

**Women and Education in Eritrea:
Society and Development**

By

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Abstract: Many countries in the world, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, work towards developing modern industrialized economies. Much of the discussion in this area revolves around investment in natural resources and physical, human, and financial capitals. This paper examines human capital development, specifically education, in the context of post-independence Eritrea. It focuses upon female enrollment in formal educational systems and the societal roles that shape their participation.

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Introduction

African countries today face many challenges in the struggle for sustainable development. In an environment wrought with poverty, hunger, AIDS, epidemics, territorial disputes, political instability, and crippling debt burdens, policy decisions are often confusing. Many agencies and scholars prescribe conflicting solutions; limited resources force hard decisions.

Human capital is one important factor affecting development and social progress. Only people can utilize physical capital and natural resource endowments to create development; non-human resources alone do not generate development (Gebremedhin, 1996). This interaction requires a skilled, knowledgeable, healthy labor force and thus investments in human capital - education and health care. Harbison and Myers (1964) established that human capital development had a statistically significant correlation with GNP. Highly developed human capital creates greater productivity and efficiency.

Education enhances the ability of people to use their natural skills and ingenuity. Investment in education creates positive externalities. Past studies show that increased education raises the average quality of labor, and thus plays a significant role in the growth of national

income (Wykstra, 1971). Health care is a necessary service to maintain people's well-being and their capability to contribute to society and to development.

The important roles that women play in today's societies cannot be ignored. Yet, the value of investing in their human capital often goes without notice. Literacy rates provide one measurable education standard. According to the World Bank (1999), the overall illiteracy rate for women in developing countries in 1999 was 32.1 percent, compared to 18.0 percent for men. The 1999 rates for North Africa and the Middle East were higher, at 46.7 percent for women and 25.2 percent for men. A clear gap between education for men and women persists in the developing world.

Eritrea also faces this gender disparity. The World Bank (1999) places literacy rates for women at 60.9 percent and for men at 33.5 percent, a 27.1 percent difference. Slightly more than half of Eritrea's population is female (the CIA World Factbook 2000 places the rate at 0.99 males/female).

A Brief History of Eritrea

Various successive colonial regimes ruled Eritrea for many years. In the early 1500's, the Ottoman Turks

extended their control into Eritrea. The Egyptians dislodged the Turks in the mid- to late-1800's, and were then ousted themselves by the Italians, who annexed Eritrea as a colony in 1890. The Italians would stay until the end of World War II. Following World War II, the British government oversaw Eritrea for ten years, and the fate of Eritrea passed to the hands of the United Nations in 1950. The U.N. declined to grant Eritrean independence in 1952, instead forcing Eritrea to join an Ethiopian federation. This federation lasted from when the British left (in 1952) until 1962, when Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia abolished the federation and took over Eritrea. A thirty-year war for independence started in 1961, with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)'s victory in 1991. A U.N. monitored referendum established overwhelming support for independence, which came on May 24, 1993.

Women and Recent History

During the colonial period, the Italians and the British focused upon securing their political domination and implementing new economic systems, neither of which required education for women (Stefanos, 1997). The attitude towards women and education changed during the national liberation struggle against Ethiopia. The EPLF

fostered the greatest change in women's roles. The EPLF recognized the need to include women in its struggle, and the role of education in mobilizing them. By including women in its cadres and as active fighters, it immediately raised women's status (Stefanos, 1997).

The EPLF also created the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) in 1979. This grassroots organization continues to work to change those factors (familial, societal) that restrain women from full-fledged educational and economic participation. However, with the end of the war and the beginning of demobilization, old values continue to resurface, complicating the NUEW's work and its goals.

Women's Roles in Eritrea

Eritrean society is patriarchal in nature. The division of male and female roles, and the accompanying prejudices, begins in childhood (Gebremedhin, 1996). Husbands and fathers head their families, wielding incredible amounts of power. They oversee family resources and determine the futures of their spouses and children. Males are raised from birth to fulfill these positions. As in much of the world, despite the introduction of modern ways of life, societal traditions often accord women a

subservient status (Gebremedhin, 1996). They are looked upon as daughters, as wives, and as mothers. Their duties are domestic; they assume the roles of cooks, caregivers, and cleaners.

