

**ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
INSTITUTE OF GENDER STUDIES**

**Post-War Narratives of Women Ex-Combatants of the  
Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)**


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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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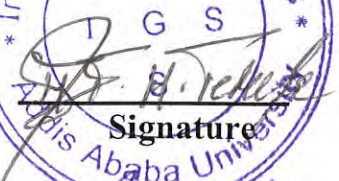
**Post-War Narratives of Women Ex-Combatants of the  
Tigray People's Liberation Front**

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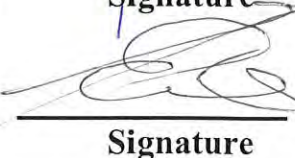
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## **Abstract**

*The leadership of the TPLF during Ethiopia's civil war and their military victory over the Derg was successful for a variety of reasons. In addition to overthrowing the Derg, the TPLF efficiently organized the involvement of various members of the society during the struggle. The involvement of women in the TPLF was an important policy decision and women's contributions to the TPLF's success is an undeniable fact.*

*Nevertheless, the lack of scholarly research on former women combatants and their experiences before, during and after the war has inadvertently written women out of Ethiopian history. The present study addressed this omission, using a semi-structured interview to analyze the narratives of 20 women ex-combatants living in Addis Ababa from a feminist theoretical standpoint. Standpoint theory as a general approach within feminism emphasizes the importance of creating knowledge based upon women's experiences and how women's lived experiences can empower women by when analyzed in ways that validate an oppositional feminist consciousness.*

*Interview responses indicated that most of the respondents felt that gender relations among TPLF soldiers during the war were almost equal noting that the idea of gender equity within the TPLF was a new phenomenon not only for TPLF members, but also the people in the rural areas. The roles of TPLF women went beyond the domestic, private and traditional role of women and the adjustment to women and men to such new roles was an ongoing process. However, after the war, most respondents noted a dramatic shift in the way TPLF women were treated. As a result, most respondents currently believe that women ex-combatants are not treated fairly by the government. Respondents who currently face challenges note economic, psychological, social/interpersonal, and health-related factors as ongoing problems. Respondents who experience few problems had educational and occupational skills that were transferable to civilian life. Recommendations and justifications for preferential treatment for war veterans are listed that might assist struggling women ex-combatants and that might ensure that the roles of TPLF women are not erased from history.*

## 1. Introduction

War is one of the political instruments in which a nation fulfills its national interest in the system of international relations (Edelman, 1985, p. 89). War can occur not only between two nations of the world but also between two or more groups, political actors and other different parties that are found within a particular nation (Edelman, 1985, p. 90). There is no single cause for war, but having different and conflicting ideologies, interests and political views are often the major causes. Moreover, some groups have used war as the means to attain recognition, overthrow corrupt regimes, to fight against colonialism and imperialism, to build nationalism and to improve the national economy.

A number of wars were fought in Africa in order to gain independence from colonial or minority rule. For example, some of the earlier anti-colonial wars were fought in countries like Algeria, Guinea Bissau, and Cape Verde, and some of the later anti-colonial wars against settler colonialism included Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa. Anti-colonial nationalist movements and their revolutionary armies refused to accept the authority of the European minority incumbent regimes and demanded majority rule (Clapham, 1998).

Civil wars occurred in different African countries for a variety of reasons, but mainly with the goal of overthrowing indigenous governments that were often perceived as corrupt and repressive, a few examples include Uganda, Somalia, Liberia, and, of course, Ethiopia (Clapham, 1998).

What makes the issue of struggles and wars even more interesting, however, is like any other life activities, women also participate with men in war. Nonetheless, it is usually assumed that men are violent and women are peaceful and the preservers of life. In fact, neo-Darwinist research suggests that males are genetically predisposed to violence. (Bouta, Frerks & Banon, 2005, p. 236). In addition masculinity is also validated by soldiering (Peterson & Runyan, 1999, p. 273). For example, war historically is associated with idealized masculinist rhetoric of virtue and glory among men. Military trainings

have been viewed as the way to build the manhood of the nation (Lindsey, 2005, p. 237). Even though women participate in war as nurses, clerical help, and builders of war equipments as well as combatants, they are mainly considered “helpmates” to the men who are fighting the 'real battle' (Lindsey, 2005, p. 237). War, particularly combat, becomes the supreme guideline for defining masculinity and also becomes synonymous with ideal manhood (e.g., toughness, fearlessness, strength, and aggression) (White, 2007).

Regardless of whether one supports perspectives suggesting that war activities are largely for men and peaceful activities are largely for women, women’s active participation in war is widely acknowledged (Enloe, 2004; Etienne & Leacock, 1980, White, 2007). This is especially true in different African countries; women were part and parcel of every anti-colonial war for centuries with African men (Allman, Gelger & Musisi, 2002, p. 11).

Likewise, in Ethiopia starting from the earliest times, women were encouraged to participate in war mobilization and preparation efforts (Minale, 2001, p. 1). During different periods of war, men who were soldiers brought along their wives, who in turn became involved in the war as civilian participants or as military combatants. Women also participated as strategists, advisors, translators and intelligent officers throughout Ethiopian’s history of war (Minale, 2001, p. 2).

In the recent history of Ethiopia, during the civil war between the Derg government and the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF), women participated and contributed in significant ways and in different capacities. Their participation led to the success of the TPLF and their current power, despite women’s lack of representation in the current government. Furthermore, their involvement as former combatants has affected their lives in different ways that require scholarly attention and systematic study (Tsegaye, 1999).

## **2. Statement of the problem**

In the long Ethiopian state formation process, history witnessed a number of wars and struggles. Ethiopians fought for the liberation, unity, solidarity and democratization of the country throughout its long state formation process. Both women and men were participants in mobilization and preparation efforts in every war and struggle that happened in the nation. The problem is that usually men gain the honor and the respect from the society as a result of their heroic activities in war and women's heroic efforts are often downplayed or ignored. In other words, men combatants come home as "war heroes" and women combatants simply come home.

One factor that influences the attitude of the society towards women and their participation in wars and struggles is the assumption that women are only care and life givers. This assumption restricts their role to reproductive activities (Peterson & Runyan, 1999, p. 187). As a result, women ex-combatants often do not receive equal reward for their important contributions after the conflict. They are expected to return to their reproductive role like most women, and rather than continuing their participation in politics and government structures, they are directly and indirectly asked to step aside for the men.

Therefore, the major focus of the research is on the role of TPLF women combatants in the civil war and their perceptions of their experiences before, during and after the war. It explains, examines and critiques the current political positions that women ex-combatants hold. In order to address the above mentioned problem, it is pertinent to pose the following research questions which are:

- Do women ex-combatants believe they get the same respect that male ex-combatants receive? If not, why do they believe this difference exists?
- What challenges, if any, did women members of TPLF encounter before and during the struggle, and what challenges do they currently face?

- What political positions are given to women ex-combatants in the current governmental structure, and what reasons do former combatants give regarding why more women ex-combatants are not present?

### **3. Objectives of the study**

The major objectives of the study are to highlight the different roles of women members of TPLF as guerrilla fighters and their perceptions about their experiences of war and the current level of political participation of women ex-combatants after the war. The following points support the objectives which are

- To allow women to provide first-hand accounts of the different roles they played as members of TPLF in the struggle for freedom and what they learned from their participation.
- To understand the challenges they encountered before, during and after the armed struggle.
- To assess the role of women ex-combatants in the present governmental structure.

### **4. Significance of the study**

Even though gender equality and equal political participation of women is part of gender mainstreaming under different protocols and agreements signed and legitimized by the Ethiopian government, there is a scarcity of written materials that provide first-hand accounts of the voices of women ex-combatants on the topic from an explicitly feminist standpoint. Therefore, the significance of the research is based on the following points

- This research accurately documents the extensive participation of Ethiopian women in the civil war and their perceptions of what they learned from their participation, thereby contributing to the literature on Ethiopian women's history.
- The research findings can be used to discuss how women ex-combatants can be better integrated into the current political process and government structure.

- The results portray the complexities of women's lives during and after civil war in ways that deepen the respect and appreciation they deserve as ex-combatants.

## 5. Positionality of Researcher

Feminist scholars have responded in different ways to the problems and limitations of scientific inquiry. Specifically, feminist critics argue that mainstream scientific approaches that attempt to be objective and the strategies adopted toward this aim often obscure the fact that the researcher's identity and standpoint fundamentally shape the research process and findings (Bhavnani, 2004; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004; Reinharz, 1992). Rather than claiming neutrality and despairing the possibility of making any kind of claim to "truth," feminist scholars have developed alternative epistemologies emphasizing "situated knowledges," arguing that knowledge is produced positionally, and hence always partial (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004; Bhavnani, 2004). Thus, feminist researchers frequently reflect on their own standpoints in relation to the topics they study and identify the ways in which their standpoints shape the research process and the study's findings. To paraphrase feminist sociologist Susan Krieger (1990), what this means for feminist scholars is that we not only have a responsibility to publish what we know, but *how* we know, and *where* we are situated in the act of trying to understand

My interest in the present study's topic evolved after reading about Ethiopia's civil war and noticing the lack of information about the detailed participation of women soldiers in the literature. As an Oromo woman born in 1985, I am not old enough to remember the war. However, my interest in women's history and the participation of African women ex-combatants in Ethiopia and other African countries was heightened as a Gender Studies specialist, former political science major, and budding feminist scholar-activist concerned about the reintegration of African women war veterans. Given the fact that I am not Tigrayan and do not have family members affiliated with the TPLF as well as the fact that generational differences existed between me and all participants, I made a special effort to gain the trust of TPLF ex-combatants. These differences (e.g., age and ethnicity) reflect multiple positions in which I differed from the women I interviewed

Therefore, I did not assume that my status as a woman or even as an Ethiopian automatically produced a good rapport and spent time getting to know each woman and allowed her to ask any questions about me at the beginning of each interview.

