was emphasised (Enloe, 1988: 163).²⁸

Women were in fact quite easy to mobilise as they saw a great opportunity for their liberation in the society the PAIGC proclaimed to build. Some concrete steps were taken in the liberated areas that benefited women, including the reservation of seats for women in every village council and the abolition of forced marriages. But very few women moved beyond traditional gender roles – not for the lack of desire, but to a large extent because men’s attitudes made it quasi impossible (Urdang, 1979). This situation was not fundamentally altered with independence and coming to power of a PAIGC government. Some efforts were made by the new government to encourage women to take up non-traditional professions (ibid.). By the late 1970s some women were indeed occupying economic and government roles to which they never had access before (Enloe, 1988: 163). In the PAIGC’s general ideological framework, however, the strive for social change (including the liberation of women) could never be allowed to hold back the main objective: the national liberation effort and after 1974 the process of nation building (ibid.).

The resulting dilemma women face when demanding their rights in opposition to men in a revolutionary situation with a wider objective is described by Helie-Lucas in the context of Algeria:

During wars of liberation women are not to protest about women’s rights. Nor are they allowed to before and after. It is never the right moment. Defending women’s rights ‘now’ – this now being any historical moment – is always a betrayal of the people, of the nation, the revolution, religion, national identity, cultural roots (Helie-Lucas, 1992: 112f).

Something else comes to the surface here: the burden for change in the status of women is firmly placed on women themselves, as in fact has been the case in most revolutionary or socialist-modernist movements. The ideological battle cry for “women’s changing roles” (Randall, 1992: 169) shows a failure to envisage a process of cultural transformation which equally relies on a change in men’s conscience and attitude (Maloney, 1980).²⁹ And, as has been pointed out in the

²⁸ One justification for not employing women on a regular basis in the fighting force (women should fight only when it was ‘needed’ was the official party line) was that enough men were available to fight and as Guinea-Bissau had a small population one could not risk the death of women (the potential producers of population growth) in combat (Urdang, 1979).

²⁹ This failure goes back at least to the Chinese revolution (which was partly a model for many revolutions to follow) and until today on the political level leaves women in China with little voice in decision making processes that can lead to full equality (Maloney, 1980: 177).

context of the Cuban revolution but represents a more general truth, “these cultural transformations must begin at the earliest stages of the Revolution, lest they become permanently postponed” (Casal, 1980: 185).

Where does all this leave the quest for more gender equality? As will be shown in the following examples, women’s fight for gender equality in a revolutionary context is more successful if a considerable number of women actually did participate in armed struggle. Doing so, they earned some “entitlements to freedom and equality” (Tétreault, 1994: 434) and were seen in a different light by their male comrades.³⁰ It was almost impossible to otherwise push an agenda of female emancipation through in a revolutionary society in the developing world characterised by male supremacy and where so many other problems related to poverty and deprivation were considered more urgent.³¹

A revolutionary movement in which women had a considerable presence and also participated in combat roles was the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), the liberation movement in Mozambique. FRELIMO started an armed struggle in 1964, and, after long infighting, at a party congress in 1968 took the ‘revolutionary line’ (Isaacman & Isaacman, 1983) in which the struggle was seen as part of a wider movement for emancipation of oppressed people. In this context, from 1969 onwards, the emancipation of women received great emphasis. The late Samora Machel, a FRELIMO leader and Mozambique’s first president after independence, put it like this: “The liberation of women is a fundamental necessity for the Revolution, the guarantee of its continuity and the precondition for its victory” (Machel, 1974: 24). Women were allowed into combat roles and could theoretically rise to leadership positions (though in practice they hardly did). The quest for women’s liberation became one of the most publicised aspects in the socialist reform programme after independence in 1975. Mozambican women were portrayed as a kind of international feminist vanguard (Sheldon, 1994) – not unlike women in Eritrea today which, as will become clear later, does not correspond to how most Eritrean women experience their concrete reality.

³⁰ The same appears true for war in general, as for example the experiences of women during World War I and II in Britain show (Segal, 1987).

³¹ It is however not the case that participation in armed struggle necessarily led to more gender equality. As an example serves the ‘Chimurenga’, the Zimbabwean liberation war. It was characterised by a highly publicised participation of women in the armed struggle. Between one third and one quarter of fighters were estimated to have been women, a number holding positions of authority in the military command structure (Ranchod-Nilsson, 1994). Because women played such a significant role in the war one might have expected that it served as a watershed or catalyst for changing women’s position in Zimbabwean society. This was, however, not the case. What changes took place were restricted to the group of women who joined the war and actually experienced being treated equally by their male comrades – but this did not have much of an impact on wider society (and often made life after independence difficult for these women) (ibid.). Other examples include Algeria and Iran, see earlier footnote.

The Organização da Mulher Moçambicana (OMM) was quite powerful in advancing a women's agenda in government and FRELIMO party structures (a construct not dissimilar to present day Eritrea, where the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) plays a comparable role). At the beginning of the 1990s, steps taken to empower women showed results in an increasing number of women involved in political processes. The continuing limitations to women's progress were described as largely due to deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes especially among male leaders (Sheldon, 1994), a somehow familiar scenario which suggests again that in order to achieve gender equality measures to empower women only go a certain way and that it is as least as important to change men's attitudes.³²

A commitment to do just that, which needs to include facilitating change in the central area where gender roles are reproduced, the family, was found throughout many socialist countries in the developing world which came into being as the result of some sort of revolution (Molyneux, 1981; 1982; 1984). Molyneux found that indeed women made major gains in socialist developing countries in many areas, as here for the first time their struggle for equal rights was given official state support (Molyneux, 1984). In general, socialist states accepted greater responsibility for the area of social reproduction: Education, housing and other basic necessities were viewed as an entitlement, an approach that strongly benefited women (Molyneux, 1982). Equally, women were encouraged to join the labour force, but what lagged behind in all socialist countries was their full participation in political life (*ibid.*).³³ Ultimately, in spite of formal legislation, socialist countries failed to alter the domestic relationship and alleviate the burden of household responsibility for women. This failure is related to the roots of socialist theory going back to the writings of Engels and Lenin. It rests on one hand on the belief that the equal participation of women in economic life will lead quasi automatically to wider gender equality (Molyneux, 1984); on the other hand, that the exploitation of women is related to the general system of exploitation in pre-socialist societies and will cease to exist

³² Concerning Mozambique, it has been suggested that a weak state in a potentially revolutionary society can be bad for women's emancipation: In the late 1980s, FRELIMO's support base was so weak that it abandoned its official position on female equality in order to recruit more people from highly traditional groups in society, which had a strong interest in keeping the gender status quo (Tétreault, 1994: 438).

³³ In addition, most socialist states did not permit any autonomous political movements, including women's movements: all women's organisations were subordinated to the party and its social and political priorities (Molyneux, 1984). A somewhat similar situation can be found in Eritrea today: The head of the women's organisation needs to be confirmed by the central committee of the party.

with the success of the revolution (Machel, 1974: 34).³⁴ To sum up her observations, Molyneux (1984) points out the following:

While most socialist countries have attempted to encourage the greater equalisation of the domestic labour load, this cannot be achieved without challenging both prevailing representations of masculinity and femininity with their concomitant gender-specific roletyping, and the identification of 'femininity' with inferior and 'masculinity' with superior values (ibid.: 87).

This last point will become important later in the context of certain attributes which are ascribed to women in Eritrea within the public discourse on gender.

A useful illustration at this stage is provided by the revolutionary process in Nicaragua, where women's participation in combat was considerable. They made up approximately 30 percent of the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional's (FSLN) combat forces (Molyneux, 1985). This participation of women was part of a wider process of popular mobilisation, but was entered into from a "distinctive social position to men, one crucially shaped by the sexual division of labour" (ibid.: 228) and reinforced by the general machismo ideology. This division was not transcended after the Sandinista government came to power. Women benefited from welfare programmes and legal reforms, but advocacy towards a change in men's attitude and behaviour was not considered a priority, a fact which hindered women participating on an equal basis in all areas of society. In general, policies from which women derived benefits were pursued because they served wider goals "whether these were social welfare, development, social equality, or political mobilisation in defence of the revolution" (ibid.: 245). Programmes for women's empowerment remained essentially conceived in terms of how functional they were for achieving wider objectives of the state (ibid.: 251).

³⁴ The main texts on which these assertions are based are Engels' 'The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State', and various statements and writings by Lenin over time compiled in the volume 'The Emancipation of Women'. Engels argues that the oppression of women came into existence for the same reason and through the same forces that brought private property and the class society into existence. Thus, within socialism "the position of women, of all women, undergoes significant change. With the transfer of the means of production into common ownership, the single family ceases to be the economic unit of society. Private housekeeping is transformed into a social industry. The care and education of the children becomes a public affair" (Engels, 1972: 139). Building on Engels, Lenin advocates that "to effect her complete emancipation and make her the equal of the man it is necessary for housework to be socialised and *for women to participate in common productive labour. Then women will occupy the same position as men* (Lenin, 1984: 69; *my emphasis*). In a different context he states that "working women must take an increasing part in the administration of socialised enterprises and in the administration of the state. By taking part in administration, *women will quickly learn and will catch up with the men*" (ibid.: 79) (the conceptualisation behind the italicised parts will be encountered again in looking at Eritrea).

This seems to be the case in the majority, possibly all, revolutionary societies in the developing world, be they in Africa, Latin America or Asia. An example of the last is the case of female participation in the Vietnamese revolution, where women took part at a similar level as in Nicaragua but remained equally underrepresented in the country's political leadership afterwards (Eisen, 1984).

Concerns which arise from here about the potential of achieving gender equality in a revolutionary society can be formulated at two extreme ends: On one end, it can be asked whether the state in any case – revolutionary or not – is an instrument of patriarchy and as such any state-centred feminist reforms have to fail (Brown, 1992)? On the other end, it has been suggested that a “unity of purpose” exists between the goals of women's empowerment and “the developmental and social goals of revolutionary states” (Molyneux, 1985: 245). The author tends to agree with the latter statement. From the evidence so far, it seems fair to conclude that women in socialist and/or revolutionary societies benefited – often quite considerably – from the official egalitarian policy agenda under the conditions of widespread poverty in the developing world. These benefits can be described in material as well as non-material terms, the latter referring to wider possibilities of agency.

For every revolutionary society, the central question remains how women who were a vital force during the time of revolutionary struggle are able afterwards to enter formal political institutions and take a greater role in decision making in their society (Ridd & Callaway, 1987). To a large extent the author tends to agree with the dictum that ultimately “the liberation of women cannot be achieved through men making concessions to women, but through constant organised struggle by women on the economic, social and political levels” (Davies, 1987: iv). In a similar vein, Hale states:

To date, no liberation or revolutionary war, no matter how progressive its ideology regarding the emancipation of women (...) has empowered women and men to maintain an emancipating atmosphere for women after the military struggle and brief honeymoon are over (Hale, 2001: 123).

At the same time the author believes that a revolutionary state with the broad commitment to modernise society – of which the more specific commitment to gender equality forms an important part – can considerably alter the status of women within that society and thus transform the conditions for female emancipation.

One central tool in this effort is education. It has been asserted that one of the most important barriers to women's ability to gain power over their lives in the household and the economy is the lack of formal education or the gender-

biased education they receive (Gordon, 1996: 152). Considering the fact that for a majority of women in the developing world it is still the pivotal role of family obligations that shapes their lives (Afshar, 1991), a change in consciousness indeed “requires profound changes in the nature of a country’s educational effort: changes in the methods as well as in the content of education” (Randall, 1992: 91). Additionally, for women to be able to occupy positions of decision making in society they need to be educated.³⁵ What has been stated about Vietnam is equally true for any other developing society: “Education, particular higher education, is a basic requirement for women to achieve equality” (Eisen, 1984: 216).³⁶ Concerning this last point, the underlying rationale is based on the assumption – also important within the Eritrean revolution, as will be discussed further below – that the more women there are in leadership or elite positions (and as such serve as often ‘exceptional’ role models for others), the more likely it will be for the bulk of ‘ordinary’ women to advance. While this might not be a sufficient condition for sustainable female emancipation within a given society, in the context of this study ‘exceptional’ women as pioneers are regarded as necessary to consolidate progress in that direction for the wider majority.

Education – encompassing political education, as well as a whole range of formal and non-formal educational endeavours – was a central element within the Eritrean revolution. Education was regarded as decisive by the EPLF leadership in terms of disseminating its revolutionary ideology among the wider population as well as with respect to altering the status of women in Eritrean society. One needs to be aware in this context of the fact that attaining high levels of education is possible for women without being accompanied by a change in their status or gender consciousness (Stromquist, 1995: 445). It has even been argued that states do propagate female education precisely because if

³⁵ Davies (1987) rightly points out in this context that even though female emancipation means partly to have women in leadership positions, it is important to begin from prevailing reality. There is no point in putting a woman in a leadership position if she is illiterate. But giving her the chance to join a sewing co-operative can be a liberating step for her, as it opens a space outside the home and gives her the chance to earn an income. Female emancipation therefore needs to be considered at different levels.

³⁶ On a more general level, female education is increasingly seen as the panacea to solve wider societal problems, particularly so in the developing world: In present day development discourse, the positive linkages between female education and overall human development feature prominently and increasingly the best way to overcome various forms of deprivation is seen in educating women (see for example Browne & Barrett, 1991: 276f; Human Development Report 1996; King & Hill, 1993; Summers, 1994; World Bank 1993). Underlying this discourse is an instrumentalist view of education in line with what has been called the post-Washington consensus on education and development (for a critical discussion see Fine and Rose, 2001; Heward & Bunwaree, 1999).

women are provided with an education that does not directly address the nature of gender, they

become capable of making more and better contributions to the economy and to the family as presently constituted, while their increased schooling does not threaten the status quo, and so the basic structures of ideological and material domination are retained and sustained (ibid.).

The question to be asked then is how far the Eritrean revolution – ultimately guided by an ideology which rejected class, gender and ethnic divisions and espoused a vision of unity where everyone worked for the common good – was prepared to go in not only providing an opening for women within Eritrean society through education but at the same time transform these structures of domination.

The following chapter will at first introduce the EPLF as a revolutionary movement, before looking at what the Front's ideology and strategy meant for women within the Eritrean revolution.

Within the Eritrean revolution: National independence and women's liberation – Conflicting objectives or complementary agenda?

Having defined revolution as understood in the context of this study, the following will introduce the EPLF as a revolutionary movement. Before embarking on this journey, it is necessary to briefly introduce the Eritrean historical, social and political context from which the EPLF finally emerged, including the Eritrean movements for national liberation predating the EPLF.¹ This brief look back in history is important for two reasons: Firstly, because the EPLF's (re)interpretation of the past and its communication within the Front's political education programme was central to the creation of the EPLF's ideology.² Secondly, to arrive at an understanding what the Eritrean revolution was a revolution from and how its notion of modernity developed.

¹ A schematic overview of the relevant wider historical context is provided in Appendix 1.

² See Pool (2001), who provides one of the most detailed accounts of the EPLF from its formation to the present day within the wider context of Eritrean nationalist politics. He characterises the importance of past history for the EPLF's success as derived from "the dialectic relationship between multi-faceted socio-historic sources of disunity and conflict and the political imperative to forge both national unity and a unified nationalist movement" and stresses that "neither the

Eritrean society and nationalist politics up to 1970

Eritrea can roughly be divided into two geographically distinct entities: the *kebessa*, or highlands, and the *metahit*, or lowlands. Whereas the majority of the highland or plateau population are Orthodox Christians and the majority of the lowland population are Muslims, it is misleading to focus on the Christian highlands versus the Muslim lowlands as the main social division, not least because of century old migration movements between both entities (see Pool, 2001).³ It is more precise to describe the different segments of the Eritrean population in terms of ethno-linguistic characteristics.

The majority of the highland population belong to the Tigrinya nationality,⁴ whereas in the lowlands, mainly populated by Eritrea's other nationalities, the Tigre dominate.⁵ Most Tigrinya speakers are indeed Orthodox Christians (with the exception of the Muslim Jiberti and some converts to Catholicism or Protestantism) while most Tigre speakers are Muslims; in some minority groups two or more religions co-exist and ethno-cultural bonds are at least as important as religious affiliation, if not more so.⁶

In general, all these divides within Eritrean society are not as clear cut as might be assumed, and in fact no "neat fit between regions and particular communities" (Pool, 2001: 5) does exist.⁷

social nor the political context from which the EPLF emerged were conducive to the creation of the most successful liberation front to fight on African soil" (Pool, 2001: 1).

³ Pool (1982: 10) has rightly pointed out that this rather simplistic religio-geographical divide propagated by many commentators "has conveniently suited the political and social analysis of European and especially Ethiopian politicians, writers and journalists", as it weakened the case for an independent Eritrean state as a multi-ethnic political entity.

⁴ The use of the concept of nationality here (instead of the rather expected notion of ethnic group) was introduced by the EPLF (see for example EPLF, 1987a: 55 – the rationale behind this use will be discussed later). Writings on Eritrea meanwhile often use this concept, and cultural and language policies in present day Eritrea (e.g. the right to basic education in one's mother tongue, see MoE, 1999) are based on this definition of nationalities.

⁵ Altogether nine different nationalities live in Eritrea. With the exception of the Rashaida, who use Arabic, all have their own language (usually the same term refers to language and ethnicity/nationality). In 1996, the percentages of each nationality as part of the whole population read as follows: Tigrinya: 50.0%; Tigre: 31.0%; Saho: 5.0%; Afar: 5.0%; Hadareb: 2.5%; Bilen: 2.1%; Kunama: 2.0%; Nara: 1.5%; Rashaida: 0.5% (Source: UNICEF, 1997: 2).

⁶ The Muslim Jiberti, mostly merchants and city dwellers, comprise seven percent of the Tigrinya population (Pateman, 1990a: 5). Among the Tigre, members of the Mensa clan are Christian. Among the Saho, a small proportion is Christian, the Kunama are mixed animist, Christian and Muslim, whereas the Bilen are equally divided between Christian-Catholic and Muslim. The Nara, Afar, Hadareb and Rashaida are Muslim (Pateman, 1990a; Pool, 1982; 1997).

⁷ A schematic overview of the geographic distribution of the nine ethno-linguistic groups is shown on map 2, which serves to give a broad orientation of a situation in constant flux – a flux due to:

a) in-country-migration (e.g. migration by the Tigrinya to the lowlands as a function of land shortages on the plateau) (see Pool, 2001); b) the return of Eritrean refugees from Sudan (see

Having said that, however, the two geographic entities of *kebessa* and *metahit* became to characterise two different social and historio-political contexts which in turn determined what type of national liberation movement originated within each entity and eventually shaped the inclusive ideology of the EPLF. Before turning to the Eritrean nationalist movements, these differences will be briefly discussed in the context of the creation of Eritrea as a geographic entity.

The creation of Eritrea

Within the settled Christian agriculturist society on the plateau one significant social division existed: the division between the *restenyat*, referring to those who owned and could inherit land (and were descendants of the original *enda* or kinship group), and the *makalai ailat*, referring to those who had migrated to the plateau and did not own land (Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989: 47f; Houtart, 1980: 84; Pool, 2001: 11f). The church, which exercised a strong influence within the highland peasant culture, was linked to the *restenyat*, and a society developed in which the priesthood and the land-owning classes “were bonded together through their mutual benefits of landownership, social privilege and political power and the exclusion of the *makalai ailat*” (Pool, 2001: 15). At the eve of Italian colonialism, the Eritrean highlands were thus characterised on one hand by a high degree of religio-cultural homogeneity, while at the same time by an internal class stratification within villages (Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989; Pool, 2001).

The situation within the lowlands was quite different. With the majority of the population being pastoralists or agro-pastoralists, the social division was based on property not of land, but of animals and command over human resources. The majority Tigre speaking tribes were divided into the *nabtab* and *shumagulle*, the ruling clans, and the *tigre*, commonly referred to as serfs (Houtart, 1980: 84f; Pool, 1983: 180; 2001: 17f). More generally, from the seventh century onwards the lowlands saw various Arab conquests (see appendix 1). A structure emerged in which Islam provided a loose form of cultural solidarity, mainly based on the role of a few devout individuals or families within religious orders (Pool, 2001).⁸ This stood in stark contrast to the organisational structures derived from the religious hierarchy of the Orthodox church in the highlands.

Gaim Kibreab, 1996; Müller, 2001a); c) internal displacement in the course of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war and large scale deportations of Eritrean citizens from Ethiopia (see Asmeron Legese 1998; 1999; 2000; Müller, 2000).

⁸ The author is not aware of any detailed study of the role prominent Muslim families or sufi orders played within Islamic Eritrea. The best overview is given by Pool (2001: 20f).

When Italy officially established the colony of Eritrea in 1890, it gave birth to the concept of Eritrea as a territory of its own with clearly marked boundaries – the same boundaries which were contested in the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war (see Clapham, 2000; Ruth Iyob, 1997a; Tekeste Negash & Tronvoll, 2000). Eritrea as a geographical entity is thus a colonial creation, and to this day the debate whether this at the same time marked the beginnings of an Eritrean nation has not stopped.

Nationalist Eritrean historiography plays down a common past with parts of Imperial Ethiopia and the common cultural and historical roots of the *kebessa* and Tigray in Northern Ethiopia (for further discussion of these roots see Alemseged Abbay, 1997). Italian colonialism is presented as “a decisive rupture which established conditions for national identity” (Sorenson, 1991: 303), read national Eritrean identity (see also Gilkes, 1991). Ethiopian nationalist discourse describes Eritrea as an artificial creation – as Sorenson has pointed out, a rather curious argument in an African context in which most states are indeed creations of colonialism (Sorenson, 1991: 303). It propagates the ‘Greater Ethiopia’ thesis, according to which from a distant past an organic unity existed between the different peoples of Ethiopia of which modern Ethiopia is the successor.⁹ During the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war both discourses gained prominence again in the media war which accompanied the war on the ground.¹⁰

This study will argue that with becoming an Italian colony, Eritrea did indeed develop markedly different from the Imperial Ethiopian Empire – even allowing for its modernising tendencies which started with Menelik II.¹¹ Italian colonial rule brought a new socio-economic order to Eritrea and in many ways modernised Eritrean society, albeit in ways to suit Italian interests.¹² In terms of infrastructure, industrialisation, modern services and “contacts with the modern and outside world” (Longrigg, 1960: 132), Eritrea became one of the most advanced nations in Africa (Firebrace & Holland, 1985: 70). Many of its people found paid employment in the rapidly growing urban centres of the highlands¹³

⁹ The concept of ‘Greater Ethiopia’ was introduced to the scholarly discourse by Levine (1974) and came to form the basis for regarding Eritrean nationalism as a secessionist and sectarian movement.

¹⁰ For a summary of the Ethiopian argument see <http://archives.geez.org>, for the Eritrean standpoint the archives of dehai-news at <http://www.dehai.org>.

¹¹ The modern territorial state of Ethiopia (including its political and economic structures), of which present day Ethiopia is the successor, emerged at the end of the nineteenth century under Menelik II, emperor between 1889 and 1913 (for more details see Eikenberg, 1995; Ruth Iyob, 2000).

¹² Alternatively it has been argued that Italian colonial rule merely imposed a capitalist sector onto pre-colonial structures without any structural modernisation (see Tekeste Negash, 1986).

¹³ By the mid 1940s, twenty percent of Eritreans lived in urban centres, and their numbers in Asmara alone grew from 15,000 to 120,000 between 1934 and 1941 (Killion, 1996: 102).

or as soldiers fighting for the Italian army. Overall, particularly so during Italian fascism, with considerable numbers of peasants and nomads entering the monetary economy, the material base of rural life in Eritrea was undergoing profound changes (Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989: 63).¹⁴

But Italian colonialism also reinforced the separate developments of highlands and lowlands. With the possible exception of Massawa, within the lowlands there was a much lower level of modernisation. Politically, the colonial administration in the lowlands partly relied on the power of local chiefs, reinforcing feudal subjugation of the serfs, while in the highlands the old feudal ruling class was dislodged by Italian land expropriation (Markakis, 1987). Additionally, far fewer modern economic activities took place in the lowlands. Rare exceptions were the fruit and vegetable plantations around Keren, and the irrigated cotton plantations of Ali Ghider in the western lowlands on the border with Sudan, which provided a livelihood perspective to serfs outside of the traditional feudal relations (Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989). These socio-economic dimensions and the fact that “the colonial economy produced almost no social integration between highland and lowland Eritrea” (Killion, 1996: 100) added to the cultural and other differences between the *kebessa* and the *metahit* (Pool, 1997: 10), and were to become an important element in how Eritrean nationalist policies took shape.

To sum up the impact of Italian colonialism on the emergence of Eritrea as a nation, one could say it established territorial integration as the first step in nation building on which social, economic and political integration then could be built (see Redie Bereketeab, 2000). However, Italian colonialism did not create an Eritrean nation as an “imagined political community” (Anderson, 1991: 6),¹⁵ this task was indeed only fulfilled by the EPLF.¹⁶

¹⁴ Three different phases can be distinguished within the 51 years of Italian colonial rule over Eritrea: the phase of territorial consolidation and the establishment of the colonial administration; the phase of ambitious Fascist development in terms of economic and political modernisation; and finally the phase of military mobilisation. The latter included a drive towards industrialisation to turn Eritrea into “the principal theatre of war” in the wider Italian campaign to create an Italian empire in East Africa, comprising of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland (see Eyassu Gayim, 1993; Houtart, 1980; Killion, 1996). During the second phase, particularly between 1911 and 1932, large scale military recruitment from all sections of the colony was a welcome opportunity for many Eritreans; only when Italian preparations for the war against Ethiopia started were Eritreans forcefully conscripted (eventually extending to 40 percent of male Eritreans of working age) (Killion, 1998: 13). For an interesting epic account of part of Italy’s war in Ethiopia and Eritrea see O’Kelly (2002).

¹⁵ As the main characteristic of such a community Anderson describes a deep, horizontal comradeship as the overarching mindset among the inhabitants, regardless of prevailing inequalities (Anderson, 1991: 7) – a mindset not present within divided Eritrean society, as the following will make clear.

¹⁶ The EPLF itself and Eritrean nationalist discourse in general would judge things differently and proclaim that Italian colonialism created Eritrea as a nation and a sense of “common national

It is certainly the case that when the fate of Italy's lost colonies was decided after the end of World War II, Eritrea should eventually have received independence as the economic and social changes that took place under colonialism mirrored the colonial experiences of other African countries to do so (see Sorenson, 1991: 302).¹⁷ But it is equally true that Eritrean society was deeply divided during the years of the British Military Administration (BMA) when the future of Eritrea was being decided.¹⁸ The BMA encouraged the emergence of political parties, whose political activities focused on different visions for the future of Eritrea. Roughly it can be said that a considerable part of the Tigrinya Christian highland population favoured union with Ethiopia and became organised in the Unionist Party (UP). A large part of the Muslim population favoured independence and became organised in the Independence Bloc with the Muslim League (ML) – founded in Keren under the leadership of serf emancipation leader Ibrahim Sultan – at its core. These diametrically opposite political visions were not entirely based on religious affiliation: The third major party, the Liberal Progressive Party, originated in the Christian highlands but opposed unionism, whereas some Muslim tribal chiefs who feared for their privileges saw union with Ethiopia as a way of restoring them and retain their power over the serfs (see Markakis, 1988: 53; Pool, 1997: 10). It was not religion which

destiny" among Eritreans (Bereket Habteselassie, 1989: 146). Whereas an important legacy of Italian colonialism was indeed that "by centralising the territory of Eritrea in a colonial state, it has created in the people a sense of belonging to – and identification with – the territory" (Redie Bereketab, 2000: 88) – witnessed for example by communal acts of resistance to the Italian occupation (see Houtart, 1980: 87; Pateman, 1990a: 47f) – the author does not believe this amounted to what could be meaningfully called a sense of national identity. Equally, the EPLF's analysis that "in backward agricultural and pastoral societies [of which Eritrea is seen as one]" social structures were based by necessity on tribal loyalties and it was Italian colonialism which "in changing the economic, social and cultural structures" was "forging a nation" (EPLF, 1977: 3f) is regarded as too simplistic.

¹⁷ The author thus supports the line of argument that the Eritrean question was indeed a question of decolonialisation (see for example Berhane Cahsai, 1985; Bereket Habteselassie, 1989; Eikenberg, 1995), and not a question of secession violating the Charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU); or an attempt by Arab states to obtain regional hegemony over the strategically important Red Sea (Ministry of Information (Ethiopia) 1988a; Ministry of Information (Ethiopia) 1988b; Ethiopian Revolution Information Centre, 1977; Henze, 1987; 1989; for the 'Arabisation'-thesis see Erlich, 1983; 1986). For an overview of this discourse within the context of international law see Eyassu Gayim (1993: 578f), and more generally Okbazghi Yohannes (1987).

¹⁸ The BMA was a temporary administration, which came into being with British military victory over Italian forces in 1941 and was intended to last until the Four Powers Commission (made up of Britain, France, the Soviet Union and the United States) determined the future of Eritrea. As the Four Powers were unable to agree, the issue was passed to the UN. A UN Commission of Investigation (1950) after a prolonged process of consultations finally recommended a federation with Ethiopia, which came into being in 1952. In 1949, the BMA had changed into a civilian administration, an altogether rather nominal change except for the fact that Eritreans gained increased opportunities to form their own political and labour organisations (Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989; Killion, 1996).

determined political choices, but the material interests of the different social groups as they perceived them at the time. To “secure maximum access to the power of the state and the resources it commands” many Muslims – particularly the serfs – saw independence as the only viable option.¹⁹ In contrast, many Christians of all classes – strongly influenced by the Orthodox church – believed union with Ethiopia (with an equally powerful Orthodox church) would guarantee “their political supremacy in Eritrea” (Markakis, 1988: 53).²⁰

Within Eritrean nationalist historiography it is commonly argued that this fragmentation and division was due to Ethiopian subversive action and the strategic interests of Britain and the United States of America (who wanted to secure the use of the Kagnev military base in Asmara) within the emerging Cold War world order (see for example the historical analysis in the EPLF’s 1987 political report). While these factors no doubt played their part, it is argued here that, as has been discussed above, the “social, cultural and political division within Eritrean society” was of “longer historical standing” and merely reinforced by these external interventions (Pool, 2001: 37).²¹ Among the majority of Eritreans a unifying vision for a future nation had simply not developed. It did so only as a function of the way in which Ethiopia mishandled the federation. Even then it took many more years for Eritrean nationalist politics to achieve a unity of purpose.

¹⁹ The politics of independence of the ML were rooted in and informed by the serf’s movement for social emancipation; the ML’s mobilisation slogan thus read: ‘Against feudalism, for serf-emancipation and national independence’ (see Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989: 151f).

²⁰ Additionally, some multi-faith organisations had sprung up, among them the first anti-colonial organisation to communicate Eritrean positions to the BMA, the *Mahber Fikri Hager Ertra* (literally translated as ‘Association of Love of the Country of Eritrea’) in 1941, whose founding members included Ibrahim Sultan and Woldeab Woldemariam (often called the father of Eritrean nationalism) – both later left the organisation as it disintegrated over the question of union with Ethiopia (see Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 65f for a more detailed discussion as well as a comprehensive account of party politics between 1946 and 1950).

²¹ Ethiopia was certainly involved in acts of terrorism against advocates of Eritrean independence and intimidation of nationalist Christians by the Orthodox church, while Britain used its administrative power to lobby for a partition plan (the so-called Bevin-Sforza plan) in which the Eritrean lowlands would fall to Sudan, the highlands to Ethiopia (see Jordan Gebremedhin, 1989; Ruth Iyob, 1997a; Johnson & Johnson, 1981; Pool, 1997). When the case went to the UN, the terms of reference for the UN Commission included besides considering the wishes of the Eritrean people equally the rights and claims of Ethiopia and the interest of peace and security in East Africa (UN Commission for Eritrea, 1950). The right of Eritrean self-determination was weighed against these other issues. The UN Commission, split in its opinion, thus advocated federation with Ethiopia, the often cited statement made in 1952 by John Foster Dulles, then US Secretary of State, sums up the dilemma Eritreans would face for the next decades: “From the point of view of justice, the opinion of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic interests of the United States in the Red Sea basin and consideration of security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia” (quoted from Permanent People’s Tribunal, 1982).

The history of the federation was from the beginning “the history of its destruction” (Pool, 1997: 10). Under the federal act Eritrea retained legislative, executive and judicial powers in domestic affairs. It had its own parliament, whereas the Ethiopian government was to control defence, foreign affairs, finance and communications, including the administration of the two ports (Imperial Ethiopian Government, 1969: 191; United Nations Commission for Eritrea, 1952: 74f). Ethiopia from the start violated the terms of this agreement and “stripped away the safeguards on the autonomy of Eritrea’s political, social, and economic institutions” (Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 88); the annexation of Eritrea as Ethiopia’s fourteenth province in 1962 was just the last step in that process.²²

The undermining of Eritrean autonomy and the eventual annexation clearly contravened the spirit and the letter of the United Nations (UN) sponsored federation (Johnson & Johnson, 1981), but the international community remained silent. This silence was partly a function of the strategic importance of Ethiopia within the Horn of Africa in the Cold War world order (Pool, 1997), partly due to the ambiguous provisions laid down in the UN Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples. In this declaration the concept of territorial integrity – successfully invoked by Ethiopia in the context of the ‘Greater Ethiopia’ discourse – was given the same importance as the right to self-determination (UN, 1960).²³

Within Eritrea however, estrangement from Ethiopia grew from the mid 1950s onwards – even among factions who before had supported union with Ethiopia.²⁴ Before taking a closer look at how Eritrean nationalism gained support and developed over time to culminate in a movement strong enough to unify the Eritrean people and revolutionise Eritrean society, one feature of Italian colonialism needs mentioning, because it played a crucial part in delaying the emergence of a united nationalist movement after the end of colonial rule. In spite of modernising Eritrean society in many ways, Italian colonialism in a conscious effort prevented Eritreans from having access to arguably one of the most important tools in transforming society, modern education.²⁵

²² For a detailed analysis of the events which preceded annexation see Ruth Iyob (1997a) chapter five.

²³ The Eritrean question was thus never brought before the UN again, as it was regarded as an internal Ethiopian problem.

²⁴ A development anticipated by Trevaskis (a British official who had served all over Eritrea until 1950) who had warned against undue Ethiopian interference in Eritrean affairs as this was bound to provoke Eritrean resistance; he recognised that the unionists were in favour of union with Ethiopia because they believed it would best serve Eritrean interests (Trevaskis, 1960: 131).

²⁵ In 1909, Andrea Festa, then Director of Education in Eritrea, outlined Italian educational policy within the colony, which was based on separate schools for Italian and Eritrean children. Concerning the latter, in a now famous quote, Festa stated as educational objectives: “By the end of his fourth year [*for most Eritreans, four years of schooling was the maximum, and these were only available to boys*] the Eritrean student should be able to speak our language [*Italian*] moder-

What has been said about social revolutions above, that they require some form of “revolutionary vanguard” (Selbin, 1993), is equally true for the creation of a national liberation movement, whether it turns out to be revolutionary or not: An indigenous intelligentsia or what Cabral calls “native petty bourgeoisie” (Cabral, 1969: 88)²⁶ is needed – capable of developing a vision for the future and thus playing a key role in its formation (Wolde-Yesus Ammar, 1997: 59; Redie Bereketeab, 2000: 141). The emergence of such an intelligentsia is related to the expansion of modern education (Redie Bereketeab, 2001).

The development of Eritrean nationalism can therefore partly be read in terms of the emergence of an indigenous intelligentsia, which occurred in parallel with the expansion of modern educational opportunities (Markakis, 1987: 61): While these were severely restricted under Italian colonial rule, they were markedly expanded during the time of the BMA.²⁷ Concerning opportunities for post-secondary education, this was particularly beneficial to certain groups of Eritrean Muslims, who could pursue further education in Egypt and Sudan. As will be seen in the following section, the first liberation movements were indeed Muslim dominated and established in Sudan and Cairo respectively. This was partly a function of the above described socio-political divisions within Eritrea – and the fact that many Muslims from the lowlands saw themselves as the main losers in an Ethiopian empire (see Markakis, 1988); partly related to the emergence of intellectual leaders that arose with educational opportunities (Redie Bereketeab, 2001). During the federation period and

ately well; he should know the four arithmetical operations within normal limits; he should be a convinced propagandist of the principles of hygiene; and in history he should know only the names of those who have made Italy great” (quoted from Adane Taye, 1991: 28). In addition to Adane Taye (1991), a very detailed overview of the educational opportunities provided for different parts of the population by the Italian colonial government (which also includes the history of missionary education which started in Eritrea around 1840 and was partly restricted under Italian fascism) is found in Smith-Simonsen (1997); see also Tekeste Negash (1987) on the wider impact of Italian colonialism on Eritrean society, with an extensive chapter on Italian colonial education that concludes: “Italian educational policy attempted, and with considerable success, to prevent the evolution of an Eritrean intellectual elite” (ibid.: 84).

²⁶ Cabral states in this context that the only social class capable of understanding the reality of “imperialist domination” was the native petty bourgeoisie, as the colonial situation would not permit “the popular masses [to] reach the necessary level of political consciousness”; thus the project of a national revolution “offers the petty bourgeoisie the historical opportunity of leading the struggle” due to its “objective and subjective position”, characterised by higher standards of living, more frequent contacts with and knowledge of colonial power, and thus a “higher level of education and political awareness” (Cabral, 1969: 88).

²⁷ For a detailed discussion of this expansion of modern educational opportunities see Adane Taye (1991); British Military Administration (1944); Four Power Commission (1948); Trevaskis (1960). For a general history of education in Eritrea – from pre-colonial traditional education to the EPLF’s educational agenda – see Schröder (1987) and – starting with education during the Italian period – Bergen & Ertzgaard (1995). For a history of women’s education see Asgedet Stefanos (1997a).

the time of annexation before the Derg came to power in 1974, secondary education in particular was expanded in Eritrea (Adane Taye, 1991).²⁸ Many graduates from the Tigrinya highlands then proceeded to Ethiopia proper, mainly to Addis Ababa university, to continue their education.²⁹ The leadership of the emerging EPLF was to come from among these two groups: (Asmara) secondary school or (Addis Ababa) university students, with the former playing an important part within nationalist mobilisation from the late 1950s onwards (Wolde-Yesus Ammar, 1997; Markakis, 1988).³⁰

These processes of mobilisation and the emergence of the most important nationalist movements will be discussed in the following, before turning to the EPLF and the qualitatively different type of movement it was to become.

The beginnings of Eritrean nationalist politics

Within Eritrea, increased nationalist agitation could be witnessed from the mid 1950s onwards, culminating in strikes and demonstrations, the most notable a general workers' strike in 1958 (Ruth Iyob, 1997a; Pool, 2001), the year in which the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was established by nationalist Muslim exiles in Port Sudan.

To eventually succeed in liberating Eritrea from foreign domination, it was necessary for any Eritrean nationalist movement to on one hand reconcile the divisions of the past – based on class differences, the Muslim-Christian schism and ethno-linguistic affiliations – in short, to construct something that could be called an Eritrean national identity; on the other hand, to mobilise large segments of the population into actually resisting Ethiopian rule.

The ELM was aware of this challenge. Its youthful founders – a new generation of nationalist leaders not drawn from traditional power brokers (see Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 98f for more details) – declared in the movement's charter that “Muslims and Christians are brothers and their unity makes Eritrea one [nation]” (quoted from Markakis, 1998: 55). It challenged the traditional model of conducting politics through inter-elite alliances and centred recruitment efforts on “the working class, petty traders, teachers and students, social groups

²⁸ Two secondary schools (grade 9-12) were opened during the federation period, and six further secondary schools after 1962; enrolment rates were higher than anywhere else in Ethiopia except Addis Ababa (Adane Taye, 1991). It was only after the Derg came to power in 1974 that education became seriously disrupted and schools were torn down or turned into barracks (see Bergen & Ertzgaard, 1995).

²⁹ In that context it has been observed that during the federation period, the percentage of Eritreans joining Addis Ababa university or working in administrative positions was extremely high (Schröder, 1987).

³⁰ Issayas Afewerki, leader of the EPLF and current president of the State of Eritrea, for example was a member of a militant student group at Prince Mekonnen Secondary School in Asmara in the 1960s, as were many others who were to become prominent EPLF members.

from which the leadership itself was derived” (Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 100). What the ELM lacked, however, was a clear strategy – apart from the notion to achieve liberation in a *coup d'état*. After its inability to counter the Ethiopian annexation of Eritrea in 1962 it was eventually destroyed by “a more militant organisation which promised to accomplish by guerrilla war what the ELM had been unable to bring about by other means” (ibid.: 106) – Eritrean independence.³¹ The ELM’s most important legacy was its inclusiveness shown in its commitment towards reconciliation between the different antagonistic forces in Eritrean society (see Pateman, 1998).³² Its demise was followed by an era of sectarian nationalism as the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) became the prime opposition movement, drawing its main support from the Muslim population of the lowlands, who were most disillusioned with the Ethiopian annexation.

The ELF was established in Cairo in 1960 by nationalist Muslim leaders in exile who drew a large following from among the Eritrean expatriate student community there (see Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 108f). The armed struggle itself is officially dated as having started in September 1961 in the Barka region, when Hamid Idris Awate, a local *shifita* leader notorious in tribal raids in the western lowlands, clashed with Ethiopian police. He thus became (not quite deserved) accredited with having fired the first shots of the armed struggle and the ELF was to cultivate the impression that he was one of their field commanders (Markakis, 1988: 56). Awate’s companions (he himself died a few months later) remained in the area and were joined by others, mainly Beni Amer tribesmen and Eritreans who had fought in the Sudanese army. They gradually spread the armed struggle from the western lowlands to the Keren area. These beginnings of the armed struggle point to its roots: the Beni Amer lowland areas had been the centre of the serf agitation movement whose leaders had formed the ML. In doing so they had “linked together Islam, social reform and national independence in an ideological cluster that was to have a profound impact on the forging of a unified nationalist movement” (Pool, 2001: 43). On one hand, the social changes which were brought about in the lowland Muslim communities by the serf liberation movement as well as by economic opportunities under Italian colonial rule did provide “an egalitarian social basis for mobilising individuals into joining and supporting an armed movement” (Pool, 2001: 47), a movement that with achieving liberation would at the same time have destroyed the serf-

³¹ For a detailed account of these developments see Ruth Iyob (1997a) chapter 6. For an attempt to throw new light onto the ELM see Pateman (1998).

³² Pateman describes the later to emerge EPLF as the logical continuation of the ELM and the elimination of the latter as the most tragic episode of Eritrean infighting and a major setback for the nationalist cause – “the EPLF was the logical home for the ELM members; both movements being firmly committed to a non sectarian, democratic socialist future for Eritrea” (Pateman, 1998: 13).

leadership system that had existed before. On the other hand, the ELF was never able to free itself from its Muslim consciousness and its tradition in the serf liberation movement, which led to a politics of exclusion – most visible in its civil war against the ELM with its programme of reconciliation – and a zonal command structure which incorporated long standing socio-economic conflicts into the nationalist movement (Ruth Iyob, 1997a; Pool, 1980; 2001). When with the heavy handed Ethiopian policies in Eritrea after the abolition of the federation from the mid 1960s onwards recruitment to the movement increased and included many educated Tigrinya Christian highlanders, this led to an organisational crisis and the eventual fragmentation and demise of the ELF in the early 1980s.³³

From 1969 onwards various factions had spilt from the ELF – made up of Muslims and Christians alike – out of which eventually the EPLF was formed.³⁴ Being a product of the divisions within Eritrean nationalism in the past, to succeed the EPLF had to build on the agenda of the ELM: It needed to reconcile these division and forge a sense of national consciousness, while at the same time appeal to and mobilise the major social classes within both spectrums of Eritrean society, Christian and Muslim.³⁵ This it regarded as possible only if the armed struggle for national liberation and a social revolution within Eritrea took place together – a social revolution which would constitute a radical break with the past. As early as 1971 the Ala group – the faction led by Issayas Afewerki which was to become the core of the EPLF – issued a pamphlet called “Our struggle and its goals”. This pamphlet, in addition to providing a justification for the group’s separation from the ELF and a sketch of its programme, stressed the need for Eritrean unity “and the necessity for a ‘revolutionary organisation with a revolutionary line’ to forge [that] unity” (Pool, 2001: 68). This line of thought was to become central to the ideological stance the EPLF was to take,

³³ The details of these events go beyond the scope of what is relevant for this research; detailed overviews are given in Ruth Iyob (1997a); Markakis (1987), (1988); Pool (1980), (2001) (the latter particularly interesting for the account of an early crisis within the EPLF). For the eventual unity of the two fronts under EPLF ‘guidance’ see EPLF (1987b), (1987c).

³⁴ For the most detailed account of the various factions and their relationship to each other and the ELF see Pool (2001), and also Ruth Iyob (1997a). Different dates circulate as to when exactly the EPLF came into existence: whereas its formal establishment can be dated back to its first organisational congress in 1977 (see Pool, 2001: 63), Ruth Iyob dates its formation back to the merger of various former ELF factions in September 1973 (Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 114f). The EPLF itself uses 1970 as the date of its formation (EPLF, 1977: 13), the year when the Ala group (see below) among others came into existence.

³⁵ This involved breaking the link between the Orthodox church and the highland peasantry (and its support for union with Ethiopia) and recruitment of the latter, as well as delinking the agenda of national liberation from the emancipatory traditions of the Muslim serf liberation movement.

that only it with its ‘correct’ and inclusive brand of Eritrean nationalism was able to simultaneously free the country and create a new society.³⁶

The EPLF and its national democratic revolution

It has been argued in the preceding that the “national revolutions” (concept taken from Hermassi, 1976: 226) which occurred in the twentieth century in the developing world were not only characterised by an overthrow of the existing social order, but at the same time by a transformation of pre-existing collective identities in the process of creating new nations – and thus a revolutionary ideology which provided a coherent explanation of the past, the justification for the revolutionary struggle and a strong belief in and commitment to its cause was decisive for their success (see MacPherson, 1966).

Looking at the EPLF, that was precisely what part of its eventual success was based on: a unifying ideological framework induced to its members in a programme of political education “which shaped the consciousness of Front members, and acceptance of it was as much a symbol of organisational commitment as the carrying of a Kalashnikov” (Pool, 2001: xv).

Within this ideological framework – which has been described as a “dialectical reaction against the past [of nationalist disunity] and a purposive reconstructive analysis of it to reshape the political consciousness of nationalists” (Pool, 2001: 35) – great emphasis was given to the re-writing of Eritrean history from a different theoretical perspective. Using Marxist and Maoist concepts and language – as was common among liberation movements at the time³⁷ – divisions within society were portrayed as class divisions and thus the link between Christian highlanders and Unionism removed. In a similar vein, the notions of religion and tribe as significant social entities were undermined by the concept of nationality as the main cultural category (see Pool, 2001). While on one hand

³⁶ It has been argued in this context that these developments do not necessarily point to a failure of the ELF, but that the ELF and its political mobilisation during the 1960s was indispensable to arrive at this new stage in the struggle for liberation (see Cliffe & Bondestam, 1983, who – in comparing various national liberation movements – conclude they generally develop from being narrowly nationalistic in the beginning towards socially conscious movements with a socialist agenda).

³⁷ As has been argued in chapter 1, revolutionary movements of the twentieth century in the developing world made use of the wider ideological discourse of revolution and socialism. In concrete, the EPLF “can be situated within the great tradition of liberation movements like the ones of China, Vietnam, Cuba, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and Angola. To a certain extent, it has been able to profit by their experiences. However, it also appears to have given much attention to the specificity of its own situation” (Houtart, 1980: 109).

bringing the EPLF into conflict with various segments of Eritrean society,³⁸ this new interpretation of Eritrean nationalist history at the same time made the Front “impervious to social, ethnic, regional, tribal, religious and ideological division” (Pool, 2001: 55). With the EPLF’s expansion into Eritrean society and its capacity to turn political and military adversity to its advantage, this new national consciousness spread to parts of the wider population. The EPLF became thus an organisation which “moulded Eritreans rather than one buffeted by Eritrean socio-historic divisions” (ibid.).³⁹

The main pillar on which the EPLF’s ideology as well as its organisational structures⁴⁰ were to rest became its concept of unity (see e.g. EPLF, 1987a: 1). To this day the EPLF slogan “unity in diversity” is one of the official slogans at every Eritrean national celebration. In its first ‘National Democratic Programme’ the EPLF states that:

Although the 1940s witnessed the emergence of several political parties in Eritrea, the Eritrean people’s struggle for independence could not triumph because none of the parties had the correct line, strength and cohesiveness to *unite* the majority of the Eritrean people around itself, overcome the machinations of imperialism and neo-colonialism and lead the Eritrean people to *independence* (...) [to achieve this goal] a democratic force [was needed and the mandate of the EPLF was thus] to fulfil the historic tasks of the *national democratic revolution* that the EPLF ever since its formation in 1970 has been fighting to *unite* the *workers, peasants* and other *democratic* and *patriotic* forces in a single Front (...) to achieve independence and freedom, peace and justice, prosperity and progress for the Eritrean people, the EPLF, led by a correct *revolutionary* line and based on the *worker-peasant alliance*, shall

³⁸ It has been noted that the way many inhabitants of the highlands understood their history “was not compatible with the project of inventing a unique identity that was being promoted by the EPLF. The quest for an identity that they can feel is distinctly their own made the EPLF resolve their past. (...) Given the gap between the collective memory of the majority and the aspirations of the political elites, the invented history had to be fanciful” (Alemseged Abbay, 1997: 330; see also Alemseged Abbay (1998) and Trivelli (1998) on relations between the *kebessa* and Tigray; Tronvoll (1999) on communal identities among the Afar and pastoralist communities in the western lowlands).

³⁹ For the EPLF’s version of Eritrean history see EPLF (1977), (1979).

⁴⁰ Cornerstones of the EPLF’s internal character were a cohesive and unified leadership and strict internal discipline, with stern punishment for internal dissent (see Pool, 1998; 2001); concerning internal organisation, it broadly followed the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, understood as being an amalgamation of popular participation through mass organisations (in the EPLF’s case, five national unions of women, peasants, workers, students and professionals) together with strong executive powers. At the apex was the Front’s Congress, then the structure worked its way down from the Central Committee via the Politburo and the Standing Committee to the various departments (see Barnett, 1980; Firebrace & Holland, 1985). Democratic centralism was regarded by the EPLF as a system “by which the people can participate directly in decision-making, albeit at the same time ensuring (...) influence and power at the top” (Pateman, 1990b: 461).

fight to implement ensuing objectives until complete and final victory (EPLF, 1977: 7-22; *my emphasis*).⁴¹

It is unity of the Eritrean people, the argument goes, which will lead to independence in a revolution carried out by an alliance of the disadvantaged social classes under the guidance of the EPLF.⁴²

In all this it has to be kept in mind that the primary objective of Eritrean nationalist politics (and the EPLF) was not a social revolution which would transform Eritrean society, but the creation of an independent Eritrean state – and the way to go about that was seen in what the EPLF calls a national democratic revolution. In its 1987 programme, the EPLF defines its mission as “the realisation of the Eritrean people’s right to self-determination and independence” (EPLF, 1987a: 46f), while stating at the same time that

even though the EPLF’s *primary task* has been to wage armed struggle to free the Eritrean people from the colonial yoke, it has *not shelved* the objective of economic, social and cultural transformation, as this is an *integral part of the revolution* (ibid.: 76; *my emphasis*).

In every revolution though, revolutionary ideology has to be related to the material reality of the people, to what could be called the ‘bread and butter issues’, or, as Amilcar Cabral put it:

Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children (quoted from Davidson, 1981b: 159).

⁴¹ It is not within the scope of this research to assess the EPLF’s claim that only it had what could be called a revolutionary agenda, aiming for the transformation of society as well as national liberation. Various people known to the author who were members of the ELF had political visions similar to those formulated by the EPLF. In a similar vein, Pool (2001: 141f) – referring to the large scale influx of new fighters to the EPLF as well as the ELF in 1974/75 – reports from interviews he conducted that many of these new recruits saw little difference between the two fronts (see also various ELF publication at the time, e.g. ELF (1976), (1986); for a contemporary overview <http://www.meskerem.net/> provides links to current Eritrean opposition movements (all based outside Eritrea) and their agendas, including the remains of the ELF and the ELF–RC (Revolutionary Council); see also Institute for African Alternatives, 1998). But as when the ELF was driven into Sudan in 1982 the EPLF became the dominant political and military force within Eritrea and thus the bearer of the Eritrean revolution to this day, an assessment of the Eritrean revolution is by necessity an assessment of the EPLF.

⁴² This concept of revolution is in line with Selbin’s definition of social revolution as the “overthrow of a ruling elite by a revolutionary vanguard that has mobilized broad popular support and undertaken the transformation of a society’s political, economic and social structures” (Selbin, 1993: 11); in this case, the ruling elite being the occupying Ethiopian regime.

In the context of the Eritrean revolution, the EPLF's success in mobilising large parts of the Eritrean population to its cause depended as much on the strengths of its military wing – the Eritrean People's Liberation Army (EPLA) – and a belief that one day it could deliver a free and independent Eritrea, as on the social transformation of Eritrean society.⁴³ This led the EPLF to forge a strategy “in which the military and the political were symbiotic” (Pool, 1983: 191). Within the EPLF, the lines between the civilian and the military were fluid (everybody who was a member of and worked for the Front was referred to as a “fighter”). Not only were civilians (who usually had undergone some form of military training) called in when the military situation demanded it, but equally the role of the EPLA was seen as crucial in both, to overthrow Ethiopian rule and transform Eritrean society (Leonard, 1984; Pateman, 1986: 4).⁴⁴

The Eritrean revolution can thus be defined as a synthesis of both, a military struggle for national independence culminating in the creation of a nation of one's own, and a revolutionary project of social transformation along modernist-socialist lines.⁴⁵ Much has been written on its successes on the military front, and even more on its achievements in terms of the social transformation of Eritrean society under the adverse conditions of war – including land reform, provision of social services particularly in the areas of health and education,

⁴³ Witness to this bears for example the fact that after the EPLF (and the ELF, for that matter) ‘liberated’ major towns from Ethiopian control in 1977, recruitment increased tremendously (see Pool, 2001: 139). It has to be pointed out in this context that the EPLF in many ways was rather a pragmatic than an ideological movement: With its overall strategic goal being an independent Eritrean nation, the tactics used were adjusted to the circumstances and the Front “proved highly adaptable to changing domestic and international contexts, and shifted from its original revolutionary ideological position, stressing class struggle and anti-imperialism, to a pragmatic quasi-liberalism, and from guerrilla to conventional war” (Pool, 1998: 20); in a similar vein it has been argued that between its first congress in 1977 and its second congress in 1987 the focus of the EPLF's programme shifted from being strongly social-revolutionary to merely social-reformist (Eikenberg, 1995: 264).

⁴⁴ Leonard describes the EPLA as the testing ground and a “social vanguard” in exemplifying wider EPLF policies and regards for example the integration of women into the EPLA on an egalitarian basis as a major factor in developing the struggle for liberation of Eritrean women (Leonard, 1984: 6).

⁴⁵ Concerning the latter, Issayas Afewerki said in an interview with Stuart Holland (then Labour Shadow Minister for Overseas Development and Co-operation) in 1984: “We want to transform this society and have a modern society, not the kind of society we have (...) there is no other way for Third World societies to transform the social and economic formations of their societies except by following the general socialist trend (...) as to the details and models, well, we do not have models practically (...) if we succeed in (...) implementing our development projects side by side with our military achievements, then we can really transform this society (...) what we are doing now is a prototype of a small experiment of our forthcoming programmes and it's been successful so far” (Firebrace & Holland, 1985: 128f).

changes in the status of women and the establishment of organs for popular political participation – and need not be repeated here.⁴⁶

Going back to Selbin and the three (often overlapping) phases he distinguishes in the way social revolutions develop – insurrection, political victory and transformation of society – the Eritrean revolution was successful in the first two as well as in the third in the areas under EPLF control from the late 1970s onwards.⁴⁷

As has been outlined above, a central cornerstone of this success in the EPLF's revolutionary strategy became the political education of all its members, including those in the Eritrean diaspora abroad, who were socialised into the Front's *weltanschauung* (Pool, 1998: 20). The programme of political education informed an active policy to incorporate all social groups into the movement and to break down rooted distinctions between Christians and Muslims, the rural and urban population, workers and intellectuals, and not least men and women (Pool, 1983: 190), as well as between the leadership and members of the Front.⁴⁸ This egalitarian agenda has “forged an intense national and

⁴⁶ See for example Chaliand (1994); Connell (1997a); Firebrace & Holland (1985); Michler (1980); Papstein (1991) on social achievements and military developments; Barnett (1980) on agriculture; Gottesman (1998) on education and literacy; Burgess et al. (1985) on political and social change; Wilson (1991) on changes in the status of women.

⁴⁷ The EPLF decided on a strategic withdrawal to its base area in Sahel after Soviet and Cuban troops had altered the military balance in favour of Ethiopia in 1977, where it started to put much of its social revolutionary agenda into practice in the areas under its control (see preceding footnote for references).

⁴⁸ Behind this systematic diffusion of its general philosophy was a powerful clandestine ‘vanguard’ party within the inner circle of the EPLF. Its existence was publicly acknowledged only in 1994, when it was said to have dissolved in the late 1980s. To this day, not much is known about the party and its workings, as silence was a prerequisite for membership (and is maintained by former members). New members were recruited on the basis of demonstrated ideological correctness, general commitment to the cause and proven leadership skills. The structures of the clandestine party mirrored those of the EPLF. Democratic centralism was the organising principle and Issayas Afewerki at its apex, a fact which increased the centralisation of power in his hands (see Ruth Iyob, 1997b; Pool, 2001; Connell, 2002). The transformation of the EPLF into the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) at the same congress where the existence of the clandestine party was acknowledged and the prevailing ambiguity about the status of the PFDJ (whether or not it is a ‘political party’) have raised the question whether the party was really dissolved or whether the PFDJ is not merely acting as ‘front’ for a still existing or transformed clandestine organisation (Ruth Iyob, 1997b: 662; Pool, 2001: 93). This question could gain new prominence as since the end of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war internal controls within Eritrea have tightened and dissenting opinions are openly suppressed – visible for example in the arrest without trial of a group of prominent EPLF/PFDJ members after having written an open letter to all PFDJ members in May 2001 accusing Issayas Afewerki of unconstitutional government (see: http://news.asmarino.com/PFDJ_Membership/ <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/AFR640082002!Open>; as well as Jayasekera, 2001).

social cohesiveness” (Pateman, 1990b: 466) and resulted in a “marked lack of social differentiation” (ibid.) or “elitism” (Johnson & Johnson, 1981: 191).⁴⁹

What will be the main concern in this study is the process of revolutionary consolidation that followed the political victory of the EPLF and the birth of an independent Eritrean nation state, in particular what happened to one pillar of the EPLF’s revolutionary agenda – the transformation of the status of women within Eritrean society⁵⁰ – after the concrete struggle for liberation gave way to the structurally different task of peaceful social and economic development.

The notion of gender equality was introduced into the Eritrean revolution within the EPLF’s programme of political education.⁵¹ After the EPLF’s political victory, this programme of political education gave way to the task of building a national system of education – based on the system of education already developed during the struggle in the field.⁵² It was underlined by a similar philosophy according to which education was regarded as “a social instrument designed to serve a specific social purpose” (EPLF, 1989: 2)⁵³ A new na-

⁴⁹ This process has been analysed in terms of Cabral’s notion of ‘class suicide’, who argued that under the conditions of Guinea-Bissau (to which the Eritrean struggle has many parallels) the only self-conscious revolutionary force was the petty bourgeoisie. In the course of a protracted struggle against the colonial state it would be forced to commit ‘class suicide’ and identify with the interests of the exploited masses (Cabral, 1969: 89; Johnson & Johnson, 1981: 185f). The EPLF itself stopped to use the concept of class by 1984 because it no longer seemed a useful category (Connell, 1997a: 188) – partly due to the levelling of differences after the drought of the early 1980s, coupled with the EPLF’s monastic approach and its philosophy of self-reliance (Kaplan, 1988).

⁵⁰ Many observers have described “the outstanding changes occurring among Eritrean women” as “probably the most distinctive feature of the revolution” (Pateman, 1990b: 465; see also e.g. Alayli, 1995; Connell, 1997a; Wilson, 1991). The Eritrean revolution thus follows the “Woman’s Emancipation model” in Moghadam’s classification (Moghadam, 1993) and serves as an example for the centre stage changes in the status of women took within revolutions in the twentieth century.

⁵¹ The first time the eradication of patriarchal social structures that placed Eritrean women into a subordinate position to men was mentioned as one objective of the liberation struggle was in the 1971 pamphlet of the Ala group (Ruth Iyob, 1997a: 170).

⁵² Many of today’s educational policies have their foundations in the time of the struggle and in most cases the same people who are in decision making positions in the Ministry of Education (MoE) today were already in charge of certain aspects of education in the field (including the Minister of Education and the three Director Generals). Much of the present-day curriculum was developed and tested in the EPLF revolution school and within other educational programmes run by the Front (see *Adulis* 1984-1991; Gottesman, 1998; *Resistance*, 1978-1981; *Rice Bulletin*, 1989-1992).

⁵³ The EPLF curriculum should “provide for the proper dissemination, respect and development of the history of Eritrea and its people, the struggle against colonialism, oppression and for national independence, the experience, sacrifices and heroism as well as the national folklore, traditions and culture of the Eritrean people” (EPLF, 1977: 28) and “promote the national unity of the Eritrean people” (EPLF, 1987a: 172); at the same time “literacy and the raising of educational levels” were regarded as “an integral part of the campaign to politicise, organise and arm the people” (EPLF, 1987a: 86) and education was to be integrated with production and put “in the

tional education system has thus been described as “clearly the most important instrument for disseminating the new culture [the culture created by the EPLF in the field including its notion of gender equality]” (IDASA, 1994: 8). Within this notion of education for social change – which together with disseminating the Front’s culture had as a major objective to change discriminatory social practices – the unequal standing of women in traditional Eritrean society featured high on the agenda. Since the time when the EPLF admitted women into its ranks in 1974, education was recognised as the crucial factor in enabling women to redefine their private and public roles. A commitment was made in the 1970s to establish educational equality between men and women (Asgedet Stefanos, 1997a: 665). This commitment has continued beyond Eritrean independence – in fact within contemporary Eritrean society, women’s education is seen as decisive to achieve (more) gender equality in the future by all women who took part in this research, as will become clear as the text unfolds.⁵⁴

In more general terms it has been stated that a crucial factor in the making of a modern nation – the ultimate objective of the Eritrean revolution – is a system of education which allows on one hand for the effective diffusion of the national narrative (Anderson, 1991), on the other for its citizens to participate effectively in this modern community (Gellner, 1964: 159). Few nations have indeed embarked on independent statehood without recourse to the “ideological potential” (Green, 1997: 1) of education as well as using it as a tool for political and economic modernisation (Green, 1997).

This leaves the notions of education for social change and education as a means to establish the EPLF’s version of the Eritrean past as hegemonic national narrative still important. At the same time, the scope of Eritrean educational policy objectives became broader: It equally centres on enabling all Eritrean nationals to exercise fully their citizenship rights (for which arguably literacy is a prerequisite),⁵⁵ and on a strategy to as a nation participate successfully in today’s globalised modern world. Thus, in the latest strategic policy document, as the main objectives of educational policies it is stated “to produce a population equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and culture for a (...) modern economy” (GSE, 1994: 39). On a more general level, it has been

service of the masses” (EPLF, 1977: 28; 1987a: 173) to become “a decisive weapon in national reconstruction and economic development” (EPLF, 1987a: 85).

⁵⁴ Special attention is given and measures are taken to increase girls’ and women’s enrolment in all strata of the educational system, and educational statistics are published gender-segregated (see MoE, 1997; 2000a; 2000b; UoA, 1998; Berhane Woldemichael, 1992).

⁵⁵ See for example Gellner (1964) who asserts that: “The minimal requirement for full citizenship, for effective moral membership of a modern community, is literacy” and continues to say that a nation’s political status “is now determined by the preconditions of education” (ibid.: 159). The latest Human Development Report (HDR) puts Eritrea’s literacy rate at 55.7% overall, 44.5% for women and 67.3% for men (UNDP 2002).

asserted that many official speeches and policy documents “demonstrate the government’s narrowing focus on economic modernisation” (Asgedet Stefanos, 1997a: 681).⁵⁶ This is in line with the observations of Habte Tesfaldet: He describes the educational system in the liberated areas in the 1970s as having been greatly influenced by what he calls the “social-demand-approach” (Habte Tesfaldet, 1992: 20). A lot of emphasis was placed on political, social and cultural development which implied freeing people from constraints in their lives and had similarities to the conscientisation approach propagated by Paolo Freire, who saw in education “that specifically human act of intervening in the world” (1998: 6) in order to promote change. But Tesfaldet notes that since the 1980s, the “manpower-demand-approach” seems to have gained the upper hand (Tesfaldet, 1992: 20) and in present day Eritrea an ambitious Human Resource Development (HRD) strategy is slowly given priority over this more holistic approach towards education.⁵⁷ A similar point is made by Hale (2000) who asserts that “the uncompromising and challenging (...) liberatory pedagogy used in the Revolution Schools is being diluted and retreated from in the development of the National Curriculum” (ibid.: 361).

The question to be asked then is whether within this new agenda of education for building a certain type of modern nation, there is still room for the concept of education for emancipation – or, more precisely, women’s emancipation. Women’s emancipation here is conceived of as a dynamic process in which arising forms of gender oppression are overcome (see Asgedet Stefanos, 1997a) – as such, it is a very personal concept, meaning different things to different women.

In a wider sense, this leads back to the question how far a revolutionary movement transformed into the governing party of a new state is generally prepared or structurally able to go in maintaining a liberatory, emancipatory agenda ‘after the shooting stops’. Concerning women’s emancipation, it leads back even a step further to the question whether women’s liberation or a profound change in the status of women can sustainably be achieved within a

⁵⁶ The economic development strategy pursued by the Eritrean government and for which human resources need to be developed is one of export-orientation, or in other words, “the establishment of an efficient, outward looking, private sector-led market economy, with the government playing a proactive role to stimulate private economic activities” (GSE, 1994: 12). The government’s overall development strategy has as a major component human capital formation “with *education* and health as key inputs” (ibid., *my emphasis*). This blueprint shows many similarities with the developmental states of East Asia (see Green, 1997; Müller, 2002a for further discussion).

⁵⁷ Overall, the HRD strategy pursued by the Eritrean government is very similar to the human capital approach propagated by the World Bank (WB), the bottom line of which regards education as an investment which will eventually lead to increased productivity, macroeconomic growth and development – while at the same time delivering positive externalities in terms of better health and nutrition as well as social cohesion and equality – and in the case of Eritrea a united nation (WB, 1999: 5).

national revolution. The following will therefore analyse the way women were conceptualised by the EPLF and what wider assumptions lay behind the way they were integrated on supposedly equal terms into the Front, before turning to what these meant and do mean today in the personal lives of present and potential future elite women in Eritrean society.

