

10 YEARS

WOMEN IN
ERITREA



NATIONAL UNION OF ERITREAN WOMEN



Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.



The National Union
of Eritrean Women

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INTRODUCTION

Women have been key players in Eritrea's nation building process, from their invaluable participation in the country's independence struggle to their ongoing contributions to the development agenda. Inspired by this powerful legacy, the Government of the State of Eritrea has made the empowerment of women a national priority, and committed to a development agenda grounded in social justice and gender equality.

Gender discrimination remains prevalent in some aspects of Eritrean culture, however, and women continue to be affected by prejudice. Social change takes time, especially in societies where the culture of patriarchy and subordination of women is deeply embedded. For thirty years, the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) has worked to propel social transformation in Eritrea and build a national environment conducive to the full participation of women in all aspects of Eritrean social, political and economic life.

In 2003, nearly 400 women from around the country and abroad participated in the 6th Congress of the National Union of Eritrean Women, which resulted in an ambitious agenda for moving forward. Over the past ten years, the organization has recorded a number of impressive achievements. More than 2.9 million persons – 90 per cent of them women – have attended nearly 25,000 meetings on women's empowerment. 47 million Nakfa has been loaned to nearly 12,000 beneficiaries of the Microcredit Program across the country and professional training centres have been established in a number of regions. 3.8 million people have benefitted from education on women's health and harmful traditional practices.

This flagship report showcases these achievements and other key steps taken on the path towards gender equity in Eritrea. We set out to evaluate the past ten years, review the accomplishments made in the political, social, cultural and economic spheres, and explore the challenges and opportunities that will define our way forward.

The National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) was established in 1979 with the support of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. In its present form, NUEW is an autonomous non-governmental organization dedicated to improving the status of Eritrean women. The organization's mission is to ensure that all Eritrean women confidently stand for their rights and equally participate in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of the country and share the benefits.

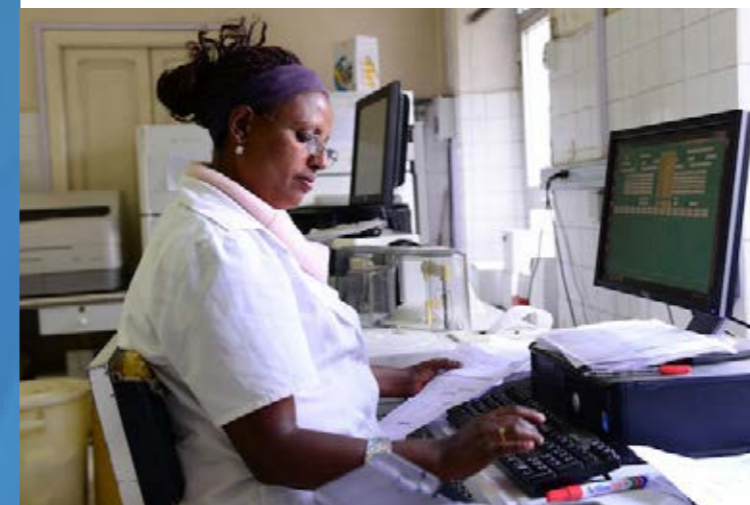
At its inception, NUEW signalled the start of a new era in which women were empowered to participate in the national building process under the auspices of a national organization. The organization

has held six congresses since the first in 1979, each of which has enabled NUEW to forward its mission and broaden its horizons. Following national independence, NUEW was reformed as a non-governmental organization to carry the struggle for women's emancipation forward as a separate entity.

Over the course of its 35-year history, NUEW has grown as an organization, both in terms of its number of members and its ability to implement its mission. The recent 7th Congress in September 2014 presented another opportunity to reinforce the accomplishments already made and chart an even more ambitious course moving forward.



