Report on Women's Rights Violations in Eritrea
HRCE Report 1/2017, 8 March 2017

This report was launched on the 8th of March 2017, on International Women's Day, a day the world celebrates the courage, determination, resilience, strength and achievements of women of all status, while calling for an improved protection of women's rights and promotion of gender equality.

Introduction

Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE) is an Eritrean-led non-political human rights organization, located outside the country, which researches, reports and campaigns on violations of internationally-recognised human rights in Eritrea. HRCE is a founding member of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Network, and associate member of CIVICUS, the global network of civil society organisations. HRCE has made submissions directly to the UN Human Rights Council to advocate for the human rights of Eritreans. It works closely with African and international human rights organizations, adding an Eritrean voice to their reporting over many years on gross and persistent human rights violations in Eritrea.

This Report on Women's Rights in Eritrea is based on a new research conducted by HRCE for over six months in cooperation with Eritrean refugees in the Horn of Africa and Europe.

Discussion of "Woman's Rights" in this document is in reference to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to which Eritrea is a party, and which it systematically violates.

Background

The State of Eritrea is ruled by a government that functions without a constitution or parliament, and has been ruled by President Issayas Afewerki since 1991. The sole permitted political party is the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ). There is no independent civil society, human rights organization or freedom of speech and dissenting opinion inside the country. The regime rules in spite of lack of elections and without any legitimacy to its power of authority. It is clear that, under such conditions, the rights of its citizens will not be and are not respected. Even though Eritrea ratified the CEDAW in 1995, committing the government to uphold international standards on the rights of girls and women, it has nevertheless systematically violated this convention. The government has not taken steps to protect or ameliorate living conditions of girls and women. Instead it has acted atrociously towards them.

This report examines the widespread and variety of violations suffered by women and girls in Eritrea, including psychological abuse, systematic sexual harassments and rape, detention and torture or ill-treatment, forced labour, and inability to study and work in their preferred schools and professions. The Report is compiled by Human Rights Concern Eritrea (HRCE), based on research, face-to-face and telephone interviews of women who are victims of the above gross human rights violations within the context of existing institutional and policy structures of the regime in Eritrea. The institutions of a women's union, education, and the military are the three key state agencies responsible for the grave human rights violations against Eritrea's girls and women and should be subject to investigations. They execute and reinforce government policies of indoctrination, family separation, and systematic sexual abuse of girls and women.

In a country where rule of law is essentially inexistent, the rights of citizens will never be respected. Moreover, the rights of women are even more precarious due to, among other things, their physical vulnerability.

Eritrean women played a pivotal role during the harsh armed struggle for independence. Many sacrificed their lives for their country; others had to spend the rest of their lives suffering from physical and mental disability. Those who did not join the armed struggle stayed behind and farmed while their husbands fought and also faced hardships, including raising children as single parents. Others did not have children and spent their lives waiting for the return of their husbands. After independence was secured some husbands did not return. The women that returned from the armed struggle also faced a society reluctant to accept the equality their service to the country merited.

The struggle for independence was difficult on all levels as there was inadequate logistical and financial support for the war. Support came mainly from Eritreans living in the diaspora and, to a limited extent, from inside the country. Women, both in the country and abroad, supported the struggle by sending food for the soldiers, raising awareness and organizing fundraising events. The contribution Eritrean women made to the armed struggle is immeasurable but women continue to be marginalized by the current regime. During the armed struggle, women comprised 25% of the military but now only hold 3 out of 18 cabinet positions.

Eritrean women participated fully in the struggle for independence and earned their position in Eritrean society through hard work and persistence. However, after independence, the vision of social justice was extinguished, and the promises of equality were betrayed by the leader of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), Issayas Afewerki. Like all Eritreans, women became victims of the dictatorial regime.

Traditionally the rights of Eritrean women are respected under customary law, which protects them from any type of abuse, including sexual and physical.

The study begins with an examination of the abuse of Eritrean women by the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), an organization that was created to promote, protect and advocate for women's rights, and goes on to address different aspects of the widespread abuse of women's human rights.