Within the Eritrean revolution: National independence and women's liberation

With the emergence of the EPLF as the sole relevant force in the Eritrean struggle for national liberation, what has been described as its progressive and revolutionary character was often connected to its agenda for women's liberation.⁵⁸

In this context, it has been mentioned as an outstanding feature of the Eritrean revolution that women participated heavily and in all aspects in the fighting force (Hale, 2000: 353f). By the end of the liberation struggle they comprised about one third of the EPLF and served in all capacities (Bernal, 2000; Connell, 1998; Marcus, 1995; Worku Zerai, 1994) – except for the top ranks of the leadership, as “women's entry into central leadership positions” was not a priority (Asgedet Stefanos, 1997b: 257).⁵⁹ Altogether, placing women's rights at centre stage has been called “one of the most striking features of the EPLF's programme of social reform” (Green, 1994: 6).⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Looking at the status of women in traditional Eritrean society, one needs to be cautious to generalise, as a variety of cultures and traditions exists among Eritrea's nine nationalities and within each of these there are many exceptions and variations. In addition not much systematic anthropological research has been conducted in Eritrea over the last decades (partly an exception is the study of Tigrinya women by Kemink, 1991). Apart from various studies conducted by the EPLF's Department of Public Administration (see Worku Zerai, 1994) or foreign visitors supportive of the EPLF's agenda – both of which were shaped by the EPLF's ideological outlook of what ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ means and portrayed, rather simplistically, women in traditional Eritrean society as lacking any form of civil, economic, political, social or cultural rights (Gaim Kibreab, 1995: 4) – little is known about the everyday lives of Eritrean women (for some mainly anecdotal evidence see Department of Administration, 1986 (in Tigrinya); NUEW, 1980; Terhas Magos, 1981; SUKE, 1990; Wilson, 1991; Worku Zerai, 1994; Wubnesh Selassie, 1992). Overall, the accounts available suggest that the status of Eritrean women varied according to social class, geographic setting (urban or rural), ethnicity and religion (Gaim Kibreab, 1995) and the gender divisions of labour differed as a result of at least three factors: agro-ecological, socio-cultural and socio-economic (Green, 1994; Silkin, 1983).

⁵⁹ No women combatants ever achieved the three highest officer ranks; the military hierarchy starts with commanding a *gujelle* (ten people); then *ganta* (three *gujelle* – 30 people), followed by *hailee* (three *gantas*) – and always multiplied by three *bottolini*, *brigade* and *kefle-serawit*. No women advanced further than *hailee* commander (see Asgedet Stefanos, 1997a: 677).

⁶⁰ The objectives of the EPLF in relation to women's rights were first formulated in its National Democratic Programme in 1977. It has to be pointed out though that women's issues were not dealt with in their own right, but under point number four “safeguard social rights”, were section

Wilson states that while Eritrean society in essence was not different from any other patriarchal peasant society in the developing world, “the way the EPLF has tackled the subject of women’s oppression is different from any other revolutionary movement” (Wilson, 1991: 131), mainly referring to the refusal of EPLF cadres to bow to pressure from traditional cultural norms but siding with and helping women for example in disputes over forced marriages or land ownership.⁶¹

Keeping in mind that the complexity of Eritrean society makes it impossible to posit a “neat dichotomy” between “traditional” and “modern” (Silkin, 1989: 148), what made the EPLF indeed “progressive” from the point of view of gender transformation was “a particular focus on the position of women” in its “transformation (...) from simple nationalism to socialism” (Silkin, 1983: 909), which challenged pre-existing forms of gender subordination and led to considerable gains for Eritrean women (Green, 1994; Marcus, 1995). Besides the issues of land reform and marriage these were most visible in the EPLF’s provision of social services, the encouragement of women’s participation in public life and the conscientisation of women and men to overcome traditional gender roles.⁶² In this context it is also worth mentioning that the EPLF did not – as many movements involved in armed conflict have done – encourage women to

B was concerned with women’s rights which were outlined in very broad terms. The full text of the section is found in appendix 2.

⁶¹ Reportedly, many women especially in the rural areas joined the EPLF to escape arranged marriages (Cowan, 1984; Silkin, 1989). The legacy of the struggle which had arguably the biggest impact on the lives of especially rural women were the new marriage law and the law on land reform introduced by the EPLF. It for the first time in Eritrean history gave women the right to own land (Fullerton-Joireman, 1996: 274; Silkin, 1983; Wilson, 1991; – Gaim Kibreab (1995) disputes the last claim and cites examples from regional Codes of Customary Law in Tigrinya peasant societies which allowed women under certain conditions to inherit property, including land). These new laws might still not be enforced everywhere but a general consciousness is said to be growing among women which encourages them to fight for their legal rights (Wilson, 1991; Worku Zerai, 1994).

⁶² Concerning social services, because of their low rate of literacy, women have been the main beneficiaries of the EPLF’s educational provision. The same is true for EPLF health care, including maternity services. Equally, the introduction of small scale technology in EPLF administered villages, e.g. grinding mills, transformed the lives especially of women (Cowan, 1984; Wubnesh Selassie, 1992). Concerning the political realm, women’s active possibility to participate has begun with the EPLF, as women were not allowed to vote in the past (for example during the brief parliamentary period of the Eritrean-Ethiopian federation, 1952 – 1962) or occupy public office, in short, they did not have any political rights (NUEW, 1995; NUEW, 1999b; SUKE, 1990). Concerning women’s participation in public life, in EPLF administered areas, in the traditionally male dominated village assemblies women were pushed to participate and in some assemblies eventually made up 30 percent of its members (Wubnesh Selassie, 1992; Wilson, 1991). Within the EPLF itself, it has been stated that there was no room for a gender based division of labour (Wubnesh Selassie, 1992: 69) and skill training for women was given special emphasis, as women usually possessed less skills than men when they joined the Front.

“breed sons to fight for the cause” (Marcus, 1995: 140), but rested its recruitment policy on convincing civilians from all strata of society to join the fight.⁶³

In assessing in more detail what participation in the struggle within the EPLF might have meant for the considerable number of women who decided to join, two things have to be kept in mind: Firstly, no comprehensive accounts exist of life within the EPLF for women and men alike. What has been written was either produced by the EPLF (or some of its members); or based on EPLF publications which served a political purpose; or on scholarly accounts of people who spent (sometimes repeatedly over the years but still) a very limited amount of time with the EPLF; or interviews with former fighters (see for example Christmann, 1996; Connell, 1997a; 1998; NUEW, 1982; Papstein, 1991; Pateman, 1990b; Pool, 2001; Schamanek, 1998; Silkin, 1989; Wilson, 1991; Worku Zerai, 1994).

All these sources taken together show a very fragmented view of life in the field and women’s liberation in concrete in the context of the Eritrean revolution. The second point to keep in mind follows from here: The women who joined the struggle came from very diverse backgrounds and thus brought with them a very different understanding about what emancipation might mean for them.⁶⁴ But after they had joined, they were exposed to and their thinking was formed by the ideological stance of the Front.

The EPLF’s approach towards gender issues and the way in which it sought to implement gender equality among its members can be summarised as “integrating women into the EPLF not simply as the equals of men, but as male equivalents” (Bernal, 2000: 62).

Even though the EPLF defined itself in terms of both, national liberation and revolutionising society, one needs to keep in mind that it was the question of nation building that was the overarching objective, and women within the EPLF were regarded first and foremost as an integral part of this process. According to Wilson, this had a major impact on the way women experienced their own identity. Shortly before independence, in an account very supportive of the EPLF, she wrote:

⁶³ One should not forget that when the EPLF emerged, it was a minority movement, threatened by the then much larger ELF. It was therefore also a question of sheer survival to make the women’s issue to one of the central issues and mobilise women to participate equally in the Front. It also needs to be pointed out that not all women who did so joined the Front out of conviction: some were caught up in the strategic retreat and did see no other choice to survive than to join, others were reportedly forcefully recruited (Christmann quotes the testimonies of two female fighters who were forcefully recruited against their will, but later became convinced members, see Christmann, 1996: 110f; 138f).

⁶⁴ Some of the accounts quoted in Christmann (1996), Schamanek (1998) and Wilson (1991) provide an idea of this diversity in the background of female fighters.

Twenty-nine years of struggle have had a major impact on the identity of the people. They have not only engendered an intense nationalism but have subtly and crucially altered it, giving it a revolutionary form. Perhaps as a result, particularly in the areas where the Eritrean People's Liberation Front has had a long presence, we no longer see the sharp cutting dichotomy between the personal struggle of women and the broader politics of national struggle (Wilson, 1991: 2).

In the EPLF a "new identity (...) erased all the other identities of family, religion, class and clan" (Wilson, 1991: 132), and, it could be added, gender. The development of a "unique identity created by the struggle itself" (Sorenson, 1991: 309)⁶⁵ was seen as a prerequisite by the EPLF to succeed in both its objectives, national liberation and national reconstruction (Schamanek, 1998: 124). Eritrea was to become a nation built "on inclusion, rather than exclusion" (Bernal, 2000: 64). But with this prime emphasis on an all-inclusive nation, what could be called the "cultural bases of womanhood" (ibid.), namely motherhood, familial roles, or domestic duties, were not transformed. The EPLF's relative success in incorporating women as equals relied more on repressing gender differences than on transforming gender relations.⁶⁶ It

⁶⁵ Sorenson (1991) speaks of two opposing discourses on national identity in relation to Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Ethiopian discourse he describes as based on historical unity and essential identity (ibid.: 312). To characterise Eritrean nationalism he uses the concept of "territorial nationalism" (ibid.) which originates in opposition to an imposed political entity (Italian, later Ethiopian colonialism in this case) rather than in a distinctive cultural identity (which in multi-cultural Eritrea does not exist). Eritrean nationalism is thus an expression of national identity based on common experience and its myths and narratives are created and altered together with these experiences. As such, it is a future-oriented ideology and well suited to serve the EPLF's wider objectives.

⁶⁶ The ambivalence in the EPLF's early attitude towards women is explicit in its dealing with sexuality. In the beginning it demanded from its members to be celibate, and sexual relations were forbidden with civilians and among fighters alike. Bernal reports she was told there were however always hidden sexual relationships (Bernal, 2000: 68), a fact also Wilson (1991) mentions. This prohibition, which was abandoned officially in 1977 when the EPLF introduced its own marriage law, was partly introduced to protect the smaller number of women from male advances (Worku Zerai 1994, quoted in Bernal, 2000) and to create a space in which both sexes could develop a (sisterly-brotherly) caring relationship necessary for the survival in the harsh conditions of the war (SUKÉ, 1990). In addition, it was believed that the Ethiopian side would send women with venereal diseases to the Front to infect its members (ibid.) – which gives a hint of the underlying suspicion with which women were initially regarded by the EPLF, as sexually dangerous and politically treacherous.

Overall it should not be negated, however, that once the EPLF came to terms with the issue of sexual relationships, especially its marriage law was in many ways liberating for women, not least because premarital sex was encouraged and contraceptives were provided, which had a particularly liberating effect on women as traditionally female virginity had been connected with the honour of the family. In general the new marriage law which gave equal rights to both partners aimed to end the tradition of marriage as an alliance between male elders of extended families, where marriage marked the transfer of a girl from the authority of her father to that of her husband's family (Silkin, 1989).

amounted in effect to “eliminating [the] female gender”, without a “comparable erasure of masculinity” (ibid.: 67).⁶⁷

This was connected to the fact that the EPLF’s gender analysis was largely based on socialist theories which regard women’s integration into social production as the cornerstone from which social and political emancipation would follow (Silkin, 1983).⁶⁸ Its agenda on women has to be viewed within the general modernist outlook of the EPLF and its secular, scientific and socialist orientation, which helps to explain that women’s advancement assumed such a central role, as “gender relations and the treatment of women figure in the ways modernity and progress are constructed in contrast to tradition” (Bernal, 2000: 66).⁶⁹ As has been discussed above, many parallels can be seen with other revolutionary movements as well as with state feminism in (former) socialist countries.⁷⁰ The emancipation of women here is regarded as central to achieve a wider objective (in the case of Eritrea, success of the Eritrean revolution),⁷¹ a “crucially different emphasis from a feminist [perspective] which sees women’s emancipation exclusively in terms of women’s interests” (Silkin, 1983: 909).

Silkin (1989) has pointed out that despite locating the origin of women’s subordination in their exclusion from social production, the EPLF recognised

⁶⁷ This ambiguity in the new image of women as equal to men became obvious in the way women and their relationship to children was portrayed in part of the official iconography: “with a gun in one hand and a baby in the other”, while no similar representations of men were to be found (Asgedet Stefanos, 1997b: 257).

⁶⁸ In the EPLF’s analysis of Eritrean society, Eritrea was defined as a “colonial and semi-feudal country” (NUEW, 1980: 7), which had become integrated into the world capitalist system under Italian colonial rule; what is termed the “Ethiopian colonisation of Eritrea” was then made possible and “sustained by US imperialism (...) because it fitted into the shift in the hegemony of the world capitalist system” (ibid.). For Eritrean women, this meant double oppression: through the overall exploitive character of society, as well as due to their own weak economic status which cemented their subordination in the political, social and cultural life of society (ibid.: 12). The EPLF and NUEW therefore regarded women’s participation in social production as an indispensable requirement for women’s liberation. This led to the major focus on mobilisation of women towards participation “in the on-going national democratic revolution in all spheres” (ibid.: 24), as only this participation would guarantee women’s equality.

⁶⁹ This construct is in line with what Jayawardena (1986) says about Asia, where reformers connected the apparent freedom of women in Western societies to the West’s advancement and “argued that ‘Oriental backwardness’ was partly due to women’s low status” – women’s status in society thus became a “barometer of ‘civilisation’” (ibid.: 12). A similar point has been made by Yuval-Davis (1997), who regards the incorporation of women into the military in e.g. Libya, Nicaragua and Eritrea as a move to construct women as the “bearers of modernity” (ibid.: 98) and asserts more widely that in many revolutionary or decolonisation projects “the emancipation of women has come to signify (...) political and social attitudes towards modernity” (ibid.: 60).

⁷⁰ In both cases, the objective to achieve gender equality often failed because the approaches followed were top-down and male-led (Bernal, 2000).

⁷¹ Mobilising women was thus one part of what the EPLF called its “overall political work among the masses” (EPLF, 1987a: 53), which was guided by assuring the participation of all nationals in the process of liberating and developing Eritrea, so “the participation of women, who make up half of our society, must be given great attention” (ibid.: 54).

that women's emancipation would not be an automatic consequence of their integration into social production and that redefining gender relations must go beyond and address social and sexual problems between men and women (ibid.: 147). In practice, however, the mobilisation of women for the revolutionary cause and their integration into the Front centred on the motto: 'Equality Through Equal Participation'.

Within the EPLF the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was founded in 1979 under the slogan "Emancipation through equal participation in the struggle" (Worku Zerai, 1994: 66). It defined as its primary goal "to mobilise and organise women to participate in the national liberation struggle led by the EPLF" (ibid.: 66) – in fact adopting the EPLF's policies on women as its objectives.⁷² NUEW followed its goals in the same way as did the EPLF as a whole,⁷³ through a top-down approach in which women were mobilised to carry out certain tasks.⁷⁴

Within this 'participatory' framework considerable achievements were indeed experienced by women in the EPLF and in areas where the EPLF had a long presence.

The EPLF itself created a cadre of skilled women in all areas who were to act as trainers and role models for other women in and outside the Front (Marcus, 1995: 138) and give the civilian population an insight into alternative gender roles (Green, 1994: 7). This approach followed the wider ideological

⁷² From the very beginning, its activities demonstrate that the NUEW was mainly concerned with the needs of the struggle and not with questioning patriarchy or a change in the sexual division of labour – even though it has to be pointed out that in establishing the NUEW women "were encouraged to view themselves as a collective group with common needs and concerns" (Hodgin, 1997: 88).

Interestingly, after independence the NUEW's objective was modified to "participate in the reconstruction of the country and to struggle for the emancipation of women" (Worku Zerai, 1994: 66), mainly through educating and training women to participate in the post-war economy (Connell, 1998: 189) – here again, women's emancipation was given secondary importance, something that might be natural in the time before independence when the question of personal survival was often at stake, but becomes more problematic in the post-independence present (Worku Zerai, 1994).

⁷³ To this day, even though the NUEW is officially independent, the PFDJ exerts strong control over its programme as well as the composition of its leadership. The chairwomen of the NUEW, for example, is elected by a congress of the organisation, but has to be approved by the PFDJ central committee – in reality, no candidate not approved beforehand would stand for election.

⁷⁴ The NUEW (together with the other national unions) was, together with the people's assemblies set up in the villages, regarded as a tool to establish what the EPLF called "people's political power", a concept which was seen as central to the transformation of women's position and in general to release the creative energy of the masses (Wilson, 1991: 49). Education campaigns were launched to describe the role of the assemblies, the unions and other institutions, and then enable people to exercise power through them. Concerning the NUEW, even though demands could move from the bottom to the top theoretically, it does not seem to have happened often practically, for which partly the poor democratic culture of women has been blamed; the exchange of information and ideas travelled in one direction, top-down (Worku Zerai, 1994: 66).

conviction held by the Front (and still important with regard to gender policies in present day Eritrea, as will become clear as this study proceeds) that to create female role models in different areas was one necessary prerequisite on the way towards gender equality within wider society.⁷⁵

A hierarchy developed in Eritrean society: Inside the EPLF controlled areas gender norms were much more egalitarian among EPLF members than in civilian society.⁷⁶ At the same time, among the civilian population in these areas gender relations changed in a way which did not happen in Ethiopian controlled areas (Eikenberg, 1995: 260; Marcus, 1995: 131).⁷⁷ Overall, it has to be kept in mind that, especially concerning female fighters, EPLF membership was selective rather than representative of the population as a whole. Women who were predisposed towards gender equality and a change in social relations were more likely to join – testimony to this is the fact that many women joined to escape arranged marriages and with it the traditional system of social control – which made social change easier to push through within the EPLF (Silkin, 1989: 158).

In spite of all these factors, already during the struggle even within the EPLF the official ideology of gender equality did not describe reality. Bernal (2000) – who spent a few weeks with a former fighter she calls Saba, a key informant of her research – reports how Saba remembers that in the field men would cook, but on vacation it would be the women. Similar observations have been made by foreign observers to the EPLF (see various accounts published in *Eritrea Information*).⁷⁸ They were confirmed by Abrehet Ghebrekidan, one of the

⁷⁵ A schematic overview of women's participation within the EPLF towards the end of the struggle reads like this (and shows that a traditional division of labour did partly exist also within the Front): of all combatants, 23% were women; as were: 35% of administrators; 30% of those working in the EPLF's industrial activities; 30% of those in the transportation service; 55% of health workers; 20% of construction workers; 20% of agricultural workers; 25% of those in electronics; 9.5% of those working in finance and 32% in communication (UNICEF, 1997: 25; *Voice of Eritrean Women* Winter 1989: 9; Zimprich, 1996: 92).

⁷⁶ When for example in 1987 a new Civil Code, containing provisions for laws on family and marriage was introduced, family law was divided into two sections – one dealing with members of the EPLF, the other with civilians. In making this distinction, in the code the tenacity of customary values among civilians was acknowledged, as were the diverging developments taking place inside the EPLF, where for example marriage reform was more far reaching than in Eritrean society as a whole (Silkin, 1989: 157).

⁷⁷ EPLF educational activities were carried out clandestinely in some of these areas, mainly rural communities removed from Ethiopian military posts. Hale (2000) quotes a fighter working for the NUEW in these activities on the coercive force she used: "There was a political struggle between us and those with *undeveloped* ideas. So we took young women and children by force for the revolutionary school. We transferred all our ideas to them. They believed us and influenced their families" (ibid.: 355; *my emphasis*).

⁷⁸ Other accounts of foreign observers paint a rather optimistic picture, for example Cowan (1984), when she writes: "The sight of men changing nappies, bathing babies and feeding toddlers with obvious enjoyment is the most promising sign that, in this revolution perhaps, women's emancipation may not come to mean 'the double shift' – women participating in men's work,

participants in this research, who worked as a doctor in the field and has this to say:

Yes, yes, [in the field] it was really something that you cannot identify the job descriptions between the two sexes, everybody went to the kitchen on schedule and boiling tea, cooking, whatever, equally we were assigned everybody, and even in the health services, well, we had quite a lot of female over there (...) [also when I trained barefoot doctors, the men] were listening, accepting orders, perfect, all the time, you know, it's military, you shouldn't forget that, it's military, that's how it was, and, you know, we had a motto, work is always put first, we have to work to achieve our goal ... wherever you were assigned, work is number one (...) you know (...) when we were fighting for our independence, the men's role in the kitchen was equal with the female, when we came here it's different ... they are there, they wash their hands and they wait for the service, and when they finish just walk to the bathroom, wash their hands and sit in the living room, that's what they are doing, I always fight when I go to the fighters' house, you know, what were you doing when we were in the field, can't you pick up this plates, then they say 'please Abrehet, we have done enough', that is what they say, 'we have done enough' (...) even the ex-fighters, when it was military order, they did it [kitchen work], but now they are free, so it shows it did not change their mind really.

And indeed since independence, particularly demobilised women fighters face a lot of problems as they lack resources, skills and work opportunities and at the same time the domestic role comes to the forefront again (for more details see Bernal, 2000; Bruchhaus et al., 1995; MITIAS, 1993; Zimprich, 1996).⁷⁹ The fact that women participated as equals in the liberation struggle "has overshadowed the fact that women, more so than men, are defined by a strong (...) patriarchal society with all the related expectations" (Tadria, 1997: 8) and that in many communities traditional custom remains more important than progres-

while continuing to bear total responsibility for the children and the housework. At the front it's certainly not uncommon to see a man cooking, while a woman fighter sits and chats or busies herself cleaning her Kalashnikov automatic rifle" (ibid.: 151). In reports by foreign observers it were accounts like these which were the norm and a general picture emerged of truly liberated women in the Eritrean struggle. This picture is also played to by the Eritrean side itself. The researcher for example during a visit to the Tsorona frontline in the new conflict with Ethiopia in 2000 was witness to the following: Upon her arrival the only female soldier present grabbed her Kalashnikov and started to go on patrol, whereas before she had been preparing tea, a task now continued by one of her male comrades.

⁷⁹ To this day, women are encouraged to participate in the workforce but very little is done to ease their domestic burdens – until a general new tax regime was introduced at the beginning of the year 2002, a washing machine for example was considered a luxury good for which 120 percent import tax had to be paid, something remarked on critically by some interviewees of this research. Equally in other areas, for example in the provision of child care facilities, there is little evidence of practical commitment by the government to free women from their domestic obligations (Green, 1994: 18).

sive laws and the most powerful institution remains the family (Connell, 1998; 2002). This implies that marriage (and childbirth) is still (one of) the most determining aspect(s) in the lives of many women.⁸⁰ Evidence suggests that particularly former female fighters in mixed marriages (marriages in which the partners come from different ethnic and/or religion backgrounds) face high divorce rates, which leaves them in a precarious position (Tadria, 1997).⁸¹ Additionally, many women who were unmarried when demobilised and are now past the traditional marriage age face difficulties when returning to their communities, as their assertiveness is being resisted (Marcus, 1995: 142) and images of free sexuality attached to living within the EPLF make it difficult to find a husband.

The official approach to address these issues and to maintain gains women have made is very similar to that followed during the liberation struggle: The Eritrean government is taking the lead in law and policy,⁸² whereas grassroots struggles are left to the NUEW, whose main activities are the organisation of women at the village level and advocacy and public education campaigns which aim to reach all patriarchal institutions of Eritrean society (Connell, 1998; 2002).

The NUEW's main focus is on poor rural and urban women⁸³ which leaves other groups of women feeling excluded and many women with a 'feminist'

⁸⁰ Abrehet Ghebrekidan, Lecturer at the College of Health Science and a former fighter herself, describes as the main problem for women in Eritrea the fact that society expects every woman to have children (which in general is only accepted by society within marriage). Therefore she feels women do not have a "real" choice about their career or their future, as this pressure basically means that at some point a woman has to stop doing certain types of work "and develop her feminine aspect and have a child [*she mentions as one example a former comrade who was with the artillery and wanted to stay in the army as a professional soldier, but left in order to have children*]" (interview notes, 12/06/2001).

⁸¹ By 1997, some 12,000 of the 51,000 women soldiers had been demobilised; of these, half are reported to be divorced (Hale, 2001: 130). As the rules of demobilisation required that people who joined latest were demobilised first, a much higher percentage of women was demobilised.

⁸² The political commitment of the Eritrean government is reaffirmed in its macropolicy document, whose section on gender issues is found in appendix 2.

Other steps taken by the government include the reservation of 30 percent of seats in the National Assembly for women (a measure criticised by many women who participated in this research). This measure is seen to be temporary until civic education campaigns by the NUEW and other stakeholders encourage enough women to stand for election and change men's perception on female representatives. And even though it is in theory recognised that social services are needed to relieve women from domestic constraints and enable them to take part in political life, implementation here is lacking behind.

⁸³ Altogether, the NUEW with its branches at regional, sub-regional and community level has more than 200,000 members predominately from these communities (NUEW, 1999b); according to chairwoman Luul Gebreab, the majority of members come from geographically disadvantaged areas and are mainly nomadic and peasant women without any professional expertise for whom in addition to literacy classes NUEW provides training in certain skills, e.g. sewing, raising of chicken etc.

agenda are in fact rejecting and criticising it. Some highly politicised ex-fighters have serious misgivings about the union (Green, 1994), as do intellectual women or women in the business community (as will be discussed later). At the same time the NUEW has a monopoly to speak on behalf of women and women's issues and no other forms of organisation are allowed and welcome.⁸⁴

Taken together, the contradictions of the nationalist project and women's emancipation have become more obvious after liberation. However, it does not seem to be the familiar story of before the revolution and after, when promises made for women's liberation were abandoned (which in fact has not happened) – even though since independence there has been a change in emphasis by the government, away “from political and social change towards a more pragmatic stance focused on rehabilitation and reconstruction” (Green, 1994: 41). Rather, already during the time of the struggle the contradictions in the EPLF's approach towards gender issues were present and in due course became intensified with the return to civilian life (Bernal, 2000: 63), when it became obvious that in many ways “tradition has prevailed over liberation ideological commitment” (Tadria, 1997: 8).

As Bernal (2000) points out, women's participation within the national revolution is in many accounts portrayed as one of the achievements of the EPLF (for a particularly analytic account see Frankland and Noble, 1996). Eritrean nationalism here remains a ‘male’ project of which women are constructed as one of the beneficiaries (Bernal, 2000),⁸⁵ with the underlying

⁸⁴ Two attempts made by groups of women (who felt the NUEW did indeed not represent their needs) to form their own organisation in the end failed: The most prominent one was the Eritrean Women War Veterans Association (BANA), established in 1995. Its members pooled their demobilisation payout together and started a share company, in due course establishing a bakery, a fish market, a training programme for commercial drivers and other projects with the long-term aim to make its members economically self-sufficient. When BANA registered as an NGO and started to receive substantial funds from Europe and the USA, its office was shut down in spring 1996. A second failed NGO by a group of women ex-fighters was the Tesfa Association, whose aim was to tackle the lack of child-care facilities for working mothers. It established a kindergarten and equally was shut down shortly after it started to attract foreign funding, with the official explanation that the project would replicate work done by the NUEW, to which its resources were turned over (Connell, 1994) (an explanation that is rather hollow as to date almost no crèches or other public childcare facilities exist). Behind both closures (and it should be pointed out that in 1997 other NGOs were closed down as well) appear to be two reasons: not wanting foreign donations which the government could not control, and not undermining the monopoly of the NUEW on women's issues (to this day, with the exception of the National Union of Eritrean Youths and Students (NUEYS) who are also engaged in programmes dealing with gender issues, no other form of organisation exists – for further discussion see Connell, 2002).

⁸⁵ The main leadership of the Front (who devised the EPLF's policy on women) was always male dominated and in spite of some women in high positions in Eritrea today (for example the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Labour and Human Welfare), all major decisions are still made by a group of male leaders around the Office of the President. Such male dominated institutions

modernist assumption “that gender inequalities (and ethnic tensions) could be erased by ‘progress’” (Bernal, 2000: 69). The drive to modernise society brought with it not only the notion of progress but also the concept of “rationality” (Schamanek, 1998: 125) – emphasised in the EPLF’s dictum to “free all people from any form of superstition und unscientific belief” (EPLF, 1982: 9).⁸⁶ This in turn changed the characteristic style of language, going beyond the use of a certain vocabulary but at the same time modifying patterns of thought and moral judgement.⁸⁷ Concerning the gender issue, this led to the EPLF’s approach of eliminating social inequality between men and women in making women’s equality “contingent on them being able to behave as if they were men” (Bernal, 2000: 67); if women could accomplish the same tasks as men, voilà, point proven.⁸⁸

It is on one hand the case that “women’s struggle for emancipation cannot be seen in isolation from society as a whole because women are part of the society” (Worku Zerai, 1994). In that sense war can facilitate change (Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 1992) and national revolutions have helped to transform society and improve the position of women (notably for example in China and Vietnam, see Jayawardena, 1986: 10).⁸⁹ The fact that women could successfully perform male roles did challenge conventional Eritrean notions of gender and did empower women. Equally, military and political involvement in the EPLF meant that many women have undergone a personal transformation and at the same time acquired valuable skills (Green, 1994).⁹⁰

But not only did this process of social transformation take place unequally all over Eritrea, the process of change is also contingent on the different levels of female participation which need to be thoroughly analysed and are mani-

are likely to be dominated by a male centred development perspective (see Connell, 2002; Tadria, 1997).

⁸⁶ Looking in this context at religion, an important organising principle in Eritrean traditional society, it became of minor importance, as for emotional encounters common especially at weddings and funerals there was little room within the culture of a liberation war (Schamanek, 1998: 126).

⁸⁷ Above all, a socialist revolution requires its own discourse from which guidelines for practical action then emerge.

⁸⁸ This spirit becomes obvious in the title of a bibliography on Eritrean women produced by the NUEW on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary in 1999: “Equal in Deeds” (NUEW, 1999a).

⁸⁹ More generally it has been said that nationalism can transform society progressively or regressively, “depending on the identity cultivated by the movement”, and in Eritrea the first was the case (Frankland & Noble, 1996: 408).

⁹⁰ And in contrast to for example Namibia and Zimbabwe, where women were deprived of this option (Melakou Tegegn, 1992: 39), women could stay in the army and to this day they are trained for example as fighter pilots, something of which Eritrean officials are very proud.

festated at the end of the day in the distribution of power, resources and labour (Mama, 1992: 75).⁹¹

Something else needs to be considered here: As Schamanek (1998) notes, the revolutionary potential of the EPLF, including its agenda on women, could develop not so much in spite of the war (as was often claimed when the massive achievements by the EPLF “against all odds” were described, see for example Connell, 1997a), but equally because of the war (Schamanek, 1998: 127). It was the war against an overwhelming enemy which formed the thread which held the revolutionary project together, strengthened solidarity among the Eritrean community world-wide (“eritreische Schicksalsgemeinschaft” in the words of Fengler, 2001: 212) and equally put personal concerns of gender identity to the background in favour of the context of the national narrative (Schamanek, 1998). In the post-liberation era, the “promise of ‘development’” (Makki, 1996: 491) replaced the war as “legitimising strategy” (ibid.) for the EPLF’s and now PFDJ’s agenda of completing the nation-building process⁹² – a nation meant to be built on the revolutionary foundations created during the struggle,⁹³ with women’s advancement regarded as both, an end and an indicator of revolutionary consolidation.

The remainder of this study will use the agenda of a change in the status of women to exemplify a shortcoming of the EPLF which is continued by the present leadership: to look at women’s emancipation and liberation primarily in terms of the political, with near total disregard for the personal.

This shortcoming has its roots in the EPLF’s early socialist-modernist ideology, which like the ideology of many revolutionary movements with similar roots is characterised by the lack of a theory of personality. This lack in turn led to women’s emancipation being conceived of mainly in terms of how functional

⁹¹ An example on how participation in certain activities might not in a broader sense prove to be liberating for women is given by Gaim Kibreab (1995) in his study on Eritrean women refugees in Khartoum, Sudan: He suggests that even though women often became the sole income earners of the refugee family, due to cultural norms they disposed of their income in a way that served the interests of male members of their communities and were often detrimental to their own well-being (ibid.: 24f).

⁹² The EPLF/PFDJ’s National Charter for Eritrea states in this context: “The journey of nation-building is long and complicated. Even though the bases of Eritrean nationalism have been firmly established through our long liberation struggle, it has yet to be concluded. (...) The EPLF [views independence] as a precondition for building a (...) modern society in which justice and prosperity prevail” (EPLF, 1994: 7f).

⁹³ While many of the government’s development policies have been based on an economic rationale, they are equally characterised by the “intention of enhancing the national unity created during the war” (Tronvoll, 1998: 461); many of the approaches which proved successful during the war have been imported into the civilian society (Fengler, 2001) – for example the social engineering project of a national service campaign (which requires all women and men between 18 and 40 years of age to undergo six months of military training followed by one year on a reconstruction project) as a citizenship obligation (Connell, 1998; 2002).

it was for achieving wider objectives of the revolution or later the state. On one hand emancipation is something Eritrean women “have learned in the process of struggle and that cannot be seen in isolation from the change that has to come within the entire society” (Worku Zerai, 1994) and tools are there for women to grasp and fully participate in society. On the other hand, there seems little room for women’s own vision of emancipation and, contrary to all official declarations and the Front’s many publications on these issues, women’s interests and those of the Front or the present Eritrean State are not necessarily identical.

These interests, together with personal visions of emancipation of individual women, will form the core of the following fieldwork based analysis on revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea. Before turning to these personal histories, however, the next chapter will briefly outline research methodology and data collection procedures.

Methodology

The following will commence with some reflections on the epistemological and methodological choices made in conducting this study, and culminate in a brief overview of the actual data collection procedures as well as issues concerning analysis and representation.

Methodological choices

The study sets out from the epistemological stance that social phenomena have an existence relative to peoples' perception and experience of them, but also have some 'objective' reality, and that certain rule-governed relationships can be found between the two. The particulars of individual lives are understood as being shaped by "forces and dynamics not locally based", while at the same time "the effects of extralocal or long-term processes are (...) manifested locally and specifically" (Abu-Lughod, 1993: 8). This leads to the notion that "action and structure presuppose one another" (Giddens, 1979: 53), highlighting the central problem of any sociological enquiry: how to merge structural and interactional traditions (Van Maanen, 1988). Here what has been called an "actor-oriented approach" (Long & Long, 1992) is followed for the analysis of certain aspects of revolutionary change in Eritrea.

Bringing human agency to the centre of inquiry allows the analysis of different responses to similar structural circumstances. At the same time, an understanding of how individual choices are shaped by larger frames of meaning and

action is provided for. Human capability and knowledgeability are brought into interaction with institutional conditions (Giddens, 1987).

Adapting a perspective in which the research participants themselves are agents in their own destiny implies the recognition of multiple social realities. This recognition leads to an open-ended ethnographic approach, in which complexities of meaning – rather than anthropological generalisations and ethnographic typifications – are developed (Abu-Lughod, 1993).¹

Integrating human agency implies the potentiality of change, a concept central to any revolutionary process. It allows for different people to interpret reality in different ways, to be “restricted by different boundaries and create different power dynamics (...) over time” (Crewe & Harrison, 1998: 4).

People to a large degree think in narratives in making sense of their own environment.² In doing so, they combine reportage and definitions in a broader picture, in order to communicate an internally consistent view of their needs, their values, their beliefs, constraints in their lives. Narratives are thus not records of facts but “meaning-making systems” (Josselson, 1995: 33) through which people choose certain facets of their past experience that have led to the present. Narratives allow individuals to render their lives as coherent (ibid.: 35) and link past and present to consistent “future life worlds” (Ochs & Capps, 1996: 24).

Additionally, narratives are the vehicles to make mental frameworks accessible and give meaning to people’s discourses. As such, they can be communicated across cultural and linguistic differences, as no language that is inherently private by nature does exist (Wittgenstein, 1984: 356). However, in the end it is the ethnographer who chooses which story to present and in what way. It is vital how different voices – including here those of the individual research participants, as well as the ‘voice of the Eritrean revolution’³ – are integrated and how the author is positioned in the final text.

¹ To speak of complexities of meaning draws on Abu-Lughod (1993) who shows – in taking the example of how the institution of polygamy is lived by a particular set of individuals within an Egyptian Bedouin community – that to speak of “the meaning” of polygamy is an essentialist simplification (ibid.: 13). A comparable simplification will be encountered in the context of official discourse in Eritrea in relation to early marriage later.

² Narrative reasoning has even been described as one of the two basic human cognition modes, the other being logico-scientific reasoning (for further discussion see Richardson, 1990a; 1990b). In a similar vein, personal identity has been described as arising from the “narrativisation of the self” (Hall, 1996: 4). Life and life-story are thus regarded as internally related through the “narrative identity” of the person whose story is being told (see George, 1997: 56; also Widdershoven, 1993). Narrative identity is defined as the unity of a person’s life as it is experienced and articulated in stories which express this experience (Widdershoven, 1993: 7). This lets narratives be born out of experience and at the same time give shape to experience (Ochs & Capps, 1996).

³ The ‘voice of the Eritrean revolution’ or its ideological discourse had at its core the reinterpretation of ‘meaning’ – most visible in the EPLF’s creation of a national narrative. It is a reflection of the way in which people use narratives as “meaning-making systems” in their personal lives. For

In essence, all ethnographic writing – as it depends on a concrete encounter between the ethnographer and members of another culture or society – “formulates knowledge that is rooted in the author’s autobiography” (Fabian, 1983: 88). No matter how loyal the ethnographer might feel towards the people whose lives she studies, the final analysis is written outside their control (Burawoy, 1991). As Clandinin & Connelly (1998: 155) put it:

We say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience.

Ethnography thus represents a world of experience that is bound to go well beyond any abstract conceptualisation. Doing research has been described as “a process of construction” (Barnett & Blaikie, 1994: 226). It starts off with a vague notion of a problem around which a certain framework of ideas is assembled and then grows via experiences once one enters the field, be it in conversation, reading archival materials or by just being witness to certain situations. At the end, an account is being produced which relates back to the problem from which everything originated (*ibid.*). There is no hidden treasure somewhere in the field which has to be disclosed in order to get “access to the truth” (De Vries, 1992: 72). The path itself and the writing of the ethnographic text is the ‘truth’ that is being produced,

it is in the process of choice, collection and organisation of data that the main theoretical work is done, and it is in this process that the reflexivity (...) is situated (Barnett & Blaikie, 1994: 228).

Thus, a reciprocal relationship exists between data and theory, in which the theory grows out of the researched context (Lather, 1991), similar to what has been described as “extended case study” (Burawoy, 1991). The overall rationale behind this study is foremost to produce a detailed and “analytically coherent description” of the social reality in question from the collected data, “rather than conceptually coherent theory” (Barnett & Blaikie, 1994: 245). An analytically coherent description which is accessible to all the actors involved – here especially the individual participants as well as Eritrean policy makers – in order to facilitate change and transform social inequalities. A description that is partly based on “partial, locatable, critical knowledge sustaining the webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (Haraway, 1988: 584).

concrete examples of the interplay between collective discourses and subjectivity in the lives of some Eritrean women see chapter four.

Overall, this study can be regarded as individual case studies of current and potential elite women in Eritrea. A case study is a strategy which focuses on “understanding the dynamics present within single settings” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 534). In this case the ‘setting’ is a subset of women in Eritrea and the dynamics investigated are whether and how the Eritrean revolution potentially led to more gender equality in Eritrean society today, which experiences lead to women being included in this process and how and why are they included.

Personal narratives can become case studies as they provide interactive insights and in doing so suggest connections that were previously not apparent; recreate and effectively portray the social and historical circumstances a person is living in; and illuminate the causes and meanings of relevant events, experiences and conditions in people’s lives (see Abramson, 1992; De La Gorgendièrè, 1999; George, 1997; Runyan, 1982). Crucial events which surface in personal narratives can reveal frameworks of meaning through which individuals locate themselves in the world they experience (Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 22).

However, this focus on personal narratives is not to discard the fact that people often narrate their lives according to prior scripts, a “script written elsewhere, by others, for other purposes” (Goodson, 1995: 95). To account for the fact that “when someone is asked for his life-story, his memory draws on pre-existing story-lines and ways of telling stories, even if these are in part modified by the circumstances” (Passerini, 1987: 8), these stories are narrated and analysed in their social context. This context includes aspects of the dominant discourse, if not hegemonic ideology. Triangulation with additional data to reveal possible inconsistencies between narrative and behaviour becomes important. The ‘truth’ of personal narratives lies in an interpretation that pays “careful attention to the context that shapes their creation and to the world view that informs them” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 261). Treated in this way, personal narratives as the product of a relationship between social reality, discourse and subjectivity (Summerfield, 1998: 16) can be used as ethnography, as “social narratives” (Richardson, 1991: 175) – even though no person “is ever truly representative of a culture as a whole” (Perks & Thompson, 1998: 405).

Different methods and data sources have been used in this study to arrive at an in-depth understanding of elite women within the context of the Eritrean revolution and transform their individual stories into a “cultural narrative” (Grele, 1998: 48). Yin (1989) mentions six sources of evidence commonly found in case studies: These are documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts. Most of these have had a part in this study (for an overview see appendix 3.1).

Data sources

The process of data collection took place between the beginning of September 2000 and the end of July 2001, and between November 2001 and January 2002. The whole process was documented on a daily basis in a fieldwork diary.

During the academic year 2000/2001 the author was a member of staff at the Faculty of Education (FoE) at the University of Asmara (UoA) and as such involved in teaching Bachelor of Arts (BA) students at the Department of Educational Administration.

The narratives of different generations of current and potential future elite women in Eritrea are at the core of this study. A strong focus is on the latter, a group of young women who are leading candidates for future leadership positions. These women are at the intersection of the past of the struggle for, and the future of creating a viable Eritrean nation state and economy – and as such are critical for the process of revolutionary consolidation. These young women were about to finish their studies at the UoA, the only institution of higher education in the country, offering Bachelor degrees only (appendix 3.2 provides an overview over the total number of students at the UoA in the academic year 2000/2001 as well as the subjects being taught). The study thus evolves from the narratives derived from in-depth interviews with a group of purposively selected 29 full-time female students at the end of their studies in degree programmes at the UoA.

The core group of women participants were to be chosen among women nearing the end of their stay at university, as they were bound to have a clearer vision of their future ambitions – an important part in this study – than younger fellow students; a total number of 30 participants was aimed for.

In a first step, the author obtained data from the Registrar's Office on all female students who were about to start their last year of academic study in the academic year 2000/2001. She then compiled a list with all their names (113 women in total) and posted it at various places in the university with a notice about the research and a call to come to a general meeting. This first meeting was attended by around 30 female students. The researcher introduced the project and pointed out she was looking for students from the biggest variety of subjects possible as well as the biggest diversity of ethnic background or religion. However, it soon became clear that the majority of female students is Tigrinya and of Christian faith. The Registrar's Office does not collect data on ethnicity or religion of students, but from her own observations and from talking to different lecturers and students this impression was confirmed. So the focus shifted towards recruiting students from as many subjects as possible. A special effort was made to recruit women who were the sole female in their area of study. In nine subjects only one female student existed in the last year of

study, seven of which eventually became part of the sample. In eight subjects, no female student existed in year four or five. Out of 38 subjects altogether, with female students of the target group present in 30 subjects, students from 23 subjects took part.

From the attendants of that first meeting 15 eventually participated in the study. The additional 14 students were recruited in the following ways: Firstly, the author asked students with whom the first interviews had been conducted about friends they might have in specific other departments. In this way five more participants were recruited, two of which had actually finished the academic part of their studies and were starting their university service year. This brought the overall number up to 20.

Secondly, an attempt was made to actively find and recruit the few Muslim and non-Tigrinya women. Among the target group were only four of the latter, three of whom had already agreed to become part of the sample (the fourth declined to do so). Five more female Muslim students existed in the target group, out of which three were convinced to participate (two refused to do so). In addition, as the researcher became to know the university better over time, six more students were recruited in personal conversations. Five were studying subjects from which nobody yet participated and one woman was in her university service year as a graduate assistant.

These women were interviewed individually in multiple sessions. In addition, the author spent time outside university with the participants, listened to and assisted with their problems and in some cases visited their homes and took part in family celebrations. They participated under the condition that the author could use all the information provided as she saw fit, but would not explicitly mention their names; thus their and their relatives names were changed in writing up their histories.

Their narratives are put into the broader Eritrean context with the narratives of a second group of women: Women who became part of the present elite either through participation in the revolution – a group of prominent former female fighters – or through pursuing a business or academic career mainly outside the revolution. Altogether, eleven of the former (including five women who were also key informants, see below) and thirteen of the latter (four business women and the rest in academia, of which one was also a former fighter) were interviewed in individual sessions.⁴ The rationale behind these interviews

⁴ Concerning the group of prominent former fighters – apart from a number of ‘obvious’ women (out of which only Askalu Menkerios, Minister of Labour and Human Welfare declined to participate) – the author discussed who else to possibly interview with Luul Gebreab, Chairwomen of the NUEW. Concerning prominent successful business women, she approached the Chamber of Commerce in Asmara regarding names and contact details. Concerning staff at the UoA, among the 107 Eritrean members of staff (58 staff members were foreigners) in the academic year

was the assumption that the overall environment which determines the leeway of women to become powerful actors in Eritrean society depends on the institutionalisation of power relations, for which this group of women is crucial in their respective areas of expertise. It is they who promote or fail to promote a 'feminist' agenda. They therewith play an important part in defining the structurally gendered properties of Eritrean society and determine whether and which windows are closing and ceilings forming for women in Eritrean society today.

The interviews with female students and present elite women alike were open-ended and the participants were encouraged to talk the ethnographer through what they felt were important or significant events in their private and public lives. They were semi-structured in that they broadly followed an agenda. The female students were asked about their general background and upbringing, their schooling history, how they experience being at university, and what their future aspirations and ambitions as Eritrean women are. The present elite women were asked about their lives before independence, how and why they became involved in the struggle or chose their respective career paths, how they experience their lives as 'successful' women and what obstacles they face, and how in their view the agenda of revolutionary change in the status of women can keep its momentum in the future. However, this agenda was not imposed but the interview context was kept open to enable the interviewees to narrate their story and determine its relevant elements (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Within the broader context of establishing how some women of previous generations broke through and got where they are now, and whether what opened up during the course of the struggle in terms of moving towards more gender equality in Eritrean society can be kept open and become consolidated, the major new channel identified by all participants for women in the future was seen in the possibilities attached to formal education, particularly education beyond the envisaged education for all up to grade seven (see MoE, 1999).

To put this stress on formal education in context with its possible link to increasing gender equality in Eritrea, relevant (altogether fourteen) key informants who have an input into different stages of educational policy and domi-

2000/2001 were 11 women. Most foreign staff are Indian and hired on two year contracts in the context of a former United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and now WB programme to alleviate skill shortages in developing countries. They were not considered relevant within the scope of this study as they are outsiders to the Eritrean cultural environment. Nine of the 11 female Eritrean staff members agreed to participate in the study.

nate the discussions on educational policy issues as well as its practice were interviewed.⁵

In addition, considering the fact that secondary education is widely seen as the critical stage at which decisions are made about the future, including the prospects of continuing higher education or other life and career options (see Bloch et al., 1998; Heward & Bunwaree, 1999; King & Hill, 1993), five secondary schools were visited in different parts of the country. This was the maximum number possible given constraints in time, resources and teaching obligations at the UoA. The objective here was to arrive at a better understanding of the general social and economic conditions girls in secondary formal education face and to what extent they are encouraged or discouraged to develop fully according to their capabilities. These schools were chosen by purposive selection (an overview of all 38 secondary schools in Eritrea is provided in appendix 3.3).⁶

Regarding the selection process, at first it was planned to go back with five women from the sample of the 29 women interviewed in-depth at university to their respective secondary schools and communities. But as most women came from either Asmara or abroad this did not prove practicable.

In fact, the author went back with one woman to her secondary school in Keren and also spent a high amount of time with her family on various occasions, including the wedding of her brother. The second school chosen was Tsabra Secondary School in Nakfa, as Tsabra was formerly part of the Revolution School and three of the 29 women grew up at the Revolution School. Additionally, Tsabra is still a somewhat special school in terms of being the only boarding secondary school and targeting students from all nationalities in Eritrea. In terms of sending students to the UoA, Tsabra has not been very successful in doing so lately – in the year 2001 matriculation, six male students

⁵ The author drew up a list of key informants she regarded as relevant and discussed this list with Mehret Iyob, Director of the Project Management Division at the MoE and a long-time acquaintance. According to Mehret's suggestions, some more people were added to the list of interviewees.

⁶ Additionally, three technical schools exist which are also considered part of the secondary school system: Asmara, Mai Habar (near Nefasit) and Winna (near Nakfa) Technical School. Students can enter one of these technical schools after the completion of grade nine. They then receive three years of theoretical and practical training in a craft. Every *zoba* is allocated a quota of students who will be allowed to join one of the technical schools, two of which have boarding facilities. In the past it were the best students who when applied were selected to join. After completion, many of these students passed the matriculation and joined the university, often studying subjects not related to their apprenticeship. To counteract this perceived wasteful use of human resources, regulations are in the process of being changed: More mediocre students – who are perceived more likely to work in the profession they were trained for – are to be allowed to join technical schools. Additionally, a compulsory two year service in their field of speciality after completion is under consideration. Technical schools are not included in the scope of this research.

from Tsabra passed; a year before, none had done so. This is partly related to the fact that students from Tsabra are given preferential treatment to join either Winna Technical School, the Teacher Training Institute (TTI), or one of the new agricultural colleges after grade nine or ten, and many students do follow these alternative options.

Two more schools were chosen in the western lowlands – in Agordat (an area with a high Tigre population) and in Barentu (an area with a high Kunama population). From both schools a female student has yet to join the UoA, and only very few male students did so in the past – in the matriculation of 2001, 2 male students from Agordat and none from Barentu passed to join the university degree programme; a year earlier, 4 male students from each respective school did so (UoA, Educational Testing Centre, January 2002; December 2000). Both schools are – as far as educational provision is concerned – in traditionally disadvantaged areas. In both towns, secondary education only started after Eritrean independence. This fact makes them interesting places to observe what difference the widening of educational provision might make in terms of changing traditional attitudes and advancing female education.

The last school chosen was Ibrahim Sultan Secondary School in Asmara, as a number of the 29 female students came from that school. Four out of the 29 women who completed their secondary schooling in Asmara went to Ibrahim Sultan, four to Keih Bahri, five to Semaetat, three to Den Den and one to Halay.⁷ With the exception of Halay, these are all inner-city secondary schools and Ibrahim Sultan is an example of a normal such school, each of which has its particular problems and advantages. Overall, these schools are very comparable – on previous visits to Eritrea in the context of journalistic work, the author spent some time in two of the other inner-city secondary schools, Barka and Keih Bahri.

Between one and two weeks were spent in each school and surrounding community to get a reasonably thorough picture of the schools itself and the social environment they are located in. During this time the author observed and participated in classes, break time and other activities in all grades and subjects in order to understand the patterns of interaction in- and outside the classroom. In some schools, she was asked to involve herself in some teaching of English, which in due course she did and thus experienced students' interaction from a

⁷ In the matriculation of 2000, the highest percentage of candidates admitted to the UoA from a government school in Asmara came from Den Den, followed by Semaetat and Keih Bahri, with Ibrahim Sultan taking sixth place only, behind Barka. A year before, Ibrahim Sultan was in third place. Among the survey respondent from Asmara, 36 students came from Den Den and Barka each, followed by 35 students from Semaetat; in that year, only 9 students from Ibrahim Sultan passed. In the 2001 matriculation exam, 29 students from Ibrahim Sultan succeeded, 8 of which were women.

different angle. In addition, she held discussions alone or in groups with a variety of female and male students, held discussions with teachers, and interviewed the respective school directors. Besides, the author familiarised herself with the respective local communities, spent time with teachers outside school, and in some cases also visited students in their family homes.

To get access to the different schools, the researcher carried an official permission issued by the MoE in Asmara, which obliged all the schools and its staff to co-operate with her. However, not to make especially teachers feel uneasy and establish a good working relationship between herself and the school staff, she made it clear at the beginning of her stay in each school that her attention was on the students and their behaviour and interaction. Apart from the school directors, with whom formal interviews were conducted, teachers were assured they would remain anonymous in her writing. Therefore, teachers are never identified by name throughout the text. Additionally, in cases where this could have adverse consequences for the person in question, names of other informants are withheld.

Finally, for the purpose of further data triangulation, a survey was conducted among male and female students from all departments at the university. The objective of this survey was to support the in-depth interview findings of the central group of current female students at the UoA; and detect differences and similarities in background, experiences at university, attitudes and future ambitions between male and female students. For the survey, stratified sampling was used to ensure to include various subgroups and capture variations. The sampling frame contained 390 female full-time students in degree programmes, 176 of whom participated in the survey as did 183 of their male counterparts (see appendix 3.4 for details). As the in-depth interviews centred on students in year four and above, the survey centred mainly on students in years two and three with the objective to involve the biggest possible variety of subjects in the survey; and between 30 percent and 50 percent of the female student population in degree courses (excluding students who were part of the in-depth interview sample) and an equal number of their male counterparts. In practice, the sampling and administering process took place as follows:

Concerning year three students, the author targeted all third year classes: She accompanied a lecturer at the beginning of a convenient class, announced the survey and decided on the sample. This was done in the following way: In classes with few female students, all were chosen and an equal number of males was chosen randomly. In cases with a high number of female students a 50 percent random sample of these was chosen again with an equal number of males. Then a time was arranged at which these students were to meet the researcher in a seminar room at the FoE to complete the questionnaire. Completion took between 40 and 60 minutes and in most cases the percentage of

students who did actually come to the agreed meeting and completed the questionnaire was high. In the case of sociology and plant science, the questionnaire was administered during class time (with the lecturer not present, only the researcher).

Concerning year two degree students the main target group were the sophomore classes. Most students in year two have to attend sophomore and usually students from different subjects are together in one class. In some classes with a high number of female students the questionnaire was administered during class time, and all the female students and an equal number of randomly chosen male students were asked to complete it (again, the lecturer was not present in these sessions, only the researcher). In other classes in which the female population was low the same procedure as with year three students was followed. Additionally, students from the College of Health Sciences, the College of Agriculture & Aquatic Sciences and the Faculty of Business and Economics who do not take sophomore classes were targeted separately for the survey, in the same manner as year three students.

The survey was conducted between 05 April, 2001 and 03 May, 2001. The questionnaire was developed from interview data with the 29 female in-depth interviewees, piloted on six male and four female students in years two and four in January 2001 and slightly modified after piloting).

In conjunction with the collection of primary data, a thorough review was undertaken of available documentation and archival records on the status of women, education and gender equality in Eritrea. This review took place mainly at the Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) in Asmara, but includes additional sources from the offices of the PFDJ and the NUEW.

All interviews conducted in the course of this study were conducted in private offices or other private settings and with the exception of three interviews with former fighters, where a translator was used, by the researcher alone and in English. All participants had a good command of the English language. The author is not aware of any situation in which participants were not able to express themselves because of language problems. Concerning present elite women, be they ex-fighters or professionals, they all for many years had to communicate in English in different contexts. Concerning the younger women, from middle school onwards formal education is carried out in English, and passing to the university implies a certain command of the English language. Besides, communicating in English put the author and the participants on a similar footing, as English is the native language of neither.

With the exception of two members of staff at the UoA, who objected to this procedure and where only notes were taken during and after the interview, all interviews were tape recorded. Subsequently, starting with the 29 female university students, they were analysed according to different thematic catego-

ries derived from the interviews (upbringing; schooling; important events; encouragement; university/ struggle/professional experiences; wider ambitions; personal judgements) using the database programme Filemaker Pro. In a further step relevant passages were transcribed. The underlying rationale behind the transcription process was not to base the analysis on the fragmentation of data but on a holistic interpretation which aims to hold “the data as a whole in mind” (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 68f). The outcome of these processes forms the main body of this study, focusing on the narratives of these different generations of Eritrean women.

Before proceeding to these texts, some final remarks seem in order about representation: As has been pointed out above, this piece of writing is above all part of the author’s “autobiographic past” (Fabian, 1983). As such it is related to her own history with ‘revolutionary’ societies – in concrete Nicaragua in the 1980s and Cuba – as well as her involvement in Eritrea over the last ten years as sympathetic observer. However, she decided not to appear directly in the text. This is not meant to suggest that here the voices of ‘the other’ speak for themselves, as of course the author is behind every word that is written and reported.⁸ But exactly because that is the case, because it is her reading of the encounters she had with Eritrean women, she does not believe in taking more space than she already, by necessity, occupies in the final text.

Having said that, however, the text will not terminate with a final conclusion. It will leave the last words to some of its protagonists and their complex histories, in order to “avoid closure” and with it the restoration of the “superiority of the interpretative and analytical mode” (Abu-Lughod, 1993: xviii). It is this mode the construction of narratives, with their potential power to “overflow our analytical categories” (ibid.) puts into question.

The stories will often be narrated in the “ethnographic present” (Fabian, 1983). The author believes that firstly, these narratives go beyond being a particular story told at a particular time in the past but have relevance beyond that temporal encounter. Secondly, in writing about these past encounters, encounters the author shared with the protagonists, in the process of reflexivity they did indeed come back to the present of writing and reveal cultural identities which undergo constant transformations in the different ways the participants and the author alike are positioned (Hall, 1990). And to these narratives the text will turn now.

⁸ In any case, the notion of “giving a voice” to research participants is rejected here as researchers do not have direct access to others’ experiences but can only deal with their often ambiguous representations of experiences within talk, text, interaction and interpretation (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000: 3).

Of freedom fighters and university graduates: The struggle as window of opportunity – Some histories

In what way was the Eritrean national revolution a window of opportunity for Eritrean women – this questions is the focus of this chapter.

The personal histories of Eritrean women narrated in the following fall into three groups: The first group are individual women who made a success out of the opportunities they were given, women who joined the struggle mostly in their teens and who today occupy various positions of authority in society and as such influence and determine the official approach towards gender issues. Their histories are put into a wider context in looking at the second group, a group of women partly from the same generation, partly older or younger, who became ‘successful’ by other means¹ (‘successful’ in this context refers to women who – apart from the traditional role as wives and mothers – at the same time pursued their own lives and careers).² Their histories alter the dominant discourse that women’s emancipation was predominately the EPLF’s achieve-

¹ A complete list of these women with a short biographic description to situate them in the overall context is found in appendix 4.1.

² In practice, ‘successful’ women defined as such in Eritrea today are found in three areas: in the (in its widest sense) political leadership (all women in this category belong to the first group of former fighters), in the private business sector (women in this category belong to the second group), and as intellectuals, namely the few women lecturers at the UoA, some of whom only came back to Eritrea from abroad after independence.

ment. For these women it was their family background coupled with educational opportunities which proved crucial for their personal advancement. This will finally lead to the young women of today who as future graduates from the UoA are destined to become part of the future elite of the country – and who are the main topic of this study. Where do these women come from? Did the struggle open new horizons for some of them? Does the university as an institution look like it could be expected of a university in a country which underwent a revolutionary transformation as Eritrea did? Or is the story more complicated altogether? These are the main issues to be discussed.³

Opening one: In the field and beyond

The following will commence by looking at a group of women who decided to become involved in the struggle and today are in positions of authority. The personal histories presented here do not claim to give a complete picture, or a comprehensive account. What they intend to show, however, is that women with a certain background – urban, with the ability to read and write and often some form of further education – were the ones likely to achieve some influential position within the Front and are, thus, the ones who still occupy important positions today.⁴

³ Conventions for transcription (for this and all the following chapters):

(...) piece of conversation left out, either repetition or probing which confirmed original statement

... pause in speech flow/hesitation/ thinking

[standard] expressions added by the researcher which refer to things said or meant (as clarified later) by the interviewee without which understanding would be ambiguous or difficult; or questions/probing by the researcher

[italics] explanations/comments added by the researcher for better understanding/giving a more complete picture

Inconsistencies in grammar were left as spoken as much as feasible, only in cases where the content would become difficult to understand they were unmodified or explanations were added in square brackets.

⁴ In contrast, the vast number of female ex-fighters went back to their normal lives with all the related problems, as pointed out by Luul Gebreab: “We were in the camps (...) but the social attitudes, the beliefs that existed in the society still is there, in a way it has changed a bit, they have seen that their girls have been fighting, have been sensitised, so they really salute them for their heroines, but still (...) that has passed, now we are in a different situation, you have to accept, you have to be like a woman (...) the different culture that do exist [in society] really pulls you down (...) in the end it is how you chose your life to continue, for most of us it has not been easy, the demobilisation came (...) maybe in the front it was easy, now you have to face the reality and how can you survive as a person (...) so it was two dilemmas, one, surviving as a woman and having the necessary economical capacity, on the other hand the cultural attitudes and norms which really do not accept you in the society ... for me it was not that hard, but it’s a kind of compromise enduring each other.” This research has a different focus and does not extent to this group of women; here lies scope for further research, as not much work has been done on social, economic, political and cultural well-being of these women.

I joined the struggle because ...

The biographies of the group of female ex-fighters interviewed who occupy leading positions in the country today, as well as their motivation how they came to join the struggle, or rather the EPLF, show many similarities: Usually they were high school students in Asmara, became politicised by everyday political events and the mobilisation effort of EPLF cadres and joined the field in the mid 1970s.⁵ It will be shown in more detail later that their biographies are not so dissimilar from those of the young women who join the university today or indeed from those of their contemporaries who chose to embark on a professional career rather than to join the struggle. For the time being it shall only be noted that they served as role models for their sisters, as many of the first female fighters came from urban and educated backgrounds and in the course of events were quite successfully mobilising rural and other women (Bernal, 2000: 63).

But what made these women, for whom the struggle was to become truly a window of opportunity, to join in the first place? Luul Gebreab remembers her joining:

I joined the liberation front in 1976, at that time it was ... of hot issue all over Eritrea, atrocities of the Ethiopian soldiers was very high, people were rounded off, put to prisons, being butchered on the streets in 1975, so most youngsters at that time were either mobilised or organised underground or joined the field (...) I was in Asmara, so I was part of the mobilised group from '75 in Asmara, then joined (...) I was studying at that time in high school, I was a high school student, but because of, there was a kind of social mobilisation by the Derg at that time, schools were not functioning, so more or less I was not going to school, especially in 1976.

Also Tsega Gaim recalls that the overall environment at the schools was a decisive factor in mobilising students to join the struggle:

It was in 1970s, early 1972, in 1973, 74, I was in high school, and there was opposition of students to the government on different issues ... Ethiopian government ... I was in Asmara in at that time it was called Prince Mekonnen High School, I have been there as a high school student ... the Ethiopian regime during that time was arresting different students from our school and other schools, so there was a lot of opposition and I remember 1973 the whole year we didn't go to school, schools were closed, and we lost one year, you know.

⁵ According to Bernal (2000) and Wilson (1991), the first women who did join the EPLF did so in 1973. They were a group of four women, all university students, three from Addis Ababa and one from Asmara, among them Worku Zerai (Wilson, 1991: 96).

Tsega had a long term plan to join the university, but because of all the disruption she decided to join the TTI instead:

I couldn't decide to join the teacher's training school because I wanted to continue to university, but the school was not running in a good way because of the situation of the Ethiopian regime, then I decided to join the TTI and I learned one year TTI, so when I joined the teachers training school (...) it was so strange for me, you know, because most of the students in that school were Ethiopians, they came from Ethiopia, for example in my class, we were 36 students, 31 of them were Ethiopians, only 5 Eritreans, this was so strange for me, I didn't know such a situation (...) in the whole school in the teacher's training out of around 500 students I think, we were only 16 Eritreans, and we were insisted to speak in Amharic, because all our classmates are Amhara, so we the 16 Eritreans were ... we come together in the discussion about our country, we didn't know anything but the boys [out of the 16 Eritreans 12 were men and 4 women] were telling us 'oh, the fighters are doing this, doing that...'.

After Tsega finished her one year course at the TTI she, together with another women from her batch, was assigned to work in Afabet as a teacher. She was already very politicised when they arrived in Afabet and both women joined the field within two months:

It was so easy to join the struggle [from Afabet], because fighters were around and we had curiosity to see the fighters (...) so both of us ... one day, the teachers, the health workers and other, they came together one day, and we were looking at their movement, we were the only two girls, others were boys, then we understood ... they are wanting to go and join and we asked them and they said 'please, we will go, but you have to wait here', we asked them why 'you are girls, and it is so difficult to go to the field, so please wait here, let us first go there, then we will see how the situation is, then we will tell you we will come back', but in Afabet during that time, all the soldiers, so many soldiers, you know the commands, the Ethiopians, there were so many in Afabet during that time, [so we told them] 'what do you think, when you leave Afabet, we are going to be arrested, do you think we can live?', they will ask us we have to give them this information, and we also want to join the EPLF, to join the struggle', (...) we heard during that time there were women who joined the struggle, so we said women are with them, and we have to fight also, the same as them ... and we even went back to our house and just cut our hair and told them now we are ready to go (...) then we decided to go with them ... there was one teacher from Amhara and he cried, he told us 'I have to go with you, why do you leave me here' and we said 'no, it is so difficult to go with you, because maybe the fighters will not be happy if we take you, you are Amhara and we are Eritreans', he cried 'please, why do you leave me here, I have to go with you, I can go to the Sudan if you don't want me', but we decided you are not an Eritrean, so we went, and the soldiers arrested him (...) after we went and walked for eight hours and for the first time we were a little bit tired, and the boys went to the people and the

people asked us ‘oh these ladies, where are you going’, ‘they are going with us to join the struggle’ [the boys replied] ‘so wait, we are bringing for them two camels, please, we are giving these two camels for these two ladies until the training centre’ [the people said], and it was our first time with a camel [Tsega laughs while she remembers this].

Three things are important to remember in Tsega’s story: Firstly, male youth were usually much more politicised and aware of what was happening in the country and young women often became interested and eventually joined the struggle in the wake of the boys’ involvement with politics. Secondly, when people entered the field they of course came from Eritrean society at the time and there was a long way to go until attitudes among the fighters themselves changed in respect to what women would be able to accomplish. And thirdly, the women who joined the Front did not have a great understanding of gender issues and did so to fight for national liberation, not for their own.

The pattern of young women who say about themselves that at the time they did not “understand a lot” (Luel Asrat) but were somehow agitated by their male counterparts and the Front’s political mobilisation alike runs like a thread through the histories of the women interviewed. The stories of Foaza Hashim and Luel Asrat may serve as further examples. Foaza recalls:

When I first joined the political movement, frankly I was not ... you know aware of ... understanding the political situation, but I have the general motivation, because of friends, and it was at my early age, at that time it was in 1969, I have a friend there, her brother was in the armed struggle, and she was agitating people to get some books for him, and she was talking of what was happening in the country, so at that time I was doing, you know [embroidering] a flag in the handkerchief, and, you know, raising small amount of money, like a quarter of a dollar, and in that way it developed, I was in Asmara and at that time I was in the middle school, and at that time one of our teachers was imprisoned for political reason (...) and his family were out of Asmara, so I was trying to take him some cigarettes, some food, so gradually I came into understanding what’s happening, how people are involved in politics, and in 1973 I became a full-member in the mass organisation of the Asmara division of the EPLF, then I was taking the political classes in the secretive units, and I joined the field in 1975.