NUEW PRIORITIES



- > Ensure gender equality and women's rights in political, economic and socio-cultural spheres
- > Increase women's social awareness and knowledge
- > Endeavour for the active participation of Eritrean women in overall development programmes in such a way that they also benefit from their efforts
- > Struggle for peace and development
- > Strengthen the union to make it more efficient and influential, and enable it to win the loyalty and confidence of its members

TAKING POLITICAL ACTION, FOSTERING ENLIGHTENMENT

The enlightened social and political engagement of women is crucial to generating lasting change in Eritrea. NUEW has therefore worked to promote more participatory and balanced political action in Eritrea over the past 10 years by (1) raising social awareness of the importance of gender equality and justice in society; (2) encouraging the implementation of policies that consolidate women's rights and equality of opportunities; and (3) creating a strong political foundation for the economic empowerment of women. The aim is to increase women's drive and capacity to claim their own rights and opportunities, and in so doing, enable women to take the lead in the fight for gender equity.

Campaigning for gender awareness

To raise women's awareness of the culture of gender discrimination prevalent in Eritrea, NUEW has conducted a number of political advocacy campaigns and educational interventions, including special courses and capacity building programmes for women in leadership positions. Overall, more than 2.9 million people – including 90 per cent women – have been reached through nearly 25,000 meetings over the past 10 years. These have included political advocacy meetings, seminars, short courses and workshops covering a range of topics, including gender mainstreaming, women in decision-making roles and women's participation in elections, among others.



Empowering women's decision-making

The inclusion of women in centres of political power, particularly the legislative and executive bodies, is crucial if gender bias and inequality are to be eliminated. Though there is an established policy for a third of seats to be reserved for women candidates in leadership positions, the persistence of inhibitive cultural, social and economic circumstances have continued to slow progress towards women's equal political participation.

In response, NUEW has worked actively to create an environment conducive to the realization of gender parity in politics. Though women's representation remains low, tangible improvements are now being observed in the executive and judiciary branches and the numbers are expected to increase with time. Alongside its efforts to evaluate progress in women's representation, NUEW has carried out gender-sensitive seminars, workshops, campaigns and trainings, and developed national strategies and action plans for advancing gender mainstreaming in both the public and private sectors.

NUEW international relations

Over the past decade, NUEW has forged relationships and shared experiences with a number of sister organizations from within Africa and around the world, including the General Union of Sudanese Women, the Support Initiative for Women's Empowerment in East Africa and the All China Women's Federation. NUEW has participated in key international forums and initiatives championing the cause of women's rights and empowerment, including the International Women's Conference in Beijing and the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women,

among others. NUEW has also honoured Eritrea's obligations under the Convention for the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women, presenting five reports between 1995 and 2012. In September 2014, an international symposium involving women leaders from the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) region and representatives from the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and other international organizations was organized alongside the national congress. These actions have facilitated an invaluable exchange of experiences, including those of Eritrean women, whose struggle for liberation has been touted around the world as a powerful example of women's participation.

Confronting the challenges

Several factors continue to inhibit women's progress in the political arena. These include early socialization equating femininity with weakness, and other traditional barriers rooted in the patriarchal culture, both of which undermine women's acceptance of gender education and willingness to enter political life. Other factors, such as women's lower socio-economic status, the transitional political situation, limited institutional capacity and lack of public dialogue on women's issues, also hinder efforts to increase women's political participation.

The campaigning efforts currently underway and already increasing public attention for gender issues are testimony to the gradual progress being made. Additional progress can be secured by developing legislation, increasing female participation in education and easing the caring role of women through intermediate technologies. NUEW will also continue to strengthen its international relations to capitalize on the shift of women's issues to the centre of the global stage.



BUILDING A GLOBAL

NUEW has long recognized the role of strong and flexible organization in empowering women. As its gender awareness messages have reached more and more people, NUEW's membership base has grown in numbers: from 178,000 in 2003 to nearly 300,000 in 2013. The organization's membership now represents a decent percentage of the female population in Eritrea and covers all 6 regions, 66 sub-regions, 681 districts and 2631 villages. At the same time, NUEW's organizational flexibility has allowed it to adapt to new and emerging needs over the past ten years.

Organizing female students and increasing school enrolment

As of 2013, organizational activities carried out in 120 secondary schools have increased the number of female student members of NUEW to 26,715. Close cooperation with teachers and parents and the strong reception for NUEW school activities, have shown that NUEW's organizational efforts in schools have served as a motivating factor for female school enrolment. Follow up actions, such as gender committees, have been taken to capitalize on this opportunity. NUEW plans to continue this and other activities that motivate female enrolment in schools until the female to male ratio is a balanced 50/50.

