



## **Reigniting the Embers: Sexual Violence and the Mobilisation of Diasporic Tigrayan Women during the Tigray War, 2020-2023**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines how far weaponised sexual violence in the Tigray War mobilised diasporic Tigrayan women for war work. It explores intersections between rape as a weapon of war with other forms of gendered violence through the testimonies of activist women in the diaspora, arguing that transnational actors positioned themselves as 'fighters' through and in response to widespread sexual violence in the region. It explores the extent to which Tigrayan women identified with the collective threat of sexual assault, challenging existing frameworks of gendered conflict participation by paying greater attention to the emotional experience of war for militarised actors beyond the physical conflict zone.*

**Keywords:** Gender, conflict, sexual violence, Tigray, diaspora

### **Résumé**

*Cet article explore dans quelle mesure la violence sexuelle utilisée à des fins militaires pendant la guerre du Tigré a mobilisé les femmes de la diaspora*



*tigréenne dans le travail contre le guerre. Il explore les intersections du viol comme arme de guerre avec d'autres formes de violence genrée à travers les témoignages de femmes militantes de la diaspora du Tigré et ces implications pour une réforme transformatrice du genre dans la région. Il examine dans quelle mesure les femmes tigréennes s'identifient à ceux qui sont confrontés à la menace collective d'agression sexuelle et s'organisent pour un changement à long terme en réponse à un continuum plus large de violence contre les femmes.*

**Mots clés :** Genre, conflits, violences sexuelles, Tigré, diaspora

## Introduction

*'We as women are under attack, so we as women must respond.'*<sup>1</sup>

On 4 November 2020, the federal government of Ethiopia launched an attack on the northernmost state of Tigray following political disputes with the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray's regional political representative. In the following two years, the Tigray War devastated the entire region through mass displacement, famine and an unprecedented blockade of communication, aid and essential services. By the time of signing the Pretoria Peace Accord in November 2022, Ethiopian federal troops, Eritrean soldiers and local militia from the neighbouring region of Amhara had perpetrated sexual violence against 120,000 Tigrayan women, girls, and some men, with thousands more lives affected indirectly by the indiscriminate weaponisation of sexual attack. Humanitarian reports uncovered systematic campaigns to rape and violate Tigrayans, including through sexual slavery, gang rape, mutilation, deliberate HIV infections, forced pregnancy and sexual assault.<sup>2</sup> The extreme brutality of the weaponised sexual violence dominated national and international discourse on the war, although healing, justice and reconciliation initiatives remain critically slim. This focus has in turn rendered to the periphery other, less extreme experiences of gendered violence affecting Tigrayan women within and beyond the battlefield. This article attends to this concern, foregrounding for the first time the emotional experiences of Tigrayan women participating in war from alternative spaces. It challenges existing perspectives on how diasporic women take part in war, arguing that non-militant actors define for themselves if, where, why and how they contribute transnational war work.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Laila.

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International Report, "I don't know if they realized I was a person": Rape and Sexual violence in the Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia', *Index No. AFR 25/4569/2021* (2021): 1-39; 'Sexual Violence in Tigray region, Ethiopia.xlsx', *Humanitarian Data Exchange* (2021); Human Rights Watch Report, "I Always Remember That Day": Access the Services for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray Region', ISBN: 978-1-62313-949-0 (2021): 1-102.

This article builds on Anne-Kathrin Kreft's pivotal observation that there is a 'robust', under-explored relationship between conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and women's political mobilisation in war.<sup>3</sup> The research draws on evidence of diasporic women's activism during the Tigray War in support of Kreft's findings, arguing that the collective threat of sexual violence in Tigray mobilised Tigrayan women around the world for social and political labour, framed by participants as a valuable site of war work. 'War work' in this context was defined by participants' beliefs that their physical and emotional labour in diasporic civil society organisations explicitly aligns with the agenda of the Tigray Defence Force (TDF) as the paramilitary wing of the TPLF.<sup>4</sup> Through sustained engagement in a transnational militarised community, diaspora participants saw themselves as 'fighting' the Ethiopian federal government for regional political autonomy, demanding perpetrator accountability, reparations, independent investigation, and even regime change. Participant association with the resistance aims of the armed insurgency therefore encompassed their activities within the domain of 'war work', as opposed to 'peace work', through civil society action. This differentiation matters as feminist scholars across disciplines move to reconceptualise women's participation in contemporary digital warfare, recognising the value of the emotional, cultural, social and gendered auxiliary labour that underpins militarised movements worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

This study centres six life-history testimonies from Tigrayan women, collected through participant-led, dialogical methods with an emphasis on storytelling. This original qualitative research is supported by ethnographic observations and analysis of nineteen diasporic activist organisational materials carried out between November 2020 and August 2023. The article begins by bringing together literature on weaponised sexual violence with a diaspora's roles in peace and conflict to provide an interdisciplinary framework for the study of women's international mobilisation for war. It then examines the work of key diasporic organisations active in the Tigray War, arguing that the widespread perpetration of weaponised sexual violence shaped the parameters of *tegaru* (Tigrayan) civil society action. Finally, it examines in turn and at length the testimonies collected from prominent Tigrayan activists working in Europe, the US and South Africa.

<sup>3</sup> Anne-Kathrin Kreft, 'Responding to Sexual Violence: Women's Mobilization in War', *Journal of Peace Research*, 56, 2 (2019): 220-233.

<sup>4</sup> For 'war work', see also: Bruce Scates, 'The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work, Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War', *Labour History*, 81 (2001): 29-49; Liz Byrski, 'Emotional Labour as War Work: women up close and personal with McIndoe's Guinea Pigs', *Women's History Review*, 21, 3 (2012): 341-361.

<sup>5</sup> Meredith Loken and Hilary Matfess, 'Introducing the Women's Activities in Armed Rebellion (WAAR) Project, 1946-2015', *Journal of Peace Research* (2023); Megan Mackenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Katherine Bruce-Lockhart, 'Reconsidering Women's Roles in the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, 1952-60', in *Decolonization and Conflict: Colonial Comparisons and Legacies*, (eds) Martin Thomas and Gareth Curless (London, 2017).

This structure is designed to address the methodological tension of this research; it duly attempts to analyse the *collective* experiences of Tigrayan women whilst foregrounding their individuality and unique perspectives. This author recognises the deeply problematic practice of scholars and practitioners who continue to subsume African women into a faceless, generalised body, perpetuating the post-colonial humanitarian trope of ‘womenandchildren’ without due attention to the complexity, depth and range of experiences.<sup>6</sup> This author therefore chose to set women’s testimonies apart from their own words in order to allow participants’ raw voices to speak for themselves, unimpeded by analysis. This approach enabled participants’ words to be examined contiguously, highlighting both the patterns and contradictions that emerge in each unique testimony.