From a very young age, girls learn domestic skills and begin to take on domestic duties. They learn to cook and sew, to care for children, to wash and clean, and to supplement the household income with cottage crafts. They take up these duties at the age of six years (Melcamu, 1994) and are expected to perform them for the rests of their lives.

As girls age, they take on more and more responsibility in the household. Estimates place the time spent on daily work for ten- to fifteen-year-olds at six to seven hours (Melcamu 1994). These chores begin to impinge on the time used for schooling.

Families also prepared Eritrean girls for marriage. They were taught to be obedient and quiet, to respect the leading roles played by males. Marriages were often arranged and included dowries. Fathers generally negotiated this economic exchange and ignored the bride and groom (Gebremedhin 1996). Daughters were thusly sold off, perpetuating their treatment as property and objects to be traded.

Girls often married at ages as young as twelve. Virginity played an important part in the bride's status; brides who were found not to be virgins may be publicly shamed and sent back to their families. Families often viewed school as a corrupting influence, one that girls should be kept away from to maintain their purity. Once a woman was married, she becomes the property of her husband. She was expected to take on the domestic duties in his household. She might often continue her informal tutelage under the care of her mother-in-law. She also took on responsibility for bearing and rearing children. She worked twelve to sixteen hours per day between things such as cooking, cleaning, carrying water and firewood, working in the fields, and caring for children. This left no time for school and precluded her working in an external job.

The treatment of women as wives and mothers has a serious negative impact on their schooling prospects. Many families view formal education as wasted on females, and consequently limit or entirely prevent their schooling.

Women's Enrollment in School

Historically, traditional forms of learning grew out of rural agricultural life and buttressed the divisions of males and females. Boys learned agricultural skills and

crafts and the complex system of societal rights and duties. As mentioned previously, mothers instructed their daughters in household duties and management and in cottage crafts.

Religious schools built during the colonial era provided the first formal education, albeit only to men. Women were not permitted to attend school until 1934. Even then, the schools taught women only domestic skills and reinforced their household and spousal roles (Stefanos, 1997).

Eritrea's independence brought much change. Rebuilding from the war damage has taken time, and will continue to. Education has become an important priority in the rebuilding efforts and the drive for development. In order to achieve goals set forth in the Government of Eritrea's macro-policy (1994), the Ministry of Education has set forth as one of its general objectives "to make basic education available to all," and as part of its education policy and goals "to promote equal opportunity in terms of access, equity, relevance, and continuity of education to all school-aged children" (MOE, 1998).

Formal education in Eritrea extends to eleven grades, generally for ages five through seventeen. However, large numbers of overage students participate in Eritrean schools

(Tables 1 and 2). This reflects the effects of the 30-year war for independence, which disrupted the lives of most Eritreans. An important part to note is the attitude that older age does not prevent schooling.

Table 1:
School Levels, Grades, Ages, and Overage Percentages

<i>Level</i>	<i>Grades</i>	<i>Ages</i>	<i>Overage %</i>
Pre-school	I, II	5-6	
Elementary	1-5	7-11	35
Middle	6-7	12-13	74.4
Secondary	8-11	14-17	32.6

Source: MOE, 1999

Pre-school

Eritrea contains eighty-eight pre-primary schools, of which only four (4.5 percent) are government owned. Overall enrollment in pre-primary schools remains small (5.1 percent and under), and thus lacks any form of prominence. As Table 3 demonstrates, male children participate more than female.

