



EMPOWERING WOMEN:
Eritrea's Achievements and Experience

PRESENTED ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 59TH SESSION OF THE
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF
WOMEN SIDE EVENT ON ERITREA



EMPOWERING WOMEN: Eritrea's Achievements and Experience

PRESENTED ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 59TH SESSION OF THE
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF
WOMEN SIDE EVENT ON ERITREA



CONTENTS:

Introduction	4
National Union of Eritrean Women	5
Key Achievements	7
Economic Empowerment	8
Education	12
Violence Against Women	15
Health	18
Lessons Learned	21
Challenges	22
Conclusion	22





INTRODUCTION

Eritrea with 1200km coastline and more than 300 islands in the Red Sea is strategically situated in the eastern part of Africa. It joined the international community in 1993 following liberation from Ethiopian colonialism in 1991 through an arduous thirty-year armed struggle. The socio-economic character of the Eritrean population comprises of more than 80% agro-pastoralists, with the rest being mainly workers, merchants, students and professionals (EPHS 2010). There are nine ethnic groups – Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Saho and Tigrinya, each having its own language.

Traditionally, the societal role and contribution of women in Eritrean has not been appropriately valued. Despite this patriarchal attitudes, the Eritrean women joined and played a vital role in the independence struggle. They constituted 30% of the total fighters carrying out different roles such as teachers, technicians, soldiers, doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, public administrators, etc.... In addition to their contribution in the struggle for self-determination, women fighters took the lead to fight the deep-rooted patriarchal

and gender inequalities through the establishment of women's association.

The women's association that was established in 1979 was fully empowered to mobilize women, raise awareness for the elimination of traditional harmful practices against women, advocate and lobby for the issuance of proclamations and policies on gender equality, among other roles. This has laid the foundation of social justice and gender equality in Eritrea. In recognition to this important contribution, the Government implemented policies and programmes geared towards ensuring gender equality and creating a platform for women to strive in all aspects of civil society and government.

The document aims to share synopsis of Eritrea's experience and achievement in the empowerment of women. It highlights the institutional and policy innovations that continues to be critical in this endeavor.



NATIONAL UNION OF ERITREAN WOMEN (NUEW)





The issue of empowerment of women was a critical issue during the liberation struggle. The Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), in its early days recognized that the true liberation of the Eritrean society can only be achieved through the respect rights and equality of women. In 1979, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was founded as one of the grass-root mass organization of the EPLF. Its establishment created the opportunity for the female fighters and women to be organized in their fight for independence, social justice, equality and emancipation.

After independence in 1993, the NUEW dedicated its objectives to improving the lives of Eritrean Women through advocacy, training and economic empowerment. Today, the Union has 300,444 members and is a truly grass-roots organization through its office in six regions, 58 sub regions, and communities. The NUEW also reaches out to Eritrean women in Diaspora to ensure their participation in national programmes. It holds 2,564 elected representatives in different levels. The extensive grassroots presence throughout Eritrea, substantial outreach capacity and organizational structure helped Eritrean women to raise their consciousness and empower themselves. The organizational structure was an imperative element that helped Eritrea to progressively tackle the MDGs, with

extraordinary strides in health and other relevant national development goals.

NUEW leads the advancement of the gender equality agenda. In collaboration with government institutions and other stakeholders, NUEW facilitates gender mainstreaming into all policies and development plans. It provides gender mainstreaming technical support to every ministry and government agencies thus enhancing their mission. The Union also played an important role in formalizing equal rights and recognition of the decisive role of women in social, political and cultural transformation of the Eritrean society in national policies and legal documents. These include: the Eritrean Macro Policy (1994), Land proclamation 58/1994, Labour Proclamation(2001: Legal Protection of Women in Employment), National Education Gender Policy (2004), National Gender Policy (2004), A Proclamation to Abolish of Female Circumcision 158/2007), National Education Policy (2010) and National Health Policy (2010). Similarly, the Social Welfare Policy (2005) promotes legal protection from all discrimination, exploitation of children, youth and women. The repeal and reform of the colonial, civil and penal code abolished all prejudice against women and established the legal guarantee of equality between men and women under the law. Notable changes include, the rights for women to inheritance, land ownership, illegalization of underage marriage as well as the



provision of divorce initiation to both men and women, and providing women legal protection in employment including equal pay for work of same value.

