“We fought as fighters, not as women”: women’s participation in ethnonational armed groups in Ethiopia

Hilina Berhanu Degefa

NOVEMBER 2025

UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

XCEPT
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

Lead researcher: Hilina Berhanu Degefa

Design: Hilina Berhanu Degefa, Deddeaw Laosinchai

Suggested citation: H.B. Degefa. *"We fought as fighters, not as women": women's participation in ethnonational armed groups in Ethiopia*. London: XCEPT, 2025: Online.

This research was completed as part of the Women Researchers Fellowship, an initiative of the X-Border Local Research Network component of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends programme (XCEPT). The fellowship consisted of a 12-month programme to support early-career professional researchers to build their skills and networks, in a field that often has limited opportunities for female researchers. Fellows undertook original, primary research into issues and dynamics in conflict-affected border areas of Asia, the Middle East and Africa. In addition to a research grant, the Women Researchers Fellowship includes skills training and capacity development activities, networking opportunities, and peer learning and mentoring with experienced researchers working with the X-Border Local Research Network.

XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. Through XCEPT, the X-Border Local Research Network (LRN) engages experts on the ground to build data, evidence and analysis that reflects the local experiences of fragility and conflict. The LRN is a partnership between The Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, the Rift Valley Institute and their local research partners.

XCEPT is funded by UK International Development. The views and opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of XCEPT partner organisations or the UK government.

For more information on XCEPT visit www.xcept-research.org

About the author

Hilina Berhanu Degefa is a 2024 XCEPT Women's Research Fellow, building expertise in the study of women and insurgency in conflicts across the Horn of Africa. Drawing from the well of both Pan-Africanist and radical feminist thought, she sees her research contributing to the broader effort to hold space for African voices in shaping African peace and security scholarship. She can be reached at: bhilina.degefa@gmail.com.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the women who were open to this research engagement—who, in their own words, are 'the shoulders, the brains, the eyes [among other parts] on which [ethnonational] groups write stories of revolution and resistance.' Research for this report has been made possible by the FCDO's XCEPT research fund through The Asia Foundation's Women Research Fellows Programme, for which I am grateful. I would also like to express my gratitude to the X-Border Local Research Network, and Rift Valley Institute for creating opportunities for in-person research-community engagement and for providing logistical support throughout my field work. I am especially grateful to Hannah Stogdon and Tabea Campbell for their support and availability throughout this research process. Huge thanks to The Asia Foundation staff, especially Nicole, for investing in the fellowship leadership track. To the all-women fellowship cohort and to Naruemol Tuenpakdee of TAF—thank you for creating a space of support and research sanctuary. I presented my initial findings at two XCEPT-funded events: the Gender, Global Security and Cross-Border Conflict Trends workshop at Pembroke College, University of Oxford; and the XCEPT Final Learning and Project Review workshop in Naivasha, Kenya, both held in February 2025. These engagements not only acknowledged but also, to some extent, shaped the feminist analysis I brought to this report, for which I am grateful. I am also thankful to the many friends and colleagues who read and commented on sections of this report in its various iterations since the first complete draft in April 2025, whose thoughtful feedback has been invaluable to its present form.

Originality

Some strands of this report are scheduled for publication as academic articles, one on feminist approaches to borderlands and another addressing fieldwork and the experience of researching armed groups as a (Southern) woman researcher. These contributions are intended to provide both methodological and conceptual feminist insights into the study of borderlands and peace and security, framed through a decolonial lens. This report also builds upon my prior publication on 'Gender and Extremism in Ethiopia' (2021), and some ideas have crossed over from that work to this with appropriate citation credits.

Sketch design

All infographics in this report are created by the author using Adobe Illustrator software.