### **Weaponised Sexual Violence in Tigray**

Whenever a girl or a woman comes and shares her story, she is speaking for 6, 8, or even 10 other women who were raped in the place she comes from. She is the only one who was able to come and get treatment.<sup>7</sup>

In the Tigray War, as in many others, the enduring social stigma of sexual violence means the number of those reported will remain only a partial reflection of its scope, compounded in this context by the deliberate destruction of health services, silencing of internet and telephones, closure of transport networks and essential support systems.<sup>8</sup> The limited evidence collected by grassroots community organisations, human rights groups, journalists and diaspora activists themselves revealed that sexual violence was perpetrated indiscriminately in Tigray, threatening all age groups, social classes, religious affiliations, marital statuses, and sexualities.<sup>9</sup> Children as young as eight to elders in their eighties are amongst the survivors, with most accounts describing extreme physical violence accompanying sexual attack. Although the violence was predominately carried

<sup>6</sup> Esther Möller et al., ‘Gendering Twentieth-Century Humanitarianism: An Introduction’, in *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics and the Power of Representation*, (eds) Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Stornig (London, 2020), 17-78; Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (North Carolina, 1999); D.L. Hodgson and S. McCurdy, *‘Wicked’ Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa* (Portsmouth, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Romina Istratii, ‘War and domestic violence: A rapid scoping of the international literature to understand the relationship and to inform current responses in the Tigray humanitarian crisis’ (Unpublished Working Paper II, 2021), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International Report, 1-39.

<sup>9</sup> Rita Kahsay, Rowena Kahsay and Sally Keeble (eds.), *In Plain Sight: Sexual Violence in the Tigray Conflict* (London: Eleanor Press, 2023); Human Rights Watch Report, ‘I Always Remember That Day’: Access the Services for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence in Ethiopia’s Tigray Region’, ISBN: 978-1-62313-949-0 (2021): 1-102.

out against women and girls, some Tigrayan men also came forward as survivors of rape and sexual violence.<sup>10</sup>

The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war has been well established in scholarship which recognises it is a strategic choice by military groups, neither inevitable nor universal, but essential information about the conflict in which it takes place.<sup>11</sup> Its perpetration is specific, requiring considered analysis of the particular functions, intentions, and effectuations of sexual attack in each context. In Tigray, scholars and human rights organisations differentiated between the sexual violence carried out by each of the three perpetrating groups present in the region; they found higher rates of gang rape and sexual slavery by Eritrean troops, and increased risk of ethnic violence alongside sexual violence by Amhara militia.<sup>12</sup> In these instances, perpetrators claimed to be able to remove their victim's capacity to produce Tigrayan children through genital mutilation, or by forced impregnation by a non-ethnically-Tigrayan male. This violence was premised on the idea that the female body is a vessel for preserving and disrupting ethnic identity, whereby a male perpetrator can either prevent a woman from producing children in her ethnic image through damaging her reproductive capacities or force her through rape and impregnation to have a child of his ethnic distinction as she is used as a boundary-marker: as a vessel for legitimising (male) collective ethnicity. As such, the female body is exploited as a political space for negotiating identity and meaning. Decisions about boundaries of the 'other' and definitions of the 'self' are defined through and within the female body by shaping its relationship to identity politics. Lori Handrahan coined the phrase 'patriarchy of ethnicity' in reference to the passing of male ethnic identity through rape and impregnation.<sup>13</sup> It is also a useful concept in this context to reflect on the ways in which ethnicity and ethnic hierarchies buttress conditions of gender domination.

Survivors of sexual violence do not endure their experience in isolation, however. Other scholars have evidenced how an attack on one woman impacts her entire community; this research is situated within an emerging body of literature identifying that there is also an

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International Report: 1-39; Insecurity Insight, 'Sexual Violence in Ethiopia's Tigray region, 20 March 2021', Geneva: Insecurity Insight, 2020; available online at <https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Sexual-Violence-in-Ethiopia-Tigray-Region-30-March-2021.pdf>, accessed 20 April 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine A Mackinnon, 'Genocide's Sexuality', *Nomos*, 46 (2005): 313-356; Sara Meger, *Rape Loot Pillage: The Political Economy of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict* (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2016); Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War? Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2013); Elisabeth J. Wood, 'Variation in sexual violence during war', *Politics and Society*, 34, 3 (2006):307-42.

<sup>12</sup> Tghat Forum, 'Tghat Forum 3: Women's Experiences in the Tigray War', online video recording, YouTube (2021). For analysis of the differing aims of perpetrating groups in Tigray, see: Hilary Matfess, 'Sexual Violence and the War in Tigray', *Lawfare Institute: Horn of Africa* (2021).

<sup>13</sup> Lori Handrahan, 'Conflict, Gender, Ethnicity and Post-Conflict Reconstruction', *Security Dialogue*, 35, 4 (2003): 429-455, 438.

indirect experience of sexual violence lived by those who do not endure physical attack.<sup>14</sup> When sexual violence was weaponised indiscriminately in Tigray, this study posits that a shared identification emerged for Tigrayan women connected by the violation of Tigrayan women's bodies as a *collective*, as well as solidarity with those suffering in reality. The meanings attached to Tigrayan women's bodies created a continuum of SGBV in the Tigray War, in which those who were not themselves literal survivors of sexual violence internalised and endured the indirect experience of bodily violation, sharing in an emotional experience of war that transcended boundaries of the conflict zone. In other words, violence perpetrated against women in Tigray was simultaneously lived as an attack on all Tigrayan women as a conceptual body. This phenomenon is by no means unique to Tigray, but it was heightened by the cultural emphasis on the maternalist position of women as gatekeepers of the 'essence' of Tigray, as later testimonies examined in this article will detail.<sup>15</sup>

### **Mobilising Tigrayan Diasporic Women for War Work**

Firstly, it must be noted that Tigrayan women have a significant history of political and military engagement. In the 1974-1991 Ethiopian civil war, Tigrayan women comprised up to one-third of combatants in the regional armed resistance, with thousands more contributing auxiliary labour to sustain the insurgent group.<sup>16</sup> During this seventeen-year liberation struggle, women's involvement in mass associations known as *baitos* resulted in radical legal reform for issues pertaining to women's rights in land ownership, marriage, and divorce.<sup>17</sup> Although pushed back into familiar restrictive gender roles after the end of civil war in 1991, the precedent for women's participation in revolution in Tigray was set, reflected in the substantial number of women taking up arms in the Tigray Defence Force in 2020 – 2022.<sup>18</sup> The title of this article, 'Reigniting the Embers' connects this research with the labour of the previous generation of Tigrayan women, whose contributions were documented in Jenny Hammond's influential monograph *Fire From*

<sup>14</sup> See Kreft; Shesterinina Anastasia, 'Collective threat framing and mobilization in civil war', *American Political Science Review*, 110, 3 (2016): 411 – 427; See also: Sara E Davis and Jacqui True, 'Reframing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence: bringing gender analysis back in', *Security Dialogue*, 46, 6 (2015): 495 – 512; Patricia A. Weitsman, 'The Politics of Identity and Sexual Violence: A Review of Bosnia and Rwanda', *Human Rights Quarterly*, 3 (2008): 561-578, 562.

