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Chapter Six

Collective and Individual Identities: Experiences of Recruitment and Reintegration of Female Ex-combatants of the Tigrean People's Liberation Army, Ethiopia.

Angela Veale[1]

Increasingly, girls and women play important roles in fighting forces. McKay and Mazurana[2] argue that involvement in military units can both oppress girls and women as they are responsible for traditional female roles of cooking, cleaning and serving men, but can also expand their opportunities for greater equality and participation as fighters. An understanding of the dynamics that shape the identities of men and women in fighting forces is often lacking at the point of demobilisation and reintegration. In particular, demobilisation programmes frequently overlook the specific needs of females.[3] If their needs are taken into account at all, it is as a set of 'add-on' considerations related to motherhood or reproductive health.

Brautigam argues, "Gender equality cannot be achieved by treating women and men identically, or through protective measures for women alone. Identical treatment ignores women's and men's different social realities and gendered roles".[4] This suggests the need for a thorough analysis of gendered roles, how participation in fighting forces transforms these roles for women and the social and political implications of these transformations.

This chapter explores the identity transformations experienced by women

who were recruited as children to fight with the Tigrean People's Liberation Army and demobilised as adults in 1992/1993. The fieldwork for this study was carried out in 2002, ten years after their demobilisation and reintegration. The interviews explored gender-specific issues facing young women in demobilisation and reintegration, the impact of having been an ex-combatant on women's social relationships and how being part of the military impacted on constructions of the self as female in the fighting forces and at reintegration.

Exploring Identity

Holland et al. note

> People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. Self-understandings, especially those with strong emotional resonance for the teller, are what we refer to as *identities*.[5]

Within psychological literature, there has been a shift from understanding identity as trait-like, internal, and stable to exploring how identity is produced and transformed through participation in the socio-cultural practices of different social worlds. Through such a process, individuals' identities are produced through affiliation with certain groups' activities, meanings and symbols and disaffiliation with others. Individuals may have multiple identities that find expression in or are constrained by their participation in different groups.

Identification with a social category, such as being a member of a fighting force for example, provides individual members with a social identity that prescribes appropriate behaviour and ways of thinking and behaving characteristic of the collective group.[6] Social categories are based on a prototype, which is a cognitive representation of the typical or ideal defining feature of a category. The point at which individuals begin to define, perceive and evaluate themselves in terms of that social category is where they adopt the behaviour or features that define the prototype. In this way, the process of categorising oneself as a group member produces a social/collective identity and collective behaviour. The stories people tell about their lives function as meaning-making strategies that draw on such collective, cultural meanings and both tell of the historical evolution of identities and shape their future behaviour.[7]

Tigrean girls and women who joined the fighting forces of the TPLF adopted the symbols that represented a 'fighter' identity. They rejected the cultural

markers of 'femaleness' and adopted more masculine ones. Symbolically, women fighters cut their hair short and wore this boyish, fighter style with pride, in opposition to traditional notions of femininity. Female fighters' body language and social style followed more masculine models, which instantly communicated to civilians their status as fighters.

Writing about political identity, Ross notes the fusion of individual, collective, and political identity over time as "group members often go through common developmental experiences, including shared events, that are incorporated into one's own personal identity".[8] Cairns notes, "Social identity then is a blanket term concealing the complexity of the relationship between the clarity of the awareness that one is a member of a group and the strength and nature of the emotional investments that derive from this identity".[9]

Demobilisation involves a transition from the community of fighters to the civilian community. For Tigrean women who had been fighters since they were children, this involved a struggle to find new meaning and purpose that was one's own and that was no longer tied up in the collective purpose of the military group. It also involved coming to identities of 'civilian' firstly i.e. non-military and as 'civilian woman' secondly i.e. as non-masculine and non-equal.

In this research, a series of two to three hour narrative interviews was carried out with 11 female ex-fighters in December 2002. All lived and worked in Addis Ababa, in government jobs, mostly in low-paid positions such as office workers or janitors. Of the 11 participants, one was 17 years old at recruitment, six were aged 13-15 years old and four were 12 years or younger. All were demobilised as young women in their 20's (20-29 years). Two spent five years or less in the fighting forces, one spent six years, and seven between 11-17 years. Seven of the 11 participants, or 63%, said they had been active participants in combat. Of the 11, only two had been awarded a military rank.

