



Exploring Portrayals of Eritrean Women in Mass Media: A Case Study of *Eritrean Profile* and Its Impact on Gender Roles (1994–2015)

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Abstract

This research investigates the representation of Eritrean women in mass media, with a special focus on the *Eritrean Profile* newspaper from 1994 to 2015. The study explores how media narratives influenced societal perceptions and gender roles during and after Eritrea's armed struggle. It highlights the transition of women's portrayal from marginalization and objectification to empowered roles in politics, economy, and cultural development, particularly under the influence of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) and the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW). Using a qualitative research approach, the study draws on primary data from interviews and secondary data from archival materials, publications, and media reports. The feminist media theory serves as the conceptual framework to analyze gender dynamics, power structures and ideological influence embedded in media representation. The findings suggest that while the *Eritrean Profile* played a progressive role in highlighting women's contributions and promoting gender equality, challenges persist in achieving consistent and nuanced portrayals. The study contributes to the growing discourse on gender and media in post-conflict societies and underscores critical role of state media in national development and gender empowerment.

Keywords: Eritrean women, mass media, *Eritrean Profile*, gender roles, media representation, feminist media theory, EPLF, NUEW, post-conflict society, Eritrea

1. Introduction:

Mass media has long been recognized as a central force in shaping public consciousness, reinforcing or challenging cultural values, and influencing perceptions of gender roles (Sutrisno, 2023). Across the globe, media operates not only as a mirror reflecting societal realities but also as a tool for constructing and redefining identities (Gao et al., 2024). In post-conflict societies, the role of mass media becomes even more critical, serving as an instrument for nation-building, reconciliation, and the promotion of social cohesion (Kuusik, 2010). Eritrea, having emerged from a thirty-year armed struggle for independence in 1991, offers a particularly compelling case for examining the intersection of media representation and gender dynamics (Lyons, 2019). During both the liberation struggle and the formative years of nationhood, Eritrean women assumed transformative roles in political, military, economic, and cultural spheres (Mekonnen & Van Reisen, 2013). They fought alongside men in combat, organized communities, participated in policymaking, and contributed significantly to the reconstruction of a war-torn nation (Hale, 2004).

Despite these contributions, the visibility and portrayal of women in public discourse have remained contested, with their representation often shaped by entrenched cultural stereotypes and patriarchal norms (Müller, 2005). Prior to independence, depictions of women in Eritrean society were frequently limited to roles of domesticity, passivity, or symbolic nationhood (Yazew, 2024). However, the liberation struggle under the ideological guidance of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), actively sought to challenge these narratives, framing women as active agents of revolutionary and societal change (Andemariam, 2022). This shift was reinforced by institutional mechanisms such as the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), which prioritized gender equality and advocated for women's inclusion in national development agendas (Fusari & Venkatanarayanan, 2021).

In the post-independence era, state-controlled media became a primary platform for advancing official narratives of nation-building and gender empowerment (Venturini, 2021). Among these outlets, the *Eritrean Profile* newspaper emerged as a significant source of state-sanctioned discourse, documenting the nation's political, economic, and social transformation (Dorman, 2021). The period between 1994 and 2015, spanning critical phases of Eritrea's development, provides a rich timeframe for analyzing how women were represented and the extent to which these portrayals aligned with or diverged from progressive gender ideals (Lwamba et al., 2022). While global scholarship on feminist media theory has extensively examined gendered representations in diverse contexts, empirical studies focusing on Eritrea remain scarce. Existing literature on Eritrean women tends to prioritize their participation in the liberation struggle or their post-conflict socio-economic roles, with limited attention to the role of media in shaping these narratives (Wilson, 2022; Ahmed & Rukema 2023). This gap necessitates a closer examination of how the *Eritrean Profile* as both a state-controlled platform and a historical record constructed and disseminated images of Eritrean womanhood.

This study therefore seeks to explore two interrelated questions: first, whether media portrayals in the *Eritrean Profile* between 1994 and 2015 challenged traditional gender stereotypes or reproduced them; and second, how these portrayals influenced societal perceptions of women's roles in politics, the economy, and cultural life. Employing feminist media theory as its conceptual framework, the research integrates qualitative

methodologies, including archival analysis of newspaper content and semi-structured interviews with key informants. By situating media representation within the broader socio-political context of post-conflict Eritrea, this study contributes to the global discourse on gender, media, and nation-building, offering nuanced insights into the transformative and at times contradictory potential of state media in advancing gender equity.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative research design underpinned by an interpretivist epistemological orientation to examine the representation of Eritrean women in mass media, with a specific focus on the *Eritrean Profile* newspaper during the period 1994–2015. The qualitative approach is well-suited to the research objectives, which seek to interpret meanings, perceptions, and symbolic portrayals embedded in media discourse. Such a design facilitates an in-depth exploration of how representations are constructed, contested, and perceived, as well as their broader social implications within a post-conflict context.