<sup>15</sup> For 'mothers of the nation', see: Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Oxford: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Tsegay Berhe, *The Tigrean women in the liberation struggle and aftermath, 1975- 1996 (OSSREA: 1999)*; Thera Mjaaland, 'At the frontiers of change: Women and girls' pursuit of education in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia' (doctoral thesis, submitted to the University of Bergen, 2013), 33.

<sup>17</sup> Jenny Hammond and Nell Druce (eds.), *Sweeter than Honey* (London: Links, 1989); Jenny Hammond, *Fire from the Ashes: A Chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray* (London: Red Sea Pr, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Fighter A 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](https://theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/23/we-dont-have-a-limit-yasuyoshi-chiba-agency-photographer-of-2021)>, [accessed 07/12/2022].

*the Ashes: A Chronicle of Revolution in Tigray*.<sup>19</sup> In this study, the ‘fire’ of Hammond’s participants has been reignited by a new generation, taking up the baton of women’s empowerment to advocate for critical social and political reform in the region.

Existing literature predominately considers sexual violence to be a consequence of war, with only a few scholars explicitly recognising its potential link to conflict escalation.<sup>20</sup> In a case study of Colombia, Kreft identified the increased political mobilisation of women affected by conflict-related sexual violence and rape, connecting women’s actions with a collective threat to gender equality through gender-based violence.<sup>21</sup> Adopting Charles Tilly’s framework on collective action to trace the threat versus opportunity dichotomy which has since characterised much of the literature on social movements, Kreft took note of Tilly’s observation that a danger to group interest is more likely to mobilise contentious political action as potential opportunities for that group.<sup>22</sup> Kreft found:

First, the threat does not necessarily have to be to women’s own, immediate safety to elicit a mobilization response as long as there is a perception of collective threat and women identify with the collective. Second, women establish a link between sexual violence and other ways in which women’s rights and interests are violated or undermined.<sup>23</sup>

This article applies these observations to the Tigray War and builds further upon them by considering the specific ways in which diaspora women experienced sexual violence indirectly and performed war work in response to the collective threat to their gendered ethnic body. This approach provides a compelling lens through which to address the development of a transnational ‘warscape’, a term first introduced by Carolyn Nordstrom, capturing the internationalisation and digitisation conflict participation in the contemporary world.<sup>24</sup>

As evidenced by Jennifer Brinkerhoff and others, diasporas have critically influenced the course and outcome of conflicts in their place of origin through economic remittance, philanthropy, human capital and policy reform, intensified by the surge of digital activism

<sup>19</sup> Hammond, *Fire from the Ashes*.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth D., Heineman, *Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: From the Ancient World to the Era of Human Rights* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Kreft, 220-233.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1978) 135; Heike Schmidt, ‘Love and Healing in Forced Communities: Borderlands in Zimbabwe’s War of Liberation’, in *African Boundaries*, (eds) Paul Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju (New York: Bloomsbury, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> Kreft, 222.

<sup>24</sup> Carolyn Nordstrom, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century* (California: University of California Press, 2004); Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (eds), *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture* (California: University of California Press, 1996).

that has positioned transnational actors as a substantial force in global politics.<sup>25</sup> From Haiti, to Croatia, to Ireland, to present-day Palestine, diasporas worldwide have engaged heavily in war and peace. In Tigray, however, the two-year communication blackout positioned *tegaru* diaspora uniquely in world history. While other conflicts have actively limited the accessibility of internet and social media to affected peoples, including Algeria, Zimbabwe, Gabon, and Uganda, the sustained, region-wide silence defining the experience of Tigrayan residents during the war is the longest internet shutdown to date. Comparisons are frequently drawn between Tigray and Ukraine, as the two wars ran concurrently for nine months in 2022, but the latter conflict is itself defined by the visibility of the ‘war feed,’ where those in conflict zones could share in real time videos, images, and commentaries of the violence.<sup>26</sup> The Tigray War, in turn, occurred within a carefully curated culture of silence.

The Tigray diaspora’s role emerged within this vacuum of information and the resulting limited response by the international community. Mobilising globally into national and transnational organisations representing Tigray’s interests on an international stage, engagement with the diaspora movement swept through the Tigrayan community in the days and weeks after the onset of war in 2020. Their roles ranged from acting as intermediaries for evidence of war crimes, lobbying for legal action and economic sanctions, raising global awareness through activism, and as direct financiers for the civilian and military efforts in Tigray. They were able to mobilise networks across the region to share information, in one instance passing recordings of attacked women from person to person until they reached an intermediary in Sudan, who in turn shared the evidence with diasporic representatives.<sup>27</sup> By February of 2022, there were thirty-eight diaspora groups operating transnationally, claiming a combined membership of roughly 120,000. Select groups rose to prominent positions in the global community, namely Omna Tigray, Global Society of Tigray Scholars (GSTS), Tigray Youth Network (TYN), Mekete Tigray, TGHAT, and the Tigray Relief Fund.<sup>28</sup>

Importantly, diaspora activists identified themselves as *woyane*, a Tigrinya term referencing the armed struggle of ordinary Tigrayans in regional history. The ‘digital *woyane*’ or ‘digital junta,’ as they became known, characterised their activism as war work through explicit support of the militarised aims of the TDF: protection of Tigray’s

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, ‘Diasporas and conflict societies: conflict entrepreneurs, competing interests or contributors to stability and development?’, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 11, 2 (2011): 115-143; B. Baser, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts: A Comparative Perspective* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> A. Hoskins and P. Shchelin, ‘The War Feed: Digital War in Plain Sight’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 67, 3 (2023): 449-463.

<sup>27</sup> Bisrat Interview.

<sup>28</sup> Including: running campaigns, fundraising, legal consultancy, documentation work, organising protests, lobbying, mobilising resources, hosting debates, arranging events, designing policy, and representing Tigray in international forums.



borders from external aggressors, perpetrator accountability, and for some, Tigray's independence. These aims were differentiated from those of the TPLF as the regional political party, which sought a difficult treaty with the Ethiopian federal government. Many participants were explicit about their support of the TDF, distancing themselves from association with the TPLF. Their testimonies reveal how they framed their efforts as a 'fight', identifying strongly with the TDF as a people's struggle, in which individuals could contribute their own forms of resistance.