Internationally, Eritrea ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1995.

Today Eritrean women organized under NUEW are actively involved in every sector of development from the high echelon of policy makers to the grassroots community involvement. The legacy of their involvement in the movement for independence secured their position in the nation building process. Eritrean women, at the center of this process have achieved much and look forward to many more.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

NUEW in collaboration with sectors and development partners has made significant strides in advancing gender equality and empowerment of women:

1. Economic Empowerment

– NUEW has offered women the opportunity to improve their livelihoods through training programmes and financial loans. Some of the opportunities include: land ownership for women, handcraft and artisanal training programme, microcredit schemes and introduction of energy saving “Adhanet” stoves.

2. Education – Over the last two decades, the Ministry of Education has partnered with NUEW and other stakeholders to expand education services across Eritrea in line with the principles of equity and social justice and in pursuance of government policy of free universal basic education for all.

3. Violence against women – NUEW proclaimed a zero tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and lobbied policy makers to pass severe legislation and banning its practices in all its forms.

4. Health – NUEW has conducted multiple seminars and meetings attended by more than 1.7 million people, to raise awareness on women’s health issues. They have also addressed issues such as treatment, prevention and eradication of health related backward traditions. According to Eritrean Population and Health Survey (EPHS 2010) and Health MDG Report (2014), Eritrea has made remarkable progress in achieving the indicators of health related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).



1



ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT





Economic empowerment, which refers to the resources and means an individual needs to achieve their desired goals, is an essential prerequisite for political involvement and organizational capacity. NUEW has offered women beneficiaries the opportunity to advance their livelihoods through training programmes, as well as financial loans. These efforts have bolstered women's economic security and paved the way to a better future.

Women and land ownership

Although Eritrea is currently in the process of social transformation, it has traditionally been a peasant society with a paternalistic culture. Agriculture and pasturing are the population's livelihood mainstays, making land possession the society's lifeline. Women have traditionally not been entitled to own or inherit land or other property, which are the most pertinent factors in determining status and influence.

Eritrea has opted to eradicate old traditions that undermine gender equality in society. The GoSE Proclamation No. 58/1994 on Land Tenure abolishes the traditional land tenure system and give women equal entitlement to rights to land. This Proclamation was vital as far as women's right to land ownership is concerned. However, entrenched traditional attitudes have

been affecting women's access to land. To counter this, the NUEW has been focusing on this issue as part of its advocacy programmes. For example, legal officers from various parts of the country were trained to advocate for women's right to land ownership.

Another mechanism which played a pivotal role in ensuring that women get their right to land was the direct involvement of women in 'shimagle adi' (Community elders), a body responsible for land allocation in every village. NUEW along with government agents made sure there was at least a woman in every committee. Thus when considered for land distribution, the women could get their fair share. As a result, at the household level, 67.8 per cent of land is owned by both men and women, and the remaining 32.2 per cent is owned by women-headed households for various purposes.

Handicraft and artisanal training programme

NUEW has been working to empower women economically by organizing different professional training programmes such as designing clothes, sewing and embroidery, wickerwork, ornamentation, weaving, pottery and hairstyling. The training programme empowered women to professions previously dominated by men such as



weaving, which was one of the areas that got special focus to change gender roles.

In Eritrea, most people wear traditional handmade cloth. About ten years back this type of cloth was imported. And the meager local production was done by men. Generally weaving was conceived to be a profession for men. After the NUEW initiative to train women and involve them in income generating activities, weaving was selected to be launched as a pilot programme in 2004.

Initially a group of women took a six month course on weaving skills. Currently, many women have become professional weavers and they are also able to train others. It is a good income generating activity, as the profits can amount to 4,000-5,000 Nakfa per month with visible impact the standard of living of their family.

