

A Soldier and a Woman: (Re)Negotiating Gender in Female Narratives of Civil Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article examines how female combatants in Tigray, Ethiopia, negotiated the connections and collisions between soldiering and womanhood. It uses original oral histories to investigate the self-presentation of fighter women throughout the 1974–91 civil war in Ethiopia, arguing that women carefully negotiated their gender performances during the conflict. Recognising the long-term impact of participation in war on combatant women has wider implications in the historiography beyond the Tigray case to reassess the enduring impact of conflict engagement on women's lives and life trajectories. At its close, this article makes brief observations about the legacies of fighter women in Tigray in light of the ongoing Tigray War (2020–present).

It is summertime in Adwa, northern Tigray. The rain has washed the sediment from the river and the water is clean to swim again. Tirfe is 11 years old and has run down to play and bathe with her friends. When her elder brother catches up, he angrily reprimands her for going off on her own and demands she return with him. A female fighter in the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is watching from a distance. She comes over to the pair and confronts Tirfe's brother publicly. Tirfe reflects on this moment nearly 40 years on.

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She said to him, 'Why are you yelling at her? Stop yelling. She has the right to do whatever she wants to do.' And I thought, that's something. That's something new. What do you mean I have the right to do whatever I want to do? That built the idea of what a woman can do for me. I am something. I can do something ... It was a life-changing moment for me.²

In the 17-year-long civil war in Ethiopia between 1974 and 1991, female combatants formed up to one-third of the leading militarised resistance group known as the TPLF. Through their participation, female fighters challenged the boundaries, roles and possibilities of womanhood in the Tigrayan context. Not only did the soldier in Tirfe's memory inspire new understandings of gender, gender roles and potential, but she also disrupted hierarchies of age and authority over girls in the family home. The very existence and the behaviours of female combatants re-designed the cultural category of womanhood, as set out by the (binary) gender normativity of Tigrayan civil society. The catastrophe of the war opened up an arena for this change.

This article examines how female combatants negotiated the connections and collisions between soldiering and womanhood. It seeks to make three contributions to discourse on the history of women in war: firstly, by investigating the self-presentation of fighter women throughout the war in Ethiopia, it argues that women carefully negotiate their gendered performances during conflict for a desirable outcome. This outcome varied from professional and social rewards in hierarchies of militarism to self-preservation and safety in the face of danger. Secondly, this article puts forward an argument about the enduring influence of a 'fighter' identity on the social positions of women in the post-war era, which required further negotiations of femininity and female roles in the reconstruction period. Recognising the long-term legacies of participation in war on combatant women has wider implications in the historiography beyond the Tigray case to reassess the enduring impact of conflict engagement on women's lives and life trajectories. Finally, this article's methodological reflections on digital qualitative research practices offer a useful addition to contemporary discourse on the ethics and benefits of virtual interview processes during Covid-19 and other global travel instabilities.

2 Tirfe, interview with Francesca Baldwin, Zoom, August 2021.

At its close, this article looks briefly at the current crises engulfing Tigray and the narratives of gender roles that have shaped women's involvement in the new conflict as a so-called necessary and natural continuation of the last. It draws on memories of women's role in previous conflicts to assess the intergenerational shaping of women's narratives of the current Tigray War and the engagement of young women as organisers and leaders in the new crisis. As Tigrayan female combatants have exemplified, women's interactions in the military sphere are neither an interesting footnote, nor an example of exceptionalism, but intricately intertwined with the gendered nature of conflict and catastrophe.

Historicising Conflict in Tigray, 1974–2022

Tigray is the most northern region of Ethiopia, bordering Sudan and Eritrea. It is home to some 6 million people, or roughly 6 per cent of Ethiopia's population. As the fabled home of the Queen of Sheba and the Ark of the Covenant, some see it as the cradle of Ethiopian civilisation, although others emphatically do not.³ In the past 50 years, Tigray has seen three wars. The first, which is the focus of this article, was a 17-year-long civil war between 1974 and 1991 between TPLF-led resistance groups and the government of the Derg (later known as the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia), a Soviet-backed military junta. The TPLF began in the early 1970s as a small student group, growing into a highly organised populist military insurgency after the Derg's regime of 'red terror' spread throughout the country, fighting to overthrow the military regime and end its repressive ethnic-based policies.⁴ The TPLF went on to form a coalition with other liberation groups in Ethiopia, including the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and toppled the Derg in 1991. In the years following, former TPLF leader Meles Zenawi became president (and later prime minister) of the newly formed Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which governed Ethiopia as a multi-ethnic federation for the next 30 years.

3 'Ethiopia – the cradle of mankind and civilization', *All Africa*, 18 June 2015, allafrica.com/stories/201506191183.html; 'Briefing no. 156: Bridging the divide in Ethiopia's north', *International Crisis Group*, 12 June 2020, [crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b156-bridging-divide-ethiopia-north](https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/ethiopia/b156-bridging-divide-ethiopia-north).

4 *The Ethiopian Red Terror Trials: Transitional Justice Challenged*, ed. Kjetil Tronvoll, Charles Schaefer and Girmachew Alemu Aneme (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009).

A core principle of the EPRDF's 1995 Constitution was that each region had the right for peaceful self-determination:

Article 39 provides:

- (i). Every nation, nationality and people has an unconditional right to self-determination including the right to secession.⁵

This was invoked by Eritrea in 1993, which broke away from the Ethiopian federation to become an independent nation-state. In 1998, however, Tigray's second war of the late twentieth century began over the contested territory of Badme, which was invaded by Eritrea and ruled to be a part of the country by a United Nations (UN) commission in 2002. The Ethio-Eritrea War (1998–2000), as it is known, did not engulf civilians in the same way as the 1974–91 civil war, but contributed to the deeply strained relationship between the neighbouring regions.