Within the *tegaru* diasporic mobilisation, women occupied a notably significant majority, rallying the community for war through actions that challenged normative discourse about women's special responsibility for peace.<sup>29</sup> Omna Tigray is one of the largest global diaspora groups and a proudly majority-woman-led organisation, with 87% of senior management roles held by women, while one of the leading organisations based in the UK, TYN, boasts 89% female leadership.<sup>30</sup> From high-profile advocacy to fundraising and administration, diaspora networks have taken visible pride in their majority-female gender imbalance and reference the 'special responsibility' of Tigrayan women for action and resilience.<sup>31</sup>

This article further posits that the widespread sexual violence dominating women's experiences of war in Tigray opened the floor for high-profile discussions in the community about the damaging gender norms underpinning the perpetration of SGBV in war, spotlighting women's rights in conflict and beyond in diasporic discourse. Of the nineteen diaspora activist groups reviewed, selected based on their size and contributions, sixteen explicitly prioritised combatting the weaponisation of sexual violence in the Tigray War through campaigns, donations, legal consultancy, awareness-raising and efforts to document the crimes.<sup>32</sup> Every organisation reviewed indicated their commitment to long-term visions regarding gender-based issues, particularly through representation, diversity and inclusion within their organisational structures and through highlighting the centrality of female empowerment in their activities. As one example, the Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals acknowledged the gendered challenges presented by the war beyond sexual violence in their 'Family to Family' campaign, which invests in the long-term educational and professional future of women

<sup>29</sup> See: Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'On beautiful souls, just warriors and feminist consciousness', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 5, 3-4 (1982): 341-348.

<sup>30</sup> TYN Leadership Interview; Omna Tigray Leadership Interview.

<sup>31</sup> See: Omna Tigray, Tigray Youth Network, Mekete Tigray UK, Yikono.

<sup>32</sup> Groups reviewed include: Omna Tigray, Tigray Youth Network, Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals, Art for Tigray, Security and Justice for Tigray, Health Professionals Network for Tigray, Union of Tigrayans in North America, Stand with Tigray, Alliance of Tigrayan Associations in Australia and New Zealand, Tegar Professionals Network, United Teagru Canada, United Tegar Australia, Tigray Youth Movement Switzerland, Tigray Youth Holland, Tigray Relief Sweden, IROB Anina Civil Society, Mekete Tigray UK, Tghat Media.

and girls in Tigray who missed opportunities during the conflict.<sup>33</sup> Substantial gender reforms were consistently prioritised by such groups through foregrounding the needs of survivors of weaponised sexual violence in organisational materials and the commitment to investment (financial and personal) in women and girls in Tigray's future.<sup>34</sup>

The rise of discourse on women's rights and bodily autonomy during conflict is a familiar phenomenon elsewhere in history; war, according to Victoria Hesford, has 'often been the scene of political possibilities for feminist claims on the nation-state'.<sup>35</sup> Breakdown of cohesion and order can provide an opportunity for those who occupy peripheral roles in the social hierarchy to make their claims for movement and inclusion. In Hesford's words, women's participation in war as 'an effective illustration of...[their] ability to be active citizens is not a new tactic for feminism'.<sup>36</sup> For those in the diaspora, complex and competing gender relations frameworks provide a unique operative space. Gender roles in their country of origin inform the expectations around their behaviour and presentations as diasporic members, but their country of residence simultaneously affects the spaces available for them to subvert or reproduce existing gender ideologies. African and global north feminisms interact in the creation of a new reform discourse; in this context, Tigrayan women in the diaspora navigated hegemonic gender hierarchies pervasive in Tigray from international locations, with the resources and inter-cultural influences available to them. In doing so, this article claims they were able to deploy familiar narratives about the role and behaviours of a Tigrayan women to renegotiate their positions and gain access to critical political reform spaces. This argument draws on interventions in discourse on the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, where Marjaana Jauhola has argued that the 'symbolic value of women during [war]... focuses on their contribution as reproducers of the nation and their role in embodying cultural and national borders'.<sup>37</sup> Jauhola posits that women's access to peace and security depends on their presentation as a 'good woman'... either a peacebuilder or a victim of violence'.<sup>38</sup> Such dichotomies are invariably false, but that does not mean they are not useful for women seeking to move within existing structures to demand transformative gender reforms.

It must be acknowledged that the work of diasporic activists did not happen against a backdrop of silence. In the years before the war, significant progress was already being made in Tigray to combat violence against women and girls by women's groups, social

<sup>33</sup>Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals, 'F2F Initiative Rationale' (2021).

<sup>34</sup> See: Omna Tigray, 'Weaponized SGBV in the War on Tigray – Explained' (2021).

<sup>35</sup> Victoria Hesford, 'Securing a Future: Feminist Futures in a Time of War' in *Feminist Time Against Nation Time: Gender, Politics, and the Nation-State in an Age of Permanent War*, (eds) Victoria Hesford and Lisa Diedrich (Lexington Books: Plymouth, 2010), 169.

<sup>36</sup> Hesford, 169.

<sup>37</sup> Marjaana Jauhola, 'Decolonizing branded peacebuilding: abjected woman talk back to the Finish Women, Peace and Security agenda', *International Affairs*, 92, 2 (2016): 333-35, 333.

<sup>38</sup> Jauhola, 334.

workers, women's groups and local NGOs.<sup>39</sup> Prominent women's associations have existed in Tigray since the early days of civil war in 1975, growing in number and influence in the subsequent decades. In 2019, anti-rape campaign group Yikono sparked public debate as they took to the streets in Tigray's capital city of Mekelle to protest violence against women. Their influential social media campaign was named *aytiteqilelen*, meaning 'she cannot be taken', as a play on the Tigrinya word *teqlila* in reference to the practice of marrying a survivor to their rapist.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, the public demonstration and subsequent discourse online heavily involved young Tigrayan men, who rallied to break down the notion that rape was a 'woman's issue'. It can be said, therefore, that the process for gender reform had begun before the outbreak of the Tigray War, but that the locus of this work was largely in Tigray, conducted in Tigrinya, and focused on a regional scope.

The Tigray War reinforced the existing efforts and indeed altered the direction, agenda and reach of reform discourse. Yikono moved its operations largely online, re-designed as a diasporic led, trans-boundary campaign group focusing on the weaponisation of SGBV and serving as a solidarity network for Tigrayan women worldwide. They also have reached a much broader audience since 2020, including elder male generations and social conservatives who had previously been largely silent on 'feminist debates' about women's bodily autonomy, the need for female contraception and protection against SGBV. Before the war, it was possible to observe disparity in the views of diasporic males and men in Tigray; however, in recent months it has become clear that many men in Tigray have also placed women's rights firmly centre stage in public discourse, demonstrated in communications from TDF soldiers who cited the abuse of women as a motivating factor for their own enlistment and in religious elder's explicit condemnation of SGBV.<sup>41</sup> Abroad, Tigrayan diaspora men have been vocal in their focus on the abuse of women in the war, and the discourse has expanded from this to explore wider limitations to women's rights in Tigray. Both men and women across generations have joined social media platforms, many for the first time, as a way to overcome a sense of powerlessness and dedicate their accounts exclusively to activism.<sup>42</sup> Notably, diasporic men have recognised the 'special' responsibility that Tigrayan women have assumed for transnational war work, as described by one male participant in northern Europe:

It's just their [women's] time. You know, Tigrayan women are so special.  
Unlike any other women anywhere in the world. They are doing everything,

<sup>39</sup> Romina Istratii, *Adapting Gender and Development to Local Religious Contexts: A Decolonial Approach to Domestic Violence in Ethiopia* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Mehret Berehe, '#Yikono Campaign Gives Ethiopian Women the Language to Challenge Violence', *African Feminism* (2019).

