
Education for Social Change: Girls' Secondary Schooling in Eritrea

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ABSTRACT

One central pillar of the Eritrean revolution is the modernization of gender roles within Eritrean society, through education. This article, based on ethnographic style research, looks at the personal experiences of young women in Eritrean secondary schools. These girls' journeys are discussed in terms of gender resistance, exemplifying modernity, and gender accommodation, exemplifying tradition. It is argued that these categories are not as dichotomous as claimed by the education policy agenda: in contrast, many young women strive to find a balance between the two. Ultimately, the success of the Eritrean model of the modernization of gender roles should be measured in terms of having created an environment in which women are able to strive to fulfil their aspirations.

INTRODUCTION

Education has been identified as decisive in nation building as well as in the reconstruction of war-torn societies.¹ More generally it has been used as a tool for economic, political and social modernization, in particular by developing or transitional countries.² In terms of the latter, the modernization of gender roles often becomes a prominent objective of educational policy, particularly in revolutionary societies where political processes are guided by modernist ideological beliefs (Müller, 2005). Here, the status of women receives prominence as an indicator of 'revolutionary progressiveness' (Moghadam, 1997). It has been observed that in many such societies in the developing world, women have indeed made major gains (Molyneux,

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1. There is a large literature on this, but see, for example, Anderson (1991); Bekalo et al. (2003); Doornbos and Tesfai (1999); Gellner (1964); Tesfagiorgis (1993).
2. Again, much has been written on this; see Buchert (1998); Castells (1992); Green (1997); Hoogvelt (1997), among others.

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1981, 1982, 1984). Those gains can be explained by the fact that a successful revolution entails the overthrow not only of social structures and political institutions, but also of the dominant values and myths within a society (Dunn, 1989; Huntington, 1968; MacPherson, 1966; Selbin, 1993; Skocpol, 1979). A revolutionary society is thus characterized by a radical change in the 'community of dispositions' or 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977: 35) brought about by a leadership able to establish its discourse as hegemonic.³

Because women are central to the material and ideological struggles of revolutions in the developing world (Tétreault, 1994), a 'unity of purpose' has been suggested between the goal of gender equality and the 'developmental and social goals of revolutionary states' (Molyneux, 1985: 245). But while it has been argued that education can only advance women's status within a given society when the state's perception of the role of education interacts with the struggle for gender equity, it is not only in relation to revolutionary societies that women's education is regarded as crucial (see Bloch et al., 1998). More widely, the project of development is being identified with the unlocking of women's capacity and productivity (Fiedrich and Jellema, 2003), and female education has come to be seen as the panacea to achieve 'modernity'.⁴

Accordingly, education features prominently in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), namely in the objectives of achieving universal primary enrolment and eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education (UN, 2000). At the same time it has been suggested that the viability of other MDGs depends on success on the education front, especially in the area of overcoming gender disparities. The rationales for this goal are manifold (see Abu-Ghaida and Klasen, 2004). They include, on the one hand, the intrinsic value of education, demanding gender equity to allow women and men to achieve their full potential (Sen, 1999). On the other hand, gender equity in education is also seen as instrumental to accelerate economic growth and realize wider social gains (Abu-Ghaida and Klasen, 2004; World Bank, 2001). Recently, two conditions have been identified as most likely to promote gender equity in education: the state taking a leading role in creating an enabling environment for women's advancement within education and beyond, the latter including a range of economic and social policies to remove discrimination; and (young) women becoming active agents for change to promote the fulfilment of women's capabilities (UNESCO, 2003) — alternatively described as the process of creating positive female role models (Müller, 2005).

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3. Hegemony is understood here, following Gramsci, as 'spontaneous loyalty' that any dominant social group obtains from the wider populace.
 4. See for example Browne and Barrett (1991); King and Hill (1993); Summers (1994); UNDP (1996); World Bank (1993); and for a critique see Fine and Rose (2001).

The remainder of this article will look at the modernization of gender roles through education, taking the example of secondary schooling in the context of the revolutionary society of Eritrea. Secondary schooling is widely considered the critical stage in the lives of young women (Bloch et al., 1998; Heward and Bunwaree, 1999). It coincides with the age of puberty when early marriage traditions, religious beliefs and other cultural expectations are most likely to determine the course of girls' future lives, but also the time when prospects of continuing higher education or other life and career options come into view. In addition, it has been suggested that a threshold exists for women's education to have an effect on overall gender equality, related not only to the general egalitarian ethos within a society but also to women's participation in secondary education (Heward and Bunwaree, 1999; Subbarao and Raney, 1993). In the context of a society such as Eritrea, this is the stage at which changes in the 'community of dispositions' become visible, in terms of what practices are being produced.