Luel Asrat says about her joining the struggle:

I went to the field in 1977, I was ninth grade student at that time in Asmara ... I was 17 at that time and the political situation at that time forced us. The students were very active about the struggle, and I was influenced by these students, even though I was young, I didn’t understand a lot, I was influenced by the students (...) and the fighters were coming to the village, to Embadhero [Luel went to school in Asmara at that time but her family comes from Embadhero, a village about ten kilometres from

Asmara on the road to Keren], the fighters were coming frequently to that village ... at that time the fighters were telling us about the struggle, and we knew we are under colonisation and that forced me to go to join ... the situation, the fighters were giving us education about the struggle (...) that we should struggle for independence, that influenced me to go [my emphasis].

What is also important in Luel's recollection is that she uses a concept that came straight from the political programme of the EPLF at the time – *colonialisation*,⁶ which shows a pattern often to be found among the interviewees: These women adopted a certain politicised language to describe their own history and feelings and put it parallel to the history of the Front, neglecting the private in favour of the political.

This interpretation of joining the struggle as a fight against *colonialism* is equally present in the memories of Asmeret Abraha, quoted below. It also surfaced in the memories of other participants in this research, including male key informants. Petros Hailemariam, for example, speaks about “the idea of liberating Eritrea both from colonial oppression as well as from backwardness” and Tesfamichael Geratu, says “we went to raise guns and oppose colonial oppression.” Asmeret recalls:

I was between 15 and 16, at that time the colonial power exercised high repression, many people were imprisoned, this oppression ... specially the youth were imprisoned and killed without any justification (...) I was in Asmara ... in school in eighth grade (...) before I joined, some of the children of my neighbours, boys and girls, joined ... at that time, in fact, no one knew about the fighters, what was their aim, [we only knew] what the Ethiopian government said, they are doing piracy ... the Ethiopian government called them separatists and pirates, robbers, not political fighters for independence, they gave them different names (...) but the EPLF they were having successes, and we were hearing about them, and my desire to decolonise made me to join others and end our suffering (...) some of my cousins also joined, my aunt's daughter, everyone ... at that time, from each family people were going, there was no family not participating in the struggle [my emphasis].

Some of the accounts of female fighters quoted by Wilson (1991) also speak in these terms about their hate of colonialism when asked about their personal involvement in the struggle.

⁶ The interview with Luel was one of the interviews conducted in Tigrinya and translated into English by an interpreter. With this interpreter it was confirmed that Luel did indeed use the Tigrinya words “megza’ati” (and “mihrar”) for colonisation, as was the case in the following interview with Asmeret Abraha. For ‘decolonisation’, no proper word exists in Tigrinya, so the process is paraphrased using the expression “megza’ati” (Dr. Uoldelul Chelati, Head Department of History, UoA, e-mail exchange 05/02/2001), as Asmeret did. This use of language can, the researcher believes, not be put down to using a foreign language, English in this case, but shows more generally how the ideological penetrated personal discourses.

This is very much in line with the ‘official’ use of language, as for example proclaimed in an interview Luul Gebreab gave to a British journal in 1984. In this interview she states “women are also joining the people’s army in large numbers to combat *the colonial aggressor* side by side with their male compatriots” (Luul Gebreab, 1984: 153). Such use of language points to a mindset in which Eritrean national liberation is so “powerful and so integral to the psyche that it is inseparable from the personal struggle” (Wilson, 1991: 69).⁷

Various testimonies do indeed suggest that under the ‘colonial condition’, under Ethiopian occupation especially in the cities, where rape and arbitrary imprisonment for women became the norm especially after the Derg came to power in Ethiopia in 1974 (SUKU, 1990; Wilson, 1991), joining the national struggle and the Front was for many the only way of escaping these on a personal level traumatic events – another option was to leave the country and go into exile.⁸

In a wider sense, the concepts used by these Eritrean women (and men) to narrate their personal histories point to what Summerfield (1998) observed in her collection of women’s memories of the Second World War in Britain as well as Passerini (1987) in her work on memories of members of Turin’s working class during Italian fascism.

These memories have to be read as the product of an interplay between collective discourses and subjectivity – with discursive dominance being greater in a social and political setting characterised by war or other upheavals in society, at the expense of subjective meanings. It is then that recurring patterns of self-representations show “a strong degree of stereotypicality” (Passerini, 1987: 17).

Personal narratives give “space to forms of ‘fixed’ identity” (ibid.), which makes autobiographical representations “very different from those (...) which centre on the development of the individual” (ibid.). In the context of Eritrea, it was the EPLF’s ideology which became the hegemonic discourse on Eritrean liberation.

⁷ Wilson quotes in the same context an anonymous woman as having told her: “My country is part of me – part of my tears, part of my pain, my hope for the future and my children’s future” (Wilson, 1991: 69). Similar emotional dispositions could be observed in the context of the outbreak and conduct of the 1998-2000 Eritrean-Ethiopian border war; discussing the rationale behind the decision to go to war on the Eritrean part, a soldier in an interview with the author at the frontline of Tsorona in 1999 had this to say: “The land of Eritrea, that is what we are, this earth, these trees ... if you take our land away, we cease to exist, so that is why we are here, that is what I am fighting for, that is what our martyrs died for.” Indeed, for many Eritreans, the national symbol of their nationhood is the outline of the map, rather than the flag or the official national symbol, the camel.

⁸ An interesting personal account of her own imprisonment in 1975 and eventual exile while two of her daughters became politicised in Asmara high schools and joined the Front is found in Abeba Tesfagiorgis’ book (1995).

Hegemony is understood here, following Gramsci, as “spontaneous loyalty” that any dominant social group obtains from the wider populace by “virtue of its intellectual prestige and its superior function in the world” (Grele, 1998: 47) – the latter in the case of Eritrea linked to the presumed capacity of the EPLF to eventually deliver Eritrean independence.⁹ This discourse thus became dominant in these memories in which the participants not only in speaking about themselves created coherent narratives and a particular version of the self (see Summerfield, 1998: 17) but equally quasi ‘through’ the researcher spoke to a larger (academic) community, promoting their interpretation of personal and collective history (Grele, 1998: 44).

Two common traits have so far been discussed in the context of women’s motivation to join the struggle: the desire to fight ‘colonialism’, and the absence of any concrete agenda concerning women’s liberation.

A notable exception to this last pattern among the interviewees is Zahra Jabir, who comes from an earlier generation of fighters and for whom joining the struggle was always as much for the cause of Eritrean women as for national liberation: “We [the Eritrean women] wanted to be liberated also, of course, we were feeling if we change everything, also we change our condition.” Zahra’s account also acts as a counterweight to the dominant reading of Eritrean liberation struggle history in which only with the emergence of the EPLF were women integrated into the project of national liberation as equals.¹⁰

Zahra’s history, who at the time of the interview was the mayor of Keren (she is not so any longer), is indeed rather exceptional. Zahra comes originally

⁹ Petros Hailemariam describes the EPLF’s ideological hegemony like this: “I think [our] ideas [*read the EPLF’s ideas*] had sipped deep down in the society everywhere, whether be it in the areas occupied by the enemy or in the diaspora, so the majority, the very great majority of Eritreans wherever they lived had this very deep desire and goal of achieving their independence and of developing the country, so in that respect, you know, all the progressive ideas, the democratic ideas that were developed by the EPLF mainly in the field had sipped to all sectors of the population.”

¹⁰ In all EPLF accounts the ELF is described as “backward” (see e.g. EPLF, 1977; 1987a) a judgement also found in the wider literature on the liberation war. Concerning the women’s issue, Wilson states that the ELF first refused to accept women’s participation and after they were finally allowed to join the attitudes they faced made it impossible for them to participate as equals (Wilson, 1991: 40). Bernal (2000) reports that the ELF limited women’s participation to the role of supporters of provision and information. Connell (2002) states that there were women fighters in the ELF but no programme to alter gender relations in wider society. In the light of the dominance of the EPLF’s interpretation of the struggle’s history in the literature and as almost no written accounts of women’s experiences within the ELF are available (for a rare exception see Christmann, 1996: 127f), it is impossible to pass a wider judgement here. The whole area of women in struggle outside the EPLF would be a fascinating topic for further research, but is beyond the scope of this book. Some accounts of women in the Eritrean revolution mention women from different backgrounds who in a society in which there was no place for women’s involvement took up activities long before the EPLF emerged. A prominent example here is the story of Mabrat, told in Wilson (1991).

from Ali Ghider, near Tessenei, and as early as 1964 joined the ELF – she was by then working in the office of Yemenia Airlines in Asmara. Shortly after she joined she was forced to leave the country because the Ethiopian authorities suspected her of involvement with the ELF. She went first to Rome and then to Algeria, where she studied law and continued political activities on behalf of the ELF, as she recalls:

During my study period of course I was struggling, I was in the students union, and I can say, I was the first one to start women's movement ... so I was working in the student union and the women's movement ... after I have finished my study [in Algeria] I came back to the field (...) 1973 I was graduated and I came back to the field (...) in 1973 directly I came to the ELF (...) I was moving inside Eritrea, in the field, I mean (...) [fighting], but most of our work was how to organise people to participate in the revolution, and also how to organise the women outside, in Sudan, Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, in Italy, all these places where we find the Eritrean women, we were moving there and organising the women (...) [asked whether there were many women in the ELF at that time] many women, yes, we were ... we had an organisation, about 18, what you call it, executive members and also local, what you call it ... anyhow, I was member of the executive (...) executive member foreign affairs (...) [asked about the relationship with male comrades in the ELF] of course it was a little difficult, you know, at the first time of course they couldn't accept you with them in the field, we were facing difficulty of course, and we were doing our best to help the women or the girls to participate in the military ... and to help them how to organise themselves and how to be respected from the men in the field ... and they have the right to fight everywhere, politically, socially and (...) for the first time it was very difficult, but after doing our best, working hard to let the women be in the field and participate in the work, really we had a lot of women, girls, working inside the military (...) after 1980, as you know, of course there was internal fighting, ELF was out of the field, so I was continue the struggle outside.¹¹

Zahra did return to Eritrea only after liberation and joined the EPLF.

Altogether, including Zahra, all the women interviewed could well have under different political conditions either finished their schooling and competed for the university entrance exam or started a professional career. They all came from an educated urban background and as such did not experience the subordination of women in traditional society the fight against which was in the centre of the EPLF's political education campaign. This background might have made them the natural leaders in mobilising the 'masses' of rural women and seems a crucial factor for their own advancement – as indeed joining the struggle did open many new opportunities for them. This is not to deny that the EPLF's

¹¹ Zahra here refers to the civil war between the ELF and EPLF, which forced the ELF out of Eritrea and into Sudan.

mobilisation had an impact on non-educated rural women also, but these are certainly not the ones who have major influence today.¹²

The following will look at some of the women who did not join the struggle but stayed behind and did indeed successfully pursue their own lives and careers, the choices they had to make, the hurdles they had to overcome.

Different biographies

Contrary to the picture painted by the EPLF, there were avenues open for women to become successful in their own right apart from joining the struggle and its ideology of gender equality.

Even though there was little room for women to assume public roles in political life (see Wubnesh Selassie, 1992; Wilson, 1991) they could do so in the economic and social sphere, mainly through a ‘normal career pattern’ – a good education followed by a professional career in (theoretically) any field.

All of these women participants in this research (and the author is not aware of any other examples beyond), whether they are lecturers at the university or run their own businesses today, come from an urban and educated family background.

Looking generally at the background of present female lecturers at the UoA, they grew up in an encouraging family environment which fostered their education and were given the confidence within this environment that they could achieve whatever they chose to strive for. So today, they do not have problems for themselves in working in a very male-dominated institution as the university is one. Almaz Bein for example recalls:

When my father raised us, he was not treating us as females, we were all like ... he was saying it, ‘I want you to be like boys’, in our culture, you see, boys have guts (...) so since I have that in mind, I don’t care about anybody [in Almaz’ account once more the feature that women’s equality means “being like men” is prominent].

And Dr. Azieb says, in a similar line of thought:

My father was a one hundred percent feminist and encouraged all the girls in the family and always told me and my sister that I can be better or at least equal to boys, I was always among the first three in my schooling and always felt I could compete

¹² It has been observed in that context that while the majority of female combatants in the EPLF were from a rural peasant or working class background, female cadres were already when they joined the Front more educated and came from economically better-off families (Asgedet Stefanos, 1997a: 677). Overall (for men and women alike) it has been stated that “elites who entered the struggle as fighters returned as elites. Peasants, with a few exceptions, returned as peasants” (Hale, 2000: 366).

with the boys and believe that is one reason why I have no problem in my relationship with male staff.

Equally Senait Ghebru sees a major deterrent for women to advance in the motivation and encouragement by the family:

Still today, our ladies are not interested to study, the youngsters, they don't want to continue their studies (...) the families are not motivating ... my family they were motivating me to continue my studies, especially my father, he was very much interested ... to motivate us in order to study [Senait's late father was educated himself, and worked for the department of agriculture during the Derg].

This encouragement of the family could become even more important in the face of the political events in Eritrea, as becomes vivid in the history of Nazareth Amleson, one of the younger members of staff at the UoA. She herself had the chance to succeed where some of her sisters could not: Nazareth's father was working in Elabared (near Keren) when she was born. Elabared at the time had an Italian school and her parents wanted her and her siblings to start their schooling there (Nazareth has three older sister as well as three younger ones and two younger brothers). From the beginning, as she was always strong in education, her parents encouraged her,

but since we were in a small town, there was no high school, sometimes when war broke out [referring to fighting during the liberation war], even the elementary school was closed for some months or a year, so we didn't have a continuous education, also all my sisters, for that reason I came to Asmara because they [my parents] were encouraging me to go and continue education, so I came to Asmara ... I was in boarding school ... I would say they [my parents] were encouraging everybody in the family to join [this boarding school] ... if conditions were normal I would say, if there was no war, and the family had everything, enough resources to educate every member of the family, I think everybody in the family would have succeeded in education [as it is, only one of her sisters finished schooling and one brother joined the university like herself, whereas her older sisters had to leave school at middle school level].

A family background favourable to their future career development was equally central in the lives of today's successful business women. Saba Mebrahtu, now import-export commission agent and wholesaler, for example completed her education in the Italian school. Later, in 1972, she graduated in economics at the UoA. It was determined for her to join the family business, which she did in due course:

We had a pharmacy and my father was like a Minister of Health during the federation (...) then my father died early and when I finished my studies I have to go (...) I had to run the pharmacy myself, I had to manage it ... we are two in our family, my brother is the oldest, but he was a government employee, he was head of foreign trade during that time, so it was me that had to run the business and we had other family business too, I had to see to it (...) my parents, they were educated, and as I told you, my father was like a minister during that time, and he was always out of the country ... so he was well developed (...) my mother stayed at home, but she was like him, she was a very good mother, I was free to do whatever I wanted to do, they were not even telling me that I came late, no control, because they had confidence in me ... but they died early, so I had to run the family businesses.

The political events especially after the Derg came to power did of course effect her life as they did for every Eritrean, but not so much in relation to the career prospects for her as a woman. The biggest impact of the political situation on her personal life was when her husband was imprisoned: “In fact during the Derg time, my husband was imprisoned for three years, he has a printing press, I had to run all the businesses and see after my children [Saba has four children] also.” Apart from the general anguish about his life, it meant a double and triple workload for her but as such rather strengthened her resolve to do what was necessary.¹³

Ghennet Bokretzion, owner and manager of Double Harvest Poultry, also obtained a degree from Asmara university – in mathematics and statistics – at the beginning of the 1980s. This means she joined the UoA at about the time when many of her sisters from Asmara high schools decided to go to the field. As was the case with Saba above, it were very much her parents who promoted her education:

I grew up in Asmara, I was born to two teachers (...) and I’m the first born, I think I took the very good milk of my mother (...) [my parents] were teachers, so they supported my education.¹⁴

After her graduation, Ghennet worked at first for the UN and then for an international non-governmental organisation (INGO). This last job was what, in her own judgement, changed her life – before, she was successful in her work

¹³ For a vivid account of the everyday challenges of professional women (and men) under the Derg see Abeba Tesfagiorgis’ (1995) book.

¹⁴ Which does not necessarily mean that at the same time her parents had a different outlook on the role of women, as Ghennet recalls about her mother: “My mother, after she quit teaching [*around the time Ghennet graduated from university*] she has been a housewife, though she was a teacher, she changed (...) and the very first teaching life has been forgotten after she became housewife, she has been looking for us [*Ghennet has three sisters*] to be housewives.”

but, like many Eritrean women, not assertive. It was mainly the exposure she got in travelling in the context of her work which made her self-confident:

I think I started to say things when I was working in [this INGO] (...) also the travelling, you know, when you go to some workshops you have to say about your work, and you have to stand up and say it in English, so after that I think confidence was built inside me, even last time (...) [a few weeks ago] I was on the TV, and invited to say something, just suddenly, and I stood and they gave me the microphone and I said what I felt about the meeting ... and you know, otherwise when I was growing up I was shivering when I had to talk ... I was not used to talking in front of people, and my mother and my father they were telling us to get out if there were people in the house, so we are used to not talking in front of people.

It also made her aware of gender issues and the possibilities open for women, if they have the courage to grasp them. A woman from Uganda whom she met at various international workshops and who ran a number of successful businesses on her own became a sort of mentor for Ghennet – “it was a whole inspiration for me”, so she decided she had to do something on her own as well. When the first rumours came that the Eritrean government was going to close down foreign NGOs, she decided to take that step and started – with active support of her husband – the chicken business.¹⁵

Exposure is also a key for Saba and in that sense she felt many possibilities opened up for her since independence. Saba says about herself that in her family, she was always treated equally with her brother and she never felt discriminated. But since she decided in 1996 to rent out the family pharmacy and start her own wholesale business, she also started to travel and became exposed to a lot of new ideas. She recalls as a decisive event when in 1996 she went to Ghana to attend a global conference for female entrepreneurs. As the only person from Eritrea she was in due course asked to give a speech on how she became an entrepreneur and the problems she faced. In the end she talked about her whole life, how it was, for example, when her husband was in jail and she alone with the children and all the harassment, and many of the women at the meeting cried with her, basically “what I raised was even at difficult times women can make it.” Her first international exposure had taken place one year

¹⁵ Starting a chicken business like Ghennet’s, who uses broiler chicken from the Netherlands, has at the present stage of economic development in Eritrea high rates of return and there is a big scope for expansion. The main motivation for Ghennet to start the business in the first place were the economic prospects related to it. In the course of establishing the business she became more concerned about women’s issues as she often faces discrimination (more details about that later). Her husband (whom she met at university and has four children with) is helping her with some aspects of the business but has a full-time job himself, and the business is registered in her name and she is legally responsible for everything.

earlier at the UN Conference on Women in Beijing, and from then on she decided to start to work for the promotion of women:

In fact, I have been to Beijing in 1995, to the conference for women, and it was my first conference to attend and after that I said, I have to commit myself for the empowerment of women ... I feel proud of myself, you know, but I don't feel proud [in general], I wish so many women could be available this time like myself, and in fact they are coming out now, more and more, but still ... the very problem here is they don't have any exposure, there are so many intelligent women in corners, women who could do better in positions, in everything, business, whatsoever, but they are hidden in corners because they can't come out by themselves and people don't notice them, don't encourage them.

Saba advocates behavioural change in society, as she is aware that her own background made her very fortunate but that in general women lack confidence:

Because environment affects you also, you don't see women outspoken ... you know I envy the West-African women, they are so outspoken, what they have to say, they say it, I really envy them, I wish we could be like that, I think environment affects us, what we need is confidence.

Saba's thinking on these issues is in fact quite comparable to the official approach concerning gender equality. She does indeed feel that the political climate in Eritrea today is supportive for women, as will be shown in more detail below. Overall it seems that what her sisters learned in the EPLF's political education and during their lives in the field, Saba learned from the exposure to the experiences of other women she was fortunate enough to share.

These two factors combined – a favourable family background and a certain degree of exposure to people and things outside the traditional Eritrean culture – were equally determining the lives of Haregu Gebreselassie, manager of Square Consulting, and Haki-Siir Yohannes, owner and manager of Ruth Trading.

Haregu was born and grew up in Addis Ababa. She decided to return to Eritrea in 1992 when she was already well established in her profession as civil engineer in Addis. Her background means that she was exposed to the more urban and 'multicultural' environment of a big capital city with a variety of international institutions all her life; an environment in which for example education for girls was rather common and early marriage frowned upon:

In Addis it was different, all of us are educated, we are seven, in our generation, you know, much weight was given for education, and our parents were spending a lot of money on our education, and that's good, they are happy now, because we don't need from them, we support them (...) in Addis, there are quite a number of girls [in

engineering], as I have told you, Addis is exposed to the world ... developed well, whereas Eritrea has been closed, it was not exposed.

This exposure could (albeit in a different context) be compared to the exposure women got in the field – it was a life in a different culture, a different environment, as is confirmed by Sushan Berhe from the UoA, who also grew up in Addis Ababa:

We grew up in a less conservative society, when I came [to Eritrea] it was a different culture [than] from where I come from, we in Addis were freer, so there were some cultural shocks but I survived with some friends who were in the same situation with me.

In the case of Haki-Siir, the environment of her upbringing in Asmara was closely related to the struggle. Her father died early and left her mother with five children behind, of which Haki-Siir is the second. Her mother at an early stage, around 1970, became involved with the fighters and the EPLF, mainly through providing food and transporting messages.¹⁶ Whereas her younger sister decided to join the struggle and died as a martyr,¹⁷ Haki-Siir finished her schooling in Asmara and encouraged by her mother continued her education. At some stage the political situation did not allow her to continue her education the way she wished, so she started to work as technical manager in a pharmaceutical company up to independence – with an interruption of two years when she was imprisoned for political reasons. In that position she had to deal with many foreign clients and “this exposure”, together with the wish to do something positive for Eritrea in memory of her martyred sister, encouraged her to set up her own company after independence.

All of the above women who are married (to a man of their choice), are supported by their respective husbands in their business endeavours, and possibly would not have started or pursued them otherwise.¹⁸ Haki-Siir expresses this most clearly:

You see, my professional life it's getting successful, it's because of him [my husband], he always was a supporter of my idea, he always was an advisor for me, he always ... what can I say, interested in my success, that's the point ... I wish or I

¹⁶ Haki-Siir's mother, now well in her late 80s, has a famous restaurant near a lake outside Asmara where to this day many members of the government regularly drop in to eat or have a chat with her. For her, “they are like my children.”

¹⁷ All people who died in the liberation war are referred to as martyrs (as are soldiers who died in the recent war with Ethiopia). Haki-Siir named her company after her dead sister, whose name was Ruth, and a painting of Ruth is hanging in the main office.

¹⁸ Among the business women, Haregu is the only one not married; among the female academic staff at the UoA Dr. Wezenet, Almaz, Nazareth, and Senait are unmarried.

would like all men to be like my husband (...) even people they do say to me, you are lucky that you met that husband, it's because of him you are getting successful and they are right ... you see, when I brought some ideas, he evaluates this ideas, he doesn't disapprove, at least he adds his advice so that we mingle it, we put it in action (...) I can say, we do have a happy and good life of understanding (...) you see, life can be successful if a man and women help each other with ideas, with works, everything, if they trust each other also (...) I am very lucky, I can say (...) for example, to tell you the truth, I have so many [women] friends and they told me so many problems ... they want to make business, and if I tell them why don't you do this, why don't you start that, they say 'you see, my husband does not allow me, does not let me to go to do this', why, I don't know (...) you know, even my daughter one day she told me, I will get married if I get a man like my father.

Similarly, Saba describes the relationship with her husband as one characterised by mutual respect and co-operation. The same is true for Ghennet, who comments:

Without his [my husband's] help, I would have died, it is hard to do it alone, especially the paperwork ... my husband prepares the proposals to send to the land commission, writing even the applications ... he is faster even on typing.

This support and the general encouragement to develop a professional career by their husbands does not necessarily mean, however, that the gender division of labour in the families of these women has been modified¹⁹ – in a similar way as women fulfilling the same tasks as men during the struggle did not necessarily change gender attributes within the EPLF and the areas under its control.

Ghennet, when asked whether her husband sometimes helps with housework, could only laugh and say “he never helps in the kitchen, no man from Eritrea helps in the kitchen unless he lives in Europe or America [Ghennet's sister lives in the Netherlands and is married there to an Eritrean man, who does indeed do all housework].” But she believes for her children it will be different: She has one boy and three girls (between 5 and 11 years old), they all visit the same public school as she wants them to feel they have been educated together. Equally she trains them to make their bed, also the boy, “he has to wash his socks, pick up his plate like the girls,” so Ghennet hopes he will behave differently when he is grown up.²⁰

¹⁹ It should be noted that all of them have a maid at home; but still, there are always tasks left to be done and at times when the maid is on leave the housework is usually done by the interviewees.

²⁰ Among the group of former fighters are also women who educate their children in a different way and thus hope to modify gender attitudes in society – but that is often not enough, as Luul Gebreab, who has three boys herself, comments: In an extended family situation, “if my boy goes to the kitchen, ‘this is a woman's job, why do you do it’ [some relatives say] so I have been

The same is true for Saba, whose children (also three girls and one boy) are some years older. She feels she succeeded in educating them freely and is especially pleased when she looks at the confidence she can see in her daughters.²¹ “They developed very much in a way I would have liked them to,” she says. Apart from the family environment Saba strove to provide for her children, she believes certain policy measures by the Eritrean government since liberation also facilitate that especially girls grow up more freely. In that context she mentions the experiences her children were exposed to when they went to Sawa for their obligatory military training:

And I also think the military training has done them a lot of good, they went two months to Sawa and then when they passed exams they went to study at the university, and then they went to Ghatelai [the military training for university students during the third round of fighting in the recent Eritreo-Ethiopian border war in summer 2000, when the Ethiopian army invaded large parts of Eritrea] it made them so strong, and they have seen bad things and good things, and the love, the care they have for each other, I think it was very good (...) they were so changed [when they came back], because they have never seen bad things, no problem, no nothing, but with so many girls together, poor and rich ... I think it really changed them.

This brings us to the present, the status of women in Eritrean society today and public policy on gender issues.

Looking back at these accounts of ‘successful’ women, the pattern that is emerging is that women from a certain urban background did in spite of the political situation and the conservative society they lived in break through. The decisive factors here, as could have been expected, were the support in the family, made partly possible by a certain affluence, often coupled with the exposure to different cultural values. As such, this possibility indeed was only open to a small number of women, not least because the Eritrean middle class was small and not many people were well off.

As has been discussed in chapter two, with the emergence of the EPLF new possibilities opened up for women: Within the Front they could (theoretically at least) occupy any position and carried out many tasks usually reserved for men, which subsequently led to a change in the traditional image of women, at least in the parts of Eritrea which were governed by the EPLF. At the same time, however, women who became to occupy certain leadership positions within the

always quarrelling with people who support me in the house, telling them don’t say that to my boys, but still, it brings something to their mind, then school influences, family influences, so there are such different influences, but you try your best to show them what’s equality between the sexes in practical terms (...) and for example my middle son is very co-operative in domestic things.”

²¹ Saba is particularly pleased with her second daughter who is studying engineering at the UoA.

Front had a background quite comparable to that of the women introduced in this section. The question then is, did different openings develop after liberation for women from a less favourable background to become part of a future elite. As has been pointed out before, education is regarded by all major actors as the central tool for a change in the status of women. Not surprisingly, having been well educated themselves, that is also how the successful women in this section see the way forward for Eritrean women, not only to become successful in terms of a career, but equally in defying “certain shackles of the culture”, as Almaz Bein puts it:

I advise them [young women today] to give priority to their education if at all they want to be successful in their life, because our society is a society where males are having the upper hand, so if they don't get education, they cannot be equal with these men, even if the proclamation is there, equality, equality, it does not work, so they must be hardworking, they must get out of this certain shackles of the culture, this is one, another thing is I think they should be ... smart enough to outsmart the males, the other thing is they have to change their mentality about marriage, you know, marriage is not ... priority in life, this is one reason that hinders them, because some of my relatives tell me 'it is because of your education that nobody comes and asks you to marry, you see, because they are afraid of you', no, they are not, it's not that (...) so I want to get these females out of this way of thinking (...) they are giving their right to the men to chose for them, to decide for them ... no, females have to decide for themselves, I mean ... I don't want them to be dependent in any way on males or on parents to decide for them, and they should go on and continue with their lives.

Education can thus be a tool to navigate around the tensions present in the lives of young Eritrean women between the forces of modernism, strongly enforced by the Eritrean revolution, and their own cultural traditions, the most dominant of which is centred around the issue of marriage.

The text will turn now to a group of young women at university today. It will look at who these women are, and whether and in what way new avenues opened after liberation to alter the composition among female students.

Opening two: The road via education

What then are the possibilities for young women in Eritrea today? If education is a cornerstone in allowing for a more liberated future, what type of women (and men) are at Asmara university, the institution where part of the future elite is bound to come from? Does the university look like a university in a country that underwent a profound social revolution? Or would that be too much to

expect in such a short period of time – after all, independent Eritrea does only exist since 1991, or, strictly speaking, 1993. A first answer will be provided in the following in looking at the background of female students at the university and inquire whether this avenue of formal education does indeed provide an opening for young Eritrean women.

An outside observer who spends a little time at the UoA and watches its female students – the way they are dressed, the way they talk, their body language – will soon get the impression that most of these young women come from an urban and fairly affluent background.²²

Affluent or semi-affluent is of course a vague concept and particularly so in the context of Eritrea, where few genuinely wealthy people exist (Connell, 1998: 191) and the dominant national narrative stresses the values of equality and sharing and is backed up by economic policies (see EPLF, 1994).²³

Affluent or semi-affluent as used in this context therefore refers to a family background where at least one parent (usually the father, sometimes both parents) has a profession with a salary which allows the family to live in a decent house, allows for the children to attend school without having to work part-time to contribute to the family income, and where expenses like bus fares, school books and uniforms, and exercise books can be paid without difficulty. Often in these families the domestic work load of the mother and the daughters is reduced by having a maid. A more concrete picture of what is referred to as (semi-) affluent background will evolve from the narration of the ‘prototypical’ female student at the UoA below.

Looking at the upbringing of the 29 female students who participated in this research seems to verify the above mentioned impression: With the exception of those who lived in the revolution school, all participants did indeed grow up in an urban environment (see table 1 in appendix 4.2).²⁴ The same is true for the survey respondents, the vast majority of which grew up (either comes from or

²² One could equally say from an aspiring middle class context, but class is a difficult concept to pin down in the Eritrean context.

²³ In the EPLF’s 1994 National Charter, where its vision for a future Eritrea is summed up in six goals, one goal is “social justice”, defined as “equitable distribution of wealth, services, and opportunities, and special attention to be paid to the most disadvantaged sections of society” (EPLF, 1994: 11). Concerning economic policy, the EPLF/PFDJ’s approach can be described as a combination of commitment to the market and socialist ideals of social justice. The latter are for example prevalent in the role the PFDJ plays within the economy: While from the beginning the Eritrean government was committed to a policy of privatisation, one objective within this process was for the PFDJ to take over about one third of these privatised assets. Profits from these businesses are to benefit the families of those who died in the struggle for Eritrean independence. This policy of redistribution reflects the fact that the Eritrean government regards social justice as important as economic growth for Eritrea’s long term survival (Fengler, 2001; Müller, 2003).

²⁴ To the knowledge of the researcher, there was no female student in the target group who did come from a rural environment.

lived at least from elementary school age onwards) in urban or urbanised areas (see table 2 in appendix 4.2).

In terms of looking at whether families are rather (semi-) affluent or poor, most families in which the major source of income are farming activities or a low position in the private sector can be considered as poor, as well as most families where the father, usually the main breadwinner, is dead.

Among the 29 interviewees, more than two third (20 out of 29) come from a semi-affluent background with one or both parents either part of the official bureaucracy or business people at various levels (see table 3 to table 5 in appendix 4.2).

This tendency is confirmed by the survey data (see table 6 and table 7 in appendix 4.2). Roughly one third of the survey participants come from a (subsistence) farming background or poor urban circumstances, a background which often leaves the household with major financial constraints and sometimes requires the children to support their parents through income generating activities.²⁵ Many survey respondents from that background indicated that one of their major problems was the inability of their parents to support them financially in any way.

Besides, the survey data also suggests that female students are indeed more likely to come from a (semi-) affluent background than male students – 98 female respondents come from a family in which the father has a good position compared with 65 male respondents. In addition, female students are slightly more likely to have a mother with her own professional career – even though in this generation the vast majority of students' mothers are housewives.²⁶

However, the overall picture is not as simple as it seems. As will be shown in the following narratives, the liberation struggle did indeed bring openings with it for some of these women who would otherwise not be here. The following will at first draw a picture of the 'prototypical' female student at the

²⁵ Very few commercial farmers exist in Eritrea, mainly in the valley of the Barka river around Agordat and its environment (IMF, 1995). Students with a farming background indicated they come from traditional small-scale (subsistence) farms that dominate the agricultural sector (IMF, 1995; WB, 1994). Considering the fact that approximately 80 percent of the Eritrean population is rural, the majority of whom are farmers or (agro-) pastoralists – and people from that background made up the bulk of EPLF fighters (Connell, 1998; UNDP, 2002; Wilson, 1995) – the percentage of students at the UoA with a farming background is comparatively low.

²⁶ Being a housewife in this context usually means being in the house most of the time, cleaning, washing, cooking, looking after the children and drinking coffee with women in the neighbourhood (the daily coffee ceremony is an important part of Eritrean culture). The tasks of shopping or, if that is required, fetching water is mostly done by some of the children. Additionally, in Christian families it often involves going to church several times a week. Sometimes it also involves small income-generating activities like sewing, rearing chicken and other activities regarded as 'female', often with support from the NUEW or in the context of a neighbourhood group.

UoA, and then deal with the ‘exceptions’, looking at what made these women succeed and how this success might be related to the societal change that came about through the struggle. It will then be asked whether this marks the beginning of a more profound change in social relations or remained an exceptional event largely due to a specific historical constellation.

The rule I – Examples of ‘the typical’ female student

Simret grew up in Asmara to a father who works as a business consultant and a mother who works as a secretary. Her older sister finished grade 12, as it was at the time – in contrast to the Eritrean system of 11 years, the Ethiopian school system comprised of 12 years. But she then failed the matriculation exam to join the university and thus started her own small business – she owns a corner shop in Asmara. She is not married (yet) and for the time being has no intention to do so. The next in line is Simret, followed by three younger brothers. All children went to some kind of pre-school, either religious or public. There was always a maid doing the housework so the children, boys and girls alike, were free to play and learn. Learning was given high priority by parents and extended family alike,

[my parents] check on me up to now (...) I show them my results, they say I have to study, I have to work harder if I am a bit less (...) everybody I know [encouraged my education] my relatives, everybody.

Simret’s success proved them right, she joined the university with good grades and now studies her subject of choice, law, a subject for which a high Grade Point Average (GPA) is needed. One of her brothers is also at the university in second year economics, the other two are still in school, in the prestigious, fee paying Italian school for that matter.

A similar story is that of Rita. Both her parents are educated. Her mother did a diploma at Asmara university, her older sister is in Italy and studies medicine. It was ‘determined’ for her considering this background to also go to university one day, not by her own choice, but from the aspirations of her parents, as she recalls: “My parents were too strict (...) they were too strict, they were controlling us, if we had done our homework, if we were doing good at school (...) now I like it.” When questioned about her feelings during her schooling she admitted she often did not like it then and felt her parents restricted the children too much – herself and her three younger brothers alike, they were not treated any different in that respect. Here again, the success of Rita in joining the university speaks for itself – and led to wider ambitions for her future life which are her personal ambitions, but more about these issues later.

This pattern – parents or other family with an educated background, often a maid who takes care of most domestic work, combined with pre-school attendance of some sort and therewith an early exposure to formal education – is the predominant one for the majority of female participants from Asmara. Other examples include the case of Fatima, whose father graduated from Asmara university and is now an English teacher. Her mother is at home and Fatima does help her occasionally with housework, but only if she likes to. She sometimes enjoys doing domestic work as it clears her mind and makes her concentrate on different things. But her mother never forced her to help – she was not educated herself but interested in the children, Fatima and her two brothers and two sisters, being good students.

At times the above described pattern is combined with a certain tradition of ‘breakthrough through education’ in the family, where older siblings or other close relatives either went to university or completed other professional training schools in Eritrea or Ethiopia, or left to study abroad and start a successful career there. These ‘educational pioneers’ usually have an influence on promoting education for the part of the family left behind, including and sometimes especially emphasising further education for the females.

Sometimes these ‘educational role models’ are themselves female members of the family – like in the example of Rita whose sister studies in Italy mentioned above. Another example is Saba, who has nine sisters and three brothers. Only her oldest sister, now 43 years of age, married straight after schooling – she did finish all 12 years of schooling though – and has seven children herself. The other five older sisters are all university graduates, some studied in Canada, the others in Asmara. And all brothers of her father live abroad and have doctorates – in fact her father, who used to be the manager of Asmara breweries, is the only one who stayed in Eritrea and who himself does not have a full formal education:

Actually, my father has no education, I mean, [no formal education] since he was born at the time of the Italian colonisation, they only allowed education till the fourth grade, you know (...) he did the fourth grade, but later he continued with correspondence, but not much, in fact.

What influenced Saba most were some of her older sisters:

Since my elder sisters are clever I used to look to them and study and everything, they are mostly the influence rather than my parents (...) like when I was fourth grade there was this sister of mine who was in tenth grade and when my father wants to go on a vacation and tells us to go, she refused to go because she has to study, and I remember I refused to go too, because I did what she did (...) I was so determined to be like here ... during the matriculation exam ... passing exam at the

university, she stood the first, she was the first female student, she was really intelligent, we were alike.

Sultan's father is a university graduate, whereas her mother never had the chance for education and to this day is illiterate. But even though Sultan is the only one at the university, three of her four elder sisters work in different professions, lead their own lives and are still single. And it was one of these sisters who, together with her father, had a major influence on Sultan's own upbringing and desire for education:

My sister she care about me more than my family, she want to lead me and my younger brother to get higher education [the sister Sultan is talking about is 10 years older and currently works as a nurse anaesthetist in Keren] she handle us as her daughter and her son, you know, she encourage us more, even in fact she encourage me to enter this university, when I was a kid, in kindergarten, she was encourage me to put in my mind that university, to go to university, she encouraged me at that time; and when I was a kid they said to me 'oh, you will be a doctor for the future, you are going to join the university, put in your mind this university', then when I grown up, I repeat that university, when I hear that word university, I shake my body, how can I enter that university, so thanks Allah, I joined the university and until now, she encourage me, until I get graduation (...) [asked whether her parents ever tried to marry her off to somebody] since they want me to learn first, since my elder sisters they didn't get married till now, they didn't impose me to marry or something, they have no potentiality to oblige me to marry, only they say, my father said to me, you have to study hard to get your higher education and so on, he already asked when I go from school to our home, he asked me 'how did you learn, please show me your exercise book' (...) my father cared about me, 'please let's discuss', when I was studying, he worry 'why you didn't discuss with me, let me share all of us to make it easy for you' and so on (...) my father is interested in education since he also is educated.

In Azieb's case – she is the youngest of eight children – her oldest brother was the first to go to university, in Addis Ababa then and currently he studies for his Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the United States (US). Most of the other siblings followed him in either joining the university or other further education institutions like the teacher training college. When Azieb was seven years of age her father died and her oldest brother took responsibility for the family, which gave the incentive for education in her family, already there anyway, another push:

While I was young he [my brother] pushes me to study, he pushed me to go to the library, even my mother encouraged me so much, in order not to lose my class, everything, work I may help her but she also gives me some chance, even she is not educated to twelfth grade or something [Azieb's mother went to school until grade

four, after that, at the age of 12 years only, she was given to Azieb's father in an arranged marriage], her thinking is very right, mature, because when I came from school, she told me to work small thing and she gives me a chance to study ... and that's why maybe helped me to come to this university, and also because I see the model of my brothers, my sister, I cannot see my neighbours as model, because most of my neighbours they hadn't good results (...) most of my friends they cannot get good results because they spent their time in bars, discos, so they cannot get the chance, and I thank God for that [having got this chance].

An interesting case is the family background of Hannah, the oldest of four children in her family. Her mother is better educated than her father – she holds a university degree in accounting – very unusual for this generation, and also works in a better position, as assistant manager, whereas her father is an office clerk. Asked whether that ever caused problems in the family, Hannah replied no, as her parents' marriage was not arranged but freely chosen, she believes her father always accepted it. Having a highly educated mother did have an influence on her, as she describes:

It had very much an influence, because in our culture you have to work in home, to help the mother, but because I had to study, she used to ... we had always a maid (...) in my break time, she [my mother] showed me everything, how to cook and things, but during the study time, I don't have to do anything, even if the maid went ... went out, she would do the things in housework, I am always free to do my studies, I can do whatever I want to do, so I think my mum had a great effect on me.

In looking at the above cases, the question arises whether the major factor for these women's successful educational career lies in having grown up in Asmara in an environment where children were rather expected to go to school and people in general believe in formal education as a means to improve one's future life; whether the educational level of their parents or other family matters more; or rather coming from a certain semi-affluent background. The study argues that – at least for girls – to succeed, growing up in Asmara where notions of modernity are most deeply rooted in Eritrea is decisive, followed by a certain semi-affluence (exceptions, women from poor families, will be looked at below) and the importance of parents' educational awareness. Without the last mentioned, much more depends on the women's own will and determination, or, to formulate it differently, they have to actively choose to continue their education and be prepared to fight for that choice. Three different cases shall illustrate that last point:

The first is Tirhas. Her father used to be an English teacher and he always stood up for his daughter. Tirhas at a young age became interested in acrobatics. Near where she lived there was a school for acrobats training, which was only

done by boys at the time. But the trainer took her on, she was talented and in fact won a number of prizes in competitions. She remained the only girl and in her neighbourhood many people went to her father to tell him he had to stop her, as she recalls: “Up to 1990, they were only boys, I was the only girl (...) it was a problem, many families told my father to stop me (...) but he supported me.”²⁷

This support carried her right through her education and, as will be shown in more detail later, influenced her to choose a career path in a field – educational administration to eventually become a school director – where no Eritrean women succeeded yet.

The other two cases are Almaz and Senait, both grew up in Asmara but to uneducated parents: Almaz’s parents only came to Asmara after their marriage, they used to live in a village nearby. Being in Asmara, all of the children went to school but especially Almaz’s mother does not believe in education for girls:

[Education] not for the ladies, for me and my sister she really want to get married my sister something like 18, when she reach 18 or something (...) she really worry about me, because if someone is reached at the university level from Eritrean culture, they are really worried about marriage, who is going to be (...) I don’t care, maybe, who knows, in the long term ... [my mother] she really wants to educate for us but she also worry about such kind of things.

In a sense it is Almaz who started to demonstrate the potential benefits of education: She is the oldest child, she was good in school and then at some point, mainly through friends, she developed an interest in going to university:

Since I am not from well-educated family I have no even the idea of what is university ... so even I don’t know what is university, so ... but I know from my friends, their brothers or sisters are joined the university, so they gave me the idea, the clue about university (...) so for example [my friend says] ‘my brother has done this calculation for me’, where is he, ‘he study at the university or something, so after we finish here we have to go’, so I know about the university, especially when I was grade 11 preparing (...) but from grade 9 something like that, no.

Also her father partly encouraged her, albeit still with an ambivalent attitude towards women in education:

I remember one day [in elementary school] my father ... I was ranked something like 34th from 66 and one lady she was one little girl like the same age with me she stood first, then ‘you are lazy’ he said, ‘she stood first but you didn’t’, my God, I

²⁷ Tirhas stopped her acrobatic training only in senior secondary school and started to play basketball instead.

said I can't do anything, then when we went home he said 'she is lazy, I saw a little girl she is the same age with her and she stood first'... so I tried to study from then onwards, from grade 2, so I started to study more (...) and he really, he say sometimes even now 'boys are clever', something like that and I like to speak with him openly what did you say, 'no, you are exception' he says to me, no, I'm not exception, everybody is exception, I mean, do you lose anything because I am women, 'no, you have done great', so why do you say that, 'I'm sorry', no, it's not a matter of sorry, you have to know (...) but when I was secondary school he really encouraged me, he was like in the middle, he was not rich and not poor at that time, so he asked me what I liked to buy for me, I remember when I was grade 9 I stood first from the whole school so he was very happy at that time and he asked me what he could do for me, I ordered him bicycle and he bought that ... so most of the time he do compensation for what he has said before and for example whenever I'm going to the fieldwork when I joined the university he really give me great encouragement.

In the case of Senait, her father is a merchant but both her parents don't have any formal education. They envisage a future for their children which follows a similar pattern as their lives, in which this pattern is not altered by the fact that the children went to school. Her two older sisters both were married after they finished school, and Senait's father also tried to marry her off:

When I was to finish eleventh grade, they [her parents] tried to make me marry, but I say no ... they accepted, I am too small, I say ... I forced them not to get marry, I say I have a vision to get to the university, I wanted it, first I have to graduate or something then I will marry the one I choose I said (...) [the person who wanted to marry me] he know my father, not me, he was almost 30, he is a merchant (...) I have been outside of my home for one night not to get married, [I go] to my uncle's home, he is a teacher, he supported me, he say OK, he promised me, 'if you fail the national examination [matriculation exam] you will get married, if you pass the examination, then that will be OK' he said (...) and then I worked very hard and I didn't fail my chance.

And this partially changed her parents attitude:

I think they are changed, but sometimes they prefer to ... getting married, they want to see my children or something (...) sometimes when we have family discussion or something, specially on Sunday when we get lunch, we have all the family, then they start chatting, and they start to say 'why don't you get married and have children and family or something' [I say] I will when I graduate, when I finish what I want I will get married and have children.

Senait became a model for her younger sister who also joined the university. Up to now, both girls have to do a lot of domestic work and Senait confesses she has not as much time to study as she would like.

What the examples from above indicate is that parents' educational awareness (and the degree of their encouragement) does indeed matter in terms of creating a more favourable climate for young women to continue their education.

This is supported by some of the survey results: Looking at the educational background of the parents of all respondents, especially in the case of female respondents, a high number has one parent, usually the father, who has university education himself. Only a relatively small percentage of female respondents has parents with no formal education at all (see tables 8 and 9 in appendix 4.2). Looking in more detail at the situation of female survey participants from Asmara supports the above sketched picture of a certain 'prototypical' female student at the UoA, who not only comes from Asmara from a semi-affluent family but equally enjoys other favourable conditions in her upbringing which should make it rather the norm that she continues her education: The majority of this sample of Asmarinas comes from an educated family (76.4 percent have one parent with secondary education or higher) and often – in almost one third of the cases – this is combined with other factors like kindergarten attendance and older siblings who already joined the university (27.8 percent of Asmarinas enjoyed all three factors). Overall it is more likely for females than males to have such a favourable background (see tables 8 and 9 in appendix 4.2) – implying that for females it might be more difficult to break through in their education if not already certain conditions exist in their upbringing (for figures on kindergarten attendance and older siblings at the UoA for all survey respondents see table 10 in appendix 4.2).

Another thing almost all of these backgrounds of the interviewed young women from Asmara have in common is that the process of growing up seems to have been hardly influenced by the liberation war – apart from occasional disturbances and interruptions during the school year of 1990/1991, shortly before independence.²⁸

In some cases, older siblings were fighters with the EPLF. This was for example the case with Saba, who had one brother who actually died in the struggle. But he was so much older that when she talks about it, it is rather a vague memory and not an experience that had a particular influence on her life.

An adverse effect of the struggle was felt by Rahel, even though it did not affect her but an older sister: Rahel's father is a teacher, her mother works for the Ministry of Finance, and she has two older sisters and one younger sister and brother each. When she grew up one of her older sisters was a role model

²⁸ One notable exception is Mehret, whose parents come from a semi-affluent Asmara background but both decided to join the EPLF when Mehret was one year old – so her mother took her with her and she grew up in the revolution school.

for her, Rahel would sit down and study with her whenever she studied and her sister was very intelligent and good at education:

She was good at education, she was studying, she was trying to join this university, but during that time when she was eleventh grade, there was the revolution, that's the EPLF was coming towards Asmara, that's 1991, but first she was studying, and I was studying with her, whenever she studies, I used to study with her (...) she was a role model, I was studying with her, she is 26 (...) when she was studying, there was the heavy artillery coming to Asmara and many people were dying, we don't know even whether we are going to live or not, so she left studying (...) I was sixth grade when she was eleventh and I was studying with her [Rahel's sister then did three years of National Service, at first for the referendum on Eritrea's independence, then with the Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare, and then in 1994 she was among the first round who went to Sawa for obligatory military service; after she returned from that service, there was no work in Eritrea and when she saw a job advertised in Lebanon as a housemaid she decided to go there and earn some money – and to this day she is still working there, she does not like it and plans somewhere in the future to shift to another country where she eventually can continue her education].

A last thing that is interesting in these histories is that religious affiliation does not seem to matter for whether girls are encouraged in their education. In the above described set-ups, Christian and Muslim families alike value education. It is seen as something prestigious and a way for a 'better' future – however differently this 'better' might be defined in concrete – even in well-off families like Hayat's. Her father was a successful trader and encouraged her education "very much (...) since they don't have any children who have learned [Hayat is the only one successful in her education]." In her case, though, being a Muslim girl might, in her own judgement, have something to do with her educational success, as she could not go out and play as freely as other children:

Because I was only at home, me only [I studied a lot], I don't have nothing to do (...) [my brother] was one grade before me, but he is a boy, he walks out somewhere, he is not with me always, but I couldn't get out [she usually went home straight after school] (...) till now, since they are old [Hayat and her only full brother are children from both their parents' second marriage and her father is 81 years of age] they think going out was something bother, I have to come early every time (...) if I have a class, I have to tell them I have a class, if not, if I want to go somewhere, I have to tell them, everything is under permission, and if I came late, they feel something has happened [even until now, whenever she wants to go somewhere, she has to ask permission from her parents, but they always grant it, they never refuse, so she does not mind as it is just a question of telling them].

A question that remains is why there are not more girls from the above described, educated, semi-affluent Asmara families at university in the first

place, if that is what many families and their daughters seem to strive for. What happens to these girls who get all the encouragement they can wish for during their years of schooling that lets them succeed or fail in their education in the end? Before turning to the challenges on these women's way through schooling, the following sections will deal with the background of the other groups of women interviewees at Asmara university: Firstly, with the group of women from an equally semi-affluent background who grew up abroad; then, secondly, with the 'exceptions', with the women who from their background one would not necessarily expect to be here. These fall into three categories: poor women from Asmara; women from rural areas who, as will become clear, own their being here in some way or other to the revolution; and finally the story of Askalu, who to some extent defies all usual patterns.

The rule II – Young women from abroad

The group of women who grew up abroad fall into two categories: women who grew up in Ethiopia, and women who grew up in Arab countries in the region, namely Libya, Saudi-Arabia or Sudan. Out of the 29 female interviewees, four grew up in Ethiopia and two in an Arab country, one in Libya and one in Saudi-Arabia.

Meaza, Miriam, Lydia and Selam were all born in Ethiopia, where their parents usually moved to after their marriage. In many ways their background is similar to the background of the women described above who come from semi-affluent Asmara families. Deciding to settle in Ethiopia was some sort of rupture in the lives of their parents, something that changed the course their lives might have taken otherwise. It mostly made them better off in terms of income – and at the same time provided a different environment for the upbringing of their children, as becomes clear from the accounts below.

Meaza and Miriam grew up in Addis Ababa, Selam and Lydia in southern Ethiopia. One might expect the overall climate in Addis Ababa to be favourable for girls' education, but in fact from the experiences of Selam and Lydia that was equally the case in the small provincial towns in which they lived.²⁹ All four women stated that, "as was the culture" (Miriam), they started pre-school around the age of four and then naturally continued their education as was normal for boys and girls alike. In the case of Lydia this was marred with some difficulties due to the economic situation in her family; in the case of Selam schooling was continued partly in Eritrea, where her family returned to when she was 14 years of age.

²⁹ Selam, however, points out the fact that this was not the case for people in the rural areas: "Because it was a town [*albeit a small one, Selam grew up in Dilla*] I was living in, [everybody went to school], but in the village, people could not go to school because of economic problems."

Being born into families in which the parents made a journey towards a perceived better life also created an overall climate of encouragement for their children. As Selam recalls, her parents were “really education-oriented” and guided and disciplined the children – herself and her three siblings – towards education:

He [her father, he worked as a crane operator at the time] always used to tell us, you know, ‘I missed that chance because my parents were not that much, they don’t believe that education is something valuable, they just think going after herds and cattle is the best thing’, so they see education as something lower, they were proud of their property so they just never allow him to go to school.

Selam feels her father was sorry for what happened to him and wanted a different life for his children, and even encouraged his wife. Selam’s mother was in grade six and only 17 years of age when she got married. But after the family moved to Ethiopia and she already had two children – Selam and her older brother – she went back to school there and finished her twelfth grade. Selam remembers when her mother finished grade eight, she scored 98 out of 100 in the final exams, and “my father was even rewarding her for performing good” – he bought her mother a ring, which is worn now by Selam. Concern about the children being able to finish their education successfully was also behind the decision of Selam’s mother to eventually return to Eritrea. Since grade two Selam always was one of the best three students in her unit, which made her one of the very few successful girls in her school and created some jealousy, especially among the boys. Then, when Eritrea became independent in 1991, the environment at school became really rough for her:

You are known, I don’t know how, ‘why don’t you go then to your country, because it’s free’, this is ... also they wrote on the blackboard ... only me, it’s only me from Eritrea (...) you never identify yourself as different, just you are the same, you go to the same school, you speak the same language, you live in the same neighbourhood, you think the same, you dress the same, there is nothing which is unique (...) there is no difference between them and me (...) it’s a shock, why are they treating me like this.

This was when her mother decided it was better for the children to move back to Eritrea and let them finish school there, as things would never be the same again in Ethiopia. Her father stayed behind for a few more years but Selam with her mother and other siblings went to Eritrea – which, as will be discussed in detail later, had a rather disruptive effect on their lives.

Equally in Lydia’s family her mother was a major influence in promoting her education. She herself went back to school after having children and

because she suffered from having had to interrupt her education she was keen for all the children to get the chance to complete the full education cycle. In contrast, Lydia's father did not really care that much, but there were other people to encourage her:

You know, he [my father] don't care of the education, he only leaves [us] to go to school, nothing else (...) my mother really encourages us, because you know, my mother had very ... she was an intelligent student and she wants to continue her education, but at that time she had some problems, due to that problems she couldn't complete her education, she stopped her education in eighth grade and joined the health assistant school, even she completed the twelfth grade after my birth [she went] back to school later, so she wants us [Lydia and her four siblings] to have full study (...) also some relatives were helping me, you know, they say me 'if you stood first I will make you this one', maybe shoes or clothes (...) then I had this watch which was a gift from my teacher in fourth grade, my English teacher, my result was 99 out of 100 and he was so happy, he gave that watch to me (...) there were also other relatives, some relatives and neighbours also, they encouraged me, some maybe give me exercise book, or a pen, many times they were encouraging me like this.

This encouragement especially from her mother was to become decisive for Lydia's future. It at an early age instilled in her a strong determination to succeed:

Even she [my mother] told me about history of some ladies who reached the higher educational level, doctors or engineers, and I remember there was one lady, the first Ethiopian professor lady, and her history was posted in the newspaper, and she got the newspaper, 'you have to be like her', she say something like this, [Lydia was nine or ten years old then] it was in our house for a long time, that newspaper, and even I read it many times, always I used to read it.

When she completed grade seven, Lydia's father lost his job as a health assistant and the family experienced economic hardship for the first time since Lydia was born. In due course, her mother decided for Lydia's education it would be better if she lived with an uncle in Asmara, away from this situation in her family. It was decided to send Lydia and her older brother to Asmara, where life was difficult for her and it was again her mother who was decisive for her determination to succeed in her education nevertheless:

In fact, I was not happy at that time, you know, I don't want to be far from my family, but there was so many problems at that time, you know, after the stopping of work of my father, in our house there was economic problems, many, many, and we haven't practised that life, it was hard for us, in fact I was not happy, but here [in Asmara] it was better life I had, I had a better life financially [the children back in

Ethiopia stayed in school and were not sent to work by her parents, her oldest sister had just completed grade 12, but she could not find any work at the time – so the family lived of the mother’s low salary as a health assistant] (...) [the uncle she and her brother lived with rather discouraged their education, but both of them continued and completed their schooling successfully] in eighth grade first in Asmara, my results were much lesser, and my uncle was not what we had expected, he goes for the field for one week or two weeks (...) [Lydia’s uncle is an engineer and often worked on projects outside Asmara], and me and my brother are in the house, we have to cook ourselves, we have to ... everything was with us (...) my results were not satisfactory but I was promoted (...) but in the ninth grade and tenth grade, it goes to the biggest, you know, also my teachers surprised at that time, some teachers teach me in the eighth and also ninth and in the eighth I was normal student, but in the ninth I had dramatic changes in my results, and all my teachers were surprised at that time, they don’t know I was such kind of student, and they were so happy at that time (...) at that time they even told me to have my effort personally or they will also help me and I have to join the university (...) [asked how this change in her educational performance came about] first of all we have already adapted the country (...) another was in the summer, after we complete our education here, the eighth grade, we go to our parents, and my mother saw my grades and she were always encourage me to join the university, but at that time she looks at my results and she even ... she wasn’t happy, she told me ‘you have to have your effort’, she had told me to join the university from my childhood, at that time she changed her idea and TTI or nursing school is enough for you, she says something like this, at that time, my sorrow was, I have to increase these things, it is not good, I say, and in the ninth grade with adaptation of the country also (...) she reduced her hope on me, I said, and then after that I started to study hard.

Looking back at her educational history, Lydia regards the example of her mother – who herself from a young age aspired a better life for herself, which the circumstances of the time and in her family partly prevented her from achieving – as the major influence on her own determination to succeed where her mother could not.³⁰

More straightforward and with less hurdles to overcome the lives of Meaza and Miriam developed. Looking at Miriam first, her history is a ‘typical’ one: Both her parents come from a village in highland Eritrea near Mendefera and moved to Addis Ababa after their wedding – which meant not only physically leaving the village behind but adapting to an urban culture with different values and opportunities, which they were keen to use. Her father made his way in mechanics and soon owned his own workshop. Altogether they are 12 children,

³⁰ Lydia’s mother grew up in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray and was a clever student, but the economic situation in her family did not allow her to continue. So she went up north to what was then the province of Eritrea to work, and here she met Lydia’s father and through the marriage got Eritrean nationality. After that marriage – again in search for better living conditions – Lydia’s parents went to work and live in Ethiopia.

Miriam being number five. All her older siblings graduated from either university or technical school in Ethiopia, and for Miriam it was basically determined to follow in that path, which she did.

Turning to Meaza, she has an equally ‘typical’ biography for an Eritrean girl raised in Addis Ababa. Both her parents finished their twelfth grade, her father had a good position in the private sector – he worked as a civil engineer – and for the children to focus on their education was the natural thing to do: “My parents told me I was just like the best, I could do anything, so I thought I would, eventually I would [go to the university].” And indeed, Meaza without difficulty passed her matriculation exam. Her father at the time wanted her to study in her own country, so she (as the oldest) was the first of the family to go back to Eritrea to start university. In the meantime, in the course of the renewed war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, her parents and other family were deported from Ethiopia and live in Asmara. Her younger sister also joined the university, she studies pharmacy, and the third sister is still in school but equally expected to go to the university when she finishes.

One thing that is interesting in how Meaza reflects upon her upbringing is that she feels it was much easier to grow up in Addis Ababa:

I miss it [Addis] a lot ... it was, I guess people were ... we Eritreans are a bit difficult, very closed, just to themselves, they were more open, in Addis they were open, maybe I was a child then, but they were more open (...) [asked whether she felt that was an advantage for women she continued] yes, they are free [in Ethiopia], here women are just under the ... the men are more powerful in Eritrea, they beat their wives and all that, in Addis the women are very powerful, they could even beat their husbands, they are very powerful.

Meaza’s statement is to some extent supported by Lydia who when asked about differences in schooling in Ethiopia and Eritrea said, among other things like shortage of textbooks in Eritrea “here, it was not like in Ethiopia, [in Ethiopia] females and males equally go to school”, implying here in Eritrea they do not. A similar point is raised by Miriam when thinking about girls especially in secondary school in Addis Ababa:

In Addis it is normal, by the way in this country I notice that many of the girls they are not continue their school after grade six or something like that, but in Addis you should complete, at least you should graduate your twelfth grade ... everybody should be, it’s a must I think in Addis (...) nobody is allowed just to drop and get out of that school but in this country I think they will just drop (...) but in this country what the problem is marriage (...) in Addis they are not interested in marriage, they are not married in early age, but the people who live in Addis who are Eritreans by the way, there is a culture of early marriage in Addis even among Eritreans (...) but you should finish, you should complete your twelfth.

In support of Miriam's last observation, Selam indicates that still, among the Eritrean community in Ethiopia, usually there are many differences in how boys and girls are treated. They might all go to school, but "he [my father] equally treats us [boys and girls] even it sometimes surprised me, you know, you can not see boys and girls treated equally in other families, but he does."³¹

Being successful in one's education in itself did however not necessarily mean more decision making power in one's own life, as the case of Meaza demonstrates. After completion of her secondary schooling, she had to follow her father's wishes: When asked whether she liked the idea to come to Asmara to study she said no,

my Dad forced me to come here, actually I could have joined the university in Addis Ababa (...) he thought it was better for me here in my country, I guess I couldn't argue, so I came here.

Again, as pointed out for the 'prototypical' women from Asmara, decisions about further education were rather determined by the overall family environment than freely chosen.

The other group of students who grew up abroad did so in Arab countries in the region. Two of the 29 women interviewed belong to that group:³² Rihab, who spent almost all her life in Saudi-Arabia, and Samira from Libya. Like the group of women who grew up in Ethiopia, both have a family background similar to that of women from semi-affluent Asmara families. Both describe the overall culture in society in Saudi-Arabia as well as Libya as very supportive of

³¹ Barbara Ridley from the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, who conducted some research on experiences of women in higher education in Ethiopia drawing on evidence from personal accounts of life histories collected between 1998 and 2000, was intrigued when she heard about Meaza's comment (which, it has to be said, in the general sense that women and girls are freer in Ethiopia was shared by all students who ever lived in Ethiopia, including Selam): She felt Ethiopian culture was a very masculine culture with a strong tradition against women's advancement and it was an uphill battle for women to break through in any area – in that sense very similar to traditional Eritrean society (personal communication with Barbara Ridley, 28/09/2001).

³² This number is in line with the more general percentage of female students from Arab countries, which is between six and seven percent. Four or five years back the government of Eritrea invited students of Eritrean origin in these countries to study at Asmara university. Usually, quite a high number starts in freshman but cannot cope with the English language as medium of instruction, as in almost all cases they received all their education up to that point in Arabic. Four years ago the students demanded an extra year of English language studies before starting the actual Freshman year, which was eventually granted by the university. Still, during that year many students drop out, either decide to return to an Arab university somewhere, get married, or pursue a different career altogether.

their education as girls and women, the only difference to non-Arab countries being that education was sex-segregated.

In Rihab's case, her parents decided to leave Asmara when she was one year old, because of the political unrest of the time. This move led to a change in the family's overall fortunes: Her father used to work as a driver in Asmara, but in Saudi-Arabia he took courses in accounting and started to work in that area. This meant Rihab and her three sisters and five brothers grew up in an economically comfortable environment. Even though they lived in Saudi-Arabia and followed the 'outer rules' of Saudi society, for example the dress code – "it's their country you have to follow their rules" – Rihab feels she grew up freely with her brothers and other male members of the family. She never felt any form of discrimination for being a girl and in general believes:

Islam gives me all rights, it gives me the right to choose the one who I am going to marry, it gives me the right to education, to study until the stage I want, it gives me the right to work, what it is doing in some places like Afghanistan is far from Islam, to restrict women from work or education, basic necessity ... something they create it from their mind, it is not in Islam.

And her family in fact always gave her all the freedom and support she could wish for. Until her death when Rihab was in secondary school, it was Rihab's mother, together with an uncle, who supported her education:

She [my mother] studied until sixth grade and then she ... they ... she married (...) arranged, of course, because you know my father and my mother they are cousins, they are relatives so my grandfather wants his niece to marry their son, something like that, and at that time the girls had not the right to choose (...) actually my mother was interested in education, my father did not care, even he don't know what department I am, he just ask me 'how is the school, how is the study' is fine, 'when are you going to graduate, when are you going to finish' probably next year, but he don't care (...) but my father is free, actually, he let us choose and do whatever we want (...) and my mother she was good also, she was promote us to study (...) actually I feel she suffered when she was pressured to marry without her will and she wanted to continue her education but she was forced to drop out and marry, so she wants to see her children better than her (...) and very special person is also my uncle [brother of her mother], he is very helpful to me, bought me dictionary, he is helping me, [telling me] 'read, read, enlarge your information, your knowledge' something like that, and he is the one who helped me to come here [to Asmara] (...) he has BA and is now studying MA (Master of Arts), I love him more than my father.

Samira was born in Libya, both her parents finished high school in Eritrea before they got married and left for Libya, where her father was an Arabic

teacher. In general her parents are very committed to education and especially her father wanted all the children to finish their school in a good way. As the oldest girl he pinned many of his hopes on Samira:

Since when I was a child my father was always telling me that he wants me to be a doctor and I have to be a doctor, so I get that idea I have to go to the university, and also there was a lot of friends who came to our family who was joining the university, I always was going with them to the university in Libya in order to see the social life there (...) I was dreaming to be at university (...) there is, I can't tell you, in Libya the university is very different from the university here, there is social life there, there is a lot of parties where you can go and enjoy (...) there is no social life here at the university.

Samira really liked life in Libya, it is “a developed country, there are a lot of schools, so everybody goes to school there” and she enjoyed her time there very much. Her family decided to return to Eritrea in 1996 with a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) sponsored return programme after she and her older brother had finished their secondary schooling in Libya.

Both, Rihab and Samira found it quite difficult to adjust to life in Eritrea at first, as they experience the society as much more restricted than what they were used to. To this day – as will be seen in more detail later – they have not overcome all of these difficulties, but rather adjusted to the way things are in Eritrea. Samira explains some of the social restrictions she feels:

It is a little difficult, especially if you have special friend, outside university, if you go [and meet them] it is a little difficult, because everyone will watch you, will ask you who are you going with, if they are school friends or something like that, it's OK, but otherwise...

To conclude some general points regarding this group of somehow ‘prototypical’ women who grew up abroad and are successful at Asmara university seem in order.

One striking observation is how articulate and self-confident especially the last two – Rihab and Samira – are, very much in contrast to many of their counterparts who grew up in Asmara. This is also true for the four women who grew up in Ethiopia, even though, with the exception of Selam, they still seem much more influenced by Eritrean traditions in their families which demand that girls are quiet and obedient. In contrast, Rihab comes across as a very mature young woman and one just believes it when Samira full of conviction says “I always do what I want” and adds that her parents trust her in whatever that might be.

A second observation is that in general these women who grew up outside the closeness of Eritrean culture are much more talkative and narrate their lives and experiences more easily and without the need for the researcher to continue asking questions to keep the conversation in flow.³³

Thirdly, it seems that the decisive factor in their success lies not so much in the geographic location where they grew up – even though it might overall be more conducive towards girls' education and has its part to play – but is rather connected to their parents' dedication and encouragement which often has its roots in their own journey in search for a different life. Interestingly, with the exception of Rihab's family, all are back in Eritrea now and still find it difficult to get used to the life here (again).