<sup>41</sup> Fighter A Interview; Cara Anna, 'Abune Mathias accuses Ethiopian government of genocide in Tigray – "The taboo of taboos, the despicable of despicable, is being committed', *Eritrea Hub* (2021).

<sup>42</sup> Amlakawit Interview.

everything. They work so hard, tell us what to do [*laughs*]. The young women especially, they rose to the task and [are] leading the way. They organise the protests, events, fundraising. They are honouring Tigray.<sup>43</sup>

In the remainder of this article, six activist women's stories are examined in turn to unpack the reasoning behind this gendered division of labour in the Tigrayan diaspora. The testimonies below are but a window into the complex, diverse perspectives of Tigrayan women worldwide, but as a body of experience they reveal the deep internalisation of SGBV by diasporic women and their engagement in a self-defined 'fight' as non-militant actors.

### **Activist Women of the Tigray War**

#### *Laila's story*

A mother of two in her mid-thirties, Laila was born and raised in Tigray, moving to the US as a teenager. She currently resides in South Africa, where she participates in advocacy initiatives and political lobbying. Of all the participants in this study, Laila has the most intimate family connections with the TDF as her 'baby' sister and two brothers enlisted at the start of the war. Her testimony provided a layered insight into both her own relationship with the Tigray resistance movement and that of her sister, as a young woman serving as an armed combatant at the time of interview.

**Laila:** The day I found out that she [my sister] joined the TDF... that was the real turning point for me. She was my baby sister!... One time she was speaking on the phone with me, and when the network doesn't work they have to go outside of the house beyond the yard, and she saw a soldier. And she told me, 'Oh my God, there is a soldier.' And I'm here [the phone], and I'm shouting, 'Hello? Hello?'-- and probably she was running, and I hear her heavy breathing, and then it hung up. The network did not come back on for weeks. Imagine at that time what I was thinking. With all the news that's coming - I don't know if the soldier got her, what he did to her. I hold it in myself, and I live for weeks thinking this has happened. When she calls and she tells me it was OK, she got inside and hid, nothing changes for me. Because it wasn't my sister, OK, but it is my other sisters. It wasn't her, but it was this other girl. Does that make sense?...

It's better that she is on the mountain freely. Defending with her friends. At least she is happy and free. I was talking to her - my confident, very proud sister on the mountains. Maybe she's going hungry from the picture she sent

<sup>43</sup> Goitom Interview.

me. She doesn't look the same. [cries] I'm sorry. I'm very emotional right now. But I think this story matters. To make sense of all of it or this madness...

Tigrayan women have risen up, all of us, young and old. We are doing everything, make no mistake. This is our fight. We as women are under attack, so we as women must respond. I will fight for them until the day I die, for every mother who died and every child who cried.

Laila's words were selected to open this article because they embody the key finding of this research: the SGBV perpetrated in Tigray has mobilised Tigrayan women transnationally for a gendered articulation of war work. Laila framed her 'fight' through a gendered lens, presenting women's engagement in activism, political reform and violence as a movement of women in direct response to the threat against their group. Her description of the sexual violence she feared had been perpetrated against her sister depicted just how far Laila viewed SGBV as a collective experience, shared amongst 'sisters' she had never known but with whom she felt intense solidarity. There are a great many Tigrayan men involved in activism, and a great many more in the TDF, but Laila captured in her testimony how the broader resistance movement has been underpinned by women, directing and sustaining diasporic labour.

Importantly, Laila did not just mobilise in response to the threat of SGBV. Her promise to fight 'for every mother... every child' resonates with the findings of Kreft and others who have mapped the complementary motivations for women engaging in war, including a strong maternalist trend to 'protect' children suffering in conflict.<sup>44</sup> What is significant is that while Laila did not mobilise *exclusively* in response to SGBV, her contention that 'nothing changed' after she discovered her sister was physically unharmed reveals how far she identified with a collective experience, transcending individual victims, but representing the essence of Tigrayan women as a group.

### *Maria's Story*

Maria is in her early 30s, living in Europe at the time of interview. She was born in Addis Ababa to prominent Tigrayan politicians. Following her father's instruction, she fled Ethiopia before the war broke out. When this interview was conducted, Maria's family in Addis Ababa had been evicted from their home by the Ethiopian federal government and their possessions sold on the streets. Preserving her parent's safety prevented Maria from taking on a public role but as a professional social worker and writer, Maria had been

<sup>44</sup> See Kreft; Marie Berry, 'From violence to mobilization: Women, war, and the threat in Rwanda', *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 20, 2 (2015): 135-156; Kim Miller, 'Moms with Guns: Women's Political Agency in Anti-Apartheid Visual Culture', *African Arts*, 42, 2 (2009):68-75; Judith Stevenson 'The Mamas Were Ripe': Ideologies of Motherhood and Public Resistance in a South African Township', *Feminist Formations*, 23, 2 (2011): 132-163.

heavily involved in what she calls 'radical work' behind the scenes. Maria's testimony provided a valuable insight into sexual violence as a continuum, tied closely to other forms of GBV:<sup>45</sup>

**Maria:** Tigrayan women are very religious. Some of them -- they almost think that it's a punishment for something, you know... I think rape in the way that it's been used as a humiliation tool, as depraved as it has been, is something that I don't think any of us have ever even seen, to even read about. I cannot imagine how they must feel...

I can even tell you from my own experience, I haven't had proper sex in a very long time. I am so trauma[tised], to be intimate with my partner, with the person I love and trust 100% and have no question over, and my body just feels like it shouldn't be touched by a man. I feel it, you know, and I don't know how they could feel.

I want them to be safe. I want them to feel their strength and to say I did this and I can build myself up, but it's hard... in Tigray it's hard... if you walk down the street with a man your mom will know about it before you get home, you know?

This is how people know you there, so I don't know. Even if their community might not shame them, it might just be pitying them, if nothing else. The pity -- like what does the future look like for a lot of these women? Because I think that a lot of them would want to build families, and that also means a husband who's willing to understand what happened to you and that they're willing to create a family with you. I don't know if our men are strong enough for that as well. They might not openly shame them, but are they willing to build a life with a woman who's gone through something like that? I don't know...

I think even with a lot of feminist movements, or even female-centred work... this is one of the things that I always had a problem with. The conversation around empowering women was very much on the shoulders of the women. They're telling them, 'You can be strong' [but] none of us are born thinking we're not strong, we're weak, we're inadequate. It's a society that makes it so... I'm worried that when they go back... how do we overcome sexual trauma and all of these things it? I'm afraid that it's just going to be focused on the women and they're still going to feel it -- it's another form of subjugating them in a way.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewer prompt: How do you feel about what is happening to women in Tigray?

(...) FB: And are you feeling like that is a good thing for you to have a community purpose and somewhere that you can put the energy and put the organization?