Female Fighters in the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF)

In Ethiopia in 1991, rebel fighters of the EPRDF, the Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, overthrew the vicious Derg regime led by the autocratic Mengistu Haile Mariam and his army of nearly one million soldiers. The two most significant groups of rebel fighters were the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and its sister organisation, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF). A very significant feature of both fighting

groups was that girls and women composed over a third of the fighting forces. Women were found in all ranks of the rebel forces and were highly respected for their contribution as fighters. Their involvement as political representatives and as soldiers transformed the social landscape for women's rights in their communities of origin in the north of Ethiopia. Strong women's associations emeged in tamdem with the development of the rebel movement. Both rebel organisations had explicit agendas of addressing women's equality. According to Tsegeye

> The role of women was indispensable to the success of the TPLF led Tigrean movement. Women saw themselves as fighting for political justice, development and social progress including gender equality. Gender emancipation was held as a vital political agenda of the TPLF. [10]

Within Tigrean society, women were politicised. The TPLF initiated very important reforms that challenged existing patriarchal power, and changes in the status of women were felt across the political, social and cultural landscape. Tsegeye[11] documents how women's schools opened in Tigray with the aim of raising political and social awareness. In pre-revolutionary times, neither Ethiopian nor Tigrean women had any significant influence in public affairs. Although the land tenure system was formally open to women, they could not act on their own initiative to secure their rights. It was only through the agency of men that they could state whatever demands or grievances they had.[12] During the fighting years, the TPLF mobilised women's participation at the grassroots level through the formation of women's associations and female representation on community level and regional political bodies. *Baitos*, local administration councils were responsible for reforming customary law, such as raising the minimum age of marriage for girls from 15 to 18 years. The reforms included legislating for equal land and property ownership rights, equal rights to divorce and a fair share of common assets in divorce settlements. As a result, women's roles, social attitudes and political perceptions underwent considerable changes and women enjoyed greater equality with men, from participation in farm activities such as ploughing and in political roles such as community leaders, commanding military regiments and administering justice.[13]

In the years following the overthrow of the Derg, female fighters of the TPLF were systematically demobilised and reintegrated back into communities. This involved a move from a position where women, as part of the fighting forces, had been actively engaged "in making their own revolution within a revolution" to being civilian women in civilian society. This chapter explores the tensions of identity that this brought about.[14]

Recruitment: From Individual to Collective Identity

All of the participants in this study were recruited into the TPLF as minors, with the majority aged 11-15 years. Through the lens of today's policy makers and legal frameworks, they would be classified as having been child soldiers. Mazurana et al. argue that the options for girls are so limited in many conflict zones, that a decision to volunteer as a fighter is the result of having no alternatives.[15] This reflects the accepted assumption that child soldiers are in rebel movements through a lack of choices, often as a result of forced recruitment through abduction, or that the circumstances of children's lives are so bad as a result of conflict, e.g. such as the death of parents, absence of caregivers or experiencing absolute poverty, and that there is no viable alternative.

Yet women's accounts of how they came to join the fighters varied widely. Although political education was used as a recruitment tool in Tigray, only one woman said she had been politicised by a friend before joining the TPLF, and cited the following as her motivation to be a fighter:

> I knew nothing about the TPLF but then one of my classmates told me about TPLF liberators, and about people being oppressed by the Derg. I withdrew from my family and went to the army. My family were not happy, about it because it was difficult for my family to tell others that I had joined the TPLF.

Joining with peers or because family members had joined the fighters before them was a frequently cited reason, which would be consistent with developmental expectations and the young age of individuals at recruitment.

> I had three friends and I joined the army with them.
> I became a fighter because my best friend went to the fighters and I went with her because I liked it more than staying.

> There were my three brothers who joined the army before. I didn't know why they had joined the fighters but I expected that I would meet them and join them there. At that time, many people were joining, even girls.

Two participants joined as a result of being separated from their families because of the deaths of family members during the drought and famine of 1984 (Ethiopian Calendar 1977). A third also lived with the fighters and was raised within the fighters' camp as an alternative home.