In November 2020, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed launched an attack on Tigray for the third time in 50 years after a series of political disputes between Ahmed's ruling Prosperity Party (PP) and the regional government of the TPLF. The latter recalled its representatives to Tigray in August 2020 and held a regional election, in which it won over 90 per cent of the seats.⁶ In retaliation for what Ahmed saw as political treason, the prime minister began a 'law and order' operation on Tigray to bring the TPLF in line.⁷ This quickly escalated into an attack on all Tigrayans, including civilians. At the time of writing, Tigray has been at war for 19 months and has been blockaded from phone and internet access, partially denied electricity and largely cut off from aid.⁸ Some 2 million people have been internally displaced and 70,000 have fled across the border to Sudan, many of whom are displaced by conflict for the second time in their lives having made the same border crossing amid the 1983–85 famine during the war with the Derg. Tigray has mounted a militarised resistance in the form of the Tigray Defence Force (TDF)

5 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Article 39.

6 Giulia Paravicini, 'Regional party wins vote in Ethiopia's Tigray, challenging federal government', *Reuters*, 11 September 2020, reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics-idUSKBN2622LA.

7 Abiy Ahmed, 'Operations to restore law and order in Ethiopia's Tigray region', *Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, London, UK*, 24 December 2020, ethioembassy.org.uk/operations-to-restore-law-and-order-in-ethiopias-tigray-region-how-did-we-get-here/.

8 'Northern Ethiopia humanitarian update situation report', *UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, 16 June 2022, archived at reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-northern-ethiopia-humanitarian-update-situation-report-16-june-2022.

and fighting has spilled over into the rest of the country.⁹ This research is driven by the ongoing conflict but primarily framed through the lens of the earlier civil war.

As earlier stated, women comprised up to one-third of active combatants in the TPLF during the civil war. Their roles extended from soldier to technician, from political teachers to health workers, and from strategists and generals to support line workers and community project managers. Their participation is often framed as a watershed moment for gender roles in Tigray and Ethiopia more broadly. Formerly a feudal society, women predominately occupied domestic spaces and were not typically permitted into spaces perceived as masculine, such as politics and war.¹⁰ The TPLF invited women to participate on an equal footing to their male peers for the first time. This was partly an ideologically motivated policy, as the Marxist roots of the TPLF advocated for revised gender expectations, but undoubtedly a logistical necessity as well, as the TPLF faced battle with the Derg's superior numbers and resources.¹¹

Female combatants often referred to their dual struggle in their participation in this war: firstly, for liberation from the Derg regime; and, secondly, for emancipation of their gender more broadly through the opportunities provided by the conflict. Women participants in the war effort expected that their contributions would lead to long-term transformative change for gender norms and female representation at all levels. The argument presented in this article, however, is that their engagement in the hierarchies and dynamics of an organised military insurgency necessitated negotiations of gender roles and performances. Their involvement as combatants required ostensible shifts in the behaviours and identities of fighter women, and reframed concepts of femininity and gender normativity within the boundaries of the conflict. This was not a linear progression towards gender equality, as has largely been presented in popular narratives of the war, but a kinetic process of opportunity and reversal, in which women had to make choices about self-presentation for professional and social rewards.

9 Ermias Tasfaye, 'Oromo and Amhara militants battle on western frontier', *Ethiopia Insight*, 1 June 2022, ethiopia-insight.com/2022/06/01/oromo-and-amhara-militants-battle-on-western-frontier/.

10 Jenny Hammond, "'My revolution is like honey': Women in revolutionary Tigray", *Women: A Cultural Review* 1, no. 1 (2008): 56.

11 John Young, *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia: The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 90–91.

Gender, War and Ethiopia in the Literature

Feminist history and international relations trends demonstrate the strength of oral approaches to studying women in war.¹² Social anthropologists Jenny Hammond and Thera Mjaaland conducted valuable interviews with women in Tigray, the former during the war itself.¹³ Their collections inspired this study and form the foundations upon which this longitudinal, historical contribution has been built. This author departs from the largely linear narratives of changing gender roles in Tigray civil society of Hammond and Mjaaland and approaches the case of Tigrayan female fighters from a historical perspective that takes into account dynamic, multi-layered negotiations of gender performances at different times and places of the war. In this regard, it is influenced by political scientists Beza Negewo Oda, Aaronette M. White and Angela Veale, whose micro-studies of fighter women explore interpretations of femininity, womanhood and gender roles in the Tigrayan context.¹⁴ Other notable works in political science that have informed this study include Sarah Vaughan and others' contributions to intersections between gender and ethnicity in Ethiopia and Tsega Berhe on women's experiences of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) after the war.¹⁵

There is a small but rich strand of literature on female combatants in small wars in Africa, which Oluwatoyin O. Oluwaniyi claims is dominated by scholarly focus on women supporting men rather than their deliberate choices to commit violence and participate in war.¹⁶

12 See Chris Coulter, 'Female fighters in the Sierra Leone War: Challenging the assumptions?', *Feminist Review*, no. 88 (2008): 54–73; Chris Coulter, *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers: Women's Lives Through War and Peace in Sierra Leone* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2013).