Table 3:
Pre-School: Enrollment Percentages by Year and Gender

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1991/92	3.4	3.3	3.5	-0.2
1992/93	3.6	3.5	3.7	-0.2
1993/94	3.9	3.9	3.8	0.1
1994/95	3.9	4.0	3.8	0.2
1995/96	3.9	4.0	3.8	0.2
1996/97	3.4	3.5	3.4	0.1
1997/98	4.1	4.2	4.1	0.1
1998/99	5.1	5.4	4.7	0.7

Source: MOE, 1999

Elementary

In the past 8 years, net female enrollment has increased by nearly 10 percent, from 21.8 percent to 31.3 percent (Table 4). While differences between the number of males and the number of females enrolled have remained relatively small, the gap grew from 1.1 percent in 1991/92 to 3.9 percent in 1998/99.

Table 4:
Elementary: Net Enrollment Ratios by Year and Gender,
1991/92 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1991/92	22.4	22.9	21.8	1.1
1992/93	25.8	27.0	24.7	2.3
1993/94	25.9	26.8	25.0	1.8
1994/95	27.1	28.0	26.1	1.9
1995/96	28.8	29.8	27.9	1.9
1996/97	28.8	29.9	27.7	2.2
1997/98	30.9	32.4	29.3	3.1
1998/99	33.3	35.2	31.3	3.9

Source: MOE, 1999

One notable improvement in gender equality lies in repetition rates (Table 5). The number of female students repeating a grade in elementary school dropped by over eight points, and the gap between males and females has closed. This indicates that female education has risen in priority, albeit still behind that for males.

Table 5:
Elementary: Rate of Repetition by Year and Gender,
1992/93 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1992/93	25.5	22.8	28.9	6.1
1993/94	20.0	17.8	22.8	5.0
1994/95	18.9	17.0	21.3	4.3
1995/96	20.3	18.3	22.8	4.5
1996/97	20.5	18.9	22.3	3.4
1997/98	22.7	21.1	24.6	3.5
1998/99	19.4	18.2	20.8	2.6

Source: MOE, 1999

Middle

Enrollment for both males and females drops off sharply between elementary and middle schools - from 35.2

percent to 9.6 percent for males and from 31.3 percent to 9.3 percent for females (Table 6). Middle school enrollment shows the greatest amount of gender parity, with only a 0.3 percent difference between males and females in 1998/99.

Table 6:
Middle: Net Enrollment Ratios by Year and Gender,
1991/92 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1991/92	7.0	7.1	6.9	0.2
1992/93	5.6	5.8	5.4	0.4
1993/94	5.9	6.0	5.7	0.3
1994/95	6.0	6.1	6.0	0.1
1995/96	6.5	6.6	6.3	0.3
1996/97	7.9	8.4	7.5	0.9
1997/98	9.1	9.5	8.6	0.9
1998/99	9.5	9.6	9.3	0.3

Source: MOE, 1999

The number of females repeating a middle school grade disputes any true gender equity, however. Following gains made in the mid-1990s, female repetition rates rose sharply through 1998/99 (Table 7). This reflects the resurgence in traditional values - increasing domestic chores and the fear of education affecting a girl's marriage suitability.

Table 7:
Middle: Rate of Repetition by Gender and Year,
1992/93 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1992/93	43.1	27.3	60.8	33.5
1993/94	16.9	11.7	23.4	11.7
1994/95	13.5	9.2	18.8	9.6
1995/96	13.4	8.9	18.8	9.9
1996/97	13.1	8.9	18.4	9.5
1997/98	15.2	10.3	22.0	11.7
1998/99	13.4	13.4	24.2	10.8

Source: MOE, 1999

Secondary

The differences between male and female enrollment in secondary schools increased from 1993/94 through 1998/99 (Table 8). Again, this reflects the slippage of female status due to traditional values.