Methodologically, the study is based on observation and interview data from four secondary schools (pupils of grades eight to eleven) in three of the six regions (*zobas*) of Eritrea, collected in 2001. The four schools and communities are Keren Secondary in *zoba* Anseba; Agordat and Barentu Secondary in *zoba* Gash-Barka; and Tsabra in Nakfa.⁵ They were selected for the following reasons: Keren is situated at the crossroads between highlands and lowlands and represents a real melting pot of the different ethnic groups and cultures within Eritrea.⁶ Agordat was one of the first towns liberated by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) outside the actual base area. With early liberation came EPLF-provided education with its 'progressive' curriculum. Barentu is situated at the crossroads of trade routes to Sudan and Ethiopia and as such was always exposed to outside influences; it is the main centre of the Kunama, the only matrilineal among Eritrea's ethnic groups. Tsabra near Nakfa is the successor of the revolution school and the only secondary boarding school in the country, thus allowing girls from remote areas to continue their education. The school data are complemented by key informant interviews. All encounters

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5. School visits were carried out as follows: Tsabra Secondary School, Nakfa (22–30 January 2001); Agordat Secondary School, Agordat (19–25 February 2001); Biara Secondary School, Barentu (26 February–2 March 2001); Keren Secondary School, Keren (6–13 March 2001). Interviews were conducted with: Mebrahtu Ghilagaber, Director Asmara Teacher Training Institute (17 November 2000); Idris Ali Affa, Director Tsabra Secondary School, Nakfa (29 January 2001); Naga Tesfai, Director Agordat Junior and Senior Secondary School, Agordat (23 February 2001); Biniam Fissaye, Director Biara Junior and Senior Secondary School, Barentu (2 March 2001); Abraham Tadesse, Director Keren Secondary School, Keren (12 March 2001).
 6. Nine different ethnic groups live in Eritrea, all with a distinct language and culture. These are Tigrinya (50 per cent of the population), Tigre (31 per cent) and the minority ethnic groups Bilen, Saho, Nara, Kunama, Hadareb, Afar and Rashaida.

took place in English, the language in which all formal education from elementary school onwards is conducted.⁷

The following section introduces the general context of education and social reconstruction in Eritrea. The article then proceeds by providing different examples from school observations on the meaning of secondary schooling to Eritrean girls in different cultural contexts. It will look at these young women's journeys in terms of *gender resistance* as exemplifying modernity and *gender accommodation* as exemplifying tradition (see Hollander, 2002). Gender resistance describes acts of opposition to traditional gender expectations, and as such can be assumed to be the ultimate objective of the official, modernist policy agenda. It can thus act as an indicator for a change in dispositions that allows for the generation of new practices. Gender accommodation implies an acceptance — at least on the surface — of those expectations, indicating a failure of the revolutionary project in terms of a radical change of the community of dispositions. The article concludes that these two categories are not as dichotomous as suggested by a policy agenda that defines gender issues in education primarily in terms of the expansion of women's participation in order to facilitate the 'socio-economic, political, and cultural transformation of the country' (Government of the State of Eritrea, 1994: 43). Rather, many young women strive to find a balance between the two. Educational policy makers would be well advised to pay attention to the values attached to tradition in the personal lives of Eritrean women who are, at the same time, aspiring for modernity.

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION IN ERITREA

Eritrea achieved *de facto* independence in 1991 and *de jure* independence in 1993, after a thirty-year liberation war against its occupying power, Ethiopia. This liberation war is commonly referred to as the Eritrean revolution, as the war for national sovereignty was coupled with a social engineering project in the early liberated areas (Connell, 1997; Pateman, 1990). One central pillar of this project was the modernization of gender roles within Eritrean society (Schamanek, 1998; Wilson, 1991). In this respect, Eritrea resembles other revolutionary movements in which gender emancipation became a central concern, such as Guinea Bissau, Nicaragua, Vietnam and China (Eisen, 1984; Machel, 1974; Randall, 1992; Sheldon, 1994; Tétreault, 1994; Urdang, 1979). Within each of these revolutions

7. I have spent some time in Eritrea each year from 1997 onwards on various assignments. When the research presented here took place, I had been based at Asmara University for about six months. I am thus familiar with the use of the English language by Eritreans and its potential subtleties in meaning.

gender equality was to be achieved by 'modernity', which in reality meant that women had to prove their 'equalness' to men.

In the case of Eritrea, this was exemplified by the slogan 'equality through equal participation', which was used to mobilize women (Zerai, 1994). It was based on the assumption that 'gender inequalities . . . could be erased by progress' (Bernal, 2000: 69). In line with various strands of modernization theory, education was seen as the central tool to achieve this 'progress' and advance women's status. The role of education in reconstructing and remodelling society is probably more pronounced in Eritrea than in most other revolutionary societies (Müller, 2005; Pool, 2001). Considerable achievements were made by the EPLF during the liberation struggle in terms of providing education for girls and women for the first time in historically disadvantaged areas, developing and testing a new curriculum in the revolution school, and more generally creating a cadre of skilled women to act as role models for others inside and outside the Front, and to give the general population an insight into alternative gender roles (David, 2004; Gottesman, 1998; Green and Baden, 1994; Marcus, 1995). Since national liberation, Eritrea has been engaged in a reconstruction effort that has at its centre the creation of a new system of formal education that will allow Eritrea to play its part as a modern nation in a globalized world (Müller, 2004). An important objective of the government's educational policy is to maintain the gender equality which existed within the EPLF during the years of the struggle and transport it into wider Eritrean society (IDASA, 1994; Müller, 2005).