The exception I – From a different Asmara

The first group of women whose being at the university is somehow exceptional – in terms of their background one would not expect them to be here – are women from Asmara but from rather poor families.

Two women strictly fall into this category, Misgana and Esther, whereas Yordanos' life was determined by both, her Asmara background and, arguably even more so, the revolution. In that sense her story creates a link to the next batch of exceptions, the women whose histories are clearly determined by the revolution.

Misgana is the youngest in her family and has three older sisters and brothers. Her father is a driver but when she grew up there was little work in Eritrea so he was away most of the time, leaving the mother alone with the children. Her parents never went through any formal schooling.

Misgana believes because of that they had a great interest in education for their children:

They are education loving, though they are not educated, they love education very much, they can write and read Tigrinya ... they learned when they are very old ... during Derg's literacy campaign.³⁴

³³ This remark expresses a tendency – there are some students among those who grew up in Asmara who are also very self-confident and talkative, namely Rahel, Almaz, Azieb, Sultan and Fatima.

³⁴ Shortly after the Derg took over power in 1974 and Mengistu cemented his position as new leader, he proclaimed "scientific socialism" as the route forwards for Ethiopia (Dawit Woldegiorgis, 1989). One of the most radical changes to be implemented by the Ethiopian revolution was a programme of land reform. To prepare the peasants who were mostly illiterate and were regarded as lacking political consciousness by the leadership for this land reform and other political changes, 60,000 high school and university students were sent to the countryside all over Ethiopia to teach literacy and familiarise the population with the programme of the Derg (Dawit Woldegiorgis, 1989; Ottaway & Ottaway, 1978). For some of the Eritrean students in Addis Ababa this was the decisive moment to join the EPLF, as it was for example for Petros Hailemariam, now

So all the older siblings of Misgana finished their schooling and most took some professional course or other afterwards, though none made it to the university. Partly their model instilled in Misgana an early longing for education, even though she almost missed the chance to be able to go to school at all:

When I was six there was a kind of a bid, if you are going to go to school, there was pieces of papers, if you get a paper with numbers, that means you are going to go to school, if you pick up a paper with zero, though you are six, you are not going to go to school (...) [this lottery system was introduced by the Ethiopian government at the time because there were not enough schooling facilities available at elementary level, and indeed, many children of her age group could only go to school in a later year or sometimes not at all] then one day I went to do the bids, then I pick up a paper with zero, that means I am not going to go to school, I cried very much and then ... I was crying and my eyes was red, then we came back to the administration office and my mother said she is crying, please, then she begged him, then he registered my name, then I went to school (...) I felt very happy when the guy registered me and I could go to school (...) I was very much interested [to go to school] and then in the first grade I stood first, the same in second grade, and then until eleventh grade I stood second all the time ... I love it.

It was a mixture of a ‘progressive’ outlook – in terms of anticipating a better, more wealthy future – on the part of her parents, coupled with the model her siblings were providing that fostered in Misgana a strong determination to get herself a place in that school. Other factors also worked in her favour: There was always a lot of domestic work to do in the house, but as she was the youngest, most was done by her two older sisters, so she had a chance to study.

working for the MoE: “I joined the EPLF in 1975, straight from the university in Addis, I was studying there in the science faculty (...) I did not finish [my studies], you know, in 1974, the Derg came up with this programme where all students were supposed to go to the countryside for literacy campaign and for helping the peasant, but it was mainly a propaganda campaign for the Derg, and it was also a means of getting rid of the especially critical high school and university students from the towns, so we were opposing the Derg, because it was not a sincere campaign to assist the people, I did not want to join it, so rather than joining it, I came to join the EPLF ... of course that was not the only reason I had, you know, during those days the Eritrean revolution was gaining strength and it has been in my mind for quite a number of years to join the EPLF.” Almost ironically, the EPLF was later to use similar campaigns to on one hand educate the rural population and on the other advance its own agenda. While it would claim it did so – in contrast to the Derg – to help the people leading better lives, the judgement here seems to depend largely on the eyes of the beholder; being judgmental on the Derg’s literacy campaign is in any case outside the scope of this research; from memories of some Eritrean participants it seems that many were reluctant to participate and forced to do so (a fact possibly to a large extent connected to the political situation in Eritrea), whereas for Ethiopia in general the campaign has been described as “one of the brightest elements of the revolution” by one of its participants (Dawit Woldegiorgis, 1989: 27). In 1982 Ethiopia won a special achievement award from UNESCO for the campaign (as did, interestingly, Eritrea in 2002 for its present day literacy endeavours).

Personal determination to succeed was equally important in Esther's case. Esther is the second oldest of seven, who were the first generation of the family to go to school – and only because her father moved to Asmara from the village to work in a factory and was eventually followed by her mother. But especially her father was open minded, and though he is still a factory worker he finished grade four of elementary schooling in an extension programme after Esther was born and is keen to see good results in education from his children. Esther was keen herself from an early age, partly influenced by the poor economic conditions in her family and her father's belief that education meant better work opportunities and a better living standard. To this day, the only person who earns an income in the family is her father, and his wages in the food processing factory where he works are low. Still, "they gave us freedom in every aspect, they understand what we need, this was a big chance" and they always encouraged her education. Now it is Esther who is advising her younger siblings and to whom her father often turns for advice on family issues: "I help my father in giving him ideas." After she graduates she plans to support the family financially.

The last case is the story of Yordanos. Her background is quite similar to that of Misgana, her father also being a driver and forced to work away from Eritrea often. But in contrast to Misgana's father, her father became involved with the EPLF in Asmara. He was imprisoned – which made the family even worse off economically, but in prison he got some formal education in contrast to her mother, who is still illiterate. After his release he went to Sudan and worked as a driver for the EPLF there. This was the break that was about to change Yordanos' life: She had started elementary schooling in Asmara, but did not really like school. When she was fourth grade her mother decided to take the (then three) children and follow her father to Sudan. They went to live in Port Sudan, where she at first attended the EPLF school. She started to participate in school and always stood first in her class from then on. On the difference in schooling, Yordanos has the following to say:

The school, I think it's very good, not like the school we have had here in Ethiopia [as Eritrea was part of Ethiopia then, 'here in Ethiopia' refers to her first four years of schooling in Eritrea with the Ethiopian curriculum] (...) the curriculum is different and because it's ... the teachers are from the EPLF ... I don't know, you feel free, they treat you as their children ... maybe you have any problems, they help us (...) I liked it (...) for example Berhane [a teacher], I was very good in mathematics and geography, I always scored the highest mark in the class, and he encouraged me ... but I was very bad in English (...) and when he sees the grade report, I think he expect for my standard to be the first or second, but when he sees I am seventh or ninth, he comes and asks me 'what is your problem', because you score good marks in other subjects, so what is your problem.

After finishing elementary school she got the chance to join the prestigious Comboni school in Port Sudan. If children of Eritrean refugees passed the entrance exam, their fees were paid for by the UN. That cemented her journey through her education.

Yordanos is the first case among the interviewees so far in which it were the circumstances – rather than any determination by herself, or encouragement by her parents or other role models among family and friends – which made her successful and in the course of that also interested her in education. These circumstances were influenced by her father deciding to work for the EPLF, so Yordanos could equally be put into the group of women discussed below, who own their being at the UoA directly or indirectly to the Eritrean revolution.

The exception II – Thanks to the revolution ...

As mentioned before, during the time of the Derg government in Eritrea (when all these women were born), in most rural areas there was no opportunity for children to go to school, boys and girls alike. But with the establishment of the liberated areas in Sahel and with more and more rural people joining the EPLF, educational opportunities not seen before opened up.

Asmeret recounts her life at that time, which not only gave her the chance to become educated but also laid the ground for a deep devotion towards her country: In Asmeret's family they are nine children, of which Asmeret is number eight. Not her father himself, but all of her four brothers decided to join the EPLF. One of her brothers decided to take her with him to the base area so that she could go to school there:

I was born somewhere in the rural area in Hamasien province, then when I was four years old, I went to the revolution school with my brothers (...) the four brothers they are fighters, all of them, two of them are sacrificed in the revolution, one is disabled in the war, and one is OK but now is still in the war (...) [one of Asmeret's brothers] he was administrator of the people there, my brother [took me] with him [he is one of the brothers who eventually died in the struggle, shortly before Eritrea gained its independence, in 1990] I know him very much, till I was fifth grade he was coming to the revolution school and taking me to the place where he work, and I know everything about him (...) I accept his sacrifice, I know everything about the freedom, so I accept it, he has one baby [now ten years old] (...) my brother, [when he was sacrificed] that time I was unconscious, so they [her teachers in the revolution school] they encouraged me as if he still is [alive] and the only solution is to study as all Eritreans, but as he is [like] my father, not my brother only, I feel sad, so they encourage me, from that time onwards my teachers are as if they were my brother.

Her teachers with their devotion and the overall climate in the revolution school made Asmeret open towards and aware of education. After the death of

her brother also the feeling of responsibility that she had to be able to take care of her brother's son eventually:

One [student] was my friend, now she is not here (...) she was very clever, she was studying hard and I was studying with her, she was the same age but she was clever enough ... when I was fifth and sixth grade, at that time my brother went to the trenches and I was not having any information about him, so I doubt about him, is he sacrificed or alive, so my mind was in division, so I am studying with her and she was encouraging me and she makes everything clear for me and I forget it and accept it and became so clever, and his [Asmeret's brother's] son was already born, so I took it, I was at that time I was thinking the only one for him to do everything and to make everything for him [is me], that was motivating me to become clever (...) in elementary school I was not good, I started from the fifth grade, from the fifth grade onwards, in the fifth grade for the first time I took prize from all the students (...) [asked again about the reasons Asmeret said it was due to] her [the above mentioned friend's] encouraging and the born of the baby [of her brother].

In Asmeret's family a big divide remains between the part of the family who joined the struggle and the ones left behind. The latter in her father's household are living a life very much determined by the age-old traditions which the EPLF set out to change: Asmeret's parents moved from the rural areas of Hamasien province to the town of Agordat in Gash Barka during the time of the struggle, where her father used to work in the cereal trade. Her mother died some years ago. As her father is very old now, her 18 year old sister had to interrupt her education at grade 7 and basically runs the trade. She is the only one left in the house to do so, as one older sister was married (by arranged marriage) long ago and now lives with her husband in a farming community around Shambuko. Her children – as is typical for the western lowlands of Eritrea – look after the goats rather than go to school. Her second older sister took on their mother's role when she died and runs the household of their father. Asmeret is still the only one who finished secondary education and the only one with an 'unusual' profession. This was made possible for her as a by-product of the revolution but seems to have very little impact on the traditions in her family, which are still characterised by arranged marriages and the demand on the children of all ages to engage in family affairs which has priority over getting any formal schooling. Asmeret says her younger sister is interested in education and hopes to go back to school one day, but by the looks of it that does not seem very likely.

Equally for Anna the struggle was the decisive event which provided her with the chance to go to school. Anna is the youngest child in her family. Her father as well as all of her siblings – three brothers and two sisters – were fighters with the EPLF, only she was too young to join. Originally her family lived in Adi Mekeda in present-day zoba Debub, a small village of around 300

people. When she was six years old, her mother and Anna went to live in Sahel in a camp for families of fighters. Here Anna started her schooling and became the only member of her family who had the privilege of complete formal education, but “I’m only learn because of my age, not allowed to go to the struggle.” However, the other members of her family all encouraged her education and in the wake of the EPLF’s campaign to make every fighter literate they also received some kind of formal education. One of her sisters went back to school just recently and will compete her final year, grade 11, in due course. In that sense for the whole family – with the exception of Anna’s mother who was too sick to learn – the struggle was a turning point not only for their lives in general, but exposing them to (formal) education opened up new possibilities for a better future. In Anna’s case things did not stop here: Her oldest sister, for example, has one child, a boy who was born in the field, and who is now studying at university in second year political science: The impulse that once started with and during the struggle lives on and has an impact on the future generation.

From the conditions into which they were born, the background of Anna and Elmi is very comparable: Both come from small villages and farming families. For both the liberation struggle was the event that brought them into contact with formal education. But whereas in Anna’s case it was a deliberate decision by her father and her siblings to join the struggle – combined with a general openness towards the EPLF’s agenda of social change, in Elmi’s case it were the circumstances which forced her father to move. Would it not have been for a mixture of luck and her own determination, the chance to get educated would not have changed much in her life.

Elmi and her family – altogether they are eight children, seven girls and one boy, two of her sisters are older, the others younger than her – come from a village about 10 kilometres away from Keren, where during the Derg time when she was born no school existed. In that area the ELF as well as the EPLF carried out a lot of clandestine activities and the Ethiopian government took some men from the village by force to work for them. One was her father who was forced to work in the city administration in Keren, as he had once attended school until grade five and therefore could read and write. As a consequence, he could not return to the village even to visit his family, as he feared retaliation by the EPLF who regarded people like him as traitors to the Eritrean cause. He then demanded that Elmi’s mother and the children move to Keren, and after some resistance her mother gave in. Elmi was eight when they moved and her father felt now that they lived in the town she should go to school, “at least he wanted me to learn how to read and write, not above that, but that he thinks as important.”

But the usual age to start school was seven and the authorities were reluctant to admit older children, as there were too many children in that age group anyway. It took her father about a year to convince a teacher friend to take Elmi in – which he only did because meanwhile Elmi had discovered an interest in education and went with her mother to classes of the Derg literacy campaign for illiterate (older) women in Keren:

I liked to go to school, I was very interested, I was studying with the women, I was saying when will I go to school, all children are going and only me I am studying with the women.

Elmi became the first girl of her family to be able to attend school, thanks to the fact that the family had to move to Keren due to the political situation. Her oldest sister was already married at that time and remained in the village with her family (and her children only got a chance to go to school there after Eritrea became independent). Still, Elmi had a long way to go to be able to continue and finish her schooling and eventually join the university, which will be narrated in more detail later.

An example of the combination of two elements, the decision of a family member to join the struggle which at the same time changed the outer condition of her civilian upbringing, is the case of Sarah. She was born in Asen, a small farming village 25 kilometres away from Asmara, and is the oldest child of her family. When she was one year of age, her father went to fight with the EPLF, but left herself and her mother behind. Twice did her mother go and visit her father in the trenches over the years – and both times she came back home pregnant. With her father in the field her mother did not have the material resources to support the children. At the same time she was “very open minded” as part of her upbringing she spent in Asmara, exposed to a lot of things “she (is) not a traditional women.” So she decided to send Sarah to a Catholic orphanage in Keren when she turned six in order for Sarah to go to school and learn. Sarah today looks back at her time in the orphanage with very warm feelings. It was here that she became very interested in education:

I’m very happy, I’m very proud of them, because they helped me a lot to study, my school, they encourage people, they arrange our time when to study, when to sleep, when to play, so I like this programme very much (...) it helped me after that to plan my time properly ... I liked it very much, in that orphanage it was full of discipline, it is very nice ... and it helped me a lot, I can say.

After Sarah completed grade six, liberation came. Her mother had meanwhile moved from Asen to Adi Teklezan with her two other siblings, because “there was no school in Asen for them.” Sarah went on to live with her mother

– her parents got divorced when her father came back from the field – and it was no question for her that she would continue her schooling:

It was usual, even when I came back from the orphanage, I have to continue ... my mother also encouraged us to go to school, to continue our school ... it was natural.

In Sarah's case, her father joining the struggle was the event which eventually led to a very different process of socialisation than would otherwise have been possible under the prevailing conditions of the time. Regardless of her mother's encouragement of and interest in education, living as farmers in Asen would not have allowed Sarah to attend school. Interestingly enough, spending altogether six years in an orphanage would probably by most children be regarded as rather dreadful, not as one of the best times in her life, as Sarah describes it – mainly due to the chance to learn and the encouragement she received from the sisters.³⁵

Looking at the above narrated histories, for the time being the point to make is that the struggle in different ways had an impact on educational opportunities of the generation which grew up at the time especially outside the towns: Either it exposed people and communities to the – by its own definition – “progressive” agenda of the EPLF with its stress on education and in the wake of family members' decision to either join the struggle or at least support its rationale changed their lives. Or it simply changed the outer conditions and – sometimes by chance as in the case of Elmi – created certain new opportunities, often with having only a minor influence on the traditional culture and way of life, as will be shown in more detail, using the example of Elmi's family, later.

Still, the circumstances created an opening which then left it to the individual involved to follow through or abandon it.³⁶

³⁵ For the sake of completeness, another woman from a rural background needs to be mentioned: Awet. She got a chance to pursue her education because of a rather terrible physical condition: At the age of two due to a heavy outbreak of measles she became blind. Both her parents are farmers in a village near Asmara and felt they could not care for Awet's needs adequately, so they decided to send her to the only boarding school in the country for the blind in Asmara. At first, Awet felt terrible, but later she saw her education as a great opportunity: “[when her parents sent her to the boarding school for the blind] at that time, I didn't know the education and first of all I disliked this braille ... difficult and the isolation from my parents is the main problem but after time when I see that students like me, they can read and they can study it is attracting me little by little, I can not know the advantage but it is important to read and see how my friend can read and write, I will try this one (...) [eventually] the boarding school is nice because your home is there, your education is there and your classmates you can meet at any time, discuss with your teachers and the other workers.”

³⁶ For the sake of completeness, a third impact of the struggle needs mentioning here: Many people, especially those in the rural areas of the western lowlands, made their way to Sudan to flee the fighting and its implications altogether. In terms of educational opportunities, these people fall into two categories: One, and by far the biggest group of mainly subsistence farmers

The exception III – The story of Askalu

There is always an exception to any ‘rule’ and this is also the case with the background of one woman among this group of 29 women at Asmara university. It is the story of Askalu. She comes from Keren, her father is a trader and the children are expected to participate in the family work, either at home or in the shop. Keren secondary school at that time rarely sent students to the university and even less girls. Elmi above was the only one in her batch, as is Askalu in hers. Children in Keren and its environment are usually too involved in other kind of work – in the case of Askalu, until almost the end of her secondary school she worked in her father’s shop – to have the time to study.³⁷ And Askalu is the oldest of nine children, which in Tigrinya cultural tradition means she has even more responsibility for family issues than the other siblings.

The only thing from her background that seems to have supported her was her father – “he always had this dream of having all his children go to university.” And encouragement is one of the most important things for her personally, Askalu says:

At elementary school, I’m not a good student, I was a bad student at that time (...) because my father and my mother do not encourage me at that time (...) it could be, my father was not there at that time, he was arrested by the Derg government then for two years he was in prison, then I started school at that time, then for the first and second grade no one is interested about me except my mother, and my mother

and small traders, went on to live in refugee camps mainly in eastern Sudan, with mostly no chance to work and little schooling opportunities available to their children. In May 2001 a big repatriation programme started which will eventually bring most of the estimated 160.000 Eritreans who still remain in these camps back home. The second group went on to live in Port Sudan where educational opportunities were available for their children. A private school run there by the Italian order of the Comboni sisters received grants from the UN for children of Eritrean and Southern Sudanese refugees who – if they passed an entrance exam – could attend this school without paying fees. Many Eritrean children used this chance (see also the story of Yordanos above) and, according to an interview with a journalist at the Ministry of Information who himself completed his schooling there, were among the best students as they were inspired by the desire to return home some day and rebuild their country.

³⁷ In the meantime, partly due to efforts by its director, Keren Secondary school is quite successful in sending students to the UoA: in the 2001 matriculation exam, 39 males and 8 females passed the exam (email communication with school director Abraham Tadesse, 07/12/2001); in 2000, 22.2% of students who took the exam at Keren Secondary passed with a GPA of 2.0 or above (compared to a countrywide average of 11.97%) of which 34 were male and only 2 female (UoA, Educational Testing Centre, December 2000). Concerning the year 2000 results one has to consider the disruption caused by the Ethiopian occupation of large parts of Gash-Barka province in the course of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian war, which had many people flee Agordat and Barentu towards Keren, resulting in the disruption of everyday life there and swelling the numbers of students in Keren Secondary. In addition, even in the highland areas which were not effected by direct fighting, the fact that every family had members at the frontline and the overall climate of fear and anxiety made it hard for many students to concentrate on their education. All figures from this period have to keep this in mind.

can't be control me really, because she is keeping the shop and I with my sister and one my brother, I was alone in the home, then when she come in the evening she can't help us, she get tired (...) [in third grade] my father came back, then at that time, especially in fourth grade, he is too much interested, he is helping me a lot of things (...) [from then on her education picked up, and in grade 5 she won a prize for the first time and when she was to go to junior school she chose to go to the school of the Lassale brothers, St. Josephs] (...) really I love that school, because it's too disciplinary (...) there is a lot of morale at that school and I was a prize student at that time and all the brothers ... the teachers are brothers ... loved me really, they are my friends (...) [one teacher particularly encouraged her, brother Amanuel who came from Kenya to teach in Keren for two years] he encourages me, he helped me a lot of things at that time, even in my life he encouraged me, 'you have to do these things because your future life should look like this' and he gives me his example (...) also our director, brother Gabriel, he was very interested about me (...) [but after she finished grade 7 all the good teachers left and were replaced by bad teachers, teachers who could not answer her questions, and that made her angry and after grade 8 she decided to leave St. Josephs and join the public Keren Secondary School] there is no any discipline especially at Keren Secondary School, but the education is very quality (...) the teachers are very, very clever, but there is not any morality and discipline especially on the side of the students (...) at tenth grade I took a mountain bike as a prize from the unit and I was participating in any debate, anything (...) and then I am the only lady who passed to the degree programme (...) [my father] he followed [my education] I like that really, because I know that he is interested about me then when people get interested about me, I am also get interested about them, because that is the best thing in life (...) the main factor [for my success in education] could be my father, because he encouraged me a lot of things, he told me a lot of thing and I got his advice well (...) I was until grade 10, I was a shopkeeper [in my father's shop], I was in the morning I went to school then after that time I went to the shop, I do my studies when there is homework and assignment and so on I do at free time in the shop, that was OK because my father helped me at that time and from ... in the evening I got rest up to four or five o'clock in the morning, then early in the morning I wake up and up to seven I study and weekends I am free from the shop, I study ... after that in the eleventh grade I set free from the shop, even at home I didn't have any work, I was free [to study for the matriculation] ... I liked the shop, really.

Looking at a typical day for her during most of her schooling – getting up early, after a few hours sleep only, studying, then going to school, in the afternoon working in the shop, studying again – makes it seem extraordinary how she could still be such a good student. But she just liked studying, and until she started grade ten, Askalu did not even have this bigger aim of joining the university one day. In fact, she did not really understand the concept of university at that time, in her world schooling finished when you left secondary school:

From tenth grade [I thought about university], because before that I don't know what is university and so on ... one day my father came to Asmara and I came with him, then I was slept at the bus then he makes me to wake up, then 'look this school', what is that school 'that is university, it will be your home later on after two, three years', then I didn't get the point exactly what it is, then next time the next year at summer I came with him for two days in Asmara and return back with him, the same thing, 'look this school, this is university this will be your home' then at tenth grade our classmates study hard and so on ... I study just to have good marks and because I was too interested in that school, I study for the sake of enjoyment, really, study I enjoy really (...) [Askalu asked her classmates why they were suddenly studying so much and they answered] 'because we want to join the Asmara university' (...) [then Askalu remembered that her father was in the years before speaking about the university on the bus to Asmara; additionally when she started tenth grade the first relative, a cousin, joined the university and encouraged her to do like him, so slowly she began to understand about the university and that she could indeed continue her education].

Askalu is exceptional in that she did actually succeed to join the university, whereas her background is quite typical for a trading family around Keren or in the lowlands of what is now zoba Gash-Barka: While children in these families are often encouraged in their education, families can on the other hand not afford to relieve them from working in the family business. This means in many cases – for females and males alike – that around grade ten the family business takes over so much time that, in spite of either interest in education or natural intelligence, no time is left to study and pass the necessary exams (this pattern became particularly obvious to the researcher during her visit to Agordat Secondary School, observation notes: 23f).

In the following chapter it will be looked at in more detail how Askalu and all the other women went through their secondary schooling at the point in history when the Eritrean revolution entered the process of institutionalisation and consolidation, and subsequently whether and how joining the university did fulfil (part of) their future aspirations for their lives. Before doing that, some summarising remarks concerning the background of these 29 female students the UoA seem in order.

Background of female students at the UoA – Some conclusions

The predominant group of female students at Asmara university does have an urban (Asmarina or foreign) background and grew up in a quite well off and educated family – an outcome that would have been expected without the Eritrean revolution.

In addition, the revolution for other women – and especially those who come from the other end of the spectrum of Eritrean society, far removed from the urban culture of Asmara – had a big impact on their lives. Concerning its impact

on women's education it can be concluded that it was not only the existence of the revolution school but different levels of impact of the liberation struggle which opened new educational opportunities for Eritrean children – and girls in particular – especially in the rural areas of the country. Opportunities which had, with few exceptions during the period of the BMA and partly the federation period, never existed before. However, the revolution school itself played a prominent role and the number of people in different positions in the country who spent the decisive years of their schooling there pay tribute to that to this day.³⁸

In spite of the hardship that came with the long drawn out liberation war, for these people it was liberating in more than the literal sense of achieving Eritrean independence. As an illustration the above mentioned example of Asmeret may serve, who regards her time at the revolution school as something very special and is aware she owes it to that school that she is now at the UoA:

Struggle is not good, everyone knows that, no house, no ... nothing is good in struggle, but when I remember it now and when I tell it to anyone, it makes me happy, because I liked it very much, and I enjoy it at that time since (...) I like it because I remember what was good, what I did at that time, I remember all my friends and everything (...) so it is nice, there were many bad things, such as aeroplanes, bombing, and other killings of our friends (...) but since I was small (...) that was the bad side of that time, but it was good, since we have got the results, we have got the freedom, I accept it, and it is nice now, when I see it in this time (...) and there are here now many girls from that [from the revolution school] some are here [at the UoA] like me, some are military forces, air force, in the marine and also land forces (...) some still they are fighters.

The education received at the revolution school laid the ground for a different future. To what extent one can speak of a more liberated future on an individual level is an altogether different question and will be dealt with later.

The above narrated histories suggest that the decisive factors in their upbringing which formed the lives of the women in the centre of this study and laid the ground for them eventually joining Asmara university are: Personal determination as the consequence of what could be called an 'encounter with modernity' (an expression suggested by Tony Barnett; modernity understood as outlined in chapter one as the hope for a better future based on the growth of education and other improvements).

³⁸ There are no statistics available but a lot of anecdotal evidence and in every ministry one encounters junior staff who received part of their schooling at the revolution school (more senior staff would have been in the field as full-fledged fighters). Just to give one example: According to Abraham Tecele from the MoE, almost all junior administrators in the MoE and its regional offices went through the revolution school.

These ‘encounters’ could have taken place in the form of an established history within the wider family of a successful future life to a high degree dependent on formal education (as is the case with most students from well-off families from Asmara and abroad). They could have occurred in the form of some role model in wider society at a time when the first women gained prominence because of their educational achievements (as was the case for Lydia), or through some friend or relative becoming the first from one’s social network to join the university (see partly Askalu). They could also have happened in the form of an encounter with the EPLF’s modernist ideology in the revolution school or other EPLF institutions (as was the case for Yordanos, Asmeret and Anna), or an encounter with other educational institutions (like the orphanage in Sarah’s case, or the boarding school for the blind for Awet). Or they could have been caused by a move from a rural to an urban area and a general exposure to new modes of leading ones life (as was the case for Elmi). These ‘encounters with modernity’ were often but not always enforced by two other factors: encouragement of family and/or friends; or other external circumstances in these women’s upbringing, like a certain affluence, being largely free from domestic work, and not having to worry about early marriage arrangements (more on this last point in due course).³⁹

Now that the Eritrean revolution won its cause and entered the process of consolidation with its modernist agenda of which women’s advancement as well as the promise of development are central pillars, the prospects for ‘exceptions’ from the next generation of students, and particularly so female students who come from rural areas, from poor families, from minority nationalities to join the UoA should be opening up. The consolidation of the revolution should be expected to create a favourable climate to outweigh the advantageous background of a well-off, educated, urban family.

Looking beyond the 29 women participants and at the wider picture of the survey – both together provide data on almost half of all female students in degree programmes at the UoA – does not show a significant increase in numbers of female students from year two onwards from either ethnic minorities or a rural background (see table 11 in appendix 4.2). But then Eritrea is only independent for ten years, and progressive education policy measures will take longer to show an effect at university level: The generation of children who started their schooling after liberation are only in grade ten or eleven of secondary school at this moment in time.

This leads to the next crucial issue – what happens in secondary schools in Eritrea today? It will at first be looked at in terms of what happened to the

³⁹ Interestingly, this trait of a personal determination to succeed, may it be against all odds, is at the same time a common characteristic of the mindset of many Eritrean people, shaped by their common history over the last forty years.

successful 29 women from above as they travelled through their schooling and why did they succeed when so many of their sisters did not. These women spent their years of secondary schooling in free Eritrea, which means their experiences can be looked at in the light of whether the educational environment in a country after a successful revolution – which partly aimed to transform traditional gender roles – offered favourable conditions for their educational advancement or not.

In a more general sense and drawing on observations in five secondary schools – including three of the schools some of the 29 women went to and an additional two schools in the western lowlands, an area where educational attainment of girls is low and to change that is given high priority by the government – the following will be investigated: Does how young women experience their schooling rather encourage them and makes (an already present) determination to succeed stronger, or is rather the opposite the case, especially when they reach the age of puberty and become more sensitive and aware of their identities as women. To these issues the study will turn now.

The journey through schooling – Successes and tribulations of young women in secondary schools¹

One characteristic of formal schooling is that the need to make a decision to continue or abandon it can arise newly at various points in time according to changing circumstances. In the context of Eritrea, this – as could have been expected – translates into overall enrolment numbers being highest at elementary level, a considerable drop of 75 percent between elementary and middle level and again an albeit slighter drop of around 20 percent between middle and secondary level (see appendix 5.1 table 1 to table 3 for absolute enrolment numbers and percentages). These percentages, as well as female versus male

¹ A brief remark concerning data sources and data representation: In addition to interview data, this chapter draws on various written accounts produced by the author while in the field. These include a fieldwork diary, field notes and observation notes. Fieldwork diary refers to a diary kept during the author's first field visit, from September 6, 2000 to July 28, 2001. Field notes are quite similar to the fieldwork diary, they refer to notes taken after relevant encounters during the author's second field visit and comprise the time between November 20, 2001 and January 16, 2002. Observation notes refer to the notes taken during and after observations in five secondary schools and communities. In these observation notes are included protocols of various informal conversations the author had with students, teachers and other relevant informants. These protocols were written up after the conversations, either based on jotted down notes during the conversation or relying on the author's memory, or both. Therefore, when people are quoted, they are quoted in 'corrected English', not like interviews from tape transcripts which kept the original verbal flow. The only exceptions are quotes from the five school directors, as these interviews were tape recorded and transcribed accordingly.

overall enrolment figures, conceal big regional variations. These variations reflect the differences in cultural attitudes – in the case of girls most prominently to early marriage – between the nine Eritrean nationalities as well as, and possibly partly caused by, the geographic distribution of the exposure to formal education in the past.

Looking for example at elementary level only, enrolment for boys and girls in *zoba* Maakel reaches almost parity and near parity in the southern highlands of *zoba* Debub, an area with a comparatively long history of formal education. In contrast, in Southern Red Sea province, historically one of the most neglected parts of Eritrea in terms of educational provision, not only are overall enrolment rates low (see appendix 5.1. table 4 for net and gross enrolment ratios), but more so for girls, with only about half as many girls in elementary school as their male counterparts.² *Zoba* Maakel and *zoba* Debub are primarily populated by the Tigrinya nationality, whereas Northern Red Sea and Gash Barka are home to the other eight nationalities (see also chapter one for further discussion of these regional differences and maps 1 and 2). The latest figures available for elementary enrolment by ethnic group are from a 1997 publication by the MoE and put girls' enrolment among Tigrinya at 89 percent, among the Tigre, Nara and Saho at between 27 percent and 34 percent respectively (MoE, 1997).

Another observation is noteworthy in this context: The fact that between middle school – the end of the period of compulsory education as envisaged by the Eritrean government in its educational strategies for the future (MoE, 1999) – and secondary level in most regions the overall percentage drop in enrolment numbers is considerable higher for girls than for boys, most drastically so in the regions of Anseba, Debub and Gash-Barka. It does go beyond the scope of this study, with its focus on the dynamics in the lives of women who follow their education through, to discuss these issues in more detail. From the author's knowledge of Eritrean society as well as her conversations with key informants about these issues it seems likely that the main reason for young women to leave school around grade seven is indeed marriage, often coupled with poverty, domestic obligations and/or weak academic performance.³

² Additionally, in Southern Red Sea it was observed by the author and confirmed by Girmai Gebrehiwot, who from 1991 to 1996 was the head of the regional education office in Southern Red Sea and based in Assab, that it are predominately the children of Tigrinya parents who work in the administration or the port of Assab who attend school, not (particularly so in the case of girls) the children of the Afar who traditionally inhabit this area.

³ In a general sense, this assumption gives support to the debate in the literature which is critical of the dominant discourse on female education and development – with its focus on the narrowly conceived issue of closing the gender gap in basic educational enrolment – and argues that there seems to be a threshold in opening up space for women which is connected to their stay in secon-

Within the context of this study with its focus on potential future elite women, the period of secondary schooling is a decisive stage in the lives of young women, the stage when the course is very much set for their future.

A common recollection of the 29 student participants when they looked back at their time in secondary school was the fact that more and more girls dropped out as schooling progressed. Looking at enrolment numbers in secondary school confirms this impression and shows that a major cut-off point seems to be after grade eight (see appendix 5.1 table 2). Many key informants as well as teachers and male students in the schools visited by the author consider the main reason behind this to be marriage coupled with a disinterest in schooling (and subsequently repetition or low grades) when they become sexually mature. Concerning the issue of early marriage, this is regarded as related to traditional culture and as such not prevalent in Asmara.

But it is not the issue of female enrolment numbers that this chapter will deal with. Considerable improvements have been made in that respect in all areas of formal schooling since Eritrean independence (see appendix 5.1 table 5). What is of concern here are the processes that keep girls in school and produce high quality exam results.

Drawing on observations and interviews in five secondary schools it will be illustrated how young women who stay on in school experience their schooling and the schooling environment and what pressures they face from the school and the overall environment in which they live.

Before turning to these school experiences, a look will be taken at some of the experiences of the 29 women at the UoA as they remember them. As was shown in the preceding chapter, for a number of these, from their overall background it was not necessarily a conscious decision to stay in education, but in their particular circumstances often rather the natural thing to do. These women will be left aside for the time being – some of their experiences will be drawn on in a later section to explain why not more women from similar backgrounds are actually at the UoA. In the next section, some of the ‘exceptions’ will be looked at and what made them become successful. It will be asked whether more general conclusions might be drawn from their experiences on the trade-offs young Eritrean women face between their cultural traditions on one hand and different encounters with education as one way to modernity on the other.

dary schooling. For a discussion of these issues see Heward & Bunwaree (1999); Subbarao & Raney (1993). The story of Elmi, see below, equally supports this line of argument.

The exceptions – Stories of fulfilled ambitions

The women in here include as women ‘from a different Asmara’ Misgana and Esther; as women who grew up in the Revolution school but completed their secondary schooling after liberation mostly in Tsabra (near Nakfa, the successor of the revolution school) Asmeret, Anna and Mehret; and additionally Sarah, Awet, Askalu and Elmi. The case of Elmi illustrates particularly clearly the potential struggle involved in integrating cultural traditions she is proud of with aspirations for a modern lifestyle as a professional women.

“Brilliant” girls in an encouraging environment

The schooling experiences of these women above were characterised by two factors which reinforced each other: They had good grades, often stood first or second of all students (male and female) in class and won prizes. Because they were – as females – good students, they got a lot of encouragement from their teachers. Alternatively, one could say that they had a certain inclination towards education, showed promise and were thus encouraged by their teachers and as a result got good grades. A number of these women additionally spent some or all of their schooling years away from their families, either in the revolution school or in other boarding facilities. Whereas some students described this separation as a condition conducive to their educational advancement,⁴ it will be argued with the examples below that it was rather due to the encouraging environment that these women – who already had an interest in and a gift for education – did indeed follow it through successfully. This encouragement was provided either by the school environment, the teaching staff, the family, the wider community or by the way the Eritrean struggle unfolded towards the final achievement of independence, or a combination of any of these factors.

Looking first at the three women who grew up in the revolution school, when they started their education, they expected to finish schooling after grade six or seven and become fighters, as was the usual at the time. Asmeret recalls how all of the students understood the war situation and were willing to fight

⁴ Anna says about Tsabra: “Since it is boarding, no effect of the family’s condition, even the city condition [at the time when she attended Tsabra, it was located in the middle of nowhere about 15 kms from Nakfa, the nearest town; meanwhile, Tsabra has been moved into the vicinity of Nakfa] far away you concentrate on your education.” But being in a boarding environment can also have a negative impact on educational performance, as Asmeret points out: “My friends [in the revolution school] they did not like to study, they had more interest in talking ... sometimes, it became difficult for me, when they [my friends] were playing, also I want to play with them, not study.” A similar problem was mentioned by some teachers in Agordat Secondary School in relation to the girls who come from far afield and live in the girls’ hostel: Even though it is officially not allowed, many girls spend their evenings walking about the town and peer pressure makes girls who would otherwise rather study to join them (observation notes: 32).

themselves. They usually had relatives in the trenches and were sometimes taken to visit them. Asmeret remembers vividly how on one such occasion she and her friend were allowed to put on military fatigues and were very excited about it. But becoming fighters for these youngsters usually did not mean actually going to the trenches, but to become engaged in other work, mostly teaching, as they had now received some education themselves. When Mehret finished her seventh grade at the revolution school in 1989, she started to teach in second grade. But even though the years of formal education had to be cut short by the circumstances of the time, staff at the revolution school tried to instil a future vision into the minds of their students. Clever girls were in particular encouraged, as was the case with Mehret:

The people who were taking care of us were advising us to learn ... even I can remember one teacher who is now in London learning his doctorate, you know, when I was seventh grade I didn't know there is a class which reaches up to twelfth or something, because I was exposed to such [school finishing at grade seven] he was the one who encouraged me to have very long-run visions, that was his (...) and there were teachers who were telling us we have to prepare for the next years and to learn more (...) also there is one teacher whose name is Teame, I remember him, he was my Tigrinya teacher and he was calling me ... because I was clever when I was first grade, second grade ... he was calling me 'bullet' [*an expression used for people who are very sharp*], he was calling me like that, and he was always telling me you must not lose that sharpness, now he is not here, he is one of the sacrificed ones (...) there was a lady also, she was a student in the revolution school and she became a teacher there and she was a clever teacher, and I was always dreaming to become like her (...) I thought always ... she is seventh grade, she is not more than that (...) but what she was teaching, she knows all, and when you went to her and ask her something she encourages ... mostly when you are a female, she wants you to win or something ... and I was liking her more than all the teachers (...) and she was encouraging me, and when we came here also, now she is in Embatkalla [*a small town between Asmara and Keren*], and she is the first one to send me a congratulation letter when I passed the matriculation exam, she always encouraged me (...) still she follows what I'm doing.⁵

Asmeret and Anna had more luck. Both of them finished grade six in the revolution school when freedom came and could stay on in Tsabra to finish

⁵ Mehret in fact had to fight to be able to continue her education: After liberation she was first allowed to continue her schooling in Tsabra for one year. But because of the shortage of teachers and because she already had experience in teaching, she was recalled to teach first in Keren and then in Tsaeda Kristian near Asmara. She thus had to continue her schooling while working at the same time, but still stood first from her class in all three years of secondary school. When she passed the matriculation, she was prevented from joining the university straight away. Instead, she had to continue teaching for some time (more about her experiences will be narrated in chapter seven).

their secondary education. After liberation they put the commitment they were prepared to give to the struggle into their education. At first they did so without a concrete objective, like joining the university, as they were not familiar with many aspects of the way in which life outside the base area was organised – Asmeret was four years old when she was brought to Sahel, Anna was six, and both came from very rural communities.

Asmeret remembers some of the differences she felt between them and the people in wider society:

The change is mostly thinking, we were different from the people who were here, no religion, we don't have any religion, we don't know anything, we don't know what religion is, what Muslim is, what Christian is, everything, this is the big change, and also things, everything was new for us, such as what a palace is, we don't know palace, we saw it at that time, we only know in videos, but we could see by our eyes when we came here, we don't know city, we changed (...) in the eighth months of 1991 I came here and I saw Asmara for the first time [*Asmeret stayed with an uncle she had in Asmara for two months, then she went back to Sahel to finish her schooling in Tsabra*], but I don't know anything (...) one time I and my uncle passed by where the university is, someone was coming down from the stairs, I asked my uncle, 'they are the students from the university' [he said], I know this word, but I don't know what does it mean and does it have interest for me, I don't decide at that time, I decide to come to the university when I was tenth grade around [*when Asmeret started thinking about what to do later*], but anyway I was clever in my education (...) I wanted to study, but I don't know about the university (...) when I was in high school, at that time I was a nice student, so I took a cycle in the eleventh grade, as a prize from that school from the girls (...) I was best student, I took it in eleventh grade as an average from eighth to eleventh, so I was OK student to come to the university, and I came with the result 3.2 to the university, (...) [after I understood about university] I tried hard to enter to the university, and my teachers and my relatives and others encouraged me to come to the university.

Two other experiences of an institutional environment which encouraged them and was reinforced by teachers or family members are those of Awet and Sarah. Awet spent part of her education at the boarding school for the blind, while Sarah spent her first years in education at an orphanage (for Sarah's story see chapter four). Awet recalls that:

At the elementary school [*the boarding school for the blind*] a [female] teacher [encouraged me] 'blindness is not a problem, if you study very well your education you reach at the highest level and lead your life in a good situation independently' she said every day, she advised me, and in junior and high school,⁶ many teachers

⁶ For middle school (which Awet refers to as junior school) and secondary schooling, Awet had to join the regular school system, as special schooling for the blind exists only at elementary level.

advised me, and I know exactly my illness so I can grasp their suggestion in a good situation, at this time I didn't think blindness is a problem, because I learn with my friends, just like them (...) I proposed when I was at junior school, me and my friend chatting all of the time 'when we reach at the university level, we join the English department or history', so it is fulfilled my wishes, I joined history [*and her friend joined chemistry*].

More generally the attainment of Eritrean independence fostered some of these women's encouragement towards education. This was not only restricted to changes in teachers but extended to other social actors, as Esther, who did her secondary schooling at Semaetat Secondary School, a normal public school in Asmara, explains:

My whole high school was in our liberation time [after liberation] ... even that encouraged us (...) there is a union for Eritrean Youths and Students (...) they are so active, the members, they were encouraging us, coming to our school, general knowledge competition, debating, I was participating there, and that was ... it lets us to meet guys like ...[they were] so brilliant, even [though themselves] students ... they were saying 'you are the ones who will have higher standard', it encourages you, gives you something to work hard (...) [*again later the NUEYS influenced her*] when I was tenth grade those from national union ... there was some Dr. Abeba (...) she came and asked for the director to bring them some brilliant students, then she collected us, you have to think for your future, what will I be, where I am at the moment, what am I doing ... write your plan and let me see it, she told us ... I was tenth grade, [I wrote] when I finish my eleventh grade, I have to join the university, four years university, two years national service, and then four years and above to help my parents, my first purpose is to help my parents, to make them out from the ... their poor condition ... the paper is still with me, it was good for me to think of that.

Esther's account confirms a pattern that was already found in the accounts of students at the revolution school and will later be confirmed by observations in present-day schools: Girls who are somehow "brilliant" – Esther stood first from her class in all four senior secondary school years – who are good in their education, are given particular encouragement by teachers and society. They are presented as a model for other women, women everybody should be proud of⁷ – in a similar way as former female fighters were regarded as role models by the EPLF.

⁷ For example when Askalu, whose story was presented in chapter 4, passed the matriculation at Keren Secondary School as the only female and with a score of 3.4, a local magazine ran a story on her entitled 'Star of Keren,' to celebrate her achievement. Also in other areas outside formal education female role models are consciously created – for example within the air force two young women were recently trained as fighter pilots in a very publicised way.

In Esther's case, her educational success also led to her being excused fees in a private matriculation training class,⁸ which gave her own motivation a further push:

There was a guy, not from our school, outside of the school he was teaching students from different high schools with a fee (...) he was giving ... feeding students with matriculation questions, revising and things like that ... I go to him, I told him ... he registered students at the very beginning of the year, but I can't afford for the whole year, then I go and tell him, can I join your class at the last of the year, when the matriculation is nearer and you start to revise everything, I told him ... he guessed I was short [of money], I don't tell him, but he guessed I was short of money then, then ... [he said, to join] my class, you will not pay me and I hope you will work for this country, being an engineer or something he told me [*in fact, Esther always dreamt of being an engineer, a subject which was not offered at degree level at the UoA at the time, but was introduced just in time for her, and she does in fact study to be an engineer in the future*].

All of these women confirmed that during their stay in secondary school, there were fewer and fewer female students, as Misgana sums it up:

In the elementary we were many [girls] and in the high school when you promote from class to class, specially women they are victims of failure (...) they get married, most of the time not boys, but girls, during our high school, especially high school, they were getting married very early.

Usually it are the girls who are not "brilliant", who do not have outstanding grades, for whom their parents arrange marriage. A good performance at school often influences the family to encourage this particular girl in her education. This does not alter the general tradition of early marriage for girls nor change perceptions on gender equality within the family, but rather provides an outlet for an in terms of academic achievement exceptional girl to continue her education.

This was very much the case for Elmi, for whom her interest and success in education eventually provided personal opportunities but did not fundamentally change the culture of early marriage in her family. Her story will be narrated in more detail in the following section.

⁸ In most towns in Eritrea but particularly in Asmara, one or two years before they have to take the matriculation exam, students usually join private tuition classes to study the exams of the last years. Fees are not very high, but for people from poor families often too much to afford.

Breakthrough and tradition – The story of Elmi

Elmi from her first contact with formalised education during the *derg* literacy campaign showed great interest in her education. She was a good student when she finally joined the formal education system. Elmi comes from the Bilen nationality where it is the custom that girls are married around the age of 14. And even though in general she feels the girls and the one boy in her family were treated equally, the difference is in marriage expectations:

In my family, there is no such ... my father he don't make any difference, he says, my daughters are also good (...) but the difference is they [my family] force [girls] to marry at early age.

Elmi's two older sisters were married when they were 15 years of age and her success in schooling was, in the eyes of her parents, not to alter this tradition, as Elmi explains:

They tried three times to [marry me] ... when I was in third grade, 12 years old, they decided to give me for marriage (...) that boy was very old, 20 years older, he didn't ... he is in the village, but I am in Keren [*the village Elmi came from originally is 10 km from Keren*] so in Keren I don't cover my [head], and he likes to cover my [head], sometimes I don't have shoes, so he says 'she is not OK, I don't want her' he said, 'she is child, her culture her behaviour is child', he said he don't want, and even I don't know what is marriage, my family wanted (...). In seventh grade also, and until ninth grade, there was engagement time [*being engaged in fact meant nothing except that eventually Elmi was to get married to that man, but she did not know him and had never met him; at the time of the engagement he did not have the financial resources to get married straight away but waited for his sisters to return from the US and arrange the wedding ceremony; her parents eventually lost patience and looked for somebody else*], they said my family, 'we are late, he does not really want to marry her' [*her parents thought*] (...) so they tried a third one, because they were late, 'if she reaches tenth grade, eleventh, she will say no, so we have to give her soon to the one who takes her' [*her parents thought*], so they gave [me] to another one, that one was a nurse, but he already [was] married [once] (...) she didn't stay with him even one week, I don't know what was the problem, but he is Catholic, so he can't marry second time [*also Elmi and her family are Catholic and would not act against the rules of the church*].

Elmi was in none of these cases willing to marry. She had a vision of continuing her education: "All these obstacles, I try to not care about that (...) 'why are you studying like that, you will get married' my friends say,⁹ but I 'no, no, I

⁹ Among her classmates, Elmi remembers there were almost equal numbers of boys and girls until grade seven, when many girls got married. In grade eight she recalls that out of 71 students there were only 20 girls left, and when they reached grade eleven, they were 5 girls in a class of 50.

will study' [I reply]". But she would have had to give in eventually "what could I do, you cannot decide against your family" she says and feels it was "by chance" that she eventually avoided the fate of her sisters.

Then something happened which changed Elmi's life. In grade ten, two students from her school, one boy and one girl, had the chance to participate in a two months exchange programme with a school in Europe. It was Elmi who was chosen, because of her good grades. She remembers that the school director spoke to her father on her behalf:

The director asked me (...) can you bring your father to the school (...) my father came with me and the director said 'she is a good girl, she is the best student, so don't force her to marry like that', the director was also very good for me, so my father said OK.

Influenced by the director and as no prospective husband was in sight her father agreed to let her go. "This changed my life forever" she says now, mainly referring to the exposure she got and seeing how teenagers of her age lived in other circumstances:

In [Europe] you grow freely, in Eritrea, you cannot grow freely, there is culture, there is people around you, they decide what you have to do, you are not free.

When she came back she was firmer than ever that she wanted to continue her education, and her parents grew to accept it and are meanwhile very proud of her.¹⁰

But did Elmi's breakthrough change the tradition of early marriage within her family? Elmi believes it did, at least to some extent:

Now, I have one sister in seventh grade, I told them [my parents] she has to finish her school, she is also brilliant, she is good in school, and one [sister in] fifth grade, she is also ... she stood second, and last year first, she is OK (...) now they [my

¹⁰ On one hand, after her return Elmi defied many traditional rules. She started to wear trousers, which she had never done before and was at the time not regarded as appropriate for girls in her cultural environment in Keren. Her parents allowed it as these clothes were gifts from her friends abroad. On the other hand, Elmi deep inside was still suspicious that her parents had not totally given up on arranging a marriage for her – even though after her return "they [my parents] said they will not force anyone to marry." After she had passed the matriculation exam to join the university, she was afraid to do so and joined the Comboni sisters instead, who promised to eventually send her to the US to study at one of their institutions there: "I did it, because my parents were always forcing me to marry and I thought even if I get the results, they will not allow me to join the university, so I joined the sisters and my parents liked it." However, after a few months she realised that she could not live with the restrictions on her personal freedom imposed by the Comboni order and finally joined the university one year later.

parents] allow [*for the daughters to continue their education*] because they are happy for me to join this university, they changed.

But taking a closer look, only as long as the girls are exceptionally good in their education and show some promise to either join the university or at least the TTI: “They [my parents] say school is good, there is also many female teachers (...) now from TTI, there are many girls.” In contrast, one other younger sister, now 16 years of age, stopped school in grade four and helped Elmi’s mother at home. Elmi’s parents arranged her marriage in January 2001 and the author had a chance to visit her in her new home (her husband’s house) in a small hamlet on the road between Keren and Hagaz two weeks after the wedding. The following are some extracts from the notes she wrote down after that visit:

Kidisti (as the sister shall be called) looks and behaves very childish for her age and was visibly happy when somebody from her family walked in to visit. We were sitting down drinking lemonade when her husband came in. In a rather dismissive gesture he waved his hand and immediately she stood up from her chair and let him sit down on it, whereas she sat down on the floor after she had served him a glass of lemonade. I did not like his behaviour and the whole atmosphere and Kidisti only returned to her normal girlish behaviour, chatting with Elmi about the siblings in Keren and other things, after he had left. When I later told Elmi how I felt, she agreed that her sister did not look too happy [for Elmi as well, it was the first time to visit her sister and meet the husband, as she could not attend the wedding] and that it was hard for Kidisti to move away from the city environment of Keren to this outpost, and that she missed her family and everything. Elmi added that especially in the countryside, “it’s the culture [that women have to be below their husbands] which is very strong”, and Kidisti’s husband himself is only 20 and left school early, also around grade four, and joined the national service, where he still is, so he did never have any exposure but basically follows the tradition. Elmi points out to me that married life in traditional culture is not about personal happiness and that if her sister had been more interested in her education, her future might have looked different (fieldwork diary: 65f)

Similarly, Elmi’s only brother, let’s call him Tesfe, got married in an arranged marriage¹¹ in February 2001. The author attended this wedding to-

¹¹ In contrast to his sisters, Tesfe could have declined to agree to the arrangement. But at the age of 21, having spent his last three years with the army in National Service, he did want to get married and at the same time did not want to disappoint his parents, especially as the only son. He had not seen his bride before the wedding day – a 16 year old from the village of Halimente, about 10 kms away from Keren on the road to Asmara. But as she is beautiful and from a well-off family, he became very happy about his father’s choice. As far as the author can tell from various visits to the family since February 2001, the bride settled in well and seems equally happy about the whole arrangement.

gether with Elmi. Some of her impressions were written down on the day after the wedding:

The tradition dictates that everybody gathers at the bride's place to wait for the groom and his friends who are going to collect the bride and bring her to the groom's place – in this case the house of Elmi's parents in Keren. So Elmi and myself drove from Asmara to Halimente in the morning, waiting for the groom to arrive. Everything in the wedding ceremony is strictly separated for men and women. At the bride's place, there is a big tent where the men of her family and some of Elmi's male relatives sit and drink sewa, the locally brewed beer. The women gather outside and play drums. As I am regarded as a special guest, I am allowed to sit with the men in the tent, as is Elmi, as my friend and translator. (...) After Tesfe and his people arrive, everybody eats and the financial transactions between the two families are completed, then it is time to depart. The bride is in tears, visibly anxious of leaving her parents and the compound of her family where she spent all her life. But off we go, I with the bridesmaids in my car, and by the time we arrive at the shrine of Mariam Dearit¹² near Keren, where it is the tradition to stop for a prayer and a photograph, the bride looks much happier. (...) Eventually we arrive in Keren at the house of Elmi's parents, and again a big tent has been erected in which all the men sit and drink sewa and eat, and the women sit outside on straw mats preparing coffee. After eating the men take turns to sing songs of praise about close relatives who either brought some special sewa or a bottle of zibib (the local anisschnaps) and then start to drink whatever was donated. Elmi and myself again sit with the men¹³ and Elmi also has some sewa (something not common for women), and she is fascinated by the whole ceremony and the songs, as normally as a woman she would never have been allowed to sit in the men's tent, were it not for me. 'I only know about their singing from what people told me before', she remarks. The men eventually sing a song of praise for me, which Elmi translates to me, along the lines that Tesfe could be very happy to have such a special guest at his marriage – in fact, in the whole neighbourhood, they sing, there had never been a foreign guest at a marriage, so it must be a sign of good luck. Outside, meanwhile, the women are dancing, joined by some of the younger men in traditional costumes waving their ceremonial swords above their heads. Tesfe and his friends join the dance, whereas his bride has fallen asleep inside her new home. (fieldwork diary: 73f)

What these examples of the lives of Elmi's siblings mean to illustrate is that the process of change in cultural tradition has many different facets.

¹² Mariam Dearit is a shrine inside the open trunk of a huge tree, where legend has it that the Virgin Mary saved some Eritrean Ascaris who fled to the tree in the battle of Keren between Italian and British forces in 1941.

¹³ A general comment on this 'male' status the author seems to be given: For a foreign women with an interest in local tradition, it is common among all nationalities in Eritrea to be invited to participate in them by all sides. In ceremonies (exceptions are religious ceremonies) where male and females spheres are divided, this includes having the opportunity to join the men.

For herself, Elmi carved out some space and is not expected any more to strictly adhere to traditional roles. Whereas clearly only the author's presence made it possible for Elmi to join the men's space during the marriage rituals, in other ways she is outside the traditional expectations. When she visits her parents, she is not expected to join the women in the kitchen and prepare food – in fact, her family make jokes that she would not even be able to cook. Her food is served to her in the living room – and she assures me this is not only the case when I am with her, but equally when she comes on her own. It is accepted that she has her own agenda of things to do and her time at home is not structured by the times when food or coffee needs to be prepared, as is that of the other women in the household (fieldwork diary: 62).

For her younger sisters who are still in school, Elmi is some sort of model. But only as long as they perform well in school will they be allowed to proceed. Their success in schooling does not challenge the traditional order of things in the house: It are these younger siblings who usually do the bulk of domestic work (fieldwork diary: 62).¹⁴ But if any of them should eventually finish grade eleven and be successful in her matriculation exam, she will be allowed to join the university or the TTI or any other professional school. In that sense Elmi's success has opened up a new path of opportunities and changed or modified attitudes towards early marriage (fieldwork diary: 68).¹⁵

These openings, however, are contingent on success in education, defined as above average performance throughout the years of schooling.

If a change in early marriage traditions appears connected to a breakthrough in education in the family, this seems like a vicious circle which can only be broken very slowly and more by chance than planning. The question then arises

¹⁴ With the exception of cooking, which is done either by Elmi's mother, the daughter-in-law or Elmi's married sister who lives next door, the younger girls are responsible for such tasks as fetching water with a donkey in a far away garden, go shopping, cleaning the compound, and washing clothes.

¹⁵ Concerning Elmi herself, she feels the pressure to get married at or after her graduation. Especially her mother would like to have the graduation and marriage celebrations together. Many relatives at her brother's wedding were saying "next time we come together here, it will be for Elmi's marriage." Elmi herself says on one hand "I like my culture [*referring in fact to the importance these marriage arrangements have within the culture*]" and feels she will have to go along with it. On the other hand she is not ready and interested in continuing to do a Master's. It remains to be seen how Elmi is going to integrate these conflicting ambitions. Overall, she is regarded as a model by the whole community as she points out: "Graduation is a big thing here [in Eritrea] in most families, and much more so in an area like Keren and among the Bilen, as not many of us go to university, it is still something special, and much more so for the girls, so everybody looks what you are doing and maybe it would be good to have this week long graduation celebration together with the marriage celebration" (fieldwork diary: 64). Elmi has graduated in September 2003 without having married; in fact, together with her whole batch, she afterwards went to Sawa for another stint of compulsory military training. At present, she is working as a researcher in Asmara.

where this leaves the policy agenda of a government which sees gender equality in education as one of its high priorities and has indeed over the last few years started various initiatives to encourage girls to attend and then stay in formal schooling.¹⁶

When asked whether they experienced any change in their schooling after independence, most of the 29 university students could not recall big differences.¹⁷ An exception was Misgana who remembers:

There was change, I mean, even the teachers, after independence, they care very much about the students, everybody has to participate, it doesn't matter whether the student is interested in schooling or so, the teacher they used to [teach] us strictly and I think they were nicer teachers than before independence (...) [before], if you are not interested nobody bothers (...) but now, they do care.

She adds that before independence, teachers “only if you are excellent they do care about you, but they don't care about the other students whether they participate or not.”

The following will take a closer look at what does happen in a sample of five secondary schools and to what extent these schools create or thrive to create a conducive environment for young women other than the academically gifted ones to continue their schooling. Or, to look at things from a different angle, in what way this encounter with formal education sets these women on a journey away from traditional certainties towards a more modern and uncertain future.

From Tsabra to Barentu: Encounters with tomorrow's elite?

The five secondary schools and communities visited were Keren Secondary in *zoba* Anseba; Agordat and Barentu Secondary in *zoba* Gash-Barka; Tsabra in Nakfa and Ibrahim Sultan in Asmara (for selection criteria see chapter three; for a brief introduction to these five schools see appendix 5.2).

¹⁶ These initiatives include economic incentives for parents to send their girls to school; girls' boarding facilities in Massawa, Agordat and Dekemhare; lower grades for women to join the TTI or the UoA (0.2 lower GPA than males); a pilot programme run by the NUEYS in formerly disadvantaged areas to give additional classes to girls with weak academic performance; general advocacy on the benefits of girls' and women's education by the MoE, the NUEW and the NUEYS (key informant interviews with Mebrahtu Ghilagaber; Mehret Iyob; Ayn-Alem Marcos; Eden Asghedom; Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak).

¹⁷ This is apart from the obvious change of getting a new curriculum and new teachers, as most of the former teaching staff were Ethiopian and returned to Ethiopia after Eritrean independence.

Keren is situated at the crossroads between highlands and lowlands and a real melting pot of the different nationalities and cultures within Eritrea.¹⁸ This fact is reflected in the ethnic diversity of students from Keren who join the UoA.¹⁹

Agordat was one of the first towns liberated by the EPLF outside the actual base area in 1988. With early liberation came EPLF provided education up to grade seven with its 'progressive' curriculum. Still, according to Sultan, the administrator in Agordat Secondary School, this seems not to have altered attitudes towards education within the community:²⁰

Most children here, they only know how to go after cattle, and their parents send them to school because the administration tells them to do so, but they don't really know what education is and the value of education; so many students here are not consciously present in class. (observation notes: 26)

It was only in grade ten or eleven, Sultan continued, that those students who were still around understood what education could be for. Only at this stage they developed an "ambition" – a vision for a future life different from the traditional cycle culminating in marriage, a certain number of children, a high number of cattle and possibly some gardens – as the plantations in the riverbed of the Barka river are called. But many students would leave before that, boys and girls alike, "girls usually because they get married, boys because they do other work, they have to support the family" (ibid.).

In fact, whenever one enters a shop or teahouse in Agordat, one is likely to see secondary school students at work there. Additionally, Agordat is surrounded by large scale irrigated agricultural schemes, where most of the seasonal labour is carried out by students (observation notes: 28f). For Naga Tesfai, the school director, poverty is one of the main reasons why students do not continue their education: "Students leaving school because of poverty (...) they do some work in help their parents, so due to this case also many students

¹⁸ Apart from the Bilen who live in and around Keren, the majority of the population is either Tigrinya or Tigre; but with the exception of the Afar and Rashaida of the coastal regions, minorities from all other nationalities do live in Keren, the biggest commercial centre between Asmara and Sudan.

¹⁹ In the matriculation of 2001, 39 male and 8 female students passed to join the university degree programme. Out of the female students, 2 are Tigre, 3 are Bilen and the remaining 3 Tigrinya.

²⁰ Beginning in the school year 2000/2001, a new administrative structure is put in place in secondary schools: Whereas before, it was mainly the school director who was responsible for every aspect of running the school, the new structure consists of a team-leadership of three people: the school director, the school administrator and the vice-director, who in theory are to divide their areas of responsibility between them. This new structure is not yet in place in all schools. Out of the five schools visited, it was up and running in all schools with the exception of Tsabra, which was still run solely by the director.

are leaving school.” It is only slowly that people realise that a better education might in the long run help to overcome that poverty. And so far there are very few people who could act as role models, as one teacher points out: “No older brothers or sisters have education, but their older siblings are usually married and farmers, nobody to look up to in a good position” (observation notes: 33). Another teacher adds: “They are not exposed to anything here, not even TV,²¹ which shows them a different perspective than looking after goats” (observation notes: 34).

But Naga feels change is emerging slowly:

Now sometimes even in front of us, they [the parents] advise their children ‘now we are going after cattle, and we don’t want to see your future like us’, this is the advice given to the children by their parents, so they start to know the advantage of education.

In addition, Agordat Secondary School is one of the schools targeted in the wake of government policy to get more students from minority nationalities educated and into positions of responsibility – to make them more ‘Eritrean’ in the words of one teacher at the school, who continues to explain:

During the third round of the Ethiopian offensive [*during the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian war*] many students just left, and very many left to Sudan and did only come back after one month or more, we taught make-up classes during the summer and some students only came back to sit the exam without preparation, and we allowed them to do so and some even passed, if we would enforce the dismissal rules strictly, we would be left with the Tigrinya students only. The Tigrinya and possibly the Saho, they have nowhere else to go, they went to the highlands [*during the offensive*], they stayed in Eritrea, whereas the majority lowlanders just crossed the border into Sudan, they do not stay and are prepared to defend their country, and through education and getting them more into the system the government tries to change that. (observation notes: 30)²²

Much of the above is equally true for Barentu, namely that students are claimed to leave school because of poverty and that few role models are available to illustrate the benefits of education. But two factors make Barentu different: It is situated at the crossroads of trade routes to Sudan and Ethiopia. As such it was always more exposed to outside influences. And it is the main centre of the Kunama, the only matrilineal culture among Eritrea’s nationalities,

²¹ The national television network, ERI-TV, started to broadcast to Agordat in May 2001 only (after the author had visited the community).

²² Traditionally, Agordat is Tigre area, but many Nara, Hadareb and Saho also settle here, as do more and more Tigrinya people from the highlands, who usually either work in government jobs, commerce or acquired some land to start farming.

whose traditions partly alter Tigrinya custom in the area as well.²³ A major impact of Kunama custom in terms of young women's schooling is the fact that early marriage is less of a problem. Many of the students come back after they either married or had children, as Biniam Fissaye, the school director, explains:

The Kunama, what they do ... they first agree [to be together] the boy and the girl, and they often also have a baby without marriage, and the grandmother takes care of the baby, and later they get married ... they do it by their choice, it is not like with the Tigrinya, they are not forced and even they can stay without ordinary marriage (...) and here now even the Tigrinya, they adopted, it is not like in the highlands, in the highlands you normally don't find a girl getting married and returning back [to school] but here even the Tigrinya, after marriage they come back and want to continue, they don't feel shy because of marriage or having a baby ... so the ethnic composition, I would say it rather encourages than discourages [girls to stay in education].²⁴

Tsabra near Nakfa is the successor of the revolution school and the only secondary boarding school in the country. Tsabra is a world of its own and in the words of its director, Idris Ali Affa:

[Tsabra is] different from other schools, because all these students who are here, they are from poor families and from the rural areas of Eritrea (...) the good thing

²³ Because it is a trade centre for the region and due to its geographical position on a hill has a rather pleasant climate, many highland Tigrinya have settled in Barentu especially since independence, and a whole new part of town is really a Tigrinya bastion. Many Kunama are less than happy about this development and tension flared up slightly during the recent war, when some Kunama were accused of siding with the Ethiopian invaders. Overall, ethnic tensions are however not a major issue yet and the government does its best to include Kunama in administrative and other government jobs.

²⁴ An example here is Senait, a 16-year old Kunama woman. She had a baby 41 days before the author arrived and altogether missed less than three weeks of school during giving birth. She did not want to have a baby now, "as it interrupts my education" but abortion was not an option for her once she was pregnant (it is first of all officially illegal in Eritrea, and secondly among the Kunama culturally not acceptable). She thus gave birth and returned to school immediately. During break time she returns home to breastfeed and hopes to eventually join the TTI and become a teacher (observation notes: 43). In other parts of the lowland areas, some advocacy is done to encourage girls' parents as well as their future husbands to let them continue schooling after marriage. As Naga Tesfai, the school director in Agordat explains: "We don't object to them [the girls] coming back ... we cannot say 'you cannot marry your daughter' but we always encourage the parents to send their daughter, even after marriage, we give them permission to stay away for honeymoon, two or three weeks, plus the vacation, we encourage them to marry during vacation, then sent them back." The situation is very different in Asmara, as is explained by Nafie Hajai Nafie, director of Ibrahim Sultan: "Here a girl who is married is not allowed to attend school again, this gives a bad impression to other students, especially when she is pregnant and comes with this kind of shape, what would other students think? ... so it is not directly forbidden, but indirectly, yes ... so marriage is the end of education."

here is [the students] are from all nationalities of Eritrea, so you can say, Tsabra is a small Eritrea.