13 *Sweeter than Honey: Testimonies of Tigrayan Women*, ed. Jenny Hammond and Nell Druce (London: Links, 1989); Thera Mjaaland, 'At the frontiers of change? Women and girls' pursuit of education in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia' (University of Bergen, PhD thesis, 2013).

14 Beza Negewo-Oda and Aaronette M. White, 'Identity transformation and reintegration among Ethiopian women war veterans: A feminist analysis', *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* 23, no. 3 (2011): 163–87; Angela Veale, *From Child Soldier to Ex-Fighter: Female Fighters, Demobilisation and Reintegration in Ethiopia* (Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2003), 1–29.

15 Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, 'The culture of power in contemporary Ethiopian political life', *Sida Studies*, no. 10 (2003): 11–21; Tsega Berhe, *The Tigrean Women in the Liberation Struggle and Aftermath, 1975–1996* (Addis Ababa: Organization for Social Research in Eastern and Southern Africa, 1999).

16 Oluwatoyin O. Oluwaniyi, 'Women's roles and positions in African wars', *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Jacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 541–60. See also Leena Vastapu, illustrated by Emmi Nieminen, *Liberia's Women Veterans: War, Roles and Reintegration* (London: Zed Books, 2018).

In particular, African and Global South feminist scholarship has explored women's contributions and positions in conflict on the continent.¹⁷ Two notable studies include Mokua Ombati on female combatants in the Kenyan Defence Forces, which examines women's inclusion in a necessarily masculine environment as a hierarchy of militarised identities, and Siphokazi Magadla, who differentiates three categories of women in war in South Africa: 'guerrilla girls, combative mothers and the in-betweeners'.¹⁸ This research is particularly relevant as this article similarly explores intersections between age, gender and choices in conflict, as well as the militarisation of motherhood in Tigray.

In history, Gloria Chuku, Alicia Decker and Tanya Lyons have each developed the discipline's purview of how women participate in war, often in hidden spaces.¹⁹ In her work on the Zimbabwean Liberation War, Lyons detailed the glorification of fighter women, which in turn obscured their contributions through supporting roles.²⁰ Similarly, in her study of women in war in Biafra, Nigeria, Chuku expanded the site of engagement in war beyond the battlefield, to recognise women's critical work in community roles, activism and social cohesion.²¹ Although this article explicitly looks at combatant women who took up arms directly, it also reflects on their additional supporting roles as health workers, education facilitators and community leaders. In doing so, it aligns with Lyons and Chuku in their rejection of fixed categories of 'fighters' and the restrictive parameters of the battlefield.

Looking 'beyond the battlefield' is another useful perspective in the theoretical foundations of this article's conceptual interpretations of gender, gender roles, self-presentation, war and militarism. It endeavours

17 Amina Mama and Margo Okazawa-Rey, 'Militarism, conflict and women's activism in the global era: Challenges and prospects for women in three West African contexts', *Feminist Review*, no. 101 (2012): 97–123, 202.

18 Mokua Ombati, 'Feminine masculinities in the military: The case of female combatants in the Kenya Defence Forces' operation in Somalia', *African Security Review* 24, no. 4 (2015): 403–13; Siphokazi Magadla, 'Women combatants and the liberation movements in South Africa: Guerrilla girls, combative mothers and the in-betweeners', *African Security Review* 24, no. 4 (2015): 390–402.

19 Gloria Chuku, 'Women and the Nigerian-Biafra War', in *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967–1970*, ed. A. Dirk Moses and Lasse Heerten (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 329–59; Alicia C. Decker, *In Idi Amin's Shadow: Women, Gender, and Militarism in Uganda* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014); Tanya Lyons, 'Guerrilla girls and women in the Zimbabwean national liberation struggle', in *Women in African Colonial Histories*, ed. Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 305–26.

20 Lyons, 'Guerrilla girls and women'.

21 Chuku, 'Women and the Nigerian-Biafra War'.

to propose a re-exploration of female fighter's gender identity, influenced by the pioneering work of Judith Butler, Cynthia Enloe and Jacklyn Cock.²² As feminist theories of gender in conflict will be deployed throughout this article, it is useful to briefly clarify here the working meanings of the language chosen in this work. Firstly, this study follows Cock's definition of militarism as the ideological foundation of militaries and militarised actions.²³ A key argument put forward by Mama and Okazawa-Rey in this context is that militarism, as a 'gendered and gendering phenomenon, persists long after "peace" has been officially declared'.²⁴ This has far-reaching implications for understanding the continuing legacies of conflict participation of demobilised women. In addition, the use of the term 'patriarchy' here is consistent with Enloe's definition as a structural system that perpetuates the privileging of masculinity and associated traits.²⁵ This is relevant as the article explores the dual process for women to transition from civilian to soldier *and* from woman to soldier. Finally, binary references will be made to categories of 'man' and 'woman' as separate, culturally defined entities. This is not intended to obscure the existence of infinite genders, as this author explicitly recognises, but to develop a framework for understanding performances of gender identity as a continuum between intelligible gendered categories, which can be adapted and negotiated depending on where and with whom a person is interacting. These terms also reflect the language used by interview participants and the gender normativity of Tigrayan civil society.

Methodology: Digital Oral History Methods

Methodologically, this research is fundamentally an oral history project. Life-history interviews with former fighters, activists, community leaders and survivors of both wars in the diaspora have been carried out with the aim of recording and preserving women's memories of civil conflict in Tigray in their own words. Between December 2020 and April 2022, 28 interviews were carried out with women in Tigray, the United

22 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa*, ed. Jacklyn Cock and Laurie Nathan (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989).