> I was born in Addis Ababa. When I was a child of five or six years, I went with my mother to Tigray. I was only a small child. My mother

> was gone to look for her mother, my grandmother. At that place (in Tigray), there was a fighters camp. There was a fighter there I liked more and I went with him. I did not want to separate from him so he took me to the kindergarten in the fighters camp. In that kindergarten, there were children who had lost their father and mothers due to the Ethiopian Calendar 1977 drought (1983/4). The children were supported by the help of foreigners. And I integrated with these children. We received education from Grade 1-6. After I completed Grade 6, I was taken to the training programme for about two years. Then I became a fighter and my major duty at that time was fighting.

Dramas, songs and cultural shows were highly effective mobilisation tools with girls and women.

> The TPLF was reluctant to recruit women combatants…women were considered non-violent compared to men... Tigrean women's involvement in violence was however, apparently induced by different factors. Among others, dramas songs and cultural shows were by far the most vital instruments of mobilisation throughout the period of TPLF insurgent.[16]

A popular Tigrean mobilisation song reveals a combination of nationalistic sentiment and military intent.

> *Tigray, my country,*
> *Do not shed tears,*
> *Do not weep*
> *Hand me a gun through the backyard*[17]

One participant told how the songs, dancing and ceremonies of the fighters and the sense of belonging and community that this enforced were attractive to her.

> When I was 11 years old, I became involved with the fighters because of the *Giola. Goila* is the fighters' dance. It implies if anyone joins that *Goila* and dances with them, he or she has already entered the fighters and is ready to become a fighter. Therefore I joined the *Goila* when I was 11 years old, and I was taken to the training programme.

With the fighters, songs and dancing played a crucial role in fusing the individual with a collective identity through such cultural performances, hence their significance and power in recruitment.

One of the consequences of the TPLF's policies to establish social services such as health, education and relief within Tigray province was that it secured the confidence of local communities, which indirectly acted as a mechanism for recruitment. The provision of education was the entry point for one of our participants into the rebel camp, and politicisation and training as a fighter came later.

> There was a school there, and I went to learn. After that, I joined the fighting. For the first while, I just lived there and I loved to be with them (the fighters) but when I got older, I got to know about the Derg. I expected that by joining, I could bring about a different government. I knew nothing about the different ideologies - I knew about the Derg bombing people in Tigray. My parents' reaction was they were happy because my sisters had joined the fighters before me. I didn't really have any personal expectations about what my life would be like because my age did not permit me to know about these things.

One participant saw being part of the fighters as a way of escaping from an early marriage, a common practice in Tigray at the time, although less so at present as a result of political advocacy by the TPLF and women's associations.

> I joined the fighters to escape marriage. I was married when I was 12 years and the only option to escape was to go join the fighters.

The most interesting observation from these accounts is the array of recruitment incentives that a military group offered to young girls in Tigray at that time. Young girls were motivated to be part of the rebels for varied, self-serving reasons, such as for education, to escape early, unwanted marriages, for kinship and belonging, and for political motivations. In the majority of cases, political awareness came later.

Ross argues that two driving forces of political conflict are identities and interests. People are motivated by their own interests and/or a sense of entitlement. When such individual subjective interests become interconnected with ethnic or political identities as a basis for political claims and entitlements, they can function as powerful motivators for political mobilisation and action.[18] The TPLF was able to appeal to the interests not only of women but also of young girls. The importance of interests in the recruitment of child soldiers, given their increasing importance as a recruitment pool in Africa and elsewhere, has been largely overlooked in the child soldier literature.

Within the Tigrean People's Liberation Front

Once recruited by the movement, the TPLF included feminist liberation ideology as a central part of its political agenda. This addressed women's interests and linked the struggle for women's rights to the broader struggle against political oppression.

> Equality, based on Marxist-Leninism was stressed as the over-riding political ideology… Ultimately the TPLF succeeded in undertaking successful indoctrination upon its women folk. They were convinced that women were more oppressed than men. Women were also convinced to fight a social and political system, the root of their oppression, not just men. This ideology laid a premise that men can, of course, be political allies in a joint struggle towards the establishment of a fair political, social, economic order.[19]

One participant explained:

> They were telling us about the differences in the ideology of the Derg and TPLF. We learnt that females have double oppression in two ways - through the whole society with the Derg and for their being female.