This policy on gender equality in education follows the instrumentalist agenda that advocates women's education as a tool for development. Formal schooling is envisaged as a mechanism by which girls gain the necessary ammunition to free themselves from 'traditional' expectations and adopt 'modern' behaviour.⁸ To that end, various policy measures have been adopted to increase enrolment and performance of women students. In relation to enrolment in particular, improvements have been made in all areas of formal schooling since Eritrean independence, as Table 1 shows.⁹ I have criticized this instrumentalist approach towards women's education elsewhere (using the example of university education) for ignoring the fact that education is not only related to one's position in a given society, but also to the development of new forms of agency on an individual level (Müller, 2004). The focus of this article is thus not on female enrolment and attainment as such, but on the processes that keep young women in schooling, the challenges they face and the aspirations they hold,

8. See Fiedrich and Jellema (2003) for a more general discussion of these issues.

9. It should be pointed out here that nationwide enrolment numbers do not tell the full story, as they do not take into account the considerable expansion of formal (elementary) education to rural areas where such education was unheard of before independence, for boys and girls alike (MoE, 2001; Müller, 1998).

Table 1. Change in Female Net (Gross) Enrolment for Elementary, Middle and Secondary Level, 1993/94–2001/02

Year/Level	Net (gross) female enrolment		Net (gross) female enrolment ratio		Total net (gross) enrolment ratio	
	1993/94	2001/02	1993/94	2001/02	1993/94	2001/02
Elementary	53,967 (92,536)	106,089 (146,218)	28.6 (49.0)	43.1 (59.3)	28.3 (51.8)	46.0 (65.5)
Middle	3,990 (14,652)	10,630 (34,667)	5.9 (21.5)	12.1 (39.5)	5.9 (22.4)	12.7 (46.0)
Secondary	9,165 (13,324)	16,842 (25,054)	8.6 (12.4)	11.8 (17.6)	8.5 (14.5)	14.3 (24.0)

Source: author's calculations, based on Ministry of Education (2002).

and ultimately on what secondary schooling means to them personally, and as Eritrean women. These are the issues that we will now address.

THE TRIBULATIONS OF YOUNG WOMEN IN ERITREAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The following extracts of a conversation between the researcher and a group of students at Keren Secondary School in March 2001 illustrate the major points of contention for young women in Eritrean secondary schools.

Class 10.2 had a free period. A group of girls were staying behind in the classroom. Among them was Luam, who, as her homeroom teacher had pointed out to me, was an exceptionally clever student. I had observed some teaching in this class before so the students welcomed me when I entered to chat with them. Luam spoke first, but even though her English was immaculate, she spoke in a low voice throughout, as if unsure of every word.

When the discussion moved to what they wanted to do after grade eleven, they all said with one voice that they hoped to go to university.

They then showed me two lines written on the blackboard: the topic on which they had to prepare a debate for their English class. Could we discuss the topic together? It read:

'Men to lead and women to follow.

Women to lead and men to follow.'

Luam said both should lead. Azieb said women needed to lead, 'but in our country it is very difficult'. Meanwhile more students came in. Two boys, Berhane and Rezene, who became jealous of the attention I gave to the girls, tried to make themselves heard. Berhane chipped in and said 'it is our culture that men have to lead', to which Luam replied it was not in anyone's culture by nature. . . . As the discussion went on, Berhane said the problem with girls was that from a certain age most of them would only think about marriage, 'that is why they are lagging behind in education'. He continued: 'from the culture they can not ask a man to marry them, so they have to wait and if they became older they are in trouble'. The girls strongly disputed this perception.

Rezene pointed out that one could see many clever girls in elementary school, then their numbers would drop, and put it down again mainly to girls becoming occupied with marriage only. But Sarah intervened and said it was different: in elementary school 'usually somebody else is around to do domestic work, like an older sister, but afterwards it is on us,

so suddenly we have a lot of obligations'. All girls confirmed they had to do their share of domestic work, and Sarah explained the trick was to do it and still find time to study, 'one needs to plan one's time, that is the trick'. Berhane countered that he also had to help at home, and as his father was at the frontline,¹⁰ he also had to take up some paid work to support the family, to which Luam replied there were always exceptions, 'but in general it is the case that boys can help in the home if they want to but for girls it is not a matter of choice but an obligation'.

How did these students view the future for women in Eritrea? Azieb felt it would take 100 years before there is gender equality: 'when we become developed' was how she phrased it. Luam was more optimistic in envisaging 'in my lifetime'; Berhane rightly pointed out that there was not even one female teacher at Keren Secondary School, and 'we just don't have women like you in Eritrea'. (Fieldnotes: 51f)

The main issues raised in this conversation proved to be, in one form or another, the major points of contention mentioned by students and educational professionals alike, as confirmed by my observations in all the schools visited. These issues centre around two themes: firstly, what is commonly called the 'shyness' of girls; secondly, cultural norms within the family and the social environment — most prominent in the pressure to marry — coupled with a lack of perspective for a different future. These have a strong influence on determining the lives of young women. Both of these themes will be looked at in more detail in the following two sections.

Another interesting observation centres on the perception of Azieb that there is a link between the stage of 'development' of Eritrean society and a movement towards more gender equality. In the context of young women in secondary schools, this has two diametrically opposed implications. One is the realization that as 'culture' has not 'modernized' enough to give women equal rights and the means to economic security via employment opportunities, the way towards a better future might be via a well-off husband, preferably one who has prospects of living abroad, showing gender accommodation as the way towards a fulfilling life. The other is to follow the path of gender resistance as advocated by Rana from class 10.5 in Keren Secondary: in developed countries, women are in leadership, 'but here only few women are in leadership because they are not educated enough . . . so we have to remove obstacles and get more women qualified' (fieldnotes: 61). The conclusion to this article will come back to this point, questioning the modernist assumption underlying the ideology of the Eritrean revolution, that education will overcome what is seen as 'backwardness'. After all, to have ambition does not necessarily mean seeking a life beyond the traditional; it could equally well encompass striving for an arranged marriage to a well-off husband, having a number of children, and

10. Between 1998 and 2000, a border conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia escalated into full-scale war. While in 2000 various agreements were signed to end hostilities and demarcate the common border, to this day the conflict is not fully resolved and the Eritrean army remains in a state of high alert.

securing the economic means to live comfortably — but for such ambitions there seems little room within the Eritrean revolution.