23 Cock and Nathan, *War and Society*, 2.

24 Mama and Okazawa-Rey, 'Militarism, conflict and women's activism', 100.

25 Enloe, *The Curious Feminist*, 4.

Kingdom, the United States, Kenya, Sweden, France and Australia. As this research was conducted during the restrictions imposed by the global pandemic and the ongoing Tigray War, all interviews were conducted on the video meeting platforms Zoom and Telegram to ensure participant safety and allow for long-distance meetings.

Other scholars have confirmed the potential of videoconferencing platforms to collect qualitative data, during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.²⁶ Although this medium presents a number of challenges in ethics and interviewer–interviewee relationships and restricts non-verbal communications during interviews, it is nonetheless a valuable platform for modern oral history practice when used carefully.

A digital approach was necessary to include global participants and to access key voices from within Tigray, which lacks consistent internet access, but this author found video meetings enabled constructive working relationships. Conferencing software allowed the researcher to have multiple meetings, ask follow-up questions and build upon transcripts at different stages of the Tigray War (2020–present). Encrypted voice notes were used occasionally with participants in Tigray to enable information to be shared safely and at a time feasible for the participant struggling with connection. The record function on Zoom facilitated an easy, transparent recording process, without the physical reminder of a recorder during a face-to-face interview. This author found this helped put participants at ease and encouraged them to focus less on the recording device as compared with in-person interviews.

Interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours. Each took the form of a life history interview, where participants were asked broad questions about their life trajectory and targeted follow-up questions depending on what their answers revealed. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 69, all identifying as female. Following Sherna Gluck's definition of oral history interviews as a feminist encounter, the research sought to centre women's lived experiences and ensure the inclusion of marginalised perspectives in a discourse in which humanitarian actors and international conflict-resolution bodies often speak on behalf of

26 J. Kessa Roberts, Alexandra E. Pavlakis and Meredith P. Richards, 'It's more complicated than it seems: Virtual qualitative research in the COVID-19 era', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (2021), doi.org/10.1177%2F16094069211002959; Elliane Irani, 'The use of videoconferencing for qualitative interviewing: Opportunities, challenges, and considerations', *Clinical Nursing Research* 28, no. 1 (2018): 3–8.

affected women, rather than consulting them directly. It must be noted that the ongoing communication blackout in Tigray has made it very difficult to engage with those who have remained in the region since the start of the war. Although some testimonies have been collected via secure VPN servers, voices of women in Tigray are largely missing. While there is no compensation for the omission of these testimonies, the lens of diasporic women who are participating in the new Tigray War from their international bases disrupts our understandings of a 'fighter' beyond physical presence on a battlefield and reveals the complex, transformative ways in which women engage in and shape the parameters of war.

A Lioness and a Mother: Reconciling Femininity and Soldiering

The meaning of the term 'female combatant' is mutable. Definitions are situationally, spatially and temporally bound. A core directive of the TPLF's military policy was that women were able to take up arms and participate in battle on equal positioning to their male counterparts. Beyond the role of soldier, however, women were also considered combatants if they dedicated themselves to the war effort in other areas. They were trained as technicians, drivers, health workers and political actors at a community and regional level. Some women were given positions as local interlocutors and were responsible for interfacing between village residents and the TPLF to communicate needs and negotiate the terms of military presence in the area. Their long-term engagement in the war, affiliation with the TPLF as an insurgent force and transient lifestyle encompassed them within the category of female combatant during this time. Many rose to critical leadership positions in both the political and military wings of the TPLF and redefined boundaries and expectations of women's roles in war.

Nonetheless, participating as a combatant required a reframing of the culturally defined category of womanhood in Tigray. Formal policies prohibiting marriage and sexual relations between combatants until the late 1980s required women to suspend their expected life trajectories of marriage and motherhood. Many transformed their appearance until they were nearly unrecognisable as women at all. Military dress meant *tegadelti* (fighter or struggler in the feminine plural) were amongst the only women to wear trousers in rural areas and most cropped their hair short for ease and practicality in the field. Their presentations and roles

initially took civilians by surprise, especially elders from rural locations. One participant, Genet, remembered her interactions with local residents after she joined the TPLF:

The women would say, ‘Why are you here? Why wouldn’t you stay with your mum and marry and then have children? Why are you with these men? You sleep with them? Don’t they—do they do something to you?’—because we sleep together with men. I was the only girl among boys. You don’t! First of all, you are there to fight, you are not there for romanticism or whatever—you don’t even think, because that’s not in your head at all. You are comrades and fully, truly seeking justice. You are not there about sex or anything else ... And so the women used to get fascinated.²⁷

The ‘fascination’ Genet described depicts how far female fighters challenged expectations of womanhood and women’s life trajectories in Tigray. Although she is adamant that romantic and/or sexual relationships were not in the interests of serving combatants, her intimacy with her male peers was highly unusual for an unmarried woman. In colloquial discussions, other participants have alluded to the fact that women in predominately male units were occasionally accused of asexuality by friends and family. In Genet’s testimony, female members of the TPLF appear to have prioritised their commitment to the cause above expectations of female behaviour in a rejection of popular expectations of female desires. Several fighters describe being asked by civilians in the villages they entered to show their breasts to prove their identity, or residents would not believe they were female at all.

