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Silent Pain: Rebuilding Community among Eritrean Survivors of War Rape

Introduction

We would like to express our appreciation to the organizing committee of the International Society for Health and Human Rights for this opportunity to present the situation of Eritrean women after the recent 2 and ½ year war between Eritrea and Ethiopia. We are focussing on women who were raped by Ethiopian soldiers during the invasion and occupation of southern and western Eritrea during the last year. However, since our topic is “silent pain,” and since the international community has been remarkably silent with regard to the situation in the Horn, we intend to bring to your attention additional aspects of the urgent needs facing women who are among the 1.1 million people internally displaced during and after the Ethiopian offensive of May, 2000.

It is significant that, nearly one year later, there were approximately 450,000 internally displaced persons (IDP's) residing in IDP camps, or in rural or urban host communities (Cobb, 2001). They have been unable to return home because the political and military terms for maintaining the temporary security zone along the border of Eritrea and Ethiopia, in which the villages of many of the IDP's lie, have not been agreed upon. UN peacekeepers are currently deployed there. Some of Eritrea's most productive agricultural land lies within this zone, which was heavily mined during the recent war. Even now, one year later, many families in the camps are without basic necessities.

As I mentioned earlier, the context of our presentation on rape as a weapon of war is silence. This silence goes beyond the stigma and shame that accompany rape, particularly in traditional patriarchal societies such as that of Eritrea. Rape as an act of terrorism destroys community spirit with intentional, personal acts to degrade and contaminate women, thereby striking at men (Card, 1996). This may further legitimize societal norms of gender inequality and discrimination, silencing the lived experience of women. Silence also characterizes the response of the international community, as the war continued and over 1/3 of the population of Eritrea was displaced. Well over 100,000 lives on both sides were lost in this period, still silence, as the fighting intensified. Can it be that African lives are less valued by the international community?

It is my great pleasure today to introduce Ms. Belainesh Araia, Director of Research and Information at the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). Ms. Araia has served her country in many ways: as a combatant for 17 years, fighting for Eritrea's independence, as a member of the Constitution Commission that formulated Eritrea's constitution in the years

immediately following independence, and now with the National Union of Eritrean Women. She is an accomplished speaker, having addressed countless audiences in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Eritrean communities in the Diaspora. Our presentation includes a brief introduction to the situation in Eritrea, followed by an overview of the situation of women raped during the war, concluding with challenges and next steps.

First I would like to thank the Organizing Committee of the 6th International Conference for Health and Human Rights that helped me be here to join in a very important Conference with such honorable participants. I believe that I am very privileged to join you. Secondly, I appreciate the role of Dr. Nancy Farwell from the USA who worked voluntarily for three and half years in Eritrea concerning children and youth and still is helping Eritrea at its worst time. She has worked hard to make the voices of Eritrean women heard here, so thank you very much, Nancy.

Background

We would like to briefly introduce the country of Eritrea. Eritrea is in the Horn of Africa. Its population is 3.5 million, approximately 50% Moslems and 50% Christians, comprised of nine ethnic groups who speak nine languages. Eritrea was established in 1889 as an Italian colony, remaining under Italian rule until 1941. After the defeat of the Italians in North Africa during World War II, Eritrea was under British colonial rule until 1951. From 1952-1962 Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia under the United Nations. Ethiopia annexed Eritrea from 1962-1991. Eritrea took its independence in 1991 after 30 years of armed struggle against Ethiopian colonial rule. In 1993, 99.8% of Eritreans at home and in the Daispora voted for independence in a national referendum under United Nations observation.

During the seven years from 1991-1998, Eritreans have been working to reconstruct their destroyed and neglected country. We have been working to heal our peoples' scars due to 30 years of war -- socially, psychologically, culturally and so on. As a result of 30 years of war, there are hundreds of thousands of people who are in exile in different areas of the world, hoping to come back home. Within Eritrea about 1/3 of all families are female-headed households.

As you all know, Eritrean society is a traditional society in which women suffer because of the violence that is inflicted by tradition. Sometimes these acts are not even recognized as violence, because they are so deeply rooted in the social texture. They are considered normal and looked upon even as duties. If these duties are not carried out, marginalization and insult are the consequences. These types of violence include female genital mutilation (FGM), early marriage, wife beating, son preference, etc. However, these practices are fading gradually because of the struggle for liberation, during which women comprised 33% of the army. Social transformation is continuing slowly through education.

