Identity Transformation and Reintegration Among Ethiopian Women War Veterans: A Feminist Analysis

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WHO ARE WOMEN WHO ARE VETERANS?

Identity Transformation and Reintegration Among Ethiopian Women War Veterans: A Feminist Analysis

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Ethiopian women in the Tigray People’s Liberation Front developed a collective identity during the civil war, including androgynous attitudes and behavior that defied traditional gender norms. After the war, they were demobilized and left on their own to re-adjust to civilian life. Interviews with 20 such women veterans suggest that all were integrated into society economically, and to some degree socially, but political integration was minimal. Social integration was facilitated when they saw their fighter identity as an asset rather than a liability. Viewing the post-war “fighter identity” as a liminal gender identity may help such women mine the strengths gained from their transformative war experiences.

KEYWORDS Ethiopian women, war veterans, reintegration, gender identity, Tigray People’s Liberation Front, military family, feminist research, feminist family research, feminist psychotherapy

The Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), founded in 1975 in a northern region of Ethiopia, mobilized the Ethiopian people against a brutal military dictatorship (referred to as the Derg) and led a united front of four different armed forces to a military victory in 1991 (Young, 1997). Women
comprised approximately a third of the fighters (Hammond, 1990; Berhe, 1999; Young, 1997).

The contribution of female TPLF soldiers in the victory over the Derg is well-known. This study explores these women veterans’ interpretations of their reintegration experiences 20 years later. Through lessons learned over the years from the perspective of the women themselves, the authors seek to give supportive networks a deeper understanding of the challenges such women face as they adjust to civilian life and of the resourceful ways in which they cope. This authors show how the identities of women fighters shift, both during and after the war, creating a liminal gender identity that may affect the reintegration process both positively and negatively. Liminality and the post-war fighter identity are introduced as conceptual tools for therapists as they attempt to understand veterans’ complex realities.

LIMINALITY AND THE POST-WAR FIGHTER IDENTITY

How can the legend of the “woman fighter” be transformed into a workable, liberating reality for TPLF women after the war? The authors believe that viewing their post-war fighter identity as a “liminal” gender identity can help female veterans mine the strengths from their transformative experiences during the war.

The term “liminal” was introduced by anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1908/1960) and popularized by Victor Turner, who borrowed and expanded upon the concept. Turner called the middle stage of rites of passage the transitional or liminal stage and noted that the status of liminal individuals is socially and structurally ambiguous, “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (1969, p. 95). Thus, liminality is not a state outside the social structure or on its edges; it lies in the cracks within the social structure itself (La Shure, 2005).

With liminality, an ambiguous state, either the possibility of freedom in society can be realized or the possibility of being marginalized can result, depending on how an individual moves back and forth between the social structures (La Shure, 2005). Some people can develop growing acceptance of a sort of permanent liminality in which there is no need to return to conventional social structure; an ongoing state of contestation, negotiation, and transformation becomes a way of life (Miller, 2004). This may be the case for some former TPLF women who have accepted the ambiguity of their gendered realities and are very much integrated economically, politically, and socially. They may be using their liminal state to their advantage by moving back and forth, adapting and resisting, as they reintegrate themselves into society in different situations and different levels over time.
Former TPLF women who find themselves barely integrated appear to struggle with their ambiguous gender identity and may not yet have learned how to make it work for them in their new setting. Instead of feeling free “betwixt and between” traditional and alternative gender beliefs and practices, they may feel marginalized, isolated, and disrupted by the change in their situation. In order to explore the usefulness of liminality as a conceptual tool in counseling Ethiopian women war veterans, a general understanding of how soldiers are reintegrated into society as civilians is presented, and then the usefulness of a feminist approach to reintegration is demonstrated.

TOWARD A HOLISTIC FEMINIST CONCEPT OF REINTEGRATION AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

Gender roles are not natural or static and can be deliberately manipulated to achieve certain political goals (Alexander & Hawkesworth, 2008; Enloe, 2000; Goldstein, 2001). Women and girls work in liberation armies, rebel groups, and other militia along with men; their roles are not incidental but are often the foundation upon which these fighting forces rely (Goldstein, 2001; Honwana, 2006).

Nonconventional armies cannot rely on state structures and conventional recruitment tactics to gain a militaristic advantage over a conventional army. Thus, gender roles are often manipulated and expanded in order to help the nonconventional fighting force gain an advantage. As was the case with the TPLF and other guerrilla armies, the nature, length, and intensity of certain wars require the training of women for combat and other critical roles. After the conflict, rather than admitting that women are equally capable of combat and other roles traditionally reserved for men, women are routinely demobilized (released from military service) in an attempt to return to “normal” (Cock, 1991; Goldstein, 2001; White, 2007). Instead of generating policies that promote ongoing gender equity, governments often minimize women’s contributions, thereby reinforcing traditional gender ideologies and hierarchies after combat ends.

Entrenched ideas about the roles of women and men must be permanently dislodged if women are to attain power that results in lasting freedom. Therefore, an analysis of demobilization and reintegration processes after war—including a feminist perspective on the complexity of gender ideologies and the roles they play in armed conflicts—is necessary to understand what happens to girls and women who have served in nonconventional armies and how therapists can intervene on their behalf.

Demobilization is typically achieved by assembling soldiers, disarming them, discharging them from service, offering them some temporary and limited form of financial compensation, and transporting them back home. Scholars differentiate demobilization from reintegration, viewing them
as related yet separate processes on a continuum (Colletta, Kostner, & Wiederhofer, 2004; Kingma, 2000; Mehreteab, 2004). Feminist scholars, in particular, emphasize that demobilization sets the tone for reintegration, because if the different needs of male and female soldiers are not addressed initially during the demobilization phase, the entire process is likely to re-establish or reinforce unequal gender relations post-conflict (Cock, 1991; De Watteville, 2002; Farr, 2002). However, most war-torn countries must cut costs, despite well-intentioned, comprehensive plans. The result is that while token attempts are made to address the special needs of women fighters before they are discharged (e.g., reproductive health care services), most of the practical challenges women face are minimized or ignored (e.g., child care services). This study focuses on reintegration, what happens when women soldiers return home (see Farr, 2002 for a feminist analysis of demobilization processes).

