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Introduction

by Gloria Steinem[†]

I am honored to have been asked to write an introduction to this special issue on legal developments in Eritrea. My hope is that I can serve as a bridge between readers in this country, to whom Eritrea may seem small and far away, and a nation that could inspire everyone who works for human rights, autonomy, and equality.

Eritrea first came into my consciousness twenty years ago when I met Bereket Habte Selassie, the former Attorney General of Ethiopia. We were both fellows at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, D.C. Bereket had fled Ethiopia, the much larger neighbor of Eritrea, when his life was in danger for supporting Eritrean self-rule, and he joined the Eritrean liberation forces fighting Ethiopia. By 1979, he was in this country to seek support for Eritrea's independence struggle and also to teach at Howard University. Later, he would represent Eritrea at the United Nations and lead the process of writing its democratic Constitution after independence had been won.

I learned from Bereket that Eritrea had been fighting for eighteen years in a war that was already one of the longest in modern history. (It would continue for another twelve, making it second only to the war in Vietnam.) This fight was also unusual in having both the Soviet Union and the United States on the same side, largely because both superpowers assumed that the regime of the Ethiopian Emperor, and that of his successors, would win and stay in control of the strategic Red Sea region.

This left Eritrea virtually alone in its struggle for independence. Though it had been colonized later than most of Africa, it had endured five decades of Italian colonial rule, followed by ten years of British occupation and an Ethiopian domination that began when the United Nations, charged with

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disposing of Italy's colonies after World War II, had failed to hold a referendum and placed Eritrea in a federation "under the Sovereignty of the Ethiopian Crown." Thus, this small and ancient country on the Red Sea had reached the 1960s without being allowed the process of de-colonization and self-rule that swept across Africa.

What neither the United States nor the USSR understood, however, was the quiet determination of the Eritrean people. After a decade in which Ethiopia's Emperor breached all powers that Eritrea should have had in a federation, they declared armed struggle. It was the beginning of a thirty-year poor-people's war in which Eritreans performed impossible feats. For example: fighting off superior Ethiopian forces with equipment captured from those forces; tunneling into a mountain to make a hospital invisible from the air; establishing a rural school for fighters' children that became the world's largest boarding school; and conducting a well-planned raid on an air strip where fighter jets were parked, thus destroying much of Ethiopia's airforce on the ground.

Meanwhile, the thousands of volunteer Eritrean fighters kept up their spirits and culture in the face of hardship and death by making troops of musicians and dancers, singers, and story-tellers, an important part of the war effort. Fighters also held endless, Marxist-inspired "struggle meetings." Though sometimes leveling and painful, these meetings went from Marxist theory to real life and were incubators of personal and political transformation in a way only such small groups can achieve. They helped to turn the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF) into a microcosm of the democracy it sought and also to maximize fighting strength. As one Eritrean leader put it, "When an Ethiopian general is killed, the troops are in disarray. When an Eritrean general is killed, every fighter is a general."

Of all these EPLF feats, however, the most unusual was the inclusion of women as full-fledged fighters. They made up a third of all troops. Not only did they build roads beside men and fight beside men, they also commanded battalions, an equality in combat that was unique in modern organized war. Moreover, this advance was taking place in a poor African country that was far from the Western stereotype of feminism as "middle class," even a

luxury, of developed countries.

In fact, equality was not achieved more easily there than in any other patriarchy. About forty-eight percent Moslem, forty-eight percent Christian, and four percent animist. The animist culture was the only one in Eritrea with traces of ancient, pre-patriarchal female power (and even it had absorbed the practice of female genital mutilation will widespread in the Horn of Africa). It took dire necessity, socialist theory, and pressure from women fighters themselves to create a policy of inclusion. It also took many struggle meetings before women comrades became a source of pride to men, a kind of secret weapon. Women fighters became crucial to creating a society-within-a-society that could endure the long war.

Eventually, this revolutionary culture evolved its own legal code, including egalitarian family law to govern the many men and women who married and had children within the EPLF. Equality between the sexes became a symbol of the struggle for independence. A cruel patriarchal practice like female genital mutilation became the subject of education and banning.

From talking with Bereket and other Eritreans who came to the United States, I could see that the special role played by women in the Eritrean revolution had changed both women and the revolution. I vowed to go there one day to learn.

