

Minister Luul Gebreab

The Front was not looking only for fighters

But for a social revolution



By: *Billion Temesghen*

Q&A celebrates the fortieth anniversary of the National Union of Eritrean Women by presenting you a compiled version of Minister of Labor and Social Welfare Mrs. Luul Gebreab's interview on the occasion. Since the earliest phase of her service to the country as a freedom fighter, Minister Luul has been an advocate for women emancipation. She was the first President of the union in 1979. We present to you today the mother of three and a passionate advocate of women's rights, one of the first big actors in the history of women emancipation in Eritrea.

Thank you for your time, Minister. We are so curious to know you outside the office.

Pleasure! I was born and raised in Asmara. I did my studies here in Asmara as well. Because of the situation back then I left home when I was in 11th grade and lined up next to the thousands of young men and women of my age to fight and die for freedom. I went to the field in 1975. I came back alive from the war and so after Independence I continued my postgraduate studies in Equity Studies. I am a mother of three. I got married in the field during the armed struggle. By the way, I am now a grandmother!

Should we take you back in time and remind you of your first days in the struggle?

Gladly. Before I went to the field I had already started clandestine activities in the city. And that year was really helpful to what I went on to become, a female freedom fighter. I was trained by women freedom fighters to be a soldier and that was so inspiring.

Now let's talk about how you got into women's rights activism. You were there when the union was first formed in 1979, and as a president, at that.

Soon after my military training I was appointed to the Front's Public Unit in Sahel and Afaabet. I started working with units that were spreading awareness about the front in all of its aspects, including its humane features and aspirations since I was very young. Back then it was really difficult for women to step out of their house and join our campaigns. So we had to go to their houses, wait for their husbands to leave home and raise their awareness. Bit by bit women started being interested in us and that was so encouraging. They started to ask about their wishes, rights and aspirations.

That is so beautiful...

Indeed. And so we worked to pass on the message of how the Front was not looking only for fighters but for a social revolution and how that would be impossible without the awareness and participation of a varied nature, of every Eritrean girl and woman. And that is how it all started. I learned more as I worked side by side my comrades and many Eritrean girls, wives and mothers. It was a joint venture to pull women out of their houses' door step. Every little step meant a bigger vision for women emancipation. The aim was to make Eritrean women part of what was evolving to be one of the greatest parts of our history. Making women wonder about their education, economic role and social justice gave birth to the Union. And, of course, ensuring the liberation of our country and women's role in it also was one item in its agenda.

The union was formed in 1979 but it was planned for a year earlier.

We were at war. A lot of times the war would get on our way. As you mentioned the creation of the Union of Eritrean Women was scheduled for 1978 in Keren but was postponed due to the strategic withdrawal that year. But we knew that we would get back and work for it as fast as possible. So female freedom fighters, like myself, who were previously working in the public units were pulled out of the front line and put back to place. In a year we reconstructed our forms and set out for the official formation of the Union and had our first convention 1979 in Arag. We had representatives from the front lines and all units of the front as well as numerous mothers from liberated cities of Eritrea. We were also joined by representatives of Eritrean women abroad. All together, we worked on mapping out the Union's foundation. After that, we voted for administrative commissions for four areas and we also voted for emissaries of the Union for North America,

Europe and Eastern Eritrea. The National Union of Eritrean Women was officially formed and I was elected to serve as the president for the first year. Our first office was located in Sudan and then moved to Beirut.

However, it is worth mentioning that in 1975, before the National Union was formed, there did exist the so called 'General Union of Eritrean Women'.

That was an organizational structure for higher executives. But we knew what we wanted from the start. That might have been the beginning but our vision and aim was different. As I mentioned earlier our venture for the emancipation of Eritrean women was multifaceted so we decided to change the order of our structure. We wanted the union to be of the people, so our structure had to start from the people. Every opinion and voice mattered highly. Which is why we had the convention and made sure that it represented every Eritrean woman.

It is interesting how the Union had the power of echoing the voice of liberation on international conventions even before Eritrea was liberated.

That is right. The fact that we were represented by Eritreans all over the world was strategic and purposeful of course. Women all over the world were advocating for peace. "We want Peace, but Peace with Justice". Eritrean women were knocking at the doors of many organizations calling for justice and peace. We joined international conventions of women in Copenhagen in 1980 and in Nairobi in 1985. I tell you, inside and outside of the country, we were one. We still are. Eritrean women supported us, female fighters, in the field. They would raise funds for things we girls needed. At first they'd get together and make sanitary pads and send them to us. Then they bought machines and so we were able to make our own sanitary pads in the field. And this is just a mere example of

the many more activities Eritrean women in the field, the country and abroad did together.

What were the challenges you encountered?

Plenty. Our society, just like many other patriarchal societies, had values that revolve around the sovereignty of men. So we had to step into the family system to bring values of equality. Girls would hardly ever get out of their houses without their husbands or fathers approving. Moreover, we had many harmful practices and that is a struggle Eritrea fought against even after Independence. Countless young female freedom fighters were arrested, tortured, killed and shot at while penetrating towns and cities to work on our missions. Heroines that gave their lives for the bigger purpose of a social revolution where women, their opinion, lives and wishes are put first, always! Then, today and tomorrow.

And the legacy still goes on today... I wish we had more pages to put it all out. Hope to meet you in the future for more. Happiest fortieth anniversary!

Today, more than 60% of the Union's members are young Eritrean women. It gives me utmost gratification to know that we joined hands with young girls, strongly thriving today with our daughters. Eritrean women are and always will be the back bone of the People and Government of Eritrea. Happy anniversary to us all.