

Interview with Mrs. Luul Gebreab, former Chairperson of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW)



March 8, is the day the Eritrean women assess their past and plan for the future. What is the situation of NUEW at this time?

The National Union of Eritrean Women is celebrating its 25 years. It is continuing with the aims which it had started during the struggle like working to ensure the freedom of the country and to strengthen the equality of women.

After independence the attention has been on the second aim that is the active participation of women on the political economic social and cultural aspects. It also works in ensuring equal partition of the natural resources of the country. There are branches of NUEW in the six Zobas, organized within 54 sub-Zobas with 1,559 villages and 3,645 groups. In the Diaspora it has 25 branches. All in all NUEW has 200,000 members.

If “self sustainability” for women is to be ensured, there should be active participation of women in the economic, political and social arena of the country. What are the activities underway to achieve these aims?

The aim was the participation of women in all sectors .In order to ensure this the NUEW has three main strategies. This is to ensure the role of catalyst, advocacy and economic empowerment of women in different sectors. As a catalyst, the Organization has prepared a document called Master Gender action plan on gender issues, and plans that should be given focus are explained clearly on this document. Already some institutions have started to use it as a reference and all public or governmental institutions have to use it.

Moreover Eritrea has signed the rights of women in 1995 and has prepared report on the situation of Eritrean women. This report is prepared with the active

participation of women in collecting information and feedback. The result is encouraging. The other work of NUEW as a catalyst in the reduction of poverty to see to it that the government's policies related to gender issues are on the right track.

The other backbone of our work is the role of advocacy. Our focus last year was on women's health situation. Over 300 women's association were trained on health issues. A trained woman has been giving lectures, collecting information and conducting studies on the shortcomings of birth attendants by going in different Zobas of the country. And the other focus is to strength women's participation in education. Women participation in education especially in the rural areas leaves much to be desired.

In the year 2002 a network of women was established in two Zobas. The result was satisfactory and the plan is to establish network of parents, women students and teachers in all Zobas .We shall see the overall result in the future.

It is known that the NUEW contributed to strong participation of women during the revolution. Analysts say that the Eritrean revolution would not have succeeded without the participation of women. Some people say that the role of NUEW at this time is not as it used to be. What do you have to say to this?

What is the measurement? The achievements and changes in social services are not quantifiable. It is not something that you can count. For example we can see women who participate in congress who come from different ethnic groups, age, and level of education raising questions, and participating in political, economic and social debates. These achievements are not the result of the activities conducted after independence but also the effects of the revolution. The rights of women can't be achieved by the role played by NUEW alone. It can only be achieved if every public and private sector works believing in the rights of women. For example we can ask if the policies outlined after independence are for or against women's rights? The national constitution, the land proclamation, civil and penal code have all put women's rights into consideration.

Female participation in education is increasing especially at the elementary level even though it differs from Zoba to Zoba. What are the actions taken to encourage women to pursue their education? The question of the rights of women is a social question. Without considering gender issues poverty will always be a threat. The question of gender is a question of health, social life, and economy. The role of NUEW is to identify if there are gaps, to see if the law is working, to supervise the work to be accomplished and to see to it that women make good use of laws and

policies. In general, Eritrean women are showing significant progress. But we can't expect a dramatic change overnight.

This means that you are satisfied?

If you are satisfied you don't work you just sit with your arms folded. But gender equality is a long process. Our aim is to create an environment where women can participate in leadership, health, education etc. We don't have to see those on the top only. We have to look at those in the bottom also. For example we can take the village administrative election of 2002. Women were elected from 20% as executive directors up to 50% as administrators. But in some places it was very low. So, have we become equal? Still 80% of the administrative job is dominated by men. But the results are encouraging. The participation of women is 45% in elementary, 20% in high school and 10% at university. Social changes are not something that you can achieve within one or ten years, it is a process that can be affected by many factors including nutrition, health and others. So I can say we have minimized the problem but we can't say that we have solved it completely.

Some women say that the NUEW does not care much about them during their national services. How much is this true?

The participation of women in national service is their national obligation. With the military situation we were not able to give much attention to their everyday problems. But last year the organization was able to talk to women in different fronts about their situation and their future plans and it has tried to identify their problems. But nobody mentions the fact that many of them have got vocational training and a lot have become teachers.

Most members of this organization are elderly women, and this may have an influence on the activities of this organization. But if this organization is to get stronger, the new generation especially the educated youth should become members. How is the effort to make the youth and the professional women members of this organization progressing?

Since 1999 the organization has put in its plan a strategy to focus on women students. It has established branches of NUEW in all high schools. In order to encourage enterprising women, it has been giving small incentives yearly. In addition, the organization has been giving lectures to these students on their spare time. The activity is different from Zoba to Zoba. For example in the past year Zoba Anseba, Zoba Debub and Northern Red Sea where active participants in the organization. As a result in the recent election of NUEW parliament about seven seats was reserved for the women who were organized in the above manner. Even though this has started earlier, since 1999 the organization has been working actively to involve the youth.

So what was the outcome of involving women?

As far as I am concerned this is only an initial point. The question is not how many professional women we have but how many of those are willing and dedicated to work for the benefit of other women. The intervention and advocacy role should be strengthened when they are at the elementary school level. But to bring a radical change it must be introduced in the new curricula. We have raised the question with the Ministry of Education as related to the new curricula. We are informed that the issue will be included in the new curricula. In addition, the role of other organizations like NUEYS in organizing and advocating should be strengthened.

Starting with the constitution of Eritrea, women have gained many legal rights. How is this being applied?

According to the assessment of the past year, with the existing limited plots of land, and more demand, the Ministry of Land, Water and Environment has distributed land to divorced and widowed women. This is only a temporary solution. If the woman is married she is not allowed to take land in her own village. This should be changed, because it may have negative effect. Hence, we are negotiating with the Ministry and it has assured us it will give it due consideration.

This affirmative action is very important to fill the existing gap. As long as we have backward traditional beliefs, and way of thinking, including low social and economic standard we need this affirmative action. Even though the revolution has played its role, it did not effect a radical change. You can't say that women's way of thinking has changed significantly. However, it should be known that this affirmative action cannot be a permanent solution.

Any message you want to convey to the people especially to women on the occasion of March 8 ?

We are living in a difficult situation. Eritrean women have been living by tightening their belts and faced many challenges including drought, deportation, displacement and others. We are living at a time when the Weyane have rejected the EEBC boarder ruling.

At this juncture, I would like to call upon the international community as well as the Ethiopian women to work for the implementation of the EEBC ruling in conjunction with their Eritrean sisters.

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