Reintegration is a comprehensive process that does not have a distinct end and it involves not only former soldiers but also their families. Three major processes are linked to successful reintegration. Social reintegration is “the process through which the former soldier and family feel a part of and are accepted by the community.” Political reintegration includes “the process through which the ex-combatant and family become a full part of decision-making processes in the community” and at large. Finally, economic reintegration occurs when the former soldier’s “household builds up its livelihood through production or gainful employment” (Kingma 2000, p. 28).

The term “reintegration” implies that soldiers return to homes that have not changed. It also implies that only the soldiers must re-adapt. Scholars are now contesting this assumption, saying that soldiers, their families, and their communities must consciously learn to adapt to change (McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Mehreteab, 2004; Veale, 2003). Some scholars use the words reintegration and integration interchangeably, suggesting a give and take involving all entities. The authors adopt this usage.

In addition, most literature on reintegration concentrates on only one aspect—political or social or economic. Most studies focus only on early post-conflict resettlement and integration issues. It is relatively rare to encounter a fully articulated holistic approach to reintegration that covers all three aspects and assesses women’s long-term views and ongoing experiences (see Mehreteab, 2004 and Veale, 2003 for two exceptions). In this study, the authors address all three aspects of reintegration as well as women’s views regarding their experiences twenty years later.

Recent studies indicate that women generally face constraints in the reintegration process over and above those faced by men (De Watteville, 2002; Farr, 2002; McKay & Mazurana, 2004). For example, all war veterans must adjust to civilian norms and a civilian identity. They must all adjust to a cash economy that requires finding economic support and housing,
while grappling with other issues such as aging, ill health, and various disabilities. However, women veterans must also adjust to civilian pressure to assume a role more subordinate to men than when they were soldiers, in general and within the family. Moreover, reintegration has a greater impact on women because they tend to have less education and fewer marketable skills than men and are the primary caretakers of their children. Family and other domestic obligations curtail their movements, making certain kinds of employment difficult. They also struggle with discrimination against wage-earning women. Therefore, a feminist approach to reintegration is holistic, covering issues women face and their coping strategies.

Ethiopia’s Civil War and Its Effects on Female Guerilla Soldiers

Anyone working on behalf of women war veterans needs to understand how patriarchal power operates in a society that is reconstructing itself after war, as well as how different women are affected by—and are differently able to respond to—this power (De Watteville, 2002; Farr, 2002). Like most ancient societies, Ethiopia espouses traditional values that subordinate women. Christianity and Islam, mixed with traditions influenced by feudal norms, contribute to the marginalization of Ethiopian women.

While both Christianity and Islam are widely practiced in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has a longer historical tradition; Christianity was accepted by the Ethiopian monarchy during the fourth century (Yesehaq, 1997). Both religions teach women to be obedient servants to their husbands and kinsmen. However, as in any patriarchal society, some women have more power than others, and most women experience some form of power, particularly as elders. Also, the practice of patriarchal norms may vary in form and intensity depending on ethnic tradition—over 80 different ethnic groups exist in Ethiopia (Desta, 2008). Despite such variability, women are consistently viewed as inferior to men across all ethnic groups and a variety of cultural practices that are considered harmful, such as early marriage and genital cutting, have been outlawed but are difficult to regulate (for an excellent source about the numerous ethnic groups and diverse lives of Ethiopian women historically and in contemporary times, see Desta, 2008).

Ethiopia was ruled by a monarchy until the 1974 revolution and military-led overthrow of the imperial government of Emperor Haile Selassie. Under the leadership of Mengistu Haile Mariam, the Derg military government was inaugurated and instigated a campaign of violence, torture, and death against anyone suspected of political opposition. In spite of this repression, powerful opposition movements that had formed during the 1974 revolution went underground and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front emerged as a frontrunner. Tigrayans had engaged in decades of political struggle due to ongoing famine in their region during imperial rule and the military dictatorship. Ultimately, a full-scale civil war developed against the Derg with
various opposition groups forming a united front. The TPLF began a gradual process of altering traditional values in the liberated zones, including gender norms, because military victory was not likely without a strategic, alternative approach to gender issues. Ethiopian women were trained as combatants to ensure the downfall of one of the largest armed forces in Africa.

In addition to allowing women to be involved in combat, the TPLF initiated reforms affecting women’s interests in the liberated zones: raising the minimum age for marriage; creating a voluntary dowry system and equal land and property ownership rights; supporting equal rights to divorce and fair share of common assets; promoting equitable access to education; and reducing women’s workloads by introducing agricultural technology (Assfaw, 2009; Berhe, 1999; Hammond, 1990). The TPLF also encouraged women’s participation at the grassroots level through the formation of women’s associations and increasing the importance of women’s representation in local and regional political bodies. Finally, women’s schools were opened with the aim of eradicating illiteracy and raising political and social awareness. Equality between men and women was based on Marxist–Leninist principles (Berhe, 1999).