In 1997, six years after the Eritrean victory, I was invited to visit with a group organized to help the Eritrean people's post-war reconstruction efforts, particularly in the field of education. At a pre-trip briefing led by another Eritrean friend, Hanna Telahun, a quiet, slender woman who had been a fighter for many years, I heard her personal story and felt again the magnetism of this new nation.

As a teenager, she had left her home in a party dress, telling border guards she was walking to a wedding in a distant village. In fact, she had seen her sister murdered before her eyes, four years after her cousin was also tortured to death, and was so embittered that she determined to join the EPLF fighters in the hills. But when she arrived at their camp, full of anger and revenge, they told her she would have to re-think her motives if she were to become a fighter. "We are not here for revenge," they said. "We are here to create people who can govern in peace and

democracy when the war is over."

This lesson inspired Hanna to become a fighter and also a teacher of fighters' children. After the war, she came here to study early childhood education, sure that it was the key to creating people who could respect themselves and each other and thus maintain democracy. It was this kind of story that symbolized Eritrea to me. But could post-war reality match the hope?

I will never forget what I saw there:

– Students trying to learn in schools with almost no books, and with teachers so scarce they have to be imported from India and other countries. Will young people despair or stay the course?

– Men and women working on road crews day and night, trying to repair thirty years of war damage; cities with water systems on the brink of collapse and tiny rooms crammed with quiet children; urban poverty in which everyone works, with no idlers or beggars in the streets. How far can work stretch a fragile infrastructure?

– Former women fighters are starting collectively owned businesses by pooling their de-mobilization pay, yet they also face traditional opposition to their independence, sometimes even threats of divorce by ex-fighter husbands under pressure to marry more acceptable wives. Will women turn out to have been only a surplus labor force for the revolution?

– Honest new officials root out corruption even when this means jailing friends and former fighters, yet still see themselves as the revolutionary voice of the people and don't take criticism lightly. Will they tolerate a democratic opposition?

– In the same spirit that repaired Soviet tanks then painted on them, "Made in the USSR, improved in Eritrea," Asmara has created an entire district devoted to recycling. Oil cans become lamps; tin boxes turn into painted chests; nothing is too old to be used again. Can this invention replace the lure of imported goods?

– Eritrean Christians have a tradition older than the Vatican, and Moslems have resisted Islamic fundamentalism. Will a secular democracy survive the winds of extremism blowing across its borders?

– Young people who do not remember the revolution will soon be deciding its results. At two rare conferences for young

girls, I heard problems that included preparing food and doing the housework while their brothers did nothing – also being expected to make tea and serve their brothers – thus losing time to study and do well in school. Will generations of tradition keep Eritrea from using half its talent? As one of the organizers later wrote me: "It's difficult to predict the size and directions of the waves that this small 'pebble' may have produced . . . . The girls returned to their towns and villages and shared what they learned with their friends, gave presentations to their classmates, and spoke to their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, to spread the message that girls are equal to boys."

The Constitution was created by an inclusive and populist process: three years of hearings in towns and villages, plus many radio discussions, all of which defeated a still low literacy rate. This is very different from developing countries in which constitutions were written by Western experts at Princeton or in London. But now, everything depends on application. As Brazilian novelist Jorge Amado wrote, "People could make it against flood and pestilence, but not against the laws; they went under." Will citizens finally feel equal under the law?

The government is stoutly resisting the international loans that have left so many developing countries in hopeless debt and saying "no" to multi-nationals that divide nations into luxury hotels and hovels for cheap labor; yet it must meet its people's needs and survive Western criticism of this insistence on economic autonomy. Will Eritreans win the economic war?

One thing is clear: The gift of the independence struggle was self-reliance. Will Eritrea be allowed to use it?

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I applaud the School of Law at the University of North Carolina for its efforts over the last five years to establish a law school at the University of Asmara and to help build a democratic country. There will be rich sources of Eritrean law to study: traditional methods of conflict-resolution that are still in use in many communities, Western jurisprudence from the British and Italian eras, and the revolutionary legal code resulting from thirty

years of struggle.

As an ancient and new country with a millennia of wisdom – yet only eight years old – Eritrea can teach us all.