

Women and Peace Building:

The Eritrean Context

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen; I am thrilled to have been invited here today to talk about women and peace building in the context of Eritrea.

I will give you a brief outline about Eritrea for those of you who may not know much about Eritrea.

Eritrea is in North East Africa on the Red Sea Coast bordering Sudan on the West, Ethiopia and Djibouti to the South.

Eritrea was colonised in 1890 by Italy, the name Eritrea refers to the Red Sea, then called the Erythraean Sea, from the Greek word red. The Italians created the colony of Eritrea in the 19 century Asmara and named it with its current name. The Italian colonisation of Eritrea officially ended in 1947.

As Italy lost the second world war all the Italian colonies in Africa, came under British military administration and Eritrea became a British Protectorate.

In 1952 the Un General Assembly decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia without taking the aspirations of Eritreans into consideration.

Soon after federation the rights of Eritreans began to be violated and by 1958 there was bitter opposition to the federation of Eritrean to Ethiopia and the Eritrean Liberation Movement (ELM) was formed. Haile Selassie then destroyed this movement once he had realised his existence.

In 1962 Haile Selassie shut down the Eritrean and illegally annexed Eritrea with Ethiopia. The result of this action led to the creation of Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the struggle for independence began. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) which splintered from the ELF was formed in 1972 and liberated Eritrea May 24 1991. Eritrea led a thirty year war for independence one of the longest in Africa.

The period between 1991 – 1993 referendum was done including all Eritreans in the diaspora who voted on the fate of Eritrea. The overwhelming majority voted for independence and on May 24 1993 Eritrea was formally declared an independent state. A national assembly was formed, and the constitution began to be developed. After independence there were cordial relations with Ethiopia, but tensions began to mount between the two countries.

In 1998 this escalated into war between Eritrea and Ethiopia over a dusty border town called Badme. This conflict resulted of thousands of people dying on both sides with no substantial outcome.

I started my human rights activism in 1998, when the Eritrean/Ethiopian border conflict erupted. I co-founded Horn Human Rights with other Eritreans in London. The idea was to have human rights activists from the Horn of Africa campaigning on human rights situation.

However, due to the political sensitivities and mistrust between Eritrea and Ethiopia this was unable to materialise as there was pressure and intimidation from the Eritrean pro-government activists and from the Ethiopian side. The work that we undertook involved lobbying national governments and international organisations in ensuring that the communities on the border of Eritrea and Ethiopia were not affected by the conflict.

Furthermore, due to the mass deportations of Eritreans from Ethiopia at the time, many underage children were separated from their families and we lobbied in re-uniting 3000 underage Eritrean children with their families. In total 70,000 Eritreans were deported from Ethiopia to Eritrea during 1998-1999.

This period, proved to be learning curve for me in understanding the political, social and cultural dynamics at play. I continued with my human rights activism in different forms but not openly and did not give up despite the challenges that I faced. In 2014, I joined Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR) which is based in South Africa, then I joined Network of Eritrean Women and 2017, I began working for Eritrea Focus.

Women

Women and Peace building is a topic that that has been contentious for a long time but there have always been issues in implementation and feminists have argued that it does not give an accurate reflection as it presumes that women are peaceful, and men are violent. This is a misconception as women are also involved in armed conflict as well as being victims.

In the African context women have not always been fully integrated into the system and into peace building. There are numerous factors that have influenced this, such as cultural, socio-economic, religious influences, land ownership and the impact of multi-national corporations in Africa that typically favour men and thereby reinforce the gender bias.

Peace building despite it's very controversial nature is something that needs to be seen holistically. In this lecture today, I will be discussing this looking at the Eritrean context but drawing from experiences in different African Countries.

This period between 1961-1991 saw great upheaval in Eritrean society with over 1 million Eritreans dispersed throughout the world, during this time civil society ceased to exist and the society became militarised. Eritrean women contributed as soldiers during the armed conflict and comprised 1/3 of the military force.

The Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) developed the female soldiers and they had received a degree of freedom and emancipation, however the principle element of the fronts was to develop the confidence of women for combat and not with the aim of emancipating women.

In post independent Eritrea we have seen the reversal of the rights of women that was gained during the armed struggle for independence. Eritrean women were integral in the fronts and they had a voice, however they increasingly became marginalised post-independence and this left a lot of women fighters disillusioned.

