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WOMEN AND ECONOMIC EMANCIPATION IN ERITREA – SOME OBSERVATIONS

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Abstract:

The woman is considered to be a pillar of the society and a model of the unity. Indeed, woman plays a great role at home as well as at work. For example, 45 per cent of the measurable Gross Domestic Income comes from the work of women in the world's richest countries. However, the women are discriminated both at work and at home. Further, they are vulnerable to conflicts, wars and terrorism. The women in Eritrea are fighting for their rights and freedom. This paper explores the role of women in economy and in society. The paper also provides some comparison of Eritrean women with that of other developing countries. By way of a summing up, some random thoughts are set out to provoke analysis and debate on the subject.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Economy, Eritrea, NUEW, Freedom struggle.

JEL Codes: I31, J16, J71

1. INTRODUCTION

The political maturity of the African masses may to some extent be traced to economic and social patterns of traditional times. Under communalism, for example, all land and means of production belonged to the community, there was people's ownership and labor was the need and habit of all. Humanity lived in communalism for at least 90 per cent of the time it has been on earth. During communalism women played a leading role in the society. There was a division of labor where the men hunted and women gathered in order to provide food for the collective (Africa Women Forum).

Indeed, woman is a pillar of the society and a model of the unity. She treats her children equally by sharing her love and knowledge with the family. A woman plays a great role at home as well as at work. She takes her children to outside work. The woman is also a great contributor to the field of education. Mothers are first teachers to children and teach them the basic things of education and the good behaviour of mother influences the children, so mother teach her children practical as well as theoretical (Wilson, 1991; Rena, 2005). Life with mother is vivid but without mother it is miserable, she unifies the family and manages them to make the life of family simple and smooth. The children living under the umbrella of mother, their life is so secured. She influences all the people around her, by her dedication and sincerity. A woman can preview her talent and ability when she is given an opportunity.

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Eritrea got its independence in 1991 after thirty years freedom struggle. It is located in the Horn of Africa, bordered in the North and West by Sudan, in the South by Ethiopia and Djibouti and in the East by the Red Sea. It has an estimated population of about 4 million. Women in Eritrea composed of more than 50 per cent in the society. Since its independence, the country has been undertaking number of developmental programs in rebuilding its war-damaged economy.

2. WOMEN AND SOCIETY

The woman plays a great role in forming a good and healthy society. But in most parts of the world including Eritrea the prevailing traditions ignored all these good qualities of woman they are not treated as equal to men (Wilson, 1991). It is observed that even in cases, where a woman and a man have completed the same level of education where employed around the same time man tend to move to higher position faster than woman. The main factors that make the women inferior to men are: i] most employers or managers aspect the men and feel that men are more clever and hard working than women; ii] some managers have the view, that women are less productive than men; and iii] some employers will term women employees as less reliable and inefficient.

Because of the above said reasons the women occupy lower positions in the society, the women did not get an opportunity to acquire adequate education and skill. The family assigned the women only to the household and given more chance to the men rather than to the women. The women played a pivotal role in freedom struggle of Eritrea. It is reported that almost 33 per cent of Eritrean freedom fighters were women (Wilson, 1991:12). It is therefore; Eritrean women have equal potentiality to contribute substantially for the achievement of freedom and economic development of Eritrea. Furthermore, in the national and regional assemblies 30 per cent of seats are reserved for women. Women compete against each other for the votes of both men and women. Women also run against men for the remaining 70 per cent of seats.

It is believed that if the women are given rights and posting in a good position they will be great contributors to the welfare of the country and aspect by the society too, because they get a chance to show their talent and capability. It is to be noted that now-a-days, the Eritrean women are united among themselves and organising different associations like other African countries and to try to bring changes in the tradition of the society that oppress the right of its women. Thus, these African women association also made relationship with the European, Asian women and are sharing ideas and experience. They showed their capability to the society that they placed in any field based on their ability and manifested their talent in higher-level studies.

The National Union for Eritrean Women (NUEW) a women association in Eritrea had played an important role in drafting the Constitution of Eritrea by organizing workshops and sensitizing women on the crucial issues that concern women. NUEW is administered by a headquarters office located in Asmara, as well as by regional offices located in all six zones. Membership numbers over 200,000 women. Besides, the NUEW continues to play a key role in advocating for, monitoring, and evaluating the

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formulation/planning and implementation of government policies and programs from a gender perspective. The NUEW is striving hard to achieve the following objectives.

1] The development of women's confidence in themselves and respect for one another, and the raising of consciousness to ensure their rights in the political and legal systems; 2] Laws that protect women's rights in the family: entitlement rights and other civil laws; 3] Equal access to education and employment opportunities: equal pay for equal work and equal rights to skills development to promotion; 4] Improved access to adequate health care, paid maternity leave, and child care services; 5] The eradication of harmful traditional practices that endanger women's health and well-being; and 6] The reduction of poverty for Eritrean women and their families.