Organizing professional women

NUEW incorporates professional women from all sectors and social strata, including farmers, labourers, merchants and students, and as a result has become as much a professional federation as a women's organization. Working members employed by 72 institutions have been organized in five federations and are led by a 15-member administrative body or federal board. So far nearly 19,000 women employed in the public and private sectors have been organized into 408 groups. Despite some challenges related to human resource limitations, the organizational bodies continue to grow stronger and the hope is that in the coming years, this will contribute to the institutionalization of gender in the public and private sectors.

NETWORK

ORGANIZING ERITREAN WOMEN

Organizing women in the diaspora

Women in the diaspora continue to play a key role at NUEW and in the struggle for gender equality in Eritrea. They serve as ambassadors of NUEW vision abroad and have been at the forefront of efforts to empower women inside the country, politically, socially and economically. Nearly 5,000 women are now members of NUEW organizational branches in the diaspora, including 2,110 members in 9 countries/branches in Europe, 875 members in 5 branches in North America, 890 members in 6 countries in the Middle East, 791 members in four countries in Africa, and 250 members in 6 cities in Australia. In addition to building strong relationships with other advocacy groups, NUEW organizations abroad are undertaking a number of crucial activities, including gender-focused campaigns and education programmes, campaign activities, interventions with rights groups and cultural events. Some NUEW branches have even registered as non-governmental organizations.

Confronting the challenges

Despite these successes, challenges remain in NUEW's organizational efforts. Capacity shortages and other human resource limitations pose significant barriers to growth. Low standards of living among women can preclude their full participation in organizational responsibilities. Lack of interest in leadership and difficulties implementing gender-specific legislation also undermine future action. Internationally, some NUEW sister organizations struggle to maintain regular activity or numbers due to the other obligations of members, social or personal challenges, or in some cases, restrictions on women's activities in the country of residence.

In all cases, the 7th Congress was seen as an opportunity to consider in depth and form solutions to these challenges to enable seamless programming and decision-making in the future.

NUEW has taken on a wide range of social projects over the past decade covering a number of strategies to advance the social and cultural status of Eritrean women. These include capacity development, advocacy, education, health campaigns and training, and legal counselling for families and women.

LEADING

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Developing the capacities of NUEW management

A number of actions have focused on uplifting the capacity of NUEW employees, including through academic support and targeted training courses. Since 2004, 569 NUEW management personnel benefitted from trainings on campaigning, awareness-raising, leadership, management techniques, communication skills, budgeting, reporting and monitoring.

In addition to these regular training programmes, NUEW also conducted annual training programmes targeting top-level NUEW officials and members of the central assembly. In particular, **The Women's Empowerment Project**, has increased the capacity of NUEW management by offering opportunities to study gender at the postgraduate level; training programmes on

raising gender awareness and campaigning skills; and various capacity-building programmes to increase management skills. The Project has effectively boosted NUEW's mission, enabling the organization to increase gender awareness and mainstreaming in ministries and other institutions, enhance budget and planning processes, consolidate a comprehensive gender policy and action plan, and develop tools aimed at increasing women's knowledge on legal issues.

Additional training offered for district-level NUEW management has reached 4,442 people since 2009, covering topics including women's and children's rights, malaria and HIV/AIDS prevention, gender and HIV/AIDS, hygiene, and post-partum fistula.

Establishing professional training centres

NUEW women abroad have mobilized resources and raised funds to build professional training centres and offices for their sisters in Eritrea. These efforts are aimed mainly at rural areas, in line with national development priorities, and are grounded in NUEW's commitment to social justice.

In the **Gash Barka Region**, a training centre and the two-year training project funded by NUEW branch in Germany provided weaving, computer and other types of professional courses between 2005 and 2007. Additional training centres in Gash Barka were funded by NUEW Switzerland and NUEW Norway, with the latter including a planned meeting hall and office building.

In the **Anseba Region**, a training centre and office were constructed with funding from NUEW Italy in 2014, and a maternity waiting room funded



GROWING SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND CULTURAL



by the United States Eritrean Development Fund is expected to be completed at the end of the year. In addition, two NUEW Saudi Arabia branches have raised funds and a sub-regional branch office and meeting hall has been built.

