



Permanent Mission of Eritrea  
to the United Nations

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Statement by  
Hon. Luul Gebreab, MP  
President of National Union of Eritrean Women  
on  
the combined initial, second and third periodic reports of Eritrea  
to  
The thirty-fourth session of the Committee  
on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women of  
the United Nations

New York, 24 January 2006

Madame Chairperson:

The Eritrean delegation wishes, from the outset, to thank you and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for having selected Eritrea to present its combined initial, second and third periodic reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Our delegation is composed of seven individuals. The members are:

1. Hon. Ms. Luul Gebreab, President of the National Union of Eritrean Women (Head of delegation)
2. H.E. Mr. Araya Desta, Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations
3. Mr. Tesfa Alem Seyoum, Counsellor/ Deputy Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations
4. Mr. Amanuel Giorgio, First Secretary, Eritrean Mission to the UN
5. Ms. Tsehai Habtemariam, Political Officer, Embassy of Eritrea, Washington, D.C.
6. Ms. Elsa Hailemariam, National Union of Eritrean Women, North America Chapter, Washington, D.C.
7. Ms. Samrawit Michael, National Union of Eritrean Women, North America Chapter, Washington, D.C.

Madame Chairperson:

The Eritrean struggle for gender equality precedes the launching of CEDAW 1979, as well as the International Conference on Women (1975). Women's liberation was an important part of the struggle for national liberation from colonial rule that started in the early 1960s. The struggle for independence, led by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), laid the foundations and principles for the total emancipation of women as part and parcel of the social and economic transformation of the Eritrean society. During the thirty-year long struggle for national liberation, women participated equally in economic, educational and health affairs as well as in policy formulation, governance, and military operations. One third of the liberation forces in active combat were women. Our Government's efforts toward full equality

women. The resolutions that were adopted addressed several important issues, including the need to increase women's participation in political and public life, economic empowerment of women, guaranteeing equal access and ownership of land, and greater access to healthcare and education.

Also in 2005, a woman was appointed for the first time Governor of one of the nation's six regions (Southern Red Sea Region), while another woman was appointed Mayor of the second largest city in the country – the Port City of Massawa. Although a great deal needs to be accomplished in the area of political and public life, we consider these achievements as concrete and significant steps in the right direction.

**Education.** Recognizing that sustainable development and elimination of poverty cannot be attained without full emancipation of women in all aspects of life, the Government issued a National Educational Gender Policy and Strategy in April 2005. The Policy ensures equal rights and opportunities to both sexes, and addresses the current disparities and inequalities between boys and girls, both in terms of access to and performance in education. The Education Gender Policy and Strategy is aligned with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and strives to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Also, it aims at closing the gender gap in secondary education by 2020.

Secondly, recognizing that household chores and economic responsibilities of women hamper their ability to take full advantage of available educational opportunities, the Government, in collaboration with the NUEW and the World Food Program (WFP), launched the "food for Education" program. This program is designed to increase women's participation in education by compensating their time which could have been used for search of food. Thus, women attending the educational programs get free basic food supplies such as flour, oil, sugar, and salt. Although the program is new, more than 70,000 women benefited from this program in 2004-2005. Preliminary results indicate not only greater motivation and participation by young women in educational activities, but also encouragement and support by male family members.

In the past several years, there had been indications that our primary and secondary educational programs did not prepare graduates to successfully pursue further training for gainful employment. Consequently, to increase the eligibility of high school graduates to pursue post-secondary education

steps pertaining to employment creation and income generation for the benefit of women. Key elements included in the measures adopted are, encouraging women who own small scale agricultural and commercial activities; training women in various non-traditional skills , such as construction and transportation; ensuring high participation of women in all sectors of trade and industry; providing them with low-interest loans for self reliance; upgrading and developing marketable skills in handicrafts; strengthening the steps taken to reduce women's load in household chores; and ensuring women's equal rights to land ownership. The Cabinet of Ministers also agreed to convene regular meetings with the NUEW to oversee implementation of its decisions.

### **Constraints**

Madame Chairperson: The strong commitment and political will of the Government and people of Eritrea toward full and equal participation by women in all aspects of our political, social, cultural and economic life are beyond doubt. In their leadership roles, the Government, the National Union of Eritrean Women and other civil society organizations are working hard to implement the provisions of national laws, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform of Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and other international commitments aimed at the elimination of discrimination against women. Within the limits of the capacity of our young nation, no effort is spared. By the same token, we do not underestimate the real constraints that limit how much we can expect to achieve in the foreseeable future.

One of the real constraints is related to persistent drought and poverty. As you know, in the developing world poverty, takes a greater toll on women than men. In our region, where the majority of people are dependent for their livelihood on agriculture and livestock, the impacts of drought and poverty are severe, particularly on women. Malnutrition as a consequence of poverty victimizes women in reproductive age and undermines our efforts to bring about full equality of opportunities among men and women. To reduce the dependence on rain-fed agriculture, our Government is spearheading a national campaign to build the necessary infrastructure including dams, irrigation systems, and feeder roads in the shortest possible time. It is obvious, however, that the resource and time requirements of such an effort are immense. This is a real constraint.