The recent war: Impact on women and children

After seven years of independence, in May 1998, Ethiopia invaded Eritrea under the pretext of a border conflict, occupying territory far beyond the contested border areas. The third offensive that took place in May 2000 was the most destructive. Ethiopian troops occupied different territories, burned down towns, and annexed many villages and several towns. The invasion, aerial and artillery bombardments, forced expulsion of Eritrean citizens, state

sponsored vandalism, arson, confiscation of property, rape, and terror have resulted in the displacement of 1.1 million people; that is, almost one third of the entire population.

In addition, Ethiopia has engaged in a deliberate policy of ethnic expulsion that some have called ethnic cleansing (Calhoun, 1999). Since June, 1998, Ethiopia has forcibly expelled more than 72,000 Eritreans living in Ethiopia, many with Ethiopian citizenship. This has been done without notification of the international agencies or of the Eritrean government, thus violating the Geneva Convention and the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Those who were expelled faced perilous border crossings across unmarked minefields at night, with no guidance in how to reach the IDP camps.

The implications for women and children were disastrous, especially during the period from June 1998 until March 2000 when Citizens for Peace in Eritrea (CPE) studied the urban deportations in some detail and presented them to the international community (Legesse, 1999, 2000). Parents and children were separated when the parents were taken by Ethiopian authorities, detained, and expelled. International agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and UNICEF were notified of these forced separations, and presented with a list of 2,600 children and their parents' names and former addresses in Ethiopia. However, no significant progress has been made in reunifying the children with their parents, so that many have been forced to survive as street children and beggars in Ethiopia. These children need the protection and intervention of international agencies that serve war-affected children (Legesse, 2000). Women, too, have been endangered by these ethnic expulsions – many pregnant women were forced to walk to the international boundary across mined areas in the no-man's land between the trenches of the two armies. Some had to give birth in the bush, without any assistance.

War rape: Experiences and testimony

All the above atrocities are the spoken ones. The worst suffering is the silent pain of the raped women and girls. In addition to facing all the above-mentioned difficulties, women have been gang-raped and in some cases, children were forced to witness these crimes. In other situations, family members and neighbors watched helplessly as groups of Ethiopian soldiers abducted young girls. In spite of their screams, no one dared to intervene, unwilling to give the soldiers an excuse to shoot. Some girls as young as 11-15 years old were taken by the soldiers to “detention centers,” private homes that had been commandeered for the purpose so that the girls' families could not protect them from violation. These abductions were witnessed and heard by other adolescents, family members, and neighbors, causing them much distress. While bystanders have testified about the abductions and the “detention centers,” the women and girls themselves often do not admit to being raped.

In some villages in the occupied southern area around Senafe, primary testimony indicates that every woman was raped (Legesse, 2000; S. Meky, Ministry of Health, personal communication to N. Farwell, July 4, 2001). This intimate and personal weapon of war was one of the principal tactics of terror forcing women to flee the occupied territories (Legesse, 2000). Thousands of women fled to IDP camps. Those who remained under the occupation, in particular the young women, did not dare to leave their homes unless they were in large groups of 10-15.

Obtaining testimony from women who have been raped is very difficult, partly due to overwhelming anger and horror. Some women will talk about being beaten by Ethiopian

soldiers who they say tried to rape them, but not many will actually admit to being raped. Their reluctance to speak comes from fear of being marginalized by society, which will bring serious consequences. In Eritrean society many men view their wives as their property and consider rape an act that tarnishes their male honor. Therefore, many husbands are likely to react to the rape by divorcing their wives. Since most Eritrean women are economically dependent on their husbands' incomes, the possibility of being evicted from their home with no means to provide for themselves or their children is a strong reason not to speak out. Young girls who were raped are even more vulnerable, at risk of being shunned, or worse, by their families. In addition to rejection and stigma, the raped girls and women are afraid to bring shame to their families, and they fear gossip and isolation from the rest of the society.

Promised that none of what they say would reach their husbands, families, or members of their community, some women were willing to speak to staff of the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) about the war crimes they suffered at the hands of the Ethiopian army. As an example, we will present some stories that some women told B. Araia in the western part of Eritrea.

A young mother of four children was attacked by an Ethiopian soldier while she was fetching water. She said that he took her from her sister, beat her on her head, struggled to make her fall, and tore her clothes. She said "I prefer to die than to give up," but at last she fell unconscious and she doesn't know what happened to her. She said that she has strong pain in all parts of her body and still is scared whenever she has to fetch water or firewood. The picture is so vivid in her mind that she is not able to go out again.