Table 8:
Secondary: Net Enrollment Ratios by Year and Gender,
1991/92 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1991/92	8.4	8.6	8.3	0.3
1992/93	8.5	8.3	8.8	-0.5
1993/94	8.0	8.1	7.9	0.2
1994/95	9.0	9.2	8.8	0.4
1995/96	9.4	9.9	9.0	0.9
1996/97	10.0	10.4	9.6	0.8
1997/98	10.3	10.8	9.7	1.1
1998/99	11.4	12.6	10	2.6

Source: MOE, 1999

One encouraging area, however, is that of repetition rates in secondary schools (Table 9). Both the numbers of female repeaters and the gap between males and females have

declined. This reveals that those females attending secondary schools do receive the support necessary to complete the later grades.

Table 9:
Secondary: Repeaters by Year and Gender, 1991/92 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1991/92	40.1	29.7	51.2	21.5
1992/93	36.2	25.3	49.2	23.9
1993/94	22.9	16.5	32.2	15.7
1994/95	16.8	12.2	23.8	11.6
1995/96	18.6	13.1	27.0	13.9
1996/97	17.6	13.5	23.7	10.2
1997/98	18.4	13.1	26.4	13.3
1998/99	12.4	9.4	17.6	8.2

Source: MOE, 1999

Overall

Female students in elementary, middle, and secondary schools still lag behind their male counterparts in terms of enrollment and repetition. Even more alarming is the recent increase in disparities. Now that Eritrea is free, many of the old prejudices and traditions sublimated during the war have resurfaced.

Vocational Education and Technical Training

A women's ability to enter the non-manual formal labor force depends upon her ability to acquire marketable skills. Her prior education and her opportunities to attend technical and vocational schools in turn determine

if and what sort of skills she can learn. While women have greater access to specialized schooling, there is still a tremendous gulf between men and women. Table 10 shows the tremendous disparities between the number of men and women in vocational and technical schools, and Table 11 breaks down the fields in which women partake.

Table 10:
Vocational Education and Technical Training: Percentage of Total Enrollment by Year and Gender, 1991/92 to 1998/99

<i>Year</i>	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>M/F Difference</i>
1991/92	87.3	12.7	74.6
1992/93	89.2	10.8	78.4
1993/94	89.8	10.2	79.6
1994/95	90.3	9.7	80.6
1995/96	89.0	11.0	78.0
1996/97	87.0	13.0	74.0
1997/98	83.0	17.0	66.0
1998/99	84.6	15.4	69.2

Source: MOE, 1999

Table 11:
Technical Education and Vocational Training Enrollment, 1998/99

<i>Field of Training</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Female % of total</i>
General Shop	345	279	66	19.1
Wood work	57	50	7	12.3
Electricity	75	61	14	18.7
Metal Work	64	56	8	12.5
Auto-mechanics	65	61	4	6.1
Surveying	60	51	9	15
Machine-shop	121	108	3	10.7
Drafting	51	44	7	13.7
Radio-electronics	35	28	7	20
Building constr.	35	30	5	14.3
Total	908	768	140	15.4

Source: MOE, 1999

Nearly a third of the students at the Asmera Business and Commerce Institute are female, but the majority (44 of 62, 70.1 percent) study secretarial science (Table 12). This vocation generally trails accounting, banking, and management in wages, responsibility, and advancement. If one considers only accounting, banking and finance, and management, females represent a mere 13.2 percent of the students. Again, males dominate the upper echelons.

Table 12:
Asmera Business and Commerce Institute Enrollment by Gender

<i>Field of Training</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Female % of total</i>
Accounting	53	42	11	20.8
Secretarial Science	51	7	44	86.3
Banking and Finance	56	52	4	7.1
Management	27	24	3	11.1
Total	187	125	62	33.2

Source: MOE, 1999

Female participation in vocational, technical, and business schools reiterates again the split between males and females. Again, women's wifely and childbearing duties reduce their freedom to attend schools that would prepare them for participation in the formal skilled economy.

Conclusion

An effective national plan for creating development recognizes the contributions made by both the male and

female labor forces. Women in Eritrea perform unquestionably valuable social and economic work, as demonstrated by their commitment and contributions to the thirty-year struggle for independence. Investments in human capital through education reap many positive benefits in economic development and social progress. Engaging women as full partners in development and investing in their education to enhance this participation should be an integral part in any plan for development.