Key Indoctrination Institutions and Women's Rights Violations

A. The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW)

The NUEW was established in 1980, during the armed struggle. From its infancy, the Union has been used as a political and propaganda tool, apart from its supposed work of safeguarding the rights of women.

As a result, both during the armed struggle era and after independence, the Union has become one of the right wings of the PFDJ, a predecessor of the original independence movement the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The NUEW has never been an independent entity; it entirely depends on allocations from the government's budget to run its activities, and these activities continue to be strictly monitored by the government. All of its board members are loyal followers of the regime, and the president of the union is a member of the dysfunctional central assembly of the PFDJ.

Most of the officials within the union are appointed through nepotism and have to maintain absolute loyalty to the regime in all they do and say, being entirely subject to its control.

Among the many objectives of the union are a political propaganda campaign for laundering the image of the PFDJ, imposing pressure on women to send their children to compulsory and indefinite national service, infiltrating Eritrean communities throughout the country and the diaspora communities, and reporting back to the PFDJ officials and through them to the national intelligence. While it continues to function for the benefit of the regime, it is disheartening that the Union has done nothing to address claims of girls and women of sexual and physical abuse by military officials and high ranking officers.

B. The Education System

Eritrean women are exposed to sexual abuse from an early age. In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Education has established a summer work program whereby every upper

secondary schooler is forced in summer work under the Ministry of Agriculture's preferred villages and community works in remote locations.

The student's summer works policy of the government exposes many young and under-age girls to sexual harassments and abuses. Summer work does not by itself constitute violation of human rights but it is not voluntarily and its aim is to keep young men and women away from the cities and villages so that to avoid any possible protests and peaceful demonstrations.

Furthermore, due to the lack of adequate secondary schools, particularly in rural areas, children are forced to walk long distances to get to the nearest school, which renders many vulnerable young girls to rape and many are forced to stop attending school at an early age. Sexual abuse is a taboo subject within Eritrean societies; many parents would not be willing to report sexual abuse for fear of stigma or isolation of the female child, yet the physical and psychological impact of it on young women is severe.

Among others, the results are:

a) Unwanted pregnancy: many choose to abort the pregnancy, but must deal with physical and legal issues. Abortion could result in infections and death. It could also result in fertility complications.
b) Social stigma: since it is taboo to bear a child outside of marriage, some young women decide to leave the country while they are pregnant and die in the process of crossing the border and others have drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to reach Europe.
c) Committing suicide: due to the psychological, physical, and sexual abuses many women endure they commit suicide, bearing huge psychological problems and trauma for the entire household, including the children they leave behind.

Since 2006, the regime in Eritrea started sending grade 11 students to the military base, known as Sawa Military Training Center, to complete their final year of secondary education where they also take their national school leaving exams. Sawa is a very

difficult place to live, particularly at such a young age, and it is much worse for women, especially when there is lack of access to adequate sanitary and hygiene services. The unfriendly weather, coupled with the intensive military training, exposes young women to physical and psychological hardships. In such a harsh environment, maintaining one's academic performance is difficult. The results are poor performance in their final exams.

National Service is meant to last for eighteen months for each conscript. However, using all sorts of machinations, the government has extended it to a limitless period of physical exploitation. Eritrean military officers are notorious for the sexual and physical abuse of young women, which goes unpunished under the banner of National Service. Understandably, such conditions become a reason for some parents to force their female children to marry at a young age and or encourage them to leave home resulting in a life of exile.

1. The above conditions systematically deny young women access to education of their choice and obstructs their aspirations.
2. The government imposes a strict rule that if any student fails to go to the military training camp, the parents are detained. Usually, the wife is the one that is detained, as she is at home; the husband is either still in National Service, has left the country, or has already been martyred. In addition, the family will be denied any service until they reveal the whereabouts of their daughter or son.

C. The Military Establishment

Being forcibly conscripted into the military disrupts the life of women beyond repair, since they are usually forced into becoming the sex slaves of the depraved military officers. Eventually, many suffer sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and many die from lack of appropriate treatment.