It is observed that the women in Eritrea are undertaking agricultural activities in different areas of the Midrizien village of Central region (Maakel) following training and loan extended to them by the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). Reports indicated that 4 members of the women farmers received a month long agricultural training in Italy aimed at reinforcing agricultural output have registered. It is to be noted that there is improvement in standard of living of the women farmers through their concerted efforts in their farm plots.

3. DISCRIMINATION OF WOMEN AT WORK:

It is reported that, 45 per cent of the measurable Gross Domestic Income comes from the work of women in the world's richest countries. The Global Report of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on equality at work, which draws attention to discrimination at the workplace taking on new, subtler forms, is a timely reminder to Governments and institutions that the battle against inequality needs to be continually fought through a combination of awareness campaigns, policy measures and legal efforts. Progress in tackling even the long-recognised discrimination against women is described in the report as inconsistent, thus underlining the difficulty involved in removing deeply-ingrained prejudices that show up in the workplace.

International Perspective

It is to note that whether the women have institutional sanction or not, societal biases and stereotypes contribute to the discrimination against vulnerable groups and ethnic and cultural minorities. Added to this, the report notes, there has been an increase in religious discrimination over the past decade with the international political climate of counter-terrorism fuelling sentiments of mutual fear among Muslims and non-Muslims. There has also been a rise in discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS. Obviously, Governments and institutions must show greater concern while looking into complaints of such forms of discrimination. But, women continue to constitute the largest group all over the world, that faces discrimination at the workplace, and, invariably, the seriousness of a Government in ending all discrimination would be measured first and foremost in this sphere.

In the Eritrean context, the fight against sexual discrimination made major gains only with the National Union for Eritrean Women (NUEW) laying down guidelines for

dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace. The Union Chairwoman Lul Ghebream announces in the sixth conference, which was held recently in Asmara, the formation of a committee to ascertain the extent to which the Government had been able to remove discrimination, particularly sexual harassment, at the workplace. Sadly, it would make abundantly clear that Eritrea lags behind other countries in ensuring a safe, non-discriminatory working environment for women. The Infosys case of India, where the company paid \$3 million to a former employee who filed sexual harassment charges against a Board member, is a pointer to the gap between Eritrea and the developed countries in this aspect. It is unthinkable that actually, the Infosys payment, which is part of an out-of-court settlement, is only a fraction of the amount demanded as compensation by the former employee. Not surprisingly, women's groups are of the opinion that the laws in Eritrea are weighted in favour of the accused in cases of sexual harassment. Enforcement of existing laws is another area where the Government is found wanting. The Government of Eritrea's guidelines, which put the onus on employers in public and private sectors for setting up mechanisms for dealing with complaints from aggrieved women, are yet to be implemented effectively throughout the country. Anyway, such guidelines are meaningless for the unorganised sectors, where the women, low-skilled and ill-paid, are the most insecure.

In such a situation, stringent laws must be complemented by adequate redress mechanisms beyond the workplace. Governmental policies and support measures must be backed up with initiatives that would involve the larger community in identifying and addressing the problem areas. In the absence of concerted efforts, where the courts succeed, the Government might fail. And where the Governments succeed, the community might fail. As the ILO report says, any failure to tackle the widening socio-economic inequalities would adversely affect social cohesion and political stability. That, surely, is the huge cost of status quo.

4. CONCLUSION

It is observed that during Eritrea's liberation struggle for independence, 30 per cent of the EPLF Army was women. In recognition of their immense contribution during the struggle, the GOE has rightly reserved 30 per cent of the seats in the local and national elections for women (Rena, 2005:8). There are three women Cabinet ministers in the Eritrean government namely: Askalu Menkorias, Minister for Labour and Human Welfare; Fousia Hashim, Minister for Justice; and Amna Nur Hussain, Minister for Tourism, and one Administrator/Governor of the Northern Red Sea Zone Mrs. Tsigereda Weldegergish are the testimony of women empowerment in Eritrea. Therefore, the same privilege has to be given to the women in the employment including top civil servant jobs to the competent women.

The Eritrean society has to understand that the women are highly talented, honest, and sociable. Through these good qualities they formed a good society and opened a new era and forming a light and that light is shining and eliminating the darkness and gave right to all Eritrean women to express their opinion and to show their ability. Hence, the women should come out of the darkness and test what life is? Thus the women in Eritrea can contribute in many fields in economic development like Sri Lanka,

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Indonesia, India and many other countries and able to change the mentality of society. It is observed that the equal opportunity of education and work to the half of the Eritrea's population (women) due to religious, traditional and cultural beliefs and attitudes. Cultural stigmas promote negative attitudes and habits in men and women that pass from the generation-to-generation and family to the work place.

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