Adhanet Sibhatu was one ex fighter during the war for liberation who felt that an independent women's organisation was imperative in ensuring the rights of Eritrean women and that these could not be secured by the political groups. Adhanet was in the process of working towards an independent women's group and died before it was established. Eritrean women in the diaspora who were ex fighters including others who weren't across Europe decided to establish an independent women's group in her memory and Network of Eritrean Women was established in 2013.

The UK branch was launched December 2014 and that was the period I joined. After the launch of Network of Eritrean Women (NEW) it was affiliated with Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in the UK.

WILPF

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom WILPF was founded in 1915 during the period of the first world War and was founded by Jane Addams as its first president. WILPF also had its links with the Quakers. Since the inception of the Women's Peace Party which evolved into WILPF the Quakers has been a strong influence.

"Many women were active both in the Quakers and in WILPF and many Quaker women banding together with other women, all of whom were committed to peace and social justice"¹.

"The Works Undertaken by WILPF"²

In 1922, WILPF tried to get the League of Nations to convene a World Congress to renegotiate the Treaty of Versailles at a "Conference on a New Peace."

In 1924, correctly seeing the development and global sale of arms as a major cause of war, WILPF worked to mobilize scientists to refuse to work on weapons of war or on projects funded by the military.

In 1927 WILPF first went to China and Indochina, moving beyond the European and North American scope of its concerns.

In 1931, first WILPF president Jane Addams, now in failing health, was belatedly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, but she was too ill to travel to Oslo to receive it. (Addams would finally die in 1935.)

In 1932, WILPF delivered over a million signatures for complete global disarmament to a disarmament conference.

From 1940 to 1945, WILPF found ways to aid victims of fascism, Nazism, and Japanese imperialism.

In 1946, WILPF was at the founding of the United Nations and pushed for the concept of mutual security—urging that security be based on justice and freedom from want, rather than on military might and prestige. WILPF gained official UN status as a non-governmental organization (NGO) at that founding meeting of the UN.

¹ <https://www.friendsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/emember/downloads/1979/HC12-50667.pdf> Page 8

² <https://levellers.wordpress.com/2009/11/10/a-brief-history-of-the-womens-international-league-for-peace-and-freedom-wilpf/>

In 1946, Emily Greene Balch, first International Secretary of the WILPF, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1958, WILPF sent missions to the Middle East. In 1961, WILPF convened the first of many meetings between American and Soviet women to break down the barriers of the Cold War.

From 1963 onward, WILPF was a major force urging an end to the Vietnam War, undertaking investigative missions to North and South Vietnam. In 1971, they went to Chile, where the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) had just toppled the elected government of Salvador Allende and installed military dictator Pinochet, to investigate Pinochet's human rights abuses.

From Northern Ireland to the Middle East to East Timor, WILPF has been a force for peace. With an International Secretariat in Geneva, Switzerland, WILPF has a UN Office in NYC, and national "Sections" on every continent except Antarctica.

As WILPF approaches 100 years of work (2015), it's vision is still that of its founding:

- the equality of all people in a world free of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia.
- the guarantee of all to fundamental human rights including the right to sustainable economic development
- an end to all forms of violence: rape, battering, exploitation, military intervention, and war.
- the transfer of world resources from military to human needs, leading to economic justice within and between nations
- world disarmament and the peaceful arbitration of conflicts through the United Nations.

WILPF now exists in many parts of Africa such as Nigeria, South Africa, Cameroon and Congo. The importance of WILPF is still important and relevant today where conflicts around the world affect women and where women remain marginalised. The importance of women in leadership positions is crucial to addressing gender inequalities, poverty, violence and mitigating conflict. However, to remain relevant and improve access for women in different sectors of society young women need to be engaged.

It is therefore important that WILPF and other women's organisations can adapt and address young women using various outlets such as social media, internet, Whatsapp and Viber.

In Africa there has been progress in improving the rights of women, but a lot remains to be done. "The African Women Leaders Network, which launched in June 2017, aims to help, supporting the role of women in leadership across Africa. The network, backed by the UN and African Union, will provide practical, grassroots training and mentoring for women trying to reach leadership posts traditionally held by men"³. However, despite the progress made "The AU Commission is not practising what it preaches.

In a brave and unprecedented protest earlier this year, 37 women employees — inspired, in part, by the global #MeToo movement — demanded an end to the "professional apartheid" that has seen senior women excluded from promotions and discouraged from further advancement in the organisation.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jun/12/african-politics-blazing-a-trail-african-women-leaders-network-evelyn-anite> By Evelyn Anite

This “excludes and humiliates” women, they said”⁴. Therefore, WILPF remains relevant today as when it first started in 1915 in terms of supporting women in Africa.