Judith Butler coined the idea that gender requires a doing.²⁸ In this view, gender is a fundamentally unstable and performative act, wherein one re-enacts expectations of gender normativity in order to uphold intelligible identifications of binary categories of ‘man’ and ‘women’. Combatant women appear to identify with this concept of performing gender for a professional and social reward as their participation required a shift in verbal and non-verbal behaviours to integrate into the military unit. They adapted their clothing, speech, mannerisms, distorted hierarchies of gender and age and were determined not to let their femininity present as weakness. In the early stages of the war, when fewer women joined

27 Genet interview with Francesca Baldwin, Zoom, February 2022.

28 Judith Butler, ‘Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory’, *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

the frontline, Marta described the additional measures taken by female fighters to match and, in some instances, surpass expectations of male soldiers to justify their presence in the unit:

All women fighters, we participate everywhere. Even hard, even easy, we didn't say we were not able to do it. We say, 'we'll do it', and we do it. We did it. From small group to big group, we made the organisation in every department—we have a lot of departments to carry the war—every department we have leaders. Woman leaders. And they work like a man. There is no difference.²⁹

Marta joined the TPLF as a young, single woman from a rural location and progressed to be a military leader, before being shot and sent away for recovery. She describes her limited prospects before the war, when she had only partial access to education and training. Her perceived obligation to prove that women's capacity was no different to men's is confirmed by Genet, who travelled from the capital, Addis Ababa, to join the TPLF as a student.

I became one of the young girls from Addis, at that time, the first one. Because there were local Tigrayans, who were—who have joined the army, but there were no girls from the city. So myself and another Eritrean lady who left a six month old child—she was a married woman ...

One of the men [also joining up] was struggling to walk these mountains—for me it was just adventure ... And then you go and spend the night at a peasant's house. There is no electricity. There is no bed. You have no bed you just (*gestures foetal position*) and you sometimes—it was just tough. I can't remember how many days it took us—three days, maybe? Or whatever, because some of the men could not walk.³⁰

Genet and Marta took care to dismiss gendered barriers to participation as fighters. In Genet's testimony, she goes as far as to note male deficiencies in comparison to her experience. This is telling as we consider how feminist theorists in history and international relations have investigated the dynamics of states and militaries as deeply gendered social institutions, underpinned by militarism as the ideological structure of war and militaries, which privileges masculinity and its associated traits—discipline, stamina,

29 Marta, interview with Francesca Baldwin, Zoom, December 2021.

30 Genet interview.

stoicism and so on—while gentleness and submission are used to degrade opponents through association with femininity. The belief that the feminine is subordinate to the masculine in this way directly implicates female combatants in negotiations of power and hierarchy. In other words, the very values, practices and systems of militaries problematise participation of women as women. Consequently, the performance of a female combatant required a remediation of conceptual categories of gender in order to reconcile them with the demands of the military arena.

Marta was keen to stress that there was ‘no difference’ between men and women as fighters. Oda and White have interpreted this language in other combatant testimonies as an example of ‘androgyny’.³¹ The argument put forward here, however, is that this obscuration of gendered difference is a deliberate effort to downplay femininity and present as closely to male fighters as possible. Female combatants recognised the professional and social opportunities of assimilation into their masculine, militarised units. They display clear awareness of the expectation that women are weaker or slower and are conscious in their intention to disprove that categorisation. In doing so, they make a choice about which qualities and identity markers to stress—strength, leadership, resilience, appetite for adventure—and which to soften: discomfort, fear or, as suggested in Genet’s testimony, post-natal physical challenges.

The hierarchy of militarism female combatants faced is also evidenced overtly in the way performances of gender were renegotiated in order to render female fighters’ participation a legitimate representation of womanhood. Mjaaland observed that female fighters were referred to as *haras nebri* or *harasat anabir* (plural), which they interpret as meaning ‘breastfeeding tiger’.³² The literal translation, however, is that of a fierce big cat, such as a lion, tiger or puma, who has just given birth. Linguistic experts agree the reference in this context is most likely to a lioness, which is in line with the numerous artistic depictions that parallel Tigrayan women and the *panthera leo* species. As the aforementioned policy preventing combatant sexual relations meant most women did not tend to have children during their service, the *harasat anabir* analogy refers to the increased ferocity of a lioness after birth. In order to protect her young, a lioness will fight harder, faster and be more deadly. In this way, femininity was reframed to be resolved with the demands of soldiering.

31 Negewo-Oda and White, ‘Identity transformation and reintegration’, 180.

32 Mjaaland, ‘At the frontiers of change’, 255.

Women engaging in violence were excused from departing from their (so-called) nurturing and peaceful roles and their behaviour legitimised through the narrative of motherhood. Their fight and resilience were conceptualised as a natural female response to a threat to their young, in this sense meaning all children in Tigray. Their position was sanctioned by framing soldier behaviour and choices not as an example of initiative and capacity for violence, but as a natural demonstration of female sacrifice and maternal instinct.