‘Because I am Shy . . .’

Being shy — *hafar* in Tigrinya, derived from the verb *mehefar* commonly translated as ‘being ashamed’ — is a cultural trait traditionally attributed especially to young women (although the terms *hafar* and *mehefar*, with the respective grammatical declination and conjugation, are used for both sexes). It is manifest in young women being regarded as almost invisible in the company of males, speaking in a low voice, and only when directly addressed. These were — and, depending on the cultural environment, still are — the traits which men valued in their future wives and which were therefore promoted within a girl’s family before she reached the age of puberty.

With the Eritrean revolution and its ideology of moving beyond traditional gender roles, being shy came to be regarded as something negative, as almost a handicap. Depending on who is speaking, shyness is seen as either based on intellectual inferiority, lack of motivation, or lack of self-confidence. In a classroom context, shyness is visible in the lack of verbal participation by girls; it may be linked to intellectual inferiority or disinterest or both. As a (male) teacher in Agordat put it: ‘The girls do not even try to speak, they simply hide behind others’ (fieldnotes: 27). He was echoed by a colleague in Barentu who (without questioning why, if true, it might be the case) remarked: ‘The girls, they simply sit and copy from the boys, not even participate, so why should I ask them, I know they will not know the answer’ (fieldnotes: 42).

Participation in Eritrean classrooms comes in two different ways: as group participation (when the whole class responds to the teacher, by far the most common) and individual participation, where students raise their hands and are asked to stand up while answering. Field observations certainly confirm the widely-held impression that girls, particularly from grade nine onwards, hardly ever raise their hands as individuals and their voices are rarely heard in group participation (partly simply because boys speak in a louder voice). What Hanan, a grade eleven student in Agordat, said was echoed by many of her sisters: she felt she participated well in elementary school, ‘but when I got older I became shy, it is not shy in front of the boys, just overall we girls become shy and stay quiet’ (fieldnotes: 27). One of her friends explains the strategies girls develop if they have a question: they avoid asking the teacher, but approach their girlfriends and if this fails eventually some of the boys in class, ‘and usually one of the boys knows’ (ibid.).

In contrast, a male student would be unlikely to approach any of his female classmates if he had a problem. A typical example was an encounter in class 9.6 during an English lesson in Keren Secondary:

The class was split into groups to solve a detective mystery. The group I was sitting with was made up of one boy, Berhane, and two girls. Berhane asked me for help and I replied he should ask his sisters first, referring to the two girls. Berhane's spontaneous reply was: 'How can she help me, what can she know?'. Berhane went on to solve the problem on his own. The two girls accepted that without protest. (Fieldnotes: 62)

These dynamics — that male students treat their female counterparts as academically less able and that the latter, instead of protesting and rising to the occasion, particularly when they are the better students in class, rather accept it as natural — were observed on many occasions. Teachers do little to counteract this. When asked, most teachers pay lip service to the need to engage girls to build up their confidence; however, the vast majority of teachers at secondary level are male (see Table 2) and share the perception that girls will not have a future in education, so why bother.¹¹ One rare example of a teacher making an effort to make girls feel more confident was observed in Keren Secondary in a physics lesson in grade eight:

To solve a physics problem related to Newton's laws of motion the teacher let two students (one male and one female) work simultaneously on either side of the blackboard. The girl finished earlier and was complimented on her good work. It might indeed be these small successes which over time make a difference and help to change common attitudes about female inferiority. (Fieldnotes: 54).

While the above raises questions of teacher training which go beyond the scope of this article, the difficulty in overcoming deep-rooted cultural attitudes and dispositions comes to the fore (see also Odaga and Heneveld, 1995). The dominant interpretation of shyness — that it is rooted in either academic weakness, lack of motivation or a lack of confidence in their capabilities as young women — is culturally negotiated and accepted by both sexes as a quasi-'natural' attribute belonging to girls and constituting an important part of their 'cultural identity' (Hall, 1996). Cultural

Table 2. Changes in Numbers and Percentages of Female Teachers by Level, 1993/94–2001/02

Year/Level	Number of female teachers		Percentage of female teachers	
	1993/94	2001/02	1993/94	2001/02
Elementary (grade 1–5)	1865	2873	35.4	38.3
Middle (grade 6–7)	140	177	14.3	11.6
Secondary (grade 8–11)	104	145	10.2	10.2

Source: author's calculations, based on Ministry of Education (2002).

11. In the four schools visited, there was no regular Eritrean female teacher. Keren Secondary had one female Indian teacher; the only female secondary teacher in Gash-Barka was based at Barentu Secondary; she was not a professional teacher but completing her year of university service. Equally in Tsabira, two female university service teachers were present.

identity here is understood as a relational and positional concept, a constructed form of closure, the outcome of dynamic social processes in which different voices become more or less hegemonic (see Hall, 1996; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Two more examples from Keren Secondary School may serve as further illustration.