Empowering women with microcredit

NUEW's Credit Programme was introduced in 2006 following the evaluation and revision of an earlier version of the project initiated in 1995. The Credit Programme targets women who have latent potential but lack resources, and it provides those women with professional training and start-up capital. To date, USD 3,130,000 (equivalent to 47 million ERN) has been lent to nearly 12,000 beneficiaries in four administrative regions of the country. Out

of this amount, 85% has been reimbursed by clients. The programme's beneficiaries now find themselves on solid economic footing with an improved standard of living. Women have registered success in small trades and businesses such as agriculture and animal rearing, as well as the catering sector. In addition to the NUEW's micro credit initiatives, there is USD 28,466,660.00 (427 million ERN) nationwide revolving fund in microcredit with 67,979 beneficiaries. Among these 60% the total beneficiaries are women with over 200,000 indirect beneficiaries.

Changing women life style; changing the environment

For a very long time, traditional ovens, which consume a lot of wood and exhaust proportional amount of smoke, have been a cause for deterioration in women's health. Thus, to avert the adverse effects on health and to address deforestation and inefficient use of domestic energy smokeless oven, also known as Adhanet (savior), was developed by Eritrean innovator. The oven can easily be built in-house by any individual. NUEW has teamed up with the innovators of Adhanet and is working diligently in transferring the technology to women. To date NUEW had distributed 91,331 smokeless ovens all over the country. With the introduction and distribution of the oven the life style of many women has dramatically improved.



Moreover, with less smoke and a cleaner environment, women and their families face reduced health risks. The beneficiary women are not only using the oven for their own domestic use, but are producing the home-made ovens for sale. The contribution of the smokeless oven to the national economy is worth mentioning.

The oven that saves domestic energy, cuts the cost of electricity or burning wood, and protects the environment from smoke pollution and deforestation. Hence, its contribution to the national economy and environmental protection is worth mentioning.

Eritrea received International Awards for the Adhanet , fuel efficient stove Initiative

2003- Ashdon Award, United Kingdom

2005- Japan Expo, Japan

2006- Tech-Museum Awards, United States

2007- Bill Gates Award, United States

2010- Green Apple Award, United States



2



EDUCATION





Over the last two decades, the Ministry of Education partnered with NUEW and other stakeholders to expand educational services across the country, in line with the principles of equity, social justice and in pursuance of government policy of free, universal basic education for all. Girls' education is stipulated as a fundamental principle to achieve social and economic development goals.

The Government implemented various strategies targeting girls and communities at large. To name a few; nomadic education, complementary elementary education and adult education, together with specific inputs such as school construction, teacher training, and community mobilization to make education more accessible and relevant to girls while improving the overall learning environments to foster retention, completion and transition.

Complementary Elementary Education (CEE):

In an effort to educate children in remote areas, especially girls, the complementary elementary education (CEE) program, focuses on children aged 10 to 14 who have never attended school. CEE learning centers have consolidated the five years education program into three years.

Nomadic Education:

30 per cent of Eritrea's population are nomadic and semi-nomadic communities and is therefore a primary target for gender equality ty in education. The nomadic education policy designed in 2011 has laid the foundations this initiative.

NE and CEE Enrolment:

A total of 41,766 children (45.5% female) are currently enrolled in Complementary Elementary Education (CEE) and Nomadic Education (NE) interventions since 2012. In 2014 total enrolment into CEE and NE more than doubled from 12,963 to 26,504 representing 51% over the enrolment of 2013. Out of the newly enrolled 13,541 children in 2014, 7,333 are enrolled in CEE and 6,208 are enrolled in NE. These results contribute to Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 2 /3 and the Eritrean Education Sector Plan 2013-2017,

Donkey and Canvas, project:

The Donkey and Canvas Project focuses on providing donkeys to girls and women. In Eritrea, traditionally women and girls fetch water by carrying it on their back or head for 1-2 hours and sometimes more. Therefore many girls fail to go to

As a result of the various collaborative interventions, Girl's Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) which was 38.8% in 1993/94 increased to 78.7% in the 2012/2013 academic year. Similarly, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in 1993/94 was 66.5% as compared to the 2012/13 figures of 96.7%. As a result, the percentage of Out Of School Children decreased from 59.9% in 1993/94 to 18.9% in 2012/13. (EMIS 2013).

school because they are responsible for fetching water. To alleviate this burden the donkey for school project was initiated.