The *harasat anabir* analogy embodies the ways in which gender and gender norms are mediated through and by conflict arenas. Reconciling femininity and militarism required careful negotiations of performances of gender and of expectations of womanhood in Tigray. This was taken further by the deliberate obscuration of the monthly menstrual cycle by female fighters. Oda noted that combatant women were supposed to tell their physician when they had their periods and be excused from participating in battle, but most lied and pretended they were not bleeding so as not to be left out of the activity.³³ When this was brought up with an interview participant and former fighter, Sofia, she laughed and joked that she remembered how women pretended to be too malnourished to menstruate and the male physicians believed them.³⁴ Marta, meanwhile, remembers her menstruation as the only gendered obstacle to her participation:

In our struggle, the hardest thing was that [periods]. Because you don't have water to wash, the cotton will be dry. And that is the hardest one. But the rest, we are the same as everyone. We didn't stay from anything. We worked the same. And they respect us too. Because we work hard, they respect. Even the enemy, they scared for womans [sic].³⁵

In these instances, female identity markers were downplayed, carefully moderated or deliberately obscured as Sofia remembers. Meanwhile, in other directives of the war effort, female combatants performed femininity overtly to reach their professional goals. Genet recalled her unorthodox route to join the TPLF as a young woman:

33 Negewo-Oda and White, 'Identity transformation and reintegration', 175.

34 Sofia, interview with Francesca Baldwin, Zoom, March 2021.

35 Marta interview.

G: You know, to get there was dangerous. We had to disguise ourselves as something else. As prostitutes ... It's two days journey by coach. And the coaches are searched ... The idea we were given was prostitutes. So we will be harassed in the coach, because when they see you are a prostitute—so you have to dress like a prostitute otherwise, you know, it was danger.

F: So you dressed as a prostitute to travel there?

G: We dressed as a prostitute, so they just think you are with the prostitutes, kind of. Because it was a matter of life and death. So that is—even from the bus we were going—they were taking out many young boys and just shoot them. Just terrible! You know, sometimes when people say, 'Oh why do you join this, why do you do this?', when you are at life and death, you have no idea what you will choose. What you choose is life. All the time.³⁶

This is a telling revelation from Genet, which she narrated fondly despite the obvious danger. Her decision to present as a prostitute allowed her to exploit social presumptions about the unthreatening, dismissible nature of female sexuality. As a woman selling sex, she was able to move under the radar of patrolling enemy soldiers who would perhaps not anticipate political agency from young sex workers. In this journey, Genet faced arrest and even execution if discovered. Utilising her sexuality was a means of self-preservation in this instance. Her observation that she chose 'life' through this presentation is indicative of how far careful gendered performance was a valuable tool for women in this war.

Sofia took part in military training and some battles as a fighter in the early years of the war, but later transferred to be a go-between for the TPLF and civilian populations. She was tasked with recruiting more women to join the movement, and with reassuring the civilian population that the TPLF meant to bring peace, stability and progress. Presenting as a woman was integral to this role. Sofia intended to appear non-threatening, measured and trustworthy. She sought to use her gender to connect with the local population as an intelligible representation of the opportunities for women within the TPLF, without disrupting social normativity and alienating conservative support bases. Sofia's case embodies the concept of gender as an instrument for female fighters in this war in her careful presentation and renegotiation of her identity for professional, personal and political outcomes.

36 Genet interview.

Liminality and Language: A Veteran, an 'Ex' or a Former?

In 1991, the war ended in victory for the TPLF. They had successfully overthrown the Derg and established the multi-ethnic federation of the EPRDF. At this time, combatant women began a process of demilitarisation, a concept introduced in this context to refer to the journey wherein one becomes separated from the military system. Although duly celebrated for their contributions, as the new government began to reform and rebuild civil society, demilitarised women experienced a push towards more socially familiar behaviours and roles. They were no longer required as soldiers and, instead, controlling their political, social, economic and reproductive activities became central to the peacebuilding process. Women's agricultural land use rights, originally a hallmark policy of the TPLF during the mobilisation phase of the war, were significantly restricted during the latter stages of the war under the pretext that 'ploughing just added to women's already overstretched workload'.³⁷ In this context, efforts to reconstruct a society from disorder relied on the return of recognisable gender normativity to secure the restoration of social cohesion and expectations of a peaceful, secure, orderly nation.

Legitimations of gender, as this article has argued, were reframed to allow for women's active participation in conflict and violence. In the post-war arena, however, such expectations were again redefined to reflect the needs and cohesion of the reconstructing nation. Combatant women's appearance, behaviours, mannerisms and experiences were, in peacetime, presented as gender nonconformity. Although commended for their participation, they were set apart and othered from civilian femininity, in an expression of marginality.³⁸

While the political education and vocational training available to all combatants recommended reintegrating male soldiers for roles in peace, this was not the case for female fighters. Their skills and experiences were not easily reconciled with expectations of gender normativity in post-war Ethiopia. Marta recalled:

37 Mjaaland, 'At the frontiers of change', 49.

38 Giuseppe Mazzotta, 'Frontiers of thought out of the margins', *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms* 17, no. 6 (2012): 745–54.

When I go to field, the struggle, I was ninth grade. When I came back, I start again, ninth grade. And I complete twelfth grade. I was working with the computers, it was hard work, and I am a mum at that time.³⁹

This was a particular struggle for Marta who had become accustomed to her leadership role in the TPLF. For other demobilised fighters who chose to reintegrate into their pre-war communities in Tigray rather than the capital Addis Ababa, the challenges of renegotiating gender norms and behaviours were intensified. Family expectations and socialisation to familiar concepts of gender normativity created a difficult space for returning women to navigate. This was compounded by the fact that many such women had not experienced the projected trajectories of marriage and motherhood and surpassed the typical age at which women underwent such coming-of-age rites of passage in Tigray. Compared with their peers without a military background, reintegrating women presented as diametrically opposed to civilian women. This is reinforced in a survey Elise Barth conducted in neighbouring Eritrea, which collaborated closely with the TPLF and where women also formed a high percentage of the fighting forces.⁴⁰ Barth's study revealed that former female fighters largely went on to marry male former combatants and rarely married men without a military background. By contrast, former male combatants mostly married civilian women. The implication of these data is that combatant men tended to prefer the behaviours and femininity of civilian women, while combatant women found less acceptance of their experiences and expressions in civilian men than in their military comrades.