## **6. Research Design**

### **6.1 Rationale**

Qualitative research has special value for investigating the richness, depth and complexity of phenomena, and “the use of semi-structured interviews has become the principal means by which feminists have sought to achieve the active involvement of their respondents in the construction of data about their lives” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 18). Semi-structured interviews are used in this study in order to emphasize women ex-combatant’s pre-war, active war, and post-war stories. Women’s voices are critical in feminist research given that their voices are often marginalized in scholarly literature and society in general.

The present study linked theory, method, and epistemology in the research design in the following ways: (a) the focus of the study asserted the standpoint of women ex-combatants and was guided by feminist standpoint theoretical perspectives that argue for the inclusion of marginalized women’s voices in research (see theoretical section for details); (b) the method highlighted the actual voices of the women using semi-structured interviews, (c) and the experiences of women ex-combatants of the TPLF were assumed to be legitimate sources of knowledge about the war and its aftermath based on feminist epistemological arguments about the value of women’s ways of knowing (covered in detail in the theoretical section).

## **6.2 Sources of Data**

This research depends on primary and secondary data sources. Existing secondary sources in the area of the study are exhaustively utilized to assist in data analysis, namely, the scholarly literature on African women in armed struggles. However, a semi-structured interview with the former women members of TPLF is the primary data source. The interview questions are semi-structured in order to elicit in-depth information on the topics in the words of ex-combatants.

## **6.3 Sample and Recruitment**

Twenty women ex-combatants in Addis Ababa were interviewed. Regarding recruitment, the researcher approached a founding member of Ye Hewanwa Rai, an organization of former TPLF women fighters, who recommended other fighters. Also, the researcher attended an informal association of former TPLF fighters who meet monthly in each other's homes. Snowball sampling was implemented such that each woman interviewed provided the name of another woman who might be willing to participate. Potential participants were contacted by telephone. Once the participant agreed, an appointment was made and the place of the interview was decided by the participant. All interviews were conducted in either the participant's home or work setting. The average interview was audio-taped and conducted in one session, lasting approximately 1 hour. The shortest interview was 45 minutes and the longest interview was one hour and a half. Participants were not paid. All interviews were conducted in Amharic (see Annex I for list of participants).

## **6.6 Instrument of Data Collection**

A 42-item semi-structured interview was used to assess women ex-combatants lives before, during, and after the civil war (see Annex II). Topics addressed the roles they played during the war, the type of training they received, challenges they faced, and demographic information such as educational, occupational, and parental status. Both closed and open-ended questions were used. However, most of the questions were open-ended. Although the questions identified general areas tied to the objectives of the research, interviewees' responses determined the order of topics, the time spent on each topic, and whether additional issues and content were introduced.

## **6.5 Data Analysis**

A content analysis of interview responses was the primary analytic strategy. The researcher transcribed all of the audiotapes. After audiotapes were transcribed, the transcripts were translated from Amharic into English. The analysis of the transcribed interview responses occurred in two major phases (1) the development of the coding sheet, (2) the coding of responses, and (3) the assessment of simple response frequencies and percentages. First the researcher read all 20 transcripts and formulated an initial set of response categories from the questions in the interview protocol. The researcher added the responses of the preexisting categories based on the close-ended questions in the interview protocol to the data-driven categories from the open-ended questions to a coding sheet. After constructing the coding sheet, all responses were coded. After all interview responses were coded, the researcher assessed the simple response frequencies. In addition the mean age of respondents at the time of the interview and the mean age at the time when they joined the TPLF were assessed.

The combination of response frequencies and narrative excerpts in the findings allowed the researcher to assess trends and underlying patterns within the sample as well as differences among participants. Therefore, unlike discourse analysis which emphasizes speech patterns and speaking styles, the present study placed emphasis on both the underlying themes and the frequencies regarding thematic content in order to generate hypotheses for future studies that may engage in comparative analyses among women ex-combatants in Ethiopia or between Ethiopian ex-combatants and other African women ex-combatants.

## **6.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical questions are heightened in feminist research because feminists make an effort to avoid perpetuating the exploitation of women. Furthermore, the relationship between the researcher and research participants raises a number of ethical issues—whether the research is described as feminist or not—such as informed consent and concerns about confidentiality. To address these issues, each participant’s formal consent was obtained. Also, each participant was asked whether she wanted her name used in the final report. Only two participants asked that their names not be used, and their requests have been honored. In addition, only the first names of 18 respondents were used in the present study despite their permission to use their full names.

## **6.7 Delimitation of the Study**

The study only recruited ex-combatants who live in Addis Ababa and was conducted in Amharic. Conveniently sampling from this urban center introduces bias in the data because many former TPLF fighters live in Tigray, not Addis Ababa. In addition, many TPLF fighters are not fluent in Amharic. Therefore, the sample may be more educated and integrated into society than those living outside of Addis Ababa and cannot be considered representative of all or even most former female TPLF combatants. Nonetheless, unique exploration of this under-researched topic will provide invaluable data for future, more representative studies.

## 2. Literature review

The following sections place the role of TPLF women ex-combatants in a larger history of African women's role as combatants in anti-colonial as well as civil wars. The history of African women combatants is largely unknown because it is often omitted and their roles are downplayed in post-war reconstruction. Therefore, by reviewing the history of African women combatants, this review provides evidence that demonstrates the long history of African women's participation in armed struggles as soldiers and how TPLF women are a part of this rich tradition. By documenting the historical legacy of African women combatants, this review also challenge the stereotype that suggests women are mainly "helpmates" to the men who are fighting rather than equal fighters in armed struggles.

### 2.1 African Women's Participation in Anti-colonial Wars

During the infamous Berlin conference of 1885, European powers scrambled to divide the continent of Africa among themselves, marking the beginning of 'formal' colonial rule throughout the European political metropolis on paper and by treaty. After the Berlin conference most African countries (the exception being Ethiopia and Liberia) fell under the control and rule of imperialist administrations which resulted in loss of sovereignty, freedom, self-determination and other civil and human rights. Moreover, the exploitation of African labor in the slave trade and the extracted wealth from Africa were used to strengthen the economy of European powers (Etinine & Leacock, 1980, p. 216).

European colonization, instigated by the notion of racial supremacy, supported the idea that it was the "responsibility of the white people to civilize backward, inferior and uncivilized people"(Iweriebor, 2002, p. 197). However, the major factor behind European



colonization was the growing needs of the capitalist world economy that necessitated a constant supply of raw materials to be used to enhance development in European industries (Iweriebor, 2002).

The people of Africa experienced colonialism through forced labor, low wages, heavy taxation, land expropriation, social segregation, racial discrimination in employment and services, racist colonial education and the diminution of the traditional political leaders and institutions. The oppressive and exploitative colonial practices culminated in the emergence of African nationalism and the eventual attainment of independence (Chuku, 2002; Falola, 2002).

As half of the society, women were part of every struggle against colonialism with African men. African studies of nationalist movements seldom give evidence of any active participation by women and tend to concentrate on the activities of men. Often, the roles played by women are, by and large, relegated to the background. Most of the major works on African nationalism have either omitted or assigned a minimal role to the activities of women in the struggles. Such works not only fail to reveal the historical development of women's involvement but also neglect to mention the achievements and sacrifices of these women (Chuku, 2002, p.109). As White (2007) states:

*Many contemporary African women served in African liberation armies struggling for political independence from European colonial rule. Their war stories are rarely read or heard, however, because of prevalent assumptions that women, African and otherwise, are simply victims of war, not active agents in war.*

Even though the detailed history of women's participation in armed struggles and their actual voices are often missing from the history of anti-colonial wars, their roles were pivotal for the success of various struggles and the eventual end of colonialism across the continent.

Women participated in African nationalist movements in different ways depending on the particularities of the colonial situation. For instance, Chuku (2002) documents women's participation in the early and relatively nonviolent movements in West African countries like Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone and women's involvement in the early movements in the former French West African colonies and East and Central Africa in which women wrote protest letters and organized strikes and boycotts. In addition, women were involved in nationalist movements in the entrenched settler colonies of Kenya, Algeria, Zimbabwe, and South Africa where violent struggle was necessary. Women's participation included leading rural resistance, engaging in cultural nationalist propaganda campaigns, managing religious protests, and organizing labour movements. The later wave of more self-consciously socialist movements led to intense fighting in Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique where African women served as soldiers in anti-colonial guerrilla fighting forces (Chuku, 2002, p. 109).