Conflict

Whilst conflict remains a major problem in various parts of the world, a lot of work remains to be done in respect to addressing sexual and gendered violence. It is however, a mistake to view women as only victims in war. In the case of Eritrea women were both active combatants and victims of war. It is an important element in addressing security issues and peace building. Therefore, the traditional notion that women are merely victims of war simply does not hold water. After independence a lot of female fighters were demobilised, and many found it difficult to integrate into society for a whole host of reasons.

The ex-female fighters were expected to go back to their traditional roles and the society found it difficult to accept them. Furthermore, there were challenges in addressing patriarchy and discrimination faced by women in different sectors. These are serious issues that need to be addressed, it is not merely about seeing women in local and national government but addressing discriminatory culture that exists. The whole notion of patriarchy and masculinity needs to be addressed especially in the context that Eritrea is a militarised state following on from the independence struggle.

The militarisation of the state post-independence has affected women in many ways. There has been an increase in violence towards women in the domestic, communal and institutional spheres of society.

The military service in Eritrea which both men and women do, has also subjected women to sexual violence, relegated them to doing chores, cleaning and doing domestic work for senior ranking officials.

The further militarisation post-independence has also created conflict with neighbouring countries as well. In a militarised environment the scope for dialogue, reconciliation and diplomacy becomes redundant. The border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 is an issue which remains unresolved.

This has led to a stagnant situation of no war no peace between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Since the start of the border conflict political repression has grown in Eritrea. The constitution has been shelved gathering dust for the past 20 years. Military service which is meant to last 18 months is indefinite service. The National Assembly in Eritrea was closed and in 2001, top ranking ministers, generals and journalists were arrested, and independent media shut down. This gave impunity to the government to arrest people with no recourse to justice and today we see the results of this with the mass migration of Eritreans.

In the case of Eritrea 53% of households are headed by women. The 30-year war led to a lot of men been killed. In the period since independence and especially since 1998 when the number of Eritrean refugees increased, the number of men leaving Eritrea has increased in proportion to the number of women leaving. This put families in increased hardship and as a result fuels poverty as the needs of women are not adequately addressed.

⁴ <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-05-04-00-editorial-au-is-still-a-mens-club> - Editorial -AU is still a men’s club, May 4 2018

Security

“In the post- Cold War security is also being expanded beyond other states and their military forces to include such new sources of insecurity and conflict as: disputes over the control of, and access to resources; various non-military threats to societal harmony and well-being posed by such things as traditional and cyberterrorism, drugs, transboundary crime, epidemics and disease; population migration caused by poverty and over-crowding, political oppression, instability; and growing environmental degradation”⁵.

Emma Rothschild classified these debates into four strands. “From the security of nations to the security of groups and individuals; it is extended downwards from nations to individuals. In the second, it is extended upwards, from the nation to the biosphere. In the third operation it is extended horizontally, or to the sorts of security that are in question. The concept of security is extended, therefore, from military to political, economic, social, environmental, or human security. In the fourth operation, the political responsibility for ensuring security is diffused in all directions from national states, including upwards to international institutions, downwards to regional or local government, and sideways to nongovernmental organisations, to public opinion and the press, and to the abstract forces of nature of the market”⁶.

Since the Post-Cold War period increasingly human security has taken precedence. In the aftermath of conflict, it is important that women are an integral part of the re-building and stabilisation of the country. The end of the Gadaffi regime brought further insecurity and destabilisation, this was due to several factors however, women were the worst hit.

“The Libyan revolution marks a watershed moment in Libyan history and specifically in the women’s participation in public space. Women were at the forefront of the demonstrations, as protesters, medical workers and aid providers as well as organising behind the scenes and in the diaspora. During and post the revolution women were systematically excluded from the public sphere facing intense depoliticisation and silencing”⁷.

It is important that for peace and stability to exist post conflict that it ensures the full participation of women in the public sphere. The exclusion of women from the public sphere reinforces masculinity, breeds corruption, criminality with no accountability which fuels instability for the country. It is important for there to be human security and peace that the military, police and legal system are gender sensitive to address the abuse of women in different sectors of society. The secondary issue is that as women are mothers and the ones who assist the extended family, ensuring that women are integral in the society would also elevate poverty. If poverty is not addressed this leads to crime, militias and other forms of criminality that lead to further destabilisation of the country.