In a grade nine English class, the teacher turns to one girl in a row of three to answer a question. She gives the right answer but speaks in a very low voice. The teacher replies: 'But your answer is correct, why do you hesitate?' and a boy answers, sort of on her behalf: 'because I am shy', and everybody laughs. (Fieldnotes: 62)

A week before, the [eleventh grade history] class was split into groups. Each group had to prepare a presentation to give to the whole class. One group had a female presenter, Misgana. Her presentation was well-prepared and she knew her topic — the Eritrean assembly during the federation period — well. But when she had to go to the front, she became inhibited and never looked at the class while speaking or rather reading. She was visibly relieved when finished, quickly looked up to the class once and went swiftly back to her desk. I did ask her later on whether the presentation was difficult for her and her answer was 'Yes, because I am very shy'. (Fieldnotes: 59)

In both cases shyness is taken as an almost defining feature of young women, with no hope of overcoming it, exemplifying gender accommodation by men and women alike.¹²

To end this section, the examples of three women in Tsabra illustrate how perceptions around shyness can be misleading. The three are Amna in grade nine, and Ashar and Seham in grade ten. Ashar and Seham could hardly be more different. Both come from the Afabet region. Seham is Saho and grew up in Sudan; her family returned to Eritrea only after independence. She speaks English very well, is articulate and self-confident. Ashar is Tigre, her family are farmers. She is shy and only opens up when spoken to alone. When, in the course of research, I asked teachers in Tsabra about girls they regard as having potential, everybody mentioned Seham. The only person who pointed to Ashar was a chemistry teacher, who felt 'she is the most clever girl in the whole of Tsabra' (fieldnotes: 18).

Watching both of them in the classroom, Ashar is very quiet; she does sometimes raise her hand, but hardly high enough for anybody to see, whereas Seham makes a point of getting the teacher's attention. However, many of her answers are wrong, and looking at both of their grades certainly shows that Ashar is doing really well, whereas Seham is rather average.

Sitting one afternoon with Ashar, the first thing she asks me is if I had any advice on how to be less shy. She is aware of the fact that her shyness is an obstacle and that girls like Seham usually get all the attention. At the same time she is confident about her ability and has a clear aim: to continue her education, hopefully at the university. At this point

12. This seems to suggest that boys in general are not shy; however, this is not the case, as witnessed by the author on many occasions, and as reported from other settings in sub-Saharan Africa (see Leach et al., 2003).

Ashar's friend Amna joins us. She is also Tigre from Afabet; her father is a soldier with the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF). Amna says about herself, 'I was always interested in education', but when one sees her in class, she does not show any sign of whether she understands what is going on. But, as she explains, that is her way of learning best: 'I like to listen to the teacher, I can learn more easily when he explains things than by just reading, so I try to understand as much as I can'. Last year she came first in her class and hopes to do the same this year. When asked about her future, Amna says so far her father was supporting her education, 'and I hope he would allow me to go to university if I get the chance . . . at the moment he encourages me but you can never know, he might change his mind'. And then, 'what could I do, I would have to obey him . . . and marry or something'. (Fieldnotes: 11, 18f).

From the present student population in Tsabra, Ashar and Amna seem to be the girls most likely to pass the matriculation. The fact that they receive little encouragement does not need to stand in the way of their educational success: conscious non-participation (gender accommodation, on the face of it) can be a strategy. Another example of this comes from earlier research. Misgana, a university student, claimed to use this strategy during her time in secondary schooling, in order to make the boys believe she would not compete with them:¹³

I had an observation, there was a guy who came first in the ninth grade and I came second, and he was not participating, but he was good in the exams. I was participating, I thought I was doing well . . . and I learned from him that I don't have to participate, just I have to be good in the exams. I changed my behaviour . . . if I don't participate [he thinks] I'm not studying, I'm careless, but if he keep quiet and I give answers he is frightened, he has to work very hard to beat me, so he came first. But if I keep quiet and study I can do good in the exams, I can slightly cheat him [into believing I am not studying hard].

However, the strategies adopted by girls like Ashar, Amna and their sisters all over Eritrea to use the (real or perceived) cultural attribute of shyness as an asset and ultimately to their advantage — strategies which in themselves indicate that the clear dichotomy between (traditional) 'backwardness' and 'modernity' proclaimed by the hegemonic discourse does not exist — might come to nothing if certain expectations within traditional culture, particularly the expectation to be married after a certain age, are not altered at the same time.

The Role of 'Culture'

In the context of cultural norms within the family and in wider society which put pressure on young women to abandon their schooling, the marriage issue features prominently, in two different ways. On one level, there is the perception of school directors, teachers and male students that girls after a certain age

13. This article evolved from a wider research on elite women in Eritrea, for which a large sample of women at Asmara University were interviewed or participated in a questionnaire survey (for further details see Müller, 2004).

are mainly interested in attracting the boys' attention as they have their mind set on marriage. In a discussion with a mixed group of students in Tsabra, a boy who was generally sympathetic towards the need to help the girls in their studies, put it like this: 'You see, when our sisters come to ask for help with a subject, they do not just want that help, but have other things in mind. [As an example he mentioned one of his friends whom 'a girl made her boyfriend' and then she left school and now he suffers and cannot concentrate on anything any more]' (fieldnotes: 12). On a different level, the pressure from the family to enter into an arranged marriage increases if girls do not perform well at school and the family sees no chance for them to continue their education or learn a profession. The prospect of being able to go to university (as evidenced by grades and standing in the class) might on the other hand postpone marriage into the indefinite future.

