



# ERI-VOICE



Special Focus Issue:  
Commemorating International Women's Day!

*A newsletter of the Eritrean Community of Greater Boston*

MARCH 2004

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## EDITORIAL



**If ever the world sees time when women shall come together and simply for the benefit of mankind. It will be a power such as the world has never known.**

*Mathew Arnold, British Poet – 1822-1888*

International Women's Day (IWD) is celebrated on 8 March. The history of IWD is rooted in the struggle for equal pay and working conditions for women. On 8 March 1857, women employed in the New York textile and garment industry marched to protest about low wages and poor working conditions. This was the first documented protest by women calling for change. Fifty-one years later, on 8 March 1908, the same workers went on strike for the same reasons. Thousands of people marched on this day, to condemn child labor, for the right to vote, the right to unionize and for safe and reasonable working conditions. International Women's Day was initially organized to mark the victory of the textile workers in New York and as focus for women around the world to participate in demonstrations and actions to win

the right to vote. It is believed that an International Women's Day was first proclaimed at an International Conference of women held in Helsinki, Finland in 1910.

Today, IWD is honored as a declaration of support for the political, economic and social rights of women, with countries around the world. Several activities and marches are organized across the world on this day to promote awareness on issues that contribute to the disempowerment of women. It originated in the U.S.A., and is widely embraced by many nations. In the USSR and the People's Republic of China it is a national holiday where flowers or gifts are presented to women workers. In Canada International Women's Day events are celebrated and organized by women in all cities. Many unionized community groups where the majority of workers are women recognize International Women's Day as a holiday. IWD is a celebration of all the women in the world.

Eritrean women celebrate IWD with pride and dignity, for we have made history in our struggle for independence and sovereignty. Eritrean mothers are symbols of courage and might in our history. They sacrificed their sons and daughters to the nation's struggle and sovereignty, they gave food, shelter and refuge to the fighters, they smuggled secrets across enemy lines. They prayed for peace.

For 30 years, we fought alongside men, making up a third of the frontline. We transformed Eritrean society by our work as political leaders, educators, health officers, environmentalists, law-makers and more. We played a significant role beyond logistics; we served in combat, seized command positions, led tanks, and operated complex artilleries. We were wounded and killed. We gave birth and brought life, love and humanity to the destruction and chaos of war. We fought beside men, yet protected and nurtured our young. We proved our worth and earned the status to liberate us from the repressive traditions of a predominantly patriarchal society. The role of women as combatants and active players in war has generated substantial historical research and amazement in recent years. It is our contribution to the world and we shall hold on to it.

What is the meaning of IWD? And why should we celebrate it as Eriteans? IWD is a celebration of being women and the women's movement. It is a special occasion where the political, economic and social realities and collective interests of women throughout the world is brought to light and affirmed. IWD is about the recognition of women's solidarity with one another. It is not a power struggle. It is about unity and reciprocity, a day to come together to share our common struggles and successes, and to remind ourselves how much further we still have to go. It is about breaking our barriers and bringing peace and integrity to the world. It is a special day to recognize the struggles women endured in the past to make our lives better today, a day to take on their lead and demand our rights.

IWD is about our power. Empowerment stems from inner strength, from a light we shine within ourselves. It is the awakening, the trust in ourselves, the belief that we could take on the world. It is the belief that each and every one of us symbolize one another. It is finding our true

self and being able to speak our minds, for our voice is our power.

How are we empowered? I am empowered by the words my uncle instilled in me, the power to be who I want to be. I am inspired by a mother who is one of the few professional women of her time. I am awakened by the value of education that my family planted in me and my sister. I have built inner strength with the brave women, men and martyrs who fought with me to bring social change. I strive through friends, colleagues and professors who guide and validate me in the work I do. I have a voice through my children who I have passed the legacy of belief in women's rights. I am empowered by my husband who respects, honors and takes pride in who I am.

“You were born with wings why prefer to crawl through life.” Rumi

Inner strength is about owning our wings and rising as high as we can fly. It is about women taking off to reach their potential.