In **Debub (Southern) Region**, an office building and training centre was completed in Senafe in 2012, with funding provided by an NUEW branch in North America. NUEW Sweden established a training centre in Addi Caeih that is currently offering services such as training in weaving and other skills. Another training centre and regional branch office funded by NUEW UK was completed in 2013 and is now fully functional.

In the **Northern and Southern Red Sea Regions**, NUEW Kuwait and partners are currently working together to build a training centre in Assab and NUEW North America has initiated a new project to build a training centre in Massawa.



EDUCATION

Eradicating adult illiteracy

Over the past 10 years, NUEW has worked in partnership with the Ministry of Education to eradicate adult illiteracy, both by organizing educational resources and campaigning for the increased participation of women in the programme. Since 2003, nearly 350,000 people – 92 per cent of them women – have participated in the adult education program. However much remains to be done: 60,000 NUEW members are still illiterate and female participation in schools remains low.

BUILDING SKILLS AND ADVANCING RIGHTS



LEGAL COUNSELLING

Supporting legal empowerment

More than 5,500 women have benefitted from NUEW legal counselling and educational programmes geared towards increasing women's knowledge of legal issues. NUEW has also fought against discrimination against women in the context of underage marriage and divorce by implementing sensitization programmes. To address women's persistent challenges during divorce, NUEW has provided legal counsel and advice focusing on key issues, including alimony, paternity, inheritance, and land ownership.

Although NUEW's legal project has become one of its most popular and warmly received interventions, there have been some challenges. In many instances, the women who need legal advice the most do not seek it until it is too late. There is also a misguided perception that NUEW has the ability to interfere with the course of justice.



HEALTH

Campaigning for women's health and human rights

Following the 6th Congress resolutions, NUEW has worked closely with the Ministry of Health and other partners to raise awareness of women's health issues and prevent and treat health challenges confronting women that are caused by poverty and backward traditions. NUEW has conducted multiple seminars and meetings attended by more than 1.7 million people – encompassing 93 per cent women – towards this end. To broaden the scope of campaigns in all regions, peer education trainings have also been provided and are currently playing a significant role in raising health awareness.

NUEW campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM) was initiated to sensitize society on the adverse effects of FGM on women and initiate behaviour change. Specific efforts include raising awareness about women's and children's rights and reproductive health, as well as sensitizing traditional circumcisers on the dangerous consequences of FGM.

Over the past eight years, vigorous efforts have been made to extend FGM campaigns across the entire country. Since 2006, more than 1.2 million participants, 73 per cent of them female, have attended meetings on FGM and early marriage. Following the criminalization

of FGM in 2007 through national proclamation no. 158/2007, a series of public conferences were conducted throughout the country to enable the sharing of experiences and the development of a common understanding on the issue. Since then, additional resolutions and recommendations have been developed based on evaluations of the previous work to chart the way forward. Community-based committees and strict monitoring have been implemented to encourage public engagement and ensure adherence to the national law against FGM.

As a result of all of these efforts, the incidence of FGM is generally on the decline. A 2010 survey by the Ministry of Health's branch in the Central Region shows that 74.4 per cent of women aged 16-40 were circumcised, compared to only 17.7 per cent of young women aged 6-15. Even fewer girls aged 5 and below – 7.6 per cent – were circumcised. A similar report revealed that 91 per cent of Eritrean women are aware of proclamation 158/2007, while 77 per cent of women and 82 per cent of men believe that FGM has no advantages. These encouraging statistics portend that FGM is bound to steadily decline in the future and prove that the campaign efforts made so far have been successful.

EMPOWERING THROUGH ECONOMICS

Economic empowerment, which refers to the resources and means an individual needs to achieve their desired goals, is an essential prerequisite for political enlightenment and organization. Recognizing the importance of brainpower in economic empowerment, NUEW has offered beneficiaries the opportunity to advance their livelihoods through training programmes, as well as financial loans. These efforts have bolstered women's academic achievements and paved the way to a better future.