According to the research participants, equality marked the social and power relations between men and women within the military. Participants said that work was shared equally between men and women, and men worked in the kitchen and cooked *enjira* (a national food), alongside women, and women fought in combat, alongside men. One said:

> Men and women, they worked together, even they sleep together, their relationship was like brothers and sisters. Any job was distributed among them equally. Whatever the job, they share it equally.

Another said "They respect females and live co-operatively." This was consistently voiced among the participants.

All respondents insisted that discipline was tight with respect to sexual relations, and it was forbidden for a man to have sexual relations with a woman without her permission. Rape, they reported, was rare and severely punished. One said sexual relations happened "only out of interest, no forced relationships". Another said that "Sometimes (there was) sex between two people on their own agreement if they were not married. If a man had sex with a woman without her permission, he would be imprisoned". Another reported that there was a good relationship overall between men and women:

> It was a co-operative life. The male does not behave like the others do in the civil society. They respect us. Even they advise those males who do not respect females. There was no forced sexual relationship with males. The male fighters did not force us to do anything without our interest. The male had no feeling of superiority over the female.

Many of the women married during their years in the military. Yet women were willing to subsume their individual interests in relationships and pregnancy to the collective goals of the group. They reported that earlier in the conflict, there was a marriage ban and marriage was prohibited, explaining that the over-riding goal of the rebel movement was to destroy and overthrow the Derg. Marriage and having children was prohibited because it would distract from this goal. As one woman reported, "Everyone worked for the achievement of the TPLF goal".

Once the marriage ban was lifted, men and women could ask their commanding officer for permission to marry, and many of the women married.

> I married during the fighting years after the marriage ban was lifted. Marriage and getting pregnant was forbidden during the fighting years, as having a child would be an obstacle to strong fighting. But later the TPLF allowed marriage, and I got married at that time.

Demobilisation

Demobilisation, when it came, was not always a welcome change. Bruchhaus and Mehreteab, who wrote about demobilisation in Eritrea where a third of fighting forces were female, found that 64% of fighters wanted to stay in the army, only 9% did not want to stay and 27% could see no other alternative to demobilisation, so accepted it as inevitable. Their paper, entitled *Leaving the warm house: The impact of demobilisation in Eritrea* reported that demobilisation was a process of 'weaning' fighters off the military and encouraging them to be self-sufficient and to take life into their own hands. They quote a senior EPLF fighter who summed up the dilemma of demobilisation as "We have convinced them to be ready to die; why shouldn't we be able to convince them to work for themselves". [20]

All the women interviewed for this study were demobilised as part of a formal demobilisation process and were demobilised reluctantly. They were sent to one of a number of camps where they received education or skills training as part of the preparation for returning to civilian life. Women explained their understanding of their demobilisation as follows:

> We were told that our goal was to bring down the Derg Government and now it is collapsed. For this reason, you don't have to lead this kind of life (military) anymore. So the programme was to educate us and give us a job. That time, we did what we were told to do.

They said they were worried about returning to civilian life; indeed, as they had joined the rebel forces while still children, and were effectively 'child soldiers' at recruitment, they saw the prospect of civilian life less as '-reintegration' and more as being catapulted into an unfamiliar and foreign way of life. One explained:

> Because before, the aim was to destroy or remove the Derg at any cost, that is why it cannot demobilise female soldiers before that time. In the demobilisation process, some of them were not [demobilised] voluntarily – I did not accept the demobilisation process because at the time, demobilisation for me was difficult because I liked the social and the military life.

Demobilisation marked the beginning of a new phase in women's lives in which they had to individuate out and separate from the collective identity they had known as fighters to new identities as civilians and as females.

The Struggle for New Identity

One of the things women most missed on demobilisation was the collective nature of military life; the camaraderie, the social life, and the sense of common purpose. One woman noted:

> At the beginning, everything seemed difficult, in the past, good social life, no responsibility, clarity, collective life; these things are not in the reintegration so it seems difficult and you adapt yourself in the process.

Another said: "There was no thinking of yourself - rather thinking for all, or for all the fighters but now I am thinking of myself only."

The participant who went to live with the fighters when she was between five and six years old said that, for her, it was particularly difficult and she experienced demobilisation almost as a loss of family, and the 'absence' of these things as a sense of loneliness.