**M:** Yeah, 100%. I have to do something. It's very important [to advocate] ... this is the way I show love, you know?... This feels big.

One of the encounters that inspired this scholarship was the moment in this interview when Maria observed that stories of rape in Tigray affected her physically, explaining that she did not want to engage in sex because of the transcendent 'trauma' of Tigrayan women. Her application of 'trauma' in this context resonated with Graham Dawson's description of 'contagious... emotion' in social groups undergoing a shared difficult experience.<sup>46</sup> Maria composed a shared gendered experience of the war that she internalised and lived, despite no physical threat to her own person. As she later clarified, she has never been a victim of sexual abuse, but intimately, viscerally identified with the collective experience of Tigrayan women, transferring the pain of survivors to herself. Her response was based on the imagined community of Tigrayan women facing violence and instability, again creating profound solidarity with those in the literal conflict zone.

Maria also identified an important connection between the aftermath of sexual attack and other discriminatory gendered structures pervasive in Ethiopia, as elsewhere. Her observation that the responsibility for healing cannot exclusively be the prerogative of women in the community is a critical reflection on the ways in which heteronormative gender roles intersect with this violence. Her description of potential responses from the community post-conflict as 'focused on the women' and 'another form of' subjugation was potent; she recognised the competing gendered hierarchies and social norms that compound the impact of conflict-related gender-based violence after war, and the difficulties in moving away from discourse defining SGBV as a 'woman's' issue. In this way, Maria linked weaponised sexual violence with other kinds of violence against women – social ostracisation, structural violence, trauma suppression, to name a few – grounded in the dangerous potential of spatially located gender norms and enduring usage of the female body as a site of identity politics.

### *Harinet's Story*

At the time of interview, Harinet was twenty-four years old, living in the United Kingdom. She is a founding member of the Tigray Youth Network (TYN). Harinet became involved in activism when the war began and has since been a pivotal figure in the community, speaking on widely broadcasted television programmes, liaising with other professional networks and recording evidence of atrocities in Sudan and Tigray. Her testimony reveals

<sup>46</sup> Graham Dawson, 'The Meaning of 'Moving On': From Trauma to the History and Memory of Emotions in 'Post-Conflict' Northern Ireland, *Irish University Review*, 27, 1 (2017): 82-102.

a great deal about the influence of sexual violence on her work, and her deep association with the 'fight' of the people of Tigray at home and abroad:<sup>47</sup>

**Harinet:** The nature of the sexual violence is so damaging and something these people have to deal with forever, being infertile, having HIV...having your wife, or child, or mother raped in front of you... sometimes I thought what are we fighting for? It makes you feel hopeless, like I am going to go back to a Tigray that's really damaged. And that is scary.

On the other hand, the fact that sexual violence is allowed to happen and we are so ok with sexism day to day... It makes me feel like that has contributed to it. Especially when the Prime Minister [Abiy Ahmed] was able to say that rape is very normal in war and it be not very alarming to Ethiopian society. It makes you feel a bit like, 'What am I doing, what am I advocating for if that's the kind of country they're going to live in anyway?' But it pushed me to want to fight for these things...

I cannot explain how much I think about it [violence against women]. It is every day. It is a part of me. Even when I'm tired, I think 'I must carry on because of what they went through'. This movement has to be enough...

In our meetings [in TYN], we tried to aim for gender parity. It made me want to push more for feminism and include these women [survivors]. Some of these women [survivors] in TDF are fighting now and the Tigray they are fighting for is not going to be a sexist Tigray. I want them on the ground to go and claim what they fought for. I don't want them to be subjugated once this war is over... so a massive part of me wants to continue feminist activism going forward after the war. We're fighting for something that we maybe never had.

Harinet connected sexual abuse with other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination that existed before the war, referencing the broader approach to SGBV in Ethiopia as a 'woman's issue', or an inevitable part of society. There has been an attempt at a smear campaign by federal government supporters to discredit survivors of rape in the Tigray War by pointing out that regional anti-rape groups existed before the war, and thus claiming the violence is a continuance of practice endorsed by Tigrayan civil society. Although this is a poor attempt to deflect attention from the specific, strategic weaponisation of sexual violence in the war, the observation that GBV is a continuum grounded in peacetime gender normativity is relevant.

<sup>47</sup> Interviewer prompt: How do you feel about what is happening to women in Tigray?



Harinet explicitly connected the sexual violence perpetrated against Tigrayan women with the activities of women's movements in the country and her own personal work. Her easy use of the term 'feminism' is notable; it remains a contested concept for women in Ethiopia, largely due to the perception that it is a separatist term reliant on stressing differences between men and woman rather than endorsing equality, as well as its reputation for being a white-led, Western term for sexual topics rather than issues of social or economic justice.<sup>48</sup> Harinet's language, however, reflects the increased usage of the term in wartime *tegaru* discourse. The alliances forged between transnational actors has provided a framework for approaching women's rights through a new, cross-cultural lens in post-war Tigray, shaped by the diverse resources and backgrounds of diasporic influencers.

Critically, Harinet claimed the mobilisation of women as armed combatants in the TDF was related to the threat sexual violence constituted to women as a group. Weaponised sexual violence stands in Harinet's testimony as explicit motivation for women's war work, both in Tigray and elsewhere.

#### *Nayna's Story*

Nayna is in her late 20s, living in the United Kingdom at the time of interview. When the Tigray War broke out in November 2020, Nayana was in Mekelle visiting friends and family. She spent ten days living under siege, witnessing first-hand the destruction caused by drone and air strikes before being allowed onto a United Nations bus for foreign nationals. Since returning home, Nayna has been a leading member of TYN, gathering testimonies from Tigrayan refugee women and working to raise awareness of atrocities in Tigray. In her words, her activism has characterised her life since November 2020:

**Nayna:** I feel like for so long we have been hearing about these mad, beyond what the mind can conceive, levels of sexual violence. Seeing and hearing the stories coming out of Tigray has undoubtedly intensified our campaign efforts.

The violence experienced by women and girls... I don't think you need to centre yourself in this tragedy with sayings like, 'It could have been me', 'This person speaks my language, or is from the same town as me'... for me to feel empathy for the survivors. The violence and sinister intentions are to strip future generations of their Tigrayan heritage, and I don't think there has been anything as intentional or thought out as that, and that has fuelled me.

<sup>48</sup> Jenny Hammond, "'My revolution is like honey': Women in revolutionary Tigray", *Women: A Cultural Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1: 56-59 (2008), 57-58; Carole McCain and Seung-Kyung Kim, (eds), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 24.

I would say [Tigray] is a matriarchal society in the case that women are often the ones who pass down tradition and protect community, are caregivers, are heads of family, and in doing that it makes this already inconceivable violence much more painful because it intends to break that tradition. Because it is so 'bad'... because of these intentions, it is enough to sustain rage and from that rage comes motivation and [I] feel a responsibility to challenge that...