⁵ Edited by Ken Booth (2005) Critical Security Studies and World Politics, Published by Lynne and Rienner Publishers, Page 21

⁶ Edited by Ken Booth (2005) Critical Security Studies and World Politics, Published by Lynne and Rienner Publishers, Page 55.

⁷ Libyan Women’s Platform for Peace – Behind the Rising Women – A documentary by the Libyan Women’s Platform -<https://www.womenonthefrontline.eu/libyan-womens-platform-for-peace/>

It is therefore, important that women can develop their own narrative in addressing issues of social justice, poverty, dialogue, reconciliation and human rights violations. Women need to be able to adequately challenge the systems of patriarchy and masculinity that exclude women from society and work to a more inclusive society which is beneficial for all. As most of the violence emanates from men it is important to involve men in the process of countering violence in society and violence towards women on the domestic, communal and institutional spheres.

It is also important that women can challenge the divisions that exist in society e.g. social, ethnic, religious and political. Challenging the notions of division is important as this is what inherently in Africa keeps dictators in power. As in the case of Libya the divisions created during the tenure of Gaddafi meant that post Gaddafi these divisions became more pronounced. The elections that took place further deepened the societal divisions.

We have also further divisions in Egypt since the revolution and paved the way for violence and it has ended up with the military back in power. As in other parts of Africa we are seeing the decrease of civil society space and the encroachment of free press. Since the revolution in Egypt there has been an increase in the harassment of women.

There are lessons to be learnt from this, it is important to challenge these notions before the government collapses to pave the way for a more stable transition.

The development of civil society and free press is also an important element in challenging these divisions. In Eritrea there is no independent civil society or free press and as such we are forced to operate from outside Eritrea. In the past 27 years we have seen the increase of civil society organisations and free press outside Eritrea in different parts of the world.

These organisations outside Eritrea can challenge the Eritrean Government in different levels using international instruments and mechanisms to counter human rights violations. As we are not able to work inside the country getting up to date information remains a challenge and we are reliant on those who have fled to neighbouring countries.

Network of Eritrean Women

Since its inception Network of Eritrean Women (NEW) has been advocating on behalf of Eritrean women. Network of Eritrean Women's structure is on two levels one on a local level and the other on an international level.

We have a branch here in the UK and are in the process of setting one up in Germany as well. It is important to have local branches in the diaspora in supporting and mobilising women.

In the UK we have Network of Eritrean Women UK (NEW UK) and they work with Eritrean women on the ground here on various levels:

- Bringing women together
- Wellbeing (including mental health)
- Conferences
- Confidence building

- Training
- Support in Education
- Support in Housing
- Supporting women who suffer from domestic violence
- Signposting women to services

The works undertaken by NEW:

- Presented at the Hague the situation of Eritrean women;
- NEW is a member of Voices of African Women (VOAW) which is part of WILPF and continues to fight discrimination against women;
- Attended the 15th Anniversary of resolution 1325 at the UN in New York October 2015;
- NEW continually presents and participates in conferences of Eritrean organisations in various parts of Europe and beyond.
- Presented at the UK Parliament June 2015
- Attended the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) October 2016;
- Attended the AU summit in Addis Ababa January 2017, providing a statement on the situation of Eritrean women;
- Provided a statement to the Human Rights Council in Geneva on the situation of Eritrean Women in March and June 2016;
- NEW continues to work with other civic organisations;
- In March 2018 NEW with other women's organisations held a meeting in the Hague ensuring the consolidation and strengthening of the voices of Eritrean Women;
- NEW collaborates with Austrian Women and held a joint conference October 2017 (WIDE)
- NEW participated in a conference held in Brussels aimed at influencing EU commissioners to policy regarding Eritrea;
- NEW independently works with Sudanese women;
- NEW continues to support Eritrean women in various political and civic organisations.
- NEW continues to present at various forums.

The work that Network of Eritrean Women does remains challenging but is making headway. Network of Eritrean Women had attended a meeting of Eritrean opposition groups in Nairobi, Kenya. The political organisations although have women did not bring any to the conference. NEW had sent representatives from Europe and the political organisations decided to have a closed meeting excluding civil society. This meant that no women participated in the closed meeting. It is not acceptable behaviour to blatantly exclude women and those organisations need to redress the culture of discrimination towards women.