> I did not have any experience of civilian life, because almost the whole of my life was with the TPLF. So life for me as a woman is

> difficult, and I preferred the military life. I liked the social life of the military. We eat, drink together, even we sleep together, we like each other as brothers and sisters. But these things are not present now and the absence of these things worried me… Life was not as I expected but whether the life is good in civilian community or not, I do not like it, rather I prefer living in the military life.

Although demobilised for approximately ten years, for this woman, civilian life is arguably still experienced as 'other' and military life is the standard against which it is gauged.

Work and Identity

Women found the everyday chores of managing a household difficult.

> Life is difficult, being a women because you know nothing about how to work in the house. Since I went to fighting when I was 12 years old, as a means of escaping from an unwanted marriage, I did not know how to manage the household and this was difficult for me.
>
> Reintegration from the military life to civilian life is difficult; when we compare between women who were not fighters and those who were, most of the time, the keeping and leading of the household is difficult for those fighter women than for those who were never fighters.
>
> To live individually was something new for us, since we came here when we were children, we didn't know any other life. Even we found it difficult to adapt to work individually, to administer our home and our life. Neighbours, friends showed us how to adapt.

In the military, tasks such as ordering and preparing food, managing and administering daily life were taken care of by the institutional machine of the military. Where soldiers carried out such tasks, the work was done collectively. Women found the individual responsibility of administering the household very strange. As the women in this sample had moved to Addis Ababa rather than returning to their community of origin, they depended on neighbours and friends to help them adapt, rather than family, as they lived far away. As a result of joining the military as children, the normative learning within the home and community was largely missing for these women. Key informants reported that this also created conflict with the host community. One man reported that mothers-in-law would be

scandalised that their daughter-in-law couldn't make *enjira*, and would sarcastically ask their sons whether their ex-fighter wife was a man or a woman!

Within this division of household labour, one of the issues women found particularly difficult was their sudden experience of a lack of equality with men, with whom they felt they had participated as equals in the difficult task of being a fighter, but suddenly, saw they were relegatedto the work inside the home. They noted that the role incongruity they experienced was not experienced by their male counterparts.

> Life is more difficult for women than for men, because during the fighting, women and men were doing the same work, and were living in the same camp, and their job also was the same. But after reintegration to the community, women have to do women's work and men have to do men's work. That is women's work is in the household rearing children and others, but men cannot work at women's work.

The lack of experience of civilian life meant women had missed their apprenticeships in the economic and social ways of family and civilian life.

> Most fighter women are poorer than other women. This is because fighter women lack experience in civilian life. The fighter women spend their life in the military but other women in urban areas have access to education and they learn from when they were children, and this leads them to have a good status and way of life.

What emerged again and again was the fact that, having joined the fighters as children, women had to some extent been institutionalised within that context, and had never had to be responsible for the generating and managing money.

> When I was in the army, what I know is about firing a gun and ammunition. I knew nothing about leading life economically. In the past, the government used to arrange everything now things are difficult and I have to be responsible for doing economical thing that had been done by Government.

Women moved from a position in which the fighter movement provided everything they needed, to one where they suddenly had to manage for themselves.

For many women who separated from their husbands during demobilisation, it was a double push to independence; the struggle to manage without the

logistical and economic support of the army and the push to survive as a single woman or head of household in an economy that offered marginal work for women. The shift from collective responsibility to being responsible for one's own self and the lack of a common sense of purpose was disorientating and experienced as a loss.

Identity renegotiation involved being sociable, being able to manage economically, being able to participate in education and learn skills that were useful for civilian life, working hard and starting your own business, and being able to integrate in some of the women's associations such as the *Ecub* associations, which are traditional savings and credit associations managed and administered by women for women. Among other criteria was adapting behaviour to fit into civilian society, in order not to come in conflict with others.

One of the necessary adaptations was to change communication style. All the women noted that they had trouble because the language they used was the language of the fighters. The adjustments required went deeper than language or words and into the whole style of communication

> Things that were difficult to adapt to were related to the work life, how to communicate with office workers and others. We speak like fighters, i.e. [fighters] have clarity, they speak to a person if he/she has weak points in front of the person. In addition, they lack politeness, but such things are not wanted by the office workers. Yes, compared to other women who were not fighters, the fighter women speak what they want without any feeling, but others feel shy or frightened or something.