Historian Tsegay Berhe (1999) documented the indispensable role of women in the TPLF-led victory and the positive, transformative effects of the war for women:

Women fighters . . . saw themselves as fighting for political justice, development and social progress including gender equality . . . [they] emerged out of a semi-feudal socio-political system, where women were marginalized, into a new setting. . . . It provided them with a relatively better sense of political, economic and social equality. (p. 135)

However, women were released (demobilized) from armed service between 1991 and 1995 after the war, because the war-torn economy of Ethiopia could no longer support a large army. Demobilization of the women and many Tigrayan men was also a means of achieving ethnic balance within the newly formed (post-civil war) Ethiopian defense force. Most important, Ethiopian women soldiers—like so many female war veterans in other African countries—were expected to put down their weapons after war and return to the domestic sphere in their traditional roles as mothers and wives.

Across the vast African continent, visions of social change and gender equity compete during post-war reconstruction with popular patriarchal yearnings to “return to normal” (Cock, 1991; Lazreg, 1994; Lyons, 2004; Mehreteab, 2004; White, 2007). However, the call to “return to normal” affects women veterans differently from men.

Two previous studies provide a foundation on which this study is built. Berhe (1999) reported that the Ethiopian Commission for the Rehabilitation
of Ex-Soldiers, in collaboration with the Ministry of Defense, developed an agricultural resettlement option for men and an education option for women. However, due to insufficient funds the programs were allegedly “hastily planned and implemented” (p. 137). “Practical impediments” prevented many women from taking advantage of the reintegration educational and training programs; thus, in frustration, the Commission “simply allotted a lump sum . . . that roughly constituted each one’s salary for a fiscal year” (p. 138). Berhe concluded that most female combatants were disempowered because of pervasive traditional attitudes about women and the poor economic situation in Ethiopia.

Berhe (1999) conducted in-depth interviews with around 30 TPLF ex-combatants in 1997 and surveyed 150, roughly five years after the war. In another study conducted in 2002, about ten years after the war, psychologist Angela Veale (2003, 2005) interviewed 11 former TPLF women soldiers, and then analyzed how the war affected their lives ten years after it ended. In the initial transition Veale noted:

> [TPLF] Tigrean girls and women adopted the symbols that represented a ‘fighter’ identity . . . Symbolically, women fighters cut their hair short and wore this boyish, fighter style with pride, in opposition to traditional notions of femininity. Female fighters’ body language and social style followed more masculine models, which instantly communicated to civilians their status as fighters. (Veale 2005, pp. 106–107)

Veale’s interviews showed that women’s reintegration experiences included feeling pressured to conform to traditional gender expectations, conflicts with family members and others, and resistance to complete conformity. While her informants made some adjustments, they “. . . refused to compromise their internalized beliefs about their competence, ability and right to participate in an equal society” (p. 124). Former TPLF women saw the changes they experienced as fighters as positive when comparing themselves to women who were never fighters. They felt stronger, more confident, better able to face and solve their problems, and considerably more assertive than non-combatants. Veale concluded: “Their experiences as fighters have become central to their identities, and it is through this lens that they view and experience the civilian world” (2005, p. 124). Using these studies as a basis for comparison, the authors explored reintegration and identity-related experiences of TPLF women roughly 20 years later.

**METHOD**

The authors bring distinct social locations to this analysis. Neither author is Tigrayan, nor do either of them have Tigrayan relatives. The first author is
an Ethiopian woman of Oromo ethnicity, born in 1985 (thus, too young to remember the war). The second author, an African American psychologist born and raised in the United States, was the supervisor of the first author’s thesis from which this study’s findings are derived and expanded.

Participants and Recruitment Procedures
The first author approached a founding member of Ye Hewanwa Rai, an organization of former TPLF women fighters, who recommended other veterans and a separate group of former TPLF fighters who meet monthly in each other’s homes. Snowball sampling was used: each woman interviewed provided the name of another woman who was willing to participate. Potential participants were contacted by telephone. Twenty former TPLF soldiers living in Addis Ababa were interviewed. All interviews were conducted in the participant’s home or work setting. The average interview was audio-taped in one session of approximately one hour (the range was 45 to 90 minutes). Participants were not paid, and interviews were conducted in Amharic.

Measurement and Data Collection Procedures
A 42-item semi-structured interview assessed gender-specific issues tied to former TPLF women’s lives before, during, and after the civil war. Topics included their roles during the war, the type of training they received, challenges they faced, and demographic information such as current age, the age and circumstances under which they joined the TPLF, and educational, occupational, and parental status. Both closed and open-ended questions were used, but most questions were open-ended.

Coding and Data Analysis Procedures
After the audiotapes were transcribed, the transcripts were translated from Amharic into English. Both authors read all 20 transcripts and formulated an initial set of response categories from the questions in the interview protocol. Analysis of the transcribed responses included the development of a coding sheet, the coding of responses, and the assessment of simple response frequencies and percentages. Responses of the preexisting categories were added to the coding sheet, based on the closed-ended questions in the interview protocol, to the data-driven categories from the open-ended questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). All responses were then coded and the simple response frequencies were assessed. Case numbers are used to protect the anonymity of all respondents. Although this study’s purpose was not to explore in detail women’s lives in the military, additional experiences regarding their lives before (pre-war) and during (active war) their military
service were gathered and are included as separate sections for providing a context for their reintegration (post-war) experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A consistent response pattern for all 20 women was a tendency to share the challenges of all soldiers before the challenges that were specific to women, suggesting the high level of camaraderie women experienced with TPLF men. Thus, each section briefly mentions challenges all TPLF soldiers faced before detailing the gender issues, in an attempt to maintain the integrity with which women expressed their concerns.

Demographic Data

The respondents at the time of the interview ranged in age from 36 to 55 (average 46.20). All were raised in Ethiopian Orthodox Christian homes. Most were single when they joined, because of a TPLF policy restricting marriage and sexual relations among fighters. However, in 1985 the policy changed, allowing “democratic marriage,” and 19 (95%) of respondents married other TPLF fighters (one woman and her husband joined the TPLF together). Presently, 11 (55%) of the respondents are still married. The other six (30%) are divorced. Three (15%) are widows: one lost her spouse during the civil war, the second during the Ethiopian–Eritrean war (1998–2000). The third widow’s husband died in a car accident after the civil war (see Table 1).

