

**Eritrean Women in Business: Networking**  
**With African Counterparts to Find New Markets**



Ruth Negash

By: Mussie Efreim

*COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) Federation of National Associations of Women in Business (COMFWB) sub-regional summit of the Horn of Africa was conducted last week. The three-day summit was held at the hall of the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers in Asmara. Regarding the summit and other related issues Eritrea Profile conducted an Interview with Ms. Ruth Negash, CEO of COMFWB..*

**Please introduce yourself to our readers?**

My name is Ruth Negash, and I am a CEO of the COMESA's Federation of Women in Business (COMFWB). Our headquarters is in Malawi and we've 21 member states from the Eastern and Southern parts of Africa. Our office deals with the business activities and development programs that are run by women, and it intends to motivate the region's women to raise their awareness and

improve their economic status. And our ultimate goal is for the region's women to be able to have a part in Africa's economic revival.

**When did Eritrea become a member of this organization, and how's the development going on?**

COMESA was established in 1994 and that year Eritrea became one the member states of the organization. Over the years, various activities have been done by the organization. When we come specifically to Eritrea, Eritrea's women were doing their commercial activities under the auspices of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). The NUEW has been working jointly with COMFWB to promote entrepreneurship and capacity building to initiate or expand existing businesses.



One of the major plans is advancing the blue economy (fish farming) in order to offer food alternative, to assure a balanced nutrition to the society and provide supply to meet the increasing demand of the fish market. Moreover, to increase the number of domestic manufacturing plants, creating employment opportunity to the citizens and to export finished goods to our neighbors and import from them what's not here. This networked interaction will help create a strong bond among the countries and bring about an economic growth and prosperity in the region. So, COMFWB is working to let the women have a great part in the economic development programs, and help them face their challenges as women entrepreneurs.

## **What does Eritrea contribute to the organization and what are its rewards?**

The COMESA fellowship is based on some fees that the members of the organization should annually pay, and as a member state of the organization Eritrea has to pay. And the organization in return gives various kinds of support to the members. The supports could be in the form of vocational training on new technologies of the industrial and agricultural machineries, capacity building courses and material supports. And due to Covid-19 pandemic it initiated an e-commerce program. It's is a virtual platform for discussion and exchange of ideas about business. It gives women opportunities to display their handicrafts on exhibitions in cooperation with the NUEW. This initiative aims to give them a platform to promote their products and have a market for their products. But more importantly than just producing and selling products, it allows them to have good organization and unity among them.



Furthermore, it creates a chance for Eritrean women to share and promote, through their products, our culture and traditional arts with other countries. The project is also expected to increase the participation of women and young people and promote their sense of entrepreneurship.

Capacity development programs have been among the major components of the project. We have so many governmental offices and private organizations in Eritrea that facilitate the training workshops. For instance, the Ministry of Agriculture is occasionally giving training to women entrepreneurs who are engaged in fishery and farming with the aim of improving the quality and quantity of food production.

And the same is true with the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the NUEW. They all give support in the areas that could help the women in terms of how effectively they could produce, and they encourage them to create their own business and improve their standard of living.

**What do you think about the progress that has been made?**

We've really stepped up from where we started. Especially in the sectors of agriculture and fishing, Eritrea has made enormous progress. And now we are here in Eritrea conducting an official meeting and tours to visit the development programs done in the fresh water fishery in Maekel region and some agricultural developments in the Southern region. In addition, an exhibition was held where handicrafts made by Eritrean female artists were displayed. The exhibition has shown their capabilities. Reports show the development programs are delivering promising outcomes regarding the amelioration of the women's living conditions. I hope this journey to Eritrea will offer a glimpse and good experience to the visitors about how much progress has been made by Eritrean women.

**Tell us more about the role of the co-partners such as the national offices and other partners on the women development programs?**

All the training programs for building capacity and awareness raising and the consultation programs are made by them as I mentioned earlier. Furthermore, they offer technical consultation on the regulations, guaranteeing qualities of the products and they help how the women can practically apply the theories on the

ground. These and other assisting programs are occasionally delivered to the women by these public and private offices.

### **Future plans?**

The COMESA nations have now agreed on the free-trade system among them, and this is expected to reinforce the ongoing endeavor to ensure the economic prosperity in the region. And one major focus of the organization is to increase agricultural yields to ensure healthy food and food security through sustainable organic inputs as well as to avoid the extra costs for importing goods from overseas.

In addition, there is a plan to produce our own packaging for the products we produce in our region because most of the packages come from abroad. The packages we make would be environment-friendly such as bottles, cans, paper packages and textile cases in order to save our environment from the hazardous plastic wastes.

### **Any final remark?**

The Eritrean society is diligent. So, we need to exploit this good habit and work jointly to change our resources in to desirable products to satisfy our needs by ourselves. But far more than the domestic market we also have to think about exporting products.

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