Inherent in this quote is one of the the fundamental difficulties women felt in adjusting to civilian life. They recognised that the style of communication of the fighters was causing conflict, hostility and was "not wanted" by those office workers, but they felt it was a more honest and open form of dialogue. It was part of not being "shy, or frightened or something", like those female office workers they were supposed to be trying to emulate in order to fit in. This theme emerged a number of times in interviews with different women:

> There is a change. Being a fighter leads you to speak freely about what you feel, and they don't like back-biting any person, rather they prefer to speak freely in front of the person, or in face to face communication.

New Political Identity

One woman explained that fighter women made their voices heard at local government level in a manner that was atypical for Ethiopian females:

> In politics, those (women) who were fighters are better than those who were not: e.g. If there is a meeting at the Kebele, these fighter women ask and answer questions. They participate actively, but this activity is not common to those who were not fighters or other women because they feel frightened or afraid of anybody.

Deeply embedded communication patterns were a part of the 'culture shock' that women experienced. Positive adjustment was linked to being able to be sociable and to get on with people and elicit their help and support; bad adjustment was when ex-fighters continued to be in conflict with other people. Despite this, women still valued the communication style they had learnt in the fighters and quietly fought against the 'shy and frightened' style that they felt characterised women who had not been fighters.

Emotional adjustment also presented many difficulties for women. In other parts of the interviews women hinted at the sense of isolation, loneliness and being suddenly 'individuated' they felt initially on demobilisation. Another element of this was that, within civilian life, the emotional numbing that may have tempered their experience of traumatic events within the fighters, partly supported by the collective experience of being with other fighters experiencing similar things, was lessened. One woman explained:

> During the fighting, I was happy; I felt happy compared to civilian life. For example, at that time, if somebody died, you didn't feel any sadness, whether that person will be their brother, or sister or friend, you didn't feel about the death of the person because their aim, dream is how to destroy / fall the Derg at any cost. The Derg was their enemy.

The implication was that in civilian life, it was a battle to keep feelings of sadness away, without the focus of a goal and the collective support of other fighters. One of the key informants insisted that many women were experiencing psychological trauma because of the violence they had witnessed and participated in, often from when they were children, and that this has to be recognised now. Community acceptance on reintegration is linked not to individual adjustment and personality, but to women's political identity as ex-fighters. For some community members, they are seen as liberators who freed the country from the Derg; for others, suspicious of the political

aspirations of the present government, they are perceived with a related suspicion.
One woman said:

> I am living in the same area as when I returned. The community treats me in a good way. They say that it is because of the struggle that everybody got freedom of speech. When I come back from work, my neighbours help me in different way.

Another said her experiences contradicted this:

> People in Addis Ababa, in the community in which I live, dislike me because of being a fighter because most of the Addis Ababa people dislike Tigray fighters for the reason that they have an intention of Derg.

The link between political identity and reintegration has been noted in the demobilisation literature with respect to whether individuals were on the side of the winners or the losers. Socio-economic and political reintegration has been found to be easier in many post-conflict contexts for the victors of conflict.[21] In Eritrea, local organisations and international NGOs were favourable to hiring ex-combatants. A similar trend was noticed in Ethiopia. However, it can also bring misconceptions. One woman argued: "The community expect that we are rich, because we were fighters, but in reality we are poor."

The sense from the interviews with women is that while they felt broadly accepted by the host civilian community, they themselves continued to reject traditionally submissive positions and roles of women. This places them in an uneasy place with respect to normative Ethiopian society. For the most part, the participation of women at a political level has not matched the promises or expectations that existed within the period of the liberation struggle.

The Impact of Being a Fighter on the Construction of Self

Throughout the interviews, there emerged a sense that being an ex-fighter was not something that women had relegated to the past, but was an active part of women's identity and part of their experiences that differentiated them from other women in Ethiopian society. Women felt they were changed by this experience and overwhelmingly, they saw this as a positive change when comparing themselves to women who were never fighters. Participants were asked "Do you think being a fighter has changed you in

important ways, compared to other women who did not become fighters?" Some of the responses women gave to this question were the following:

> Because I was a fighter, I got access to education; had it not been for being a fighter, I could not get access to education because the place where I was born is rural, and there is no school there.
> Being a fighter, I escaped from an unwanted marriage.
> Before, I was afraid of somebody, to do what I want to do but now I have confidence to do everything, I can decide by myself. I can marry who I want, I do not care for someone else (their opinion). All these things I get from being a fighter. I know I can solve whatever problems face me.
> Interviewer: How has being a fighter changed you?
> Woman: To think about the equality of female with male, to believe and internalise that there is nothing that women do less than men.