The early TPLF policy restricting marriage and sexual relations among soldiers limited the number of children born to most TPLF women. Of the 20 respondents, 80% (16) have children: 12 have two children, 2 have three children, and 2 have one child, while 4 have none. The average number of children born by an Ethiopian woman in her lifetime is 5.3 (Population Institute, 2008).

Eight (40%) of the respondents were high-school students at the time they joined the Front. Five (25%) were from farming communities and were illiterate upon joining. Another four (20%) joined during elementary school; the other two (10%) were in junior high (middle school), and one (5%) was a university student. Boarding schools were established in the liberated zones to reduce illiteracy, provide political education for combatants, and to improve their educational status (Assfaw, 2009; Berhe, 1999; Hammond, 1990).

Most important, all the women in the present study improved their educational status as a result of being TPLF soldiers. Currently, six (30%) have earned B.A. degrees and six (30%) hold high-school diplomas. Six (30%) have some high-school education, and two (10%) have earned master’s
degrees. Their educational status was related to the age at which they joined the TPLF. The average age of respondents at the time they joined the struggle was 15.4 years: the youngest was 11 and the oldest was 20. The majority, 13 (65%), would be classified as “child soldiers” according to various international agreements, because they were under age 18 when they joined (see Veale 2003 for similar findings and Honwana 2006 for details on various agreements).

Convenience samples have a high educational bias, thus the findings cannot be considered representative of all or even most TPLF women. Nevertheless, the challenges they report and their coping skills can increase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Age during interview</th>
<th>Age joined TPLF</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Children</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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<td>51</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Community relations</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>Entrepreneur</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>47</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>MA</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10th grade</td>
<td>Vegetable co-op partner</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>Accountant</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>BA (Law)</td>
<td>Judge</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>BA</td>
<td>Upper level management</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
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<td>Diploma</td>
<td>Coordinator rural project</td>
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<td>BA</td>
<td>Works for opposition political party</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12th grade</td>
<td>Vegetable co-op partner</td>
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our understanding of factors that shaped successful reintegration of TPLF women.

Pre-War Roles and Challenges

To see to what degree respondents were already integrated into society, the authors asked what specific roles they played before the war. Overall, respondents said they shared all the social, political, and economic challenges of Ethiopian people in general and the everyday domestic chores of girls and women in particular, before joining the struggle.

Six women (30%) came from peasant families, engaged in farming and other rural work, and eight (40%) were students at different levels in their education. Six others (30%), all 18 or 19 years old when they joined the TPLF, participated in intelligence and espionage activities as young adults in different networks that the TPLF established in urban areas. Through those networks they educated the public about TPLF objectives.

According to one woman, mobilizers used diverse approaches to create mutual trust and sympathy between the public and the TPLF. Some assisted women, especially mothers, with household chores including food preparation (kneading, grinding, cooking) milking, and other routine activities. One helped the front financially from her family business. Five sold handicrafts, such as TPLF flags, to contribute financially to the struggle. Another distributed pamphlets to other urban TPLF members who then handed them to people in churches, the market, and other highly populated areas.

Although women were highly vulnerable to the Derg regime’s inhumane actions, only one woman directly experienced Derg repression:

My parents were TPLF supporters and the Derg got information about them and came to arrest them. However my parents got warned and left the village before the Derg soldiers arrived. Since the soldiers couldn’t get my parents, they arrested me. I was only 11 years old and stayed in prison for seven days as collateral for my parents.

The rest of the respondents talked about other people they knew whose stories affected them and their motivation to fight against the Derg. Journalist Jenny Hammond (1990) interviewed many TPLF women who joined the armed struggle to escape early marriages, and thus gender oppression explicitly. However, only one of the respondents joined the TPLF for that reason:

I had an older and younger brother. They were allowed to go to school, but I was not because I was a girl. My parents were planning to marry me to someone when I was 13, so I ran away and joined the TPLF. Because of the TPLF, I have my freedom.
Eight women (40%) mentioned explicitly political reasons for joining (e.g., to end Derg oppression). These respondents were the oldest, the best-integrated before joining the TPLF, and students when they joined. Eleven (55%), in their formative years when they joined, were attracted to the discipline and power of the TPLF women fighters, particularly as shown in TPLF songs and cultural presentations. The authors consider these reasons nationalistic and implicitly political, because the purpose of cultural shows was to educate the public politically and to incite Tigrayan nationalism.

The TPLF provided basic military and political training to all members, whatever their reasons for joining. All 20 respondents confirmed they had received such training (for details about the training, see Berhe, 1999).

Active War Roles and Challenges

All respondents had struggled with hunger, thirst, and all the psychological difficulties and unfavorable physical conditions that most soldiers face. One woman provided a vivid example: “We faced shortages of water and many were forced to drink their own or another person’s urine”. Another woman added: “During early times, facilities were not available such as anesthesia for surgery and antibiotics to treat wounded parts of our body. Once I was wounded and suffered badly because my wound was infected and I had no medication.”

Respondents mentioned three gender-specific challenges during the war: a) overcoming feelings of inferiority by developing confidence in their abilities as soldiers, physically and mentally; b) gaining acceptance from the public that women could be soldiers; and c) gaining acceptance from TPLF men and grappling with male chauvinism.

