

## **ERITREAN WOMEN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND JUSTICE**

**Dr. Tesfa G. Gebremedhin**

March 8 is *International Women's Day*. We all men and women have the moral obligation and humane responsibility to observe, celebrate and cherish this important day. On this day, we show great respect, dignity and serenity in honor of our daughters, sisters and mothers who have fallen and disabled for national independence, gender equality and social justice. It is evident that Eritrean women have made an extraordinary sacrifices and contributions to the struggle for the independence of Eritrea. They threw away their veils and skirts to carry guns and grenades to fight the national colonial enemy. After national independence, contemporary Eritrean women replaced their aprons with overalls, their wooden spoons with spades, their forks with wrenches, their kitchen knife with garden hoe, their head scarfs with hard hats, and their kitchens with offices to work in typically male-dominated occupations. Eritrean women, through their consolidated efforts, played a powerful role in advocating for full equality with men and ensuring gender-sensitive perspectives and attitudes in the Eritrean society. Despite the joyful celebration and jubilation of the national independence and the fundamental change of the legal framework for gender equality, the ugly and painful traditional stereotypical attitude of men against women still prevail in most Eritrean households. In this contemporary era, it is alarming to observe that the lingering adverse effects of male domination is vividly manifested into rising divorce rate and single parenthood. This has resulted in many innocent children growing up in dysfunctional and broken households without the presence, support and protection of their biological fathers. In fact, marriage has almost become obsolete among many young Eritrean women. When they observe their mothers living under the oppression of their own fathers, they have no desire to get married at all. Though God has given women so much power to influence, sharp and clear minds to think wisely, proper character to speak calmly, unique and appropriate skill to do the right things carefully, and the ability to behave with respect and kindness, it is a pity that human nature has unwisely and unfairly given them so much trouble and so little support in their effort to establish a solid foundation for healthy relationship between men and women.

Once upon a time an interesting story was told in a church by Joel Osteen, a famous pastor of the new generation. The story is very much relevant to the gender issue debated among Eritreans in Diasporas. It is about a little dog that had been kept on a twenty-foot leash tied to a tree near his home for many years. The owner came out to feed him and played with him occasionally but did not unleash the dog. The dog remained on the leash all the time. Whenever the other dogs were playing in the field, he would run right out to the end of his leash, knowing exactly how far he could go. He wanted to chase the other dogs and go play with them, but he knew the extent of his limited mobility. If he went too far, the leash jerked him back into place. One day, the owner felt sorry for the dog, so he decided to let him off that leash. Instead of removing both the leash and collar, however, the owner simply unfastened the leash from the dog's collar. The collar remained intact around the dog's neck, but it was not buckled to the leash anymore. The owner thought for sure the dog would take off running, happy and free. Another dog came along, and sure enough, his dog got up and took off running as expected. But much to the owner's surprise, when his dog got to where the leash would have ended, he stopped right where he always did. A few minutes later, a naughty cat came strutting by. This cat had tormented and annoyed the dog for many years. The fact is that over the years the cat knew where to walk. She learned long ago that she could annoy the

dog by walking just a couple of feet outside the reach of the leash. Again, the dog took off running and stopped right where he normally did when he had the leash. The dog was free. All he had to do was to go one step further than he was used to do and he could have walked right out of it, but he did not do it. Since his owner left the collar around his neck, the dog felt that the collar was still buckled to the leash and subsequently limit the extent of his mobility. He did not feel that he was free at last. What important lesson do we learn from this interesting story?

The story reflects how many Eritrean women still live in unpleasant relations with their male oppressors, who seemingly left the collar around their necks. Obviously, the war for independence has loosened the evil chains of dominance over women forged by men. However, the hateful stereotypes, nasty attitudes and discriminatory practices of men against women are still displayed and featured in our households. Women are not completely free because men are not yet liberal enough to understand the gender issues. Gender inequalities between men and women still have a negative effect upon many Eritrean households. Our women are still paid less than their male counterparts (not more than \$0.85 to \$1.00) while overloaded with all types of responsibilities. They still work 14 to 16 hours per day to take care of their children and manage the household affairs without much if any assistants from their husbands. Unlike men, women must make greater efforts to gain acceptance both at home and in workplace. Traditions in our society still create an artificial separation between men and women. Cultural stereotypes against women are lock-stitched into the social fabric and character of Eritrean men. Most of us, the male population that is, go through life comfortably, without being conscious of the many ways in which men are automatically privileged by the legacy of our male-dominated cultural norms and social practices. This privilege makes men unwitting beneficiaries of exploitative and repressive male roles. In fact, many men seldom think about gender inequality and social injustice while, so few women pass a single day without being reminded of or affected by this social evil. It is that men, in general, seem to employ their reason to justify their superior attitudes rather than to root them out completely. There is nothing inherently wrong with being unaware of gender issues. However, when strings of character and resistance to change are attached to gender, and when ability is measured by gender, when privilege is tied to gender, and when success and failure in our society are dependent upon gender, it becomes a denigrating factor that creates two separate and unequal worlds for men and women. The male population that has oppressed the female population cannot understand the deep frustrations and exasperation of women that have been oppressed throughout their lives. The constant indignities and outright discrimination and humiliation in all their ugly forms that women must face throughout life cannot be understood by men who have not lived through it and who have deliberately staged and cherished male domination. It is about time, in fact long overdue, that the male population should be liberated from their horrible and dishonorable attitude towards women.