*Hanna Telahun Gebretensae*  
(Guest Editorialist)

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**PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:**  
**Knowing the Roots of Our Strength**



*By Bernadette Davidson*

In the forward of her book, Anything We Love Can Be Saved, Alice Walker traces the roots of her activism to May Poole, her great, great, great grandmother, who lived enslaved in the North American south. May lived for 125 years, outlived her owners, and her strong spirit and courage inspired Alice

As women, it is important for us to understand the roots of strength that enable us to survive oppression and live full lives. In our histories, literature and lives we need to look for role models. Whether it is Sojourner Truth, the Mariposa Sisters, George Sands, Eleanor Roosevelt or others, we need to know and teach the histories of strong women.

Sometimes our inspiration comes from a family member, sometimes a teacher or a friend, but we all need role models to show us the way. We need to become for others those role models. Former EPLF fighter and social activist, Hanna Telahun credits the words of an uncle for her own will to be all she could. He had encouraged her by telling her she could do anything in life she wanted.

Perhaps the strongest role models are our mothers. My own mother's work during World War Two as an airplane inspector for Pratt and Whitney Aircraft and her volunteer fire fighting inspires not just myself but my daughters. Her message was always that using what God gave you was important for men and for women. In the words of the great C. G. Jung, speaking about women who have stifled their voice and talents, *nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment*

*and especially on their children than the un-lived life of the parent.*

What does it mean to live fully? When I think of women who live fully in my own life, I think of Marta Rosa. Mother of three, Marta went to school evenings on top of her job. She wrote a history of the Puerto Rican people in Chelsea and ran for school committee. Marta became the first Latino woman elected to public office in the city. She nurtures the spirit of many men and women to be all they can. In her work in the childcare community, her leadership and strong voice are respected. In some ways she has broken a tradition that says the role of women is to stay at home and care for family. Yet, in many ways she is following a Puerto Rican cultural tradition of the *strong godmother*, the women others come to for advice and help. Marta has extended that concept to nurture and inspire a whole child care community.

What seems to epitomize this living of life fully is to follow what Quakers call *leading*. That means to find what you have been put on earth to do and to believe you have a right to do this thing. Whether you are called to paint, to run a business or to hold public office, the thing is to do it. We must begin to show our children, by our example, that the energy and joy in life comes from being who we are, not what others think we should be. In so doing, even with the disapproval of others, we in the end contribute far more to the well being of the earth.

As women we have learned through centuries of oppression to silence the self. The cost of a life of obedience and servility has been to keep grown women children without basic rights and access to an array of full human feelings and experiences. Research has shown this is the root of depression, anger and despair. It is the unmaking of marriages, the destroyer of mental health.

This means we need to be aware of the events in the world, have opinions and make them heard. We need to learn to not be afraid of conflict. We need to protect the rights of all women to work, to have a voice. We need to be deliberate in the praise of daughters as well as our sons for their accomplishments. It is

imperative to support them in having aspirations beyond marriage and motherhood. In so doing we will free the men we love to be who they are as well. For when we are stuck in obedience, prescribed roles and prohibited from being individuals, we trap the men in our lives in similar rigid roles. By living our lives authentically and fulfilling our leadings we also grant our children permission to live a life of wholeness and integrity.

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### **COMMUNITY PROFILE:**

#### **Ruth Gebru**



Ruth is a young woman that has made her impact in the Eritrean Community felt as a tutor and organizer in various community activities. She sat down with ERI-VOICE to tell us a bit about herself and how she got involved in the community.