Asked about the roles they played during their service as TPLF soldiers, 17 of the 20 women said they were primarily involved in direct military activities. Only three were removed from such activities. One wrote various secret documents for the TPLF as well as magazine and newspaper articles for the public and for TPLF internal publications. She was also one of the leaders of the Women’s Fighter’s Association during the war. Another woman was an administrator in TPLF schools, and one woman continued to work as a mobilizer in urban areas.

Five of the 17 women involved in military activities had additional duties because of their educational status and skills. Three taught in TPLF schools. Two others assisted with health services. Later, one woman became active in the TPLF radio station.

Generally, women undertook all activities of the TPLF without limitation, unlike many guerrilla armies where a strict social division of labor is maintained (see White, 2007). Both Ethiopian (e.g., Assfaw, 2009 and Berhe, 1999) and foreign scholars (e.g., Hammond, 1990; Veale, 2003) have corroborated this claim. Male and female combatants had to walk, fight, eat,
and bunk together. The daily life of the soldier required learning new roles and new skills, irrespective of gender. Women had to overcome feelings of inferiority. This re-socialization generated additional challenges and new ways of coping. Two respondents explained that women were expected to withdraw from actual combat during their monthly periods in order to decrease any additional physical hardship. However, many refused to tell their commanding officers when they had their periods because they wanted to fight, proving themselves capable any time of the month. Three respondents mentioned gender-specific issues regarding childbirth and childcare once the marriage ban was lifted. One woman explained: “When we gave birth all traditional treatments that civilian women get were unthinkable, and we were still expected to return to our responsibilities shortly after giving birth. It was very difficult.”

In addition to developing confidence in themselves and juggling soldiering and mothering roles once the marriage ban was lifted, TPLF women worked hard to gain the confidence and acceptance of their male comrades. According to Assfaw (2009) most TPLF women wanted to be involved in direct military activities because to fight against the Derg directly was perceived as a highly honorable task for any soldier. Berhe (1999) also noted that involvement in combat and other direct military activities was a major way for women in the TPLF to demonstrate their efficiency and equality with men. One woman in our study said “Men of the Derg’s military feared us because they said we as women were fierce. Some of them, rather than surrender to us, committed suicide.” Another woman recalled: “During the first time women joined the war most of them wanted to show their ability and equality with men by holding heavy load armaments like the Bren rather than lighter firearms such as the Kalashnikov.” At least four women (20%) admitted to having abortions during the war so as not to be removed from their responsibilities: One woman said candidly:

I had an abortion because women who got pregnant were criticized by other women and accused of using pregnancy because of a fear of fighting. So, most of us would abort if we became pregnant and tried to be careful not to get pregnant after marriage and sexual intercourse were permitted among fighters.

This strong competitive spirit was clearly noted by our respondents, five (25%) of whom were distinguished guerrilla commanders during the war. Although proving themselves to their male comrades was an ongoing process, 80% (16) felt that gender relations had been almost equal during the war.

Four respondents (20%) said TPLF men still believed certain stereotypes about women that were reflected in their behavior throughout the war. Three noted that when a woman and a man had equal qualifications
for a position, the man would be preferred. Two said men used to make jokes about women’s upper body strength and other issues that involved physical endurance. Another recalled that before the permission of marriage and sexual relations within the Front, men assumed that women were trying to be seductive and distracting and accused women of impeding men’s success in preparing for battle. One woman recalled how some men objected to serving under a woman, stating:

I was a war commander. One time a newly joined man was assigned under my leadership as an ordinary soldier. He was not happy to work under a woman, and once said “Is there no one better than a woman to take the level of war commander in the front?” I was very angry with his chauvinist belief and I assigned him to the back line.

Overall, respondents noted that achieving gender equity within the TPLF was an ongoing process, in which some people adapted more easily than others.

Finally, respondents consistently articulated how gender relations were a new phenomenon, not only for TPLF members but also for people in rural areas. Often, when they saw TPLF women, they assumed that these women were men. Three respondents had to prove their gender to rural women by showing their breasts. Occasionally, women in the towns would express sympathy for the TPLF women’s living conditions and encourage them to desert the rebel force. One respondent shared an interesting story:

Once I was doing military visits to a place where Oromo people were living and I met a woman there. I introduced myself and told her I am a TPLF combatant. She felt so sorry for me, and couldn’t believe that I had become a combatant willingly. So she tried to convince me to leave the struggle and get married to her son. She further provided me with traditional bride clothes to persuade me to stay with her.

Over time, TPLF women were successful in gaining acceptance by the public in the liberated zones by showing that they could be women and combatants, simultaneously.

Reintegration (Post-War) Challenges

All TPLF soldiers had to adjust to civilian life while addressing various health problems and dealing with grief over the loss of friends, partners, and family members during the war. However, as previous studies have indicated, most of the respondents confirmed that they faced constraints over and above those faced by men. The lack of planned and well-funded reintegration strategies as part of a comprehensive package for demobilized soldiers left
all war veterans vulnerable, especially women. However, some women were more vulnerable than others.

Of 20 respondents, 15 (75%) said they encountered major challenges after the war. Only five (25%) reported no major difficulties. Of those five, four were students when they joined the TPLF and one was from a family that had a thriving business. These five women are an elite group because of their education and class backgrounds; their elite status probably shielded them from challenges most respondents faced.

**Economic integration.** All 20 participants in this study were working at the time they were interviewed. Six (30%) of the women were co-owners of small vegetable shops, three (15%) were district representatives for Parliament, two (10%) were high level administrators, two (10%) were nurses, and two (10%) reported having their own businesses. One worked for an opposition political party, one was a judge, one worked for a non-governmental organization, and one worked in community relations for a municipal organization. Thus, all respondents in the sample were doing better economically than the average Ethiopian. However, their high level of economic integration is a reflection of sampling bias. Moreover, economic reintegration, like reintegration in general, occurs in varying degrees. Thus, despite the overall appearance of economic integration, the vegetable co-op workers reported that their income was insufficient to sustain them and their families. Also, two reported being the sole breadwinners for their children. One woman noted:

Many marriages dissolved after the war and now women are suffering with their kids without support from the fathers. Many men refused to take care of their children [with TPLF women] after the war when they attained high political positions. Because the marriages were not legal during the war, it is difficult for some to get child support.