In fact, a high proportion of students in Tsabra comes from around Nakfa or Afabet, where no regular secondary schools exist and where a semi-nomadic lifestyle is common for many families. The remaining numbers are allocated via the different *zobas* in a quota system, whereby preference is given to children of poor families from remote areas, who otherwise would have no chance to attend school.²⁵ In that sense, Tsabra is not unlike the revolution school in that its existence allows a certain group of students to attend school at all.

Lastly, one of the secondary schools in Asmara, from where the majority of students at the UoA does come, was included to investigate the differences in attitudes, ambitions and problems for young women in the urban environment of the capital.

The following extracts of a conversation between the author and a group of students at Keren Secondary in March 2001 illustrates the major areas of concern for young women in Eritrean secondary schools:

Class 10.2 had a free period and a group of girls were staying behind in the classroom to do some maths homework. Among them was Luam, who, as her homeroom teacher had pointed out to me before, was an exceptionally clever student (she scored marks above 85 in almost all of her subjects). I had observed some teaching in this class the day before so the students knew me and welcomed me when I entered the classroom to chat with them. It was usually Luam who spoke first, but even though her English was immaculate, throughout she spoke in a low voice, as if unsure of every word. Most of her friends appeared even more restrained, with the exceptions of Azieb and Sarah, who were very outspoken.

When the discussion moved to what they wanted to do after they finished grade eleven, they all said like with one voice they hoped to go to university.

They then showed me two lines written on the blackboard: the topic on which they had one week to prepare a debate session for their English class. Could we discuss the topic together? The debate topic read:

“Men to lead and women to follow.

Women to lead and men to follow.”

I asked them what they thought, and Luam answered first and said both should lead. Azieb and most of the other girls present said women needed to lead, “but in our

²⁵ Under present conditions, Tsabra can accommodate up to 1000 students, albeit fewer girls than boys due to the state of dormitory facilities. This only partly explains the low number of girls, however. The main reason, according to Idris, is that parents are reluctant to send them. Idris has been working in Tsabra since 1993, and recalls that at that time the ratio between girls and boys was 1: 3, whereas now, there are only 129 girls out of 945 students. This is mainly due to the fact that in its first years after independence, many students who grew up in the revolution school attended Tsabra, like some of the student sample at the UoA did; now, however, the intake is from among the most rural populations in Eritrea, for whom formal education is a new concept.

country it is very difficult.” Meanwhile more students came in and joined our small group, and especially two boys, Berhane and Rezene, who became jealous of the attention I gave to the girls, tried to make themselves heard. Berhane chipped in and said “it is our culture that men have to lead”, to which Luam replied it was not in anyone’s culture by nature (...) As the discussion went on, Berhane said the problem with the girls was that most of them from a certain age would only think about marriage and getting a husband, “that is why they are lagging behind in education.” He continued in saying “from the culture they can not ask a man to marry them, so basically they have to wait until a man asks them and if they became older they are in trouble.” The girls strongly disputed this perception and Luam remarked “in any case there are more boys than girls in Eritrea [the average ratio of males to females within rural Eritrea (the only figure available) has been estimated as 47: 53, see Green, 1994: 4, a figure which contradicts Luam’s perception] so it is really the men who have a problem.”²⁶

Rezene pointed out that one could see many clever girls in elementary school and then their numbers would drop, and he again put it down mainly to girls becoming occupied in their heads with marriage only. But Sarah intervened and said it was different, in fact in elementary school “usually we are considered too small or somebody else is around to do domestic work, like an older sister, but afterwards it is on us to do the work, so suddenly we have a lot of obligations and no time to study.” All the girls present confirmed they had to do their share of domestic work, and Sarah explained the trick was to do it and still find time to study, “one needs to plan one’s time, that is the trick.” Berhane countered he also had to help at home, and as his father was at the frontline, he also had to take up some paid work to support the family, to which Luam replied there were always exceptions, “but in general it is the case that boys can help in the home if they want to but for girls it is no matter of choice but an obligation.”

How did these students view the future for women in Eritrea? Azieb felt it would take 100 years until there is gender equality, “when we become developed” was how she phrased it. Luam was more optimistic in envisaging 20 to 30 years, “in my lifetime”; Berhane rightly pointed out that there was not even one female teacher at Keren Secondary School, and “we just don’t have women like you in Eritrea.” (observation notes: 51f)²⁷

²⁶ When I asked the girls about choosing their husbands they all said they would be able to – which, as Berhane rightly pointed out, means that the prospective husband would ask the family and they could refuse to accept him, not, that they as young women could take the initiative. And Sarah added “only now the culture is changing and in my family I will be the first girl involved in choosing [my husband].”

²⁷ This last remark is something the author came across a few times: Rather than seeing Eritrean women – be it former fighters or women who at present occupy public positions – as a model, a “Western” woman like herself was more likely to be viewed as such. On various occasions during her stay at the UoA, especially in the context of conducting the survey when she approached a variety of women she had not met before, a number of them handed her back their questionnaires with remarks like: “One day I want to be like you, go to places and do such research.” A teacher in Keren Secondary said to the author: “The only role models are these *hamade* women [referring to the ex-fighters who now work for the NUEW], but some of the leaders should be *educated*

The main issues raised in this conversation proved to be in one form or another the major points of contention mentioned by students and educational professionals alike, and were confirmed by the author's observations in the five secondary schools she visited. These issues centre around two major themes:

Firstly, what is commonly called the 'shyness' of girls: Being shy (*hafar* in Tigrinya, derived from the verb *mehefar* commonly translated as 'being ashamed') is a cultural trait attributed traditionally to especially young women – even though the terms *hafar* and *mehefar* (with the respective grammatical declination and conjugation) are used for both sexes. It finds its manifestation in girls and young women being regarded as almost invisible in the company of males, speaking in a low voice, often only when directly asked – these were, and, depending on the cultural environment, still are, the traits men were looking for and valuing in their future wives. They were thus promoted within a girl's family before the time when she reached the age of puberty. Sushan Berhe, a lecturer at the UoA, who herself grew up in Ethiopia in a different cultural environment, sums up her experiences with mature students in Eritrea:²⁸

Usually the females [even these older professionals] they are shy, you have to nag them to speak (...) I think it is the culture, you know, whenever a husband and a wife are sitting together with other guests, it is always the husband who talks, the women, they are not saying that much.

With the ideology of moving beyond these traditional gender roles brought about by the Eritrean revolution and its subsequent focus on education as the main thoroughfare towards a modern role for women in Eritrean society, being shy became regarded as something negative, as almost a handicap. Female and male students as well as teachers commonly put the often rather passive or quiet behaviour of females, as well as their assumed lack of intelligence and /or self-confidence, down to their shyness. This shyness is seen as leaving girls without their potential being recognised. It contributes to the general impression that girls "are narrow minded, they cannot think very well" – expressed here in lieu of many of his counterparts by tenth grader Tesfamariam in Keren Secondary. But shyness can equally be a strategy and is not necessarily the disadvantage it is assumed to be. Young women are more likely to hide in the background and try to do "things quietly in our own way", as Luam put it, but not necessarily less successfully (observation notes: 52).

women like you, to serve as a positive role model for women to strive for more" (observation notes: 55; *my emphasis*).

²⁸ Sushan mainly teaches short-courses in management for administrative personnel sent by their respective employers, mainly the different ministries.

Secondly, cultural norms within the family and the social environment – most prominent in the pressure to marry – have a strong influence on determining the future of young women.²⁹

Both of these themes will be looked at in more detail in the following two sections.

Another interesting observation centres on the perception of Azieb that there is a linkage between the general stage of ‘development’ of Eritrean society and a movement towards more gender equality. Concerning young women in secondary schools, it has two diametrically opposite implications: On one hand the realisation that as ‘culture’ has not ‘modernised’ far enough to give women equal rights and the means to economic security via certain employment opportunities, the way towards a better future might be via a well-off husband, preferably one who has prospects to live abroad. On the other, as put to the author by Luam and Rana, two women from class 10.5 in Keren Secondary: In developed countries, women are in leadership, “but here only few women are in leadership and that is because they are not educated enough ... so we have to remove obstacles and get more women qualified” (observation notes: 61). Chapter seven will eventually come back to this last point in looking at the anticipation of the future of some of the women who are potentially going to join the future elite, and more generally question the modernist assumption underlying the ideology of the Eritrean revolution that with education and the wider dispersion of knowledge what is seen as ‘backwardness’ is overcome. After all, to have an ambition does not only include, as Sultan, the administrator in Agordat Secondary, described above, to want a life beyond the traditional, but can equally mean to strive for just that: an arranged marriage to a well-off husband, a number of children, and the economic means to live comfortably – only for these last kind of ambitions there seems little space within the Eritrean revolution.

²⁹ These cultural norms theoretically include issues like domestic work obligations, mentioned by Sarah above. Even though it is the case that – except in some cases in Asmara – even in well-off families girls have to do domestic work, none mentioned this as a major obstacle when one was committed to studying. Besides, especially due to the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian war, many male students had to equally work, usually outside the home to contribute to the family income, which puts boys and girls alike in a position where they have to structure their time carefully. In addition, no major differences were encountered between Agordat, Barentu and Keren on one hand and Tsabra on the other in terms of girls’ overall dedication to studying. One could have expected Tsabra, without any domestic chores except for washing one’s own clothing, a more favourable environment. An example how domestic chores and studying are integrated successfully provides the following account of Almaz, one of the UoA students from Asmara, of a typical day during her secondary schooling: “I woke up at five early in the morning and doing breakfast and cleaning the room and preparing food for lunch ... if I am in the afternoon shift school I went to the library at eight o’clock in the morning then I take my lunch in the school then enter class, then I stay again up to 8: 30 in the evening in the library and then I came back to home and then I study and do domestic works (...) it’s a kind of refreshment for me.”

“Because I am shy ...”

“Eritrean women are shy”, on this occasion uttered by Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, President of the UoA in the context of a conversation on why it was important to “have women at the helm of authority” to “try to do whatever they can to encourage [others]”, was one of the most common ‘explanations’ offered to the author on why women fail to develop to the full of their potential.

Depending on who is speaking, this shyness is seen as either based on intellectual inferiority, on lack of motivation, or on lack of self-confidence.

In a classroom context, shyness is viewed as related to a lack of girls’ verbal participation, intellectual inferiority or disinterest or both. A teacher in Agordat put it like this: “The girls do not even try to speak, they do not try to be motivated, they simply hide behind others” (observation notes: 27). He was echoed by a colleague in Barentu who – without questioning why, if true, that might be the case – remarked:

The girls, they do not even do the homework or any exercise, they simply sit and copy from the boys, other than that they just sit in the classroom, not even participate, so why should I ask them, I know they will not know any answer. (observation notes: 42)³⁰

Participation in Eritrean classrooms comes in two different ways: as group participation, when the whole class responds to the teacher, by far the most common form, and individual participation, for which students actually raise their hands and are usually asked to stand up while answering. The author’s observations in all five secondary schools certainly confirms the widely held impression that girls, particularly from grade nine onwards, hardly ever raise their hands as individuals³¹ and their voices are rarely heard in group participation – partly simply because boys speak in a louder voice. What Hanan, a grade eleven student in Agordat, told the author, was echoed by many of her sisters: She felt she was not shy and participated well in elementary school, “but when I got older I became more and more shy, it is not shy in front of the boys, just overall we girls become shy and stay quiet” (observation notes: 27). One of her friends explains the strategies girls develop if they have a question or don’t

³⁰ To put classroom participation into context it has to be pointed out that much of the teaching in the secondary schools visited followed a top-down lecture method approach, even though the official guidelines call for student-centred teaching. In some schools (particularly in Agordat and Tsabra) the school directors repeatedly raised the issue of the importance of more student-centred methods in teachers’ meetings, but change does not come easily especially without proper training, which is usually lacking.

³¹ The above mentioned Luam from grade 10.2 in Keren, for example, who could solve every maths exercise on the blackboard when asked to, always had to be called to do so by the teacher. Even on occasions when no other student came forward, she would not volunteer (observation notes: 54).

understand something: They usually avoid asking the teacher, but at first approach their girlfriends and if this fails eventually some of the boys in class, “and usually one of the boys knows” (ibid.).

In contrast, a male student would hardly approach any of his female classmates if he had a problem in class. A typical example of such a situation was an encounter in class 9.6 during an English lesson in Keren Secondary:

The class was split into small groups to solve a detective mystery. The group I was sitting with was made up of one boy, Berhane, and two girls. Berhane asked me for help and I replied he should ask his sisters first, referring to the two girls. Berhane’s spontaneous reply was: “How can she help me, what can she know?”, to which the girl sitting next to him replied: “I can help him, I am more clever than he is.” Berhane made another joking remark disputing that she was in any way clever, how could she, being a girl, and went on to solve the problem on his own. The two girls accepted that without protest. (observation notes: 62)

These dynamics, that male students treat their female counterparts as academically less able and that the latter, instead of protesting and rising to the occasion rather accept it as natural, have been observed on many occasions. The author never witnessed a situation in which a boy asked one of his sisters for help, even when from their results girls were the better students in the class.

Teachers do little to counteract these dynamics and actively encourage girls. Even though when asked most teachers pay lip service to the need to engage girls more to build up their confidence, the vast majority of teachers are male and share the perception that girls will marry eventually and not have a future in education, so why bother.

One rare example where a teacher made a real effort to tackle that problem and make girls feel more confident was observed in Keren Secondary in a physics lesson in grade eight:³²

To solve certain physical problems – in this case exercises related to Newton’s laws of motion – he (the teacher) let two students (often one male and one female) do it simultaneously on either side of the blackboard, while the rest of the class tried in their exercise books. It happened quite often that the girl was finished earlier and was complimented on her good work. It might indeed be these small successes which over time make a difference and help to change common attitudes about female inferiority. (observation notes: 54)

Another factor which contributes to undermining the general self-confidence of young women in secondary schools is the attitude of teachers who generally

³² The only other teacher in the five schools visited by the author who actively tried to encourage the female students in his classes was a chemistry teacher in Tsabra.

regard the arts stream as inferior to the science stream. Most girls choose the arts stream because they are, often unjustified, afraid of maths. An English teacher in Keren sums up a common attitude when he says that students and “especially the girls” join the arts stream “because promotion is easier, not because they like history or geography” (observation notes: 53).³³ Misgana from grade eleven in Keren complains with some teachers this attitude shows in the teaching: “They prefer the science stream and do not teach us as well” (observation notes: 53).³⁴

While the above raises questions of teacher training which go beyond the scope of this study – and which are tackled according to some key informants, including the five school directors as well as the director of the TTI – at the same time the difficulty in overcoming deep rooted cultural attitudes comes to the fore. The dominant interpretation of shyness – rooted in either factual academic weakness, lack of motivation or a simple lack of confidence in their capabilities as young women – is culturally negotiated and accepted by both, males and females, as an attribute quasi ‘naturally’ belonging to girls and constituting an important part of their “cultural identity” (Hall, 1996).³⁵ Two more examples may serve as further illustration:

In a grade nine English class in Keren Secondary, the teacher has a habit of asking individual students who do not raise their hands to answer his questions. On one occasion he turns to one girl in a row of three, and even though speaking in a very low voice her answer is correct. The teacher says to her: “But your answer is correct, why do you hesitate?” and a boy who is sitting behind her answers, sort of on her behalf: “because I am shy”, and everybody laughs. (observation notes: 62)

³³ After grade nine, students choose either arts or science, in some schools in Asmara, the third option of commerce is also on offer. Promotion rules are as follows: In the science stream, the subjects taught are: maths, physics, chemistry, biology, English and sports. If a student fails two subjects, no promotion. In the arts stream subjects taught are: maths (with an easier textbook), geography, history, English, sports and biology, as otherwise arts students would have one subject less. But as biology is not a compulsory arts subjects, students can fail biology and one more subject and still be promoted.

³⁴ Up to university level it is a concern that so few women choose the natural science disciplines which in general are regarded as more important to develop the human resource base of the country, and thus receive greater attention from elementary up to higher education level. In terms of gender equality, it is thus an objective to have more women qualified in the sciences. This approach is not dissimilar to the general EPLF approach during the struggle to define gender equality in terms of women being able to fulfil the same tasks as men (and by implication being somehow ‘inferior’ if not able to do so).

³⁵ Cultural identity here is understood as a relational and positional concept, a constructed form of closure, the outcome of dynamic social processes in which different voices become more or less hegemonic (see Hall, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1977).

The second example equally took place in Keren Secondary, in an eleventh grade history class:

A week before the class was split into different groups and each group had to prepare a small presentation on a different topic and choose one person to present it to the class today. One group had a female presenter, Misgana. Her presentation was well prepared and she knew her topic – the Eritrean assembly during the federation period – very well. But when she had to go to the front to do her presentation, she became inhibited and never looked at the class while speaking or rather reading. She was visibly relieved when finished, quickly looked up to the class once and then went swiftly back to her desk. I did ask her later on whether the presentation was difficult for her and her answer was “Yes, because I am very shy”. (observation notes: 59)

In both cases but especially so in the last example, shyness is taken as an almost defining feature of young women with no hope to be overcome, but the need to develop strategies not to let it be too much of an obstacle.

To end this section, the examples of three different young women in Tsabra illustrate how perceptions around shyness can be very misleading: The three women are Amna in grade nine, and Ashar and Seham in the same section in grade ten. Ashar and Seham could hardly be more different. Both come from the Afabet region. Seham is Saho and grew up in Sudan, her family returned to Eritrea only after independence. She speaks English very well as she does some other languages, including Saho, Tigre, Tigrinya and Arabic. She is articulate and self-confident. Ashar is Tigre, her family are farmers and stayed in Eritrea during the struggle. She is shy and only opens up when spoken to alone. When the author asked teachers in Tsabra about girls they regard as having potential, everybody mentioned Seham. The only person who pointed to Ashar was a chemistry teacher, who in fact felt “she is the most clever girl in the whole of Tsabra” (observation notes: 18).

Watching both of them in the classroom, Ashar is very quiet. She does sometimes raise her hand, but hardly high enough for anybody to see. In contrast, Seham usually makes a point of getting the teacher’s attention. However, many of her answers are wrong. Looking at both of their grades certainly shows that Ashar is doing really well, whereas Seham is rather average.³⁶

³⁶ This chemistry teacher remarks about Seham that she speaks English well and is not shy to talk to teachers or to the boys, that is why everybody regards her as clever. And she might well have a lot of potential, but instead of focusing on her education, she spends most of her time chatting in the tearoom – during the author’s stay in Tsabra she did miss many of her classes (observation notes: 17).

While sitting down one afternoon with Ashar, the first thing she asks me if I had any advice on how to be less shy. She is aware of the fact that her shyness is somehow an obstacle and that girls like Seham usually gets the teacher's attention. But at the same time she is also confident about her ability and has a clear aim: to continue her education somehow, either at the TTI or, hopefully, at the university. Her parents would be happy to "send me for further education if I got the chance." At this point in the conversation Ashar's friend Amna joins us. She is also Tigre from Afabet, her father is a soldier with the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF). Amna says about herself "I was always interested in education", but when one sees her in class, she just sits quiet and does not participate or show any sign of whether she understands what is going on. But, as she explains, that is her way of learning best: "I like to listen to the teacher, I can learn more easily when he explains things than by just reading and studying, so I try to listen and understand as much as I can." Last year she stood first in her class and hopes for the same again this year. When asked about her future, Amna says so far her father was supporting her education, "and I hope he would also allow me to go to university if I get the chance ... at the moment he encourages me and says I could go to the university, but you can never know, he might change his mind." And then, "what could I do, I would have to obey him ... and marry or something." (observation notes: 11; 18f)

From the present student population in Tsabra, Ashar and Amna look the most likely females to pass the matriculation in the future. The fact that they – related to their perceived shyness – receive little encouragement does not need to stand in the way of their educational success. Conscious non-participation can be a strategy. It was as such used for example by one of the 29 university students during her time in secondary schooling, in order to make especially the boys believe she would not compete with them, as Misgana explains:

I had an observation, actually, there was a guy who stood first in the ninth grade and I stood second, and he was not participating in the class, he was very silent, I mean he keeps quiet and listened but he was good in the exams and I was participating, I thought I was doing well, but he was ... he was not even giving answers, and he did good in the exams, and he stood first ... and I learned from him that I don't have to participate in the class, just I have to be good in the exams, I changed my behaviour (...) it helps, if I don't participate [he thinks] I am not studying, I am careless, but if he keep quite and I give answers he is frightened, he has to work very hard to beat me, so he stood first, but if I keep quiet and study I can do good in the exams, I can slightly cheat him [into believing I am not studying hard].

But all these strategies by girls like Ashar, Amna and their sisters all over Eritrea to use the – real or perceived – cultural attribute of female shyness as an asset and ultimately to their advantage, strategies which in themselves indicate once more that the clear dichotomy between 'traditional backwardness' and 'modernity' proclaimed by the hegemonic political discourse does not exist,

they might come to nothing if certain expectations within traditional culture, particularly the expectation to be married after a certain age, are not altered at the same time.

There is always the culture

In the context of cultural norms within the family and in wider society which put pressure on young women to abandon their schooling, the marriage issue features prominently. It does so in two different ways:

On one level, there is the perception of directors, teachers and male students that girls after a certain age are mainly interested in attracting the boys' attention as they have their mind set on eventual marriage. In a discussion with a mixed group of students in Tsabra, a boy who was overall sympathetic towards the need to help the girls in their studies, put it like this:

You see, when our sisters come to ask for help with a subject matter, they do not just want that help, but have other things in mind [and as an example he mentioned one of his friends whom "a girl made her boyfriend" and then she left the school and now he suffers and cannot concentrate on anything any more]. (observation notes: 12)

On a different level, the pressure from the family to enter into an arranged marriage increases if girls do not perform well and the family does see no chance for them to continue their education or learn a profession. The prospect of being able to go to university – as evidenced by grades and standing in the class – might on the other hand postpone the issue of marriage into the indefinite future.

According to the school directors in the five schools visited and the author's own observations, the major cut-off point for girls in secondary schools is usually after grade eight. This is when most young women leave the school, when girls, according to Abraham Tadesse, director of Keren Secondary "reach the age of puberty and become too concerned with their sexuality" and as a consequence their grades drop and eventually many are dismissed.³⁷

Abraham does not regard early marriage as such as the problem: "When girls reach here [secondary school], they usually try to complete and their parents let them." The issue is rather girls' underperformance "we'll see her grades? [the parents say], 'if she fails now in grade eight, in grade nine, let us marry her', that is our culture, that is how the people think."³⁸

³⁷ If students fail twice during the four years of secondary schooling, they are automatically dismissed.

³⁸ Early marriage does not only have a cultural dimension, but equally an economic one: A well-educated girl might in the future have a 'good' job and be able to support her parents or wider family economically – following the 'classical' script of modernisation via education leading to

The author's own observations and conversations with female students in all the schools visited does not support this widely held (male) perception that a majority of female students is interested in marriage rather than education. In contrast, the vast majority of girls asked in any grade in the schools visited dreamt of going to university eventually, however unrealistic these hopes might turn out to be, or at least the TTI.³⁹

Even if a young woman's hope for further education remains unfulfilled, going through secondary education does seem to change her position in relation to being forced into an unwanted marriage. According to Naga Tesfai, director of Agordat Secondary more and more girls refuse these arrangements:

If they reach grade eleven, most female students they refuse to be married (...) because they want to continue their education, or they want to have a job, so after having a job or after having [been] educated, they want to be married sometime later ... if they reach grade eleven, many of them refuse for marriage, because now they are able to know what's good and what's bad, so even they try to convince their parents, explain why they refuse (...) whether the parents are open or not, they start to be governed by their children, you see, if their children got higher education [*with 'higher' Naga was referring to the completion of secondary education, still rare for girls in the cultural environment of Agordat*], they [the parents] believe them and they try to understand their children's ideas also ... many of them refused to be married, you see, even though they were asked (...) or for example last year in this school, one female student of grade eleven married one month before the national examination, but she didn't face problem, she came and took the examination, in fact she is now working in the bank ... whereas others, they refused, I know three forced by their parents, but refused (...) and the parents accepted, now they are giving their national service, they were females in grade eleven of last year (...) the problem is when they are at the lower age and lower grades, when they are at grade eight ... because then they have to hear their parents' view, many of these got married, and with this the number of females decreases [*again, grade eight is considered as an important cut-off point; see also Elmi's story above, who recalled equally how her parents tried to marry her off before she would be old enough to possibly refuse*].

economic and cultural 'progress'. For a girl with no such prospects dowry arrangements (officially outlawed but still widely practised) and the possible family-linkages established through an arranged marriage may prove the best way to secure her and her wider family's economic future.

³⁹ It was only on one occasion in Tsabra that two girls in grade nine, when asked what they wanted to do afterwards, said they wanted to marry; the boys who were with them answered they would become soldiers. These answers seem very much related to the little exposure students in Tsabra have: Not only do many of them come from rural areas, where these are the major forms of life known to them: getting married and going for national service (which in the present war condition meant becoming a soldier). But Tsabra (and Nakfa) itself is a quite isolated place, connected to the nearest town of Afabet by a rough road only. After break time, students sometimes spend up to a week in Afabet before securing transport back to Nakfa.

Also in the case of younger women, Naga mentions an example which he hopes will be followed by others:

Last year there was one problem, she was grade six, her parents agreed with the husband and husband's parents to marry their daughter for him, but their daughter refused and disappeared from the town, everything was ready for the marriage ceremony, but the daughter disappeared, even her parents came to school and asked us (...) but we didn't know, and she never came [for the wedding], he then married another woman ... and the girl, she came after six months and now she is learning in our school again, and when we asked her, 'why did you do such actions', 'because I don't want to be married, my parents forced me, but I couldn't tolerate this, that is why I disappeared' [she said], and the parents felt sorry (...) of course it was a great loss for them, they made a lot of preparations for the wedding, so they were not happy, but they did nothing ... still, now she is with her parents, and at the beginning of this year, when we started school, they [her parents] came and asked us to readmit her to continue her education [she is in grade six again now].

These examples do point to a slow change in attitudes. But they should not let one overlook the fact that for many young women especially outside Asmara the 'choice' still very much comes down to (successful) education or marriage. And completion of grade eleven does not necessarily alter this pattern. An example here is Fatima, a Tigre woman in grade eleven in Keren Secondary.

Fatima speaks English well and with confidence. At the time of the author's visit to Keren, she went to private tuition classes to revise for her matriculation. Her father was happy to let her go and willingly paid for the classes. But if she fails the matriculation, "my father will send me to Australia or Saudi-Arabia to marry."⁴⁰ Fatima adds that if she should only pass to join the TTI, "I will prefer to marry, as I do not want to be an elementary school teacher" – and whereas it would be acceptable to her family to delay marriage if she had a chance to continue her education, it would not be considered acceptable within her cultural environment for her to simply find a job after the completion of grade eleven and marry sometime later. (observation notes: 53)⁴¹

Fatima's example shows that young women in fact do have their own agenda, and getting married can be a very rational choice and the best thing to do when weighing the options for the future – options which include a synthesis of career opportunities and potential future income, national service obligations, and marriage, possibly coupled with life in the diaspora.

⁴⁰ Among Eritrean Muslim communities it is still very much the costume to marry within family relations. All of Fatima's male relations of marriage age are either in National Service or abroad in these two countries.

⁴¹ Fatima did eventually score 1.8 in the matriculation exam. It is however not known to the author whether she joined the TTI or is rather getting married.

This leads to another important point: Young women's (and men's, but here the focus is on young women) inclination towards education is strongly connected to the vision they have of a different future for themselves. This relates to what has been called in the literature "private rates of return" as one of the factors determining female participation in higher education (Subbarao et al., 1994: 11). Rates of return here are not interpreted solely in the economic sense of anticipated higher future monetary income – even though this undoubtedly plays a part, but more broadly in terms of personal ambitions, self-fulfilment and individual freedom of choice – in contrast to following a traditional path with little room for personal manoeuvre.

These future aspirations might be different and related to the overall cultural environment in which these women grow up in and how far 'modernity' has taken root within this environment: In Tsabra, the major focus is on going to either a one-year agricultural college where better ways of farming and animal husbandry are taught "to be finished not to old, then marry and work with my husband as a farmer", as one student put it, or the TTI to become an elementary school teacher (observation notes: 8). In Agordat and Barentu ambitions often centre on finishing grade eleven to find a good job – as in both places there is a shortage of secondary educated minority language native speakers to work in the administration. In Keren, and much more so in Asmara, ambitions centre on joining the university. In both locations openings for young women were created earlier in time and role models do exist to be followed – a process that is only in the making in Agordat and Barentu.

Biniam Fissaye, director in Barentu, who until recently worked in Keren Secondary, when he compares Keren to Barentu, explains it this way:

In Keren the students have something, they are trying to go to university, not completing only the eleventh grade, since they are seeing their former brothers or friends going or joining the university, they are ... mentally they are thinking they can join also, and they are seeing also students going to the university or continuing their higher education, so that might be the reason for having more students joining in Keren ... but here (...) we don't have many students joining the university first of all ... they don't think that they are able to do that here (...) then simply what they see is this local environment, and the locals they are uneducated, their education reaches only elementary or the junior, even you don't find [a] person who is graduated at any level (...) so what they want is to complete the secondary education, that is the final [for them] ... completing grade eleven will allow them some job opportunities and they can live their lives in a good way (...) and then the Kunama, they do not take an interest into further education they want to be in their culture, and if they are going to continue, they will be out of their culture, so they have an interest in going to TTI, because then they can come back here and stay inside their society, they don't want to be far from their ethnic group normally.

The next section will briefly look at this last point – who could be the women from these – in terms of exposure to modernity – historically disadvantaged areas to become part of a future elite.

On the way to Asmara

The young women from Agordat and Barentu who are potentially going to join the UoA are clearly ‘exceptional’ – and from her observations in both schools it seems to the author it will take some time until a woman with an average local background will do so. They show similar characteristics to those found among many of the 29 female students at the UoA: a particular background or personal history; future ambitions beyond the traditional; various sources of encouragement. Two examples follow below:

In Agordat Secondary, from which up to date no woman ever passed to university and only very few men, this pattern might be altered by Ashar, now in tenth grade:

Ashar, 19 years of age, belongs to the Nara nationality and comes originally from Barentu. She got married when she was in grade five: “It was sort of an arranged marriage”, she recalls, “but my parents did ask me my opinion. They were separating at that time so there were many problems in my family, so I thought it is better to get married to have a better life.” Ashar did tell her husband-to-be that she would like to continue her education, and he was supportive. While in grade seven she got pregnant and now has a three year old daughter, “and that was a difficult time, but I stayed in education.”

In fact, Abdu, her husband, who is a nurse in the local hospital, encouraged her very much to do so. Only a month after Ashar had given birth, and after having one of her younger siblings moving in to look after the baby, Abdu went to the school director and told him Ashar would be coming back and they had to accept her, which the school duly did. “And in the first few weeks he himself drove her to school on his motorbike every morning”, a teacher remembers.

It was Ashar’s wish all along to stay in education, but she is aware that all her determination would not have helped her if Abdu would not have agreed to her continuing education “if he would have refused, if he wanted me to stay at home, I would have obeyed him and do that, that is our culture”, she says.

Her teachers are confident that she can pass the matriculation, and Abdu would support her to join the university, even though that would mean her staying in Asmara during term time. Already they have an agreement to delay any more children until she finishes her education. Ashar is an unusual woman in more than one way; about her interest in education she says: “Education for me is not only to have a better job, I also want to know things, know how the world works”, a very rare comment for any student in Eritrea. (observation notes: 33f)

In Barentu, it is Aseda, equally in grade ten, who could become the first girl to join the UoA as well as the first Kunama girl to do so. If she succeeded, that

would be very much related to the overall circumstances of her family, in which most members are educated and education is thus highly valued:

Aseda invited me to her home one evening where she lives with her mother and Senait, her older sister who is a teacher in Agordat junior school. Aseda's mother is the director of an elementary school run by a Protestant mission and also a leader within the Kunama community and very outspoken in speaking up for the Kunama cause. Her late father was a fighter with the EPLF and died long ago in the struggle. Senait has been working as a teacher for many years and has a three year old daughter. Both Senait and her mother encourage Aseda to study. And while Aseda has interest in her education, she is more of a free spirit, understands things easily but finds it hard to sit down and study the things she doesn't. Also, in this female only household, she is the youngest and responsible for many domestic chores as well as looking partly after her sister's child. She says she loves both duties. The evening I was there, she did all the cooking, served us and then started to make coffee after we finished eating, all in good spirit visibly enjoying herself.

Aseda certainly has the potential to join the university, but I am not sure she is disciplined and organised enough to really sit down and study for the matriculation when the time comes. And she herself does not take it that seriously, on one hand she likes the idea of being the first Kunama woman to join, on the other she very much enjoys her life as it is and with her good English and outgoing personality she will have no problem to find something else worthwhile to do in her local environment. (observation notes: 48f)

Aseda's case demonstrates once more the importance of one's individual ambition in making decisions on future education. In her case, an alternative route into the future could possibly be to follow in her mother's footsteps and assume some political leadership role among the Kunama.

These ambitions have on one hand been created by the modernist agenda of the Eritrean revolution, and what is regarded as in the national interest by the present leadership is often at the same time conducive to women's advancement. On the other hand, their ambitions often lead to frustrations among young women in a (post-)revolutionary environment where the personal is expected to take second stage behind the national interest, and where their role as potential future elite is defined by the anticipated nation's needs. Before these issues will be dealt with in more detail, the final section of this chapter will take a look at young women in one of Asmara's secondary schools, and how their ambitions are pursued and frustrated.

The view from Asmara

The most obvious difference when entering Ibrahim Sultan secondary school in Asmara compared to the other four schools visited by the author is the number of female students, almost at parity with males, as well as their active involvement in class and comparatively much better command of the English language. Some notes from the author's field observations may serve as an illustration:

I tend to agree with what teachers and Nafie [the director] tell me, gender is not a major issue here, how students perform and whether they engage and show an interest in their education comes down rather to individual ambitions. One can find active and disinterested boys and girls, occasionally girls leave the school to get married,⁴² boys also drop out – often for a year at first, so they can come back if they wish – to earn money. Boys and girls also interact very naturally, like normal teenagers. Regarding teachers, they encourage boys and girls alike,⁴³ and mainly it are good students who are encouraged. Overall, it is quite a different atmosphere from all the other schools I have been to. (observation notes: 83f)

Another difference shows in the way young women who are good students picture their future: They have a quite clear idea of how they want their future to look like – beyond the vague objective of joining the university, their future plans and ambitions often have a concrete shape. An example is provided with the following extracts from a conversation with a group of female students:

After class I sit together with a group of six grade eleven students and we talk about the matrix and what might come afterwards. I was surprised how some of them had a very clear vision of what they wanted to be. Magda wants to become a lawyer, “but now I am natural science, and I know to get into law one needs high grades, so if I pass the matrix, I might rather try marine biology, which I am also interested, and it is easy to join.” Meazalet wants to study chemistry, “then go abroad and do a doctor.” When asked whether in the long term she wanted to stay abroad, she says

⁴² Concerning marriage, there are a few female students every year who get married according to Nafie, the director, often to Eritreans from abroad. Even though more often than not it will have been the parents who arranged the liaison, Nafie feels these young women are happy to agree as they have the opportunity to live abroad. This is supported by one of the 29 Asmarinas at the UoA, Hannah, who remembers about her own secondary schooling in Semaetat: “In the eighth grade, in the first year, we were many girls, but later on they started to drop out of school ... some of them they started to get married (...) in our class there were three girls who got married the same year to Eritreans who came from abroad, they married to go abroad because ... they don't want to live here (...) that was the reason ... at that time a lot of Eritreans were coming from abroad ... they just came and their parents said marry [a girl] from your country and the girls were saying OK with no argument because they wanted to go ... get out.”

⁴³ Tirhas, one of the 29 women from the UoA who went to Ibrahim Sultan recalls similarly: Even though she was always a prize-winner (among the first three in her class), she did not feel she was particularly encouraged as a girl, but everybody was encouraged the same way.

“no, I want to come back and live and work in my country, with good education I can have a good position here.” Magda agrees, she also wants to continue her education abroad and come back. This vision of looking even beyond joining the university I have not encountered among any of the students outside Asmara, where it was usually joining the UoA which was the major objective. When I said to the two women they seemed to have very clear plans for their lives, Magda answered: “Yes, but all fail or succeed with one exam, that is the problem here, the way it [the matriculation] is done⁴⁴ and having only one university.” (observation notes: 73)

This last point is indeed a major problem: the limited number of students the UoA could at the time of the research accommodate (around 1200 in degree programmes per new academic year).⁴⁵

Many more young women at Ibrahim Sultan had an equally clear picture how they wanted their future to look like. Among them were Intessa, who aims to study marine biology, or Lulit and Mahled who want to study history to become teachers (observation notes: 78). But when asked what they would do if they failed the matriculation – and with the high number of good students at Ibrahim Sultan this year, many of them will do – none of them had any concrete alternative idea. Some said they would try again – which is made difficult by new regulations that before being allowed to do so, one needs to do 18 months of national service. And most young women equally said they would try to avoid going to Sawa, some that they would “hopefully find a job” (observation notes: 78), something that will be easier said than done.⁴⁶

This problem of having only one university in the country is a cause of frustration for many students, including those who did indeed succeed in joining. Saba, one of the 29 women at the UoA, for example feels:

Most of them [the girls] finished eleventh grade, the problem comes in joining the campus, since it’s one university, they can’t accept many, so they restrict the grades and everything (...) many students really have potential, they study hard, but they are given bad grades because the university cannot accommodate all of them, that is the

⁴⁴ Some people within the education system are indeed critical of the fact that only the matriculation exam decides who can join the UoA, and that performance from grade eight to eleven does not count for anything. For example Nafie, director of Ibrahim Sultan, put suggestions to the MoE to modify this procedure, but believes it will take a long time for some changes to happen, if these suggestions would find majority backing at all.

⁴⁵ Limitations on student intake at the UoA are due to teaching space and capacity within the different academic departments, as well as dormitory space, as every student from outside Asmara has a right to free accommodation.

⁴⁶ The younger sister of Rahel, one of the university students, narrowly failed the matriculation and overall had good grades. She had then been intensively looking for a job but to no avail. In 2002, when the author was in Asmara, her father paid for her to do a private computer course, and she hopes to find a job after she completed that. Overall, not many positions are available for students who simply completed secondary education, as too many of them exist in Asmara.

problem of having only one university, a lot of students even in the matriculation exam who should have passed fail because they cannot take so many students [*for matriculation pass rates see appendix 5.3*].⁴⁷

It also has implications for future elite women in Eritrea: Young women of the future generation are united by the belief – here expressed by a group of eleventh grade students in Keren consisting of Zeneib, Worku, Helen, Semhar, Emnet and Luam – that the way towards gender equality is via education, with higher education being particularly important. Only after the completion of higher education women have a chance to secure high profile jobs where they can then prove their capability. “It will be us who will do it” this group of women exclaims – in fact three of them, Zeneib, Worku and Helen, did pass to the UoA (observation notes: 66).

After having overcome the hurdle of university admittance procedures, what then does joining the university hold for these young women? How can their individual ambitions be reconciled with the role they are supposed to play in the development of the nation? Before turning to the ambitions of the potential future elite women who are at the UoA today, the story turns once more to the women who already ‘made it’, to those women who are part of the present elite in Eritrea. The contradictions they might experience in their lives give important insights into the consolidation of a change in the status of women within Eritrean society. That is the case in particular in the light of the EPLF’s general belief – a belief shared by many of today’s younger generation of women – that the more female ‘role models’ exist as part of the elite, the easier it will be for ‘ordinary’ women to advance and for entrenched ‘backward’ attitudes towards women to be overcome. The challenges present elite women face and the outlook they have for the future will thus be the concern of the following chapter.

⁴⁷ In fact, if too many students pass the matriculation exam with high grades, they are often dismissed after the first semester in freshman, which is mainly done through changing the grading system upwards.

Women in the elite I: Challenges of the present, education for the future

Women who occupy positions within the political and economic elite of present day Eritrea fall into two groups: Firstly, the group of ex-fighters who were appointed to positions of power by the EPLF leadership after the struggle ended – to which the women whose personal histories and motivations to join the struggle have been partly narrated in chapter four belong. Secondly, another group of women introduced in chapter four: Women who chose a professional career and became successful within the academic or business sector. The following two sections will deal with both of these groups separately, before in a further step some general conclusions from their experiences will be drawn. The final section of this chapter will then turn to these women's outlook for the future.

After the struggle ... still fighting for the revolution?

When asked about their experiences as women in the struggle and in Eritrean society today, all the women fighters interviewed expressed feelings similar to Asmeret Abraha: During the struggle

there was equality there, between even the leaders and ordinary fighters, between men and women, everybody, even there was no religious or ethnic difference, everyone was equal.

These feelings were combined with an awareness that things would be different in the civilian society they were about to join.

Even though they were happy on one hand to have achieved their long fought for objective, women like Asmeret found it at first hard to adjust to the new situation, in general and particularly as women, as Asmeret remembers:

The most important thing why I joined the Front was the suffering of the people, and the liberation brought this suffering to an end, this made me very happy, but when I joined here [this society], it was difficult to join the society, we came without anything, and it was difficult in the initial stage to look like the other members of the society ... even our families here, they have a lot of problems, they suffered a lot, economically, socially, so we have to support them, and then also we have to get married, have children [Asmeret is married with one eight year old son, she met her husband in the field and married after independence but in “a fighter’s wedding” in Tessenei, not in a traditional wedding in society].¹

Joining the civilian society also brought with it changes in the importance given to the fight for women’s equality, as Asmeret self-critically explains:

During the time in the field, we didn’t have any other idea, the liberation and equality, bringing equality for women, but when we joined here [civilian society], the society is like the sea, and there are few of us, those who understand it [the issue of women’s equality], the fighters, and even besides of being few, we have to marry and have family, children, so we are not only thinking about equality, we have many other things to do in the society, so there is some abandoning, we are not as interested in women’s equality as during the field, there the consciousness was better than here (...) at that time [the time of the struggle], the civilian society also accepted that we are equal in the Front, we showed our equality in fighting equally and the society accepted that, but when we came back here, we have to marry, to adjust ourselves to the society, the struggle for equality, it should have continued, but it did not continue that much after liberation.

Indeed many of these former fighters reported that they faced a lot of pressure from their extended families to marry and have children and thus to do what is traditionally expected of women. One of the few exceptions who did not go down that road is Tsega Gaim. She also had to face down strong pressure from her family but resisted it and now says:

¹ A “fighter’s wedding” was a simple signing ceremony at an EPLF registration office, usually followed by a special meal and celebration with *sewa*, the locally brewed beer.

The rest of my life, I want to be happy, and I know what makes me happy [it is not to marry and have children] I don't want to live by other people's needs, and at first people [from my extended family] they were talking and talking [telling me to have a child], but now they gave up.

In a more general sense, it has to be remembered that already during the time of the struggle – even though allocating different tasks within the Front was theoretically without gender bias – women's ability to reach higher ranks was curtailed by their in general lower level of education or specialised work experience compared to men (Green, 1994: 7). This is another reason why after liberation relatively few women are found in high positions.

Among the women who do actually occupy positions of power in society, none reported that she faced any major problems in being accepted in her position. They see this as related to them doing their work well, as Asmeret Abraha remarks, who has ex-fighters as well as civilians working with her at the MLHW: "You have to show them in your job to accept you, even the civilians, if they see a good job, they accept you." Or Luel Asrat, who says:

The women are everywhere now, they are not only in the administration, they are also in the ministries ... everywhere, and they are doing good (...) even they face the fighting, they fought and they died [referring to female soldiers in the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia], so if they can face this, they can face everything, in politics, everywhere.

This remark by Luel leads to the arguably central pillar for society to – albeit reluctantly – accept women in powerful positions: their equal participation in the struggle. Zahra Jabir, then mayor of Keren, expressed it like this:

Of course our men sometimes, you know, they have low mentality about the women, how the women becomes a mayor ... sometimes they do their best to destroy something, but if you are a strong woman, nothing will happen to you and you can face everything and let your work go straight (...) the people never say that but with your staff sometimes you feel, 'how a woman becomes a mayor to us' [they might think], you see, our society it is still ... we need a lot of time to accept many things about the women ... *if we didn't participate in the struggle, believe me, our men they will not accept the participation of the women* (...) you know in the history of women the women they started from the beginning of the struggle (...) when we declared the war [Zahra here refers to 1961, when the ELF started fighting, of which she became a member in 1964], the women inside Eritrea and outside Eritrea, the women were the first citizens who were participating in the revolution (...) they wanted to be liberated also, of course, they were feeling if we change everything, also we change our condition, you see [*my emphasis*].

Similar sentiments – echoing what has been described in the literature as having earned some entitlements to equality through participation in armed struggle (Tétreault, 1994) – are voiced by Luel Asrat, mayor of Adi Quala:

The society considers that women have to be in their homes only, to wash, to clean and to prepare food for the men, they have that perception of women, but when they see that such positions [like mayor] are taken by women, they came to understand that women are kind to their people in administrating and that they are better than the men (...) *no one gave us this chance, it is us, the Eritrean women who went to the field and brought this chance back with them, with our blood we fought, they [the men] did not give us anything in the end, they had to accept us because we fought equally with the men in the hard time, so they have to accept ...* now I am good in working with the hard people, they are more conservative [Luel, who originally comes from Asmara, feels the people around Adi Quala are quite conservative and reserved] and even if I am given the chance to work for example with Asmara people, who are more open, I can influence more, now I am influencing this region and although they are conservative, now they are changing, and if I am given the chance to work with more open people, I will influence more, so having females in such positions influences the society, I believe that it influences [*my emphasis*].

Both women, as far as the author can tell from having spent time in both places on various occasions, are well regarded in their communities and have a good reputation among the general population for listening to people's grievances and trying to help in whatever way they have the power to do so.

How, then, do these women themselves view their role as part of the present elite? Foaza Hashim, Minister of Justice, sums up a more general attitude:

I have never thought of being a powerful woman, to be frank, when I had motive to join the field it was for independence and for the betterment of society and when I came here [to my job as minister] I always used to say that it is the second phase of the struggle, one was for independence the other was for reconstructing the country then the third will be submitting the power for the [next] generation to be responsible, to take over all these years we fought for ... I always thought one of the best things we have in this country, you know ... in the West, you think of yourself, as a single person, [here it is different] of course when you are in a career, you say I have to do something, I have to prove myself, I have to built the history, individually and collectively, as part of this history, I have to do the best I can, this is one aspect of it, *but generally you don't think in terms of individual because history is not personal, it is collective ...* and I have never thought of myself as an important person, I think of being a role model for young girls, you know, a woman could do many things, and they have to take the best thing, they have to think of being in leadership, they have to think of working with men, they have to think of ... I mean fully understanding their right (...) so within that understanding, if you deal with people on daily interaction I think you can think of yourself in terms of integrating your effort and attitude of change and emancipating yourself from different, you know, viola-

tions, so it shows if you are a good role model, your reflex will be for the other girls (...) I try to be a good role model for the young girls, I try, I'm not saying I am ... I try to be careful to be a good example for them [*my emphasis*].

This quote from Foaza touches all the important aspects mentioned in one way or another by the ex-fighter interviewees. Most prominently, a disregard for the individual – other than as a possible role model, in favour of satisfaction and fulfilment within the broader entity of the collective of the Front and ultimately the nation runs like a thread through the lives of all these women.

They measure their success in terms of their contribution to a better future for the Eritrean people. Zahra Jabir formulates it like this:

If you sacrifice for your people, you feel good, and also the people like you, and this is our mission, you know, really, we must sacrifice for our people, I consider this as a mission, and if we do like that, we can organise our people, we can be with them, part of them ... so you find their respect and you respect them.²

Equally, when asked about their personal future, the answer given by Luel Asrat is typical in lacking individual ambitions and identity:

Anyway, I can't say this or that, what will be [in the future], I am doing my best for my future and for my people's future and just only I am ready to work and help my people and to do my best (...) I'm ready to work for my people until I die.

In the overall context of what has been said so far about the Eritrean revolution, and in particular considering the hegemony of the EPLF's ideological discourse, the above answers should come as no surprise. They point to what Wilson has described as a dissolution of boundaries between the personal and the broader politics of the national struggle (Wilson, 1991) as well as the dominance of the EPLF's discourse in the interpretation of personal and collective history. The former is – due to the absence of a theory of personality – predominately conceived of in the light of the latter, leading to women's emancipation being conceived of mainly in terms of how functional it was for achieving wider objectives of the revolution or later the state.

² This mindset is related to geographic factors, including a certain isolation due to the natural geography and the effective size of the community. The Eritrean population (with about three million people) is small and closely knit, almost every family has members who joined the struggle in one way or the other, and reputation within the community is something that matters. These geographic factors have been equally important in determining the way other revolutions developed – for example Cuba, where the process of revolutionary consolidation showed many similarities to Eritrea (see Müller, 1993). This is in contrast to Russia or China where individual sacrifices 'drowned' in the vastness of the geographic place and the enormous scale of political events; they became almost meaningless in the context of the grand narrative of revolution.

But even accounting for the fact that part of their answers are dominated by the EPLF's official discourse and intended to promote these former fighters' interpretation of the Eritrean cause, they equally represent what these women hold to be true. The way they interpreted their history had implications for their personal lives after liberation, where the attitude of personal sacrifice for the wider common good led to some problems of adjustment when the ex-fighters found themselves working side by side with civilians.

Abrehet Ghebrekidan, a nurse and midwife and since 1996 also a lecturer at the UoA, remembers her problems of adjustment when she found herself working as the only ex-fighter in an Asmara hospital straight after independence:

Well, after independence, regarding the work, I was placed at Mekane Hiwot hospital ... and it was interesting, we had to work with civilians and we had to work for eight hours instead of 24 hours (...) you know, in the military hospitals [in the field] where we were working during the war for independence, it is quite different, there is determination, there is dedication, which you don't see when you come to the cities and towns, and you know ... you try to develop some understanding (...) [you wonder] why the people are not dedicated to do their work, why is the communication between the health workers and the patient so different, and ... that was a little bit ... their attitude [of the civilian staff in Asmara] was quite different and I never liked it (...) you know, in Sahel we were working straight hours till we finished the job, till everybody is been seen, no limit hours (...) sometimes we used to get tea, we told the people we are going to have a cup of tea now, we are tired, and the people give you the permission, if at all there is a tea to take, but here you work eight to twelve and then you leave the patients, waiting for you, so that was my problem, you know ... so I spoke to the doctors, and I told them I'm going to work straight, and they said, yes, because you don't have children to pick up from the school, you don't have this, you can do that ... so that was my satisfaction, I started at eight o'clock and I worked straight, and I liked it, because I don't want my patients to wait for me for so many hours, I always carry my responsibilities when I go to my house as well, I could not forget my patients, I would feel bad if I did not see them ... that's my, I don't know, call it a sickness or whatever [Abrehet eventually talked to her co-workers about it and they accepted her working through breaks; until she had done so she really had a problem with feeling she neglected her patients in taking the usual breaks and was not sure she could adjust to the civilian situation, but after she came to this arrangement with her colleagues she felt satisfied; in 1993 she got the chance for further medical and academic training in the UK, Australia and the US and since her return works partly for the UoA and partly does in-service training in hospital, so her professional responsibilities changed].

Among all the women ex-fighters interviewed in the course of this study, only two spoke about any incidents that were meaningful to them primarily on a personal, individual level: Selome Iyob and Tsega Gaim. For Selome, who

works as IT co-ordinator at the MoE, “a personal dream came true” when she was sent to a workshop in Italy:

In 1994 I went to this workshop, that was a really exciting time, because it was my first time abroad, I went to Italy, for three weeks, and in fact, because I was an Italian school pupil when I was a child, I always dreamt to go to Italy and see Roma, Roma, la grande Roma, so I went to Turin [for that training] and I visited Roma, and that was the highlight of my time, I was so happy, the dream of my childhood.

Even though the event in itself seems rather minor and came about by chance rather than personal choice, what makes it interesting is the linkage to the time before the struggle, a time when a young girl had a personal dream which somehow survived all the years of hardship and eventually became reality.

Tsega is the only woman ex-fighter interviewed who developed a personal vision for her future life and continues to incorporate this vision into the responsibilities she is presently given – not so unlike some of the young women graduates of the UoA today, as will be seen in the following chapter. Her story is therefore being narrated in some detail:

When we heard that all Eritrea became liberated (...) I have been far away from Asmara ... although we believed that one day Eritrea will liberate, I didn't expect that I will see it (...) when we heard the news from the radio me and my colleague were sitting down, oh, today the fighters enter Asmara, Asmara is liberated, I couldn't explain, but I was full of tears, I don't know, it was my first time to cry since I joined the struggle, until the end, but then [when we heard the news of the liberation] I cried [Tsega was the only one among the interviewees to admit to such personal emotions] ... so then, now, after independence I thought about my life, what do I have to do now, and I went back to the 1970s, my dream during that time was to join the university, so I have to continue my education [I thought], so I went back to school in 1991, then I completed this grade 11, so I was working at the daytime, I did night school, then I took this matriculation exam, then I passed the matriculation exam (...) when I passed to university, I had to come to Asmara [Tsega was working in Keren while she studied for the matriculation] (...) and the Minister of Education [Beraki Gebreselassie during that time] he asked me 'you want to go to university now?', yes, 'but if you come here [to Asmara] you have to work as a teacher' [he said], I don't mind, just I want to study during night, then he decided I should work at daytime and go to university in the evening ... then at the end of 1992 I joined Asmara university in management ... we were not allowed to attend full-time, [so I did it as extension programme] (...) but then in 1994 I was assigned by the National Assembly for the Constitutional Commission, which was very hard with my degree and something I had not planned for (...) I went to Osman [Osman Saleh, by then Minister of Education] and asked him 'why did you do like this, Osman, I don't want anything to do at this time, just I will work and I will finish my study, please

don't interrupt me' [and Osman] said not to worry, I could do it, I would just have to go to meetings every few months, it would not be an obstacle, so I accepted it, but I also said 'if this work interrupts me to continue my education, I am not going to work here' [and Tsega worked for the civic education committee at the Constitutional Commission while studying for her degree until 1996, when she got an ODA scholarship to Leicester university, where she completed a Master's in mass communication and research] (...) when I came back from England, I tried to work related to my field of study, but I was not successful ... because in 1998 there was this big hamade [NUEW] congress and I was elected to work for them here, came here [referring to her present post as Head of the Social Service and Rehabilitation Department at the NUEW] in June 1998 (...) so you could say still, I am not successful because what I have studied and what I am working are not related ... but first of all I was fighting for independence, and I have got my [referring in fact to Eritrea's] independence, this was my first aim and this was successful, and my second aim is to continue my study, and I have continued my study, it is enough for me, so I am satisfied with what I did in my life, I am very satisfied, and now I am living in a good condition.

Tsega did go back to the ambitions she had for her personal life before she decided to join the struggle and did go a long way in fulfilling these, negotiating successfully the hurdles put in her way.

Personal ambitions were decisive for the second group of present elite women, who joined the elite in pursuing an individual career. To the challenges they face, which might turn out not to be so dissimilar from those faced by their ex-fighter sisters, the text will turn now.

Different careers, different feelings?

The civilian professional women interviewed are all successful in their different professional environments and reportedly do not face any problems with their (male) colleagues, as here reflected upon by Nazareth Amleson from the UoA:

I do not feel I have any problem, my male colleagues respect me (...) they think I am feminist because I always say (...) I am aware of everything that would discriminate women, so I would react to everything, so they always tease me (...) [I am not regarding myself] as feminist ... in the term, but I would fight for my right and if people have low attitudes or opinions towards me I wouldn't stand it, just I react immediately.

As indicated by Nazareth, women professionals do however still have to fight against entrenched attitudes in society. Haregu Gebreselassie explains in

connection to Square Consulting, the engineering company of which she is the managing director:

You can sense, sometimes, initially, in the beginning, the clients, they prefer to talk to them [the men] [Haregu founded the company together with three male business partners] rather than me, but now they are used to ... they come to me ... anyway, as a female with a career, like *you have to work threefold than the men to get the respect equal to them* (...) [with my partners, it is alright, it is only the clients] the way they perceive you, but I think it's changing, anyway, with regard to the offices, like government, I have no problem, but private clients, they have some reservation on females (...) [Square is the only engineering company run by a woman, but Haregu does not feel special about that] I don't even remember it, I don't feel anything [she says] [*my emphasis*].

Again, the issue that women have to prove themselves in their performance is raised. In the eyes of Haregu, not only do they have to do well, they do have to do better than men to gain the same respect. This lack of respect is also experienced by Ghennet Bokretzion in her poultry business:

Most of the time they [the customers] expect men to be there, expect men to be the managers, and sometimes they ask me 'can we talk to your husband', but the business is in my name, from the very beginning, they just expect ... you know, it is always in our mind that the man is the boss, so they just come, even the women themselves, they come, 'can we talk to the director, the manager', something, yeah, I am the manager, 'OK, don't be kidding now, we don't have time to kid, why don't you ask the director to come', you know, they just expect a man with trousers, it is me, if you want you can talk to me, otherwise you can leave (...) sometimes it irritates me, and I tell them, especially if they are men ex-fighters who say like that, why were you there fighting, if you are not really, you know, respect women ... I become really irritated, you don't expect sometimes, you don't expect such words from a man fighter, but the women fighters they are just appreciating what I am doing.

Even though Ghennet herself does ignore these remarks – and the fact that her business is booming allows her to do so – understandably she feels irritated when encountering these attitudes among former fighters who after all were part of a movement that proclaimed and still proclaims gender equality.

Saba Mebrahtu chose to counter any doubts she might have about her own confidence in becoming a candidate for the Board of the National Chamber of Commerce. She was duly elected, one of three women among 21 members. It was from the beginning an interesting learning experience for herself:

It is good to be among men, you know your standard, you can challenge them in so many ways ... actually, deep inside we [the women] feel inferior, that's how they

[the society] make us, maybe, that's what I think, and first meetings were hard for me (...) because all of them there, they talk, but the substance of what they say does not mean much ... so you feel more confident day by day [Saba has been on the board for three years now] ... they know how to talk and they feel bossy and they are the ones who think they can do everything, but when you sit there and think, you come out with better ideas (...) the first times, to be true, I was shy, my first time to be in a big [meeting], and it is not easy to be in the chamber, you know, so ... but now, I talk, and they very much [respect what I say], it is how you make yourself appear, it's your dignity that makes you respected.

Then, is the success of these women mainly due to their personal ambition and perseverance, or does the general policy environment in Eritrea have a role to play as well? Saba Mebrahtu believes it does:

In fact, I am really proud of the policy and the environment here about women, but *the problem is us*, I think, *the government has given us every opportunity*, everything in fact, we are better off than any other country, even in the developed countries you don't see so many rights as we have, but *do we use them or not is the problem [my emphasis]*.

Saba in essence is holding women themselves responsible for failing to achieve equality, very much like her sisters who fought in the liberation struggle. This does not mean that she denies the contradictory demands imposed on women by traditional culture, as she experiences them everyday in her working life, for example if she feels the need for informal meetings with potential customers:

It is always difficult [as a woman in business] you know, it is coming to our culture, our behaviour, our environment, it's always difficult, sometimes if I want to make a business with people, you know, like the male partners they could go out, invite people, but for myself it's a problem, I have to include my husband if I want to invite someone (...) it's not my husband who is the problem, but the ... they ask 'what is Saba doing with such people, just by herself', you know there is gossip going around and you have to keep things ... I think there is a problem for women in that kind of network, for a man they can say 'let's go to the bar and discuss business there', not for us, it's a problem (...) the problem is our culture, it is so conservative, and if you are very well known, people talk about you [and most people Saba does business with are men].

But in the end, for Saba the failure of many women to grasp potential opportunities is due to them not developing a personal vision persistently enough. Similar sentiments are voiced by Almaz Bein, lecturer at the UoA. Almaz feels it is a lack of ambition and being content with following the tradi-

tional routes that need to be overcome. In a similar fashion Haki-Siir Yohannes partly blames women themselves for their low ambitions:

I wish successful life for women ... involving themselves in business, in higher education, in higher governmental and political affairs (...) you see, finishing twelfth grade and just stopping and getting married or doing some typing or something [as many of them do], that is what I dislike.

In a comparable way, Haregu talks about the problems she has with employing women in her company:

To be frank, the Eritrean girls, those who have been educated here [in Eritrea], they are a bit slow, slow in catching up and easily satisfied with the education they have, they don't strive for better one ... it is not a matter of preference, but is the reality, with the regard to boys, they [the boys] are smarter ones, they are really smart, but the problem with boys, you know, they get short time here, then they demand you a lot or they will leave you ... because in the engineering field at present, the demand and supply is not balanced, very little supply, so one guy if trained here he can go somewhere else, or even the other company would snatch him from our office, they will say we give him so much more of money, come to us, and they leave us [Square is very good in providing training as they were at the time of the interview the only engineering company fully computerised, so their staff are attractive to other companies; the way Square usually operates is to train people in the first four weeks without pay, then they are paid but on probation for three months, after that they become full employees with a good salary and many incentives] ... so with the boys you have insecurity, though they are smart, with girls we are secured, they don't leave you, they will stay with you, they don't demand, but also they don't improve as much as we wish them to ... you always have to push them, that's the problem ... [the reason] I think, the way they have been brought up, it has to change, you know Eritrea has been a very closed country, and even culturally the girls are, even in the house, they are oppressed, I think that's the reason.

For Haregu, who was brought up in Addis Ababa in a different cultural environment, it took some time to get used to working with women here in Eritrea. But she also sees things slowly changing, albeit not because of the government's agenda, but because of different groups of diaspora Eritreans coming back:

You know, now we are many types here, even we have some coming from abroad (...) so that makes the change very rapid with regard to cultural aspect, economic aspect and everything, because of many different cultures coming to the city [to Asmara], so I think it is changing, even our fathers and mothers who are here are mentally changing [her own parents are still in Addis and Haregu herself for example lives on her own, very unusual in Eritrean society for a woman in her thirties

(even in Asmara), but fends off any pressure from the extended family to get married] (...) only when I am ready to do it, for the moment I am very happy because I am successful.

Ghennet equally feels that attitudes are changing, but puts it down more to the political changes brought with liberation:

I remember the time of the Derg's regime, but after liberation, everything changed, even my father, he changed, I have seen him changing, he was telling us not to wear trousers, he was against that, but in the university I had to wear trousers, and he just kept silent, and after the freedom everybody wears trousers (...) now my father I think he values us together, with my brothers ... and he respects me what I am saying, otherwise if you are in a group, he just tells me to keep silent, it was like this, but now he values what I'm saying ... in a group of discussion, even I give my idea and I shout [meaning that she speaks in a normally loud voice not the subdued voice traditionally expected of women in the presence of especially older men], I tell them, and he just respects that, and I just feel he is believing that the women can say and the men can say and it has good value from both of them, I think he changed [asked why Ghennet puts it down on one hand to her father having seen the women fighting in the struggle, on the other her own business success].

This leads to the more general question whether and how these two groups of women – the former fighters who were the 'enlightened vanguard of the revolution' together with their sisters who successfully pursued an individual professional career – are regarded as (modernist) role models for the future generation of Eritrean women to follow by the political leadership. This question will be dealt with in the following section, before turning to the anticipation of women's advancement in Eritrea in the future as envisaged by these present elite women.

In search of a role model

The wider picture that is emerging from the accounts of these two groups of elite women can be sketched broadly as follows:

Different dynamics are at work in how women regard themselves as part of the elite. Women who are at present in positions of power due to their active participation in the struggle judge themselves and their achievements in terms of what these contribute to the development of the nation and how they might serve as a model to Eritrean women in general. In contrast, the women who belong to the academic and business elite successfully do so because they – consciously or due to their particular circumstances – decided to pursue an

individual career, some at the time when their sisters went to the field to fight for the communal well-being. The latter group is partly enthusiastic about and supportive of the changes that came with liberation. They in their own way support the wider agenda of gender equality in Eritrea, some in engaging directly in debate and advocacy, some more indirectly in setting an example within their families and the academic and business community. But their lives remain determined by and related to their personal success in the endeavours they set out to pursue. These women are, however, not necessarily publicised as what one could call ‘true modernist role models’ – in terms of having overcome ‘harmful’ or ‘backward’ traditions and achieved ‘economic and cultural progress’ via a good education, following what one would assume to be the EPLF/PFDJ’s blueprint. They are only regarded as role models in as far as their individual endeavours comply with the overall blueprint for the nation’s future development as defined by the (post-)revolutionary leadership.

The following example serves to illustrate this last point: On one side are women like Haki-Siir Yohannes: In 1996 Haki-Siir, in addition to her trading company, set up a flourishing joint venture to grow flowers in Arbate Asmara (a village suburb of Asmara) for export to the European market. The project is jointly owned by Haki-Siir and an Eritrean investor who lives overseas (both together own 50 percent), and the village of Arbate Asmara (which owns the remaining 50 percent). In due course, on various occasions Haki-Siir was invited by ERI-TV³ and presented as a woman not only successful in business, but at the same time incorporating the entrepreneurial spirit and values the political leadership wants to install in the wider population to advance Eritrea’s development.

On the other side are women like Dr. Belainesh Araya, an educational psychologist by profession and at the time of the study dean of the FoE at the UoA. In 2001 she conducted a small research project in *zoba* Maakel on domestic violence against women, a phenomenon believed to be widespread but not talked about publicly and thus no data are available on its incidence. Her findings showed that domestic violence against women, including rape, was indeed common among the sample population. She criticised official policy as a

³ ERI-TV is the only television network in Eritrea, it is government owned and controlled by the Ministry of Information. It serves as a propaganda tool for the political agenda of the Eritrean leadership, mixed with some bought in foreign movies for entertainment. This is in line with the objectives and functions of the press enshrined in the Press Law, enacted in 1996, to “serve society by disseminating political, social, economic and other knowledge” and “work to realise national objectives”. Under the Press Law, ownership of radio and television stations is reserved for the government, whereas print media (newspapers) can be privately owned (The Press Proclamation, 1996: 33). In fact, until they were closed down in a general government clamp-down on ‘the opposition’ in September 2001, a lively spectrum of private newspapers existed with a substantial readership (see Amnesty International, 2002).

mere verbal commitment to make changes in the interest of women, which was not backed up by concrete action (Belainesh Araya, 2001a). When presenting these findings at the Eritrean Studies Association (ESA) conference in Asmara in July 2001,⁴ with her on the podium was Luul Gebreab, chairwoman of the NUEW. Luul played down these issues of violence against women and instead dominated the discussion by repeating the official strategies for women's empowerment especially in the economic sphere, and outlining the achievements of the NUEW to date in areas like the elimination of the traditional practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) (for a discussion of the role of the NUEW in promoting gender equality see chapter two).⁵

Domestic violence is arguably one of the most harmful 'traditions' within the family, not only for the violated women themselves but equally considering the long-term impact on the children who grow up in such an environment and their socialisation into certain gender roles. The fact that it is not given adequate consideration within the government's framework on gender issues underscores once more that the political leadership's focus on women is not primarily motivated by concerns about women's rights or 'women's modernisation' per se, but by the question of women's potential role in the process of Eritrean nation building. It is based on the doctrine that, as Abraham Teclé, one of the key informants put it, "you cannot think about sustainable development with only half of the population, so that is why we need to incorporate women fully" (see also Tesfa Gebremedhin (2002) who uncritically repeats the EPLF's ideological position on this issue; and Rentmeesters (1993), who argues that as a small

⁴ Overall it has to be pointed out that the ESA conference, held in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of Eritrean independence under the title 'Independent Eritrea: Lessons and Prospects', did truly provide a forum for controversial issues to be discussed, and a variety of papers presented were highly critical of government policies. In the aftermath, however, some of the critical speakers who at the time occupied public roles within Eritrea were removed from their positions; and since the government clampdown on public dissent in September 2001 (see endnote above) such an open exchange of views would simply not be possible. In general, when critical issues were on the agenda, either on the podium (as here with Luul) or in the audience a representative of the official line (usually somebody high up in the PFDJ's political hierarchy) spoke up and 'explained' the 'correct' line to be taken on the issue in question (fieldwork diary: 128).