The Sawa Military Camp is not an ideal place for anyone, but the situation is much harsher for women. Among other things, girls and women do not get a chance to take a bath

every day, even when they are in their menstrual cycles. Informing the military officer about their menstrual cycles is difficult enough, sometimes even being forced to provide evidence, which is a great embarrassment for the young girls. With inexplicable cruelty, at the military base, it has been reported that no one believes the women if they are sick. They are insulted, ridiculed, accused of lying, and dehumanized. Here are some of the stress related conditions and illnesses commonly seen in SAWA Camp: -

- Walking backward (Rit-les)
- Running backwards
- Epilepsy
- Persistent hiccups
- Vomiting
- Speech problems (mutism)

Some women face unexpected termination of menstruation due to the weather and harsh treatment in the military base. Others experience periods of heavy menstruation, which usually results in anemia. Daily activities start at 4:30am and the training goes on until 6-7 in the evening. Anyone who refuses or is unable to respect an order given by military officers receives military punishment, which can be unbearable, especially for women. Hence, the number of women with mental illnesses or attempting suicide is much higher than that of men.

Key Findings

A. Forced Labour

After completion of military training, some women are forced to work in military shops and canteens. Women are deliberately assigned these duties where they can be easily targeted for many forms of abuse. No one is willing to address this issue; even if a woman makes an official complaint, because the abuse is systematic as well as their vulnerable situation is also strategically planned.

Civilian mothers are also not immune from abuse; they are forced to dance in the streets on every anniversary and national holiday. Any woman who refuses to take part in such activity is considered a protester and will be forced to pay a fine.

B. Young Women Unable to Establish Families

From 1st January 2017, completion of National Service became a requirement for marriage. Therefore, the municipality, priests, and sheiks have been given instructions not to permit any marriage unless the couple can produce certificates of National Service.

If a couple was married before the specified date, and want a marriage certificate, they must bring a letter from their respective military units, bearing witness to their active participation in National Service. Of course, those who are engaged in performing their National Service duties can marry; but if the women get pregnant, they are not released from national service until they are dangerously close to the delivery date.

After delivery, and while waiting to be demobilized, they usually struggle, as there will not be any source of income nor governmental assistance, and are not allowed to work. With the increasing cost of living and no means of support, marriage becomes a difficult choice to consider.

Getting an exit visa, whether for study or medical reasons, is a rare privilege in Eritrea. People must pay a large sum of money to bribe officials in order to be able to leave the country. The only other means of obtaining this visa is if one has a close relative amongst the immigration officials who can assist. If a woman claims her husband is living overseas and wants to join him, her husband must produce a certificate to show that he is paying 2% of his annual income to the Eritrean Embassy in that country.

Women below the age of 28 are only allowed to obtain an exit visa five years after their marriage, even if their husbands pay the 2% levy. Moreover, a child above the age of five is not permitted to leave the country; hence, many opt to leave illegally.

C. Prison Conditions

Eritrea is described as a mass prison by all in the human rights community, since people are not allowed to move in and out of their own country, and are deprived of all basic human rights, including freedom of expression. Many languish in the nation's 300 prisons, denied any contact with their family and without ever having a court hearing. Included among official justifications for imprisonment are the following: -

- Not completing national service
- Absconding from the military
- Trying to leave the country illegally

Some women are in detention because they resisted the aggressive sexual advances of military officers. The documented reason for their detention is that they disobeyed a direct order. The situation in the prisons is appalling: 70-150 people are detained in one cell, or in a metal shipping container in most cases. There are many underground cells, in which the temperature reaches an unbearable level, where prison hygiene conditions are dreadful. Many prisoners suffer from severe malnutrition and do not receive proper care. Many die in prison due to the harsh conditions, and of course women are also subjected to these conditions.

Receiving proper medical treatment in the prisons is a rare privilege, due to the overwhelming number of prisoners and lack of appropriate facilities. Usually the person qualified in First Aid on the site recognizes the prisoner's serious condition and recommends referral to a clinic or hospital. However, permission comes only from the immediate prison leader, who is not usually present and is typically unconcerned. Many prisoners die in the process of being transported to the appropriate health facility.