African women's involvement in armed struggles was stimulated by a number of reasons. For example, many women were concerned about their ability to fulfill gender obligations that were threatened by colonial policies that impoverished their families. Also, women often followed their husbands who joined. Most importantly, current research reveals how the political agency of women played a major role in their decision to join the armed struggle:

*African women who possessed a strong sense of political agency entered anti-colonial fighting forces to demonstrate their support for revolutionary ideology, gain protection for themselves and their families from local or state violence, avoid domestic violence, earn money, improve educational opportunities and improve career options (White, 2007, p. 10)*

In addition, women's participation in war was varied and not limited to that of combatant or noncombatant activities. Rather they were involved as soldiers, builders of war equipments, strategists, advisors, translators, clerical help, nurses, cooks, and so on (Bouta, Frerks & Banon, 2005, p. 11). Their participation in these activities was critical to the abolishment of colonialism from the continent.

## 2.2 African Women's Participation in African Civil Wars

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s many African countries gained independence from the system of colonialism and established their own sovereign administration. However, the newly established African governments were hampered by greed, corruption, mismanagement of financial resources, and the continued interference of Europe and the United States in their economic and political affairs. Scholars like Walter Rodney (1974) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1961) have connected Africa's current underdevelopment and persistent conflicts to the expansion of European capitalism, of which colonialism was only one of its manifestations. The current post-independence structural relationship between Africa and the developed world has been called a structure of neo-colonialism, for it reflects structural similarity with the colonial era except that African countries are now technically 'independent' (Azevedo, 2005, p. 235).

The effect of colonialism still manifests itself today across the African continent in different ways. For example economically colonized African countries were forced by their colonizers to produce a single cash crop and this affected their ability to produce other products after independence given years of dependency on the single cash crop. Furthermore, politically, traditional state systems were superseded forcibly by new ethnic and linguistic groups. These conflicts resulted in various resentments among different ethnic groups that often erupted in violent disputes that led, ultimately, to civil wars being declared after independence (Nyang'oro, 2005, p. 170). Thus, the 'underdeveloped' economies of formerly colonized African countries, the hatred between different ethnic groups that were manipulated by colonial rulers as a part of their divide and conquer strategies, and the unaccountability, often autocratic, if not despotic, corrupt administrations that emerged after the independence of many African countries contributed to the proliferation of civil wars across the continent (Oliver & Atmore, 2005, p. 310).

The above situations motivated different disadvantaged groups to organize revolutionary movements against the African elite who controlled the government and the country's resources (Claphem, 1998, p. 3). Thus, many civil wars in Africa can be ascribed to post-independence governments that have not been willing or able to address issues of prolonged immoderations, exploitation, state decay, and neo-colonial dependencies of foreign aid that shape national interests (Oliver & Atmore, 2005; Claphem, 1998).

Most importantly, like the anti-colonial wars and other struggles against European invasion, African women have also participated in these civil wars. For instance, women combatants were active in civil wars in Algeria, Rwanda, Mozambique, Somalia, Sudan, and Angola. Recent scholarly sources document that women were members of fighting forces, including civil wars during the years 1990-2003. Furthermore women were part of fighting forces in 55 countries and were involved in armed conflicts in 38 of the 55 countries; all of them were civil wars (Bouta, Frerks & Banon, 2005, p. 11). Although female participation varies in armies, guerrilla forces, or armed liberation movements, generally they are between one tenth and one third of the combatants, and they share every responsibility in those struggles and wars with men (Bouta, Frerks & Banon, 2005, p. 11).

### **2.3 Ethiopian Women's Participation in War**

Although Ethiopia has never been colonized by Europeans like other parts of Africa, similar to other African countries, chronicles of war and military prowess are plentiful in Ethiopia's history. According to Minale (2001), internal wars were fought mainly for reasons like territorial expansion, political supremacy and because of ethnic group conflicts of one sort or another. In addition, Ethiopians have been involved in external wars at different times with Italy (Minale, 2001). When historians and scholars mention the long state formation process of Ethiopia and its history of never being colonized like other African countries, the emphasis is often on men soldiers who contributed to Ethiopia's sovereignty. However, Ethiopian women have participated in every struggle for sovereignty and their activities must be documented (Nesanet, 2007).

Starting from the earliest times, both women and men were encouraged to participate in mobilization and preparation efforts to protect the sovereignty of Ethiopia. During mobilization, women encouraged men to join military expeditions through their songs and also by preparing food and drinks for royal feasts for consumption by the military. Moreover, women were also expected to help in excavating trenches, clearing roads and preparing camping sites (Minale, 2001, p. 1).

In addition to their noncombatant roles, women participated in actual war activities such as guarding the camp and other soldier-related activities. The most striking and memorable example that clearly demonstrates the pivotal role of Ethiopian women in an external war was the renowned Battle of Adwa. During the war against the Italians, Empress Tayitu played an important role regarding the success of the struggle leading more than 5000 foot soldiers and more than 600 soldiers on their horses beside her women followers (Bahru, 1991). Even though there is no precise estimate of the number of women camp-followers during the campaign of Adwa, some writers have estimated the total noncombatant followers to about 30,000. The Empress and her women followers were also engaged in gathering intelligence information from local people and enemy camps. Others were engaged in the taking away the rifles of the dead soldiers. These activities were in addition to the other noncombatant activities of the women (Minale, 2001).

During the time of Emperor Haile Selassie, the fascist Italian administration invaded Ethiopia for the second time from 1936-1941 in an attempt to erase the 'shameful scar' of their defeat at the Battle of Adwa (Bahru, 1991). Although they had no formal or unified command structure, Ethiopian patriots organized themselves into separate units in different parts of the country prepared to fight, and women like Woizerit Hoy Kebedech Seyoum and Bitewish Belay were part of these patriot fighters (Desta, 2008, p. 171). Shwareged Gedaly organized an elite Ethiopian intelligence service to gather weapons and lead the Ethiopian patriot fighters to the locale of Addis Alem to defeat an Italian fortification (Desta, 2008, p. 172). Women joined the resistance and played their part in

the war by going to the front to encourage and feed the soldiers and to help care for the wounded. According to Alem Desta (2008):

*A lot of women also took up arms and fought in the war. Some of them sounded the war trumpets and alerted the patriots, others sharpened swords and cleaned the shields without in any way being frightened by the shower of bombs that were falling down from the air over them. Some women like Sindu Gebru and Tsgie Mengesha, set up first aid centers and cared for the wounded. Many women accompanied their men to the battlefields (p. 172).*

Also, different women's organizations, mainly noncombatant in nature, were established to contribute to various war efforts in Ethiopia like the Ethiopian Women Welfare Association (EWWA) in August 1935 and Women's Volunteer Service Association (EWSVA) (Mulugeta, 2005, p.115). Such organizations raised money, organized medical supplies, gathered clothes and gas masks for the military and prepared food items for the army. These organizations also encouraged women to assist the military as cooks, nurses. However, Tseday Alehegn notes:

*The record of Ethiopia's long-standing independence will be incomplete without the recognition of thousands of women servants who accompanied women and men of the aristocracy into battle after battle. Maids and servants were responsible for the gathering and preparation of food and other administrative roles (cited in Desta, 2007, p. 173).*

Though the people of Ethiopia—men as well as women—participated at different levels in supporting Emperor Haile Selassie to fight against the imperialist government of Italy, the Emperor's popularity among the people was in strong decline after his return. Famine, heavy taxes levied against poor peasants, the Emperor's preference for a single ethnic group (the Amharas), and the inhuman treatment and exploitation of other ethnic groups led to different rebellions against the Emperor and his administration across Ethiopia. Organized struggle of the Ethiopian student movement against the Emperor and

various opposition forces defending the interests of the working class and the peasantry made clear that revolution was inevitable. Although the ideological orientation of each opposition varied, some supported Marxist views while others favored nationalist ethnic politics, the major factor that joined oppositional groups was their revolt against Emperor Haile Selassie's regime (Merera, 2003)

The 1974 revolution brought significant changes at different levels by the military government referred to as the Derg. The military government, led by Colonel Mengistu and his group, established equality among religions, separation of church and the state, implemented policies that led to the expropriation of land from landlords and its redistribution to the peasants, and proclaimed a new political philosophy of "Ethiopian Socialism" (Desta, 2007, p. 131). However, while the reforms may have been peaceful in the beginning, the Derg established "neither full equality between social groups nor between nationalities" and failed to implement "a democratic political order" (Tsegaye, 2002, p. 54). The failure to establish a democratic government strengthened most of the established oppositions against the military regime and encouraged new oppositions to flourish in the country.

The Derg responded by unleashing a reign of terror against opposition groups and any person suspected of being "a counter-revolutionary" as defined by the military government and its supporters. The reign of terror was a reflection of the divisions and power struggles across the country and resulted in one of the most brutal and inhumane periods of the country (Desta, 2007, pp. 126-127). Ongoing human rights violations by the Derg government on intellectuals and other individuals who opposed the military government led to the civil war which began in 1974. Of interest in the present study is the role women played in the civil war that lasted for nearly seventeen years.

Although the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) declared war against the Derg, different disadvantaged ethnic groups also suffered under the Derg. This situation led to the establishment and development of different liberation groups like the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front), SLF (Sidama Liberation Front), and ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front),

and EPLF (Eritrean people's Liberation Front) in addition to the TPLF (Merera, 2003, p.79). Women were key fighters in this particular war, compared to previous internal and external wars, and contributed to the front in various ways as combatants, particularly in the TPLF. TPLF women fighters' determination for combat contributed significantly to what could be described as an especially radical and militant order of the liberation movement to overthrow the Derg. The involvement of women fighters to the struggle started during the student movement and continued to that of the field.