⁵ Official campaigns which address violence against women in Eritrea (conducted by the NUEW and the NUEYS in connection with UNICEF) concentrate on FGM. This goes back to the time of the struggle, when FGM was defined as one of the harmful and backward traditions within Eritrean society which needs to be eradicated (Odede & Eden Asghedom, 2001). In the course of the Eritreo-Ethiopian border war, the vulnerability of particularly young women among refugees and displaced populations, including increased risks of sexual coercion and rape, has been acknowledged – albeit primarily in areas temporarily occupied by Ethiopian forces (ibid.). In the years after independence, some women ex-fighters advocated a more radical position on women's issues, for example calling for domestic violence to be accepted as ground for divorce (see Pool, 2001: 181, referring to a 1994 NUEW workshop); but issues like these never gained prominence on the national agenda of the NUEW nor the government (Hale, 2001: 125).

country Eritrea faces increased pressure to facilitate women's economic participation). This is in line with the EPLF's instrumentalist agenda on gender issues during the struggle and perpetuates the shortcoming of ignoring the cultural bases of womanhood including familial roles (Bernal 2000).

Within this framework, the dominant role model remains the ex-fighter woman in whose life there was no room for such 'personal' concerns as inter-family relationships and power structures. The 'family' was the Front and the personal life of little importance. This ideological mindset is reflected in the importance given to the compulsory national service. It is commonly called "going to Sawa", referring to the geographic location of the military training camp in *zoba* Gash-Barka.

The political leadership regards the national service as an important way to model young women's aspirations as Eritrean women and "promote the notion that females can and should participate as equal as men in all aspects (...) of society" (Tesfa Gebremedhin, 2002: 87).⁶ It is not the military aspect in itself which is important here, but the socialisation into an 'imagined community' in which sacrifices on behalf of the nation are of overarching importance, and where serving in the military or in reconstruction efforts are two sides of the same coin.

This ideology found its concrete manifestation when the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia erupted: In the beginning, women as well as men were mobilised within the National Service framework and were fighting together at the different frontlines. These *warsai* women – as the new generation of women soldiers, many in their twenties, are called – comprised around 40 percent of national service recruits. They compared their experiences to those of their older 'sisters' – in some cases their real mothers – who fought in the liberation

⁶ "National Service", according to Minister of Defence General Sibhat Efreem in various public appearances, "means nurturing youths to be active and morally sound citizens." The National Service Proclamation came into force in 1995 and formulates that all citizens and permanent residents of the State of Eritrea between the age of 18 and 40 are required to perform 6 months of military training and one year in reconstruction activities. Usually, students are required to go to Sawa after they sat for the matriculation exam or quit schooling. Its major objective is to enhance nationalism in getting people from different parts and nationalities of the country to work and live together during the time of service. In addition, especially females should become encouraged and motivated to fully participate in society. Other objectives include to overcome the devastation after 30 years of war and help to develop the national economy (see Connell, 1998; 2002). Since the 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia started, people who are called for National Service are not allowed back after the required 18 months, but are made to stay in service indefinitely, until the war situation is fully resolved (which in the eyes of the Eritrean government has not yet happened). They are either stationed as soldiers at one of the frontlines, or were allowed to return to their civilian work (depending on the importance of the civilian profession for the country) but are not paid their usual salary but only the much lower national service allowance. Many of the teachers in schools visited were regarded as fulfilling their service and had to make ends meet for themselves and their families with this rather symbolic payment.

war. Like their predecessors they believe that the equality on the battlefield must be met with equality in civilian life afterwards (see Fischer, 1999; Jenkins, 1999; visit by the author to the Tsorona frontline in December 1999).⁷

From November 1999, with the exception of former EPLF fighters who had stayed on in the army after liberation and some *warsai* women in support staff roles, all women were recalled from the frontline to participate in a wide ranging skills development programme. The official rationale behind this move was that in this way the human capacity in the country was used in the most efficient way. At the same time openings were created for women to participate in certain professions in the future, when the war was over. Besides being trained to become elementary school teachers, women were being trained in construction, truck driving, mechanics, radio operation and other areas traditionally not open to women.⁸

In this context the question arises whether in a community so shaped by the experience of war as Eritrea – a fact enforced once more by the recent new war with Ethiopia – the military does not become an overly important symbol of the state, like the EPLF once was for Eritrean independence. And whether with excluding the young generation of women from the battlefield women's role in the army does mirror a consolidation of gender relations in the economic and political sphere: Certain openings are created for women as long as these correspond to wider national objectives, but ultimately women are prevented from fully moving to the top and 'threaten' male power structures. While answering this question is beyond what this study attempts to do, the 1998-2000 war with Ethiopia in general and the move to recall women from the frontline in particular put the rationale of the national service as a social engineering project to foster gender equality in Eritrea into question. Before this war a strong case could be made for the potential importance of the national service campaign in

⁷ In a similar way as women who joined the struggle, they were publicised as role models not only within Eritrea, but equally (and perhaps more importantly) in the public relations campaign Eritrea conducted to present their cause to the wider world. Foreign journalists were offered 'guided tours' to the frontline, in which great attention was paid to women soldiers. A government official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who usually accompanied these trips on various occasions pointed out with pride that two of the *warsai* women even featured in the fashionable magazine *Paris Match* (researcher's own experiences in December 1999; see also Hatch, 2000).

⁸ According to Luul Gebreab from the NUEW, considerations were made along these lines: "If the majority of youngsters is at the frontline, who would you prefer to come back to do the different developmental work ... the government chose that women should come back and do these activities (...) how best to use the human capacity of the country, that was the issue." On the streets of Asmara at the time, the decision to remove women from the battlefront was rumoured to have been prompted by increased pregnancies among women soldiers as a way to get out of duty, a charge strongly denied by Luul (own observations and conversations; see also AFP, 11 March 2000).

advocating a change in the status of women.⁹ But this emancipatory effect has been at least partly reversed by the unpredictability of the length of stay in service, as well as the nature of women's assignments. *Warsai* women within the fighting force for example speak of assignments to kitchen work or as personal assistants to male commanders.¹⁰ In addition, reports on sexual abuse within the army begin to surface.¹¹

Whereas it is difficult to get a true picture of the life for women in the Eritrean military, what is important here is that neither the government nor the NUEW show any willingness to acknowledge any of the (personal) problems these women may face. With this instrumentalist agenda on women the knock-on effect for the following generation of young women, particularly those nearing the end of their secondary schooling, is equally neglected. These observations from Keren Secondary illustrate this last point:

⁹ Connell, interestingly, relates its role in this respect directly to the struggle, stating that national service "will have a profound effect on the status of women, placing them in a condition of relative gender equality for eighteen months, much as the service in the liberation front did for tens of thousands of young women and men during the war years" (Connell, 1997: 63). See also Saba Mebrahtu's story about her daughters in chapter four. Or Haregu Gebreselassie, who remarked that "in fact even the national service, it contributed a lot to the perspectives for the girls and women, it exposed them, it might have its own negative aspect, but it has a positive aspect too (...) it is changing [the girls], they are coming up, they are coming up from the house ... some of them are a bit shy and the worst is they get satisfied with little, but they are changing and will change."

¹⁰ Equally, women who were recalled to participate in the skills development programme do not regard their new assignments as necessarily beneficial in terms of fostering notions of gender equality. Two examples of young women personally known to the author illustrate the potential problems women may face: The first example is Yordanos, who completed grade eleven and started to help with the administrative work in her brother's bicycle repair shop in Asmara. She was called to service when the war with Ethiopia started and was happy to go and defend her country. When recalled in December 1999 she was given a short course in teacher training. She was then sent to teach in a small village 50 kilometres from Asmara and 12 kilometres away from a main road. Yordanos hates to be there and hates teaching. She would immediately return to the frontline if she had a choice: "There [at the frontline], I know why I am there, my country is in danger, I have to defend it ... but here, it is a waste of time and benefits nobody" is how she sees it. The second example is Awet, who when recalled from the front was trained as a radio operator. While she likes the work, she is now based in a remote area of Gash-Barka, and together with one other woman, also a radio operator, they are the only females in the unit, as all other women have been recalled. While "at first it was fun, and until now I do not have problems with the boys, but still, only two women out here, it is difficult" (personal conversations in March 2001).

¹¹ The findings of a BA thesis dealing with sexual abuse of women in national service (to which the author acted as an advisor) for which a small sample of women within the national service from various educational backgrounds was interviewed, report that more than 80 percent of this sample experienced some sort of sexual discrimination, ranging from verbal advances by higher officers to rape; for fear of repercussions for her future (threatened by some army personnel), the author of the thesis wants to remain anonymous. When the researcher raised this issue of sexual abuse within the military with Luul Gebreab, she simply denied it existed.

A long-term teacher in Keren told me during a conversation in the tea-room that he had observed recently among his students that girls cared less about education because of Sawa [if students want to join the UoA, they usually take the matriculation exam in May or June, then they go to Sawa, and if they passed, they are called back in September to commence university, TTI or whatever they qualified for; however, if they do not get the required GPA, they have to stay in Sawa, and under present conditions might do so indefinitely] and also more and more parents are not keen for their daughters to go these days; he personally felt many girls preferred to marry rather than go to Sawa, so the once liberating potential seems lost but Sawa does contribute to let women seek refuge in their traditional roles. (observation notes: 55)

In a similar vein, Bisrat from grade 10.5 in Keren told me “my parents might try to arrange marriage for me before the matriculation results are known, so I would not go to Sawa.” She was in a group of other girls when she said that, and the whole group agreed that Sawa should be stopped for girls, not the national service in general, they were all willing to do their service, but if they could do something nearer to their home their parents would not object and not be worried, especially “about the stories one hears about the women who come back from Sawa with a baby, this is against our culture”, and happily let them go,” it would make life much easier for us” was the general consensus. (observation notes: 62)

Again, what might be in the interest of women in terms of facilitating a change of traditional gender roles is ignored if it contradicts wider objectives of moulding the Eritrean nation.¹² Referring to the *warsai* women and the way they are assigned to different tasks, Luul Gebreab has this to say:

If you see it in general ... if these women, high-school drop-outs [Luul asserts that the majority of *warsai* women left high school around grade nine or ten because of bad results, an assertion that could not be verified by the researcher] if they were at home, could they have the opportunity of becoming a teacher, any other profession (...) whereby they can get a salary in the future? ... here, they are getting this chance [to learn a profession] for free ... I think sometimes they don't really understand that ... the benefits they get, but they will understand later.

¹² This is not only the case concerning gender issues, in other areas as well the ideological component in the Eritrean nation building process is given priority over other concerns. Thus for example the batch of UoA students who, after completing their university service year graduated in August 2002, was suddenly called to Sawa again for yet another round of military training. These highly qualified people would be put to much better use for the country in working in their profession. The same is true for the following batch who were to start their university service in September 2002, and who were also sent to Sawa instead. These measures are part of a general government drive to reinforce discipline and patriotic commitment among the student community, and come in the wake of student protests in summer 2001, which ended in the majority of all students at the UoA being sent to work camps in the summer heat of the coastal plain near the red sea port of Massawa for some weeks (fieldnotes: 6f; Jayasekera, 2001).

Women's emancipation as offered within the process of revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea does envisage emancipation on an individual level only as a by-product of serving the national community. In traditional Eritrean society the collectivity of the extended family and the general cultural norms determine the future of a young women. In (post-)revolutionary Eritrea it is envisaged by the political leadership that the collectivity of the nation determines the lives of individuals. In both scenarios the ambitions of the individual women (and men) are regarded as negligible.

What is overlooked here is the fact that for many young women it might be a fulfilling life strategy to opt out of the EPLF/PFDJ's modernist blueprint – which might give them even less scope to realise their personal ambitions than the traditional – but to use the traditional routes to their advantage.¹³ This approach towards women's emancipation also puts question marks behind the main avenue envisaged by the two groups of present elite women for women to advance in the future – education. In the way education is conceptualised the dichotomy of individual versus communal benefits comes to the forefront. These issues surrounding education will be discussed in the following final section of this chapter, before the story returns to the 29 young university women and their future ambitions within the contradictory forces of Eritrean society.

Education for an emancipated future?!

To recapture some of the important insights so far, the Eritrean revolution – which, it needs to be emphasised again, was led by men – created a policy environment in which women are legally regarded as equal to men and are encouraged to become part of the elite of the country and occupy positions of leadership. The latter albeit not, as will be discussed further in the conclusion, including the highest strata of decision making, which is centred around a more and more autocratic male president and his inner circle, to which no women belong. It is however for women to take up these newly arising opportunities and in doing so help change general attitudes in wider society and thus achieve equal status eventually. To enable women to do so, the biggest chance for women in independent Eritrea is seen in taking up the opportunities offered by all areas of education.

It is not only the group of ex-fighter elite women who share this outlook that women need to use opportunities they are given by the policy environment

¹³ This issue was discussed in chapter five in relation to Elmi and her family and will be taken up again in the concluding chapter.

since independence and concentrate especially on their education. One should recall that these women when they joined the struggle all had some background in education, either a few years of secondary schooling or already a higher degree. Equally, and perhaps not surprisingly, the professional women who became successful in their own right and for whom one step on that way was a university degree or other forms of professional qualification see in a good education the way forward for Eritrean women. As a particularly vivid example of this view among the former fighters, Luel Asrat is cited:

We got the positions we have because we fought equal to the men, but now it does not work this way; the women of this generation, they have to be good in their education. If they are good in their education, they can have access to good positions, so it will be through education in the future, so I hope the women ... will work hard for their education (...) I have one daughter, she was born in the field, and she was a fighter herself, because she was born in such a hard situation ... my daughter, I couldn't care for her in the field, I left her when she was one year old and I saw her again after 13 years, the life was very hard, and I don't think it is good that my daughter didn't get any love from me, didn't grow up with her mother, so that's why I said she is also a fighter, she is in grade 10 now, a good student (...) I wish my daughter gets good results and joins the university, that's what I wish for my daughter ... education is very important, without education no one can have a good position in this present world, so you have to teach your children as much as you can (...) I for myself, I didn't get the chance, because I had to go to the field and had to stop my education in 1977 ... I don't regret it, because I have contributed greatly to my country, but I don't want my daughter to have such problems and stop her education, I want her to continue as much as she likes ... by any means, she has to continue (...) if women's performance in education is good, I am sure they will rule their country in different positions, only that they don't have good education prevents them from having access to important positions in the future Eritrea ... surely, we can have a female president, it will happen, our country is very open to women.

This emphasis on education is shared not only across the range of interviews, but is equally in the centre of the post-liberation approach towards a change in the status of women by the Eritrean government, as has been outlined in chapter two in more detail. It shows that the underlying philosophy for female equality is very much the same as during the struggle: A chance is provided by certain structures or policy measures, and it is up to the women to take it. The opportunity to show their 'equalness' through participation in the struggle is replaced in the context of being a newly independent nation with a

major deficit in qualified human resources by participation in the efforts to overcome this deficit.¹⁴

This is put into words by Hiwet Megas:

Women have to be educated, education is the most important thing, *the government is doing its best to encourage all Eritreans but particularly the women to get education, so the women have to take this chance and they have to improve their educational level and if they do that there is no question that they will be in the offices and they will have good positions [my emphasis].*

A similar attitude is expressed by Zahra Jabir:

You know the new generation, they really have a lot of chance, we were struggling for them, and now really they have, specially the women, the girls, they have a chance to go to school, they have chance to go to the university and they have chance to work, because now in our country (...) they are giving chance of places for the women, you see, *so now the women or the girls they must be very serious and intelligent to know how to use this chance, which is given to them, you see (...) but if they give you a chance and you don't know how to use it, really that is the failure of the women ... so they must be very interested and active in using this chance which is given to them [my emphasis].*

A bit more nuanced in acknowledging the pressure that comes from early marriage traditions, Saba Mebrahtu from the group of civilian professional women equally feels that in giving young girls a vision – centred on education and a following career – it is up to them to resist this pressure. From her experience in the parents' committee of her daughters' high school she concludes:

First they [the girls] have to maintain their status equally with men ... they have to study and it is early marriage, I don't accept it (...) in fact I was in the parents' committee in Den Den high school for three years (...) from first grade up to ninth, sometimes tenth grade, they are the best, the girls, but then they start declining and

¹⁴ Another area where women are to show their equality is in a process of political empowerment: In local assemblies as well as in the National Assembly, 30 percent of seats are in theory reserved for women. Additionally, women can compete for the remaining 70 percent of seats. In 2001, out of a total of 150 National Assembly members, 33 were women (22 percent). In the assemblies of the different *zobas*, women's participation ranges from 28 percent in *zoba* Maakel to ten percent in Southern Red Sea (Source: NUEW, 1999b). Due to the outbreak of the border war with Ethiopia in 1998, there have not been any elections since the 30 percent quota was introduced. Among the interviewees, this affirmative action measure is regarded as controversial. It was partly acknowledged that this threshold was necessary for women to be elected at all. Other women however, especially the non-fighters, regarded it as outright wrong. One of the lecturers at the UoA even regards the quota system as a political ploy "so that inexperienced women rubber-stamp decisions by the male leadership." To discuss these issues in further details is beyond the scope of this study.

those who go to the university are few (...) what's the reason behind it (...) I think they don't see the future bright for them, so what they think is better get married, have children, get settled, that's it ... so what I say is we have to prepare a bright future for our girls (...) show them the future, they should have also exposure, bringing students from outside, sending students outside the country, then they would see ... open up their minds ... then they have to maintain their effort.

Saba's impression confirms many of the experiences of the 29 female students at the UoA – in many of their lives there was an event which triggered the anticipation of a “bright future”. These events were however mostly accidental, caused by a particular constellation in their personal environment, and rarely the result of planned policy – exceptions are Esther and her encounter with the NUEYS and partly Elmi and her exchange programme abroad (see chapter five). To this day, no organised efforts exist to give young women (and men) in secondary schools a future vision or foster foreign student exchange programmes.¹⁵

This points to the central issue in putting the main emphasis for women to achieve gender equality on education: Here the dichotomy between the individual and the wider nation is played out in full. Education in itself is a multidimensional concept, encompassing possible contradictions between the individual and the common good and one of the most important areas where individuals and society overlap:

Education on one hand relates to one's position in a given society, as one of the prime roles of any educational system is to ensure the social and cultural reproduction of a given social system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Fägerlind & Saha, 1983). Additionally, an educational system is to underpin the fulfilment of broader development goals, often stipulated by a national development plan (Buchert, 1998: 18). The latter is particularly so in a (post-)revolutionary society like Eritrea's. Indeed, the educational system is the cornerstone of the government's HRD strategy within its overall macro-policy which outlines the course for the nation's future development (GSE, 1994).¹⁶

¹⁵ In some cases, schools do make an effort of their own: Abraham Tadesse, the director of Keren Secondary, used to invite the only female medical doctor in Keren to talk to the students about the challenges of her own life and career, in order to show “especially the females some future perspective.” Since this doctor has been transferred to Asmara, these invitations stopped. Abraham was therefore very happy for the researcher to be around “and show the girls what they could do one day.” Concerning foreign exchange programmes, the exchange from which Elmi benefited was never repeated. Two years ago, four students from all over Eritrea (2 girls and 2 boys) got the chance to visit Sweden, France and England on a 40-day-trip. Selection was by academic competition and Zeneib, a Tigre girl from Keren Secondary, was one of the four. She subsequently passed to the UoA with scoring 3.2 in the 2002 matriculation exam.

¹⁶ Within the general conceptualisation of education by the political leadership, education is regarded as the “foundation of development” as it enhances people's “productive capacity to build their country” (EPLF, 1994: 33); it is in that sense that female education is viewed as crucial

This future development strategy is for Eritrea to become a modern nation, with “a technologically advanced and internationally competitive economy” (ibid.: 10). To achieve this objective, HRD is seen as of paramount importance (ibid.; Araia Tseggai, 1999).¹⁷ HRD in its broadest sense is an all-inclusive concept, referring to the process of “increasing the knowledge, skills and capacities of all people in a society” (Araia Tseggai, 1999: 216). It encompasses in economic terms the accumulation of human capital, in political terms preparing people for participation in democratic political processes, and in social and cultural terms helping people to lead fuller lives, less bound by tradition (ibid.). As such, HRD can be regarded as central to unlocking the door to modernisation (ibid.). Within its framework for future development, the Eritrean government has narrowed HRD down to its economic aspects, or the human capital component of HRD, centring on a strategy to systematically extend the system of formal education in Eritrea (Araia Tseggai, 1999; <http://www.shaebia.org>, 09 August 2002).¹⁸

On one hand Eritrean officials acknowledge that forms of personal incentives are crucial as

investment in education may be wasted unless men and women have the will to prepare for and engage in those activities which are needed for accelerated economic growth and social and political progress (Araia Tseggai, 1999: 218, emphasis in the original).

in permitting women “to operate on an equal footing with males in the building and development of the Eritrean economy and the construction of (...) society” (Tesfa Gebremedhin, 2002: 88).

¹⁷ Araia Tseggai, a macro economist by training and then director of the Housing Bank of Eritrea, was made responsible for the theme of human resource development within the War-torn Societies Project in Eritrea (for an overview of the project see Doornbos and Alemseged Tesfai, 1999).

¹⁸ This operational approach towards HRD is outlined by Osman Saleh, Minister of Education. According to Osman, the main objective of Eritrea’s HRD scheme is to strike “a happy balance between the technical and the academic line.” For the future that means, after grade seven education will be divided into two streams: technical and academic. At present, the majority of secondary education takes place in the academic line. The first step is to have more technical and vocational secondary education. And as far as higher education is concerned, after secondary school students “should go to junior colleges [...] and a very small proportion of students should go to the university for their degree [none of these junior and technical colleges, where students shall be trained in two to three year programmes, depending on the subject, does exist yet].” Osman does not consider it as a problem that with education becoming more widespread, also expectations will rise and more people will want to go to the university “once we have the framework for qualification in place, people will be aware of these things and accept it [...] these people will not be able to continue but will have to go to the world of work.” See also the discussion in chapter two, in particular Tesfaldet’s (1992) distinction between a social-demand-approach and a manpower-demand-approach to education, and Hale (2000).

But apart from (limited) economic gains, the main incentive currently on offer is the satisfaction arising from sacrificing one's personal ambitions for the wider common good of the nation.¹⁹

In using education predominately as a tool for the economic modernisation of Eritrea, the political leadership ignores that the different aspects of HRD cannot meaningfully be separated. Greater material well-being coupled with a higher level of education is bound to lead to people demanding more say over their lives as well as within the Eritrean polity. Or, to put it differently, the process of modernisation develops its own dynamics and with it people's ambitions and their visions for the future change.

More generally, education is – in addition to being related to one's position in a given society and whether envisaged as such or not by the political leadership – strongly connected to the development of personal identity and new forms of agency on an individual level. In the context of Eritrea, this can simply mean legitimating not having to enter into an arranged marriage.

For higher education it has been stated that it improves individual lives and at the same time enriches wider society, as it “allows people to enjoy an enhanced ‘life of mind’, offering wider society both cultural and political benefits” (WB, 2000: 57). But what happens if these potential ‘cultural and political benefits’ – which are seen to include the promotion of an open and meritocratic civil society as well as accountable democratic structures (ibid.: 59) – are in conflict with the ideological values of the political leadership?

This question leads to another point mentioned in the above accounts of Eritrean elite women by Haregu Gebreselassie:

In contrast to the time of the revolutionary struggle, after having become an independent state at the historical juncture of the end of the Cold War and within an international environment characterised by the forces of globalisation, these forces are bound to effect Eritrean society and Eritrean women within it directly or indirectly.²⁰ The influence of women returning from the diaspora in

¹⁹ The level of education is determining one's salary in the public as well as most parts of the private sector, so economic incentives exist to pursue one's education. It has to be kept in mind here that in the current circumstances many people are not paid their normal salary but are treated as fulfilling their national service; and with steep price rises in the aftermath of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian war especially in urban areas even belonging to the highest earning group is at best allowing for a reasonably comfortable life. In 2000 monthly salaries in the public sector were as follows (at a time when 10 Nakfa equalled one US dollar): PhD holders: 4000 Nakfa; MA holders: 2930 Nakfa; BA holders: 1900 Nakfa; BA beginners (for example graduate assistants): 1618 Nakfa; Secondary schooling plus four years professional training: 859 Nakfa; Secondary schooling plus two years professional training (for example as secretary): 757 Nakfa; minimum wage: 425 Nakfa; national service allowance: 120 Nakfa (author's enquiries; see also Fengler, 2001: 208).

²⁰ It has to be pointed out here that the Eritrean government retained its sovereignty in economic issues, as it started with a zero balance sheet (all debts became liabilities of Ethiopia) and thus did

slowly changing Eritrean traditional cultural attitudes was mentioned by Haregu.

Another important factor – and next to relatives in the diaspora for the time being probably the most important impact of globalisation in shaping ambitions for a future life – is increased global communication, particularly since the internet was publicly introduced in the major cities of Eritrea in November 2000 with no access restrictions. Eritrean society thus moved from being closed off in a remote corner in the Horn of Africa to being exposed to the wider world. The global environment offers new opportunities, particularly for the educated female elite of the country in the centre of this study. This global exposure, together with the disappearance of the (liberation) war which formed part of the thread which held the revolutionary project together, is bound to weaken the ideological hegemony of the political leadership. Questions about the personal versus the communal are bound to be formulated in a new light.

Returning to the theme of education as a decisive tool in the revolutionary consolidation process, the question to ask then is in what way can personal ambitions become fulfilled within an educational system that is first and foremost geared towards the needs of the nation. Before looking at the challenges the 29 women students at the UoA face in this respect for their future, the story of Senait Berhe may serve as an illustration to set the frame.

Senait graduated in chemistry at the UoA in 1989 and the then Ethiopian government – which had a strikingly similar approach to education policy and human resource development to the present government of Eritrea – made her teach chemistry in secondary schools. Senait always hoped to be able to continue her education at Master's or even PhD level in chemistry, a subject she feels very passionate about. In 1998 she was indeed given the chance by the Eritrean government to continue her education in South Africa, but on the condition that the focus had to be on pedagogy. She eventually grew to accept it, reluctantly:

Now I have almost accepted it, because I do not have any other possibility, I have to accept it, but specially at the beginning [in South Africa, we were taking 4 courses in education] and it was boring for me (...) why only in education, why not two in my field and two in education ... I was asking the department heads and so on, but the answer they give you is 'no, your government asked us [for you] to be trained more on education' [her schedule in South Africa was determined by representatives of the Eritrean government beforehand, representatives of the MoE went to South Africa and decided what courses the students should take, but neither Senait nor her fellow students were aware of this] (...) my colleagues they were laughing at me ...

not have to succumb to the conditionalities of the International Financial Institutions. It follows a mixed economic strategy that can be described as a combination of commitment to the market and socialist ideals of social justice (for a detailed discussion see Fengler, 2001; Müller, 2003).

what for are we doing all these courses, I need three fourth chemistry and one fourth pedagogy, I was just saying like this to the department heads to the faculty dean and so on, but they didn't accept my position [and most of her colleagues felt the same, especially the science people they did not want social science studies] (...) but now I have accepted it, because I don't have any other chance, so I have to accept it [it was her only chance to go for a Master's] (...) even when I studied chemistry in the first place, I never anticipated to become a teacher, even in high school I like chemistry, physics and mathematics and chose to be a chemist and thought of working in factories and so on, that was my idea, but I did not have any other chance, the MoE would not give me release, I asked a number of times for release to work somewhere else [during the Ethiopian government as well as after independence], but I could not get a chance, so the only way is to be a teacher [Senait's life is very determined by things she cannot influence – it started with the Ethiopian government, with her 20 people graduated in chemistry and only one started to work in the Salina factory in Massawa as a chemist, all others became teachers] (...) they forced us to become teachers ... anyway, life is always challenging [Senait will eventually be sent to work at the newly to open Teacher Training College in Keren, but would very much prefer to live in Asmara] (...) but whether I like or not, I have to go there [to Keren], but I like to be here [in Asmara], but in general, we Eritreans ... we will accept a lot of things, maybe we have adapted that idea from our parents, we will accept what our parents say, what the elder people say, because we grew up in that way we will also accept what the government says.

Looked at from the outside, Senait is an independent woman in her thirties. She so far chose not to marry and lives with her two sisters in the family home (both her parents are dead). Looking at her individual ambitions, however, her life seems restricted in many ways. These restrictions are different from those that one could imagine in the life of a woman who finds herself in an arranged marriage or succumbed by other traditional expectations. No doubt her university education, among other things, gave Senait a lot of freedom she would otherwise not enjoy – as it did for Elmi and many of her fellow students.

The question that arises then is what can university education mean for young women in the context of a (post-)revolutionary society in which education has a clearly defined role in the modernisation of society and in which space for individual fulfilment is scarce? What does the university experience mean to young women in present-day Eritrea? Do they see themselves as part of a future elite, and what type of elite? How these conflicting agendas are synthesised in the lives of individual young women at the UoA will be discussed in the following chapter.

Women in the elite II: Ambitions for the future – The university experience and personal emancipation

Joining the university from the perspective of Eritrean development planning defines a student as somebody who is trained to fill a perceived human resource need of the country in a socially valuable area in the future.

The mission of the UoA, the only institution of tertiary education in Eritrea, is to “serve the needs of society, strive to address itself to the challenges facing our people and contribute to the solutions of the problems afflicting our country” (UoA, 2000). At the same time, its aim is to be “a powerful catalyst for change and social progress” (ibid.). In other words, the UoA has two main objectives: firstly, to provide the human resource base needed for the development of the country, and secondly, to facilitate social change.

Human resource development planning in Eritrea is very centralised.¹ Concerning the UoA, this has certain implications: If one does pass the matriculation exam and is assured access to the university, there is no such thing as a free choice of which subject to study. Subjects are allocated. The procedure for this is as follows: The university president, Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak,

¹ For a more general discussion on human resource development planning in Eritrea see Müller (2001a; 2002b; 2004).

together with all the ministries, draws up a list in which areas human resources are most urgently needed. According to these predictions, it is then decided how many students should be admitted to which department.

After their freshman year, students are asked to fill in a form to choose their priorities. According to their GPA in freshman, the university placement committee then places them in the different departments. If their subject of choice is full, they are either placed in their second choice department or automatically in the biggest and least liked one: the Secondary School Teachers (SST) department. This is due to the fact that the need for secondary school teachers in the country is perceived as immense.

Equally, for further education the university draws up staff development plans and then facilitates to send students abroad for education at Master's or PhD level. In that way it hopes to assure that the country's human resources are not wasted but used in the most efficient way.²

This approach towards education in general and higher education in particular is underlined by an instrumentalist view of education centred on building up human capital for the benefit of the nation. It is very much in line with the post-Washington consensus on education and development (Fine and Rose, 2001). Overall, the human resource development strategy behind it broadly follows the pattern advocated more than twenty years ago by Thompson & Fogel (1976) for educational development in developing countries.³ Higher education is strongly embedded into the national community as a whole instead of being an elitist institution which is removed from the realities of the majority of the population of the country – note needs to be taken of the difference made here between the university as an institution that produces a future elite in contrast to an elitist institution.

The role of the university herein lies in what has been described as the “developmental university” (Coleman, 1994: 334), which is an institution that is first and foremost concerned with the “‘solution’ of the concrete problems of societal development” (ibid.). Such a university sets out to “ensure that the development plans of the university are integrated with or linked to national development plans” (ibid.: 343). This is exactly how Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak views the role of the UoA: The three pillars on which the university's mission rests he describes as, in that order, relevance (the link with local stakeholders),

² In February 2001 for example, a group of 300 students left for further education or undergraduate degrees not available in Eritrea to South Africa (BBC, 13 February 2001).

³ Thompson and Fogel classify patterns of educational development in developing countries in five stages. These are (very schematically) the following: 1. formation of basic national education system; 2. formation of university with undergraduate studies; 3. generalisation of basic national education system; 4. maturation of university – research related to national problems; 5. extension of role of university, national service programmes etc. (for a more detailed overview see Thompson & Fogel, 1976: 79f).

followed by quality and sustainability (reliance on local rather than foreign resources).

The success of such a strategy depends largely on a shared vision between the goals of the official policy side, embodied by the government and the university administration on one hand, and the people, the individual students, on the other – not least to avoid the phenomenon of brain drain which plagues many African countries who see their university graduates leave after graduation to work in the industrialised world where salaries are considerably higher.

The Eritrean government claims as one of its major assets that the cornerstone of “the culture of governance in Eritrea is the close relationship between the people and the leadership” (MoE, 1999: 3f). But looking at the young women who participated in this research, the majority regard university education as a means out of which new possibilities for personal agency can emerge. The following will show their lives to be characterised by a number of conflicting aspirations, concerning their own personal future as well as their future as Eritrean women.

“Our future is trapped” – The individual versus the nation

Sitting in the tea-room of the UoA one topic comes up regularly in students’ conversations: how to avoid becoming a teacher, a highly unpopular further career perspective. Thus as only very few students choose to join the SST department, students who fail to get their first choice of subject are almost automatically put into SST. Equally, many students who study applied sciences in the end are sent teaching.⁴

Students find all sorts of ways to get around becoming a teacher. That is for example why Sultan chose plant science: “When I joined the university, I really wanted to study medicine, but in freshman my marks were low”, she explains. She could have gone for biology and maybe continued in the medical field from there, “but at the college of science they will make you to become a teacher” and she hated the idea of teaching. As she was interested in agriculture, she chose plant science (a subject for which her freshman GPA was enough) – “and also some medicine is made of plants, so there is some connection.”

⁴ The university operates according to the following system: most degree courses require four years of academic study (including a freshman year). After that students have to complete one year university national service, which basically means they are allocated to a relevant ministry and work for a lower salary than usually. Only after students completed this service year will they graduate. Most students in applied science subjects are allocated to the MoE and sent to secondary schools to teach.

Stories like Sultan's are very common. When students know their freshman GPA is not high enough to join their department of choice, they rather settle for a compromise with the objective to avoid becoming a teacher.

This poses some problems for the general human resource development of the country, as one of the major needs identified is the shortage of secondary school teachers.

There are cases like the one of Senait – but they are rather the exception than the norm – who recalls: “When I first came to university, I wanted to study mechanical engineering, but I did not get that chance [*her grades in freshman were too low*], and I was assigned to SST-Physics. At first, it was discouraging”, but she made up her mind and, as to become a teacher was the only way she could continue at the university, she grew to accept it.⁵

This – what could be called – overregulation of educational opportunities, the fact that “here they [the university administration] take care of everything” (personal communication with staff at the Office of the Registrar), not only implies a lack of personal choices but equally a lack of decision making power over one's future. Some of the personal frustrations inherent in this system are expressed by Saba:

Specially what disappoint me much ... about the grading system you know (...) I remember in freshman they told us A is 80 and above, and everybody studied hard, and everybody got 90 and what did they do ... they started A from 90 something, because everybody got good grades, and those who got 80 they were like C, that's how they do it, they restrict ... that's what happened in my econometrics class the

⁵ Recently, suggestions were circulated among all university faculties to give students more choice in the subject allocation process (including considerations of their second choice subject instead of assigning them to SST straight away), a move strongly resisted by the FoE, as the following excerpt from the minutes of a faculty meeting at the FoE on 25 July 2000 shows: “The Faculty of Education seriously discussed the revised proposal for placement of students in the various faculties of the UoA. While the FoE appreciates the effort of the university to avail more freedom in the students' interest of study, it is found difficult to comprehend the logic for doing so. The FoE has consistently disagreed with such approach in placement of students to the various faculties and departments. The FoE is of the opinion that the university's agenda (philosophy) is to serve (meet) the interest of the manpower need of our nation. It strongly believes that the best students become best teachers and will help our children to become good students and productive citizens at the same time. The FoE also recognises that competitive students should be encouraged to pursue their education in the field of their interest. Now, the question is, whether the university is to serve the interest of the nation or the interest of the students. As educators, members of the FoE believe and insist that to be “a teacher” is a noble profession, no matter what the working situation is at present. We also insist that both the university and the government realise their commitment to the excellence of education at all levels in our country. The FoE realises that the proposed revision is to the interest of the student and not the nation. Therefore, the FoE leaves the decision to the appropriate body with great concern”. While in the meantime students' second subject priorities are indeed taken into consideration by the placement committee, this has not altered the general workings of the university.

past semester, I thought I really did good, but the instructor gave me C, and I ‘can I see my final examination’ and he showed me, it was like 65 out of 80, and [I got C] that’s how it is (...) you study hard ... it’s really frustrating ... it’s part of the game or what can I say ... the university cannot afford to send too many students abroad for further study,⁶ so they let you have bad grades, only few will get good grades, and then there is this Sawa and everything that keeps you here (...) I’m glad I’m finishing and have a BA, but it was not easy, you know, it was not much ... it will not be a good thing to remember later.

Saba’s last verdict, that the university “will not be a good thing to remember”, is however not shared by the majority of women in this study who, in spite of personal frustrations, try to make the university experience work for them personally and as Eritrean women, even though that can be difficult at times, as Rita recalls:

Until now, I felt [powerful], having a good degree soon [*Rita was in her last academic year at the time of the interview and started her university service in autumn 2001*], but this summer when we came back [*at the beginning of the academic year 2000/2001*] I heard that the service was changed to two years, they told me, but I don’t know is that real or no, and I was crazy [*there were rumours that the university service was to be extended to two years, but that seems not to have happened*], in one year I could have gone to the States or somewhere and start my school [*for a Master’s*] (...) I am not frustrated, because my parents encourage me, and I have a cousin in the States who graduated from this university and she went to America and she is doing business administration or something like that (...) she did her military and her university service, and then she worked here for one year (...) then she went to America because she won a scholarship (...) and I think that’s my hope.

Rita on one hand has her personal ambition to continue her education. But she wants to fulfil that without abandoning her national duties which are an essential part of Eritrean citizenship. Hannah finds herself in a similar situation. What unites both young women is the fact that they cannot do much more than hope, as in planning one’s individual life one can only go so far, as Hannah explains:

We don’t have private life ... our private life is ... whenever you decided something there are a lot of things that you have to consider ... even if I get the scholarship, I mean, OK, I decided to get a scholarship, but even if I get a scholarship, my going

⁶ In theory, students who finish their studies with a GPA of 2.8 or above are meant to be sent for further study abroad, mainly to partner universities in South Africa, but occasionally also to Europe or the US. Bulks of students fulfilling this criteria have indeed been sent over the last years, whereas others have not; the GPA in itself is not necessarily an entitlement to continue one’s education.

out is not sure, I can say ... I mean the government [...] now I can decide minor things, but for the future ... our future is trapped, limited ... you have to get permission from the government to do whatever you want ... even if I get the scholarship, I have to face a lot of problems before I could make it ... I can decide minor things [...]. The last year I lost hope, I mean, I was really discouraged by everything. I have a brother in law, I mean my mother's brother in law, he got a scholarship he got, I mean they said they pay his fees and everything, and he was ... I mean, he couldn't go still, he was in the fields [*meaning doing extended national service because of the war situation*] [...] when I saw him he was really frustrated and asked why am I learning" [*the American university where he was supposed to go extended his scholarship twice and he eventually went in September 2001*]. The effect on Hannah was: "I was like, I mean, all the time I was thinking what is our future if we cannot do ... I mean, you get scholarship from abroad and your government cannot send you there so I was like, I was frustrated, but it does not discourage me, I have to do and see what happens ... even until I do the national service and all of that, things will change a little bit ... I'm hoping things will get better."⁷

This attitude of accepting certain drawbacks in one's individual life as part of what being Eritrean means – which has been described as an outcome of the EPLF's successful endeavour in forging an Eritrean nation (Chabal, 1994; Ottaway, 1999; Schamanek, 1998) – surfaces in different ways in the lives of different people. For Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel, Dean of the College of Science, it was part of her motivation to return to Eritrea from Canada:

I knew there would be drawbacks to come here, but I wanted to come because I wanted to contribute something, I knew it would be challenging, but the things I could do here were more meaningful, in Canada many people could do my work, but here there was only me, I came because of spiritual gains, as financially it was obviously not to my benefit, I liked to be involved in building up the college, to work in a place from which you know it needs you, where your expertise is really needed and valuable, and after all it is my country, I also wanted to come and do something for my country.

In Dr. Azieb's case, it was a conscious decision to return and help building up capacity in the country. Among the 29 women at the UoA, the story of Mehret, who grew up in the revolution school and was thus socialised within the culture of the EPLF – demonstrates particularly well the different trade-offs potentially faced by the present generation of educated, young Eritrean women

⁷ This is the other side of the coin of an educational policy that centres strictly on perceived human resource needs of the country. The university in general does not encourage people to get their own scholarships, but wants them to be sent through university channels. However, there is no clear policy on that issue: Anecdotal evidence does suggest that the majority of people who secure a scholarship on their own are allowed to leave. But in some cases, exit visas are refused, as happened to Hannah's relative.

(and men) and how she grew to accept them. Her story shall therefore be dealt with in some detail in the following:

In 1995 I participated in the matriculation and I passed getting 2.6, for me I was satisfied because I was too busy, I did not have time to study [*Mehret was working full-time as a teacher and could only study after work*] (...) in 1995 when I was told my results, that I passed here [to the university], I asked to join the university, but at that time I was not allowed, since it was not allowed for the fighters ... we are considered as fighters, because we started to teach when we were in the field, in the last of 1990 ... that's because there was scarcity of teachers at that time, so we were not allowed to join the university and I stayed again for one year, I stayed teaching, then in 1996 I asked again to join the university and at that time this faculty of education was opened, and it was opened as diploma programme only, and I was told if I am willing, I can join this faculty, even though my grades were for the degree programme (...) but I was not allowed to go to other fields outside education, I was told if I was willing to join the education faculty, I can be allowed to join this university, so I prefer to go to the diploma programme (...) if I stayed waiting for a degree programme in education, years may go over, so I preferred to join the university and I started my diploma programme here ... when I completed my first year, my freshman, this faculty [of education] started ... it upgraded its programme to a degree programme, and I asked to join the degree programme and I was told once you are assigned to the diploma programme, you can't change now, so I was going to the education faculty and I asked them, and they promised me if I can score above 3.0 in my diploma, I can continue to the degree programme, if not I am going to take my diploma and return back to teaching ... I think I studied hard to get that score, and in 1999, I graduated in diploma and because I have scored 3.2 I was allowed according to their promise to continue for the degree programme ... I am happy now [*Mehret studied one additional year and graduated with her BA in SST-Biology in 2000 – because she had done years of service with the MoE already, in the field and after independence, she was not required to do university service but graduated after she finished her academic requirements*].

That Mehret is “happy now”, however, was not such a straightforward process, but needed a lot of frustration to overcome to be arrived at, as she remembers:

I was confronted with one frustrating time ... when I participated in matriculation exam in 1995, you know I can't tell you how eager I was to join the university and when I was told that I am not allowed to join the university now, everything became black to me you know, I became hopeless I became just very frustrated ... I was always believing that if I have tried my best or I worked hard, I can do everything that I dream of, but at that time, you know ... I was telling myself, I tried my best, if I have done my best [in the matriculation achieving a good result], and still I can't succeed, there is something that can block me, so what if I can't penetrate it at the end ... you know that frustration stayed for about six months with me (...) just I was

thinking all the time ‘then I am not going to continue my studies’ and I was not ready for anything except for continuing my studies you know, ‘so I am not allowed to continue my studies, so what am I going to do’ (...) I became very frustrated, I became very angry and I read only fictions, even I was not happy to have conversations with my friends or something, even to my family, I was becoming very dormant and just I take a fiction, I read a fiction, I just listen to the tape recorder or something and when I went back to teaching, to my work again, I was just going to the class and when I finished my class I go to my home ... I quit every other participation, it took six months, then I tried to rethink things (...) ‘do I have to search for another way, or do I have to wait for another chance’ [I was wondering], and fortunately I got that chance which I was looking for after one year.

Having been given the chance to finally join the university did not end all the frustrations for Mehret, but it did change her attitude on how to deal with them in a better way:

When I completed my freshman studies I wished to join the field of geology, and I had the grade to join geology, but when I was told I must join this educational faculty, I was not happy (...) at that time, we had a meeting with Dr. Wolde-Ab for the students who were in the faculty of education, and there were people who didn’t like to join this faculty and they were asking him questions (...) so when they were asking him, in one of his speeches he said that *‘you know you are intending to study something and you are finding some obstacles, most of the time at this time what we are doing is we are preparing for the needs of the country, not for the needs of you, so if you are ... brilliant enough and if you are strong people, you have to know yourself, you don’t become successful through finding all your needs but it’s how do you become successful even if there are obstacles and making your ways in different branches, that’s what makes you more strong people, for example I studied chemistry but I am working in management, so that’s the way how life goes on’*, (...) and that influenced me, I can say ... I found myself, most of the time I was rigid, I am going to do this, this, this and this, if not, I become frustrated, but from then onwards I want to say ‘I’m going to do my best and work as hard as I can in the area which I am exposed to, then I am going to try as successful as I can to continue with the chances I can get’ ... so that’s the way which I prefer to go ... you know, when I got my diploma, I was not sure I’m going to be allowed to continue to do my degree programme, so even though there was a promise, it can sometimes change, so my father was bringing me to university and he asked me that ‘are they going to allow you to do degree programme there’ because most of the time he worries about me, because he saw how I was frustrated (...) so what is she going to say if they don’t allow her, I told him that from now onwards *I don’t want to make myself busy with problems which I don’t have any power to overcome*, so if they allow me, I am going to make my degree programme, if they don’t allow me I am going to do it with correspondence or something, spending my money, and I am going to teach (...) he became very happy, ‘that’s the way how you have to manage’ [he said] (...) I think I have to make my way in a very branched way and try (...) if I was not

allowed in 1996 [to join the university], what would I have done, I ask myself and I get back to that frustration and sometimes I feel it, why I was in such a way, because it hurt me in so many ways at that time, but now I don't want to get back into such feelings (*my emphasis*).

Mehret developed – albeit in the course of quite painful personal experiences – an approach how to successfully overcome her own powerlessness and in the end use it to find individual fulfilment. This approach guides her life to this day: Mehret finished as the best student of her batch and for the time being is working as a graduate assistant at the UoA – the MoE agreed to release her if she stayed on at the university, as she would after all still be working in the field of education. She is at the same time preparing to go abroad for further study. Mehret had for a long time dreamt to continue her studies in biology, preferably genetics. But at the last encounter with the author in December 2001, she explained why she thought differently about that now:

I have to complete my Master's at least, and hopefully also PhD some day. But I want to come back here and live and work here in my country, do something useful in my country, so there is no point for me going to study genetics, as I can do my research abroad, that's fine, but when I am back here, there are no facilities for this kind of research here, I can only read things from books and search the internet for new research and new developments in that field, that is a bit pointless and boring, so I had to change my focus and will have to do something where I can carry out research activities here, so I will try to do my Master's either in something related to educational biology or early-childhood development, as this is a problem in Eritrea. (field notes: 27)

How Mehret and her fellow students come to accept the obstacles put into their way is very much in line with what is considered by many Eritreans as a spirit of pragmatism and adjustment in the face of adversity which they claim characterises Eritrean people. It is equally summed up in this statement by Sushan Berhe, Lecturer at the UoA, about plans for her future: “You know, you never know what's going to happen in Eritrea, most of the time, I cannot decide what I want to do in the future, I just have to take things the way they come.” Or by Asmeret, one of the 29 female students, who says:

I feel confident, but I relate it also with the condition of this country, this is my country, so I expect OK for my country and OK for my work ... if this condition of war is not continuing, if the peace is coming, I'm confident enough ... everything is related, my history cannot be separated from my country, also not my future plans.

These attitudes seem on the face of it to vindicate the EPLF's claim about the closeness between the leadership and the people. Or observations like

Ottaway's that within the Eritrean population, in spite of frustrations people are prepared to go along with much interference into their lives as long as it helps the overall development of the country and are "willing to accept government control without much resentment" (Ottaway, 1999: 62). Does this mean then that the young generation of potential future elite women will follow the examples of their ex-fighter sisters and make the building of the nation the overarching priority in their lives? Far from it, as the following section will reveal.

"I want a good job" – Ambitions for what kind of future?

When asked about their longer term future, the 29 women at the UoA in the centre of this study all came up with very personal visions of what they are trying to achieve.

Three issues feature prominently in these visions: One priority for many is the well-being of their families, and with the exceptions of some students who come from semi-affluent families, their foremost concern after graduation is to earn money and support their families financially. A second priority is to continue for further studies or alternatively start a business, and the third, eventually, to marry and have a family of one's own.

In spite of these very individualistic, material, careerist – in short, conventional – ambitions for the future, however, with the possible exceptions of Azieb and Rihab, all women want to live and work in their country Eritrea. That is the case in spite of the possible sacrifices this might involve. These women only aim to go abroad to acquire qualifications not obtainable in Eritrea.

These three issues – the well-being of one's family, continuing one's education and future marriage – will be illustrated with examples in more detail below. At times they overlap in quite complicated ways, as is the case for Anna:

Anna – who grew up in the revolution school and whose father and all siblings were fighters – after having finished her studies as Medical-Laboratory Technician (MLT), found herself in a set-up of conflicting aspirations and real and felt obligations. When she started at the College of Health Sciences, the only options available were diploma courses. It was promised at the time that people who scored more than 2.5 in their diploma could eventually, after a year or two of working for the Ministry of Health (MoH), continue for a degree. Anna qualifies for this track and really wants to have a BA degree, "I don't have ambitions for Master's now", she says, "but I do want to get BA, and after that, who knows."

Overall, concerning her wider ambitions for the future, she says – and this statement could have been made by almost any of the 29 women:

As a human being, I want to find a job, a good job, and my family, I want to help my family and my father especially, then (...) I think as a human I want to marry intelligent boy and have a good family, it is a normal thing as human.

Because she feels the obligation of having to take care of her father who lives in Asmara (Anna's mother died a few years ago), she would prefer to work in the private sector instead of for the MoH, "because then I could work for Hal Hal [a private laboratory in Asmara], but the ministry will send you any place." Asked what the chances are that the MoH would release her she replies: "I don't think so, the Ministry [of Health] cannot allow me, it's my suggestion only, the problem is the Ministry, you have to work with them two or three years, like that."

Another side of her would however prefer to stay with the MoH. On one hand Anna personally likes the idea of travelling within and getting to know more of the country. Secondly, leaving the MoH might put an end to her wish to continue for a degree: "Maybe the UoA is reluctant to allow me for degree programme when I work for the private and not for the Ministry." Her father encourages her to do whatever she likes and assures her that he does not need her help. But she does feel the traditional obligation put usually on one of the daughters (and she is the only one living with him at the moment) to take care of him. For the time being the decision is not for her to make, as she is required to continue to work for the MoH.

All women from not so affluent backgrounds but also some within that group mentioned as one of their first priorities after graduation to help their parents or wider families financially. Sarah puts it like this: "When I finish my BA degree, I will work for at least two years and help my parents (...) after that, maybe I will decide for myself." The same is true for Esther, who says:

I always feel so [responsible for my family], even it forced me to have good results in my [studies] ... because I think for myself the only way to join good job then help my parents is to have good results in my studies, that may be one point that encouraged me to do well and I always think to do something for my family, then go to my own life.

Sultan feels that for the moment, she does not have further aspirations to study but "I really want to help my parents and earn some money, after all these years they supported me in my education." And if she should not be able to find work in her area of studies, plant science, "I would do a computer course and work as a secretary or something ... or even start a small farm, growing vegetables, chicken ... really, I want to earn some money." Lydia has not given up her dream to eventually continue her education, but in the present situation of her family, who were deported from Ethiopia, she feels she needs to work and

support them “and I would prefer the chance for further education four or five years later.” Miriam’s family was also deported from Ethiopia. She feels her family, especially her father, has not settled here yet. Miriam hopes she can give him some peace of mind after she finished her studies:

I hope to stay here and have my job and settle the mind of my parents ... and also support my smaller brothers, my dream is that my father settles his mind, so I hope to help him [*Miriam finished her studies with very good grades and her father thinks she should go for a Master’s, but she will have none of it and is determined to stay and support her family*].

Together with supporting one’s family financially, being able to continue their education is the prime ambition for the majority of women in this study. Out of the 29 women, 16 definitely would try for a Master’s or further, seven would like to go if the opportunity arose, and only six felt content with having completed a Bachelor’s degree.

Among these six (which also include Anna, Sarah and Sultan mentioned above) are Simret, a law graduate and Samira, a graduate in accounting and management. Simret’s father is a successful consultant with international organisations in Eritrea in the legal field. She basically wants to follow in his footsteps, earn a good salary and live an independent life:

I don’t want anything, also not marriage, to interfere into my career life (...) I like to work and besides, I do not want to be dependent on anyone, I like to be dependent on myself only.

Simret has an obligation to work for two years after graduation within the court system, but is confident she will be able to pursue her individual career after that. Equally determined to have her own business is Samira, who says “I do not mind doing [university] service for free for one or two years, I feel I want to give my country something”, but after that, “I want to continue with my business plans, probably start some import-export business.” This strong vision of an individual professional career is otherwise rare to find. The majority of women has a rather vague notion of a good job they wish to have in the future, which is regarded very much related to the possibility of continuing their education. Rahel describes the need to continue one’s education:

Everyone is getting the BA degree so it’s becoming ... in the old days, twelfth grade it was the highest if you ... if someone gets a BA degree it’s one in the crowd like, now everyone is getting BA degree so you have to be different, that’s Master’s degree or PhD degree, I would love to get Master’s or PhD.

Similar concerns are voiced by Esther, who says “because nowadays, everybody is trying to have MA, then I will be the lower one, and therefore, I have to have MA as well [*Esther envisages doing it part-time so that she can work and earn some money to support her family at the same time*].”

The ambition to continue their education and do a Master’s was equally the majority sentiment expressed by female and male survey respondents alike. Almost 70 percent overall voted for continuing their education, with very little differences between female and male students, as table 1 in appendix 6.1 demonstrates.

When asked whether they felt their stay at university would have an important impact on their future life, 147 female and 140 male respondents said yes. From the answers given when asked in an open question in what sense they felt their graduation at the UoA would help them, however, it became clear that for many students it is mainly a stepping stone to a future career, or a “starting point”, as one student expressed on his survey questionnaire, which very much depends on having the chance to go abroad for further education.

One female student wrote: “For me it is the first step towards more helpful studies. You can only have Master’s, PhD and so on by having a BA first”; or a male student: “My graduation is the first step in my research career – I hope it will be a milestone in my further study for a higher degree”; or another: “My graduation is the base or core for my further ambition.”

Among other things mentioned why the graduation in itself was worthwhile, a female student answered: “It will help me to lead my life without expecting anything from any other people”; and another: “I feel very happy, graduation at university gives me confidence, acceptance by people and helps me to communicate with different foreigners” – but answers like these were rather rare exceptions.

When asked whether they thought they would work in an area related somehow to what they study at the UoA, a large majority of female and male respondents said yes; but again in an open question a number of qualifications were offered. To cite just a few rather typical comments, a male student expressed his view like this: “I think if I would have studied in the department I was interested in, the university would fulfil my ambitions, but not with the area I am studying now”; a female student wrote: “I don’t think I will continue in the field I am studying now; maybe I will try to succeed in other ways through having my degree”; and another: “having been at UoA means nothing because I want to change my field.”

Only two out of the 29 young women interviewed have the ambition to continue their education with the longer term vision of becoming part of the academic elite and work at the UoA in their former departments eventually. One of them is Elmi, who feels for her future “I would like to work in this univer-

sity” and the other Selam, who sums up her motivation for wanting to join the UoA:

I think I need to contribute something to this department [*the political science department which due to a shortage of qualified Eritrean staff is almost entirely run by Indian instructors at present*] (...) maybe this is a revenge ... sometimes I think why should I come once I get out, but I think once I got the qualification nobody is going to hurt you, I know why they are now doing these things, but once when you step up a bit higher, everyone will join you (...) so I think I have to come back (...) but sometimes I think for me, it’s good for my sake, because you know something I learned in these two years that I don’t belong to this society, that’s what I found out, so I something dare to say this is not my home [*Selam grew up in Ethiopia in what she feels was a very different culture*] ... if I’m here I know I have to do something (...) there are many nationals abroad, I am not blaming them, but sometimes it is good to come and even to serve for free and to show ... I just want to prove myself successful, I am not that much selfish (...) I’m just trying to do something which is valuable, I don’t even think the department deserves that [*coming back and work here*] from my side, but I think it’s my country, so in a sense you can’t escape.

Selam, apart from feeling she has to rectify many shortages and frustrations she experienced while being a student at the UoA – and in that sense being very ‘Eritrean’ in feeling she needs to do something positive for her country, in spite of the fact that she does not really feel she belongs here – raises one issue that comes up in many accounts: that a higher degree is the gateway to a respected position at work and in society. In a similar way, for Fatima only continuing for a Master’s will allow her to pursue the type of work she likes to do in the future. “If I don’t get MSc (Master of Science), it’s the greatest failure in my life”, she says and continues:

I’m confident [I will get a scholarship somehow to do a Master’s], I have to go to Holland, because of the linkage [*the department of soil and water conservation where she is studying has a linkage with a university in the Netherlands*] and they say it’s a good university (...) for my father and my mother, she doesn’t want me to continue ... you should marry, my father, ‘it’s OK, BA degree it’s enough for a girl’, he said (...) I don’t even now speak to them [about the Master’s], one day I asked him, I showed him some forms, now I don’t show him (...) one day I told him that it’s good to get scholarship or anything, what he said ‘BA is enough for you’ when he said that, I stopped the second time (...) and my mother ‘it’s enough, you should marry, you should do other things, you should be here, you should work and not go abroad’ she said, but I don’t mind (...) they will not put pressure on me ... I will convince them, I will be going out for only two years, when I come back I will do what you told me (...) I will go for the Master’s, but I don’t know what will be after, so far (...) so far I didn’t think about PhD, but I don’t know, I may continue (...) and I will work, I want to work (...) [to do a Master’s] it’s important I think, if I

want to work successfully, I have to continue, it's not enough the BA (...) the greatest important thing [in my life] was to come to this university ... my life would have been quite different if not ... it worked for me (...) I think now I have power about my future ... I don't even speak to them [to my family], they don't even know what I'm doing ... also [when one day I get a scholarship], they will say OK, they don't mind (...) I don't even ask anybody to tell me what to do, of course I ask them [my family] what if I did this, but I don't give them to decide for me ... I'm confident ... if I work hard, it's simply a matter of work, I should study, I should ask the guys who know about scholarship (...) so far I got what I wanted and if I'm going to get everything I want, the first basic thing is that I have to go and get my MSc, if I don't get my MSc, it's the greatest failure in my life, I think ... and this university is the step to the MSc ... I have to go and 90 percent I'm confident.

But having been able to join the UoA in the first place and having the possibility of continuing her education is important in Fatima's life not only in terms of future work opportunities. It equally provides her with the freedom to make her own decisions and not give in to family pressure on her to marry – not unlike Elmi, whose story was expanded on in chapter five.

These are what could be called side effects coming with the opportunity to join the UoA and were again backed up by the survey results: The young women and men respondents claimed to have ambitious plans for their lives – and the overwhelming majority of females and males alike expressed confidence they will achieve their ambitions: 88 percent of all female respondents and 90 percent of all male respondents. In this sense, the UoA seems at least to have succeeded in transforming the more often than not shy and intimidated students one can observe in freshman into assertive and confident young adults, women and men alike – even though this is not among its stated objectives.

For women in particular, this also implies more freedom in dealing with the pressure to marry. Even though, as Asmeret, who does not have a boyfriend and no concrete plans to marry, says: "Marriage is a 'must', not for myself, but for society, for everyone, my family, there is no pressure, but for the future it is a 'must' to marry." Similar sentiments are voiced by Elmi:

The people in Eritrea they think that girls must marry ... in fourth year, all the girls now think about marry like that, because now it is last year ... some of them also marry in fourth year, before graduation ... and some the same day with the graduation (...) if you want to participate in the society, you have to marry ... the society they think marriage is the most important (...) the society, you want to be respected by the society, like that, so you have to think about it.

In Hannah's case, it is not so much her parents, but the extended family who put on the pressure. She is however determined to resist this pressure as much as she can:

In our culture I mean, I am planning to do my MA, but like they will tell me to get married, because in our culture ... my grandmother, my parents are OK, but my grandmother she really influenced my mum, 'why is she studying all the time, tell her to have a social life' ... till I do my MA, she will really force me to get married, not only my grandmother but we have, because it is extended family we have a lot of aunts and all that and they will tell my mum (...) they will put pressure on me after a few years, two years maximum, they will start to talk about marriage (...) whenever they come together, the family [Hannah is now 23 years old] (...) 24, 23 is the time for marriage, if you get like 27 ... 'oh, she is getting old, and why don't you marry her like that', even if my mum doesn't want that the people put pressure on her, so she will say (...) she will tell me to get married, because I am one only, I mean against the whole family's will ... and that's the culture [*Hannah believes if she does not manage to get a scholarship to do her Master's straight after her university service year, she will face a lot of pressure to get married and might have to give in; she will, however, choose her husband herself and only agree to marry somebody who is educated as well and will support her future professional career*] [...] they will pressure you day in and day out, it's not normal to live ... alone after you graduate, I mean you have to get married to get away from your family, because I am with them they will tell me to get married all the time (...) my parents, I feel like they are educated, but I mean if I am to tell them that I want to live alone, no, they wouldn't allow it (...) because it is not normal, they will think what people will say, it is really restricting, I mean, I want to live alone (...) I want to live alone, if you live alone you have to deal with your life, you can challenge your life, you can learn more, but that is not possible here (...) for me coming to this university is a first step.

The same pressure is experienced by the three unmarried female lecturers at the UoA. Almaz Bein says it is not only exercised by the extended family:

Even your neighbours worry about you, they always tell me ... one neighbour also last time we had a certain get together in our house and we called the neighbours, and she was telling me 'oh Almaz, when are you getting married, how long are you going to hug your sisters' children, why not have your own, why not get married', in front of all those people, you see, it's not a big deal for me but even the neighbours are very much worried about you, let alone your family.

And Nazareth Amleson says her parents were happy for her to do a Master's, but now that she is about to go for a PhD, they are getting worried: "Now you have to settle and start a family, are you crazy to waste another four years, five years to do PhD", but in the end they can not influence her decision to go.

In fact, almost all 29 women – with the part exception of Hannah and the sole exception of Selam – want to get married, but on their own terms. Only Selam says:

I don't think [I will get married one day] because I am very much committed to things, I'm committed to my career and I want to be successful, you know marriage is not a small stuff, it is a big business that you have to treat seriously, I just don't want that guy to suffer, because I will be busy with my things (...) I think marriage is not, it has never been on my mind [...] my friends tell me 'you know you are extraordinary', whenever the discussion comes about marriage they get shocked.

Her fellow students see their future like Esther who wants to

be successful in all aspects, not only in education, to have a good family (...) he [my husband] has to know what I want, he has to accept everything what I want [*and in fact Esther has a boyfriend who goes along with her plans*] (...) I have to finish my [education], I told him always my plans (...) he don't mind.

In addition to the fact that all 29 young women are confident they will be able to choose their future husbands and their parents will accept their choice, they regard it as important that their education and future profession will give them a certain financial independence, as expressed by Sultan:

You should have to be steady first by yourself, you should have to plan to work for your home first, you should collect money, then you should marry, after that you will not have any financial problem, specially I dislike those women who are going to expect from their husbands only ... if you have an education you can imagine things, you can think how can I earn money.

And Yordanos says: "I want to work and also [...] marry, but I will continue working, that is why I am studying, I don't just want to wait for my husband to give me money."

Overall, looking at the survey respondents it seems not only are ambitions of men and women at the UoA very similar, but equally during their stay at university they face the same challenges – regardless of their sex. The foremost of these challenges include resource shortages at the university, a lack of choices, and a lack of accountability and transparency in grading (for a more detailed overview see appendix 6.2). The survey respondents' answers also indicate that men's attitudes in general are not as gender insensitive as many females believe them to be (see appendix 6.3 for details). Whether this is due to the ideological discourse on gender issues within the Eritrean revolution or simply the consequence of the modernisation of Eritrean society in its wake, or a combination of both, remains an open question at this stage (an attempt to partly answer it will be made in the concluding chapter). What needs to be kept in mind is that the survey respondents spent their years of formal schooling to a

large degree in independent, EPLF-led Eritrea – and were thus from an early age exposed to the ideological orientation within the EPLF curriculum.

However, the 29 individual women in this study do feel the difference of being a women when trying to combine their career ambitions with the wish and pressure to get married. Eritrean men are perceived to be reluctant to marry a highly educated woman, and from informal conversations the author had with various single men of different status and education, this perception seems to be still very relevant. Rahel describes this catch 22 situation:

My [female and male] friends [say] ‘oh, if you are going to get this PhD, you will get old teaching, learning all your life’, the people ... for example there are cases where the women get PhD (...) so the opportunity to get married I think will get less ... I think that the perception maybe for example if he is a boy, he wants to get married to a girl which is lower in education or something, so even though he loves her, if she has a PhD degree he don’t want to get married to her ... that’s the problem (...) but I want to have PhD degree [and get married also] you can do it at the same time, for example if you get Master’s degree and get married and then you go for your PhD.

Ruth recalls the reaction of one of her (male) instructors, who himself is about to go abroad for a PhD, when she mentioned on some occasion that she would like to be a PhD student one day as well. He told me: “‘You want to be a PhD student? – it is enough for you Masterate, because you will have social problems’ he said, so it is their [the men’s] intentions who block us.”

In general, most of the young women do believe they will somehow manage to combine both worlds in a similar way as Rahel envisages, in going for a Master’s first, return to marry and maybe have a first child, and then continue. Another example is Hayat who pictures her future:

To go away from here to continue my lesson to do MA, PhD in pharmacy (...) I marry and I continue my PhD ... I will arrange it [with my husband] first (...) my brother specially he encourages me to continue until PhD (...) and I have to do my PhD, I don’t mind [the time], I will marry and continue, it doesn’t matter even if I get a child, I will continue, [...] if I get a chance to go for PhD, I will do it, if not, I will accept it [but will be disappointed] (...) if I get a way, I have the power, I can decide it ... having joined this university it can make me independent ... and I will work till I will die.