The concept of liminality is relevant in this context. Coined by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and developed by Victor Turner to denote rites of passage representing a state of 'no longer' and 'not yet', liminality is a shifting process: the betwixt and between.⁴¹ It is a transitional state between intelligible categories and roles, not separate from but not within the bounds of those categories. Liminality could, as an example, apply to adolescents transitioning between childhood and adulthood. Here, the concept is useful to critically examine reintegration; that is, women who are no longer combatants but not yet non-combatants.

39 Marta interview.

40 Elise Fredrikke Barth, *Peace as Disappointment: The Reintegration of Female Soldiers in Post-Conflict Societies: A Comparative Study from Africa* (Oslo: PRIO International Peace Research Institute, 2002).

41 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Kegan & Paul, 1960); Victoria Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Kegan & Paul, 1969).

Its connection with the use of language to refer to female fighters since the end of the war is revealing. They are rarely called veterans, except in the context of some non-governmental organisations. Ex-fighter is not usually applicable either, as the 'ex' implies dishonour or dismissal to former fighters. Former combatant is the preferred English language term, holding a connection to the subject's previous experience, but it is the Tigrinya, majority language, word for women in 'The Struggle' (the name used by many fighters to refer to the war) that speaks volumes. *Tegadalit* is translated as fighter or struggler in the present continuous. It literally refers to someone who *is* a fighter woman, not someone who was in the past, despite over 30 years passing since the end of the civil war. Women claim to be *tegadalit*, or are assigned such distinction by their communities, in post-war Tigray in order to make sense of their experiences. Liminality theory posits that identities are kinetic, changeable depending on where and with whom a person is interacting. An enduring *tegadalit* identity gives women the space for expression and differentiation from peacetime gender normativity. It signals that their combatant status has not reached a fixed end and continues to be used as an identity marker affecting social interactions and self-expression.

Reflecting, then, on post-war performances of gender, the connections between social cohesion, femininity and hierarchy merit analysis of the category of former fighter women. The cropped haircuts and trousers which were worn with pride during the war were slowly grown out and thrown out in a physical enactment of the gradual but necessary shift for combatant women to reintegrate as women, again measured by the normativity of civil society. They reframed expressions of their gender once more, seeking peaceful assimilation and acceptance. Samrawit described her transition performance as follows: '[When you come back] you have to live with the society as well, you live the same way. You have to talk about and act like that [sic]. It is backwards. Backwards. But you want to be the same society. So you live as the same way [sic]'.⁴²

For Samrawit, her experiences of the conflict and political education had been an awakening to progressive politics that she could not forget. Her reintegration with those who had not experienced the conflict as she had was, to her, 'backwards'. Yet, she describes having to live the same way as directed by the peacetime community, shifting her expectations

42 Samrawit, interview by Francesca Baldwin, Zoom, March 2021.

and behaviours accordingly. This goes some way to account for the notable lack of female expression of their conflict memories and illustrates clearly the influence of social cohesion on personal identity. Participating in culturally recognisable performances of femininity required fighter women to revise the boundaries of their gender norms or else be confined to social fringes. It is interesting to consider the connections between liminality and marginality in this context; both are spatial concepts involving perimeters and limits but can be viewed as the flip side of one another.⁴³ If liminality is a dynamic middle-ground, marginality is defined by its distance from the centre. In social spaces, non-conforming women occupy marginal sites, set apart from the hub of 'women's activities' in the home and community.⁴⁴ Combatant women's gender can exist in a state of both liminality and marginality, sometimes simultaneously, and often contradictorily. The critical point is that their gender exists and is enacted in these spaces in response to their environment. It is a landscape in which *tegadelti* (plural) can perform their selves and redefine what it means to be a soldier and a woman.

A Final Reflection: Womanhood and the New Tigray War (2020–present)

Across Ethiopia, women are presented as protectors of history, of culture and of nationalism, and this has ultimately manifested in placing meaning on and within the female body. Women have been encouraged to only reproduce within their ethnic distinction, while the post-war era has also seen a rise in discriminatory gendered practices such as female genital mutilation as an ethnic boundary marker.⁴⁵ Although this latter practice is not widely undertaken in Tigray, it is an example of how political devolution has manifested in regulations of the female body and women deriving meaning through their ethnic distinctions.

In the Tigray War (2020–present), sexual violence and gender-based violence have been weaponised to some of the furthest extremes in the contemporary world. At the time of writing, the United Nations Population Fund has estimated over 26,000 women have been subjected

43 Mazzotta, 'frontiers of thought out of the margins', 478.

44 Sofia interview.

45 Vaughan and Tronvoll, 'The culture of power', 47–48.

to sexual violence and rape.⁴⁶ As this type of violence is chronically underreported and many of the facilities necessary for safehouses and treatment have been destroyed in the conflict, this is likely a conservative estimate of those affected. Sexual slavery, gang rape, mutilation with objects, forced incest and extreme sexual brutality have characterised the attacks on civilians, with humanitarian reports naming the perpetrators of the violence as the Ethiopian National Defence Force, the Eritrean Defence Force, Amhara Regional Police Special Forces (ASF) and Fano, an informal Amhara militia group.⁴⁷

The female body has become a landscape of negotiation for identity and meaning in this war. Decisions about boundaries of the 'other' and definitions of the 'self' have been played out on and within the female body by shaping its relationship to identity politics. That this has led to extreme gendered violence is indicative of the need to critically unpack the roots and manifestations of dangerous constructions of gender normativity, where such categories may—and can—create a permissive environment for gender-based violence during conflict on any scale, domestic or organised.