Participants felt that, as a result of being a fighter, that they were stronger, more confident, more able to face and solve their problems, and considerably more assertive. The significance of this can only be truly appreciated by comparing it to Ethiopian social norms of appropriate and desirable traits for women. According to Tsegay (1999) in Ethiopia, society characterises adult males by traits such as dominance, achievement and aggression, whereas 'decent' women are characterised by traits such as timidity, passivity, emotionalism, deference and self-abasement. He goes on to state "deviation from this norm would be discouraged and rejected". [22] The women in this study, on the contrary, expected equality in their relationships with men and in their personal relationships with their spouses. This expectation characterised their approach to their life. One woman said of her relationship with her husband:

> There is equal right in decision making. The decision is based on whose idea is better and right, beyond this we have equal power in the family.

Another said:

> My husband and I - the decision making in our family is between us equally. We have equal power, we discuss everything. In the family, I advise if these is any problem.

Another said it gave her confidence in her ability to cope with challenging situations. For example:

> It changed me in many ways. Even when you get few things to eat, you can prepare them in good way.

Another woman said it empowered her with respect to family planning, and the experiences and knowledge she gained as a fighter helped her in taking control of her reproductive health:

> It makes a difference because my friends and family are in the rural area. They have many children and they know nothing about birth control but I do have only two children. I could add [more children] but I live my life economically. [i.e. having the number of children I can afford]

Equality

It became clear that the principle of 'equality' is something women have internalised and it influences how they approach every aspect of life, from day-to-day decision making within the family to decision-making about larger issues such as family planning, to the social and political development of the country. One woman explained:

> I prefer this [equality] because accepting ideas from one side is not good. Taking example from my married life, I don't want my husband to be superior so that he will make every decision to me. For instance, if my husband wants to have a child, it is not only his choice but I have to agree at this point.

For other women, 'equality' was important in terms of being able to access resources that were automatic for men and more difficult for women, such as education and work. One woman gave an example that demonstrates how the issue of 'access' is subtle and fundamental in everyday life. She worked in a government office in the city centre. She said that sometimes, if she did not have time to prepare food to bring with her, she would go to a restaurant close to her workplace and have something to eat there. However, she explained, as a woman, to enter and eat in a restaurant on your own, is culturally not accepted. She gave this example as a testament to her principles of equality and her defiance of the cultural restrictions on females, and the norms and cultural values that restrict women's access to resources of all kinds.

For another woman, equality is important as it means a woman can 'decide for herself, by herself' and nobody will pressure her. In this is the sense of

resistance or defiance, a stand against forces that may want or expect something more traditional. From interviews with women, this feeling of pressure, conflict and resistance was a central part of their relationship with civilian life on their emergence from the military.

One woman defined equality as important for her as a potential source of opportunity and support; "If there is equality for both men and women, if I can have equality with men, I can get as good access as them. I can lean on them in the rearing of children and doing in the household". As in feminist literature everywhere, it is in the domestic sphere that women feel the burden of inequality most fundamentally. Women defined the polar opposite of 'equality' as 'inequality', as 'accepting the superiority of men' or as 'accepting the inferiority of women'. Two women linked their constructions of equality with the broader political agenda of social development. One participant said equality was important in development:

> [The] equality of both men and women is important for the economic, social and political development of the country. I have equal rights with men, I can participate in many things. As women are part of the society, they should have equal rights for the development of the country.

The link between the personal and the political is explicit in women's constructions of themselves and their view of their social world.

Self-confidence

Women constructed themselves as 'self-confident'. Self-confidence for participants meant women had confidence in their ability, in their right to speak up for their rights, and in their decision making and problem solving. One woman explained:

> Self-confidence - it is important for all. I am not the one who is suspicious/ not sure of everything I do. When I decide to say something or do something, it is with confidence that is it possible for me to do it. I am not that much dependent on others to come up with better ideas or better solutions.