According to the directors in the schools visited, the major cut-off point for girls in secondary schools is after grade eight or nine (see Table 3) when, according to Abraham Tadesse, director of Keren Secondary, 'they reach the age of puberty and become too concerned with their sexuality'; as a consequence their grades drop and eventually many are dismissed. Abraham does not regard early marriage as such as the problem — 'when girls reach here [secondary school], they try to complete and their parents let them' — but rather the girls' underperformance. "'We'll see her grades' [the parents say], 'if she fails in grade eight, in grade nine, let us marry her'", that is how the people think' (interview, 12 March 2001).

My own observations and conversations with female students do not support this widely-held (male) perception that a majority of female

Table 3. Number (and Percentage) of Female Students in the Four Schools Visited, by Grade, School-year 2000/01, Second Semester

Secondary school/Grade	Keren	Agordat	Barentu	Tsabra
Grade 8	487 (38.5%)	79 (26.3%)	109 (26.7%)	61 (16.3%)
Grade 9	288 (30.8%)	44 (21.6%)	111 (35.0%)	27 (7.5%)
Grade 10	161 (28.3%)	40 (26.7%)	64 (29.0%)	17 (23.6%)
Grade 11	68 (33.0%)	12 (21.4%)	41 (41.8%)	12 (13.2%)
Total	1004	175	325	117

Note: The low number of female students in grade 11 is partly due to the fact that students (male and female) from minority ethnic groups are offered a preferential chance to join other educational establishments like the Teacher Training Insitute after grade 10. Many of the students at the schools visited took up this opportunity. The overall low number of female students at Tsabra was due to limitations in boarding facilities for girls at the time the study was conducted.

Source: compiled by the author from data received from the school registrars' offices.

students are interested in marriage rather than education. On the contrary, the vast majority of girls interviewed in any grade dreamt of going to university, however unrealistic these hopes might turn out to be, or at least to the Teacher Training Institute (TTI). Even if a young woman's hope for further education remains unfulfilled, going through secondary schooling seems to change her attitude to being forced into an unwanted marriage. According to Naga Tesfai, director of Agordat Secondary, more and more girls refuse these arrangements:

If they reach grade eleven, most female students refuse to be married . . . they want to continue their education or have a job. . . . Now they know what's good and what's bad, so they try to convince their parents. . . . The parents start to be governed by their children, if their children got higher education,¹⁴ they [the parents] try to understand their children's ideas . . . many of them refuse to be married, even when asked . . . Or, for example, last year one female student of grade eleven married one month before the national examination, but she came and took the examination, she is now working in the bank . . . I know three others [who were] forced by their parents, but refused . . . and the parents accepted, now they are doing their national service. . . . The problem is when they are at lower age, when they are at grade eight . . . because then they have to hear their parents' view, many of these get married. (Interview, 23 February 2001)

But even in the case of younger women, Naga mentions an example which he hopes will be followed by others:

Last year there was one problem, she was grade six, her parents agreed with the husband's parents to marry their daughter to him, but she disappeared from the town . . . and she never came [for the wedding], he then married another woman. The girl came back after six months and now she is learning in our school again. When we asked her, 'why did you do such actions', [she said] 'because I don't want to be married, my parents forced me, but I couldn't tolerate this, that is why I disappeared', and the parents felt sorry. . . . Of course it was a great loss for them, they made a lot of preparations for the wedding, so they were not happy, but they did nothing. . . . Still, now she is with her parents, and at the beginning of this year, when we started school, they [her parents] came and asked us to readmit her to continue her education. (Interview, 23 February 2001)

These examples point to a slow change in attitudes; but they should not obscure the fact that for many young women, especially outside the capital Asmara, the 'choice' still comes down to successful education or marriage. Completion of grade eleven does not necessarily alter this pattern, as proven by Fatima, a Tigre woman in grade eleven in Keren Secondary.

Fatima speaks English well and with confidence. She attends private tuition classes to revise for her matriculation. Her father willingly pays for these. But if she fails the matriculation, 'my father will sent me to Australia or Saudi-Arabia to marry'. Fatima adds that if she should only pass to join the TTI, 'I would prefer to marry, as I do not want to be an elementary school teacher' — and whereas it would be acceptable to her family to delay marriage if she had a chance to continue her education, it would not be considered

14. With 'higher', Naga was referring to the completion of secondary education, still rare for girls in the cultural environment of Agordat.

acceptable within her cultural environment for her to simply find a job after the completion of grade eleven and marry some time later. (Fieldnotes: 53)

The example of Fatima shows that young women have their own agenda, and getting married can be a rational choice when weighing the options for the future — career opportunities and potential future income, national service obligations,¹⁵ and marriage, possibly coupled with life in the diaspora.

This leads to another important point: young women's inclination towards education is strongly connected to the vision they have of a different future for themselves. Thus 'private rates of return' are one of the factors determining female participation in higher education (Subbarao et al., 1994: 11) — rates of return here not interpreted solely in the economic sense of anticipated future monetary income, although this undoubtedly plays a part, but more broadly in terms of personal ambitions, self-fulfilment and individual freedom of choice (in contrast to following a traditional path with little room for personal manoeuvre).