All six women currently struggling were originally from farming communities and were demobilized reluctantly, without steady incomes, adequate formal education, or marketable skills. These respondents also stated that demobilization criteria emphasized educational level and physical fitness, placing women at a disadvantage. Veale’s study of 11 Ethiopian women ex-combatants also reflected a sampling bias—most of her respondents worked for the government as security guards and janitors—but the women she interviewed were still struggling economically as a result of employment in mainly low-paid, unskilled government work. They had joined the TPLF as children and been institutionalized within a military context. As a result, they never had to assume responsibility for generating and managing money, and single women with children had an especially difficult time. Most were reluctantly demobilized (2003, 2005). The six women in this study share a similar plight.
Some might not have fared any better had they not joined the TPLF, given their economically poor backgrounds as Hebret Berhe (1996) noted in her study of Eritrean women war veterans. Many had no work experience before joining the TPLF and continue to find it difficult to gain such experience twenty years later. Women in this category may be considered economically integrated, albeit minimally.

Four other respondents said they faced economic problems initially when the new government assigned them to different government offices without a salary and provided only modest food rations. But the difficulties were temporary because they were eventually assigned to positions based on their higher educational level and skills. This group included a judge, an accountant, a clerk, and a community relations staff person.

Political integration. Political reintegration addresses the extent to which women war veterans are involved in decision-making and power structures, both locally and nationally. During the civil war the TPLF’s highest structure, the Central Committee, had only one female member. All respondents and scholarly sources confirmed this reality (Hammond, 1990; Assfaw, 2009; Berhe, 1999).

Most respondents stated that the highest officials of the TPLF were against women being members of the Central Committee during the war, and three respondents felt strongly that the omission of women combatants from influential and higher political positions continues to the present day. According to one respondent:

Women were systematically withdrawn from the nominated positions at different times. The reason presented for the disqualification of women in the selection process was “inefficiency” for administrative posts as described in different conferences held to elect members of the Central Committee.

Today, the Central Committee of the TPLF political party includes very few women (9 out of 43 at the time of this writing) and, unlike men who were former TPLF soldiers, former TPLF women are conspicuously absent from the highest executive positions (e.g., Ministers). Only one respondent is a high official in the current government. Ten others continue as active members of the TPLF political party. The remaining nine no longer have ties to the TPLF, for different reasons. One respondent resigned from the TPLF because she is a judge and is expected to be free of any political affiliation. Another, formerly a high official within the TPLF, left for reasons she preferred not to disclose, and one other former high official left to join an opposition party. The remaining respondents work in demanding, often menial jobs, and do not have the time or money to maintain official TPLF membership.

The failure of political integration among women combatants across Africa has been noted by other scholars, and lack of education has been a
Identity and Reintegration Among Female Veterans

key factor in their marginalization (Berhe, 1996; Cock, 1991; Lyons, 2004; McKay & Mazurana, 2004; Mugambe, 2000). Although TPLF women experience limited representation at the political level nationally, three of the respondents are currently active politically at local and regional levels. Two of them were students when they joined the TPLF (both hold bachelor’s degrees) and the other was an urban mobilizer (holds a master’s degree). Again, these women are considered the educated elite.

Like Veale (2003, 2005) and Berhe (1999), the authors found that most women war veterans are not well integrated politically, despite their active political involvement in the liberated zones during the war. The promises and expectations regarding women’s equality that galvanized their participation are not reflected proportionately in Ethiopian political structures. However, at one point this sample was quite politically involved and is more involved than most women veterans, most likely because of the high education bias. That six (30%) women have been involved in political decision-making capacities demonstrates how education facilitates women’s political empowerment.

Social integration. Women veterans had to grapple with civilian pressures to assume a role subordinate to men, generally and within the family. Among the respondents, 75% (15) said a dramatic shift occurred in gender relations and that women had not been treated fairly by male former comrades who were in government. Two women reported that the major reason they divorced was their husbands’ increasingly male-chauvinistic demands after the war. One commented: “I wish the respect men had for women would have continued after the war . . . but, men revealed their real personalities and attitudes about women when we returned to the city.”

The same six women who mentioned ongoing economic challenges also reported facing major social and psychological challenges. They had left their families at an early age and spent most of their formative years with the TPLF. After being estranged from their biological families for years, it was traumatic for them to detach from the organization that had become their family during the war and to return to civilian life upon demobilization. This finding supports Veale’s observation that women soldiers who spent their formative years in the TPLF “experienced civilian life less as ‘reintegration’ and more as being catapulted into an unfamiliar and foreign way of life” (2003, p. 33).

The same six women also reported social (interpersonal) challenges, notably in communicating with civilians after years of living in a militarized environment. TPLF women were taught to speak assertively, whereas civilian women are expected to be demure and indirect. Adjusting to different expectations—particularly traditional cultural norms that were not practiced by the military, such as funeral rituals—was often difficult. Although most respondents felt welcomed by their families and communities when they returned home, one said that instructors at her university incorrectly assumed
that she was spying on them, because she was an older student who also worked for the government. Her identity as a fighter made social integration difficult in that context.