Traditionally, Eritrean women grew up to be highly dependent on Eritrean men in all aspects of life. Even though Eritrean women had the potential to develop their skills and capabilities, all the necessary opportunities for social progress and development available to the Eritrean men were not accessible to the Eritrean women. For example, school was considered not good for girls, but arranged marriage at an early age was considered good for girls. Eritrean women were taught from childhood to be loyal and obedient to their husbands and parents; to be kind and compassionate to their children and siblings; to be humble and gentle to their relatives and friends; and to be patient and tolerant under any adverse and hostile circumstances. Eritrean women have been expected to live with men for their entire lives with patience, endurance and have the ability to tolerate the undesirable behavioral

traits of men. Eritrean women are capable to survive without the presence of men in their lives. They have been able to raise their children by themselves with great determination and full confidence, whenever they get divorced or lose their husbands. Eritrean men would not be able to survive in similar situations. The fact of the matter is that the survival and sustenance of every Eritrean household are attributed to the responsible efforts and concerned support of the Eritrean women. It is evident that on the right side of every successful Eritrean man stands firmly a smart Eritrean woman to encourage and support the man to be successful, to be the pride of his family and the role model of his children, and to make him look great in front of his friends and relatives. Eritrean women are usually proactive and well organized, in handling social affairs and solving critical household problems with care and affection. Eritrean women are the real architects of our Eritrean society in taking care of the Eritrean men, building decent Eritrean families, and raising Eritrean children in peaceful homes. Even though women are consistently undermined, underestimated, and degraded by men, women have never shown resentment, bitterness, or hostility against the irrational and ignorant attitude and discriminatory practices of men. Instead women have always shown love, affection, compassion, patience, tolerance, and friendship to all of us. Men need to ask forgiveness from God and women for their inhumane social practices against women. The fact is that *“A woman neither take what is another's, nor should be deprived of what is her own.”*

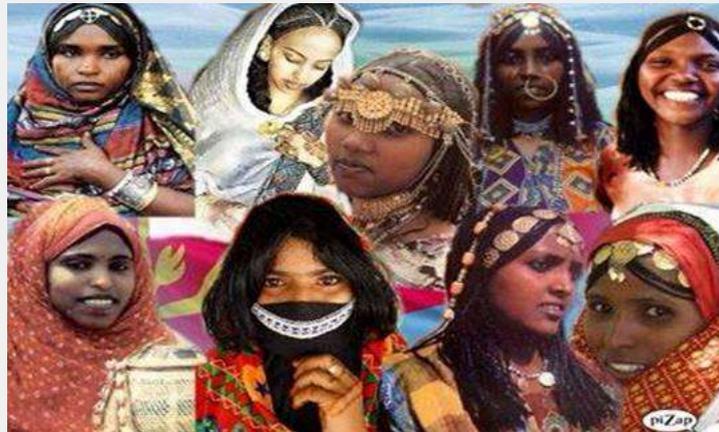
With keen observation, we see those countries characterized by economic disaster, social injustice, political corruption, and human rights violations are typically countries which have been led by ruthless and notorious men leaders. On the other hand, if we observe countries which are led by women, they are usually characterized by economic progress, social justice and political stability. The most merciless leaders and dictators, narcissists who are ousted from their political leadership by people's revolt are usually men, not women. It is hard to find in political history female leaders removed from their political posts by people's uprising. It is unfortunate to observe that our wretched world is consistently threatened and tormented by social unrest, political disturbances inflicted by irresponsible terrorist male leaders. To this effect, instead of sending the so-called peace-keeping men in uniforms carrying firearms to countries devastated by explosive internal conflicts and/or senseless border-related wars among neighboring countries, just like the one we had between Eritrea and Ethiopia. the world could be much safer if the UN sends a peace-seeking delegation composed of talented women carrying white flags to the troubled leaders to settle critical issues wisely and peacefully. As Eleanor Roosevelt indicated, *“A woman is like a tea bag – you can't tell how strong she is until you put her in hot water.”* It means that women have the unique capabilities to negotiate, influence and convince stubborn male leaders with their God-given expertise and wisdom. The outcome of such women-led missions would be effective and efficient in establishing an ever-lasting peace in the troubled regions and the UN would save a great deal of financial and material resources and spare numerous precious humans lives. Women usually make the highs higher and the lows much better. Women have been called queens and guardian angels of human beings, but the human kingdom has not yet given them the power to lead and even rule in their own households. However, according to the Jewish culture, women are considered to be the ambassadors of the Almighty God who are often delegated on His behalf to protect and safeguard the planet earth and its constituents whenever God is resting. Women are considered as the delegates of God on earth because women are endowed with special ability to accomplish big dreams what seem to be impossible to men.

