

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although there is increasing awareness about the role that girls and women play in fighting forces in conflicts around the world, there are still few gender-based analyses of the differential experiences of men and women who have been involved in military units. Demobilisation programmes are complex process in which ex-combatants, through gaining acceptance in communities, finding new livelihoods and becoming a part of decision-making processes, establish civilian lives for themselves.

The contribution of women as fighters in the liberation struggle against Mengistu's Derg regime is almost legendary. It is widely regarded that fighter women were strong, if not stronger, than the men, and played a critical role in the success of the movement. Women's associations emerged in tandem with the development of the Tigrean movement and the movement along with an explicit agenda for addressing women's equality, which was considered a cornerstone for the liberation of the society as a whole.

Within Tigray, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) set up a counter-government, and organised health and education and rehabilitation systems for the population. With respect to the position of women in society, the TPLF was responsible for initiating number of reforms within its counter-government addressing marriage, access to education and land tenure reforms, intended to address the mechanisms by which gender inequality were sustained. This in turn acted as a mechanism for the mobilization of women, who clearly identified their own emancipation in the agenda of the struggle.

This brief study captures the demobilization and reintegration experiences of a group of women fighters, all of whom were recruited as children and demobilized as adults. The methodology employed enabled the researchers to explore how being a fighter had impacted upon women's constructions of themselves as 'women'.

Within a small sample, it traces the movement of a group of women from a time when they were children, through their entry to fighting forces and the

impact that the militarisation and politicisation they experience in that setting has on their lives. Their identity and experiences as fighters have become central to their current identity and it is through this lens that they view and experience the civilian world.

At the point of demobilisation and reintegration, women found that the values, socialisation experiences and expectations they had inculcated during their fighter years, as women, were at odds with the traditional feminine values of Ethiopian society. They had to make some adjustment within themselves in order to reduce the level of conflict they experienced with that society.

The women, however, refused to compromise their internalised beliefs about their competence, ability and rights to participate in an equal society. Through the analysis, we can see the influence of fighter women on the political context in Ethiopia, and the dynamic impact of women's political and military participation on a gradually evolving political system in the post-conflict years. Although women feel frustrated personally, their ongoing resistance and challenges to the social and political system means that the host society has been 'pushed' by them, as they have been pushed by it. At an individual level, it is an unequal battle and women struggle economically and personally within this system.