The project provides a donkey and a canvas, water tank, for significant number of rural women. So far 11,000 families have benefitted from this project. It has also enhanced a work sharing attitude and activity between girls and boys.

The Donkey for Schools project focuses on providing donkeys for families with school age girls and children with disabilities. This intervention has increased enrolment and attendance and reduced dropout, which in turn contributed to improved academic performance of girls. The beneficiaries interviewed during the 'Donkey for Schools Evaluation' conducted in 2011, said that previously they were missing one or two days of school per week, but their attendance had increased markedly as the result of the project.

From a human rights perspective, the project is promoting the right to education for the girls as well as economic empowerment of women. As a result, traditional perspectives of gender roles are positively influenced and transformed.





3



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN





NUEW recognizes that all forms of violence against women, including Female genital mutilation (FGM), violate the rights and integrity of every girl and woman. It violates a well-established human rights principle. Since the independence struggle, intensive sensitization and awareness raising campaigns to enlighten the society on the harmful practice were conducted.

In Eritrea, FGM was justified through traditional, religious aesthetic reasons and social pressure. As a result there was high prevalence of FGM in the country. Eradicating and abolishing it has been one of the main activities of the GoSE and NUEW.

The Union lobbied policy makers to pass a firm law prohibiting the practice of FGM. After independence the GoSE and NUEW launched a zero tolerance campaign against FGM and moved towards eradicating the practice. In the villages, community elders and religious leaders were involved. A documentary video and pictures displaying the horrors of FGM was produced and disseminated through all mass media outlets (TV, Radio and newspapers). In 2007 under the leadership of NUEW, the government enacted the FGM Proclamation 158/2007 criminalizing and banning the practice in all its forms. The NUEW went further to develop a national strategic framework and plan of action.

The NUEW along with Ministry of Health and Ministry of Information designed behavior change and communication strategy to reject and challenge this harmful and unhealthy practice. The Ministry of Information has developed and broadcasted radio and TV programmes in nine local languages. Posters and Cartoons have been produced and posted in public places and recreational areas. Community dialogue and engagement are enhanced and organized. The Ministry of Education has incorporated anti-FGM education in the national education curriculum.

Community level sensitization and empowerment are being implemented through the establishment of anti- FGM committees. Nation-wide there are about 2,745 anti-FGM committees. These committees were established as part of the nationwide campaign that started in 2006. It targets the whole population of all, six regions down to the village administration level.

The most effective initiative was targeting the practitioners, influential people, elderly women, religious leaders, and parents. Sustained community mobilization led by women and supported by legal reforms has achieved systemic action resulting in behavioral change. A decline in prevalence of FGM compared to 1995 decreased to 33% in 2010 for the age group under 15 and 12% for age under 5. Today, less young girls are subject to this harmful practice.