Prison conditions - Eye Witnesses

A former female detainee, who did not want to be identified, expressed her ordeal as follows:

There were days when we used to think that those who were killed by the border soldiers were better off than those of us who were inside the prison, because life

in the prison was hell. The border guards enjoy sleeping with any women – whether she is married or not, young or old, even if she tells them she is pregnant. The soldiers at the border are given shoot-to-kill orders as regards anyone who tries to cross the border; hence, upon arrest, the soldier would demand sex from the women as a bribe to spare her life. Many may believe that being submissive in such a situation is the better option. However, for those women who have been raped in front of their children and those who were raped by the very person who killed their husbands, one can argue that death might sometimes be a better option.

In 2009 I was detained in a small cell with 70 other women who came from different places. The room was very small with literally no space to stretch your legs. We were only allowed one toilet break where we go out onto the open field to defecate. Other times there was a small container in our room that we use for urine only. And the worst part was, we had to eat in our room, while the room is full of urine smell and other body odours. However, life was not safe outside the cell as well. When your name is called by the prison guards, you know for a fact that you will be beaten if not raped; hence you prefer the filthy prison cell.

Witness No-2

In the prison, I met three old Eritrean women, from the Kunama ethnic group, who were detained for a year and three months. They were told the reason they were detained was that their sons have joined the armed opposition groups based in Ethiopia. In 2010, we were transferred to another prison called prima country. However, there was very little change in our prison conditions. Even though we were not beaten, still we were not allowed to meet our family.

In this new prison, I met a woman by the name of Meron, who had a mental problem due to the severe prison conditions. She used to shout openly that her boyfriend was killed in front of her, and that of the military officers called her to his office and raped her. When she tried to report all these, she was accused of

lying and she was moved to another prison. After a while, in prima country we were moved to Adi–Abeyto prison, near the capital city Asmara. In Adi-Abeyto we were 130 women in one room, all young and old crammed together. Still, even there we were not allowed a visit from our family. Water was scarce and we were usually concerned about the women who were detained with their young children. For instance, there was a woman that was detained for eight months with her child, because she was alleged helping her husband leave the country, as opposed to reporting him to the authorities. Eventually, the child got sick and his condition got worse in a short period, and he died in detention. The mother left the prison to bury her son, but she never returned and we never saw her again. I am not sure whether she is alive or not.

Most of the women who were detained with their children did not have anyone at home to take care of their children. And those who did manage to get someone to take care of their children, usually suffered greatly from the separation which had a serious psychological impact on their lives.

There was another woman who was detained with her child who was found trying to leave the country illegally. She was advised by her prison mates to claim that she was HIV positive. One evening, one of the interrogators called her to his office and as he was preparing himself to rape her, she told him that she was living with HIV/AIDS. The officer, however, didn't show any concern; instead, he told her he was living with HIV too and he ended up raping her, and she ended up having HIV."

D. Access to Livelihoods

According to the Land Proclamation No.58/94, all lands belongs to the government. Historically land was owned by the communities.

The Eritrean regime is notorious for taking land from the occupants of any farm or village to sell it to wealthy people. At present, only women who have completed their national service can obtain land. The regime does not tolerate any form of opposition, and has arrested women who assembled to vent their frustration with the process of land allocation that impacted them. Recently, the women of 'Hadish-Adi' and 'Awhi', for example, faced harsh retributions for objecting to the government's reallocations of their land. Women who were proceeding to the offices of the president and the Ministry of Local Government to file their complaint regarding this issue were blocked by the security forces of the country and arrested.

No retirement pension plan has ever been introduced in Eritrea. Those that suffer the most as a result of this are women, since men are forced to remain in the military sometimes up until the age of 80. After they reach the age of retirement, women have no source of income. Moreover, the rise in the cost of living, including rent and household commodities, makes it more difficult for women to rely only on savings. As a result, many fall into destitution and usually beg on the streets, or outside churches and mosques.

Unpaid maternity leave in Eritrea lasts for only two months. Moreover, the government has not developed a program to assist mothers after they return to work, and there are no adequate, affordable and privately owned child care facilities.