The special “fighter identity” of TPLF women war veterans has been described in earlier studies (e.g., Berhe, 1999; Desta, 2008; Veale, 2003). Veale in particular makes important links between social integration and a collective “fighter identity.” TPLF membership transformed women’s individual identities into a collective, social identity that “helped them begin to define, perceive, and evaluate themselves as being a member of a fighting force” (Veale 2005, p. 106). The female fighters were “androgyous,” adopting certain positive masculine traits in their dress, communication style, and military abilities, which transformed their perceptions of themselves as women. After the war, TPLF women, like all combatants, had to adjust to civilian norms, accepting a shift in their identity after the prestige of fighting in a victorious army. However, TPLF women in Veale’s sample did not fully internalize a civilian identity and maintained aspects of the fighter identity as they processed civilian norms and the values of such norms, depending on the situation: “... being an ex-fighter was not something that women had relegated to the past, but was an active part of women’s identity . . . that differentiated them from other Ethiopian women in positive ways” (2005, p. 119). The authors found a similar pattern, but with additional complexities.

Throughout the interviews, a strong (collective) fighter identity emerged as an active component in women’s identities twenty years later. However, that identity could facilitate or hinder a woman’s social integration, depending on whether she framed it as an overwhelming strength or an overwhelming weakness. Many respondents vacillated between the two perceptions in their interviews, suggesting the post-war development of what the authors call a liminal gender identity. The term “liminal” can serve as a conceptual tool for therapists when addressing the complexities of reintegration among former women combatants.

**Liminality and the Post-War Fighter Identity: A Tool for Therapists**

The authors believe if therapists view the post-war fighter identity as a “liminal” gender identity, they might be able to help female veterans mine the strengths from their transformative experiences during the war. As aforementioned, with liminality, either the possibility of freedom in society can be realized or the possibility of being marginalized can result (La Shure, 2005).

On the one hand, former TPLF women who have accepted the ambiguity of their gendered realities are very much integrated economically,
politically, and socially. They are using their liminal state to their advantage by moving back and forth, adapting and resisting, as they reintegrate themselves into society in different situations and different levels over time. On the other hand, former TPLF women who find themselves barely integrated appear to struggle with their ambiguous gender identity have not yet learned how to make it work for them in their new setting. Instead of feeling free “betwixt and between” traditional and alternative gender beliefs and practices, they feel marginalized, isolated, and disrupted by the change in their situation.

Liminality offers the possibility of freedom, depending upon one’s situation and sense of agency, but it can be both positive and negative depending on the context. For example, a TPLF war veteran might enjoy her liminal identity at work but not at home, or vice versa. Her family may experience her liminality as an advantage in some way (e.g., they enjoy her economic contributions to the family) but as a disadvantage otherwise (e.g., they find her assertiveness “too masculine”). Therapists can help former TPLF veterans in their efforts to contest, negotiate, and transform their lives by highlighting how their war experiences can actually facilitate their adjustment after war across different situations that veterans may experience as difficult (Miller, 2004).

The risk of being marginalized is great because women fighters’ gender identity cannot be easily reconciled with predominant, traditional gender ideologies. Their identity proposes a unique set of challenges for them and the people with whom they interact. Their experiences and interviews clearly demonstrate that even though certain traditional norms of “womanly” behavior were suspended during the war, women are expected to resume their “normal” (traditional) behavior in peacetime.

TPLF women responded in different ways to powerful social pressures to erase their revolutionary, androgynous style of thinking and behaving. Many affirmed what they learned and use those lessons to cope, demonstrating how a liminal gender identity can facilitate reintegration:

I know today it is possible to win when one I have hope despite any difficulty because I know we beat an African super military power!

As a fighter, I learned that women should empower themselves economically to be free from the subjugation of men and that getting my education was important.

Being a fighter made me strong, some of my friends died, but I am alive. War makes you strong because you see the extreme side of everything like hunger, pain, and death yet I was able to witness our success over the Derg.
I learned that I can contribute equally with men because I was willing to sacrifice my life equally. I risked getting wounded and disabled just like them and I survived.

The military victory could not have happened without the women. Without women, the struggle would have been like clapping with a single hand!

As a fighter, I learned confidence, problem-solving, and other knowledge that I use today in my life.

Therapists can highlight such strengths and help veterans transfer these skills and values to various civilian situations that veterans experience as problematic. By helping veterans connect what they learned during the war to civilian life—particularly underlying values such as discipline, problem-solving, and courage—therapists can help veterans integrate past war experiences to their present experiences, thereby bridging the disconnection veterans often experience between what they learned in the military and what they face in civilian life.

Some TPLF women’s post-war narratives make clear that they have not found the freedom that comes with being betwixt and between; they long for the past and feel marginalized. Their liminal post-war fighter identity feels like a liability rather than an asset:

I feel left out and disappointed. I did not want to leave the army and joined when I was 13. The TPLF was like a parent to me.

I currently work in a vegetable co-op but I used to be a well-known soldier and commander. I see no relationship between the two and do not know how to relate to civil society. I was not taught how to live as a civilian with limited money and a child.

I feel I was demobilized without any knowledge as to how to live a civilian life. I was not empowered with such knowledge and still find it difficult.

One woman summarized what many less well integrated women felt:

Many demobilized women used to be heroines during the war and we used to get honor and respect for our contribution from members of the Front. This made us want to stay in the military . . . but now we are only left with scars and pains that we got during the war, nothing that is useful for our present life . . . Some women have become prostitutes
and beggars after demobilization. We don’t deserve the situation we are presently in.

These women often slip through the cracks and therapists can help them regain their footing by validating the usefulness of their war experiences by helping women discover what they learned that can prove useful currently. Helping women discover such strengths should not be difficult because despite current hardships, no respondent regretted serving as a fighter in the TPLF. Slightly more than 55% (11) of them articulated the benefits of informal educational experiences they gained during the war, despite certain hardships after it. These benefits include political awareness regarding gender issues, physical endurance, persistence, problem-solving skills, leadership skills, discipline, integrity, and self-confidence. As one modestly testified, “As a fighter, I got the opportunity to come out from illiteracy and see a different world than what I learned from my peasant family.”