Empowering women with microcredit

NUEW's Credit Program was introduced in 2006 following the evaluation and revision of an earlier version of the project initiated in 1995. The Credit Program targets women who have latent potential yet lack resources, and provides those women with professional training and start-up capital. To date, 47 million Nakfa has been loaned to nearly 12,000 beneficiaries in four administrative regions of the country. Out of this amount, 85 per cent has been reimbursed by clients and is already being put to use for lending to other clients. The program's beneficiaries now find themselves on solid economic footing with an improved standard of living. Women have registered success in small trades and businesses, agriculture and animal rearing, as well as the catering sector.

There have been some challenges, including a shortage of clients in some regions, late repayment by some clients and limited human resources for managing the program. NUEW intends to address these issues and build on the program's success by introducing better practices and management systems.



FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

Supporting women's livelihoods

Over the last decade, NUEW has worked to empower women economically by organizing various professional handicrafts and artisanal programs to supplement existing skills. More than 5,000 women throughout the country have benefited from training in clothing design, sewing and embroidery, wickerwork, ornamentation, weaving, pottery, hairstyling, as well as computer applications and typing. Another more than 3,000 women received special trainings in video shooting, home economics, nutrition, doll making, childcare and midwifery. The programs have proven their practical worth by economically empowering women throughout the country.

In rural Eritrea, women are often tasked with fetching water and food over long distances, causing great strain to their health and livelihoods. The Donkey and Water Bag Project was initiated to alleviate this challenge, especially the fatigue of fetching water, and has had a profound impact on women's lives over the last decade. Between 2003 and 2011, NUEW allocated a budget of more than 14 million Nakfa to provide more than 11,000 women in remote rural areas with donkeys and water bags. Pregnant women, in particular, have benefited from the project, as have women who had no prior income and can now earn money by selling water.

Although women engaged in agriculture and livestock keeping for many years, they rarely owned land. A few years ago, a new land policy on equal access to land that NUEW advocated for was implemented and women can now own land. NUEW and partners such as UNDP have supported the women with funds for farming and livestock keeping. More than 1,400 women farmers have received water pumps to cultivate a collective 153 hectares of land. Strong progress has been demonstrated among women farmers as a result and two groups of women farmers have organized for integrated assistance. The success of these farmers has encouraged many others to purchase their own water pumps and engage in agricultural activities.

NUEW's Arag factory in the Dehub region, which produces sanitary pads, overalls and some tailored products, has created employment opportunities for women by hiring staff that is more than 99 per cent female. Arag provides sanitary pads for women at a fair price with nominal profit and enables a comfortable atmosphere for female students during menstruation. The factory has registered steady growth over the past decade.

WAY FORWARD

CHARTING THE WAY FORWARD

NUEW's achievements have led to so many positive developments. The number of young women employed in government ministries and other institutions is growing. Female participation in education has increased significantly. Women now have more professional opportunities than they ever had before. Harmful traditional practices that were once prevalent are now subject to strong transformational forces. Women – especially pregnant women, mothers and children – are increasingly benefitting from crucial health services. Awareness of paternalistic and oppressive attitudes towards gender is increasing among young women who now seek full empowerment. And affirmative action is slowly being replaced by the competitive spirit of driven and empowered women.

NUEW recognizes that the achievements made so far are dependent on strong organization and that Eritrean women must continue to work together to ensure women's empowerment. NUEW also honours the efforts of Eritrean women abroad, who have made significant contributions to ensuring social justice in Eritrea. As a leading organizer of women, NUEW will continue to consolidate the gains that have been achieved and pursue a holistic approach to gender equity. The organization salutes the Government of the State of Eritrea for creating a national atmosphere conducive to this important work, as well as UNDP, UNFPA and other international partners for their invaluable support.

Moving forward, NUEW will work to:

- > Encourage and inspire women to participate in positions of leadership and decision-making posts at the highest levels
- > Enhance efforts to ensure women's health, decrease maternal mortality and fight harmful traditional practices
- > Continue the campaign to boost female participation in education
- > Inspire youth engagement in traditionally male-dominated professions
- > Further women's participation in national development projects

NUEW's ability to appraise and evaluate the last 10 years from 2003 to 2013 is a legacy of its proud political culture and history. Looking ahead, the organization anticipates that the results of the 7th congress will act as a navigating compass that will bring the journey towards full empowerment to the next level.



Credits

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Production (copy-editing, layout, design and printing): Julie Pudlowski Consulting

Photography: © UN/ Ladavicius, UN/ Pudlowski

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