These future aspirations are related to the overall cultural environment in which these women grow up and how far 'modernity' has taken root within this environment: whereas in Tsabra, the major focus is on going to either a one-year agricultural college 'to be finished not too old, then marry and work with my husband as a farmer', as one student put it, or the TTI to become an elementary school teacher (fieldnotes: 8), in Agordat and Barentu ambitions centre on finishing grade eleven and finding a government job, as in both places there is a shortage of secondary-educated, minority language native speakers to work in the administration. In Keren, sights are set on joining the university, as openings for young women have been created and role models have established a path to be followed — a process that is only just beginning in Agordat and Barentu. Biniam Fissaye worked in Keren Secondary until recently; he is now director in Barentu. He compared the two schools this way:

In Keren the students are trying to go to university, since they are seeing their brothers or friends joining . . . but here [in Barentu] we don't have many students joining the university. . . . Simply what they see is this local environment, education reaches only elementary or junior level, you don't find [anyone] who has graduated . . . so what they want is to complete the secondary education, that is the final [for them]. . . . Completing grade eleven will allow them some job opportunities and they can live their lives in a good way. (Interview, 2 March 2001)

Given this historical disadvantage — in terms of exposure to modernity — could any of the young women from these areas become part of a future elite? The young women from Agordat and Barentu who might join Asmara University (UoA) are clearly 'exceptional' and show characteristics similar

15. In Eritrea, men and single women between eighteen and forty years of age have to do at least one year of national service, comprising three months of military training followed by civilian reconstruction activities. Married women are exempt from this service.

to those found among the majority of female students at the UoA: a particular background or personal history; ambitions for the future which go beyond the traditional; and various sources of encouragement (see Müller, 2005). Two examples follow.

At the time of the research, no girls (and very few boys) had gone from Agordat Secondary to university. This pattern might, however, be altered by Ashar in tenth grade:

Ashar, 19 years of age, is Nara and comes originally from Barentu. She got married when in grade five: 'It was an arranged marriage', she recalls, 'but my parents did ask my opinion. They were separating at that time so there were many problems in my family. I thought it is better to get married to have a better life'. Ashar did tell her husband-to-be that she would like to continue her education, and he was supportive. While in grade seven she conceived a now three year old daughter, 'and that was a difficult time, but I stayed in education'. In fact, Abdu, her husband, who is a nurse in the local hospital, encouraged her to do so. A month after Ashar had given birth, Abdu asked the school director to allow Ashar back, which the school duly did. 'In the first few weeks he himself drove her to school on his motorbike every morning', a teacher remembers.

Ashar is aware that her determination to stay in education would not have mattered if Abdu had not agreed: 'if he would have wanted me to stay at home, I would have obeyed him, that is our culture', she says.

Her teachers are confident that she can pass the matriculation, and Abdu would support her to join the university, even though that would mean her staying in Asmara during term time. Already they have an agreement to delay any more children until she finishes her education. Ashar is an unusual woman in more than one way; about her interest in education she says: 'Education for me is not only to have a better job, I also want to know things, know how the world works', a very rare comment for any student in Eritrea. (Fieldnotes: 33f).

In Barentu, it is Aseda, also in grade ten, who could become the first Kunama woman to join the UoA. If this happens, the circumstances of her family, in which education is highly valued, will certainly have played a role:

Aseda invited me to her home one evening where she lives with her mother and Senait, her older sister who is a teacher in Agordat junior school. Aseda's mother is the director of an elementary school run by a Protestant mission and also a leader within the Kunama community. Her late father was a fighter with the EPLF. Both Senait and her mother encourage Aseda to study. And while Aseda has interest in her education, she is more of a free spirit, understands things easily but finds it hard to sit down and study the things she doesn't. Also, in this female-only household, she is the youngest and responsible for many domestic chores. She says she loves those duties. The evening I was there, she did the cooking, served us and then started to make coffee, all in good spirits, visibly enjoying herself.

Aseda certainly has the potential to join the university, but I am not sure she is disciplined enough to really sit down and study for the matriculation. She herself does not take it that seriously. On one hand she likes the idea of being the first Kunama woman to join, on the other she very much enjoys her life as it is and with her good English and outgoing personality she will have no problem to find something else worthwhile to do in her local environment. (Fieldnotes: 48f).

Aseda's case demonstrates once more the importance of individual ambition in making decisions about future education: in her case, an alternative route could be to follow in her mother's footsteps and assume a leadership role

among the Kunama. These ambitions have, on one hand, been created by the modernist agenda of the Eritrean revolution; what is regarded as being in the national interest by the present leadership is often at the same time conducive to women's advancement and as such fostering gender resistance. On the other hand, their ambitions often lead to frustrations among young women in a (post-) revolutionary environment where the personal is expected to take second stage behind the national interest, and where their role in a potential future elite is defined by the anticipated needs of the nation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The experiences of the young women in this study go to the heart of the debate on whether post-elementary education ultimately fosters social reproduction or social change (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Within the ideological framework of the Eritrean revolution, the wider mission of secondary schools is to overcome the customs and social norms of the surrounding environment and replace them with a modernist outlook on women's capabilities. Whilst apparently fostering social change, the underlying rationale asks how women's education can improve society, not how it can improve the lives of women themselves in a way they regard as important. In practice, Eritrean education policy thus treats secondary schools predominately as sites of knowledge transfer to serve national interests within the global economy, making the major objective of formal schooling to secure societal reproduction. This notion of the purpose of education is ultimately based on 'ungendered notions of citizenship' (Morley, 2002: 10), while more generally it has been observed that, for women, attaining high levels of education does not necessarily correlate to a change in their overall status (Stromquist, 1995).