When it comes to any sustained, longer-term work, you're more likely to find women at the forefront of that. The women are the backbone of everything. They're our protectors, not just as physical individuals, but of our culture, of our existence, our identity. As a movement, it's our women dominating [it], of course.

As in Harinet's testimony, Nayna explicitly connected the weaponisation of sexual violence to the intensity of her activist work. Her explanation that she did not need to identify as a victim in order to relate to the experiences of other Tigrayan women was telling; Nayna, unlike Maria, was able to distance the imagined danger to her own body but retain a close solidarity with affected Tigrayan women. This perspective adds nuance to this article's argument. For Nayna, weaponised sexual violence was narrated as constituting a threat to women as a group, but this threat was explicitly not Nayna's own. Her relationship to the violence was thus not channelled through her physical body, but a wider allyship.

Nayna referred to her community as 'matriarchal' and the intentions of perpetrating groups to target women on such grounds. Although Tigrayan society largely adheres to fixed gender norms and expectations of female behaviour, Tigrayan women are integral to social cohesion as community leaders and upholding standards of morality, representing the essence of being Tigrayan.<sup>49</sup> For Nayna, sexual violence was not just perpetrated against women's bodies, but against all they represent in Tigray. Her personal mobilisation and motivations were sustained through the resulting 'rage' and responsibility to all women in her community to deny perpetrators the outcome intended.

By presenting Tigrayan women as natural 'protectors', Nayna's words spark association with Jauhola's aforementioned concept of a 'good woman' as a malleable identity called upon by women to subvert gender roles and access restricted spaces.<sup>50</sup> In this context, activist women navigated the transnational warscape through the narrative of 'mothers of the nation', positioning themselves as the necessary leaders for sustainable peace.

<sup>49</sup> Thera Mjaaland, 'Beyond the Coffee Ceremony: Women's Agency in Western Tigray, Northern Ethiopia', *Betwixt and Between: Sosialantropologstudentenes Årbok: Master og Hovedfag*, 14:171-187.

<sup>50</sup> Jauhola, 334.

At the end of her testimony, Nayna drew poignant association between the political and military operations in Tigray and those abroad, stating:

**Nayna:** Us, TPLF, TDF – Tigray comes first. We're Tigray first.

The use of the collective pronoun in this context depicted how far Nayna saw her role as part of the broader war effort, all working towards a shared imagining of 'Tigray'.

### *Saba's Story*

Saba, a woman in her early twenties, was born to Tigrayan parents but was fostered in her early years by an Eritrean mother and Ethiopian father, describing herself as a 'by-product of Ethiopian nationalism'. She explicitly named the day she became interested in politics as November 4<sup>th</sup>, the day the war broke out in 2020. Since then, she has been one of the most prominent public faces of the movement. As a passionate speaker with a high-profile social media presence, Saba was at the forefront of the youth movement and has assumed leadership responsibilities over the past year, including as an interlocuter receiving news from Tigray and sharing reports with media outlets.<sup>51</sup>

**Saba:** There was a video going round a couple of months ago of a woman who had been raped by Eritrean soldiers and they had inserted stuff into her private parts. When that video came out, they sent it to me and a couple of people first. This was a couple of days before it came out. I was really traumatised by that. I think that's probably the worst video I've seen. I've seen a lot of the videos of the executions, and really horrible stuff, but I think that that's one of the worst videos I've seen...

You know, there are a lot of implications behind rape. It's not just rape [which] happens one day and it's over, it's something that will stay with you for the rest of your life. And as a woman – I'm a woman myself so I know how I feel ... Because society is really built on Tigrayan woman. The women are the ones that really hold the social structure of Tigray together... the idea of breaking their spirit is literally breaking the heart of the social structure that Tigray has... To feel like these women have been attacked, and not only attacked but left with a scar – a scar so deep, where it's really going to affect not just our generation but the next generation...

For me, I think the more pain I feel, the more passionate and motivated I become to do something about it. I hate just feeling like a victim. That's the worst thing for me to feel. I think the best thing I can do is to give my time.

<sup>51</sup> Interviewer prompt: How are you dealing with the information you receive from Tigray?

That's the best thing I can do. It's who I am. I can do what I can from where I am, and then at least I feel like I'm doing something.

Saba was clear that the exposure to gender-based violence affected her more than exposure to other forms of violence in the war. She identified with the experience of sexual violence as a Tigrayan woman, confirming that attack on one Tigrayan woman was also experienced as an attack on Tigrayan women as a group. Importantly, Saba projected that the legacy of the gender-based violence would leave an indelible mark on the future generations of Tigrayan women, suggesting their identities are bound together and inextricable from this group experience.

Saba's personal motivation was directly linked to her pain in this testimony as she described her mobilisation as a choice to perform resilience and reject narratives of victimhood. In doing so, Saba embodied the narrative concept of Tigrayan female resilience that she admired from previous generations, in turn strengthening the idea of *belonging* as a Tigrayan woman to a community offering physical and emotional labour as war work.

### *Mel's Story*

The final participant included in this study is Mel, a Tigrayan woman in her mid-thirties, born and raised in the United States before moving to Tigray in 2019 to take over the family business. She was in Tigray when the war broke out and, as her words will detail, narrowly escaped sexual violence whilst in detention. Mel's story presents an additional layer to the other participants'; after working as an activist during our interview, she returned to Tigray a few months later to serve as an armed combatant in the TDF. Her words in this testimony provide a unique insight into her mobilisation, connecting the range of gender-based violence she observed in Tigray with her militant action.

Her testimony here begins with her detention by Ethiopian federal forces, during which time she was taken to a former school turned into a military camp. In this camp, Mel was rigorously interrogated but eventually allowed to leave; a grace she puts down to her US citizenship and the fact she had told her captors that her family in the US knew where she was and were expecting her to contact them. When we spoke, she was reconciling her experiences with her life as an activist, struggling to navigate the value of her international voice with the need to help the resistance in Tigray:

**Mel** [speaking of her detention]: I just remember constantly making myself appear fearless. And I'm kind of used to that, I do have a very dominant personality. I'm a business owner, a hustler, I'm used to being in very male dominated areas, so that quality that I have was very present in those moments, and I think it confused them [the soldiers] even, right? I'm sure

they've had interactions with other women who are not [like me] because of their background... But it was so scary, really the scariest time. I knew they could do anything to me right now. I can disappear right here and no one would know where to find me. I had that thought in my head constantly.... I was also the only woman [in the detention camp], and that was really terrifying because I had already been hearing about rape. I really think my American passport had a lot to do with it...

[On her life in the US] I can't stop. I won't stop. I wake every day and think of Tigray before anything else. I work all day until I fall asleep for Tigray, but even then, I often lie awake and I remember. I think of my friends [left behind] and I cry, and then the sun comes up and it is time to start again... I know what I do here is important. The people need a voice. My story, what I saw - it matters that I can be here and tell the world. But it's hard, you know, when I think of the other women who joined up. To be in the mountains with them and serve Tigray...