Certainly, the liberation of men is the liberation of women. Women cannot be liberated unless their life counterparts are liberated from their fears of insecurity and thoughtless

traditional chauvinism and inhumane practices. It is quite clear that whatever directly affects women directly or indirectly affects men because men and women are created equal and should live together respecting each other in peace and harmony. No woman is required to accept immoral traditional stereotypes and despicable attitudes as a normal part of natural heritage. No woman should be expected to live in a household that tolerates the evil discriminatory practices of men against women. Women should be thought of as progressive, smart, intelligent, capable and strong rather than considering them only based by their physical appearance because the qualities and attributes mentioned above persist in women long after beauty fades. In practice, gender awareness in both men and women is an essential first step in creating a framework for understanding equality and justice. This is not necessarily to suggest women adopt the same insensitive male behavioral traits and eventually to become just like men. Upholding the fundamental rights of women to be liberated from any kind of inconsiderate male domination or subjugation, is not an act of benevolence by the male population. We all men and women have the moral obligation to advocate for and implement gender equality and social justice. Men cannot and should not allow women to be dehumanized and underrated under any circumstances. These offensive and wicked practices create psychological and emotional problems to our female population, which could possibly and easily be embraced by our female children who were exposed to such biased roles played in their households when they were growing up. Obviously, there is a shared moral obligation of men to change positively their traditional stereotypical attitudes towards their female counterparts. The main responsibility of all Eritrean women is then to get strongly involved in challenging and changing the machinery of human relations in securing their fundamental and unalienable rights for gender equality and social justice. In fact, the Eritrean women, as they did in the 30-year armed struggle for national independence, are now actively participating with their male counterparts in the Eritrean people's movement for the rule of law, justice, democracy, and peace in Eritrea. We must realize that the Eritrean people's movement cannot be successful without healthy and powerful partnership between Eritrean men and women. It is just like only one side of a cow cannot get fat.

At times, it is ridiculous to observe that gender issues are deliberately obscured, disrupted, and deformed by both men and women. Sometimes it is confused, complicated and distorted due to mere misunderstanding and misconception of the true sense of the issues. It should be clear that gender issue is not based just on emotions. It goes deep down and far beyond the question of who should go to the kitchen to cook food and wash the dishes. In fact, in this modern world, contrary to our preconceived expectations and customary practices, the most successful CEO of major contemporary corporate businesses are women. While the most distinguished leaders in modern culinary businesses – top ranked chefs in high class restaurants – are truly men with aprons. It is evident that the cultural stereotypes of men against women cannot be easily extracted from the brains of the male population. However, to make the necessary change, every gender-based discrimination, prejudice, and other gender barriers placed on woman should be broken down and thrown away. At the same time the brain of every man should be inculcated and reprogramed by instilling appropriate moral responsibilities so that gender issues can be addressed properly and positively to achieve the desired change. In addition, to change the perspectives of both men and women, the whole pattern of life in our society must be altered. The only thing we can do to change our society is to change our individual perspectives and perceptions towards humanity. Change of attitude positively should start in every Eritrean household. We may even need to establish and strengthen our relationships with our religious institutions for divine intervention from our Heavenly Father to bless us and accelerate the desired change to happen. The tolerance,

challenge and understanding of the gender issue must come from each one of us. Arising from our everyday conduct and perspective, decency and sincerity should influence and move our own households and communities toward gender equality and justice. The struggle for the liberation of men from their hostile stereotypical attitudes is an important element of everyday life for millions of women. The forces that can keep women in front are more powerful than the forces that can keep them behind. We need to join the many Eritrean women in the struggle against discriminatory practices and to uphold and secure gender equality and social justice in our society. We all are deeply indebted to women, first for giving us life itself and caring us with love and dedication, and then for making life worth living with great pleasure. Women will always shine on men to lead the way to a pleasant and peaceful life. Next to the Almighty God, men and women must respect each other because respect for ourselves guides our moral and respect for others guides our manners. Men cannot respect women without having humility in themselves. When men have self-respect that leads to self-discipline, they can have the real power to respect women. According to Confucius, *“Without feelings of respect, what is there to distinguish men from beasts?”* Thus, we all need to respect each other and bring ourselves together in unity to follow our Eritrean youth who have galvanized the dynamism of *“enough is enough”* movement together with the support of the Eritrean women who have stirred up the flame of the struggle by the *“Yes, we can”* movement to defend and safeguard the sovereignty of Eritrea, to transfer the political power to the Eritrean people, and to advocate for gender equality in all economic opportunities, social functions, political leadership, national affairs and religious activities. Go bless Eritrea and its people!



The concept of diversity is portrayed above by the Eritrean women. The nine (9) specific ethnic identities of these women are: Tigrigna, Tigre, Saho, Bile, Kunama, Narra, Hidareb, Denkelia, and Rashaida. Together in unity the women are beautiful like the rainbow.