Therapists can use the benefits mentioned in the present study as a guide for exploring such strengths with clients, demonstrating the value of a liminal post-war fighter identity and thus the advantages of a gendered identity that dwells betwixt and between conventional norms.

CONCLUSION

Although TPLF women were members of a guerrilla army that led them to a military victory over a dictatorship, the victory was bittersweet; TPLF women fighters were left on their own after the war to cope with civilian life and mainstream Ethiopian society. However, there are differences among them in age, educational level, occupational status, rural or urban family background, skills, physical abilities, and personal and political aspirations. Their ability to cope with civilian life, just like that of men, is influenced by their capacities and experiences, their adaptability to different economic and cultural circumstances, and their levels of physical and psychological stress. Their families and communities are also affected during the reintegration process, and all must adjust and accommodate to change.

It is a great challenge for any government to run a war-torn economy with drained resources, and Ethiopia has been no exception. Ethiopia had fairly limited resources to fund its development agenda, which was competing with the social and economic rehabilitation of combatants, refugees, and others affected by the conflict. Like so many other African countries, its transitional government was running state business largely through financial aid from donors. They could not fund the expensive, comprehensive demobilization programs soldiers needed after almost 17 years of civil war. Facing such constraints and competing priorities, the government simply
gave lump-sum payments to former combatants, with no financial advice and meager support services.

Despite these disadvantages, elites who entered the struggle as “fighters” returned as elites. Peasants, with a few exceptions, returned as peasants. Our respondents’ level of education was unusually high. All were working, although some were underemployed because the underemployed lacked education, marketable skills, and civilian work experience, and were thus the most vulnerable. Therefore, the reintegration of certain individual women was more successful than the reintegration of most women.

Although no respondent used the phrase, the authors suspect that some of them may be suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition that is not sufficiently recognized and addressed in Ethiopia. Therapists may want to explore this further with clients because the consequences are damaging not only for the individuals but for their partners and families as well. Although all respondents demonstrated resourcefulness and a tremendous ability to cope, not all of their coping strategies and demonstrations of resilience generated empowerment. The six women who were the most vulnerable told us what is empowering for them—education, meaningful employment, fair treatment and a chance to get ahead, given their sacrifices and years in the field. However, the combination of underemployment and unfulfilled expectations left them barely reintegrated—economically, politically, and socially—twenty years after demobilization. They represent many demobilized TPLF fighters, most of whom are actually unemployed (Berhe, 1999; Desta, 2008).

The limitations of this study are obvious. The sample had a high education bias and was not representative of the majority of TPLF women. Nonetheless, because of the educational level and integration of most respondents, the authors gleaned from their interviews how their fighter identity could be used to their advantage during reintegration.

Consistent with previous studies (Berhe, 1999; Veale, 2005) the authors found that TPLF women war veterans twenty years later had a “fighter identity” and “androgynous” perception of womanhood that included certain traits traditionally associated with men (assertiveness, courage, ambition, and economic independence). However, this identity facilitated or hindered a woman’s reintegration, depending on whether she framed it as an asset or a liability. Many respondents vacillated between the two perceptions in their interviews, suggesting the post-war development of a liminal gender identity, socially and structurally ambiguous, betwixt and between the gender positions traditionally assigned to Ethiopian women by custom.

Respondents who accepted the ambiguity of their gender transformation were largely integrated economically, politically, and socially. They were using their liminal reality to their advantage by moving back and
forth within the social structures, adapting and resisting, as they re-integrate themselves into society in different situations and different levels over time. Respondents who found themselves minimally integrated struggled with their ambiguous gender identity and had not yet learned how to make it work for them in their new setting. Instead of finding freedom in their transformation, they felt marginalized, isolated, and disrupted by it. Liminality offers the *possibility* of freedom, depending upon a woman’s sense of agency in varying contexts, but does not guarantee its realization. In particular, the lack of political re-integration of TPLF women into the current government remains a sore point with female veterans of the civil war.

Political integration helps soldiers become responsible and peaceful citizens and influential in ways that extend their commitments developed during the war. The integration of military women into the political arena is a worthwhile goal because it makes use of the strengths they bring from their war experiences. To that end, women’s political advancement must be prioritized at the highest levels of government.

A commitment to women’s ongoing political education ensures that they will ultimately be broadly represented in the governance of the post-conflict state. Those who are willing to enter the political arena should be offered education, training, connections with established women’s groups, and other forms of support to facilitate their development as leaders. The handicaps due to military service that soldiers and their families experience, and which women experience disproportionately, must be recognized currently, many of these women’s skills are wasted and their creative efforts to maintain themselves and their families are overlooked—an immeasurable loss for a country facing other grave problems common to post-conflict countries.

How can Ethiopia recover some of the loss? Many industrialized nations openly support war veterans through ongoing government programs that define them as a special population deserving of preferential treatment because of the unique sacrifices they made. War veterans’ sacrifices result in an unpaid national debt that must be acknowledged and addressed, given how Ethiopia currently benefits from the peace, stability, and economic growth that are a result of such sacrifices. Although additional benefits and programs cannot compensate for all losses, they should be a part of ongoing government deliberations as Ethiopia gets back on its feet. Clearly fighting alongside men is no sure route to gender equality in the nation-state, but it’s a starting point from which to argue that the leadership, organizational abilities, and positive experiences of female ex-combatants should be emphasized as uniquely valuable for Ethiopia. Therapists can work with veterans and their families to highlight the strengths women gained as a result of their war experiences, bridging the fighter and civilian identity into a “liminal” post-fighter identity.
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