The contradictions in the lives of the young women discussed here thus expose the limitations of the Eritrean revolution in terms of radically altering the community of dispositions underpinning Eritrean society. Those limitations are inherent in the version of modernity advanced by the revolution, which relies more on oppressing gender differences than on transforming gender relations (Bernal, 2000), and the practices such a vision inspires. Interwoven with the diversity of Eritrea as a multiethnic society are 'common strands of gender inequality rooted in patriarchal beliefs' (Mirembe and Davies, 2001: 402, in the context of Uganda), which the gender-neutral ideology of the revolution has not touched.¹⁶ These include

16. However, it is worth noting here that the kind of sexual harassment caused by stereotypical masculine and feminine behaviours which has been reported in other African settings (see Leach et al., 2003; Mirembe and Davies, 2001), is not prevalent in Eritrea.

beliefs about women's shyness and the superior capabilities of men, beliefs which maintain inequality in male and female relations but at the same time constitute gender identities that people from both sexes might be reluctant to give up — even if simultaneously longing for 'progress' in a 'western' sense of the word. These are being reinforced by certain traditions, for example inter-generational marriage which is encouraged in the overall cultural environment, and to which girls and boys are introduced from a young age.

The future aspirations of secondary school students are influenced by this environment, making marriage a fulfilling and rational choice to many young women — especially in the light of the new social obligations placed on them as emancipated citizens. At the same time, too few role models are available to encourage a more profound change in the understanding of male and female roles. The importance of female role models is widely accepted as a means of promoting gender equality, by expanding the aspirations of young women and demonstrating that barriers to female advancement are socially constructed (UNESCO, 2003). In that sense, ten years after the Eritrean revolution, the modernization of gender roles has not progressed enough. This is demonstrated by the unequal participation rate of girls in secondary schooling (see Table 3), the small percentage of female teachers at secondary level (Table 2), and the continuing low number of female students at Asmara University (Table 4).

Even where 'modernity' has taken hold, 'tradition' still plays its part and should be acknowledged, not least because those who resist certain parts of their traditional gender identity still live and have to survive within the social and cultural system that they contest (see also Hollander, 2002).

Table 4. Number (and Percentage) of Female Graduates of Asmara University by Department, 1994/95–1999/2000

Year/Department	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000
Science	1 (3.0%)	19 (14.1%)	12 (9.4%)	8 (6.9%)	12 (11.3%)	10 (10.4%)
Health Science	–	–	11 (30.6%)	–	–	4 (14.3%)
Arts and Social Sciences	–	7 (17.5%)	5 (21.7%)	6 (10.2%)	15 (13.0%)	11 (11.3%)
Business and Economics	15 (19.0%)	21 (16.2%)	15 (11.4%)	11 (11.1%)	30 (11.9%)	14 (13.7%)
Education Programme	–	–	–	–	–	–
Agriculture and Aquatic Sciences	1 (5.0%)	9 (7.6%)	3 (3.6%)	6 (11.8%)	5 (6.6%)	3 (6.0%)
Total	17 (12.9%)	56 (13.2%)	46 (11.4%)	31 (9.5%)	62 (11.2%)	42 (11.1%)

Source: compiled by the author from data received from the registrar's offices, Asmara University.

More generally, the diverse traditional cultural practices need to be seen not merely as impediments to modernization, but also as valuable resources. The Eritrean revolution aimed for gender resistance on a collective level and in many ways hastened Eritrean women's road towards modernity. At the same time, some of its features reinforce gender accommodation on an individual level, as a way to oppose those aspects of modernity that call for women to reject facets of traditional culture which they might deem valuable in their personal judgement. The Eritrean revolution has merely laid the foundations for a different community of dispositions.

That said, the experiences narrated here indicate the beginnings of a process in which women are enabled to negotiate their gender identities through processes of 'definition, experience, recognition, rebellion, desire or ambition' (Bennett, 2002). In common with observations from other contexts (Pessate-Schubert, 2003; Stambach, 1998), their secondary education provides an institutional forum for the women discussed here to re-define their world and create a space of their own within the public as well as the private domain. In so doing, they use both gender resistance and gender accommodation — often at the same time and reinforcing each other. As such, education acts as a 'strategy-generating' institution, 'enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and everchanging situations' (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). The young women in this study derive some social power from formal schooling at secondary level and deploy their schooling as a kind of cultural capital.

Low participation levels are undoubtedly an important indicator of marginalization and the fact that, despite improvements, female secondary school enrolment rates and the share of female secondary teaching staff both remain low, is indeed cause for concern. Nevertheless, the success of the Eritrean model in terms of the modernization of gender roles and equity in education should not be measured solely in terms of access, but also in terms of having created an environment in which women are enabled to strive for their aspirations. Furthermore, the Eritrean experience holds wider lessons in serving as a counter-narrative to the official global discourse and practice on women's education which — not unlike the discourse in Eritrea — is predominantly based on women as mediators within the modernization process (see Stromquist, 1999), not on an understanding of women as autonomous citizens.

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