2.2 Theoretical framework

The analysis is informed by Feminist Media Theory, which critically examines how gender ideologies are embedded in media content, production practices, and institutional structures. This theoretical lens allows for interrogation of the extent to which portrayals of women reinforce patriarchal norms or challenge and subvert them. It also provides a foundation for situating media narratives within broader socio-political processes of gender construction and transformation in post-independence Eritrea.

2.3 Data collection methods

A multi-method approach was adopted to ensure triangulation and enhance the depth and credibility of findings. Data were collected from three primary sources: archival materials, semi-structured interviews, and secondary literature.

2.4 Archival content analysis

A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select *Eritrean Profile* issues published between 1994 and 2015. Items that directly addressed women's roles, achievements, and participation in public life, including articles, photographs, editorials, and feature stories were identified. These materials were systematically analyzed to detect dominant themes, symbolic framings, and temporal shifts in women's representation.

2.5 semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the archival analysis and provide contextual understanding of media practices and perceptions. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling based on their direct engagement with media production or gender advocacy. The sample included:

- Former female freedom fighters who participated in post-independence media initiatives,
- Female journalists and editors affiliated with *Eritrean Profile* or other national media outlets,
- Media scholars and gender advocates based in Eritrea.

Interviews followed a flexible guide of open-ended questions, allowing respondents to elaborate on experiences, perspectives, and interpretations of women's media portrayal.

2.6. Secondary sources

Secondary data were integrated to enhance contextual depth and historical grounding. These included:

- Academic scholarship on media, gender, and Eritrean socio-political history,
- Government reports and policy documents from the Ministry of Information and the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW),
- Archival records, public speeches, and policy statements relevant to women's representation.

2.7 Data analysis

All data, archival materials, interview transcripts, and secondary sources were subjected to thematic analysis. Coding combined inductive and deductive approaches: inductive coding allowed themes to emerge organically from the data, while deductive coding was guided by the principles of Feminist Media Theory. Attention was given to recurrent motifs, shifts in narrative framing, and the ideological underpinnings of media portrayals over the study period.

2.8 Ethical considerations

Ethical protocols were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. All participants received clear information about the study's purpose and scope, and written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, particularly for participants currently employed in governmental institutions. All archival and secondary sources were appropriately cited to uphold academic integrity.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Media representation trends (1994–2015)

A longitudinal analysis of *Eritrean Profile* issues published between 1994 and 2015 reveals three distinct phases in the portrayal of Eritrean women, each shaped by evolving national priorities, political climate, and socio-economic transformations (Table 1). The trends indicate a gradual shift in the narrative—from revolutionary heroism during the immediate post-independence years, to a focus on domesticity and societal stability in the early 2000s, and finally to a broader portrayal of professional and entrepreneurial achievement in the later decade. In the first phase (1994–1999), the media celebrated women primarily as former fighters and nation-builders, reflecting the state's emphasis on unity, sacrifice, and reconstruction. Women were framed as political pioneers whose wartime contributions legitimized their active participation in governance and public life. In the second phase (2000–2005), coverage pivoted toward women's domestic and caregiving roles, alongside emerging discussions on legal rights and diplomatic engagement. This shift coincided with efforts to consolidate social stability, suggesting a partial re-domestication of the female image even as new professional and international opportunities emerged.

Table 1. Timeline showing frequency of women-related articles per year in *Eritrean profile* (1994–2015).

Period	Thematic Focus	Dominant Representation
1994–1999	Post-war reconstruction, empowerment campaigns	Women as nation builders, ex-fighters, political pioneers
2000–2005	Domestic roles, legal rights, international diplomacy	Women as caregivers, emerging diplomats, legal reformers
2006–2015	Professional success, cultural representation, environmental awareness	Women as entrepreneurs, educators, cultural icons

By the third phase (2006–2015), representation diversified to include women as entrepreneurs, educators, and cultural icons, reflecting broader socio-economic developments and the gradual opening of professional sectors to women. Environmental awareness campaigns also featured prominently, positioning women as community advocates for sustainability. These trends indicate a gradual narrative evolution from revolutionary heroism to domestication, and later to professional and entrepreneurial empowerment though each phase carried both progressive and regressive elements.

3.2 Women as nation builders (1994–1999)

In the immediate aftermath of independence, *Eritrean Profile* placed significant emphasis on women's contributions during the armed struggle, framing them as central to the nation's reconstruction and governance. Articles such as “*Speak Out for Women*” (December 1994) and leadership profiles of NUEW figures underscored both the symbolic and practical significance of women in post-war state-building.