Mel's account of her time in detention resonated with the idea of cognitive agentival capacity discussed by Saba Mahmood.<sup>52</sup> Mel chose to position herself in a way that presented as 'fearless', closer to the cultural expectation of masculinity in Tigray, and thus protect herself as far as possible against gender-based violence. When the interview ended, we agreed her story could have ended very differently.

Throughout her interview, Mel referenced the gendered violence levied against women in diverse forms:

**Mel:** One of things about this being a genocide is intentionally creating impediments just for us to be able to feed ourselves, and that really starts with burning our crops and turning off the electricity. Because the women feed everyone, you know?... The purpose of turning off the electricity was so that the women wouldn't be able to grind grain to make *injera* to feed [their families]...

The women are travelling with their children [to Sudan as refugees]. So they're vulnerable. Banks are closed, travel stops. Even my small rural village town, people were fleeing to more rural areas. Because you don't know what to do! You don't know where to go. So they went to their town called Bora, and the Eritrean army came there - this is nowhere near Eritrean border. Eritrean army came in and one of them [her friends] was raped, and she was pregnant, and she was only 19 years old. And there's another one, she barely

<sup>52</sup> Saba Mahmood, 'Agency, Performativity, And the Feminist Subject', *Pieties and Gender*, 9 (2009): 11-45.

speaks when I talk to her, she's just always so emotional. I haven't even learned her story yet. And I can only imagine what they'll be saying when they can say something.

Mel articulated poignantly the continuum of gendered violence facing women in war. In Tigray, the inaccessibility of money and safe transport forced women to flee on foot. As many such women had young children, the speed of their movement was limited and their visibility to occupying troops increased; so, too, did the danger of sexual violence.

Mel did not explicitly link her war work with the threat of sexual violence, but it is insightful to take in the gendered colouring of her narrated story. Mel consistently foregrounded the suffering of women and framed her own activism as a service to the female characters she felt she represented on an international stage. Reflecting, then, on her subsequent enlistment as an armed member of the TDF, this testimony is a powerful window into her motivations, layered with the stories of the women and men she witnessed suffering in the war, but firmly positioned alongside the 'other women who joined up', thus situating her participation in the struggle as an explicitly gendered site of resistance.

### **Conclusions and Reflections: Sexual Violence in Post-War Tigray**

For each participant in this study, the relationship between sexual violence and their mobilisation for war work was personal and unique. None of participants can be said to have been mobilised exclusively in response to sexual violence, nor should their relationship with the communal threat of SGBV obscure other complementary motivations, not least the suffering of loved ones, lack of communication and massacre of civilians. Nonetheless, these testimonies as a body lend strong support to the notion that women have identified with the collective threat of sexual violence to Tigrayan women and mobilised directly as a gendered cohort. Aligning with the findings of Kreft, the women in this study connected the relationship between sexual and other forms of violence against women, framing SGBV as a manifestation of gender inequality and the dangers of a pervasive patriarchal culture.<sup>53</sup> Where this research departs from Kreft is in its contention that women's engagement in transnational activism and political work is a manifestation of *war work*. This article evidenced how Tigrayan activists narrated their physical and emotional labour as part of the broader resistance effort, positioning their work as a 'fight' contributing to the militarised aims of the armed Tigray Defence Force. Coming to understand women's transnational non-militant labour as an important domain of civil war in the digital age challenges scholars' existing frameworks for examining gendered conflict participation, reorienting the narrative to encompass the

<sup>53</sup> See Kreft.

emotional experience of those consistently peripheralised in policy, in discourse and in memory.

Foregrounding the diverse, complex experiences of Tigrayan women navigating the realities of life after war is all the more timely and relevant as the region settles into a fragile post-conflict era. But, for women, peace does not necessarily begin with the cessation of armed conflict. Feminist scholars of global history have evidenced the rise of GBV in post-war states through the rise in domestic violence, police violence against women, increased risk of trafficking, exploitation, and vulnerability to poverty and sex work.<sup>54</sup> In Tigray, the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) signed in Pretoria in November 2022 failed to make any provision for the hundreds of thousands of survivors of weaponised SGBV; in fact, the palpable absence of justice proceedings or female-centred reconciliation initiatives has created a permissive environment for further GBV to be perpetrated in post-war Tigray.<sup>55</sup> A report by Physicians for Human Rights and the Organization for Justice and Accountability in the Horn of Africa documented 304 medical records of CRSV in August 2023, nine months *after* the CoHA was signed, including 123 accounts of rape.<sup>56</sup> In the August 2023 Ashenda festival, the annual Tigrayan celebration devoted to womanhood and female joy, Tigrayan woman Zewdu Haftu was brutally, publicly murdered in Mekelle after refusing the sexual advances of an unidentified group of men.<sup>57</sup> A witness to this violence, Zewdu's friend Semhal Gebregziabiher, was arrested by Tigrayan police and held without due cause, where she remains at the time of writing, four months later. In the words of a Tigrayan woman writing about the August violence: 'Trauma begets trauma... Women have been harassed, molested, raped, robbed & killed during Ashenda. When there's no accountability, what do we expect?'.<sup>58</sup> In these words, the continuum of sexual and gendered violence continuing to face Tigrayan women is made painfully clear.

\* All names have been changed to preserve participant anonymity.

<sup>54</sup> Helen Scanlon, 'Militarization, Gender and Transitional Justice in Africa', *Feminist Africa*, 10 (2008): 31-48, 46; R. Istratii, 'War and domestic violence: A rapid scoping of the international literature to understand the relationship and to inform current responses in the Tigray humanitarian crisis' (Working Paper II, 2021); Samantha Bradley, 'Domestic and Family Violence in Post-Conflict Communities', *Health and Human Rights Journal*, 20, 2 (2018): 123-136; J. P. Kaufman et al. *Women, gender equality and post-conflict transformation: Lessons learned, implications for the future* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3; Donna Pankhurst, *Gendered Peace: Women's struggles for post-war justice and reconciliation* (New York, Routledge), 7.

<sup>55</sup> Weitsman.

<sup>56</sup> Organization for Justice and Accountability in the Horn of Africa. 'Report: Broken Promises: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence Before and After Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in Tigray, Ethiopia', *Physicians for Human Rights* (24 August 2023).

<sup>57</sup> Omna Tigray, 'Justice for Zewdu, Protection for Semhal' (September 2023) < [Justice for Zewdu, Protection for Semhal - Omna Tigray](#)>, [accessed 03/11/2023].

<sup>58</sup> Maebel Gebremedhin, writing on X, 25/08/2023.

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Francesca Baldwin is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Exeter. Her doctoral thesis examined women's experiences of armed conflict and peacebuilding in Tigray since 1974

## Abbreviations

CoHA – Cessation of Hostilities Agreement

GBV – gender-based violence

GSTS – Global Society of Tigray Scholars and Professionals

SGBV – sexual and gender-based violence

TDF – Tigray Defence Force

TPLF – Tigray People's Liberation Front

TYN – Tigray Youth Network

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