Another said:

> If I have confidence in my self, I will not depend on others in any decision. And this leads me to be successful in everything. If I have confidence, I can do whatever I want to do.

One construct of one of the participants was "decide by yourself", of which the opposite was "depend on others for the decision". This is similar to the ideas being expressed by other women as self-confidence. One expressed it as deciding about birth control, family planning and other things.

> Deciding for yourself is advantageous. For example, if I have the ability to decide for myself, say, if my husband wants me to give birth, but I don't want, this will be done by agreement between me and him.

Being Educated/Independent

Being educated was constructed as being linked with being independent, and economic independence in particular, and with having an awareness of what is going on politically. One woman explained:

> If I am educated, I become independent in everything. If I am educated, I would have a good job, and good way of life. Economically, I become independent. Even I know about everything that is going on in my country.

As with other constructs, women linked their education and independence with broader societal development, thus integrally linking the personal with the political:

> If I am economically independent it will be advantageous for myself as well as for my country. If an individual's country is economically independent by itself, this shows the development of the country, and this leads to the independence of the country.

Economic independence is also linked with equality and self-confidence, as the person who is economically independent is also free:

> It is obvious that everyone prefers economic independence. I have economic independence so that I allocate the income I get in a way that it furthers my interest. If I were not economically independent, I would be dependent on my husband not only financially but also for other things. My husband would have been the one to decide for my own life. I wouldn't have freedom to go whereever I like and so on.

Three participants included political knowledge, knowledge of fighting or knowledge of political struggle as constructs in their meaning systems. The women said knowledge of political struggle was the opposite of 'does not

know about politics' or 'having no knowledge or experience about fighting', or 'having no knowledge of political struggle'. Political knowledge was constructed as the opposite of 'being ignorant'. For half the women, it was part of their core constructions of themselves.

Conclusion

Within a small sample, this study traces the movement of a group of women from a time when they were children, through their entry to fighting forces, to the impact that the militarisation and politicisation they experience in that setting has had on their lives. Their experiences as fighters have become central to their identities and it is through this lens that they view and experience the civilian world. At the point of demobilisation and reintegration, they found that the values, socialisation experiences and expectations they had absorbed during their fighter years, as women, were at odds with the traditional feminine values of Ethiopian society. They had to make some adjustments within themselves in order to reduce the level of conflict they experienced with civilian society. However, they also refused to compromise their internalised beliefs about their competence, ability and right to participate in an equal society. Reintegration involved a loss of a collective identity by which they had defined themselves since they were children and involved a whole new re-socialisation as 'civilians' and as 'women'.

What implications have considerations of identity for policy and practice in reintegration, if any? Identity connects past experience to future expected experiences. Women's identity as fighters was tied up in the political goals of the collective. On demobilisation, their experience was that this political identity was not adequately acknowledged or supported. While women fought in the war, it is not clear to what extent they were consulted in the formation of the peace. De Watteville argues that

> The participation of women, and especially female ex-combatants, in peace negotiations at an early stage is a prerequisite to the promotion of their interests and to their future participation in decision making. It is at the peace table that the tone is set for the reconstruction of the country, and that the political, economic, social and institutional changes are initiated. It is also an opportunity for women to express their views and influence decisions.[23]

The author is not aware but assumes that women were involved in the Addis Ababa transitional conference of July 1991 in which the EPRDF set out its

agenda as a transitional government. In the report of this conference, there is not a single mention of issues that could be seen as priorities for women, and the discussion was dominated by issues of regional self-determination; in particular, the issue of Eritrean independence.[24] Although women individually in this study highlighted that they continued to construe their role in their own communities as speaking up and being heard, their potential was not mobilised in peace-building initiatives. There was little social scaffolding available for women's constructions of themselves as political and equal. The internal experience of demobilisation and reintegration was, in their reports, one initially of loss.

Finally, this study raises important challenges to many assumptions about the impact of being a child soldier, albeit within a highly specific context that is not applicable to all situations. All women in this study entered the fighting forces as children, and did not emerge, in their constructions of themselves, as victims but rather, as having been empowered by their experiences. These women challenge not only their own society but commonly accepted assumptions about children's risk and resilience in the context of war.

Endnotes

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