Summing up the wider ambitions of these 29 women, their visions for their future are very much centred on their family on one hand and their individual career ambitions on the other. Being at university for most does not so much mean becoming part of any future elite, but is a means to a good position in their future work as well as a means to buy some time from traditional expecta-

tions, particularly the expectation of getting married at a certain age. Some women even are rather reluctant to join this elite, like for example Tirhas, who will graduate in educational administration and be groomed to become a school director in the future, who however feels:

I have no problem [working as director], but I prefer rather to work in the Ministry of Education rather than be a director [...] here in Eritrea, there are no women directors before and the people may not accept that, and I will never ... maybe I will never get happy to work with them [...] even it might be difficult to work with men, to be superior of them, most of the times the culture has an influence (...) [if I give orders to men] they might not accept that.

Even though quite a number of these women would not be where they are today had the Eritrean revolution not taken place, this does not seem to have a major influence on their present lives. The expectation of Luul Gebreab, chairwoman of the NUEW, seems unfulfilled, when she hopes for the future, in terms of achieving gender equality as well as preserving the spirit of the revolution:

I can be happy if I can really nurture youngsters who can replace my generation, because the continuity is then guaranteed (...) the Eritrean women have a good record, they have been fighting for the liberation of the country, we own it, it was not a kind of independence that was given to us women, we have been working to maintain it (...) so I think this record, if it is going to have any kind of fruit, the youngsters have to follow the course which we have been fighting for (...) the continuity has to be established.

On the other hand, however, what does unite these women as Eritreans is that they see their future connected to their country. Very few would take individual career ambitions as far as to be considering to leave and join the diaspora. In contrast many feel they want to contribute something to the development of Eritrea, and these are not only women like Mehret who grew up in the revolution school, as the examples of Almaz and Rahel mean to show. Almaz puts it like this:

I want to return to Eritrea in order ... there are not archaeologists in Eritrea, I mean what is the benefit of this university training archaeology students and no one is returning back (...) so I mean I like to be here if things are ... everything is OK [if there is peace], if not, I can work in other African countries (...) I like to do practical work, maybe I can also work at this university if they encourage women, something like the association of Eritrean women archaeologists or something like that (...) but archaeology really needs peace situation, something like that, I really made this kind

of decision not to make a decision about the future, I have no idea what is going to happen ... but I want to really work here in Eritrea.

In a similar spirit, Rahel wants to return after having completed her higher education abroad:

I will come back, if you get educated, you can be here, other than bringing Indian teachers, you can do it yourself, and if you get educated and you came here you ... are getting some kind of growth and development in your life, also if you came here you help your country to develop ... both of you [you and your country] are getting advantage.

Among the 29 women, only two felt they would eventually like to leave Eritrea: Azieab and Rihab (and for Rihab it has to be said she only came to Eritrea to study, she grew up and her family still lives in Saudi Arabia). Azieab says about her reasons for wanting to leave:

I don't like to live here (...) because our culture most of the time is not good and our people it will take such a long time to change ... we are so restricted by our culture (...) so if you go to foreign (countries) there is much to broaden your mind and you can think about so many things ... even if you come back from foreign your parents have to understand (...) I had desire to go abroad from very young age, because you will be free.

Whereas freedom for Azieab is related to personal freedom from cultural restrictions, freedom is equally the reason for Rihab for not wanting to stay, in a personal and political sense combined:

But in my field, actually, in political science, I don't know if our government is going to give us a chance to participate in actual political activities ... they have to realise ... they can't rule the country forever, there must be elections, we have to place some rule, but I don't know, is it going to happen (...) but my dream I don't want to live here for my kids in the future, I want them to grow up something like not difficult, it's difficult here, I want them to grow up more easy (...) maybe Eritrea is going to be something good in the future, it's a matter of time (...) maybe if some change, or a miracle happen to Eritrea I would like to stay here ... even the people here discourage you to stay here, first of all I was loving Eritrea, I want to stay here I was encouraging my family to come here and study but when I see it really when I stay fourth year and I integrate with the people more, I knew them more carefully, I didn't like it actually (...) maybe because the situation of war, they always lived in a suppressed society [*being part of the foreign community in Saudi Arabia, Rihab feels she grew up in a very open cultural environment; while respecting certain 'outer' rules of Saudi society, like the dress code for women and sex segregation in public, within her family and among friends life was very open; in addition, a num-*

ber of family members live in other countries in the diaspora, which always brought a lively cultural mix to the household during their frequent visits].

This tendency, that a majority of students at the UoA regard their education as a vehicle for personal career advancement on one hand but equally retain a desire to use their talents within their country is backed up by the survey data.

A majority of respondents (85 females and 96 males) would prefer to work somewhere in the private sector in the longer term, followed by work for the government or in academia (for details see table 2 in appendix 6.1). This is in line with experiences in most African countries which achieved independence in the 1960s, where people tended to view higher education as the “main vehicle for social mobility, primarily because it made possible the acquisition of a well-paid job in the modern sector” (Ergas, 1982: 571).

Only a relatively low number of respondents – though the number is high enough to be a cause for concern – aspire to work and live abroad. Altogether 80 out of a total of 357 who answered that question do so, thus around a quarter of respondents. One reason for this figure might be the fact that at the time of the survey the threat of further war with Ethiopia was not over yet. What has been termed brain drain and is regarded as a major impediment to the development of human resources in Africa so far thus seems not a major problem in Eritrea. Dr. Wolde-Ab in this respect feels on one hand

it [brain drain] has not been a problem, it could be a problem in the future, but I think before the conflict with the Ethiopians [*referring to the 1998-2000 border war*], the return rate [of students who went abroad for higher degrees] was more than 85 percent ... now after the conflict, lots of people have tried to find excuses to stay on, so our return rate has been lower than fifty [*the concrete figure was not made available to the researcher*] (...) but this we think will be rectified.

He says in a different context, however, that even a rate of 20 percent who do not come back was too high a figure for a country as small as Eritrea (BBC, 13 February 2001). Overall, however, he is confident for the future as he believes “most Eritreans are very committed, that’s one of the most important assets we have today”, which he relates back to the experiences of the liberation struggle.

This leads back to one of the major themes this study brought to the fore, as will be argued in more detail in the following concluding chapter: The contradictions being apparent between women’s emancipation on a collective level as envisaged by the ideology of the Eritrean revolution, and women’s emancipation on a personal level. Women’s emancipation on a collective level finds its concrete expression for example in the number of young women who in joining the UoA are groomed as candidates to occupy leading positions within society

in the future. On a personal level, women's emancipation means different things to different women and the capability to fulfil one's personal future ambitions, whatever these might be, becomes of utmost importance.

The story so far – Conclusion

The Eritrean revolution was the combination of a national revolution (understood in the way Hermassi (1976) defines that term) coupled with a social revolution (as conceptualised by Selbin, 1993).

Even though it unfolded at a historical moment in time often referred to as post-modern or post-developmental (see for example the discussion in Sachs, 1996), the Eritrean revolution belongs to the tradition of revolution as a modernising project, inspired by (socialist) notions of “economic, social and cultural progress” (Cabral, 1980: 150). But far from being an anachronism, it is argued here that the Eritrean revolution – in combining a developmentalist orientation with a concept of women’s rights – was, like other revolutions before and possibly in the future, in various ways a successful attempt to “improve the human social condition” (Dunn, 1989: 20) of the Eritrean people.¹

As such it puts the usefulness of labels such as ‘modernity’ versus ‘post-modernity’ into question (see Kolakowski, 1990). The line taken in the context of this study and within the ideology of the Eritrean revolution is to conceive of modernisation in its most basic sense, resting on the idea of “progress” as a “near-universal aspiration” (Edwards, 1999: 19), albeit without assuming that a standardised way ‘forward’ exists to move from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’, but acknowledging the need to take account of the particular conditions within a particular society at a particular juncture in its history.

¹ For the most recent discussion on the potential future relevance of revolutions see Foran (2003).

At the same time, however, to arrive at a 'better' future in economic, social and political terms, most revolutionary movements in the twentieth century in the developing world were guided by very similar ideological beliefs: The anticipated 'new' society was to be created through the spread of education and the (anticipated) simultaneous diminution of superstitious beliefs, coupled with technical development and a general drive to eradicate 'backwardness'. Concerning the latter, the status of women within a given society received prominence as an indicator for its 'revolutionary progressiveness.' Gender relations became to "constitute an important part of the culture, ideology, and politics of revolutionary societies" (Moghadam, 1997: 137).

This rationalist worldview which underlies revolutionary ideology – ultimately relying on the emancipation of secular reasoning from revelation – ties revolutions to the "transformations wrought on the consciousness of 'the people'" (Lazarus, 1999: 138). It makes them – at least in the short term – elitist endeavours, as "the process of revolutionary change is one of instruction of the many by the few" (Dunn, 1989: 7), guided by the idea of a movement in popular consciousness from "local knowledge to knowledge of the principles of national and social revolution" (Lazarus, 1999: 138).

In the context of revolutions in developing societies in the twentieth century, this in fact made the majority of such revolutions endeavours in which revolutionary change was combined with nation building. Within the modern era it is the nation which has been the site for forging "this articulation between universalist intellectualism and popular consciousness" (ibid.). The Eritrean revolution was no exception here, and with the attainment of Eritrean independence, which in itself at the same time fundamentally altered the structural conditions of Eritrean society, achieved the main objective of the national revolution.

This leaves the focus on the social revolution and the question what became of the social-revolutionary agenda the EPLF set out to implement during the process of revolutionary consolidation, after national liberation was achieved and the former revolutionary movement took over power in the new state and transformed itself into a political party – the PFDJ.²

As has been outlined above (see in particular chapter 2), the EPLF's programme of social transformation placed a change in the status of women within Eritrean society at centre stage. The Eritrean revolution has thus been described as an outstanding example for Moghadam's 'Woman's Emancipation model' of revolution (Alayli, 1995). Revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea was therefore here looked at from the perspective of emerging possibilities for women's emancipation and a change in gender roles within Eritrean society –

² In fact, the exact status of the PFDJ partway between "a single ruling party and a national movement" (Luckham, 2002: 256) remains unresolved.

following the dictum that gender is a prism through which wider processes of social change can be illuminated as well as evaluated (Einhorn, 1993: 2f).

Women's emancipation in itself is a wide concept. The focus in this study was on individual (present and potentially future) elite women, for three reasons:

Firstly, in the lives of present elite women the contradictions within the revolution are bound to be particularly pronounced.

Secondly, the EPLF's approach to bring about societal change in the status of women was guided by the principle to create female role models and the accompanying belief that the more of these role models existed, the easier it would be for 'ordinary' women to advance. This belief is in line with the general model of revolutionary change as a process relying on an elite to instruct the ignorant. Often it were in some ways 'exceptional' women who became such models and therewith part of the elite. While this is not a sufficient condition for women's emancipation, it is regarded as a necessary one in the Eritrean context. It will be the present and even more so the potential future elite women who will in the longer term shape the conditions for institutionalising and consolidating progress for the majority of 'typical' women.

And thirdly – instead of examining a revolution's promises predominately in terms of fulfilment on a collective level, related to a change in the structural conditions within a society as revolutions are about mass movements and grievances and to succeed require the mobilisation of large parts of the population – it is argued here that a revolution's most important legacy can be found in examining the grandeur of individual lives. The focus is thus on understanding how individuals – individual women in this case – were freed by the Eritrean revolution, possibly in ways not anticipated by its agenda. This line of thought follows Wertheim's dictum that "the mental forces released through a revolution may embody its most important effect on a society", these "mental forces" understood as encompassing for example a "heightened sense of human dignity and a fresh belief in new social values" (Wertheim, 1974: 220).

Taking gender as the prism through which the EPLF's social revolutionary agenda is being illuminated and evaluated, the potential impact of the Eritrean revolution on the present and future generations of Eritrean women (and men) can be situated at two opposite poles. These are expressed here by Asmeret Abraha on one hand, and Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel on the other. Asmeret believes that:

The history of Eritrean women it's unparalleled, no one can compare it ... I read many books about the different liberation struggles, and no one did like Eritrean women, what they achieved should be preserved in the coming generations (...) their history should be preserved and the coming generation should inherit it ... and

the society will then also understand (...) it cannot change the whole society, but there will be some people who will be influenced by reading the story (...) *I believe that we are models, we fighters, and the women have to take lessons from our experience* (...) not only here in Eritrea, we have to exchange experiences with other women around the world, women are still not given equality of opportunity, so our experience might be useful for other women around the world ... this exchange between Eritrean women and other women, it can be helpful to change the women's situation around the world (*my emphasis*).

Dr. Azieb, in contrast, draws the following, different picture:

In Eritrea, it is still so often the culture that holds the girls back, the expectations of the outside world, that girls are expected to marry ... so to change that situation, the culture will have to change, and that will only happen gradually, and the women who fought for the EPLF after all only had a small impact on facilitating this cultural change, *I thought the liberation movement would open a door for women in this country, but it did not as much as I hoped it would* (...) the culture needs to change and become supportive of women, the cultural change did not come in the revolution, in the field, it was something out there far removed from the culture of the society as a whole, it turned out that the tradition was more powerful than what they [the female fighters] had done, they have done the hardest thing, fighting, related to that everything else seems so much simpler, but they did not really break the tradition, and what is sad, some of them after they came back they have some position, are successful, but many struggle, they are single mothers and find it hard to make a living, but at least what happened through the experiences in the struggle is everybody could see their contribution and now there are women in many fields which were unthinkable for women to join before ... *but in the longer run, I think only education can help women to truly liberate themselves* (*my emphasis*).

These two statements point to the major themes which emerged in the individual lives of the women in this study. They expose the main contradictions within the Eritrean revolution and to what degree these will be resolved is bound to be decisive for a successful process of revolutionary consolidation. These themes can be described as: the conceptualisation of the dichotomy between 'modernity' and 'tradition' by the revolution and its practical implications in individual lives; the model of social change towards (more) gender equality; and the almost exclusive focus on collectivity. The model of social change envisages women to enter the elite and act as role models for others to follow. But it does not take account of the fact that the women to do so are often 'exceptional', nor, particularly in excluding the importance of the domestic in women's lives, of the fact that individual women might choose to follow different models. The focus on collectivity not only ignores the 'personal' in women's lives, but equally – and at least for the potential future elite women in this study more crucially – that the revolution's modernist agenda, resting above

all on the expansion of educational opportunities and advancement on merit, will create individual ambitions “and help women to truly liberate *themselves*”, not (only) the nation.

The following will, in bringing together the complex findings of the previous chapters, discuss each of these themes in more detail – albeit acknowledging that they are in fact very much interlinked and cannot easily be separated. Finally, some more general conclusions will be presented.

Caught between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’

One thing the above quoted statements by Asmeret Abraha and Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel have in common: A ‘modernist’ outlook, in which women’s emancipation is seen as a quasi natural outcome if certain paths or models are followed. Be it that women should take the ex-fighters as a model on their own way ‘forward’, or that they should get educated and thus become enabled to “liberate themselves”, or a combination of both – modernity is put in contrast to a ‘traditional’ lifestyle regarded as backwards and in need to be overcome.

But this dichotomy between the ‘progressive’ agenda fostered by the Eritrean revolution and the ‘backwardness’ of traditional society does not necessarily correspond to how women in this study conceptualise their lives. In the way it is conceptualised by the hegemonic political ideology, this dichotomy implies rejecting parts, possibly valuable parts in one’s personal judgement, of one’s own culture.³ It resulted in the conception of an “enlightened vanguard” (Hale, 2001: 134) with the task to educate the unenlightened majority. But for many women the right to choose certain parts of their tradition may be as important as the chance to lead a ‘modern’ life.

Among the generation of present elite women, be they former fighters or civilians, as well as among many women of the younger generation, the attitude dominates that for ‘backward’ (read ‘traditional’) attitudes towards women to be overcome, women need to prove their capability in a (male-dominated) professional environment – ideally in a high position. But even in the lives of some young women with aspirations for a modern lifestyle as professional

³ See for example Tesfa Gebremedhin (2002: 15f): “Traditional institutions and social structures (...) are constraints when improving the well-being of society”, and “many long-established values, customs and ways of thinking and doing are incompatible with human resource development objectives”, before he concludes that these will have to change in order to “accelerate economic development and social progress in the country.” It is not only in relation to the status of women that the EPLF’s modernist development strategy ignores parts of people’s reality. Another prominent example is agricultural policy – with its focus on the settlement of pastoralists – which has been described as a revival of modernisation theory and its agricultural applications, characterised by a lack of understanding of the value of pastoralism as a mode of production (for further discussion see Fullerton-Joireman, 1996; Hirt, 2001 – who quotes the responsible minister as having described pastoralism as “a very backward way of raising cattle”, *ibid.*: 144).

women, the break with some of their traditions does not come easy. This is for example demonstrated in Elmi's considerations about going along with her family's agenda on marriage. For many other women, marriage, including arranged marriage, can indeed be a very rational (and fulfilling) choice for their future.

Besides, women can and do use certain cultural traits and traditions to their personal advantage and, arguably, personal emancipation. This is most strikingly visible in the discussion of 'shyness'. In demonstrating how shyness – perceived as a handicap in Eritrean modernist thinking – can serve as a valuable asset, it becomes apparent that the postulated neat dichotomy between 'backwardness' and 'modernity' does not correspond to Eritrean women's reality.

This is particularly the case in the recent political climate, where national service obligations are enforced with a rigour not seen before: Having started on an irregular basis in 2000 mainly in Asmara, the authorities have meanwhile mounted a nation-wide campaign to identify men and women who did not fulfil their service obligations.⁴ This happens at a time when going to Sawa is as unpopular as never before.⁵ Married women, however, are exempted from national service, whereas women who would qualify for joining the university are not. Thus, choosing the 'traditional route' for women might in the end lead to more personal freedom and fulfilment. After all, what traditional expectations and the EPLF's gender ideology have in common is that they leave little room for individual choices, but centre on the collectivity of either the extended family and the cultural environment on one side, or the nation on the other.

In addition, the conditions the vast majority of former female fighters – mostly rural women who defied traditional roles and, in the words of Dr. Azieb at the beginning of this chapter, have "done the hardest thing, fighting" – experience in their present civilian lives, the problems they have on the professional as well as familial level, makes them unlikely role models for the vast majority of Eritrean women to follow (see Zimprich, 1996: 97f; for some

⁴ Within this campaign, groups of soldiers are posted at busy street corners and check the identity papers of all passers-by of national service age, and particularly young people. Increasingly, soldiers also conduct searches in bars, taxis and people's homes. If identity papers do not show that the person in question has fulfilled his/her obligations, they are immediately brought to a holding centre and in most cases subsequently sent to Sawa (author's observations in Asmara and Barentu during 2001; see also BBC, 18 July 2002).

⁵ This has not always been the case: The first batch of national service recruits in July 1994 comprised of 10,000 youth mainly from Asmara; accounts of their service were widely broadcast on radio and TV and made many young people registering for the second batch. Eventually, 30,000 youth had registered, while Sawa can only accommodate a maximum number of 20,000 at a time (UNICEF, 1996: 20; account of Rahel, one of the 29 UoA students, whose sister was in the first batch). It is mainly since the aftermath of the 1998-2000 war that people are reluctant to go. During the war, many volunteered to defend their country – including UoA students who had to be convinced to stay and rather concentrate on their education.

individual experiences also Christmann, 1996; Bernal, 2000). They point to a more general failure to institutionalise and consolidate the advance of 'ordinary' women. A similar failure – at least so far – becomes apparent in the composition of female (and male) students at the UoA in 2000/2001, with only a negligible number of females from a non-urban, not-advantageous background.

Aspirations of 'traditional' women – women who for example opt out of formal education and with it out of the 'modern' vision – is an issue beyond the scope of this study and its focus on elite women; here lies scope for future research. More generally, the different aspirations of Eritrean women in the aftermath of the struggle seem to show the same pattern that Summerfield (1998) reports for women after World War II: On one hand, the war "hastened women towards modernity", on the other "it stimulated a return to traditional feminine lifestyles" (ibid.: 253).

Revolutionary women as 'bearers of modernity'

As has been discussed above, women were regarded by the EPLF as important 'bearers of modernity'. The 'revolutionary EPLF woman fighter' was constructed as a desirable female role model – a model for an emancipatory understanding of gender roles, where women in the way they lived their lives, an important aspect of which was women doing 'men's work', presented an alternative to the traditional understanding of women's status in society. This view neglected to define women's emancipation in terms of women's own interests (see Bernal, 2000; Silkin, 1983), resulting in what Bernal has called the "repression of the domestic" (Bernal, 2000: 61) together with the neglect of other specific traits of womanhood.⁶

While in the field its members complied with the prescribed EPLF culture of what amounted to the attempt to create a 'gender-neutral' organisation, based on an elimination of female gender characteristics without a "comparable erasure of masculinity" (Bernal, 2000: 67). In the aftermath of the struggle they are pressured – and especially men are often more than willing – to conform to the rules of civilian society. For male ex-fighters this entails "proclaiming positions of authority within their families and enjoying male privileges such as freedom from domestic work" (Bernal, 2000: 65). In de-facto concentrating its efforts to change the status of women on mobilising women into participating on an equal footing in the societal sphere, the EPLF on one hand failed to

⁶ In this context Christmann (1996) quotes a former fighter (who herself is divorced with one daughter and continues to work as a midwife) on the problems this approach creates for many of her comrades: "After liberation, many women finally had the child they were dreaming about all along. Now, they would prefer to stay at home and nurse it properly. But in doing that, they would risk losing their fought for equality" (ibid.: 125; author's translation from German original).

acknowledge that the individual circumstances in a woman's familial environment often lay the foundations for her future (in addition to the accounts narrated in this study, see Asgedet Stefanos, 1997b). On the other hand the EPLF failed to take account of women's specific role within the process of social reproduction, which in Eritrea is embedded into a general cultural environment in which marriage is regarded as the aspect of prime importance in a woman's life.

The modernising aspects of the EPLF's ideology and practice opened up new spaces for women to join the elite – though mostly for women whose biographic traits were conducive to such a future life path. But these spaces could, and in fact have on past occasions been, equally opened up by a 'modern' attitude within individual families in defiance of usual cultural norms. Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebiel, one of the female academic staff at the UoA and representative for the group of present elite women remembers about her childhood – and similar biographic traits were found among many of the 'typical' present day female students at the UoA:

You are not immune from what the outside world is saying, when I grew up, for example when guests came, they saw me reading rather than helping my mother in domestic work. And they say 'she should help her mother' and argued and discussed with my father, but my father always said in front of me and my sisters, also to encourage us 'the children should not do housework, they should be free to study', and also we had a maid to support my mother, still, it would upset the guests, and they would continue to argue with my father, but he would always defend us and basically not allow us to get involved in these domestic tasks (...) and also my mother, even though she left school after elementary level, supported my father and always told us 'do something with your own life, do not depend on anybody else' that is what she always said.

Overall it seems fair to say that the revolution and its aftermath created new conditions – apart from a gender-progressive legacy within individual families – which exposed Eritrean women in different ways to a future outside the traditional. This exposure reflected back on the lives of the women in this study in different ways: In the field the EPLF's programme of political education opened new horizons for at least a certain group of women who had joined the Front and made them define their liberation in the context of the collective liberation and modernisation of the Eritrean nation. In contrast, exposure in the revolution's aftermath is related to different encounters with and exposure to the modern global environment, leading to more individualistic visions for the future.

These different 'encounters with modernity' opened up space for certain women. In fact, the women in this study for whom this was the case can be

described as similar in terms of structure of personality: What they have in common is a strong personal determination to succeed in using the opportunities that were given to them – be it in the struggle, in business, within the family, through education, coupled with the inclination to make the ‘modern’ agenda their agenda. The latter not least because the modernisation of Eritrean society is almost a prerequisite for allowing many of these women to live the lives they want to live.⁷

What these ‘encounters with modernity’ largely failed to do was to transform the mass of Eritrean men and their understanding of gender roles – apart from individual exceptions – and as such the general cultural environment for women in Eritrea. This wider transformation is, however, a necessary condition for more ‘ordinary’ women to advance and an important challenge for any revolutionary society. The only indication in this study that gender attitudes among men might have been altered over the last ten years since the EPLF came to power was among the ‘modern’ elite of students at the UoA (see the discussion of survey results in appendix 6.3). In contrast, among many professionals as well as secondary school students, this seems not the case (see in particular the discussions in chapter 5).

Within the broader context of the EPLF’s ideology this points to the Front’s failure to exercise sustained leadership on gender transformation based on the interpretation by women themselves of the reality they live in. This becomes apparent not only in the repression of the domestic by the (post-)revolutionary leadership discussed above, but more generally in the negligence of the “cultural bases of womanhood” (Bernal, 2000: 64), which amounts to women being let down by the political leadership. This, according to one of the female lecturers at the UoA, is most prominent in the stance taken by the NUEW in ignoring most of the issues that really concern women. Citing the example of women in the military, she says:

I would say this organisation [the NUEW] does not represent women, the organisation just supports the government and wants to hide all the government’s faults and victimise women, for example always women in the military service, they try to express their opinion, they have these problems, sexual problems, other problems ... they [the NUEW] always try to silence them ... they don’t see objectively the problems women are facing (...) we need strong women in politics, independent women.

⁷ A good example for the assertion that the personality traits of the women in this study are quite similar, regardless of whether they succeeded in the military environment of the struggle, in business, or in education, is Tsega Gaim, who after liberation went back to her ambitions before the struggle and succeeded in a similar way as she had done in the field (see chapter 6).

The perceived failure to incorporate “gender consciousness into the Eritrean world view and definition of development” (Rentmeesters, 1993: 81, who in a presentation on women and development planning at a conference on policy options for Eritrea held in Asmara in July 1991, immediately after the EPLF had come to power, recommended to do just that) relates back to the fact that the Eritrean revolution was predominately men led.⁸ Additionally, the continued absence of women from the major decision making bodies within the state and the PFDJ means women’s concrete experiences are not part of the political deliberations (Connell, 2002).⁹

This is connected to a wider issue: the control over virtually every aspect of Eritrean development by the highly centralised executive branch of the state (ibid.). It points to the main shortcoming in the process of revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea: a lack of democratic participation, combined with a lack of decision making power over one’s individual life.

The individual versus the nation

Saba, the informant to Bernal’s research mentioned before, expresses this shortcoming like this: “I can only understand the problem of Eritrean women as the problem of democracy in Eritrea” (Bernal 2000: 73).

For Abrehet Ghebrekidan, former fighter and present lecturer at the UoA, it is the “coming into the constitutional government” which means that “people have to be elected rather than appointed” that will allow at least the educated women to occupy influential positions.

What Abrehet refers to as “constitutional government” should have been started to be put in place in 1997. From 1995 onwards a new constitution was widely debated in the whole country and finally ratified in 1997 “as the fundamental law of our Sovereign and Independent State of Eritrea” (Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE), 1996) by the highest legislative body, the National Assembly (NA) (Bereket Habteselassie, 1998; Luckham, 2002).¹⁰ Even

⁸ At the UoA an attempt might be made in the future towards the incorporation of gender consciousness into public discourse. Former dean of the FoE, Dr. Belainesh Araya, was relieved from her duties at the beginning of the academic year 2001/2002 in order to investigate the establishment of a women’s/gender study unit. Whether this project will receive the financial and institutional support needed remains to be seen (for a discussion of a preliminary agenda see Belainesh Araya, 2001b).

⁹ For example according to Connell, high government and party officials regard childcare facilities as an unnecessary luxury (Connell, 2002: 121).

¹⁰ The Constitutional Commission of Eritrea (CCE) was established in 1994 and consisted of a 50 member policy-making council and a 10 member executive committee drawn from the council. Members presented all sections of Eritrean society (rural and urban populations, all nationalities, ex-fighters and present army personnel as well as Eritreans from the diaspora); twenty-one women were part of the council, albeit only two in the executive committee. The Commission’s mandate was for two years, during which it was to draft a constitution on the basis of “a wide-

though in the constitution national duties are arguably given priority over individual rights (see CCE, 1996; Christmann, 1998; Ruth Iyob, 1997b), the constitution does provide for the creation of representative democracy and the guarantee of basic human rights – including free speech, free press, freedom of movement (within and outside Eritrea) and freedom of assembly as well as equality before the law (CCE, 1996).¹¹

For the time being, the implementation of the constitution has been suspended indefinitely. This move is officially justified with the national emergency in the course of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war.¹² It could, as will be argued in due course, endanger the whole social revolutionary project, as the forces of modernity that were unleashed by the EPLF develop their own dynamics and cannot easily be subdued again under authoritarian control.

To this day, the political leadership places the enhancement and persistence of national unity above all other aspects of its agenda (see EPLF, 1994). An agenda that is otherwise characterised by a high amount of pragmatism, an “awareness of how the world had changed since the fall of the Berlin Wall”

ranging and all-embracing national debate and education through public seminars and lecture series on constitutional principles and practices” (CCE, 1995: 1).

¹¹ Representative democracy does not necessarily mean multi-party democracy, but (according to a conversation the author had with two members of the CCE in 1997) was more envisaged following the Ugandan model of no-party democracy (see also CCE, 1996: Article 20). While the constitution provides for the possibility of a multi-party system, parties along religious or ethnic lines are forbidden and the legislation needed to establish a multi-party system has yet to be prepared (CCE, 1996; Luckham, 2002). Luckham in this context quotes a senior minister’s mistrust of a multi-party system which from the author’s own experience is paradigmatic for a wider part of the political elite as having said: “Whatever the provisions of the constitution, where is the social and political basis for multi-partyism? Who would form an opposition party? Anyone who tried to challenge the PFDJ would be asked ‘where have you been during these thirty years of armed struggle, what have you contributed to this nation?’” (ibid.: 256).

¹² The current security situation does on the whole not provide any justification for the delay of the constitution’s implementation or the government crackdown on its critics (see Amnesty International, 2002; Jayasekera, 2001). The military phase of the war ended when – after Ethiopia militarily gained the upper hand and occupied large chunks of Eritrean territory mainly in the western lowlands of the country – both parties signed an agreement on the cessation of hostilities, brokered by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in June 2000 in Algiers, followed by a further agreement in December 2000 which paved the way for the deployment of an international peace keeping force along the border and the establishment of a buffer zone between the warring parties 25 kilometres inside Eritrean territory. In due course, a border commission was appointed to determine the exact boundary based on colonial treaties and applicable international law. It gave its ruling in April 2002. The demarcation of the border on the ground should have begun in October 2003. It has for the time being been put on hold indefinitely as Ethiopia suddenly voiced serious objections to the commission’s ruling. There seems, however, no imminent threat of a return to war. (Agence France Press (AFP) 24 October 2003; AFP, 30 October 2003; Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC), 2002; Müller, 2003; UN-Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), 18 November 2002; for an analysis of the commission’s ruling and its implications see Clapham, 2003).

(Luckham, 2002: 253), which includes (at least on the surface) a commitment to “market-oriented development and democratic constitutional government” (ibid.) – the same pragmatism that had characterised the EPLF in the field. However, these commitments become “secondary to this prime goal” of national unity (Tronvoll, 1998: 462f). This unity is to be fostered by national development policies which rely for their implementation on broad participation, arrived at by mobilisation of the people, comparable to the EPLF’s war strategy, combined with a propensity to individual self-sacrifice – while at the same time ensuring the influence and power of the leadership.¹³

But, in contrast to the years of the struggle, where it has been observed that the “democratic centralism had a genuinely democratic or participatory content, which was never extinguished by central control” (Luckham, 2002: 251)¹⁴ today’s participation has been described as a mere “response to government dictates” (Tronvoll, 1998: 482).¹⁵ While not called “democratic centralism” any longer, the present government structure reflects the idea that only a few individuals at the top of society are to be entrusted with the power and duty to decide what the optimal strategy for the future development of Eritrea and its citizens should be (Tronvoll, 1998: 469).

What is ignored here is the fact that the process of modernisation of Eritrean society – relying above anything else on various forms of formal and informal education – develops its own dynamics and with it people’s ambitions and their visions for the future change.

Looking at the former women fighters in this study, their ambitions were geared towards an independent Eritrea and more liberated women within it. Once that was achieved personal visions for the majority remained tied to the collective of the nation. Ambitions were already altered and became broader for the children of the revolution, those who grew up in the revolution school or

¹³ This finds its most concrete expression in the presidential office at the core of executive power. Not only is Issayas Afewerki president, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, chairman of the NA and secretary general of the PFDJ; he also commands wide ranging powers of appointment (including ministers, provincial governors, high court judges and ambassadors). In addition, the presidential office, including the Office for Macropolicy attached to it, is the ultimate decision making body, often sidelining the relevant ministries and through its own directives undercutting ministerial authority (Christmann, 1998; Hirt, 2001; Pool, 2001).

¹⁴ Similar judgements were made by various former fighters over the years in conversations with the author, in spite of the existence of the clandestine party.

¹⁵ An example for the loss of genuine democratic input provides the administrative reform of 1996, which in addition to establishing new regional boundaries (see map 1 and 3) also altered the way decisions are made at the local level. The power of the Ministry of Local Government (MLG) has been considerably enhanced, whereas the traditional *baitos* (the village councils strengthened by the EPLF during the struggle) only retain an advisory role. This move has been described as a government strategy to ensure its development policies are executed on the village level by the MLG (for further discussion see Hirt, 2001; Tronvoll, 1998).

other EPLF institutions, as Mehret's story is testimony to. She recalls when visiting her father and other family members in the trenches during the struggle:

There was something that they were giving us as a message ... they were telling us that you are children, and you have to learn more, we are going to make your country very free and you are going to build it ... so what you have to stress is school, not fighting or something ... that was their advice, and fortunately it became like what they said and I can say this advice also gave us some strength to study hard.

For others, see for example Esther and her story, as well as Asmeret and Anna from the revolution school (all in chapter 5), it was with the attainment of Eritrean independence that a personal ambition for their future developed. For others again, independence resulted in new avenues of exposure with the outside world. These exposures could take the form of the chance to travel abroad and meet women from different cultural environments (see for example the accounts of Ghennet Bokretzion and Saba Mebrahtu in chapter 4). Or, particularly for the present student generation, it could mean increased contact with the Eritrean diaspora – as since independence, each year many Eritreans return at least for a visit, some to stay¹⁶ – and with friends or relatives who study abroad, coupled with the not unlikely prospect to be sent for further study by the UoA dependent on one's academic performance. Last but not least exposure to global opportunities is provided through the internet.

By way of conclusion

Looking at these issues from a wider perspective, the development of strong personal ambitions is a logical consequence of the EPLF's model of social change in terms of altering the status of women in Eritrean society, based as it is on some 'vanguard' women accomplishing something 'extraordinary'. In the past it was a small elite of female fighters who in the course of the struggle became models for their sisters. Today, it is for example the "brilliant" girls – brilliant being related to their academic performance in formal schooling – who are presented and encouraged as models for others.

The same philosophy is behind certain policy measures, for example the decision by Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, president of the UoA, to "try to create some role models for them [the female students], I wanted to have women at the helm of authority [*referring to his appointment of two women as director of academic affairs and director of research respectively*]." What all these approaches have in common is that they are related to the 'promise of a better future', 'better'

¹⁶ According to official sources, in the first half of the year 2002 alone, 78,000 foreign visitors (most of which were diaspora Eritreans) entered the country (<http://www.shaebia.org>, 13 July 2002).

understood as ‘modern’ – in contrast to ‘tradition’ with the connotations of being ‘harmful’ and ‘backward’. In striving for the same goals as these ‘model women’, this future can be attained – ideally within the parameters of the Eritrean revolution, what Foaza Hashim refers to as the third phase of the struggle: submitting power to the next generation who are expected to take over the ideals the revolution fought for.

What is overlooked here is the fact that ‘modernity’ means different things to different people, and that the social changes brought about by educational and other opportunities for women within Eritrean society do have an important individual component. Concerning the young women at the UoA in the centre of this study, as well as their counterparts in secondary schools, Asmeret Abraha’s belief – a belief enforced by an official ideology in which the dominant female role model is the ex-fighter woman with her propensity to serve the nation – that she and her ex-fighter sisters are models from which the younger generation of Eritrean women will take aspirations for their future does not correspond to reality. Former fighters like Asmeret are rather regarded as what Hale has described as “symbols of a romantic era that passed, metaphors for and icons of the struggle” (Hale, 2000: 349), their deeds admired and respected, but to a large degree irrelevant in confronting the challenges women in present-day Eritrea face. Today’s role models for the young women in this study are educated women, diaspora women, not least women like the author – women who are successful in both, their professional careers and their family lives.

Overall, concerning revolutionary consolidation and here in particular looking at the EPLF’s socialist-modernist ideology, one can argue – and the different women participants in this study bear witness to this – that its modernist agenda, particularly its believe in education in fostering modernity and gender equality, led to increasing agency for individual women and opened up opportunities which in many ways would not have been possible without the revolution. It is this agenda which will remain the most successful legacy of the Eritrean revolution, and as such has contributed to “the building of the [Eritrean] people’s economic, social and cultural progress” (Cabral, 1980: 150).¹⁷

¹⁷ In addition, structural changes in (particularly rural) Eritrean society were caused by the large number of (male) casualties during the thirty years of struggle (the EPLF gives the number of its combatants killed as 70,000 – see Berhane Woldemichael and Ruth Iyob, 1999: 29), resulting in an unusually (by Eritrean traditional norms) high percentage of female headed households (see Rentmeesters, 1993: 80; Green, 1994: 16f for more details). These female heads of households in due course needed to carry out a variety of tasks autonomously which were previously reserved for men (the most prominent example being ploughing). Whether and how this demographic impact of the Eritrean revolution will in the long run have a lasting impact on the cultural traditions of rural Eritrea only time will tell (see Christmann, 1996: 30). In any case, these issues are

Looking at formal education in (post-)revolutionary Eritrea, this study, in having focused on higher education, shows that tertiary education can act as the lowest common denominator for social change in potentially fulfilling three different roles in the process of modernising Eritrean society and gender relations within it. These roles can be situated in the three different spheres of the economic, the political, and the cultural.

Firstly, concerning the economic sphere, the development of human capital in line with modernist assumptions about human capital development and economic growth is the major role attributed to tertiary education by the political leadership. Secondly, concerning the political sphere, tertiary education is regarded as helping to create a meritocratic, non-corrupt post-revolutionary political leadership – a leadership in which certain women will be included by virtue of their academic achievements. And thirdly, concerning the cultural sphere, tertiary and other forms of higher education are viewed as important tools in overcoming ‘cultural backwardness’. The data in this research shows higher education to make a valuable contribution for moving along each of these three roads towards modernisation. But at the same time, each road can only be travelled for a short distance before diverse and often contradictory demands produce friction and slow progress in that direction.

Concerning the economic, the problematic nature, technically as well as ideologically, of planning human capital development and deployment becomes apparent in the (more often than not contrasting) individual aspirations of young women and men at the UoA (see various discussions in chapter 7). Concerning the political, future recruitment of a female political elite by educational achievement is bound to (continue to) select primarily those with an ‘exceptional’ background, and more generally women who are detached from the living experiences of the mass of ‘ordinary’ women. As such, the political leadership is likely to continue to fail to consolidate the advance of ‘ordinary’ women. Lastly, concerning the cultural, for many women in tertiary or secondary education, to be able to complete or continue their education often mainly postpones certain ‘traditional’ obligations, for example marriage, for a few years rather than leading to a real confrontation with ‘traditional’ values – even though the un-gendered survey responses discussed in appendix 6.3 indicate a slow change in cultural attitudes.¹⁸

beyond the scope of this study with its focus on part of the elite of educated women and the assumption that the challenges they face will in the longer term shape the conditions for the majority of Eritrean women caught between the forces of modernisation and tradition.

¹⁸ A study on the experiences of women in higher education (students as well as academics and from backgrounds comparable to those of the urban women in this study) in Ethiopia came to a similar conclusion: they “mostly (...) avoided the traditional pressures rather than confronted them” (Ridley, 2000: 138).

Taken together, for the majority of the women in this study it is – ironically, considering the fact that for the EPLF the collective or the nation is of overarching importance – on the individual, personal level that the revolution (partly) succeeded and will continue its influence into the future, and created what Moore describes as “the possibility of liberation” (Moore, 1967: 506).

Looked at from a wider perspective, this increasing focus on individuality is a logical consequence of processes of modernisation: As they progress and offer increasing opportunities for individuals in a rapidly changing world – while at the same time traditional certainties lose their hold – individuals are forced to negotiate “lifestyle choices” (Giddens, 1991: 5), which in turn become more and more important in the constitution of personal identities (McCrone, 1998).

For the constitution of the latter, what has been called “personal nationalism” (McCrone, 1998: 40), understood as an active process of affirmation of one’s national identity, can however be equally important – and is definitely so in a nationalist culture like Eritrea’s. Personal nationalism in the Eritrean context is not only reinforced by rituals like the nation-wide twice-daily minute of silence at six o’ clock when the national flag is raised or lowered at all official buildings, when all traffic comes to a hold, as does any other activity in public spaces. It is equally reinforced by the propensity to at least partly serve the country in one’s professional life, as expressed to different degrees by the protagonists of this study.

In terms of consolidating a change in the status of women, the survey conducted among a sample of UoA students indicates that a change in gender attitudes seems to have taken place at least (and possibly only) among the younger generation of educated men and women with a modern outlook, namely those who attend university.¹⁹

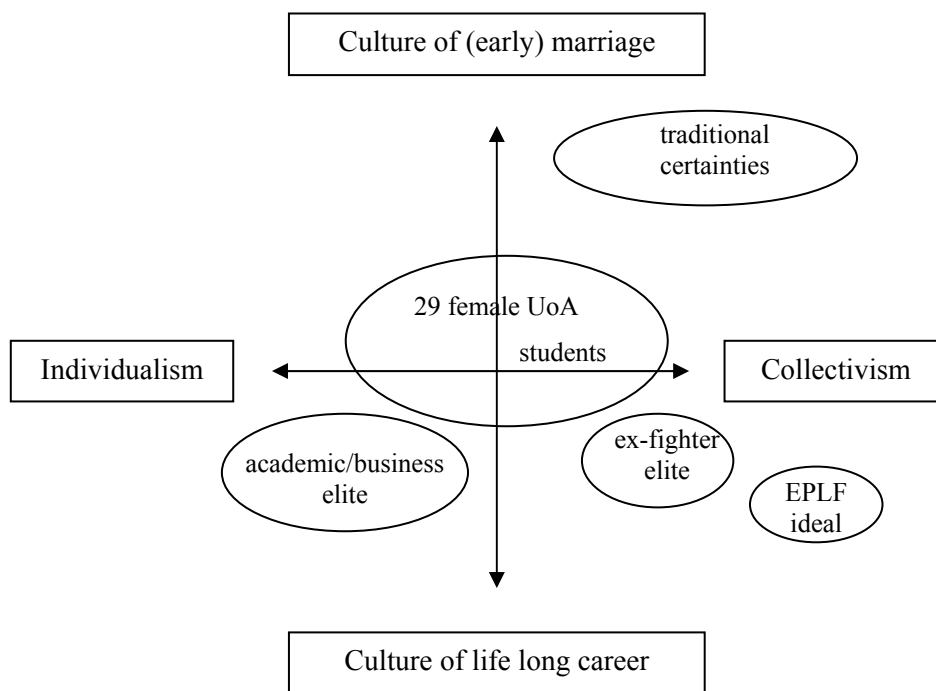
In the longer-term future, the process of modernisation will lead to new contradictions which are bound to have their impact on gender attitudes. Whereas for example at the present stage of Eritrean development, enough good employment opportunities exist for the vast majority of qualified people who complete their university education, in a few years this might be different and might lead to a situation where women compete with men for scarce resources – already secondary school leavers have problems in finding adequate working opportunities. But a discussion of these issues is beyond what is attempted here, and can in any case only remain speculative in the present situation.

By way of conclusion, the women in the centre of this study can be situated in the following graph (see figure 1; the idea to this scheme comes from John Cameron). It shows their identities constituted by the certainties of tradition,

¹⁹ While appendix 6.3 shows gender-sensitive attitudes of male survey participants, the observations in secondary schools show how girls are often treated as inferior by their male peers.

and the nationalist, collective-centred ideology of the Eritrean revolution and its practical implications on one hand; on the other by uncertainties as a product of the fragmentation of individual experiences in a post-traditional, modern world (Giddens, 1991: 187f).

Figure 1: Situating Eritrean elite women



Their lives can be described as the individual search for a compromise between these contradictory forces. Despite and because of the Eritrean revolution the women in this study and Eritrean women in general are left with the challenges familiar to women the world over: challenges of a professional life within a male-dominated society; family concerns; simple issues like domestic work; early marriage traditions – to name just the most prominent. But the conditions within which they have to make their decisions – or have decisions made for them – differ from those before the revolution. While new avenues opened up for Eritrean women, the challenge lies in coming to a synthesis of the fulfilment of personal ambitions and the satisfaction of the collective context, a

context determined by a strong nationalist ideology with practical obligations and certain cultural impositions.

The last words shall thus be given to two of the 29 female students at the UoA, Misgana and Ruth, and how they intend to negotiate their future within the parameters of modern aspirations, tradition and a patriarchal state.

Misgana – in relation to her future as planned by the government and her personal ambitions – has this to say:

I am not sure about my future, I mean, at the moment, I don't know whether it is the policy of the government to go outside ... it is not free to go for studying, I don't know whether the government will allow us [*asked how important it was for her to eventually continue her education*] it's important, I mean you are increasing your living standard, if your education is increased, you are going to be paid highly and like that, and you can learn also something, you can learn a lot and improve skills and you can be stronger in your field (...) to increase my knowledge actually (...) if the policy of the government is changed, you can have a lot of choices (...) even due to the current situation many are ... I mean we are lucky, we studied, we have at least something (...) and we can get a job in here (...) and overall, the government was doing good for us, in the past I mean.

And finally Ruth, who says about her future and the trade-off between professional career and marriage, probably the most burning issue for the majority of young women in this study:

But there is social problem, I think, mostly, most women who reach up to their doctorate courses, they are not successful in their private lives, they don't marry, they don't give birth, mostly (...) it is according to the perception of the men, I think ... mostly the men are not willing to have a woman with higher education, that is their thought, but if he is good minded, it's possible, I see it, it is possible and I would like to complete my PhD and also at the same time I would like to get married, to have children and all, I would like to continue ... and then if I am among the successful ones I would like to have both, but if it's a difficulty I would like to quit at my Master's course level, but mostly, up to now, I would like to have PhD, I would like to be PhD major [*when asked if she had to make a choice, what would she choose, she said both and basically hoped she will meet somebody, maybe an Eritrean abroad who is more open minded, and it will not be a problem*] (...) in general, when I have certain goals, when I intend to be or do something, I don't see the problems, I see only the aim, to reach my objective.

Ruth's last sentence shows the same mindset that led eventually to the victory of the Eritrean national revolution – and might turn out to be its most important legacy: to have created the conditions for young women like her to aspire for and actively bring about a 'better' future.

Epilogue

The idea for this study was born in Tokyo, Japan, in the winter of 1997, and at a preliminary visit to Eritrea then discussed with the relevant people whose support was needed in carrying it out. While the subsequent process of securing funding proceeded smoothly, in May 1998 war erupted again between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The war did not have a direct impact on the conduct of this study, but it did alter the political conditions in Eritrea that form the background against which the individual histories in the centre of this research unfold. It also altered the course of the process of revolutionary institutionalisation and consolidation, most visible in the reinforcement of the collective by a more and more patriarchal, autocratic state, and the indefinite postponement of the implementation of the country's democratic constitution.

It has been described as the major challenge for any (post-)revolutionary society to maintain forms of democratic activism at the base of society, from where the power of the central government or state bureaucracies can be checked and redirected if necessary (Davidson, 1987). These basic democratic principles often remain largely a memory of liberation wars and become rhetoric in empty speeches in their aftermath (ibid.: 16). A similar view is taken by Makki (1996) who defines the process of what here is referred to as revolutionary institutionalisation and consolidation as “the transition from nation to nation-state” (ibid.: 475), the nation being conceived as an “‘imagined community’ of deep, horizontal comradeship”, and the state as “often hierarchic, regulatory, and coercive” (ibid.).

The years since Eritrean independence have on the whole been characterised by a nation building process which relies on a highly paternalistic political elite. This elite on one hand advocates participation as mobilisation of the whole population, in line with the more general description of state formation as a cultural process, which entails the “elaboration of (...) moral frameworks for the enhancement of social cohesion” (Makki, 1996: 482). On the other hand, however, it deeply mistrusts that ‘the people’ have the capability to make the ‘right’ decisions. Thus, participation and individual engagement are only welcome as

long as they comply with the overall blueprint of the political elite (Hirt, 2000: 87f). The PFDJ thus acts not so much as a political party, but rather as a socialising organ which, supported by the education system and the mass media, mobilises the human resources of the country for its economic, political and social progress (ibid.). Herein it has to be acknowledged that the political leadership has followed an agenda which aims for the development of the country as a whole, not to benefit a small powerful and often corrupt elite as has been observed in many other states on the African continent, guided by principles of social justice which have emerged as a legacy of the struggle (Luckham, 2002: 255). When coming to power, and in fact, until its conduct of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian war, the new EPLF/PFDJ-led government commanded a significant capital of broad popular legitimacy (ibid.; see also Ottaway, 1999).

Apart from having its roots in the EPLF's success in bringing about Eritrean independence, this legitimacy was related to the leadership's developmental achievements after liberation. This is in line with the more general observation that whereas during times of oppression or colonial rule, wider legitimacy for and support of a revolutionary project and its leadership comes with the real prospect of being freed from this oppression, together with some anticipated material benefits, in the post-liberation era it is the "promise of 'development'" (Makki, 1996: 491) and the prospect of its achievement that legitimises the leadership in the eyes of the population at large. As such, where legitimacy rests on economic or developmental progress, the objective of liberation is being replaced with 'modernisation'.

And indeed, in the years up to 1998, Eritrea was a success story in terms of 'modernising development', particularly considering the fact that it had to start virtually from scratch in most areas (WB, 1994; Luckham, 2002; Connell, 1995). This success was visible in economic indicators, with a yearly real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increase of up to seven percent at a yearly inflation rate of only three to four percent (Hirt, 2001; IMF, 2000; WB, 2002). It showed in the rehabilitation of the country's physical infrastructure, including roads, ports, buildings and telecommunication facilities. And it extended to the more broader concept of human development, including the provision of social services, particularly in the areas of education and health (Hirt, 2001). This led to Eritrea climbing in the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure taking income as well as life expectancy, education and health indicators into account, from rank 168 (out of 175 countries) in 1997 (the first time Eritrea appeared in the report as an independent country) to rank 159 (out of 174 countries) in 2000 (the data used in the 2000 report does not yet show

the impact of the 1998-2000 war) (UNDP, 1997; 2000); in due course, Eritrea was hailed as a model for African development.¹

The war with Ethiopia slowed down these developmental successes. Not only did many social projects come to a standstill, also economically the majority of Eritrean citizens became worse off. What Mehret Iyob says about the impact of the war on projects in the educational sector is true for other areas as well:

We were moving smoothly and we had reached a stage where we could take really off, from 1994 onwards, but then in mid-1998 this conflict erupted, so now all our attention was geared towards addressing the emergency needs, of course at the same time we did not totally stop the development projects but this war diverted the whole issue.²

Concerning the Eritrean economy, the GDP growth rate fell from 7.7 percent in 1997 to 0.3 percent in 1999 and toppled to minus 11.9 percent in 2000 (see <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/er2.htm>). Inflation, which had been largely under control, increased to 19.9 percent by 2000 and fell only marginally in 2001 (*ibid.*). At the same time, in most families the main breadwinner(s) were called up for national defence, leaving dependants to rely on government handouts or other sources of help. Between 250,000 and 300,000 people were mobilised at the height of the war, amounting to more than 35 percent of able-bodied men

¹ Eritrea – as well as Ethiopia, Uganda and Rwanda – were regarded as models in terms of succeeding in reconstructing war-devastated economies and restoring stability, and overall symbolising a new style of politics in post Cold War Africa (see for example Fengler, 2001; Ruth Iyob, 2000; Ottaway, 1999).

Eritrea equally won high approval ratings from foreign governments, the donor community and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) for its overall commitment and reliability, and a business environment virtually free of corruption (Fengler, 2001). Its development approach – a combination of commitment to the market and socialist ideals of social justice, the latter with a focus on policies of redistribution (for examples see *ibid.*) – might not conform to the international community's ideals, but to a large extent, the international donor community goes along with it. This was most visible at a meeting between Eritrea and international donors in 1998: The Eritrean side had not only drafted its National Economic Policy Framework and Programme (NEPFD) for 1998-2000 on its own without donor input, it also insisted on presenting it to the donor community in Asmara in April 1998, a novelty in African development co-operation, where it is the norm that such papers are drawn up and discussed at the donors' headquarters (*ibid.*).

² Mehret (and other key informants, for example Ayn-Alem Marcos and Petros Hailemariam) also pointed out that considering the war and its impact, it was rather surprising how many projects did still go ahead; this judgement is shared by the author, who during a visit in 1999 to remote areas and IDP camps (populated by people who had to flee the border areas because of the war) was impressed with the provision of educational and health facilities (see Müller, 2000). It were mainly projects requiring big investments in physical infrastructure which were put on hold due to lack of funding, like for example two hostels for girls in post-primary education in Agordat and Massawa, and a new teacher training college in Keren.

and women being at the frontline (Hirt, 2001; Tekeste Negash & Tronvoll, 2000). Many Eritreans turned to family members in the diaspora, who themselves felt the drain on resources the war imposed. Diaspora Eritreans, to retain Eritrean citizenship, are required (and mostly willing) to pay a two percent tax on their foreign salary to the Eritrean state. In the course of the war, this tax was raised to one monthly salary per year (Fengler, 2001) – which was paid enthusiastically often even surpassing the required amount, but which also left less resources to support family members.

At the same time, the flaws in the government's leadership style were exposed – in the way the war erupted as well as its subsequent conduct – and the PFDJ lost its “aura of invincibility” (Hirt, 2000: 121, “Unfehlbarkeit” in the original), particularly as the war ended in military defeat for Eritrea.³ Part of the government's broad popular legitimacy was lost, even though the majority of people are still reluctant to express dissent openly – apart from a few prominent party members, intellectuals and journalists, who for the time being have been silenced (see Amnesty International, 2002; Jayasekera, 2001).

On the face of it, one can thus argue that the EPLF/PFDJ's post-liberation strategy was during the first few years after independence successful in the

³ This is not the place to discuss the different versions on the outbreak of the war by both protagonists. What seems to be confirmed is that the first outbreak of hostilities in the Badme/Yirga triangle in May 1998 was a localised clash in one of the border areas between Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. When Eritrea gained independence, both countries regarded the Italian colonial border as the legitimate boundary. However, this border was never clearly demarcated and boundary-related problems had at first begun to surface in the early 1990s (and before that already during the time of the struggle between the then EPLF and the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), see Young, 1996). Numerous meetings were held to dissolve these issues, but the problem remained that territory inside Eritrea according to colonial maps was administered by Ethiopian authorities. The incident on 6 May 1998 was thus not so special: a small group of Eritrean soldiers entered one of the disputed areas around Badme, a shoot-out followed with the local (Ethiopian) militia which caused a few casualties on both sides. The Eritrean reaction this time was to send large contingents of Eritrean soldiers into the area to reclaim what was regarded as Eritrean territory controlled by Ethiopia (Tekeste Negash & Tronvoll, 2000). The reaction of the Ethiopian government was equally firm: it declared Eritrea had launched a war of aggression against Ethiopia and made the recovery of its territory its major objective (Clapham, 2000). For a more detailed discussion of the different lines of argument each side used to make its case see Gilkes & Plaut (1999). In Eritrea's official discourse, the end of the military phase of the war – which came about in signing the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in June 2000 and the subsequent agreement in December of that year – is not interpreted as a military defeat, but in fact a victory over Ethiopian aggression. While it is true that Eritrea in the course of this new war lived through the threat of being overrun by an enemy army with an apparently infinite supply of soldiers using human wave attacks, and that at some point in the military campaign the Ethiopian command (though this was never official Ethiopian government policy) openly spoke about marching onto Asmara and changing the Eritrean leadership (see Péninou, 2000), it is hard to see (also for many Eritreans) how one can claim victory in the face of an official Eritrean casualty figure of 19,000 men and women and Ethiopian troops having occupied large parts of Eritrean territory (for further discussion on wider political objectives of both sides see Müller, 2003).

institutionalisation of the Eritrean revolution – defined as the establishment of state structures by the revolutionary movement which are domestically and internationally recognised (see Selbin, 1993). From 2001 onwards, however, in delaying the transition to constitutional government and with it the creation of rules of succession for the political leadership, this institutionalisation is put into question. Concerning a change in the status of women in Eritrean society as envisaged by the EPLF, one of the consequences of the failure to create institutional mechanisms as to how the top leadership is chosen is the minimal representation of women at the higher echelons of political power.⁴ In a broader sense, returning to a question posed at the beginning of this study, it shows that the Eritrean revolution, while having been guided by an ideology which rejected gender as well as class and ethnic divisions, is only prepared to create certain openings for women, but not to at the same time transform the structures of male domination. It as such provides one more example of the limitations of women's liberation within national democratic revolutions where programmes for women's emancipation are essentially conceived in terms of how functional they are for achieving wider objectives of a (patriarchal) state (see also Molyneux (1985) on Nicaragua).

In judging processes of revolutionary consolidation – the process by which the majority of the population comes to support the social revolutionary project and makes it their vision for the future – Selbin (1993) suggests as prime indicators: trust into the government or revolutionary leadership; opportunities for people, coupled with a positive vision for the future; and a sense of personal empowerment (ibid.: 102). As has been mentioned above, the government, once widely trusted, has lost important parts of that trust in the course of the recent new war with Ethiopia. Concerning opportunities, the majority of the protagonists in this study subscribe to the EPLF-fostered narrative of progress based on meritocratic achievement and as such enjoy new opportunities facilitated by the Eritrean revolution – at least as long as their ambitions do not contradict the national blueprint. Thus, the majority has a positive outlook into the future. This is the case in spite of the fact that they only have limited power over certain aspects of their future lives, as national obligations take up increasingly more time and resources while democratic participation is diminishing.

When the survey was conducted at the UoA, it was only one (male) student who in answering the open question at the end wrote:

I don't care about Eritrea, but I can only dream about myself, because the condition of Eritrea does not allow my dreams; I have a vision, we will be winners at last and

⁴ Selbin (1993) cites the Cuban revolution (1959-1969) as an example for revolutionary consolidation without institutionalisation, the latter judged as failed because no leadership succession procedures exist.

the constitution of Eritrea will permit participation and citizenship ... and the dictatorial government of Eritrea is not to stay for ever; death for EPLF and PFDJ.

In the meantime, even though probably few students would formulate their opinion in such harsh words, many are frustrated and alienated – a process which started in the summer of 2001, when almost all students were sent to summer work in the desert as ‘punishment’. These were the same students who only a year before, during the third Ethiopian offensive in the spring of 2000, had volunteered to go to the frontlines, “and now they treat us this way, as traitors”, an acquaintance of the author told her in a conversation in December 2001, shortly after all students had finally been allowed back to resume their studies (fieldnotes: 2f). It remains to be seen in the future whether students who are sent abroad for further study will come back as most participants in this study anticipated they would do, or rather opt to stay abroad.⁵ The modern ambitions that have been created by the Eritrean revolution can, in today’s globalised world, not be indefinitely suppressed by sending people to Sawa – as happened again in November 2002, when more than 350 recent graduates from the UoA were called up, their names being published nation-wide (UN-IRIN, 13 November 2002). Nor can they be curtailed by denying exit visas for people of national service age as seems to have become common practice (The Economist, 23 November 2002).

Eventually, successful revolutionary consolidation in Eritrea, in terms of a change in the status of women as well as for the Eritrean revolution as a whole, will depend on the re-emergence of a culture of democracy. The lack hereof and its implications for a change in the status of women, as seen by one of the female lecturers at the UoA, sums up the present stage of revolutionary consolidation:

I don’t see any development [for women], I would say, because in reality, what you see (...) in general, what I saw in other countries where women developed this assertive character, where women managed to improve their position, they worked really very hard and there were many civil society associations who helped women, you know, but in this country, we have only this *hamade* [the NUEW], and there is competition for power ... so they [the NUEW] don’t allow any other women associations to come up and to work for women; but if you don’t give individual, separate women the chance to form organisations (...) if you don’t leave women free to solve their problems and to have associations that answers their needs and demands, but if you just want to control everything, there will be no progress for women (...) I

⁵ Some students might not be sent in the future at all. In February 2003 a moratorium was announced by the university president prohibiting students as well as staff members to go abroad for further studies for the foreseeable future. In reality, however, students known to the author have been allowed to leave since then, while others are still waiting.

was in Nairobi for a conference and I met a lot of women from different organisations, and they do a lot of activities for women (...) I think that is what we lack most, because *hamade* does control the whole activity for the empowerment of women in this country, they [the NUEW] would need to collaborate and give also chances to other women to try different things ... at this moment, I would say most of the things concerning women, they are degrading.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Timeline Eritrea – A brief historical overview

8000 BC	first known settlements in Barka valley
4000-2000 BC	pastoralists from Southern Egypt migrate to Eritrean lowlands
1000-600 BC	migration from the Kingdom of Saba on the Arab peninsula; introduction of new agricultural techniques and semitic written language (predecessor of Ge'ez); establishment of trade posts at the coast, later on establishment of various city states in the Abyssinian highlands
300-600 AD	Kingdom of Aksum, with its centre in the Abyssinian highlands; Aksum as capital (in present-day Ethiopian region of Tigray). main port Adulis (south of Massawa in present-day Eritrea);
400	with King Ezana of Aksum converting to Christianity, Kingdom of Aksum becomes part of the Christian world
700	decline of the Aksumite Kingdom; Arab conquests in the coastal areas bring Islam to Eritrea; Arab control of trade routes via Adulis; tribes in the lowlands convert to Islam; 710 port of Adulis conquered and destroyed
700-1500	various rulers rule over different parts of the area of present day Eritrea; influence of Islam increases
1500-1890	1517 Turkish troops occupy Massawa, Ottoman empire extends its influence inland; new status quo develops: central highland areas under Abyssinian-Christian control (including Tigrayan emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), whose successor became Menelik II); coastal plain, western lowlands and northern highlands under Islamic rule (including Ottoman empire; Funj Kingdom; from 1848 partly Egyptian rule – with the exception of the independent Afar sultanates in Danakil)
1890	creation of Eritrea as an Italian colony (in 1889 Emperor Menelik II of Abyssinia and King Umberto I

	of Italy define the borders of the new Italian colony in the treaty of Wichale)
1890-1941	Italian colonial rule
1941	British forces defeat Italian troops and occupy Eritrea
1941-1952	British Military Administration (BMA) as a United Nations trust territory (from 1949 onwards de jure British civilian administration)
1950	UN Commission of Investigation recommends federation with Ethiopia
1952	Federation with Ethiopia Woldeab Woldemariam organises Confederation of Free Eritrean Labour Unions
1953	US signs 25 year lease with Ethiopian government for communications base at Kagnev Station in Asmara
1956	Amharic replaces Tigrinya and Arabic as official languages
1958	Eritrean flag replaced by Ethiopian flag Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) formed in Sudan
1960	Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) formed in Cairo
1961	official begin of the armed struggle
1962	Annexation by Ethiopia, Eritrea turned into Ethiopia's 14th province
1961-1970	ELF dominant liberation movement
1970	ELM officially disbanded leftist factions split from the ELF and eventually form the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)
1972	civil war between different nationalist factions (1974 truce declaration at Zagher)
[1974	Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie overthrown in a coup led by Mengistu Haile Mariam]
1977	formal establishment of the EPLF at its first congress in Sahel EPLF liberates towns from Karora to Keren, and eventually Massawa ELF liberates towns in western lowlands plus south-western highlands
1977-1978	Eritrean liberation fronts control 95 percent of Eritrea and surround Asmara Soviet advisers and Cuban troops help Ethiopian forces reverse these significant advances made by Eritrean guerrillas EPLF's strategic withdrawal to its base area in Sahel

	second civil war between EPLF and ELF which leads to the disintegration of the latter and makes EPLF dominant political and military force within Eritrea
1987	Second and unity congress of the EPLF and the ELF (Central Leadership)
1988	EPLF destroys northern Ethiopian army in the battle of Afabet
1990	EPLF captures Massawa.
24 May 1991	EPLF captures Asmara and forms a provisional government; the political future of Eritrea to be determined by an internationally supervised referendum
23-25 April 1993	Referendum is held under supervision of the United Nations Observer Mission to Verify the Referendum in Eritrea (UNOVER); voter turnout of 98 percent, 99.8 percent of those who participated voted for independence
24 May 1993	Eritrea formally declares itself independent; in due course becomes a member of the UN and other international bodies, including the OAU and the WB
February 1994	EPLF transforms itself into a political party – the People’s Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)
1997	draft constitution approved by Eritrea’s highest legislative body, the National Assembly (NA) which provides e.g. for the creation of representative democracy and the guarantee of basic human rights (including free speech, free press and freedom of assembly as well as equality before the law)
1998-2000	Eritreo-Ethiopian border war
February 2002	NA decides not to allow the creation of any political parties in the near future; elections to a new NA postponed indefinitely, as is the implementation of the constitution

(Sources: Killion, 1998; Ruth Iyob, 1997; Pateman, 1990a; Pool, 2001; UN, 1996;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/africa/newsid_1070000/1070861.stm

APPENDIX 2: Texts on women's rights in EPLF/PFDJ programmes

EPLF, National democratic programme 1977

Section 4 – Social rights

B. Women's rights:

1. Develop an association through which women can participate in the struggle against colonial aggression and for social transformation.
2. Outline a broad programme to free women from domestic confinement, develop their participation in social production, and raise their political, cultural and technical levels.
3. Assure women full rights of equality with men in politics, economy and social life as well as equal pay for equal work.
4. Promulgate progressive marriage and family laws.
5. Protect the right of women workers to two months maternity leave with full pay.
6. Protect the right of mothers and children, provide delivery, nursery and kindergarten services.
7. Fight to eradicate prostitution.
8. Respect the right of women not to engage in work harmful to their health.
9. Design programmes to increase the number and upgrade the quality of women leaders and public servants.

(EPLF, 1977: 30f).

An identical passage is repeated in the Front's 1987 programme.

Government of the state of Eritrea, macro-policy 1994

Section 13 – Human resource Development and Population Policy

13.5 Gender issues

- a) All efforts will continue to be undertaken to sensitize and enhance awareness of the society on the decisive role of women for the socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country.

- b) The equal rights of women will be upheld and all laws that subtract from this right will be changed.
- c) Participation of women in education and economic activities and employment will be expanded.
- d) Appropriate labour saving technologies will be introduced to reduce the drudgery of women in the household and other activities (water, fuel wood, child care centres, etc.).
- e) Mother-child care services will be improved and expanded.