“We were not only fighters; we were planners, nurses, and teachers in the field. After independence, we wanted to be seen as leaders, not just survivors.” - Interviewee, Female ex-fighter and NUEW member

This representation aligns with Feminist Media Theory, illustrating how media, when aligned with political will and grassroots mobilization can challenge patriarchal assumptions and promote alternative gender narratives. Table 2 condenses the numerous detailed narratives from 1994–1999,

Table 2: Women as Nation Builders (1994–1999) based on the scanned content:

Year / Date	Article Title / Source	Theme / Focus	Representation of Women
Dec 3, 1994	<i>Speak Out for Women</i>	Participation in African regional women's conference (Senegal)	Women as political representatives and advocates for empowerment through NUEW leadership
Nov 12, 1994	<i>Shushan Band Women Group</i>	Cultural diplomacy and gender equality	All-female music group breaking stereotypes, showcasing Eritrean culture internationally
Mar 1995	<i>Helping Demobilized Women Combatants Help Themselves</i>	Economic reintegration of ex-fighters	Women as self-reliant entrepreneurs in agriculture and handicrafts
Apr 1, 1995	<i>Heroism of Mothers</i>	Wartime and post-war resilience	Women as moral pillars, mobilizers, and community protectors
Mar 9, 1995	<i>Developing Feminine Capacities and Virtues</i>	Gender equality awareness	Women as equal contributors in all sectors, challenging old notions of inferiority
Mar 23, 1996	<i>Developing Feminine Capacities and Virtues</i>	Historical roles of women	Encouraging women's social, economic, and political engagement
Apr 13, 1996	<i>Legend of Wuba Ferede</i>	Cultural heritage and women's agency	Women as symbols of beauty, strength, and influence
Mar 18, 1995	<i>A Nine-Year-Old Woman</i>	Marriage reform	Advocacy against underage marriage
Apr 1, 1995	<i>Proving Virginity in Kunama Culture</i>	Challenging harmful traditions	Exposing and questioning virginity-based bride price
May 18, 1996	<i>Women in Business Statistics</i>	Economic participation	Women as entrepreneurs in diverse sectors despite dual domestic responsibilities

Sep 7, 1996	<i>A Red Flower in Full Bloom</i>	Arts and performance	Female artists as cultural ambassadors
Mar 14, 1998	<i>Eritrean Women Reaffirm Role in Nation Building</i>	Women's congress and policy goals	Women as active players in governance, rights advocacy, and social justice
Apr 18, 1998	<i>Women's Role in Environmental Protection Positively Assessed</i>	Environmental activism	Women as key actors in conservation efforts
Nov 28, 1998	<i>Culture and Arts Features</i>	Music and unity	Women artists promoting national unity through cultural expression
Dec 26, 1998	<i>Fawzia Hashim's Diplomatic Visit</i>	International cooperation	Women as diplomats and legal reformers
Mar 13, 1999	<i>Endurance of Women in Childbirth</i>	Health and resilience	Women portrayed as stronger than men in enduring life's hardships

3.3 Transition to domesticization and professional roles (2000–2005)

The early 2000s marked a discursive shift, with portrayals increasingly positioning women in domestic, symbolic, or culturally moralistic roles. Celebrations of women's resilience coexisted with subtle re-domestication, casting women as “mothers of the nation” or “moral guardians” rather than as political actors (Table 3).

Table 3. Sample portrayals and implied narratives (2000–2005)

Article title	Portrayed role	Implied narrative
<i>A perennial monument for the eritrean mother</i> (2001)	Idealized mother figure	Motherhood equated with nationhood
<i>Building a vivid society</i> (2000)	Teacher and cultural bearer	Women as custodians of morality and cultural preservation

While notable achievements in diplomacy and law were highlighted, such as the appointments of Ambassador Hanna Simon and Minister Fawzia Hashim the framing often reinforced essentialist views that women's societal value derived from their nurturing or cultural roles.

3.4 Women's empowerment through legal and educational reform

Throughout the study period, *Eritrean Profile* documented significant legislative reforms and educational campaigns initiated by NUEW and the Ministry of Information. Coverage included bans on early marriage, advocacy for equal pay, and women's land rights.

"The media played a critical role in disseminating these legal changes. But implementation still lags in rural areas." - Interviewee, Female journalist

Despite progressive coverage, interviews revealed a gap between policy representation and grassroots realities. Media centralization and literacy barriers limited awareness of rights among rural women, highlighting a disconnect between national rhetoric and lived experience.