The main issue that we have is mobilising women which is not easy as many are cynical towards civic and political organisations. This cynicism is not ill-founded while some organisations exclude women.

The other reason is whilst some go back to Eritrea they do not wish to be associated with what is deemed an opposition group. Whilst these challenges remain we are beginning to make progress and attract more members.

The other factor that remains an issue is that in the political and civic organisations whilst women remain members of organisations we do not see women at the top end of organisations. There is an element of discrimination towards women and some do not have the environment for women to participate adequately. The other fundamental problem is that women also do not have the confidence to put themselves forward and this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

NEW is looking in 2018 to do training with the help of academic institutions to provide training on negotiating skills, confidence building and leadership skills to enable women to be able to participate within the community and have a stronger voice. We will look at the first phase as a pilot project and with the success of this project we aim to roll this out to Eritrean women across the UK.

Since the inception of NEW we have been raising awareness on the plight of Eritrean women. We had from the start realised that this was not an issue that we alone could fight. Whilst violence towards women is detrimental to women it is a societal issue that needs to be addressed by everyone. We had concluded that if we did not engage men then our efforts could not be wholly successful.

As the organisation has grown we have been asked by Eritrean men from various countries to join in countering violence against women and address societal violence.

NEW had been contemplating on how to engage men in addressing the violence within Eritrean society and this coincided with our objectives. We are aiming to start this in the UK next month as there has been interest in this from several individuals. This will include a panel discussion between men and women as well.

In the long term we aim to have a branch for men within Network of Eritrean Women who can work within the Eritrean communities in their respective countries in addressing violence in society and violence towards women.

In the first phase we aim to see the effectiveness of this here in the UK before we roll it out to other countries. The aim of the projects that we are currently working on, is that we will one day be able to do this inside Eritrea.

We aim to help Eritrean refugee women in Sudan and Ethiopia and we have made a start but not to the level that we would want, we currently sponsor an Eritrean woman to get education in Sudan. This however, is something that we are looking to expand to ensure that women develop the relevant skills to support themselves. Women in the refugee camps require basic items for themselves as maintaining personal hygiene is not always easy. The other factor is making women economically independent so that they can support their families. We were looking at sending sewing machines to enable the women to make clothes that they could sell to support themselves and their families.

I am the only female Executive member of Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR). EMDHR was started by Eritreans in South Africa in 2003 and has networks in various countries.

We are currently looking to be able to get women on the Executive and board levels of the organisation. The vast majority of the members tend to be men and it is important that we are able to outreach to women and increase their participation within our organisation. It is important that women are given the support and the space to grow not only in EMDHR but across Eritrean organisations.

Here in the UK we are trying to influence organisations to involve and recruit more women within their organisations with the aim of being able to involve themselves within the community and ensure that the voices of women are heard.

Women in Peace Negotiations

Women need to be given the space to be able to participate in any peace process, “Track 1 peace processes is crucial for women as this is where agreements are forged which will shape the future of a country and have long term effects on its population”⁸. Therefore, training women in negotiation skills is crucial to ensuring that any peace that is secured involves women and enables the creation of a more inclusive society.

In October 2000, in recognition of the impact of war on women, the UN security Council adoption resolution 1325. It called for an understanding of gender to be mainstreamed in peace operations. The adoption of Resolution 1325 did not see an increase in the number of women at negotiations at peace processes. In the statement provided by NEW at the Human Rights Council one of our request was “Ensure that any peace building process includes women and that their concerns and needs are addressed”. Only time can tell whether this bears fruition, but we will continually lobby to ensure that the voices of Eritrean women are heard and are included in negotiations. We clearly do not want to suffer the same fate as Syrian women who were by and large excluded from Track 1 of the peace negotiations held in Geneva.

Conclusion

For women to be engaged in peace building they need to be included at all levels. This includes the engagement of women’s organisations and the refugee women in camps whose needs and requirements require urgent attention. These women know more than anyone else the reasons that drove them out and any peacebuilding process that neglects, to consider their concerns cannot bear fruit. The lack of security in the refugee camps means many leave looking for alternatives and end up at the mercy of traffickers. Ensuring human security in these respects is of vital importance.

The voices of women who are affected by conflict needs to be represented in any peace negotiations that are undertaken. The lack of women’s participation in such negotiations will only create a peace that is not durable and has effects on society long-term.

Helen Kidan 2018

⁸ Claire Duncanson (2016) Gender and Peacebuilding – Published by Polity Press