The particular place of women in Tigray's history, specifically their contributions to the civil war, is worth considering as one reason why women and girls are being targeted through the intensification of gender-based violence in this war. Violating and destroying women, when women have been central to Tigray's story, is a strong message of violation and destruction of Tigray's history. Have women been attacked in this war because they represent the essence of Tigray: its history, its values and its promises? More specifically, has the dual struggle for liberation and the presence of women as leaders in combat, in politics and in law under the TPLF created a unique position for women that this violence has sought to undermine? This research is asking whether the female combatants of the 1974–91 civil war, who decisively disrupted gender normativity and expectations of gender roles, are in fact linked to the choice to enact gender-based violence broadly and systematically in this war.

46 'UNFPA Ethiopia response to the Tigray crisis: Situation report', 15–30 June 2021, *UNFPA Ethiopia*.

47 "I don't know if they realized I was a person": Rape and sexual violence in the conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia', 11 August 2021, *Amnesty International*, [amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr25/4569/2021/en/).

Former fighter Samrawit took this idea further and claimed those known to have participated in the TPLF have been specifically targeted by the coalition forces:

Some of them are killed, my best friend killed, and friends, a lot of friends killed ... Even [though] they are not participating in the war because they are fighters, Tigrayan fighters, they have to be killed, they have to be arrested ... Tigray is in a war again and then, this time, my friends will be retired, should be in rest, again they are in the war ... because they [former fighters] are progressive, they want to destroy the—the intelligent—the progressive people. They want to destroy our culture. They want to destroy our heritage. These people are our heritage.⁴⁸

Again, the idea of a *tegadalit* in the present continuous is relevant. Although officially demilitarised nearly 30 years ago, participation in the civil war remains a relevant and potentially dangerous identity marker on account of connotations of leadership, skills and knowledge. Marta confirmed the legacies of female fighters in Tigray, who are once again being recruited in significant numbers:

The best girls of Tigray are the ones who fought and brought justice in Tigray. Those girls of Tigray are today, you see, chasing, you know, the cruel and barbaric armies of Abiy Ahmed.⁴⁹

Here, Marta makes a clear association between combatant status, heroism and honour. For Marta, it is the ‘best girls’ who take up the responsibility to engage in war and rise in the footsteps of the fighters who came before. In this way, the legacy of the civil war continues to inform the dynamics, patterns and parameters of the current conflict. It has set out the terms of the violence, but also the terms of the organisational response. In particular, the strength with which young women have mobilised for action draws heavily on gendered historical narratives to lend direction and weight to their activities. Every female interview participant engaged in activism in the diaspora referenced the categorisation of Tigrayan women as meaning something inherently different from other categorisations of womanhood. The new conflict has re-mediated the arena for women’s participation and legitimised their engagement as historic gender norms, as Nayna, a young activist in the diaspora, confirmed:

48 Samrawit interview.

49 Marta interview. See also “‘We don’t have a limit’: Yasuyoshi Chiba – agency photographer of 2021”, *Guardian*, 23 December 2021, theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/23/we-dont-have-a-limit-yasuyoshi-chiba-agency-photographer-of-2021.

This isn't the first war; this isn't the first struggle. The others have seen women play really instrumental roles ... I think Tigrayan women are a particular brand of fierce, and fierce protectors as well ... [they have an] unshakeable strength that I've never seen before. All of us have mothers, grandmothers, aunts, that are like this. You're just a by-product of what you've seen.⁵⁰

Nayna's testimony reflects the ways in which gender has been renegotiated again through and by catastrophe. It speaks, firstly, to the strength of history as method of mobilisation. By framing women's engagement as 'instrumental', their place in the conflict appears natural and necessary. Secondly, it reflects the persistent relevance of the civil war on women in Tigray as the landscape of womanhood is framed through generational legacies of conflict participation, which continues to permeate the roles, boundaries and possibilities of gender normativity in Tigray.

Conclusion

The existence of female fighters, as both active conflict participants and demilitarised combatants, has required renegotiations of gender performances in Tigray in present and past conflicts. The legitimisation of female engagement in war has dictated representations of femininity in soldiers, while the gendered order necessitated by social cohesion has marginalised and othered those presenting gender nonconformity post-war. Combatant women in Tigray carefully negotiated their self-presentation during and after conflict to navigate hierarchies of militarism, expectations of civilian femininity and reintegration needs. The endurance of their *tegadalit* identity illustrates the challenges of settling into safe social spaces post-war. Finally, the response from Tigrayan women to mobilise for the current war effort has been indelibly shaped by historical legacies of women's involvement in war in Tigray. In summation, these oral history interviews provide insight into the lives of Tigrayan combatant women and reveal the multiple, kinetic ways in which women are able to mediate presentations of their gender during war. As the war in Tigray continues, further research into the long-term impact of combatant status on women in the region becomes all the more timely and necessary.

50 Nayna, interview by Francesca Baldwin, Zoom, July 2021.

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