3.5 Portrayals of professional and entrepreneurial women (2006–2015)

From 2006 onwards, portrayals shifted toward celebrating women's professional, artistic, and entrepreneurial achievements (Table 4). Coverage increasingly featured women as musicians, designers, environmental advocates, and business leaders, signalling a gradual broadening of acceptable female identities in public life.

Table 4. Sample coverage frequencies of women in professional sectors (2006–2015)

Profession	Number of articles (Sample)
Entrepreneurs	12
Environmentalists	8
Musicians/Artists	14
Diplomats/Ministers	9

These portrayals suggest a slow ideological shift in state media framing from symbolic national figures to active contributors to economic growth and cultural innovation thus offering aspirational models for younger generations.

3.6 Media limitations and state control

Despite its progressive elements, *Eritrean Profile* remains constrained by its function as a state-owned outlet. Editorial content is shaped by nationalistic rhetoric, often omitting coverage of contentious issues such as gender-based violence, rural inequities, or dissent against government policies.

"There are things we couldn't publish like early marriage cases or harassment—because it was seen as tarnishing the image of progress." - Interviewee, Former Eritrean Profile editor

This selective empowerment underscores the paradox of state media in authoritarian settings: while it can amplify gender equality narratives, it also circumscribes them to align with state ideology.

3.7 Media as a tool for gender transformation

The findings confirm that *Eritrean Profile* has functioned both as a mirror reflecting evolving societal attitudes toward women and as a moulder actively shaping gender discourse within the framework of state nationalism. Through the lens of Feminist Media Theory, three key insights emerge:

1. Media representation is inherently ideological, reflecting power relations rather than offering neutral accounts.
2. State media in post-conflict Eritrea reframed women's identities, shifting them from revolutionary fighters to national icons, and later to professionals while maintaining underlying traditional expectations.
3. Sustainable gender transformation requires diversified media ecosystems, enabling decentralized, community-based, and independent platforms to voice grassroots realities, dissent, and nuanced narratives.

Overall, *Eritrean Profile* contributed to advancing gender visibility in Eritrea but remains emblematic of the limitations faced when representation is mediated by centralized, state-controlled institutions.

4. Recommendations

This study found that *Eritrean Profile* has played a dual role in shaping gender discourse initially portraying women as active agents in national development, later shifting toward more traditional representations. While it normalized women's public presence and offered positive role models, coverage often avoided systemic critique due to state-controlled media structures. To foster transformative and inclusive representation, the following measures are recommended:

1. *Diversify media voices* – Promote independent and community media to include marginalized and rural women's perspectives.
2. *Adopt gender-sensitive journalism* – Integrate gender training in journalism, challenge stereotypes, and critically address issues such as violence, discrimination, and pay gaps.
3. *Strengthen legal and policy frameworks* – Enforce protections for women's rights and ensure media aligns with national and global gender equality commitments.
4. *Expand media literacy and access* – Provide rural women and girls with media literacy programs and multilingual, low-cost access platforms.
5. *Support research and monitoring* – Encourage continuous study and establish observatories to track gender representation trends.

A pluralistic, gender-aware media landscape is essential for moving beyond symbolic portrayals toward authentic, equitable representation that supports inclusive national development.

5. Summary and conclusion

This study examined the portrayal of women in *Eritrean Profile* over a defined period, applying feminist media theory as the guiding analytical lens. Using archival review, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data, it employed thematic analysis to trace shifts in representation from the post-independence era to the present. Findings indicate that *Eritrean Profile* initially foregrounded women as active participants in nation-building, reflecting the legacy of their involvement in the liberation struggle. However, over time, coverage tended to revert to more traditional gender narratives, with reduced visibility of women in decision-making roles and limited critical engagement with systemic gender inequalities. Positive role models were present but often framed within state-sanctioned ideals, suggesting that media content functioned as both a site of empowerment and an instrument of ideological reinforcement.

The analysis underscores the complex interplay between media policy, political context, and gender representation in post-conflict societies. It demonstrates that while state media can contribute to normalizing women's presence in public life, sustained progress toward gender equality in media requires pluralism, critical discourse, and the inclusion of diverse female voices from across social strata. In conclusion, the portrayal of women in *Eritrean Profile* reflects broader socio-political currents in Eritrea, revealing the tension between progressive imagery and entrenched patriarchal norms. Strengthening gender-sensitive journalism, fostering independent media platforms and enhancing media literacy among women are pivotal steps toward achieving equitable representation. These measures will not only enrich media narratives but also contribute to advancing national goals of inclusivity and social justice.

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M.Venkatachalapathy: Conceptualization, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration, Investigation, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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