**E-V:** Where are you from, or where have you spent most of your life?

*I was born in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia. I came to the US about 15 years ago. I moved to the Boston area 4 years ago and now live in Worcester MA.*

**E-V:** What is your family make-up like?

*I have 2 sisters, one younger and one older. My mom lives in Somerville,*

*MA. I have cousins all over the US. I actually have three that live in Boston area.*

**E-V:** What did you study in college or what area are you involved in professionally?

*I graduated from The Ohio State University with a degree in Electrical Engineering. I am currently working at Allegro Microsystems, Inc., Worcester MA, as a Test Engineer.*

**E-V:** What are some of your hobbies?

*I like to dance, listen to music, watch movies, go to plays, eat, travel, I read occasionally*

**E-V:** How do you like your stay in Boston, and what are your short and long-term plans?

*Although I don't live in Boston, I try to come as often as possible. I like it a lot because although it's a relatively small city, it has so much diversity and a lot to offer.*

**E-V:** How do you find your involvement with the ECC? What areas are you most involved or interested in with regards to the community center?

*I got involved with the community primarily through Yonas since he's so involved. I tutor some Sundays with a couple of other people and it's been really fun! I also involved in a fundraiser that was held at MIT in February and it was amazing how hard people worked and the support we got from everyone. I think the community center is a great place for people to get involved in their community.*

**E-V:** Who are the people or ideas that had the greatest impact on you? Do you have any messages that you like to share with the youth?

*My parents and siblings have been a big influence in my life. I think the biggest problem we have in the community is the political division and animosity. It embarrasses me that people from a country of less than 4 million people plagued with poverty and war have so much time and energy for division and hatred. I think that energy should be channeled towards resolving differences and moving forward. That would send a positive message to the youth.*

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### **VIEWPOINT:**

#### **International Women's Day**



***By Eveline Gebremichael***

The United Nations declared International Women's Day to celebrate women's contribution to society, to acknowledge their unequal burdens of poverty, illiteracy, and violence and to raise the consciousness of governments and leaders to pursue policies and programs to alleviate their suffering. Seventy per cent of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty are women. Ninety per cent of those killed in armed conflict are civilians, a disproportionate number being women and children. Of 50 million people who have been uprooted in the world, 80% are women and children. Even in the U.S., a domestic violence incident occurs on average every nine seconds and 85% of the victims are women. The National Organization of Women, a U.S. organization, works on many levels to publicize American women's issues and encourage women to work proactively to change their collective future by educating themselves and exercising their right to vote. In order to have a peaceful and healthy economy, women's

economic potential and contributions must be recognized. Women must have equal voice and rights in the society and as well, in the home.

#### **Women Helping Women**

We live in a patriarchal society, basically a man's world; although it has not always been this way. There are studies of matriarchal societies through the ages in many parts of the world, especially in early American Indian societies. Women had economic and sexual dominance over men. They were heads of household in their villages and allowed men (the hunters), to live with them periodically to provide them with food and to procreate. Even lines of lineage went through women, rather than men. Titles as well as property descended in the female line. But today's world is different, and women must often fight for equal consideration and respect.

I believe women are survivors, they perpetuate the species. They possess unique nurturing characteristics, linked with an ability to look toward the future, especially for the good of their children. Women are often the glue that binds the family together. While men provide shelter for their families, women provide a 'home'. To overcome their obstacles and improve conditions for them and their children, U.S. Eritrean women must gain knowledge and confidence by expanding their world. In a practical sense, this means continuing their education and removing themselves from isolation in their homes, communities and culture to connect with the women in the society around them. This is not to be construed as losing one's identity as an Eritrean woman by assimilating into Western culture, but learning to better understand the world around them, how to navigate through the American society to obtain what they need to take care of themselves and their families. This is a chance to be empowered and build bridges of understanding with women of other cultures, to gain support from them and equally to give support to them. To me, this is the true spirit of International Women's Day.

## **A Call to Boston –based Eritrean Women**

Sadly this year, Eritreans in Boston celebrated International Women’s Day at two separate locations. What a paradox! I remember when we were a strong, united community. We held meetings, classes, and celebrations in various rented spaces. The unity we had gave us strength as to endure the strain of living in this Western society while a war raged in Eritrea. It also provided a strong ethnic and cultural identity for our children who learned, played, ate, danced and even slept together in our *bietsifet*. Now relationships among families and former friends are strained or dissolved. We have a community center that we all contributed to obtaining, which sits largely unused. And how confusing can this divide be for our kids? How will it affect their self-concept, confidence, and personal relationships? How children will view themselves, their confidence and behavior as socially responsible, caring adults depends on the atmosphere they are growing up in now. Will they view the Eritrean culture as one of disharmony and strife and lack of mutual respect, or of strength, independence and good morale values and a unique and beautiful culture?

