

International Women's Day 2026: Eritrean Women and Leadership Across Generations



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Perhaps uniquely, women's leadership is part of Eritrea's national memory. Across the country, there is deep respect for the women who stood shoulder to shoulder in the liberation struggle. They carried responsibility in every sense of the word – in combat, in logistics, in medical care, in political education, and in command. Their contribution was visible, and it shaped expectations about women's place in public life.

Today, Eritrean women are contributing across classrooms and vocational institutes, in hospitals and laboratories, on farms and in fisheries, within public administration, and in emerging digital spaces. They are navigating a context shaped by climate variability, water stress, food insecurity, and technological change. Many are the first in their families to access higher education. With that access comes both opportunity and expectation.

International Women's Day provides a moment to recognize this generational continuity. The women of the liberation era expanded the space for participation in national life. Young women today are extending that space through education, enterprise, and public service, strengthening the country's resilience in ways that respond to current realities.

A young woman studying engineering in Asmara, an entrepreneur building an agribusiness in the lowlands, a teacher serving in a rural school, or a health worker supporting a coastal community each represents a multiplier for national progress. Education strengthens productivity and creates opportunities that reach across generations. Maternal health reinforces community stability. Accessible childcare and support for eldercare ease the weight of unpaid responsibilities that often limit economic participation. When those pressures are reduced, time and skills are redirected toward broader contribution.

That generational link is also reflected in policy direction. As President Isaias Afwerki states in *My Struggle for Eritrea and Africa*, “[Women’s equality] is not a matter of ideology or rhetoric: it’s the reality of [Eritrea]. Without women, without their contribution, without their participation, nothing could have been achieved.” He further emphasizes that the task ahead is practical: “restructure [society] and guarantee [women’s] right to contribute fully to the life of the community, whether they are carrying or bringing up children, working in agriculture, industry or manufacturing.”

This approach is reflected in the priority placed across government institutions on women’s participation and equality, and in the integration of these considerations into planning and accountability. These efforts resonate with global priorities.

In his message for International Women’s Day, the UN Secretary- General calls on us to close gendered power gaps, invest in women for higher returns, ensure women’s full participation and leadership, including in peace and security, eliminate bias in digital spaces, and embed gender in climate action. These are not abstract ambitions. They are practical necessities.

Consider the climate.

When rainfall patterns shift, or water sources diminish, women often carry the added burden – literally and figuratively. Yet they are also leading adaptation efforts, managing natural resources, and strengthening household resilience. Including women fully in climate planning is not symbolic. It improves outcomes. Policies grounded in lived realities are more durable and more effective.

Consider peace and stability.

Eritrea's history demonstrates clearly that women are central to national resilience. Their participation during the liberation struggle reflected a principle later affirmed globally through Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security: sustainable peace requires women's full and meaningful participation.

Consider the digital future.

As technology reshapes economies and governance, access to science, innovation, and digital skills will define opportunity. No country seeking resilience and self-reliance can afford to leave half its talent behind. Ensuring girls and young women are fully equipped for this frontier is not only a matter of equality, but also a strategic imperative.

Evidence shows that numbers matter. Representation influences priorities. Participation shapes institutional culture. Policies are stronger when those affected by them are present in their design. This lesson has been evident in peace processes, governance systems, and multilateral institutions alike.

As UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, I have had the privilege of meeting women who carried Eritrea through conflict and women now shaping its future. The continuity with the past and the resilience and strength derived from it are unmistakable.

Our role, as United Nations partners, is clear: to accompany Eritrea's efforts to strengthen systems, expand opportunity, and ensure that development initiatives are inclusive. Women's rights and equality are not a parallel agenda. They are embedded in – and the key to success – for economic growth, climate adaptation, and sustainability.

Eritrea's women have long demonstrated their willingness to lead. The task ahead is to ensure that systems, investments, and partnerships fully reflect that reality.

March 7, 2026