Culturally begging is considered taboo in Eritrean society, and the government does not tolerate it. However, women who have children, whether conceived through rape or marriage, do not have any source of income and therefore have no alternative to begging. Yet the government detains anyone who is found begging, and the women become victims again. Ironically, they are usually asked to pay a 20,000 Nakfa (Eritrea's local currency) fine to be released from jail, and those who cannot raise such an amount are forgotten in prison. Many die due to harsh prison conditions and lack of medical care, and are usually buried by the state without informing their relatives.

E. Rape and children who do not know their father

Since the 1990's the number of unplanned pregnancies has increased, particularly with the introduction of the students' forced summer work program and national service. In some of these cases, the young women became pregnant due to rape.

Of course, in some pregnancy cases men have abandoned the women and chose to not be responsible for the child. In other cases it is rape leaving the young women to deal with the pregnancy on their own. Some women file charges against the rapists. However, even when the rapists are summoned by the court, there have been cases when they refuse to present themselves and the file is withdrawn or closed. There also instances where the women do not know who the father is, particularly when the rape and attack have occurred at night.

In the past, in accordance with traditional laws, there was a system that addressed the issue of children born with no father. The government now claims to have replaced the traditional system by introducing a DNA paternity test; however, the test is rarely used in the country. As a result, many children do not know their fathers and are obliged to use the surname of their mothers.

The victimized mothers, after going through such an ordeal of physical and psychological trauma, mostly end up in prostitution in order to support themselves and their family, and often leave their children with their parents. Those who do not have parents leave the country, sometimes leaving their children in the streets.

F. The Right of Worship

In Eritrea, there is no freedom of religion or belief. Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals are not allowed to practice their religion freely. Leaders of these faiths have been detained for more than a decade now. Likewise, many Eritrean women are languishing inside prison cells because of their faith. Few of those prisoners who have been lucky enough to be released dare to recount the inhumane treatment and hardships that prisoners experience.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, maltreatment of citizens is common when any country lacks the rule of law. The proud and reckless military officers and their soldiers find satisfaction and gratification through the abuse of the rights of the people, especially women. In a small country that secured its independence through a long and arduous armed struggle, it is disheartening to see acts of lawlessness and gender-based violence and discrimination that are almost unheard of in the 21st Century.

Eritrean women are being sexually and physically abused not only by military officers but also by the leader of the country. This has been verified to HRCE by women who stated they were victims of this ordeal. Since gender-based abuse appears to be sanctioned at the very highest level, the miseries endured by Eritrean women seem unrelenting and will continue until the regime is held accountable.

Finally, the world must take action to protect the Eritrean people, and especially Eritrea's women, from further hardship and violations, and become more pro-active in identifying and bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and in assisting the emergence of a country which respects the rule of law.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE UN AND ITS AGENCIES

- Recognize these serious violations by the Government of Eritrea of CEDAW, and take appropriate measures to bring the situation of women in Eritrea into conformity with the relevant international human rights treaties and standards.

TO THE ERITREAN GOVERNMENT

- Immediately end all assignment of children under the age of 18 to the military training camps at Sawa and to become proactive in safeguarding female conscripts from abuse, ensuring that monitoring systems are implemented to safeguard female conscripts and to take action against perpetrators of abuse;

- Empower and support female conscripts who complain of harassment and take action against perpetrators;
- Remove compulsory military service from the secondary education system, and prohibit torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment of female conscripts in connection with current national service practices;
- Ensure that sanitary products are available to female conscripts in Sawa and other military training camps, and throughout the military service
- Closely monitor the treatment of women in detention and take action against officers implicated in the sexual abuse or torture of female conscripts;
- Ensure that no recruits to national service are less than 18 years old and monitor closely to ensure against underage conscription;
- Remove the requirement for national service as a prerequisite to marriage and ensure the right to begin a family;
- Ensure the welfare of the elderly and other vulnerable members of society, including victims of rape, single mothers and women forced into prostitution by deprivation

TO THE UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR FOR ERITREA

- Continue to investigate the Eritrean government's treatment of girls and women and report abuses to the UN Human Rights Council, General Assembly and other appropriate UN bodies