STOP FGM



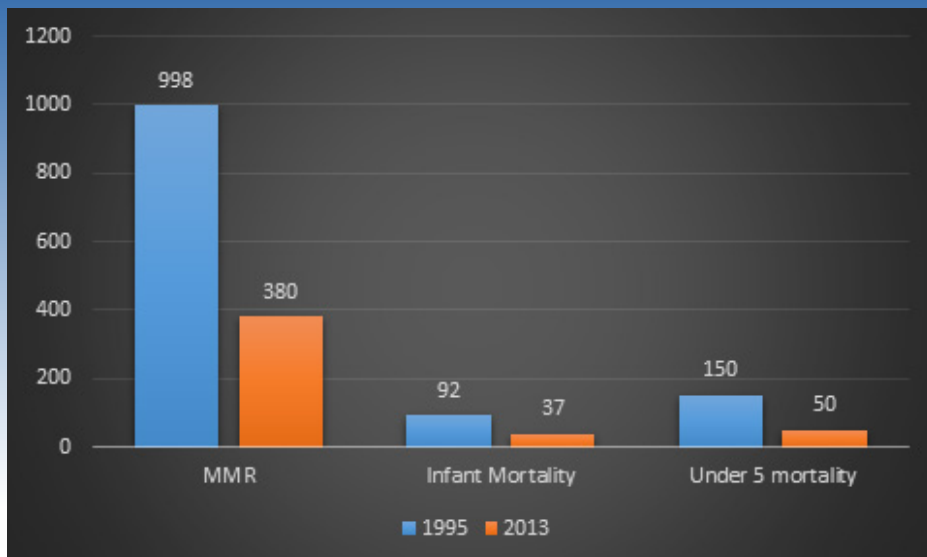


4



HEALTH





Health and well-being of women and men are fundamental rights and an engine to national development. Conscious initiatives and commitments made by women have contributed to Eritrea's progress as one of the few countries on track to achieve the three health-related (4, 5 and 6) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Eritrean Population and Health Survey (EPHS 2010) and Health MDG report abridged version (2014), indicate that Eritrea has made remarkable progress in health-related initiatives. Maternal mortality ratio for Eritrea per 100,000 in 1995 was 998 and reduced to 380 in 2013 (Health MDG Report 2014). Eritrea has already exceeded its MDG-5 target of 425 per 100,000. Furthermore, Eritrea has witnessed an unprecedented reduction in infant mortality rates per 1,000 live births, from 92 in 1990 to 37 in 2012 (Health MDG Report, 2014). A similar trend is also observed on under five mortality per 1,000 live births was reduced from 150 in 1990 to 50 in 2013 (Health MDG 2014).

The cumulative result in addressing the root causes of girls and women illiteracy has led to a drastic decline in morbidity and mortality. For instance,

high coverage of immunization of children for all anti-genes and the zero death rate associated with malaria is attributed to the involvement and educating mothers (Health MDG report, 2014).

An example of the active involvement of women in initiatives taken against the prevalence of malaria is the formation of Peer women malaria group. This peer group is composed of 10 women per block, covering approximately 30-40 families. Each peer group is responsible for promoting awareness and supervising the neighbourhood in malaria prevention activities. They teach and demonstrate the use of mosquito nets, check the viability of the nets of each family, and prevent environmental hazard by mobilizing their community to clean out any mosquito breeding areas.

The country has succeeded in reversing the prevalence of HIV from 2.4 percent in 2003 to 0.9 percent in 2010; a majority of those infected/ affected by the virus were women. . With special focus on women, awareness raising, training, and voluntary testing were conducted. Prevention activity concerning Mother to Child Transmission was introduced in all medical facilities, including community



clinic, giving pregnant women timely and special medical attention. The main success factor can be attributed to the involvement of women at all levels such as health workers, support groups, and campaigners against HIV/AIDS.

Community-based Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (c-IMCI) has been adopted as the main strategy for improving child health. It aims to develop the capacity of health workers where women play a major role to treat the principal causes of morbidity and mortality. The focus of c-IMCI has been both at facility and community level whereby thousands of community health workers, mostly women, have been trained to manage childhood illnesses (pneumonia, malaria, diarrhea, and malnutrition) at home and work to promote key child care practices. These women also provide trainings on easy provision of food and nutrition at home, conduct awareness campaigns on the benefits of breastfeeding, monitor their neighborhood to check if every child is vaccinated, and they assist in growth monitoring services. (Height and weight measurement of a child on a scale or a child being vaccinated insert picture)

To facilitate safe delivery, NUEW is building waiting homes in various villages, to give care for expecting mothers before and after delivery. These waiting homes are situated near health facilities. Expecting mothers register into these waiting homes and attend

necessary care before being transferred to medical centers for delivery. After delivery, they return to the waiting homes for postpartum/ postnatal care. For those who live far from adequate medical facilities, NUEW has trained and equipped Traditional Birth Assistants (TBAs) as change agents in the campaign against FGM to convince mothers not to circumcise their daughters. This noteworthy contribution of TBAs was one of the many elements that resulted in the achievement of MDG 5.