The greatest barriers to the improvement of education for women in Eritrea continue to be ingrained social and cultural beliefs. These beliefs attribute a subservient status to women, lowering their worth, and accordingly reducing the priority of their education. Returning to the old ways prevents women from achieving their full capabilities in society and the economy, retarding social progress and economic development.

Eritrea has made great strides in improving the status of women in society, beginning with the revolution and carrying forward into today. It has implemented initiatives aimed at reducing the familial obligations of women and including them in the formal economy.

However, societies evolve slowly. It takes constant, long-term pressure to change entrenched beliefs. Highly

developed nations with strong, active women's groups still have yet to achieve true gender parity. Organizations such as the NUEW, with the support of the Eritrean government, can make a difference.

The primary driving force behind many women's rights movements in other countries have been women. For example, leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton propelled the suffrage movement in the United States of America. Women organizing and leading other women have shown themselves to be the greatest proponents for active change. The Eritrean government needs to unshackle the NUEW. Currently, men hold all of the NUEW's top leadership spots. The government should allow women leaders to rise to the top in the NUEW, and grant it greater autonomy. Then women would have a more powerful organization able to advocate changes on their behalf.

Change also comes with successive generations. Young people can be raised with different belief systems from the entrenched older generations. The government, however, cannot and does not raise Eritrea's children. Thus, it must instead work to raise public consciousness of women's importance in roles other than wives and mothers. A campaign promoting female role models would publicize concrete examples of what women are capable of. This could

take the form of teaching about historical and contemporary figures in the classroom. This would specifically target children at a point when their belief systems are still malleable. Outside of the classroom, the campaign could raise women's profiles through advertisements and national holidays that commemorate the birthdays of significant female figures, celebrate female achievements, and tout females as professionals. These initiatives would raise the female profile in the national consciousness, and show girls and women role models and heroes that they could strive to emulate.

Changing ingrained beliefs and attitudes will take time. The government must work to reach both younger generations and the society as a whole. Eventually, change will come, and it will gain momentum as it progresses. It will result in engaging all of Eritrea's most important resource in the drive for development.

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Table 2: Age-Specific Enrollment, 1998/99

Age	School Age Population			Elementary			Middle			Secondary		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
4	118436	58916	59520									
5	115823	57624	58199	14	8	6						
6	112655	56179	56476	3512	1817	1695						
7	109005	54587	54418	23081	12248	10833						
8	104948	52854	52094	32334	17256	15078						
9	100557	50985	49572	39802	21422	18380						
10	95933	49042	46891	38650	20564	18086	49	25	24			
11	91175	47079	44096	33012	18066	14946	1225	615	610			
12	86225	44850	41375	28912	15948	12964	5078	2644	2434	12	6	6
13	81103	42265	38838	25546	14301	11245	10800	5756	5044	1016	565	451
14	75964	39484	36480	16464	9036	7428	14611	7663	6948	3046	1674	1372
15	70900	36752	34148	10627	6134	4493	13834	7075	6759	6061	3315	2746
16	65842	33965	31877	5811	3688	2123	10485	5943	4542	10811	6028	4783
17	61536	31490	30046	2543	1749	794	6196	4183	2013	11077	6738	4339
18	58442	29503	28939	1655	1341	314	2811	2129	682	8294	5718	2576
19	56161	27825	28336				1179	1011	168	3959	2993	966
20	53983	26194	27789				1898	1580	318			
21	52004	24642	27362				713	604	109			
22	50330	23360	26970				392	349	43			
23	48922	22408	26514				121	105	16			
24	47739	21710	26029				753	687	66			
25	46760	21113	25647									
26	45973	20634	25339									
27	45216	20220	24996									
Total	1795632	893681	901951	261963	143578	118385	67021	37731	29290	47533	29777	17756

Source: MOE, 1999