The founding and struggle of the TPLF can be taken as a continuation of the first '*woyane movement*' ("revolution or revolt") which included the eruption of peasant resistances throughout the country in 1943 due to Emperor Haile Selassie's oppressive rule once he returned from exile after the end of the Italian invasion (Hammond, 1990). The Emperor assigned nobilities to collect high taxes that were imposed on the people of Tigray and this proved especially difficult after fighting with the Italians. Although the initial resistance was in response to exploitative local administrations and the high taxation imposed on the Tigrayan people, the resistance developed into broad self-determination and the desire to overthrow Haile Selassie's regime. In response, the Emperor requested military assistance from the Britain administration to control and end the resistance of the peasants. The British administration accepted the call and sent its Royal Air Force from Yemen to attack the capital of Tigray (Mekele) as well as the Woyane resistance members (Assfaw, 2009, p. 23). Following the military attack and the regaining of control of Tigray, the Empire assigned special military forces to maintain control. The soldiers of the Special Forces were extremely abusive toward Tigrayans. Women were forced to provide food for the soldiers, their husbands were routinely arrested, and many women were raped. Moreover, the Emperor developed different economical and political strategies to cripple the people of Tigray (Assfaw, 2009, p. 25).

The repressive response of the Emperor's regime towards the people of Tigray stimulated the youth to continue the struggle and this led to the establishment of another movement from Tigray. According to Tsegaye (2002) the 1943 revolt was led by the lower sector of traditional elite, the 1975 insurgence secured the ideological blessing and organizational

leadership of the modern elite, the intellectuals.” (p. 59). The second Woyane (revolution) which led to the founding of the TPLF was the result of the 1960’s student movement which flourished with other opposition national groups within the university student union of Addis Ababa University (Hilay, 2009).

According to Assfaw (2009), the members of the Tigrayan student movement mobilized Tigrayan university and high school students in the capital and in different regions of Tigray through different political forums. Among the first women members of the Tigrayan movement were: Aregash Adane, Genet Hilu (Woyanity), Herit Beyene (gual keshi), Hadish G/selase, Meberat Beyene, Yewbmar Assfaw, and Zufan G/meskel (Assfaw, 2009, p.25).

The student movement formed the basis of the TPLF, and one year after Haile Selassie’s fall from power and six months after the Derg take-over, Tigrayans took up arms on February 18, 1975 and became the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front (Hammond, 1990, p. 24). Like most revolutionary armies across Africa, in the early years of the TPLF, Ethiopian men were initially reluctant to recruit women combatants. One of the earliest women fighters, Kahsu Martha, went to the field to join the TPLF only eight months after the struggle began (Hammond, 1990, p. 42). She was killed in battle, but fought with great ability and courage (Tsegaye, 2002, p. 171). Despite her heroics, TPLF men’s hesitation regarding accepting additional women fighters centered around basic biological differences between men and women regarding physical strength, women’s monthly menstruation, and the supplies that women need such as sanitary pads, soap, underwear. As a result, the front decided that women should remain in the cities and assigned them secret urban operations in the areas of intelligence, fundraising and politicizing Tigrayan youth (Tsegaye, 2002).

But following continuous inquiry and insistence from women, the front reached a decision to accept a few women in first half of 1977 who were mainly university and high school students, civil servants and some women who were working in their own

businesses (Assfaw, 2009). During their arrival to the field the first challenge they faced was to prove they could successfully complete the required military training.

According to Aregash Adane, early TPLF fighter and the only woman who was ever on the TPLF Central Committee,

*“There were threats of male chauvinism. Even when women were visible and practical during the armed struggle, male chauvinism was there as a threat. There was this attitude from men ridiculing and diminishing women fighters on the basis of allegedly being weak and unable to run fast, to climb mountains, or to carry as heavy a load as the men. There was also an inferiority complex on the women’s part. There were women fighters who looked at equality as something physical and reflected the attitude that they were not equal to men. Though this was also a problem, male chauvinism was the bigger challenge. The first thing that we did was to realize the problem and conceptualize it before tabling it for discussion. I believe those discussions on the questions of chauvinism and inferiority complexes were very important in changing individual attitude of both female and male fighters”* (Cited in Desta, 2008, p. 146).

Later, the liberation front gave shelter to girls running away from oppressive social cultures and political situations like early marriage, abduction, or violent or abusive husbands (Desta, 2008, p. 145). The TPLF made great efforts to break entrenched attitudes to women’s roles and women’s subservience within the armed camps and women fighters, who numbered about a third of the armed forces at one point, were a strong influence in changing men’s and women’s attitudes. The TPLF also enlarged the concept of “fighter” beyond participation in combat (Desta, 2008, p. 147). Some women fighters were able to rise to commanders while many other women and girls were trained as administrators, health workers, technicians, carpenters, metal workers and drivers (Desta, 2008).

Although many of the former TPLF soldiers were incorporated into the new national army formed in 1991, many others, including most of the women, were demobilized and given a one time grant between 4000 to 8000 birr (Desta, 2008, p. 147). There were no further planned reintegration strategies which left the ex-combatants to fend for themselves as they attempted to re-enter life as civilians. Female soldiers faced additional problems because many had joined as children and had been socialized into liberation politics based on gender and class equity during their formative years. After being demobilized, they were returning to their neighborhoods as adults in a society still plagued by various inequalities. Their limited educational background, lack of marketable skills and re-adjusting to the patriarchal way of life in their communities created difficulties regarding their chances of employment, marriage and motherhood (Tsegaye, 1999). The lack of additional training, psychological support, educational opportunities, and other social support systems made it difficult for many of the women to re-establish roots in society. Alem Desta notes:

*“Sadly, many of the women who were active participants in the war, and who had contributed significantly to the peace that resulted from the struggle, have been ignored during the rehabilitation and stabilization process. In fact, many of them ended up in a worse situation than they had been in before they joined the struggle and found themselves living in squalor and the slums. This was due to spending much of their time working for the army, many had their marriages dissolved and as a result the number of female-headed households dramatically increased, which made women highly vulnerable and poor”* (2008, p. 149).

In response to the unique needs of women ex-combatants and 16 years after demobilization, some of the former TPLF women fighters organized themselves under the name Ye Hewanwa Rai (Eva’s Vision) to address various issues they faced (Desta, 2008, p. 149). In addition, women ex-combatants’ participation in politics after the war is noticeably absent. The purpose of the present research is to understand what some of their lives are like today, and why their presence in politics is minimal from their point of view. Feminist standpoint theory is the framework used to interpret their lives.

## 3. Feminist Standpoint Theory

### 3.1. Overview

Standpoint theory is a broad theoretical approach that includes somewhat diverse theories ranging from Nancy Hartsock's (1983) feminist historical materialist perspective, Dorothy Smith's (1987) everyday sociology for women, Donna Haraway's (1988) analysis of situated knowledges, Patricia Hill Collins's (1990) Black feminist thought, and Chela Sandoval's (1991) analysis of third world feminists' differential oppositional consciousness. Feminist philosopher Sandra Harding (1986) first described standpoint theory as a general approach within feminism to refer to the many different theorists who argued for (a) the importance of creating knowledge based upon women's experiences and (b) the utility of standpoint theory for feminist praxis as a way of empowering women and validating an oppositional consciousness (see also Harding, 2003).

Harding states:

*"Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge" (p. 43).*

Thus, standpoint theory argues that feminist research should be practiced from the standpoint of women and that knowledge generated from the various disciplines should make women's experiences, instead of men's experiences, the point of departure given centuries of male bias across disciplines (Harding, 2004). A feminist standpoint is essential to examining the systemic oppressions in various societies that devalue women's knowledge. Most importantly, the nature of knowledge (and truth) is that "it is partial, situated, subjected, power imbued, and relational" (Harding, 2004). Therefore there is no single universal truth.

Regarding the historical development of feminist standpoint theories, Harding (2004) states,

*"The intellectual history of feminist standpoint theory is conventionally traced to Hegel's reflections on what can be known about the master/slave relationship from the standpoint of the slave's life versus that of the master's life and to the way Marx, Engels, and Lukacs subsequently developed this insight into the 'standpoint of the proletariat' from which have been produced Marxist theories of how class society operates. In the 1970s, several feminist thinkers independently began reflecting on how the Marxist analysis could be transformed to explain how the structural relationship between women and men had consequences for the production of knowledge"* (p. 43).

Standpoint theorists make the case that because women's lives and roles in almost all societies are significantly different from men's roles, women hold a different type of knowledge. Their location as a subordinated group allows women to see and understand the world in ways that are different from and challenging to the existing male-biased conventional wisdom. Because women have been dominated by men, they have formed a dual perspective. They know the workings of not only the female world, but also much of the male world. Therefore, women's lives can provide the starting point for asking new, critical questions about not only those women's lives but also men's lives and, most importantly, the causal relations between them (Harding, 2004).

Researchers who use feminist standpoint perspectives often note that the problems that women face on a daily basis are often invisible to, or ignored by, the male eye; it is these problems that are of interest to many feminist researchers" (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 16). Accordingly, many feminist researchers use standpoint theoretical perspectives to analyze the actual voices of women as part of their feminist methodology. Standpoint theory links theory with methods and the epistemological belief that women can possess and share valuable knowledge, thus research should start from the perspective of women's lives (Smith, 1987; Harding, 1993).