LESSONS LEARNED

- From the vocational and skills training, it was clear that women too can contribute to the economic welfare of the society. Eritrean women changed the traditional attitude towards women's roles, contributed to minimization of the country's textile imports, and changed the standard of living of their families by being able to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medication, education, and other necessities.
- One of the very effective initiatives was the targeting of community opinion leaders - circumcisers who were considered influential, elderly women who command respect, and religious leaders who are the moral authority of the society. Former circumcisers who shared their stories and denounce female genital mutilation were instrumental in the eradication campaign. The transformation from circumcisers to campaigners has altered the long held perception of practitioners. The circumcisers who used the act as an income generating activity were enrolled in NUEW's micro-credit programme. The engagement of religious and other opinion leaders has further contributed to the positive change in the wrong common perception of FGM as a religious requirement.
- The establishment of Peer women malaria group has been one of the most successful interventions in malaria elimination programme. The peer groups engage communities with behaviour change messages on malaria prevention, environmental sanitation and the use of insecticide treated mosquito nets. As a result of the concerted efforts and continued community dialogue, Eritrea is at the elimination stage of malaria and has achieved health related, 4, 5 and 6, MDGs.



CHALLENGES

The progress explained above has not been realized without challenges. NUEW and laws recognize gender equality, however, the practice is undermined by the cultural beliefs that do not recognize women on equal basis as men. Strong cultural beliefs continue to perpetuate gender inequality.

Cultural challenge; Due to customary and religious laws, backward cultural attitudes and social pressure, even after women are aware of their basic legal rights, some are reluctant to pursue their case in court, as it is considered an unaccepted norm and threatens family respect.

Economic challenge; Poverty is the biggest challenge Eritrean women face. Lack of resources hinders their access to social services. Their inability to get adequate education and medical services keep them trapped in the vicious circle of poverty. Even when the legal framework provides them with access to resources the issue of utilizing the opportunity remains a stumbling block.

Women in decision making; even though 30% of the national assembly is earmarked for women, the number of women in political and socio-economical decision making, is not as it is desired to be. More effort and advocacy

must be implemented to change the backward and traditional beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, skills training needs to be enhanced in order to let women learn operating techniques and modern agricultural and technological practices.

CONCLUSION

In light of its strategic objective, “Moving towards Emancipation” NUEW lobbied policy makers, advocated for the rights of women, educated and trained women, but above all strived to achieve societal behavioral change to foster development friendly attitudes. Supported by its far reaching organizational structure, NUEW was able to change the lives and the attitudes of women and society at large. The Union works hard to educate and create better opportunities for young girls so that their development and achievements can be sustainable.

For NUEW to work towards achieving the post-2015 development agenda, technical assistance and resource mobilization are still critical factors. Thus, committed collaboration of all stakeholders and development partners is appreciated and necessary.



Photos by:
UNICEF: Jacomo 2014 p17,
Shamla 2014 p20

UN/Ladavicius,
UN/Pudlowski: Cover page, p2,
8, 11,12,14,15,18

National Union of Eritrean
Women Archives: p5

Articles Produced by:
Commission on status of women
side event taskforce - Eritrea

Layout Design by:
Shamla Tadese
MAD services



National Union of Eritrean Women
Av. Gureito 10-12/1A73
Tel: +291 1 122012
P.O.Box: 239
Asmara, Eritrea
www.nuew.org



UN Resident
Coordinator's Office - UN Eritrea
Tel: 291 1 151166
dpi.er@undp.org

Empowering Women: Eritrea's Achievements and Experience

Presented on the Occasion of the 59th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women Side Event on Eritrea
UN Headquarters, New York March 16th 2015.