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‘When the war stopped, a new one started on women.’



Earlier this year, hundreds of women took to the streets of the northern Tigrayan city of Mekelle to protest the growing violence women are facing across the region – two years after the end of the civil war.

The spark was the murder in March of 16-year-old Mahlet Teklay, who was kidnapped and then killed in the city after her abductors didn't get the ransom they had demanded – a victim of the [epidemic of kidnappings](#) Ethiopia is struggling with.

Birhan Gebrekirstos, an activist and lecturer at Mekelle University, said Mahlet's killing was the final straw that triggered the women's march. Placards and flags in hand, the demonstrators converged on the headquarters of the regional government demanding protection and justice.

Among them were women former fighters of the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). One placard read: "We chased the enemy; we won't be killed now by our brothers".

Protesters also carried photographs of Zewdu Haftu, who was [bundled into a car](#) in broad daylight in August last year and then killed. Her death took the toll of women

murdered in the city over the previous year to 12, with 80 reported cases of rape, according to the region's police commissioner.

"After all that women have endured during the war, we no longer have the capacity to take any more," Birhan told The New Humanitarian. "I think this is what drove the protest."

'Being raped by one person is starting to be perceived as trivial'

"When the war stopped, a new one started on women," said Birhan. "We have heard repeated stories about women being gang raped; being raped by one person is starting to be perceived as trivial. The indication is that, as a community, we're getting used to these stories – it's scary."

Violence has always been a fact of life for many women in what is a highly patriarchal society, where issues of gender discrimination and sexual violence [are often minimised](#). But during the war, rape became almost standardised, used deliberately to terrorise.

Sexual violence in Tigray was conducted by both federal forces and their Eritrean allies. The purpose was to inflict "lasting physical and psychological damage on women and girls in Tigray", according to a report by [Amnesty International](#).

"On top of their suffering and trauma, survivors have been left without adequate support," the report noted. "They must be able to access the services they need and are entitled to – including medical treatment, livelihood assistance, mental healthcare and psychosocial support – which are essential aspects of a survivor-centred response."

The TPLF also committed atrocities against women during their occupation of parts of neighbouring Amhara. In addition to [gang rapes](#) – and rapes in front of their victims' children – TPLF soldiers inflicted beatings and torture.

Multiple conflicts, multiple abuses

Violence against women continues to be a feature of [several other conflicts](#) currently underway in Ethiopia. In Amhara, the government has been battling a year-old insurgency, with the country's [rights body](#) warning there is evidence of "sexual and gender-based violence perpetrated by government security forces".

With so many conflict areas unsafe and off-limits to monitoring, rights groups struggle to relay fully the extent of the violence being done to women.

“It’s very hard to do first hand documentation in the Amhara region,” explained Rigbe Gebrehawaria, the federal commissioner for the rights of women, children, older persons, and people with disabilities. “The population and the needs are not in line with our capacity and what we are able to do.”

But she is certain that the trend of violence against women is worsening “as conflicts gain momentum” – even though most cases go unreported.

Women can be double victims. An entrenched cultural idea of a woman’s “purity” often stigmatises survivors – forcing them into silence. They are left alone to bear the burden of what they have been forced to endure as communities become desensitised to the horror.

Women’s rights are being eroded in more indirect ways. Traditional practices like female genital mutilation (a criminal act) are reestablishing themselves in parts of the country as government attention shifts, and as its authority wanes.

Early marriages are also on the rise in conflict and drought-hit areas as hungry families – forced to make difficult economic decisions – increasingly choose to withdraw their girl children from school.

In the [Oromia region](#) of Guji, where another anti-government insurgency has caused serious rights violations, some families force women to marry their rapist who also provide financial reparations – a socially acceptable way for the perpetrator to pay for his crime.

Speaking out

Isolated by their community when they do speak out about what happened to them, some sexual violence survivors have chosen to leave their hometowns and relocate to where they cannot be recognised.

Yet despite the harsh consequences they face in sharing their stories, women have become more outspoken about the violence they have experienced, said Maria Yusuf, who runs women’s shelters across the country.

“The violence women face used to be kept as a family secret,” she explained, “but I’ve seen this changing over the years.”

Her NGO, the Association for Women's Sanctuary and Development, has been creating safe spaces for women for the past two decades. When the Tigray war broke out in 2021, the association opened two temporary shelters in the border towns of Weldiya and Kobo in northeastern Amhara.

“It’s important to document women’s stories from the recent conflicts before their trauma gets buried by further trauma, as these conflicts expand.”

Sehin Teferra, runs Setaweet, a feminist organisation

“We were not able to go into the region, so we set up camp in a place where we would reach those that were escaping,” said Maria. “We help women and children who had survived – who had survived gang rape and other unspeakable acts.”

They worked through women in the community as a bridge to reach survivors, who, fearing the stigma, were wary of acknowledging what had happened.

Some organisations are taking aim at that culture of silence that further victimises women in the name of family “honour”.

Setaweet, a feminist organisation, has made the documentary Misikir – the Amharic word for witness – to capture the stories of sexual violence survivors in Afar, Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Tigray – regions that have all experienced conflict.

“It’s important to document women’s stories from the recent conflicts before their trauma gets buried by further trauma, as these conflicts expand,” Sehin Teferra, who runs Setaweet, told The New Humanitarian.

Truth, told transparently, will be key to more authentic and meaningful peace settlements when the wars finally end, she said.

Laws are not enough

The widespread cases of gender-based violence in Ethiopia are not for the lack of legal frameworks supposed to protect women.

Ethiopia has ratified international legal instruments like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, better known as the Maputo Protocol.

But without a consolidated law against gender-based violence, and due to other gaps within the scattered protections – the Ethiopian criminal code for instance doesn’t recognise marital rape – many offenders escape serious penalties.

Women who report their cases can even be ridiculed.

“One women in our network was told she should consider herself lucky by a police after she reported a rape case,” said Fikirte Shumet, a project manager at the Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association.

The first step in tackling gender-based violence is recognising the pain women have to deal with and the knock-on-effects this has on families and our society, said Birhan.

“Rape is seen as any other crime here, but there needs to be laws that clearly differentiate the varied forms of violence women are facing,” she noted.

“We need to also work on empowering women – there are many women who don’t know their rights – especially in rural areas. Women need to understand that they have rights so they can fight for them,” Birhan said.

Edited by Obi Anyadike.