Standpoint theorists also note that in most scholarly research, the views of those who belong to groups with more social power are validated more than those in marginalized or subordinate groups. However, standpoint theorists believe that those in marginalized groups provide significant insights about power relations and these complex human relations become visible when research is started from their perspectives—the bottom of the social hierarchy as opposed to the top (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004, p. 16).

Standpoint theory supports what Harding (2004) refers to as strong objectivity or the notion that the perspectives of marginalized and/or oppressed individuals can help to create more objective accounts of the world. Contemporary standpoint feminists have emphasized that because of the many differences that divide women it is impossible to claim one single or universal ‘women’s experience’ given the differences among women (see Collins, 1990 and Sandoval, 1991). Furthermore, standpoint feminists have recently argued that individuals are both oppressed in some situations and in relation to some people while at the same time are privileged in others (Collins, 1990). Their goal is to situate women and men within multiple systems of domination in a way that is more accurate and more able to confront oppressive power structures.

In summary, standpoint theoretical perspectives highlight the importance of developing a theory of knowledge (referred to as feminist epistemology) that also delineates a method for constructing feminist knowledge by starting one’s research from the insights of women’s experiences. As a theoretical approach that combines diverse perspectives, it emphasizes how: (a) a standpoint is a place from which human beings view the world; (b) a standpoint influences how the people adopting it socially construct the world; (c) social group membership affects people’s standpoints; (d) the inequalities of different social groups create differences in their standpoints; (e) all standpoints are partial truths, however, the standpoints of the marginalized offer important insights about power relations, thus offering what is referred to as “strong objectivity” (Wood, 1993).

### 3.2. The Standpoint of TPLF Women Ex-Combatants

In order to highlight the standpoint of TPLF women ex-combatants, theory, method, and epistemology were linked in the following ways: (a) the focus of the study asserted the standpoint of those whose voices have been marginalized since Ethiopia's civil war; (b) the method highlighted the actual voices of the women using semi-structured interviews; (c) and the experiences and standpoints of women ex-combatants of the TPLF are taken as legitimate sources of knowledge about the war and how its aftermath has affected their lives.

This research project stresses the need for what Sandra Harding (2004) refers to as "strong objectivity." Strong objectivity acknowledges that the production of power is a political process and that greater attention paid to the context and social location of knowledge producers will contribute to a more ethical and transparent result (Harding, 2004). In fact, Harding (1986) and Hartsock (1983) argue that knowledge produced from the point of view of subordinated groups may offer stronger objectivity due to the increased motivation for them to understand the views or perspectives of those in their own marginalized positions as well as those in positions of power.

*"It is because the conditions of women's lives are worse than their brothers' in so many cases that women's lives provide better places from which to start asking questions about a social order that tolerates and in so many respects even values highly the bad conditions for women's lives..." (Harding, 2004, p. 47).*

Therefore, the participation of only women in this study was adopted in order to maximize "strong objectivity" because complex human relations regarding the difficulties women ex-combatants encountered before, during and after the armed struggle are often invisible to, or ignored by, the male eye. By starting inquiry from the lived experiences of women who made sacrifices during the civil war, yet who have been traditionally outside of the institutions in which knowledge about the civil war has been generated and discussed, more objective and more relevant knowledge can be produced.

#### **4. Background Characteristics of the Sample**

In this section background characteristics of the sample are presented demonstrating both similarities and differences among the 20 women. The average age of respondents at the time of the interview was 45.50 years with the youngest respondent being age 36 and the oldest respondent was age 55 (See Annex II for list of respondents).

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, the TPLF was first reluctant to allow women to join the armed struggle and limited women's participation to support to the front in the cities. However, the front accepted women in large numbers during the 1980's. In this study, 75 % (15), joined the armed struggle between the years 1976 to 1980 with the remaining group 25 % ( 5) joining during 1981-1987.

Most young female combatants were single when they joined the front and got married during the war. According to Assfaw (2009) after the TPLF officially allowed marriage and sexual relations among fighters in 1985, a number of women married other TPLF fighters. Among the ex-combatants in this study, 95% (19) of them married during the time of the policy change regarding marriage and sexual relations within the front. Presently 55% (11) of the respondents are still living with their spouses. The other 30% (6) divorced after the end of the struggle for different reasons. Two ex-combatants, however, responded that the chauvinist attitudes of their husbands, who were also former ex-combatants, ended their marriages. The men's attitudes changed after the war and became more traditional as a way of adapting to civilian life. There were also widows in the sample, 15 % ( 3). One lost her spouse during the civil war, the other in the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eriterian war, and the third one lost her husband as a result of a car accident after the war.

The official TPLF policies restricting marriage and sexual relations among soldiers until 1985 as well as the courage and commitment of the women fighters to the responsibilities resulted in most women having a limited number of children. Of the 20 respondents, 80%

(16) have children: twelve have two children, two have three children, and two have one child. Four women (20%) have no children.

In the present study 40% (8) of the respondents were high school students at the time they joined the front and 25 % ( 5) respondents were from peasant families and were illiterate. Another 20 % ( 4) of the respondents joined during elementary school; the other 10 % ( 2) were junior secondary school students, and one respondent (5%) was a university student. As one can see from the results the number of women high school students and women who came from peasant backgrounds account for the largest groups of respondents.

The results of this study also indicate that all of the women improved their educational status when compared to the level of education attained at the time of joining the front. The number of respondents who are BA degree holders in this study include 35%(7) and 30%(6) of are diploma holders. The number who attained some high school education include 25%(5) whereas 10%(2) of them became MA degree holders. In order to improve the educational status of the combatants, schools were established in the front contributed to address illiteracy. According to Assfaw (2009) the first school for women combatants was established in 1983 and named as 'Martha school' based on the first woman combatant Martha Kahsu. The objective of the school was to teach women combatants to read and write. These classes were in addition to their political education classes. Slightly over half 55%(11) of the women also noted informal educational experiences they gained during the war and these experiences included gender awareness, physical endurance, persistence, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, discipline, integrity and self-confidence.

Related to the educational status of the respondents at the time of entrance to the front was the age in which they joined the front. The average age of respondents at the time they joined the struggle was 15.50 years: the youngest age reported was 11 and the oldest age reported was 20. In this study, only one respondent (5%) mentioned that she joined the front in order to escape an early marriage. However, national and political factors were the reasons why 40% (8) of the respondents joined, and these respondents were

often older when they joined. The majority, 55% (11) of the women in the study were very young when they joined and mentioned how they were attracted to the military lifestyle of the TPLF fighters--the sentimental songs, cultural shows, and the discipline the fighters demonstrated when interacting with civilians.

As previous literatures have indicated (e.g., Tsegaye, 2002 and Assfaw, 2009), women members of the TPLF joined the armed struggle from all over the region of Tigray, and the current sample reflects this pattern to some degree. The majority of the women in this particular study 95 % ( 19) came from the western and central parts of the region, areas that are densely populated compared to the eastern part, according to Tsegaye (2002). Adwa was the most common city with 35% (7) of the respondents joining the armed struggle from there. The second city from which 20% (4) of the respondents came was Shire. From the province Haferom, four (20%) women joined. One woman came from the capital city of the region, Mekele, and one woman each came from Axum, Michew, and Atsibi Wegmberta. Also, one respondent came from Wagehmra Sekota which is found in the Amhara region.

The regions and places from which the respondents came also determine their first language such that, 90% (18) of them said their first language is Tigrinya. Among the remaining 10% (2), one spoke both Amharic and Tigrinya and the other one mentioned Amharic as her first language.

According to Tsegaye (2002) the overwhelming majority of the Tigrayans are adherents of Orthodox Christianity although there are a few followers of Islam and Catholicism. Likewise all (20) of the respondents for this study were adherents of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

Regarding occupational status, all 20 respondents were currently working. Six (30%) of the women were co-owners of small vegetable shops, three (15%) are district representatives for Parliament, two (10%) are administrators (one for the Ministry of Defence and the other for Ethiopian Telecommunications), two (10%) are nurses, and

two (10%) have their own businesses. One works for an oppositional political party, one is a judge at the governmental level, one works for a nongovernmental organization, one is an accountant, and one works in community relations for a municipal organization.

## **5. The Roles of Study Participants in the TPLF**

One of the objectives of the study was to explore the roles women played in the TPLF. The following section describes specific roles participants in the study played before and during the war.

### **5.1 Before Becoming a TPLF Soldier**

When asked about the role they played before they went to the field as TPLF soldiers, among the 20 respondents, 30% (6) mentioned that they participated in intelligence and espionage activities in different networks that were established in the urban areas by the TPLF ( Respondents: Tsege, Workeneshe, Zewdu, Roman A., Roman H.,and Himanot). Through those networks they prepared and distributed pamphlets that informed the public about the aims and objectives of the front and other political information regarding the struggle. These mobilizing efforts educated the public about the front and encouraged the public to be supportive of TPLF efforts. According to Himanot, women mobilizes also used diverse approaches to create a mutual trust and sympathy among the public and the front. Such approaches included assisting women and mothers with their household chores including food preparation like kneading, grinding, milking and other routine activities. Roman H also describes a common activity of mobilizers:

*I used to collect the pamphlets to be distributed from other city members of the front and distribute it for people who go to the churches in early the morning. Others also distributed those pamphlets in the market places and other populated areas.*

Except for Roman H., the other five also collected meager resources in order to strengthen the financial capacity of the front. Respondent, Roman A., used to assist the

front through providing financial resources from the benefits of the family business. However, most of the women raised funds for the TPLF through selling different hand made materials including slogans and flags of the TPLF.