(GSE, 1994: 43f)

APPENDIX 3.1: Overview of data sources

	<i>informants</i>	<i>type of data</i>	<i>type of sample</i>	<i>data collection instruments</i>	<i>written and secondary sources</i>
Potential future elite - women at university	29 female degree students at the UoA	f) open-ended, semi-structured, narrative interviews 4 observation at the UoA 1 observation and participation in private/family settings	purposive selection: last year(s) at university; out of this group: maximum variation sample (variation according to ethnicity; religion; area of study)	4 interview guide • MD recorder	data from UoA registry
Present elite women: Government & admin. Business Academia	11 women in gov./ administration 4 women in business 9 female UoA staff	• semi-structured, narrative interviews • informal encounters and conversations	• purposive selection • snowball sampling	• interview guide • MD recorder	• data from UoA • Personnel office data from chamber of commerce
Key informants	14 men and women involved in policies on women's/girls' education	semi-structured, narrative interviews	most relevant officials (snowball sampling)	g) interview guide 5 MD recorder	MoE documents
Secondary school visits	potentially all students, teachers and support staff school directors	semi-structured interviews	purposive selection of five schools (related to female UoA students; location; girls' past performance)	2 observation guide 3 fieldnotes notebook • interview guide 4 MD recorder	h) data from school administrations 6 data from UoA testing centre

APPENDIX 3.1, continued

University survey	176 female and 183 male degree students at the UoA	questionnaire survey; questionnaire completed individually in group sessions in presence of the researcher	targeted stratified sample (2 strata: male and female)	survey questionnaire	5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> data from Sophomore programme
Official discourses over time		informal conversations with various public figures in- and outside Eritrea between 1995-2002		personal notebooks	documents/written materials from various archives; PFDJ, NUEW; internet sources

APPENDIX 3.2: Background information on the UoA

Table 1

Number of students in degree programmes at the UoA, at the beginning of the academic year 2000/2001, by year and sex

Year	Male	Female	Total	% females
Year two	872	156	1028	15.2%
Year three	767	147	914	16.1%
Year four	542	90	632	14.2%
Year five	135	12	147	8.2%
Total	2316	405	2721	14.9%

Source: University of Asmara, registrar's office, December 2000

Table 2

Total number of students at the UoA, at the beginning of the academic year 2000/2001, by programme and sex (excluding freshman programme)

Programme	Male	Female	Total
Degree	2316	405	2721
Diploma	222	20	242
Certificate	126	43	169
Total	2664	468	3132

Source: University of Asmara, registrar's office, December 2000

Table 3

Freshmen for the degree programmes at the UoA, at the beginning of the academic year 2000/2001, by stream and sex

Stream	Male	Female	Total	% females
Natural Science	559	51	610	8.4%
Social Science	545	138	592	23.3%
Total	1013	189	1202	15.7%

Source: University of Asmara, registrar's office, December 2000

Table 4

Degree courses offered at the UoA, at the beginning of the academic year 2000/2001

<i>Faculty of Science:</i>	<i>College of Agriculture and Aquatic Sciences:</i>
Biology	Animal Science
Chemistry	Marine Biology and Fisheries (MBF)
Computer Science	Plant Science
Earth Science/Geology	Soil and Water Conservation (SWC)
Mathematics	
Physics	
	<i>Faculty of Engineering:</i>
<i>Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences:</i>	Civil Engineering
Archaeology	Electrical Engineering
English	Mechanical Engineering
Geography	
History	<i>College of Health Sciences:</i>
Journalism and Mass Communication (JOMC)	Public Health Clinical Practitioner (PHCP)
Political Science	Pharmacy
Sociology and Anthropology (SOAN)	[Medical Laboratory Technician (MLT)
Statistics and Demography	(only diploma course at the moment, is planned to be upgraded to degree level)]
<i>Faculty of Business and Economics:</i>	<i>Faculty of Education:</i>
Accounting	Educational Administration
Business Management	Educational Psychology
Economics	Secondary School Education (SST)
Public Administration	(students major in one of the following subjects: English, Biology, Chemistry, Geography, History, Mathematics, Physics)
<i>Law Programme:</i>	
Law	

APPENDIX 3.3: Secondary schools in Eritrea, school year
2000/2001

<i>zoba</i>	Town/village	School name	Owner
Anseba	Adi Teklezan	Nakfa	Government
Anseba	Elabared	Awet	Government
Anseba	Hagaz	Hagaz Secondary	Government
Anseba	Keren	Kedus Yosef	Mission
Anseba	Keren	Keren Secondary	Government
Debub	Adi Keih	Adi Keih Secondary	Government
Debub	Adi Quala	Adi Quala Secondary	Government
Debub	Dubarwa	Dubarwa Secondary	Government
Debub	Dekemhare	Dekemhare Secondary	Government
Debub	Mendefera	Adi Ugri	Government
Debub	Mendefera	Ahwt Capucini	Mission
Debub	Senafe	Senafe Secondary	Government
Debub	Segeneiti	Segeneiti Secondary	Government
Gash-Barka	Barentu	Biara (now: Duta)	Government
Gash-Barka	Agordat	Agordat Secondary	Government
Gash-Barka	Mekerka	Daero	Government
Gash-Barka	Tessenei	Sagem	Government
Northern Red Sea	Ghinda	Ghinda Secondary	Government
Northern Red Sea	Nefasit	Debre Bizen	Government
Northern Red Sea	Massawa	Semhar	Government
Northern Red Sea	Nakfa	Tsabra	Government
Maakel	Tsaeda Christian	Tsaeda Christian Secondary	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Limaat	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Den Den	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Gulelmo Marconi	Community
Maakel	Asmara	Halai	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Ibrahim Sultan	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Semaetat	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Barka	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Debre Medhanialem	Mission
Maakel	Asmara	Keih Bahri	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Harnet	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Debre Tsion Kidste Mariam	Mission
Maakel	Asmara	Issak Tewolde Medhin	Government
Maakel	Asmara	Asmara Comprehensive	Government
Maakel	Mai Nefhi	Mai Nefhi Secondary	Government
Maakel	Serejeka	Toker	Government
Southern Red Sea	Assab	Woldeab Woldemariam	Government

Source: MoE, research division, November 2000

APPENDIX 3.4: Survey sampling frame and respondents

Table 1

Sampling frame: number of students in degree programmes at the UoA, second semester of the academic year 2000/2001, by year and sex

Year/ No. of students	Female	Male	Total	Percentage Females
Year two	147	767	914	16.1%
Year three	147	738	885	16.6%
Year four	86	527	613	14.0%
Year five	10	128	138	7.3%
Total	390	2160	2550	15.3%

Source: University of Asmara, Registrar's Office, April 2001 & June 2001

The focus was on students in study years two and three. But as some students in year four still have to complete credit hour courses from previous years, a small number of them did also become part of the sample of students who completed the survey. Altogether, 359 students did participate in the survey, studying in years two to four:

Table 2

Survey respondents by year of study and sex

Year/No. of students	Female	Male	Total
Year two	93	93	186
Year three	73	69	142
Year four	10	20	30
Year missing	0	1	1
Total	176	183	359

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

APPENDIX 4.1: Overview of interviewees – Present elite women in Eritrea

Women in government or higher administrative positions (former fighters)

Asmeret Abraha (“Gwandi”), since 1998 head of the community development division in the MLHW; joined the EPLF in 1975 and was assigned to the fighting force where she rose to become a squadron leader; was wounded during the fifth offensive of the Ethiopian army and could not continue in the fighting force; therefore from 1979 onwards until after liberation she worked in various capacities (mobilisation; executive division) for the NUEW until she was assigned to the MLHW.

Asmeret Habtemichael, since 1996 director of supervision and national examination in the MoE; joined the EPLF in 1978, had before worked as elementary school teacher, had then completed a course to become director and supervisor at Addis Ababa university and had worked for about ten years in Asmara, Keren and Dekemhare as school director and supervisor in junior schools; in the field was assigned to educational division and worked in all areas of teaching, curriculum development, administration and supervision; after independence university studies in the UK on educational planning and international policy.

Foaza Hashim, since 1993 Minister of Justice; joined the EPLF in 1975 from Asmara; after her military training was assigned as political commissioner, later sent to Sudan to work in public administration among Eritrean refugees, then became executive member of the NUEW for foreign relations, travelling and agitating in the field and mainly the Middle East (including Saudi-Arabia, Egypt, the Emirates, Kuwait and also Sudan); for some time also vice administrator of Barka region.

Hiwet Megas, since 1992 administrator of Gesabanda (district of Asmara); joined the EPLF from Asmara in 1977 and was assigned to the fighting force where she rose from group leader to become a hailee commander; spent all the time until independence with the fighting force, inspite of being wounded several times – her last battle was in Dekemhare from where she entered Asmara in 1991.

Luel Asrat, since 1991 mayor of the town of Adi Quala; joined the EPLF from Asmara in 1977; after her military training was assigned to work in public administration and in organising new recruits; stayed with these tasks almost until liberation, briefly joined the military reinforcement troops at the battle of Massawa in 1980 and the regular fighting force in the last battle of the war in Assab in 1991.

Luul Gebreab, since 1998 chairperson of the NUEW; joined the EPLF in 1976 from Asmara; after her military training was assigned to the department of public administration where she looked after women's issues; worked there (with some interruptions at the frontline when the military situation demanded it) until November 1979, when she became elected as chairperson of the NUEW for the first time – remained so until 1988; then went back to her work in administration and worked in different zobas until 1992 after liberation; then she was made the director of the Post and Telecom Authority until the NUEW congress in February 1998, when she became elected as chairperson of the NUEW for the second time.

Mehret Iyob, since 1997 director of the project management division in the MoE and at the same time head of the national commission for UNESCO; joined the EPLF in 1978 after having completed the Italian school in Asmara and having received a graduate diploma in business education from Addis Ababa university; was after her military training assigned to the division of education, English panel, where she remained until independence, teaching English and developing an English curriculum; continued her work with the English panel after independence, was then given the opportunity to study for a master's in curriculum studies and education in Birmingham; when she returned in 1994 was assigned to work for the constitutional commission and came back to the MoE in 1997.

Selome Iyob, since 1999 IT- co-ordinator in the MoE (sister of Mehret above); joined the EPLF in late 1970s when she was 17 and a student at the Italian school in Asmara; was assigned as a typist to the transportation department and in 1987 was moved to education, because she knew English and Italian and was accustomed to type in Latin script; in 1989 when the first computers arrived in the education department she was trained how to use them; completed highschool after independence and received further computer training and was thus chosen when the IT project in the MoE started in 1999 to administer it.

Tsega Gaim, since 1998 head of the social service and rehabilitation department, NUEW; joined the EPLF in 1975 and stayed with the fighting force

for two years; from 1977 until 1982 work as a teacher in Zero school and then as elementary school director and school administrator in Sahel, Anseba and Barka regions; after independence, school administrator in Keren, work for the constitutional commission and continuation of her own education, first completion of highschool, then university studies at the UoA and in Leicester, UK.

Zahra Jabir, at the time of the interview mayor of the city of Keren; joined the ELF in 1964 from Asmara (but comes from Ali Gider/Tessenei) and had to leave the country shortly afterwards, worked for the ELF in Cairo and Algeria, mainly in the mobilisation of women, and got a law degree at the same time, returned to Eritrea after graduation in 1973 and continued her mobilisation activities; after the civil war left with the ELF, stayed mainly in Sudan and Syria; returned after liberation, joined the EPLF, became first a member of the National Assembly and at the third congress in 1994 a member of the central committee.

Zaid Mesfin, since 1996 headofficer education office subregion south-west, Asmara; joined the EPLF in 1978 from Asmara, where she was a student in grade 11; after military training was assigned to teach in the revolution school; from 1982 until independence worked in the liberated areas as director and teacher in the literacy campaign; from 1991 up to 1995 in Mendefera, at first as elementary school director then in regional education office; then had a child and moved back to Asmara; from 1998 onwards took various short courses in educational administration at the UoA and a six month course in India.

Women in business or academia

Ghennet Bokretzion, owner and manager Double Harvest Poultry; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her education there and graduated in mathematics and statistics from Asmara university; then started to work as statistician for the World Food Programme and later as executive assistant for World Vision; when rumours spread in 1997 that all NGOs might be closed down, she started her own business; actively engaged in gender issues.

Haki-Siir Yohannes, owner and manager Ruth Trading and Commission Agent (RUTCA); was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her education there and became a nurse/midwife; disliked work in the health sector and had a plan to continue her education, which was not possible under the political conditions at the time; worked as a technical manager in a pharmaceutical company for about

14 years altogether (with a two year interruption when she was imprisoned for political reasons); after independence started her own business; currently in addition to RUTCA as a shareholder involved in La Belle Flowers, a flower farm in Arbate Asmara.

Haregu Gebreselassie, since 1996 managing director of Square Consulting – Architects, Planners & Engineers; grew up in Addis Ababa where her family had lived for generations, graduated with a BSc in engineering in 1985 in India with a scholarship from the Ethiopian government, worked for a few years in Addis Ababa and then got a second scholarship to do her master's in Finland, which she completed in 1991; decided to come to Eritrea in 1992 and eventually started her own company with three business partners.

Saba Mebrahtu, import-export commission agent & wholesaler; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her education there, graduated in 1972 from Asmara university in economics; then started to run the family business, a pharmacy, and partly her husband's business, a printing press, as well, as her husband was imprisoned for political reasons for some years; in 1996 she started her own import-export business; actively engaged in promoting women's issues.

Dr. Wezenet Tewodros, director of academic affairs (from 1998-2001) and lecturer in biology, UoA; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her schooling there in Key Bahri secondary school and went to Addis Ababa university for a bachelor's and master's degree in biology; then went to Sweden for five years to do her PhD and returned to join the department of biology at the UoA in 1994/95.

Dr. Sarah Ogbay, lecturer in the English department, UoA; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her schooling there at the Comboni sisters, then did a BA in English at the UoA and was recruited as graduate assistant afterwards; after two years went to Addis Ababa for her master's from 1987-1989; returned to the UoA to teach, but after Massawa was captured the university was moved to the south of Ethiopia including all the staff, so she worked there for two semesters; in the meantime, Eritrea was liberated and she returned in 1991 and was among the first groups of lecturers at the re-opened UoA; went for her PhD at the university of Lancaster in 1995 and returned in 1999.

Almaz Bein, assistant lecturer in the English department, UoA; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her schooling there at the Comboni sisters, then did a BA in English at the UoA and was recruited as graduate assistant

afterwards; after two years went to Addis Ababa for her master's (all before independence) and stayed to teach in Addis Ababa; was deported back to Asmara in 1998 in the context of the 1998-2000 Eritreo-Ethiopian border war and joined the UoA.

Nazareth Amleson, assistant lecturer in the English department, UoA; was born and grew up in Elabared near Keren; at the age of 13, after she completed junior education in the Italian school there, her parents encouraged her to go to Asmara to continue her education, so she went to what was then Santa Anna (now Semaetat) secondary school (which had boarding facilities then); joined the UoA in 1991, the year of independence, with the first batch of students at the new Eritrean university; completed BA in English, taught for one year at Halai secondary school and graduated in 1996; worked for one year as graduate assistant and in 1997 went to Lancaster to do her master's; returned in 1998 to the UoA and is lined up to go to the US for her PhD.

Sushan Berhe, lecturer at the Eritrean institute of management, part of the UoA; was born and grew up in Ethiopia, where she finished her schooling in private schools in 1991; her parents sent her to study at the newly opened UoA, so she came to Eritrea and did her BA in accounting, graduated in 1997 and joined the institute of management; did a two year master's in international business and management in France, the Netherlands and Scotland between 1999 and 2001.

Senait Ghebru, assistant lecturer FoE, UoA; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her schooling there first in a Lutheran mission school later at Keih Bahri secondary; then did a bachelor in chemistry and physics at the UoA, graduated in 1989, and, as there were no other options available at the time, taught first in Keren secondary, later in Barka secondary school in Asmara; eventually got the opportunity to go to South Africa for a master's in chemistry and pedagogy, returned in 2001 and joined the UoA.

Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel, dean college of health sciences and director of research and human resource affairs, UoA; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her schooling there and then went to Addis Ababa university to study pharmacy; stayed at Addis Ababa university as graduate assistant; secured a scholarship to Canada for a master's turned into a PhD in pharmacology; stayed and worked in Canada for 10 years before deciding to return to Eritrea in 1995 to work at the UoA.

Dr. Senbetu Meri, lecturer in the department of geography, UoA; was born and grew up in Asmara, completed her schooling there and then went to Addis

Ababa university to study geography; after graduating she first continued to work at Addis Ababa university and then came back to Asmara to work at the UoA; went to East Germany in 1988 for a PhD and stayed there until 1996, when she returned to Asmara to work at the UoA.

Abrehet Ghebrekidan, lecturer at the college of health sciences, UoA; ex-fighter; grew up in Ethiopia, completed her schooling there then went to the US for a BSc in nursing and midwifery; returned to Ethiopia and was working at the public health college in Gondar when she decided to join the EPLF in 1977; after military training she was assigned to the health department in Keren, which was liberated then, and later after the retreat continued to work at Orotta hospital in Sahel, where from 1979 onwards she organised maternal- and childcare and trained barefoot doctors; after independence worked at Mekane Hiwot hospital in Asmara; from 1993 onwards she went for further training to the Liverpool school of medicine and to Australia, and completed a master's in administration and management for the health services in California in 1996; since her return from there based at the UoA.

APPENDIX 4.2: Background characteristics of group of 29 female students at the UoA and survey sample

Table 1

Group of 29 female students at the UoA, where did they grow up?

Grew up in*	No. of students
Asmara	17
Keren	2
Orphanage	1
Revolution School	3
Ethiopia	4
Saudi-Arabia	1
Libya	1
Total	29

* Growing up in this context includes the time of (at least) elementary schooling and is as such not necessary identical with the birthplace indicated by the category 'background' used below, which refers to the place where the parents/family lived then.

Source: Interview Data

Table 2

Survey respondents by place of elementary school and sex of students

Place of elementary school	Female	Male	Total
Asmara	84	72	156
Urbanised area in Eritrea*	29	48	77
Rural area in Eritrea	13	21	29
Ethiopia	38	28	66
Other abroad**	11	8	19
Missing	1	6	12
Total	176	183	359

* Students who passed their elementary schooling in the Revolution School are included here, as even though many of these students came from rural areas, having grown up in the revolution school and being exposed to the EPLF's agenda of change through education gives them a different outlook on its benefits (in fact, out of the students who spent their elementary schooling in Eritrea, the highest number of students from one place (outside Asmara) came from the Revolution School, ten females and seven males).

** These countries include Egypt, Libya, Saudi-Arabia and Sudan.

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

Out of the survey respondents who grew up in Eritrea, 67% of all female and 51% of all male respondents did so in Asmara.

Table 3
Group of 29 female students at the UoA – background

Background	Name	Total
(Semi-) affluent Asmara	Almaz, Sultan, Rita, Rahel, Hannah, Senait, Saba, Ruth, Simret, Fatima, Hayat, Azieb, Tirhas, Mehret (but grew up in revolution school)	14
Poor Asmara	Esther, Misgana, Yordanos	3
Other town	Askalu	1
Rural area	Awet (blind, grew up in school for the blind in Asmara), Asmeret (Revolution School), Anna (Revolution School), Elmi (forced to move to Keren by the struggle), Sarah (orphanage due to the struggle)	5
(Semi-) affluent abroad	Rihab (Saudi-Arabia), Selam (Ethiopia), Samira (Libya), Miriam (Ethiopia), Lydia (Ethiopia), Meaza (Ethiopia)	6

Source: Interview Data

Table 4
Group of 29 female students at the UoA – fathers' profession

Fathers' profession	Name	Total
Own business/shop/workshop	Simret, Rita, Hayat*, Almaz, Senait, Asmeret, Askalu	7
Office/administrative staff	Sultan, Azieb**, Ruth*, Hannah,	4
Education/health/sector	Fatima, Tirhas*, Rahel, Lydia, Samira	5
Good position private sector	Saba, Miriam, Meaza, Rihab	4
Low position private sector	Selam, Esther	2
Farmer	Elmi, Awet	2
Driver	Yordanos, Misgana	2
Fighter	Mehret, Anna, Sarah	3

* retired; ** dead

Source: Interview Data

Professional categories (they were obtained from the professions of the interviewees' parents as well as those of survey respondents with regard to the average income earned in these professions):

Own business includes: (local) consultant; merchant; metal/wood/mechanic workshop; tailor.

Good position private sector includes: accountant; agent; auditor; banker; company director/manager; contractor; economist; engineer; supervisor.

Low position private sector includes: guard; worker; cleaner.

Table 5

Group of 29 female students at the UoA – Mother's profession (professional categories defined as in table 4)

Mother's profession	Name	Total
Own business/ shop/workshop	Hayat*	1
Office/administrative staff	Simret, Rita, Rahel	3
Education/health sector	Ruth, Lydia, (Selam, partly)	2 (3)
Good position private sector	Hannah	1
Housewife	Sultan, Fatima, Azieb, Saba, Tirhas, Almaz, Senait, Selam, Miriam, Meaza, Samira, Rihab**, Anna, Asmeret**, Elmi, Sarah, Yordanos, Misgana, Esther, Askalu	20
Farmer	Awet	1
Fighter	Mehret	1

* retired; ** dead

Source: Interview Data

Table 6

Survey respondents by fathers' profession and sex of students (professional categories as above)

Father's profession	Female	Male	Total	Valid percent
Government official	23	12	35	10.1
Own business/shop/workshop	36	28	64	18.6
Office/administrative staff	4	10	14	4.1
Education/health sector	18	11	29	8.4
Good position private sector	17	4	21	6.1
Low position private sector	18	16	34	9.9
Farmer	21	43	64	18.6
Retired	13	17	30	8.7
Unemployed	1	1	2	0.6
Dead	9	17	26	7.5
Other (not specified)	10	16	26	7.5
Missing	6	8	14	N/A
Total	176	183	359	100.0

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

Table 7

Survey respondents by mother's profession and sex of students (professional categories as above)

Mother's profession	Female	Male	Total	Valid percent
Government official	9	6	15	4.3
Own business/shop/workshop	11	4	15	4.3
Office/administrative staff	10	7	17	4.9
Education/health sector	9	3	12	3.5
Good position private sector	6	1	7	2.0
Low position private sector	4	7	11	3.2
Farmer	6	18	24	6.9
Housewife	114	120	234	67.4
Retired	0	3	3	0.9
Unemployed	0	2	2	0.6
Dead	2	2	4	1.2
Other (not specified)	2	1	3	0.9
Missing	3	9	12	N/A
Total	176	183	359	100.0

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

Table 8:

Survey respondents by fathers' education and sex of students

Father's education	Female	Male	Total	Valid percent
No formal	17	49	66	18.7
Elementary	48	41	89	25.2
Secondary	39	41	80	22.7
University	64	38	102	28.9
Don't know	5	11	16	4.5
Missing	3	3	6	N/A
Total	176	183	359	100.0

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

The computed Chi Square value for $\alpha=.05$ and $df=1$ for whether the respondents' fathers obtained secondary education or higher is 8.649 (the critical value being 3.84) and thus shows a significant difference between female and male respondents.

Table 9

Survey respondents by mother's education and sex of students

Mother's education	Female	Male	Total	Valid percent
No formal	44	69	113	31.9
Elementary	51	53	104	29.4
Secondary	48	38	86	24.3
University	25	12	37	10.5
Don't know	4	10	14	4.0
Missing	4	1	5	N/A
Total	176	183	359	100.0

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

The computed Chi Square value for $\alpha=.05$ and $df=1$ for whether the respondents' mothers obtained secondary education or higher is 8.740 (the critical value being 3.84) and thus shows a significant difference between female and male respondents.

Table 10

Survey respondents by kindergarten attendance/older siblings at the UoA and sex of students

Kindergarten/ Older siblings	Female	Male	Total	Valid percent	Chi Square value $\alpha=.05$; $df=1$ critical value: 3.84
Kindergarten attendance yes	97	61	158	48.0	17.961
Kindergarten attendance no	65	106	171	52.0	17.961
Missing	14	16	30	N/A	N/A
Older siblings at UoA yes	85	42	127	35.5	25.653
Older siblings at UoA no	90	141	231	64.5	25.653
Missing	1	0	1	N/A	N/A

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

Table 11

Survey respondents from Eritrea* by nationality**, urban/rural background and sex of students

Ethnicity/ Background	Tigrinya	Tigre	Bilen	Saho	Total	Valid percent
Rural background						
Females	20	0	0	0	20	7.5
Males	39	0	1	0	40	15.0
Urban background						
Females	101	2	1	1	105	39.5
Males	92	4	1	4	101	38.0
Total	252	6	3	5	266	100.0
Valid percent	94.7	2.3	1.1	1.9	100.0	

* Out of the 268 respondents who grew up in Eritrea, valid data for all variables was available for 266 respondents; only these are included here

** No students from either the Kunama, Nara, Afar, Hadareb or Rashaida nationality took part in the survey and the researcher is not aware of any student belonging to any of these nationalities who was indeed studying at the UoA in a degree programme at the time the fieldwork was conducted (though their might have been a small number of male students who was Nara or Kunama)

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

APPENDIX 5.1: School enrolment figures and percentages by level, *zoba* and sex

Table 1
Elementary, middle and secondary enrolment by *zoba* and sex, school year 1999/2000

<i>zoba</i>	Elementary level grade 1 to 5			Middle school level grade 6 to 7			Secondary level grade 8 to 11		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
Anseba	19,197	25,281	44,478	3,364	4,779	8,143	1,437	3,665	5,102
Southern Red Sea	1,421	2,722	4,143	360	593	953	240	384	624
Debub	47,422	55,236	102,658	9,716	14,852	24,568	4,758	12,620	17,378
Gash-Barka	18,762	26,587	45,349	2,376	4,384	6,760	899	2,703	3,602
Maakel	37,937	37,965	75,902	16,160*	13,563	29,723	14,233	16,524	30,757
Northern Red Sea	8,306	15,105	23,411	1,308	2,862	4,170	526	1,637	2,163
Total	133,045	162,896	295,941	33,284	41,033	74,317	22,093	37,533	59,626

* The researcher is puzzled by the fact that more female than male students seem to be enrolled at middle school level in *zoba* Maakel (Asmara and environment) and would assume that the two figures were mixed up. She was assured that this was not the case, however. One possible explanation could be that parents from outside the *zoba* sent their daughters to live with relatives within, so that they could continue schooling (whereas boys might be more likely to either walk long distances to school or start working after they finish elementary level). Overall, one must not assume that students necessarily start at elementary level and then progress through the system. Even though ten years after independence this is possibly true for the majority of students, there are still students who either have been in the field and delayed returning back to education, students who grew up abroad and only return now, students who for whatever reason, mostly economic hardship, interrupted their education and get back when the situation allows them to do so; therefore some of the students at secondary level will not have come from within the system (which does make the higher numbers of male students at secondary compared to middle school level in *zoba* Maakel possible). *Source*: Basic Education Statistics 1999/2000, Asmara. MoE.

Table 2

Secondary school enrolment by *zoba* and sex, school year 1999/2000

<i>zoba</i>	Grade 8			Grade 9			Grade 10*			Grade 11*		
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total
	Anseba	809	1835	2644	348	985	1333	229	506	735	51	339
Southern Red Sea	96	164	260	67	109	176	54	66	120	23	45	68
Debulb	2299	5966	8265	1152	3504	4656	903	2024	2927	404	1126	1530
Gash-Baraka	444	1211	1655	249	836	1085	169	518	687	37	138	175
Maakel	5946	6320	12266	3639	4453	8092	3070	3472	6542	1578	2279	3857
Northern Red Sea	275	853	1128	119	425	544	85	271	356	47	88	135
Total	9869	16349	26218	5574	10312	15886	4510	6857	11367	2140	4015	6155

* The drop in student numbers between grade 10 and grade 11 is partly related to a special scheme which offered certain students, mostly students from minority ethnic groups and particularly females among these, the chance to join the TTI or nursing school after grade 10. This scheme was mostly halted during the academic year 2000/2001.

Source: Eritrea: Basic Education Statistics 1999/2000, Asmara: MoE (net or gross enrolment figures by *zoba* not available)

Table 3

Percentage drop (increase) in absolute enrolment numbers between elementary, middle and secondary level, by *zoba* and sex (negative percentage unless stated otherwise), school year 1999/2000

<i>zoba</i>	Between elementary and middle school level			Between middle school and secondary level		
	<i>Female</i> %	<i>Male</i> %	<i>Total</i> %	<i>Female</i> %	<i>Male</i> %	<i>Total</i> %
Anseba	82.5	81.1	81.7	57.3	23.3	37.3
Southern Red Sea	74.7	78.2	77.0	33.3	35.3	34.5
Debut	79.5	73.1	76.1	51.0	15.0	29.3
Gash-Barka	87.3	83.5	85.1	62.2	38.3	46.7
Maakel (see footnote table 1)	57.4	64.3	60.8	11.9	+21.8	+3.5
Northern Red Sea	84.3	81.1	82.2	59.8	42.8	48.1
Total	75.0	74.8	74.9	33.6	8.5	19.8

Researcher's calculation, based on data from:

Eritrea: Basic Education Statistics 1999/2000, Asmara: MoE

Table 4

Net (and gross) enrolment ratios for elementary level by *zoba*, school year 1999/2000

<i>zoba</i>	Elementary level net (gross) enrolment ratios %	
	Anseba	37.0 (58.2)
Southern Red Sea	7.7 (11.5)	
Debut	51.0 (76.7)	
Gash-Barka	27.3 (46.2)	
Maakel	56.0 (79.3)	
Northern Red Sea	20.4 (31.3)	
Total	37.9 (57.5)	

Source: Eritrea: Essential Education Indicators 1999/2000, Asmara: MoE

No sex aggregated data available, nor data by *zoba* for middle or secondary level.

Table 5

Change in female net (gross) enrolment for elementary, middle and secondary level between 1993/1994 and 1999/2000

Level	Net (gross) female enrolment		Net (gross) female enrolment ratio		Total net (gross) enrolment ratio	
	93/94	99/00	93/94	99/00	93/94	99/00
Elementary	53,967 (92,536)	90,215 (133,045)	25.0 (42.8)	35.6 (52.4)	25.9 (47.4)	37.9 (57.5)
Middle	3,990 (14,652)	8,649 (33,284)	5.7 (20.9)	10.6 (40.4)	5.9 (22.4)	10.5 (43.2)
Secondary	9,165 (13,324)	16,397 (22,093)	7.9 (11.5)	12.1 (16.2)	8.0 (13.7)	14.0 (21.3)

Source: Eritrea: Essential Education Indicators 1999/2000, Asmara: MoE

APPENDIX 5.2: Visits to five secondary schools in Eritrea

Keren secondary school

Keren Secondary School was opened in 1949 by the British Military Administration of Eritrea, making it one of the oldest secondary schools for Eritrean children in the country. It has a spacious and well tended compound. Over the last ten years many trees have been planted in a joint effort by the late former director, teachers and students, which makes the compound resemble a green oasis in the predominately dry and dusty condition of Keren. Keren Secondary has a volleyball and basketball pitch inside its walls, as well as a comparably good library – although some books are dated, newer reference material is available as well and the library has some space for students to sit and study. It does not have any laboratory for science teaching.

The main problem for the school is space and a stagnant number of teachers who have to cope with increasing numbers of students every year. Classes are thus very big and numbers can reach up to 90 students per class, especially in grades 8 and 9. Teaching takes place in two shifts. On average about one third of the students are girls, though more than half in grade 8, getting considerably less in grade 9 and 10. Some teachers have as many as 700 different students in all their sections taken together which makes it impossible to pay attention to individual students or for example realise if they have a problem.

At the time of the researcher's visit, no female Eritrean teacher was teaching at Keren Secondary (but one female Indian teacher), and in the past there were never more than one or two female teachers the researcher was told.

The majority of students in Keren Secondary are Tigrinya, followed by Bilen and Tigre in that order, and a negligible number of students from other nationalities, mainly Nara and Hadareb.

The school director, Abraham Tadesse, had been working at the school for nine years, first as a teacher and then as a director, and has seen the number of female students increasing every year: from 513 young women in the academic year of 1993/94 to 1004 in the year 2000/2001.

During the second semester of the school year 2000/2001, while the researcher was visiting the school, the student numbers were as follows:

	Female	Male	Total
Grade 8	487	778	1265
Grade 9	288	646	934
Grade 10	161	407	568
Grade 11*	68	138	206
Total	1004	1969	2973

* The low number of students in grade 11 is partly due to the fact that 33 students from the Tigre and Bilen ethnic groups, 18 males and 15 females, were offered the chance after grade 10 to join the elementary teachers training at the newly established training centre in Mai Nefhi and subsequently took up this opportunity. The same – that students joined other educational establishments after grade 10 – is true for Agordat, Barentu and Tsabra.

Source: Keren Secondary School Administration, March 2001

The researcher visited Keren Secondary from March 6, 2001 to March 13, 2001. During that time she usually spent both shifts at the school, dividing her time between visiting classes and talking to students and staff, in groups and individually. Altogether she visited two out of the 18 sections in grade 8, 10 out of the 14 sections in grade 9, all 7 sections in grade 10 and all three sections in grade 11, some of them more than once. That she spent relatively little time in grade 8 is due to the fact that in general grade 8 is somewhere in between junior and senior secondary school. It is the last class when students still behave more like excited children, most visible in the many hands shooting into the air shouting ‘teacher, teacher’ whenever a question is posed, no matter whether one can answer or not. After grade 8 a censure seems to take place and the students become more like young adults, which apart from issues of puberty discussed elsewhere becomes visible in the reduced active involvement in class. It is from grade 9 onwards that decisions start to be made on whether to take education seriously and try to achieve something or pursue other interests.

Agordat junior and secondary school

In Agordat the junior and senior secondary school share one compound and facilities. During the time of the researcher’s visit, from February 19, 2001 to February 25, 2001, the junior school had its shift in the morning, the secondary school in the afternoon. The researcher concentrated her stay at the school on the secondary part and spent the mornings in the community, partly with teachers and students from the school. The school compound has a dusty volleyball pitch. A library exists with some newer reference material but mainly outdated books and limited space for sitting and studying. There is no laboratory.

During the third Ethiopian offensive in 2000 in the course of which Ethiopian forces occupied Barentu, Agordat was evacuated and the school was closed for some time as many students went back to their villages or fled to Sudan. Authorities were afraid that Ethiopian forces could use long-distance weapons

to attack Agordat and in fact planes flew over Agordat twice and dropped smaller bomblets in the near environment. Due to these disturbances, the 2001 grade 11 students are academically weak. Many of them returned to Agordat without their parents in order to be able to complete their schooling, and those who are with their families often still suffer economic hardship as a consequence of the war.

About one third of all students come from remote areas, for which Agordat is the nearest secondary school, and two hostels, one for boys and one for girls, offer these students free accommodation and food.¹

Two third of the students are Tigrinya, followed by Tigre, and then Nara, Kunama, Saho and Hadareb.

During the second semester of the school year 2000/2001, while the researcher was visiting the school, the student numbers in the secondary school were as follows:

	Female	Male	Total
Grade 8	79	222	301
Grade 9	44	160	204
Grade 10	40	110	150
Grade 11	12	44	56
Total	175	536	711

Source: Agordat Junior and Secondary School Administration, February 2001

These students were divided into five sections in grade 8, three sections in grade 9, two sections in grade 10 and one natural science class in grade 11. All of these were visited by the researcher, grade 10 and 11 classes more than once.

Biarar junior and secondary school, Barentu

As was the case in Agordat, in Barentu the junior and senior secondary school share one compound and facilities. During the researcher's visit from February 26, 2001 to March 3, 2001, it was the secondary school which had its shift in the morning. Again, the researcher concentrated her stay on the secondary part and thus spent her afternoons in the community, often in the company of teachers.

Biara does not have a proper compound with gates or a fence. It used to have a fairly good library with a lot of books donated by the British Council. The library was looted during the third Ethiopian offensive in 2000 and all books of any value were taken to Ethiopia – reportedly, Ethiopian civilians were bussed in to decide what was worth taking, which still leaves many school personnel

¹ The researcher spent some time in the girls' hostel, which is by far too small for the number of girls staying there. They sleep in two rooms and there are no facilities to study at all. A new hostel is planned in Agordat as well as in Massawa for girls from remote areas who otherwise would not have access to any schooling. Due to the war with Ethiopia its building has been delayed indefinitely for the time being.

feeling bitter. Biara also used to have a small laboratory, albeit only with basic equipment, which was also looted, and many chairs and tables in the school were burned. Attached to the school used to be a dusty soccer pitch which now served as the helicopter landing strip for the United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) soldiers, whereas the burnt out former library building provided shelter to Eritrean soldiers who supported the UN troops – in short, the aftermath of the war still very much disturbed school life in Barentu.

The only female secondary school teacher in the whole of Gash-Barka was teaching in Barentu at the time (there was none in Agordat), and she is not a professional teacher but was completing her year of university service.

Many of the students who came back to the school did return to Barentu on their own – their parents still being in Afabet, where many of them were evacuated to during the Ethiopian occupation, or in one of the Internally Displaced People's (IDP) camps in the area. They rent accommodation in Barentu and often have to work to provide for their necessities; that they came back at all to continue their education shows their dedication.

The majority of students in Biara are Tigrinya, followed by Kunama, and a small number of Nara and Bilen and a number of Hausa from Nigeria, who settled in the area.

During the second semester of the school year 2000/2001, while the researcher was visiting the school, the student numbers in the secondary school were as follows:

	Female	Male	Total
Grade 8	109	299	408
Grade 9	111	206	317
Grade 10	64	157	221
Grade 11	41	57	98
Total	325	719	1044

Source: Biara Junior and Secondary School Administration, February 2001

These students were divided into six sections in grade 8, five sections in grade 9, three sections in grade 10 (one of which is an arts class) and two natural science sections in grade 11. The researcher visited three sections in grade 8, four in grade 9, and all grade 10 and 11 sections, some of them more than once.

Tsabra, Nakfa

Tsabra is the only boarding secondary school in Eritrea. In the school year 2000/2001, students from grade 7 to grade 11 were attending Tsabra, but as Nakfa now has a middle school of its own, from 2001/2002 onwards Tsabra will become a secondary school only. Tsabra used to be situated in a valley 15 kilometres from Nakfa but was relocated to Nakfa in 1998. This means a deterioration in infrastructure and facilities. While a proper new compound with stone buildings is planned, for the time being Tsabra is situated in open space

on a hillside with classrooms and dormitories made of corrugated iron sheets, making conditions very cold during the winter and extremely hot in the summer, not a very conducive environment to study. There is no running water nor toilet facilities, students use certain allocated spots in the surrounding fields, which for girls brings many problems especially when menstruating.

Tsabra students can use the volleyball pitch of next door Winna Technical School and the soccer pitch in Nakfa town. The school has a well-equipped library container (the best building on site).

More than two thirds of students in Tsabira are Tigre, with the rest made up of all other ethnic groups (albeit in 2000/2001 no Rashaida or Afar).

Two female teachers were teaching in Tsabira, both of whom were teachers in their university service year.

During the second semester of the school year 2000/2001, while the researcher was visiting the school, the student numbers were as follows:

	Female	Male	Total
Grade 7	12	34	46
Grade 8	61	313	374
Grade 9	27	335	362
Grade 10	17	55	72
Grade 11	12	79	91
Total	129	816	945

Source: Tsabira Administration, January 2001

These students were divided into one section in grade 7, seven sections in grade 8, seven sections in grade 9, two sections in grade 10 and one section in grade 11. During her stay in Tsabira from January 22, 2001 to January 31, 2001, the researcher visited all sections, some of them more than once, and also spent much time in the girls' dormitory and with the teachers.

Ibrahim sultan secondary school, Asmara

Ibrahim Sultan is located in the centre of Asmara, one block away from the main street, around the corner from the MoE. It does not have a proper school compound, as its building goes back to the Italian colonial period when it was used for administrative purposes, until the (Ethiopian) government started to use it as a school. It thus has no sports ground, but facilities in other schools are occasionally used, while most of the sports lessons take place in the small inner courtyard. The school does have a library, most books are however dated and there is not enough space to sit and study for the number of students. Many students therefore use other libraries in the city. What the library does provide, however, are sets of old matriculation papers which can be borrowed to practice within its premises.

The school has a laboratory, which in 2000/2001 was however closed and under repair, and a set of microscopes; a language lab is in the process of being established.

Many students, especially in grade ten, are not promoted, in some classes as many as 80 per cent. This is due to the fact that most (male) students (partly because of the war with the family breadwinner at the frontline) work outside school to earn money; also, while they are in education, they do not have to go to Sawa themselves, so they are happy to repeat grade ten and stay a year longer in school.

Teaching takes place in two shifts. There is one female Eritrean teacher in the school, an experienced teacher who has been teaching for many years.

During the second semester of the school year 2000/2001, while the researcher was visiting the school, the student numbers were as follows:

	Female	Male	Total
Grade 8	300	222	522
Grade 9	178	229	407
Grade 10	262	346	608
Grade 11	149	135	284
Total	889	932	1821

Source: Ibrahim Sultan Administration, May 2001

These students were divided into 12 sections in grade 8, 10 sections in grade 9, 12 sections in grade 10 and six sections in grade 11 (two of which were arts stream). During her stay at Ibrahim Sultan from May 3, 2001 to May 11, 2001 the researcher stayed at the school for most of both shifts and visited half of all sections in grade 8 and 9, 8 sections in grade 10 and four sections in grade 11, some of them more than once. Additionally, she spent time with groups of female students in their free periods or after school, and talked to many of the teachers either in the teachers' room or the nearby teachers' social club.

APPENDIX 5.3: Admittance to the UoA

Numbers and percentage of regular* matriculation candidates admitted to the UoA (degree, diploma and certificate programme) by *zoba* and sex, year 2000

<i>zoba</i>	No. of candidates			Percentage admitted out of all candidates		
	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Total</i>
Maakel	235	820	1055	14.7	32.4	25.5
Dehub	53	374	427	13.9	35.3	29.6
Southern Red Sea**	9	36	45	42.9	83.7	70.3
Northern Red Sea***	14	115	129	24.6	55.8	49.1
Anseba	19	162	181	35.9	56.6	53.4
Gash-Barka	3	37	40	8.3	39.3	29.2
Total	333	1544	1877	15.5	36.6	29.4

* Regular refers to candidates who took the matriculation exam straight after completion of secondary education (in this case including the three technical schools and the Asmara TTI). In addition, every year what are called private candidates (candidates who try for a second time, candidates who have been working and want to get back into education etc.) take the exam as well. These are not included in these figures. In the 2000 matriculation, 74.3 percent of candidates were regular candidates. Due to the war, the overall number of candidates was extremely low in the year 2000, whereas the overall pass rate was extremely high – suggesting that a high number of students committed to education took the exam.

** The students who passed in Southern Red Sea do all come from Woldeab Woldemariam Secondary School in Assab and are the children of Tigrinya highlanders who work for the *zoba* administration or have businesses in Assab.

*** Figures for Northern Red Sea include the two technical schools Winna and Mai Habar, with regular pass rates of more than 50 percent.

Source: Researcher's calculations, based on data from the UoA Educational Testing Centre, 2001

APPENDIX 6.1: Survey respondents' future plans

Table 1

Survey respondents by post graduation plans and sex of students

No. of students immediately after graduation: I want to ...	Female	Male	Total	Valid Percent	Chi Square value $\alpha=.05$; $df=1$ (critical value: 3.84)
... do a Master's	119	124	243	68.6	010
... work and support my family	40	47	87	24.6	465
... marry, have children and work	15	9	24	6.8	1.835
... marry, have children and not work	0	0	0	0.0	n/a
Missing	2	3	5	N/A	n/a
Total	176	183	359	100.0	n/a

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

The computed Chi Square values showed no significant difference between female and male respondents.

Table 2

Survey respondents by long term plans and sex of students (multiple responses possible)

In "ten years time" I want to ...	Female	Male	Total
... work in academia	17	45	62
... work for the government	29	35	64
... work in the private sector	85	96	181
... work abroad	34	46	80
... stay at home and have a family of my own	3	11	14
... have a family and continue my career	80	55	135
Missing	1	1	n/a

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

APPENDIX 6.2: Survey respondents' problems at the UoA and beyond

Survey respondents' most serious problems in Freshman

Problems experienced in Freshman	Female	Male	Total	Chi Square value $\alpha=.05$; $df=1$ (critical value: 3.84)
Not enough textbooks	123	138	261	1.392
Some teachers not good teachers	98	117	215	2.557
Not enough books in the library	82	103	185	3.387

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

The computed Chi Square values showed no significant difference between female and male respondents.

Survey respondents' categories which affect academic performance positively or negatively

Categories that affect academic performance positively	Female	Male	Total	Chi Square value $\alpha=.05$; $df=1$ (critical value: 3.84)
General situation in my family	128	95	223	17.742
Available time to study	105	100	205	1.862
Motivation to study	104	110	214	.012
Health issues	97	97	194	.280
Understanding of subject matters	114	124	238	.135

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

The computed Chi Square values show no significant difference between female and male respondents except for one category: the general situation in the family. This comes as no surprise as for many of the 29 women in the centre of this study an encouraging family environment had a major role to play in them continuing their education. Equally, in an open survey question, female students explained the importance of a positive family environment as follows: "Because it [the family] is the one which makes you feel alright and motivates in your studying"; "I have a great feeling towards my family and since mom and dad are alive I didn't have any problem, they give me their help"; "my family are much interested in education so they have hope in me and encourage me"; "my family are educated so I have to follow them as did my brother and sister"; "if some of my family did not understand about education, that means if they did not want me as a girl educated, girls would only have a career in the

house” (this answer spells out the potential relationship between either continuing one’s education or marriage); “my family are always supporting me, encouraging me in my study and would like to see me achieving something and I like that very much”; “they (my family) always tell me about the importance of education and make me study hard and not think about anything else.”

Categories which affect academic performance negatively	Female	Male	Total	Chi Square value $\alpha=.05$; $df=1$ (critical value: 3.84)
Resources at the university (lack of)	106	116	222	.381
Way grades are given	92	125	217	7.932

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

For both, female and male students, the lack of resources and dissatisfaction with the way grades are given are the major negative categories, albeit in different order. Concerning the latter, the computed chi square value shows a significant higher number of men feeling aggrieved. A possible explanation might be the fact that in general women are less likely to complain and more prone to accept given results. The important fact here is that overall more than half respondents of each sex consider grading unsatisfactory. Some of the reasons given in an open question why are cited below:

Female students mentioned that “most of the time, especially in freshman studies, the teachers seem to be giving grades unfairly – and that affects the students who work hard to achieve a good mark”; “specially in the faculty of social sciences grades are not given by what you have done but it seems to me by personal contact specially by the Indian teachers”; “if grades are not given in a fair manner then it discourages you to study hard and perform well.” Some of the explanations given by male students included: “Teachers give grades according to their perception of students they like”; “grades are the result of the teachers’ evaluation which is wholly based on the teachers’ objective and his approach which is mostly personal”; “most of the instructors give grades not according to what you know, but how you stood before, they believe you cannot do better than in the beginning”; “the way grades are given is not the result of your hard work but a matter of chance.” One male student gave the following answer: “Grades should be given according to merit, not because she happens to be a girl or he has been known as lazy, she/he should get the grades according to how they performed.” This was the only answer showing the perception of a male that females might get different grades simply because they are females, something mentioned in a few interviews with the 29 women – that they felt if they got good grades, the male students believed it was only due to the fact that

they were females and the instructor liked them. Another student mentioned that the problem was not only in grades, that the way of giving grades was just an indicator for a more general problem: “This is because there is no transparency; feedback on my performance is not given; there are potential grounds for corrupt practices, we students are the victims.”

APPENDIX 6.3: Survey respondents' gender attitudes

To find out more about differences in attitudes between female and male students, certain statements were given to respondents and they were asked to circle whether they agreed or disagreed (the Likert scale was used in this context). Some of the findings are reported below.

Asked to rate the statement: "Teachers like to give good grades to female students only because they are females", the answers looked like this:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Female	1	1	13	23	138	176
Male	31	28	65	33	26	183
Total	32	29	78	56	164	359

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

This shows that there is indeed a believe among some male students that females are not graded according to their academic performance but their sex, but it is less relevant than could have been expected from the narratives of female students.

Another issue which was mentioned in some of the interviews with the 29 individual students was that for female students it is more difficult to go to the office of mainly male teachers and discuss issues with them. This was indeed confirmed by a considerable number of females who participated in the survey. However, almost one third of female respondents disagreed – which might indicate that these issues change over time, as most of the survey participants were in study years below the interviewees:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Female	33	46	40	35	22	176
Male	15	20	52	40	55	182
Total	48	66	92	75	77	358

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

An issue on which the majority of female and male students agreed or strongly agreed – 122 females and 103 males respectively – was that male students dominate discussions in class. At the same time, however, there was a common consensus that some teachers especially encourage female students in class with 77 females and 115 males agreeing. This also shows that more males felt that females were encouraged than females felt themselves, and given the fact that still most females and males felt males dominated discussions, this encouragement does not seem to have a big impact. This was confirmed by asking whether students agreed that females rarely speak in class, to which an overwhelmingly majority of 139 females agreed or strongly agreed, as did 120 males.

Concerning general remarks about gender relations, responses to the statement: “It is more important for men to go to university than it is for women” were as follows:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Female	9	7	4	37	119	176
Male	24	24	12	63	58	181
Total	33	31	16	100	177	357

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

What is interesting here is that even some women themselves agreed to that statement – although the majority strongly rejected it, and that also the majority of male respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. A similar tendency can be observed concerning the next statement: “Women will marry eventually and have children so they do not need to go to university”, for which the responses were as follows:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Female	7	5	3	28	132	175
Male	17	16	15	54	79	181
Total	24	21	18	82	211	356

Source: Survey Data, SPSS Spreadsheet

These answers seem to indicate that indeed a change took place in men's attitude towards women in the younger generation, or at least the younger educated generation, and that some of the fears communicated in the interviews might be unjustified. There was also a strong consensus among both sexes that more women should go to university and have their own career, with 157

females and 128 males agreeing or strongly agreeing to that statement. A majority of 102 females would like to have more female lecturers, whereas 42 men said they don't know and 84 also supported that wish. But in general there was a strong consensus among both sexes that it did not matter whether lecturers were female or male, more important was that they were competent and made students understand the subject, with 156 females agreeing or strongly agreeing and 141 males. The issue of having (more) single sex study rooms was not a priority, only 64 females supported it (as did 54 males) with 76 disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that this was desirable (and 100 males).

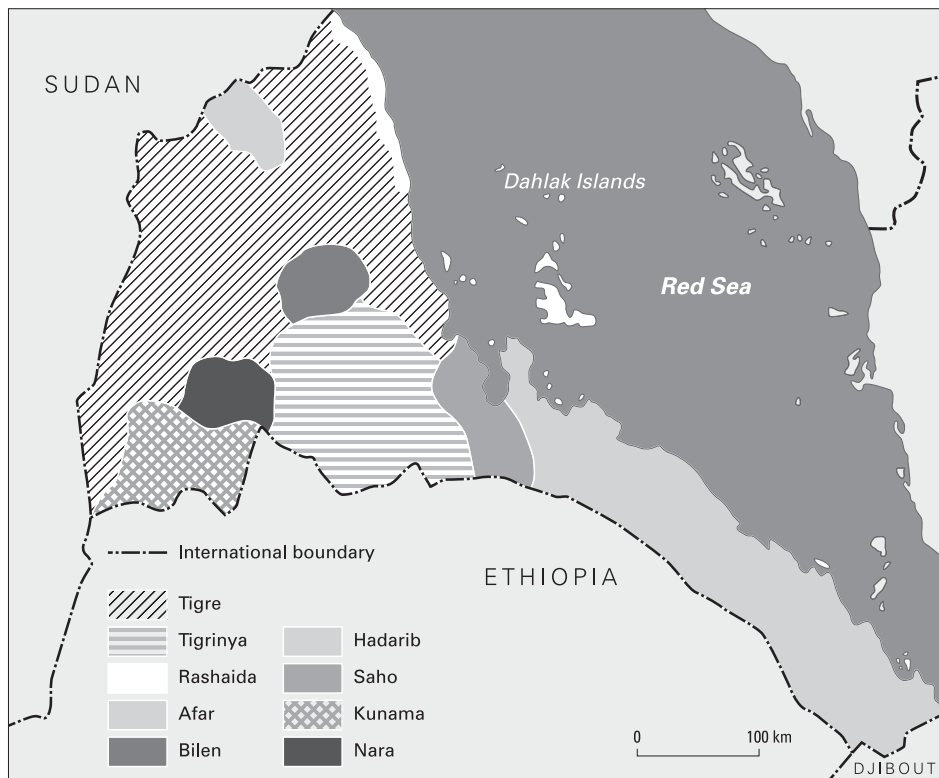
Altogether it seems that men's attitudes are not as gender insensitive as many females believe them to be; and overall, for most statements attitudes of female and male survey participants were found to be very similar.

APPENDIX 7: Maps

Map 1 Eritrea: Provincial boundaries and main towns



Map 2 Geographic distribution of Eritrean nationalities



Map 3 Eritrea: Regional boundaries and main towns until 1997



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All Eritrean and Ethiopian names are listed, as is standard practice, in alphabetic order of the author's first name, followed by the father's name.

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Interviews

Women students at the UoA (names withheld to protect their identity):

29 female students in year 4 or 5 at the UoA from the following subjects (number of students if more than one from one subject in brackets): Accounting, Animal Science, Archaeology, Civil Engineering, Economics (3), Educational Administration, Geography, History, Journalism and Mass Communication, Law, Marine Biology and Fisheries, Medical Laboratory Technician, Pharmacy, Plant Science, Political Science (2), Sociology and Anthropology (3), Soil and Water Conservation (2), SST-Biology, SST-Chemistry, SST-English, SST-Geography, SST-History and SST-Physics, interviewed between October 2000 and May 2001.

Women in government or other higher administrative positions (ex-fighters):

Luul Gebreab, Chairwomen National Union of Eritrean Women, 20/12/2000.

Zahra Jabir, Mayor, City of Keren, 08/02/2001.

Luel Asrat, Mayor, Town of Adi Quala, 17/03/2001.

Asmeret Abraha, Head Community Development Division, Ministry of Labour and Human Welfare, 08/06/2001.

Hiwet Megas, Head Administration Gesabanda (Zone 2 in Asmara), 27/06/2001.

Tsega Gaim, Head Social Service and Rehabilitation Department, NUEW, 28/06/2001.

Foaza Hashim, Minister of Justice, 27/07/2001.

Selome Iyob, IT-Coordinator, MoE, 14/12/2000.

Mehret Iyob, Director Project Management Division, MoE, 19/12/2000.

Asmeret Habtemichael, Director Supervision and National Examinations, MoE, 11/01/2001.

Zaid Mesfin, Headofficer Education Office Asmara (subregional office south-west), 11/04/2001.

Women in business or academia:

Haregu Gebreselassie, Managing Director Square Consulting, Architects, Planners & Engineers, 20/12/2000.

Saba Mebrahtu, Owner and Manager Import-Export Business, 06/06/2001.

Haki-Siir Yohannes, Owner and Manager Ruth Trading and Commission Agent, 08/06/2001.

Ghennet Bokretzion, Owner and Manager Double Harvest Poultry, 25/06/2001.

Dr. Wezenet Tewodros, Director of Academic Affairs, UoA, 19/12/2000.

Dr. Sarah Ogbay, Lecturer English Department, UoA, 14/12/2000.

Almaz Bein, Assistant Lecturer English Department, UoA, 18/01/2001.

Nazareth Amleson, Assistant Lecturer English Department, UoA, 21/03/2001.

Sushan Berhe, Lecturer Eritrean Institute of Management, 11/04/2001.

Senait Ghebru, Lecturer Secondary School Teachers, FoE, UoA, 16/04/2001.

Dr. Azieb Ogbaghebriel, Dean College of Health Sciences and Director Research and Human Resource Affairs, UoA, 15/06/2001.

Dr. Senbetu Meri, Lecturer Department of Geography, UoA, 21/06/2001.

Abrehet Ghebrekidan, Lecturer College of Health Sciences, UoA, 12/06/2001 (also ex-fighter).

Key informants

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Ayn-Alem ("Joe") Marcos, Director General Adult and Technical Education, MoE, 20/11/2000.

Girmai Gebrehiwot, Head Regional Education Office Zoba Maakel, 23/11/2000.

Abraham Teclé, Director Human Resource Development, MoE, 08/12/2000.

Petros Hailemariam, Director General Research and Human Resource Development, MoE, 23/12/2000.

- Eden Asghedom, Project Manager National Union of Eritrean Youths and Students, 10/01/2001.
- Tsehaitu Daniel, Administrator, Ibrahim Sultan Secondary School, Asmara, 11/01/2001.
- Osman Saleh, Minister of Education, 20/03/2001.
- Berhane Demoz, Director Research, MoE, 20/03/2001.
- Tesfamichael Geratu, Director General General Education, MoE, 20/03/2001.
- Dr. Wolde-Ab Yisak, President, UoA, 13/06/2001.
- Idris Ali Affa, Director Tsabra Secondary School, Nakfa, 29/01/2001.
- Naga Tesfai, Director Agordat Junior and Senior Secondary School, Agordat, 23/02/2001.
- Biniam Fissaye, Director Biara Junior and Senior Secondary School, Barentu, 02/03/2001.
- Abraham Tadesse, Director Keren Secondary School, Keren, 12/03/2001.
- Nafie Hajai Nafie, Director Ibrahim Sultan Secondary School, Asmara, 10/05/2001.

School visits

- Tsabra Secondary School, Nakfa, 22/01/2001 – 30/01/2001.
- Agordat Secondary School, Agordat, 19/02/2001 – 25/02/2001.
- Biara Secondary School, Barentu, 26/02/2001 – 02/03/2001.
- Keren Secondary School, Keren, 06/03/2001 – 13/03/2001.
- Ibrahim Sultan Secondary School, Asmara, 04/05/2001 – 11/05/2001.

Index

- Agordat Secondary School · 116, 123, 134, 135
- ‘bearers of modernity’ · 49, 209
- British Military Administration (BMA) · 30, 31, 33, 117
- Chinese revolution · 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 18, 37, 55, 159
- Cold War · 1, 11, 15, 31, 32, 178, 223
- constitution · 212, 213, 214, 218, 221, 225, 226
- Cuban revolution · 7, 11, 15, 19, 37, 69, 159, 225
- ‘culture of democracy’ · 226
- demobilisation · 52, 53
- Derg · 33, 34, 72, 76, 80, 81, 106, 109, 111, 112, 114, 166
- developing world · 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 11, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 37, 45, 204
- diaspora · 41, 77, 148, 165, 178, 179, 199, 201, 212, 215, 216, 224
- education
- education for social change · 1, 5, 7, 15, 18, 30, 35, 40, 42, 43, 51, 54, 111, 181, 205, 206, 215, 216, 217
 - formal education · 3, 22, 64, 65, 68, 88, 91, 93, 95, 96, 108, 111, 118, 121, 124, 126, 128, 133, 137, 177, 209, 217
 - higher education · 23, 62, 65, 92, 100, 103, 143, 147, 149, 154, 165, 177, 178, 181, 182, 200, 201, 217, 220
 - non-formal education · 23
 - political education · 2, 23, 25, 37, 41, 42, 78, 83, 210
 - secondary education · 33, 65, 66, 96, 110, 125, 147, 149, 153, 177, 217
- elite
- academic elite · 2, 193
 - business elite · 166
 - economic elite · 155
 - elite women · 2, 3, 4, 44, 61, 62, 64, 68, 122, 154, 162, 166, 173, 178, 190, 205, 206, 207, 209, 210, 219
 - political elite · 37, 213, 217, 221
- Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) · 35, 36, 38, 39, 46, 77, 78, 111, 157
- Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) · 34, 35, 36
- Eritrean liberation struggle · 1, 2, 9, 17, 19, 33, 36, 40, 42, 45, 46, 47, 48, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 56, 62, 64, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 77, 78, 79, 84, 85, 88, 89, 96, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 117, 125, 143, 144, 151, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 161, 162, 164, 166, 168, 169, 170, 171, 174, 201, 205, 206, 209, 211, 214, 215, 216, 222, 224
- Eritrean People’s Liberation Army (EPLA) · 39, 40
- Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) · 2, 3, 11, 13, 17, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 31, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 59, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 83, 84, 85, 86, 88, 89, 96, 97, 106, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 118, 126, 134, 143, 151, 154, 155, 156, 157, 159, 160, 167, 168, 169, 170, 173, 176, 186, 189, 198, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 218, 222, 224, 225, 226
- Eritreo-Ethiopian border war, 1998-2000 · 27, 28, 41, 76, 84, 157, 169, 170, 171, 175, 201, 208, 213, 223, 225
- ex-fighter · 2, 52, 53, 54, 68, 71, 72, 138, 155, 157, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 168, 169, 173, 190, 207, 209, 212, 216

- Federation period, 1952-62 · 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 46, 81, 117, 144
- Frete de Libertação de Mozambique (FRELIMO) · 19, 20
- Frete Sandinista de Liberacion National (FSLN) · 7, 11, 15, 21, 22, 49, 69, 225
- gender equality · 7, 17, 19, 20, 22, 42, 47, 49, 50, 51, 61, 64, 68, 79, 83, 127, 133, 138, 140, 143, 154, 163, 167, 168, 170, 171, 176, 199, 206, 216
- gender relations · 1, 2, 3, 7, 16, 48, 49, 51, 77, 170, 217
- globalisation · 1, 43, 178, 179, 226
- hegemony · 30, 49, 77, 159, 179
- human agency · 6, 12, 58, 59
- Human Resource Development (HRD) · 44, 176, 177, 178, 179, 181, 182, 184, 207
- Ibrahim Sultan Secondary School · 66
- ideology · 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 41, 43, 45, 47, 48, 50, 51, 54, 56, 59, 61, 75, 76, 77, 79, 118, 139, 140, 159, 168, 169, 172, 178, 179, 197, 201, 203, 204, 207, 208, 210, 211, 216, 219, 220, 225
- 'imagined community' · 169, 221
- intelligentsia · 33
- Issayas Afewerki · 34, 36, 40, 41, 214
- Italian colonialism · 13, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35, 49, 78, 90, 91, 161
- Keren Secondary School · 115, 126, 138
- masculinity · 21, 48, 209
- Ministry of Education (MoE) · 26, 42, 43, 64, 65, 67, 107, 117, 121, 133, 153, 161, 179, 183, 187, 189, 199
- mobilisation · 9, 15, 16, 21, 29, 31, 34, 36, 49, 50, 72, 74, 79, 169, 205, 214, 221, 223
- modernisation · 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 15, 18, 28, 29, 32, 40, 43, 49, 54, 56, 118, 140, 146, 151, 166, 167, 168, 173, 177, 178, 180, 197, 203, 206, 207, 208, 210, 211, 214, 216, 217, 218, 222
- 'modernising development' · 222
- modernity · 6, 25, 49, 93, 117, 118, 122, 145, 149, 150, 203, 206, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 213, 216
- Muslim League (ML) · 30, 31, 35
- narratives · 3, 48, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 69, 76, 77, 89
- nation building · 2, 12, 13, 18, 29, 47, 168, 172, 204, 221
- National Democratic Programme · 38, 45
- national service · 56, 86, 97, 126, 130, 132, 147, 148, 153, 169, 170, 171, 172, 178, 182, 183, 185, 186, 208, 226
- National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) · 20, 45, 46, 47, 49, 50, 51, 53, 54, 55, 63, 68, 89, 133, 138, 162, 168, 170, 171, 175, 199, 211, 226
- National Union of Eritrean Youths and Students (NUEYS) · 54, 126, 133, 168, 176
- participation
 - equal participation · 20, 50, 157
 - political participation · 15, 40
- Partido Africano do Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) · 17, 18
- paternalism · 221
- People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) · 41, 50, 56, 68, 88, 167, 168, 173, 204, 212, 213, 214, 222, 224, 226
- 'personal nationalism' · 218
- progress · 5, 8, 20, 23, 38, 49, 54, 147, 167, 177, 181, 203, 205, 207, 216, 217, 218, 222, 225, 226
- revolution · 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 33, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 47, 49, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 62, 63, 64, 69, 71, 78, 88, 96, 97, 98, 106, 109, 110, 116, 117, 118, 119, 123, 124, 126, 136, 137, 140, 151, 155, 157, 159, 166, 167, 173, 176, 178, 179, 180, 186, 190, 199, 203, 204, 205, 206, 209, 210, 211, 212, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 221, 222, 225, 226
- democratic revolution · 9, 225
- developmental revolution · 9
- Eritrean revolution · 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 12, 15, 16, 23, 24, 25, 33, 37, 39, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 47, 49, 54, 55, 59, 61, 70, 77, 87, 107, 109, 116, 118, 139, 140, 151, 159, 173, 197, 199, 201, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 212, 216, 219, 220, 225, 226
- national revolution · 9, 12, 15, 37, 55
- revolutionary consolidation · 2, 3, 4, 10, 14, 15, 16, 29, 41, 56, 57, 62, 116,

- 118, 154, 159, 170, 173, 179, 204,
206, 212, 216, 221, 225, 226
- revolutionary institutionalisation · 2, 4,
14, 15, 64, 116, 221, 225
- social revolution · 1, 8, 12, 14, 16, 33,
36, 39, 40, 87, 203, 204, 205, 213,
225
- Revolution School · 42, 44, 65, 88, 96, 109,
117, 118, 123, 124, 126, 136, 137, 186,
190, 199, 214, 215
- revolutionary society · 5, 7, 8, 15, 17, 19,
20, 22, 176, 180, 204, 211, 221
- role model · 2, 4, 23, 50, 72, 91, 96, 97,
109, 118, 126, 135, 138, 149, 154, 158,
159, 166, 167, 169, 170, 205, 206, 208,
209, 215, 216
- Russian revolution · 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14,
159
- Samora Machel · 19
- sexual division of labour · 18, 21, 50
- shyness · 136, 139, 141, 143, 144, 145, 164,
171, 195, 208
- social change · 1, 5, 7, 15, 18, 30, 35, 40,
42, 43, 51, 54, 111, 181, 205, 206, 215,
216, 217
- social justice · 1, 5, 6, 15, 88, 179, 222, 223
- social transformation · 39, 40, 55, 204
- socialism · 1, 7, 10, 11, 12, 15, 18, 19, 20,
21, 22, 35, 36, 37, 40, 46, 48, 55, 56, 88,
106, 179, 203, 216, 223
- status of women · 1, 2, 7, 8, 16, 18, 22, 23,
40, 41, 42, 44, 45, 56, 64, 68, 86, 87,
154, 171, 174, 204, 205, 207, 209, 215,
218, 225, 226
- tradition · 2, 3, 11, 16, 17, 18, 20, 29, 33,
34, 35, 37, 42, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52,
54, 55, 66, 70, 78, 83, 86, 89, 91, 103,
112, 113, 114, 119, 122, 127, 128, 129,
130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 139, 140, 145,
149, 150, 156, 164, 168, 172, 173, 177,
179, 180, 191, 198, 203, 206, 207, 208,
209, 210, 214, 216, 217, 218, 220
- Tsabra Secondary School · 65
- Unionist Party (UP) · 30
- University of Asmara (UoA) · 3, 4, 43, 62,
63, 65, 66, 67, 68, 70, 71, 75, 79, 80, 81,
84, 86, 88, 89, 90, 96, 109, 114, 116,
117, 118, 122, 127, 133, 134, 137, 138,
139, 140, 141, 150, 152, 153, 154, 160,
161, 162, 164, 167, 172, 175, 176, 179,
180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 186, 189, 190,
191, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 201, 208,
209, 210, 211, 212, 215, 216, 217, 218,
220, 225, 226
- Vietnamese revolution · 7, 11, 23, 37, 55
- women's emancipation · 1, 2, 3, 7, 11, 13,
14, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 30, 31, 44, 47,
49, 50, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 70, 159, 173,
181, 201, 204, 205, 207, 208, 209, 225
- women's empowerment · 21, 22, 83, 168,
175, 225, 227