I believe, as women, we have the capacity, foresight and inherent qualities to exercise a positive change for this problem. We must bridge the gap between our two half-communities, put away our egos and personal ill feelings toward each other and identify common themes on which we can all agree. Our children are fortunate to receive the gift of a free Eritrea, for which their parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, sisters, brothers and unknown heroes fought and died for. This is a heritage that we hope they will understand clearly and identify themselves with, proudly.

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## **EXPRESSION SECTION:**

### **Taste of Eritrea: Organizing Events in the Name of Culture and Unity**

*By Naomi Bitow*

I have not been in Boston for long, but I am also well beyond considering myself “gasha”. Since becoming involved with the Eritrean community in Boston I have been inspired by the wealth of resources in the area and the willingness of young people to work towards uplifting the wider Eritrean community. In recent months I have had the great honor of working with a group of students and young professionals to organize the event, *Taste of Eritrea*. The event was held at MIT on February 27, 2004. There was a wonderful turnout and it was truly a night of cultural exchange and giving.

The aim of the event was to introduce Eritrea and Eritrean culture to non-Eritreans and raise funds for an orphanage in Eritrea. Beyond these goals it seems that the event also had the affect of unifying the image of Eritrea and it’s community. Many of the organizers are children of the Diaspora, and we worked on this project with pride for culture and country in hand. It was especially poignant that a number of elders in our community approached myself and other organizers to share their support for our work and determination to organize a non-partisan event. I would like to thank all those individuals that helped us prior to and during the event. Without you this event would not have been a success.



**Taste of Eritrea Organizing Committee  
(Members not pictured: Daniel Negusse  
and Yonas Kinfu)**

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**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

- This year International Women's Day was observed with two separate celebrations, one at the Eritrean Community Center and the other at a different location organized by the National Union of Eritrean Women. We convey our best wishes to all.
- Gaber Menfes Kudus Eritrean Orthodox Church Fundraiser invites members of the community to join in a Tupperware fundraising event after mass on Sunday, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004, at 4pm. The church is located at 65 Harvard St., Brookline, MA. The fundraiser will be held in the church hall (downstairs).
- The annual Eritrean Community Center meeting that gathered at the ECC Sunday February 25, 2004 was adjourned when some serious commotion caused by undisciplined behavior erupted during the deliberations. Even at the outset there were signs that the meeting might not get underway because the necessary quorum to conduct a successful meeting was not present. Despite this and other obstacles, however, the gathering had moved on to other issues and was in the process of debating alternative options to avoid similar paralysis in

future meetings. As of this writing the next meeting will be held on **April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2004.**

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***QUIZ TIME!***

*This month's challenge is to answer these questions in both Tigrinya (English text is okay) and English.*

- 1. What color is the central triangle of the flag of Eritrea?**
- 2. What type of plant is pictured in gold, on the national flag?**
- 3. When is Eritrea's Independence Day celebrated?**

**E-mail answers to  
[eccnewsletter@yahoo.com](mailto:eccnewsletter@yahoo.com) or mail them  
to:**

**ERI-VOICE  
590 Shawmut Avenue  
Boston, MA  
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***Send us your answers by April 15, 2004.***

***Answers to last month's questions:***

*1) What is the root word of Eritrea's name?*

**The root of the word Eritrea can be found in the Greek words *erythros*, "reddish," and the Greek name for the Red Sea, *Erythra Thalassa*.**

*2) How high is the highest mountain in Eritrea?*

**Amba Soira, is 9880ft (3010m)**

*3) Name the Italian company that bought Asseb at one time?*

**Italian shipping company, Societa Rubattino, purchased portions of Asseb in 1870.**

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