Another 6 women were from peasant families and engaged in farming and other rural work (Hiwot, Megebay, Lemlem, Abdet, Askale, and Negeste H.). The remaining 8 were students at different levels in their education (Yewbmar, Yalem, Negeste G., Letay, Zemzem, Meberet, and two women who wish to remain anonymous).

## **5.2. Activities as a TPLF Soldier**

When asked about the roles they played during their time in the field as TPLF soldiers, in addition to their political, intelligence and mobilization activities, 17 of the 20 women were primarily involved in the direct military activities. Regardless as to whether one's primary assignment was combat or noncombat-related, the TPLF provided military and political trainings to all members, and all 20 of the respondents confirmed that they had received these trainings. The trainings strengthened the political and military capacity of the women to become effective and efficient in their performance physically as well as psychologically.

Only 3 (20%) respondents weren't primarily involved in direct military activities after basic training (Yewbmar, Roman A., and Himanot). Yewbmar wrote different secret documents for the front as well as magazine and newspaper articles for the public and for TPLF internal publications. She also was one of the leaders of the Women's Fighter's Association during the war. Roman was an administrator in the TPLF schools, and Himanot continued to work as a mobilizer in urban areas.

According to Assfaw (2009) the major reason the large number of women wanted to be involved in direct military activities was related to their admiration of the military as a career. Also, to fight against the Derg directly was perceived as a highly honorable task. Tsegaye (1999) also noted in his study that the involvement of women in combat and

direct military activities demonstrated their efficiency and equality with men in the TPLF. For instance Roman H. said:

*During the first time women joined the armed struggle most of them want to show their capacity, efficiency and equality with men by holding heavy load armaments like Bren than that of lighter firearms such as Kalashnikov.*

The strong competitive spirit, courage and military prowess the women developed were clearly noted among the respondents and 25% (5) in this study were distinguished women guerrilla war commanders (Yalem, Negesti H., Letay, Negesti K., and Askale).

Although 17 of the 20 women were primarily involved with military activities, five had additional duties given their educational status and training received before joining the front. Of the five, three were responsible for teaching in the schools established by the TPLF (Yalem, Negesti K., and Worknesh). Two others, Mebrat and Zemzem, assisted with health services. Later, Tsege became active in the 'Voice of Woyane Tigray' radio station.

Generally, when asked about the roles the women carried out in the TPLF, the overall finding of this study was that the respondents were active in all activities of the front without hesitation. Most importantly, all respondents in the present study felt as strongly as one participant, Negesti, K. stated, "*Neither TPLF [nor EPRDF] could attain the level it has today without the support, active participation, and commitment of Ethiopian women in general, and Tigrayan women in particular.*"

## 6. Perceptions, Challenges, and Political Positions

In addition to the roles that women played, the following questions were also posed as part of the study's objectives:

- Do women ex-combatants believe they get the same respect that male ex-combatants receive? If not, why do they believe this difference exists?
- What challenges, if any, did women members of TPLF encounter before and during the struggle, and what challenges do they currently face?
- What political positions are given to women ex-combatants in the current governmental structure, and what reasons do former combatants give regarding why more women ex-combatants are not present?

### 6.1 Perceptions of equality with men

#### 6.1.1. Perceptions during the War

When asking respondents about their perceptions regarding gender equality and whether they felt they gained respect, one must remember that the roles that TPLF women carried out in the military were assumed to be roles that only men were capable of doing. Therefore, when people in the rural areas saw women TPLF soldiers, they often assumed that they were men. Three respondents mentioned experiences they had with rural women where they had to prove they were women by showing the women their breasts (Letay, Lemlem, and Hiwot). Occasionally, women in the towns would express their sympathy for the living conditions of the women combatants and would encourage them to leave the military. Letay shared an interesting story:

*My nick name is 'Oromo' and my friends in the armed struggle gave me this name following one incidence. Once I was doing military visits to a place where Oromo people were living and I met a woman there. I introduced myself to her and told her that I am a combatant of the TPLF. She felt so sorry for me, and she couldn't believe that I had become a combatant willingly. So she tried to convince me to leave the struggle and get married to her son. She further provided me traditional bride clothes to persuade me to stay with her.*



Over time, the women combatants were successful in gaining acceptance by the public that they could be women and combatants, simultaneously.

Within the field, TPLF women also witnessed and learned new kinds of gender relations from the way they had been socialized. Men and women combatants had to walk, fight, eat and sleep together. The daily life of the soldier required new roles and new skills that one had to learn irrespective of gender. Eighty percent (16) of the respondents felt that gender relations during the war among TPLF soldiers was almost equal, and sometimes women would get better treatment and respect compared to men. All of the women mentioned they were allowed extra underwear and trousers as well as homemade sanitary pads and soap. Moreover, women were expected to withdraw from actual war activities during their monthly periods in order to decrease any physical hardship at that time. However, according to Hiwot and Meberat, many women refused to tell their commanding officers when they had their periods because they wanted to fight. .

The other 20% (4) respondents mentioned how TPLF men still held certain stereotypes about women and these stereotypes would be reflected directly and indirectly. For example, men used to make jokes about women's capabilities in the field regarding women's upper body strength and others issues that involved physical endurance. One respondent recalled that before the permission of marriage and sexual relations within the front, men used to assume that women were trying to be seductive and were distracting in ways that could harm men's success in preparing for battle. Also, the same respondent recalled how sometimes a few men would refuse to be assigned under a woman commander (Respondent: Negesti K.). Negesti describes one incident:

*I was a war commander during the armed struggle. One time a newly joined man was assigned under my leadership as an ordinary soldier. But he was not happy to work in the military under a woman leader, and he once said "Is there no one better than a woman to take the level of war commander in the front?" I was very angry with his chauvinist belief and I assigned him to the back line.*

Generally, respondents articulated that gender relations within the TPLF were a new phenomenon not only for TPLF members, but also the people in the rural areas because the roles of TPLF women went beyond the domestic, private and traditional role of women. Respondents also noted that achieving gender equity within the TPLF was an ongoing process whereas some men and women adapted more easily than others.

### **6.1.2. Perceptions After the War**

When respondents were asked about their experience of gender issues after the war and whether they felt they have been treated fairly, a dramatic shift was noted in their perceptions. Among the 20 respondents 75% (15) of them said they don't believe women ex-combatants have been treated fairly by the government. The remaining 25% (5) all worked for the government and mentioned how they fought in the struggle for the people and did not expect special treatment (Yalem, Workenesh, Roman A., and two who wanted to remain anonymous).

Most of the respondents explained how gender played a role in the demobilization process. The responses of six demobilized ex-combatants in particular suggested the criteria for the demobilization was related to physical fitness and level of education (Abdet, Lemlem, Megebay, Negesti H., Asakale, and Hiwot). These criteria led to the demobilization of many women because most of the women in the TPLF toward the end of the war were from peasant families and had received very little education. Physical fitness as a criterion also disproportionately affected women.

Currently most demobilized ex-combatants live in different corners of the country and work in diverse low profit activities that are not connected to the skills they received training for in the armed struggle. But according to respondents like Negesti H., those women deserve a better life—politically, educationally and economically—as a reward for their contributions to the success of the struggle.

*“Most of the demobilized women used to be heroines during the armed struggle and we used to get honor and respect for our contribution from all the members of the front. This made us want to stay in the military rather...but now we are only all left with scars and pains that we got during the war, but nothing that is useful for our present life... there are women that are found in a worse situation than us. There are women who have become prostitutes and beggars after demobilization. We don't deserve the situation we are presently found in.”*

The other concern expressed by respondents, 60 %(12), was the absence of women in the written history of the TPLF. The history of the role of women combatants has been downplayed and in some cases overlooked and ignored. Negsti K. shared that, some people have created imaginary stories about courageous women combatants that are grossly inaccurate and that detract from the true historical record regarding their contributions and abilities as women. Most of the respondents mentioned how grateful they were that the present study was being conducted because it documented their history in ways that reveal the complexities of their lives without overstating or understating their roles.

## 6.2 Challenges Faced

This section addressed the the question "what challenges, if any, did women members of TPLF encounter before and during the struggle, and what challenges do they currently face?"

### 6.2.1 Before and During the War

Before the beginning of the struggle in the region of Tigray, women shared all the social, political and economic challenges and problems with Ethiopian people in general and women in particular. Although women were highly vulnerable to inhumane actions of the Derg regime, only one woman, Askale, directly experienced Derg repression:

*My parents were supporters of the TPLF and the Derg officials get information about them and come to our living area to arrest my parents. However my parents get information about the situation and left the village before the arrival of the Derg soldiers. And the soldiers couldn't able to get my parents, so they arrested me in return. At the time I was only 11 years old. I stayed in the prison for seven days as collateral for my parents*

The rest of the respondents talked about other people they knew whose stories affected them. Otherwise, the challenge most respondents felt were largely political and economic due to Derg repression in general.