Another 30-year-old mother of 4 children was in line to grind corn when an Ethiopian soldier started to beat the two men who were behind her in the line. After scaring them, he took her in a nearby hut and raped her. She said that she was so horrified that at the beginning she was ready to commit suicide. If it were not for the sake of her poor children she would not choose to live.

"Fortuna" is a 42-year-old mother and businesswomen. When the Ethiopian troops entered her town, she fled with her children leaving all her belongings behind. Twelve days later, she returned home to look for food to feed her starving children. Two officers raped her and she reported the incident crying to the Ethiopian commander in the area, but he laughed at her.

The Ethiopians did not spare even their own compatriots who were living on Eritrean soil. They had to suffer the same penalties as the Eritrean women. They too were raped by Ethiopian soldiers. Bogalesh is a hotel employee. She is an Ethiopian, a 31-year-old mother of three. She left her three children back in Ethiopia and came to work in Eritrea. The Ethiopian soldiers raped and beat her for two days in a row. As a result of the rape and beating, she suffered from severe health complications. Although she was under treatment, she had developed hearing problems (because of the slapping and beating), had internal bleeding, and is in tremendous pain.

Abrehet is a 30-year-old woman, also from Ethiopia. She reported that, in three nights, ten soldiers raped her. Hoping that the rape would stop, she started sleeping between her 7-year-old and 3-year-old children. This didn't stop the raping, however. Ethiopian soldiers would pull her out of her children's refuge and rape her. Watching this, her children would cry and ask her to take them to their father. She says the worst suffering she experienced was her children witnessing such a brutal act. She now suffers from extreme depression and other

health complications. She is worried about her future, uncertain about how her husband will react to news about the rape.

In general the women say "He beat me, he overpowered me, and when I tried to scream he gagged my mouth. He locked the door to the hut, but God saved me." This is what many of them say. Although they know that their rights and dignity have been violated, they prefer to suffer in silence rather than reveal the violations they have endured.

Psychosocial support: An urgent need

In the IDP camps, the Eritrean governmental agencies and the international non-governmental organizations (NGO's) have provided food, shelter, and water (basic needs), but there has been virtually no attention to psychosocial issues. Many deportees and IDPs, both children and adults, are struggling with trauma and multiple issues of disruption, loss of normal life and livelihoods, betrayal, and lack of trust. There is an urgent need for outreach, healing, and the promotion of psychosocial health.

Access to health services is limited in the camps as well as in the local communities. UNICEF is in the process of conducting a pilot health examination in one of the 9 IDP camps, the results of which will be available in the future. There is a need to conduct similar health examinations in all other camps but there are no funds available at the moment. Because of high cases of HIV/AIDS in the Ethiopian army, and the high incidence of war rape, these examinations are essential.

Preliminary data and information gathered by the National Union of Eritrean Women and Citizens for Peace in Eritrea indicate that rape is very widespread in the occupied areas. Difficulties in documenting or assessing the extent of war rape and its impact should not be cause for dismissing or understating the extent of the problem. Instead, methodologies must be developed that can address the sensitive and painful nature of sexual violence. This is essential not only to break the silence, but also to continue to address psychological and physical distress and to provide economic assistance and support to children and other family members traumatized by the rape of their mothers, sisters, and wives. These women who are suffering in silence are not sure when they will be able to return to their villages to live normal lives, because the agreement to establish a temporary demilitarized zone prior to full demarcation of the border, has not been fully implemented. Women need basic necessities and medication. They need psychological support. They need education and training. Taking this into consideration, staff of the NUEW visited the camps, organized fund-raising programs to procure basic needs, and trained 33 women as psychosocial outreach workers in order to alleviate some of these problems. There is a need to train others and to upgrade the skills of the already trained women. Therefore, the NUEW is trying to secure funding for this purpose.

It is NUEW's plan in the immediate future to continue the training and capacity building of village level psychosocial outreach workers. In addition, NUEW plans to seek funding for community level education on the psychosocial effects of trauma, including men and community elders in this process. Due to the scale of need, the overall lack of institutional resources, and the cultural emphasis on social networks and community, NUEW envisions a program of psychosocial support that involves women in communal activities rather than individual counseling. Through supportive outreach and group meetings, NUEW can help

women with parenting concerns, provide mutual support and assistance, and build psychosocial health through productive activities at home and in the community.

I would like to comment that even though I am glad to be here with you, I feel sorry to be the only African woman at such an important conference dealing with human rights and health. We believe that African women are among the victims of all human rights violations such as sexism, racism, and economic, political, and cultural discrimination, both domestically and in the Diaspora. We hope that this will be taken into consideration in future conferences, so that we can work together to break the silence.

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