During the struggle, however, all respondents mentioned that women combatants were fighting and struggling not only with the Derg soldiers but also with hunger, thirst and all of the other difficulties and unfavorable conditions that most soldiers face. Hiwot provided a vivid example:

*There were times during the armed struggle we faced shortage of water in the middle of heavy war time and many members of the front were forced to drink their own or other person's urine.*

Negesti K. also said,

*At the early age of the front, different facilities were not available such as anesthesia for surgery and antibiotics to treat wounded parts of our body. Once I was wounded and suffered too much because my wound was infected and I couldn't get any medication.*

The other challenge mentioned by three (15%) respondents involved childbirth and childcare issues while also dealing with the responsibilities of being a soldier (Worknesh, Zemzem, and Roman A.). Worknesh explains:

*When women gave birth within the armed struggle all the traditional treatments that civilian women get were unthinkable, yet women were expected to return to their responsibilities shortly after giving birth and it was very difficult to handle both of the responsibilities.*

Although women fought along side men, the challenges and vulnerabilities that women faced as combatants were complex and sometimes specific to their gender. Nonetheless, the fact that most of the challenges that women faced were also faced by men demonstrates the overall difficulties and vulnerabilities guerrilla soldiers face in any armed struggle.

### **6.2.2 After the War**

After the end of the armed struggle the challenges and vulnerabilities of women ex-combatants continued. Kees Kingma (2007) defined demobilization and reintegration as a complex process in which basically each of the combatants has to find a new civilian life and re-establish roots in society. Most of the challenges women ex-combatants faced after the war can be tied to the lack of planned reintegration strategies. This left all ex-

combatants vulnerable, particularly the women. However, some women were more vulnerable than others.

Among the 20 respondents 70% (14) of them admitted that they have encountered a number of challenges after the war. However, 30%(6) respondents said they didn't face any challenges following the end of the war (Yalem, Roman A., Negisti K., Zewdu, and two women who wished to remain anonymous).

Regarding the 14 who mentioned challenges, six respondents continue to face economic challenges that they believe is related to their being demobilized from the military without a steady source of income (Askale, Lemlem, Abdit, Megebay, Hiwot, and Negisti H.). Currently, the income from their present occupations is insufficient to sustain them and their families. In addition, two of the women are widows with children (Askale and Lemlem).

The other four respondents said they faced economic problems initially when the new government assigned them to different governmental offices without a salary and only provided moderate food expenses. But the challenge was temporary because they were eventually assigned to other organizations based on their education and skills (Tsege, Himanot, Roman H., and Zewdu).

The remaining four mentioned ongoing economic problems because they did not learn any skills during the armed struggle that were transferrable to civilian life. All of the respondents who are still suffering with economic problems, 50%(10), cite the lack of education and skills as their primary problem.

In addition to economic challenges, the same six women who mentioned economic challenges regarding the demobilization process also reported facing psychological challenges (Askale, Lemlem, Abdit, Megebay, Hiwot, and Negisti H.). Specifically, they described how they left their families at an early age and spent most of their formative years with the TPLF during the armed struggle. Therefore, after demobilization, it was a

bitter experience to detach from the organization that had become their family during the war and to return to civilian life after being estranged from their biological families for several years.

All 14 respondents reported that the psychological challenges were not only related to detachment from the front and being demobilized, but were related to the loss of friends, partners and family members during the armed struggle. It was also difficult watching handicapped ex-combatants struggle to survive after sustaining major injuries.

Half of the 14 respondents who faced challenges also reported social or interpersonal challenges after the war. These difficulties centered around communicating with civilians after years of living in a militarized environment. One respondent explained how adjusting to the different expectations, particularly traditional cultural norms that were not practiced by the military was very difficult (e.g., funeral rituals). Also, ex-combatants who returned to an urban environment after living in rural settings found the social adjustments awkward. One other respondent shared how some of her teachers at the school she attended incorrectly assumed that she was spying on them.

The other challenge mentioned by three respondents involved health-related problems, mainly physical, and particularly back pain. All three described back-related injuries and one described gynecological problems.

Although the results of civil war meant a military victory for the TPLF, war has economic, psychological, social, and physical costs. However, those costs are not shared by men and women equally. All respondents were aware of this gendered reality.

### 6.3 Political Positions

In the highest structure of the TPLF which is the Central Committee there was only one woman from the beginning of women's involvement to the end of the armed struggle. According to all the respondents and secondary scholarly sources, Aregash Adane was the only women member of the Central Committee at the time (Hammond, 1990; Assfaw, 2009; Tsegey, 1999).

Respondents also verified that the highest officials of the TPLF (all male with the exception of Aregash Adane) were against women being members of the Central Committee and at least three respondents mentioned that the omission of women combatants from influential and higher political positions continues to the present day. According to one respondent, Yewbmar,

*Women were systematically withdrawn from the positions at different times, the reasons presented for the disqualification of women in the selection process was "inefficiency" for administrative posts as described in different seminars held to elect members of the Central Committee.*

The Central Committee of the TPLF includes very few numbers of women (9 out of 43) and women ex-combatants are not proportionately visible in the highest executive positions (e.g., Ministers).

Only one respondent is a member and high official in the EPRDF. Ten others continue as active members to TPLF. The remaining nine no longer have ties to the TPLF for different reasons. One respondent resigned from the TPLF because she is a judge, and she is expected to be free from any political party membership. One high official within the TPLF left for personal reasons she preferred not to disclose and another high official left to become a member of an opposition party. The others are involved in work-related activities and do not have the time or money to maintain official TPLF membership. These numbers reflect a negligible presence of TPLF women in political positions and support their claim that a dramatic shift occurred regarding gender equity and respect as equal to men after the war.

## **7. Conclusion**

As one respondent noted, “Neither TPLF [nor EPRDF] could attain the level it has today without the support, active participation, and the commitment of Ethiopian women in general, and Tigrayan women in particular.” The present study confirmed this statement and the fact that all 20 respondents were active in several activities of the front without hesitation.

Before the beginning of the struggle in the region of Tigray, most respondents stated that they experienced all of the social, political and economic challenges and problems that most Ethiopian people experienced, particularly Ethiopian women. Although some of the respondents were involved in mobilization and intelligence activities before joining TPLF, most respondents were either students (at elementary, secondary, and university levels) or rural labourers.

After joining TPLF, most respondents were primarily involved in direct military activities. However, those with a relatively high educational background were also assigned to teach in TPLF schools, perform health care services, and serve in journalistic capacities. The involvement of women in combat and direct military activities most clearly demonstrated their efficiency and equality with men. In fact, five respondents were military commanders demonstrating not only their military prowess and courage, but the relative openness of TPLF to female leadership. Most of the respondents felt that gender relations among TPLF soldiers during the war was almost equal noting that the idea of gender equity within the TPLF was a new phenomenon not only for TPLF members, but also the people in the rural areas. The roles of TPLF women went beyond the domestic, private and traditional role of women and the adjustment to women and men to such roles was an ongoing process. However, after the war, most respondents noted a dramatic shift in the way TPLF women were treated. As a result, most

respondents currently believe that women ex-combatants are not treated fairly by the government.

Although a few women mentioned how they fought in the struggle for the people and do not expect special treatment, most respondents expressed concerns about the absence of women in the written history of the TPLF, the fact the most women were demobilized due to unfair criteria that emphasized educational level and physical fitness, and the lack of TPLF women in political positions.

Most of the challenges women ex-combatants currently face can be tied to the lack of planned reintegration strategies. This left all ex-combatants vulnerable, particularly the women. However, some women were more vulnerable than others. Most respondents experienced problems that were economic, psychological, social/interpersonal, and health related after the war. Most of the economic problems were due to the lack of educational and occupational skills that were transferrable to civilian life.

Although the results of civil war meant a military victory for the TPLF, the war had economic, psychological, social, and physical costs and TPLF women made many sacrifices and deserve to reap some of the fruits and benefits. However, the Central Committee of the TPLF includes very few numbers of women (9 out of 43) and women ex-combatants are not proportionately visible in the highest executive positions (e.g., Ministers). Only one respondent is a member and high official in the EPRDF and two others are members of parliament. These numbers reflect a negligible presence of TPLF women in political positions and support their claim that a dramatic shift occurred regarding gender equity and respect as equal to men after the war.

Interestingly, regarding the educational status of respondents before and after the armed struggle, TPLF women, on the average, were able to increase their level of education. The most visible changes were evidenced by women who joined the TPLF from peasant backgrounds. They gained literacy despite the fact that they did not gain additional vocational skills to help them after the war. Moreover, the findings make clear that the

women ex-combatants who are presently found in better educational, economic and political positions are those elite women who joined the TPLF with advanced educational levels who were predominantly from the urban areas. In fact, these same women often reported that they did not experience any challenges after the war and do not believe they deserve special treatment. Their class status affects their perceptions of inequality given the advantages they experienced before, during, and after the war. Nonetheless, most of the women reported how they benefited from their experiences during the war, regardless of class background, and highlighted informal skills that they have transferred to civilian life such as problem-solving skills, overall persistence, self-discipline, and self-confidence.

TPLF women deserve to share social, economic, and political benefits as well as honor and respect from the government and the people of Ethiopia given their sacrifices and contributions to the military victory that ended the dictatorship of the Derg. This study reflects what both Tsegey (1999) and Assfaw (2009) found and that is that the social, economic, and political benefits of success from the struggle are not shared by men and women members of the struggle equally. Although women fought along side men, the challenges and vulnerabilities that women faced as combatants were complex and often specific to their gender. One can share the view of Tsegaye (1999) who eloquently stated that there is no doubt that TPLF “women wrote history with their blood!”

## **8. Recommendations**

Armed conflict can be a profoundly unnatural experience for soldiers because in addition to placing their lives on the line, soldiers often endure physical and mental illnesses directly related to their military service after the war. (Levy & Sidel, 2009; Pearrow & Cosgrove, 2009; Pizarro, Silver & Prause, 2006; Sher, 2009). As a result, many countries openly support war veterans through government programs and view war veterans as a special population deserving preferential treatment due to the unique sacrifices they made.

Historians, political scientists, and sociologists have critically examined various justifications for war veterans' benefits (e.g., veterans' pensions, health insurance, housing and land allocation, and preferential treatment in employment and education programs) given the fact that many nonveterans experience the same or similar needs as veterans (see Altschuler & Blumin, 2009; Levitan, 1973; Mettler, 2007; Rohrlich, 1957). War veterans are often deemed the most worthy of such preferential treatment because unlike those who stayed behind and did not live in the military camps, the war veteran (1) placed his or her life on the line where substantial hazards to life and limb existed daily (2) endured environmental conditions that undermined his or her health that increased the chances of active war disabilities as well as post-war infirmities and premature aging (e.g., hunger and related nutritional deficiencies, intestinal disorders, exposure to contagious disease due to unsanitary living conditions in the camps, limited transportation, and limited medical care), (3) sacrificed the customary comforts and pleasures associated with civilian life that even civilian war supporters working underground do not have to sacrifice, (4) placed on hold personal aspirations regarding family, career, and other forms of enjoyment to assist the nation in its time of need, (5) placed their families at risk and often negatively affected the development of their children during their absence, and (5) experienced no material gain from the war, (the exception being a few soldiers who became high officials thereby benefitting materially from "political currency" after the war.

In Ethiopia, others, besides TPLF soldiers, made sacrifices and contributed in ways that resulted in the fall of the Derg. However, the conditions under which others were permitted to make their contributions were usually less onerous and less disruptive of their accustomed way of life than the conditions TPLF soldiers experienced. Soldiers experience a series of handicaps due to their armed service that must be recognized, and women soldiers frequently experience these handicaps disproportionately. War veterans' sacrifices result in an unpaid national debt that must be acknowledged and addressed given how the nation as a whole currently benefits from the peace, stability and economic growth that is a result of such sacrifices.

The following possible solutions are forwarded based on the findings to help war veterans in general, and TPLF women war veterans in particular, overcome the various social, psychological, and economic handicaps some continue to experience as a direct or indirect result of their war service.

- The government and other nongovernmental organizations might consider collaborating with demobilized women ex-combatants in order to develop projects that would ameliorate their economic situation, specifically focusing on ways to improve the educational and occupational skills of women ex-combatants.
- Demobilized women ex-combatants should be provided with free health services to decrease their expenses for health services given sacrifices during the war that resulted in chronic health problems.
- Scholars should be encouraged to continue documenting the civil war from various disciplines and perspectives, with special emphases on the women combatants and the gendered aspects of war and post-war issues.
- Women ex-combatants should document their stories in order to increase the number of publications regarding their roles before, during and after the armed struggle and in order to compare their experiences with the experiences of other women ex-combatants throughout Africa.

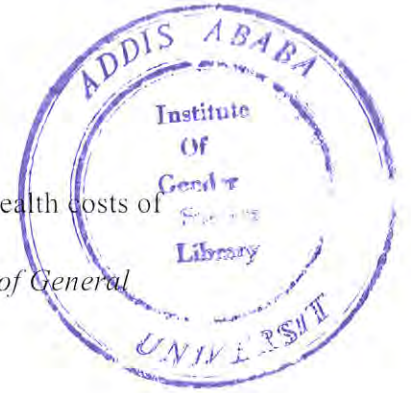
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## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this is my original work and not been presented for a degree in any other university. All references used for this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

Name: Beza Negewo Oda

Signature: Beza

Date: 21 May 2010

Confirmed by the advisor

Name: Dr. Aaronette M. White

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Annex I. list of the respondent

No	Name of the respondents	Remarks
1.	Roman	Working her private business
2.	Mebrat	Nursing student
3..	Werkenesh	Member of the house of peoples representatives
4.	Roman	Working in the Mega Anfi theater
5.	Negesti	Working in her private business
6.	Hpr	Member of the house of peoples representatives
7.	Yealem	Head of Ethiopian Telecommunication women's affairs office.
8.	Hiwot	Demobilized ex-combatant
9.	Haimanot	Working as accountant
10.	Tsege	Lawyer in the Ldeta higher court
11.	Zemzem	Nurse in the Defense force Hospital
12.	Letay	Working in the Defense force
13.	Zewdu	Working at EROFT
14.	Lemelem	Demobilized ex-combatant
15.	Abadit	Demobilized ex-combatant
16.	Negesti	Demobilized ex-combatant
17.	Megebey	Demobilized ex-combatant

18	Hpr	Member of the house of peoples representatives
19.	Yewbmar	Member to the opposition party called Medrek
20.	Askale	Demobilized ex-combatant

## Annex II Interview questions

### Interview questions for ex combatants of TPLF

I would like to extend my best greeting for your cooperation and have an interview with me. I would like to ask you some questions about TPLF women and their roles before, during and after the struggle.

The purpose of the study is to collect data for academic purposes and to assess what are the needs of women ex-combatants and what can we learn from you and your experiences.

The interview is completely voluntary. If you come across any question that you don't want to answer, tell me to pass it.

I hope that you will participate in the study because your views are important.

Since it is difficult to write down all the answers you give, I would like to record the interview using tape recorder.

Do you agree to be tape-recorded? A. yes B. No

If the answer is "yes" **"thank you very much in advance for your cooperation!"**

1. Case ID \_\_\_\_\_
2. Date of interview \_\_\_\_\_
3. Birth date \_\_\_\_\_ Age at the time of interview \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your first language(specify) \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are you married? Yes No  
(Read all choices and circle)  
Married and living with husband now (1)  
Never married (2)  
Separated due to the war (3)

Divorced/ separated not because of the war (4)

Did your husband die because of the war? (5)

Did your husband die not because of the war? (6)

6. What is your religion? (*Circle*)

Muslim (1)

Ethiopian Orthodox Christian (2)

Protestant (3)

Other (*specify*) (4) \_\_\_\_\_

7. What level did you complete in school before joining the army?

8. What level have you attained since the end of the war? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Where were you born( be sure to get correct spellings)

Province \_\_\_\_\_

District \_\_\_\_\_

Town or village \_\_\_\_\_

10. Which front were you with? (*Circle*)

*Specify* \_\_\_\_\_

11. When did you enter the front and at what age? \_\_\_\_\_ Date

12. How were you able to join the army and make contact with army personnel?

13. Why did you join the front?

14. How did you enter the front?(*Circle*)

Joined (1)

Recruited (2)

Abducted (3)

Other (*Specify*) (4)

15. What were you doing before you joined the front?

16. What did your relatives say when you decided to join the front?

17. Was anyone else in your family in the front with you?

18. What was your PRIMARY role in the front?(*Circle ONE*)

Fighter (1) Specify role \_\_\_\_\_

- Porter (2)
- Cook (3)
- Communications (4)
- Childcare provider (5)
- Health care provider (6)
- Wife (7)
- Teacher (8)
- Messenger (9)
- Food producer (10)
- Spy (11)
- Intelligence (12)
- Mine labour (13)
- Other (14) Specify role \_\_\_\_\_

19. What other role or roles did you perform(*Circle ALL that apply*)

- Fighter (1)
- Porter (2)
- Cook (3)
- Communications (4)
- Childcare provider (5)
- Health care provider (6)
- Wife (7)
- Teacher (8)
- Messenger (9)
- Food producer (10)
- Spy (11)
- Intelligence (12)
- Mine labour (13)
- Other (14) Specify role \_\_\_\_\_

20. Did you voluntarily accept the role given to you?

21. What were the major activities of women in the front?

22. Were there women members in the highest administrative organs of the front? If so, what were their responsibilities?
23. If you participated as a fighter, did you ever fight against any women in the Derg force? Yes NO  
If yes, where and when did you fight against them?
24. What training did you receive in the forces?(*specify*).
25. Did you train with women only or with women and men? [NEW QUESTION]
26. Were any special accommodations provided for women such as pads during monthly cycle or childcare? .
27. Did you learn skills in the front that you think could be helpful to you now?(*specify*)
28. Were other people in your forces ever forced to punish or hurt you? Yes | No  
(*Note form of abuse if offered by subject*)
29. Did you encounter any problems with men during your stay in the front?
30. Do you have children? Yes or No
31. If yes, How many children do you have? Were your children with you during the struggle?
32. Did you ever become pregnant during your time in the front?
33. When did you leave the front? \_\_\_\_\_ Date
34. How did you leave? (*Circle*)  
Escaped (1)  
Released/let go (2)  
Left behind (3)  
War ended (4)  
Other (5) (*specify*) \_\_\_\_\_
35. Did you participate in an official Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration program? Why or why not?
36. What were the challenges that you encountered after the end of the struggle?
37. Did you have any plans after the war in terms of what you wanted to do? If so, what were those plans?
38. What is your status in relation to party now?

39. How were you treated after your return by family, friends, and strangers?
40. Do you think women contributed to the success of the struggle? In what ways?
41. Do you believe that women ex-combatants have been treated fairly by the government? Why, or why not?
42. What, if anything, do you think you learned from your experience of war? Positive or negative or both?