Table of Contents

About the author **i**

Acknowledgments i

Originality i

Sketch design i

List of abbreviations **1**

Executive summary **2**

Key findings 2

Introduction **4**

Study design and methodology **5**

What is feminist about this research? 5

Methodology 6

Which woman counts as a fighter? 10

What this study adds 11

What is next for future research? 11

Background and context of insurgencies **11**

Geographical scope of the research 11

The politics of naming 12

A brief background of the armed groups 13

Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) 14

Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) 14

Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) 15

Findings **16**

If the violence crosses borders, so must women 16

'I joined because . . .' 21

‘I see my role as . . .’ 24

Fighters first, women later—then women first and fighters no more 28

Conclusion **33**

Key policy considerations 33

For states where ethnonational armed group mobilisation occurs: 33

For supporters and funders of peace processes: 34

For ethnonational non-state armed groups in transition: 35

References **36**

Online sources 37

List of abbreviations

DDR – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

ENDF – Ethiopian National Defense Force

EPRDF – Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

OLA – Oromo Liberation Army

ONLF – Ogaden National Liberation Front

TDF – Tigray Defense Forces

TPLF – Tigray People's Liberation Front

Executive summary

This report examines women's participation in non-state armed organising in Ethiopia, focusing on the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), Tigray Defense Forces (TDF), and Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), highlighting their ethnonational armed mobilisation across transnational and internal borders. Based on over 60 interviews—nearly 75% with women, including former fighters and mobilisers, community members living along transnational and internal borders, and security experts—the report documents women's experiences as active ethnonational political actors. Using feminist research methods and analysis, it examines the motivations driving women's participation, how they perceive and articulate their roles, and the gendered ways in which they navigate cross-border ethnonational armed organising. While mobilisation strategies vary across these groups, the report establishes that women's participation is neither a unique, isolated phenomenon nor simply an extension of men's engagement. It is rather shaped by both shared socio-political considerations as well as distinct gendered experiences. By analysing these dynamics, the report aims to inform political processes such as the Ethiopian national dialogue initiative and the ongoing disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) efforts, which have often dis-and un-counted women's involvement. Although the three armed groups have differing percolation and histories of armed mobilisation, the analysis reveals shared patterns of women's engagement in ethnonational conflicts and cross-border politico-military activities in Ethiopia and its bordering communities. The report concludes with targeted policy considerations for national and regional actors and international supporters of peace processes.

Key findings

- **Women's participation in ethnonational armed mobilisation is both politically informed and gendered.** Their political motivations often reflect broader community concerns, including the securitisation of identities and political and economic marginalisation. They are also shaped by gender-specific drivers, such as state-perpetrated violence against women, including the targeting of their livelihoods. Historical grievances and early exposure to ethnonationalist political platforming within families and communities also sharpen this engagement.

- **Borders, both transnational and internal, function as operational zones for armed mobilisation.** Often, women more easily navigate cross-border ethnic and clan ties, market networks, and gender stereotypes to move between spaces and even bypass security surveillance. Armed groups leverage this mobility and perception—not only to transport armed logistics but also to soften the public image of their operations. In some cases, women's participation in these armed groups has been used to ease community resistance during incursions into areas labelled as 'enemy territories', as women are commonly perceived as less hostile.

- **Ethnonational armed movements frequently flatten and subsume gendered identities, particularly those of women, into broader nationalist agendas.** For many women who join these movements, freedom is framed as liberation from an 'outsider', often the state. As such, advocating for a separate women's agenda is treated as a betrayal of the collective cause. These dynamics silence women's political claims and often prevent (any) latent gender equality built during armed resistance from carrying over into the post-conflict period. In the rare exceptions when it does, it only benefits a select few, who are assigned a liminal, third-

gender-like role described as ‘she is not one woman, she is four,’ or ‘she is like a man.’ In many cases, the deferred promise to address ‘women’s issue(s) later’, results in their exclusion from both post-conflict nationalist political order and broader peacebuilding arrangements.

- **Peacemaking efforts by local, regional, and international actors often reinforce traditional gender views, where women involved in armed groups are rarely included (and remembered).** In peace processes and negotiations, men from non-state armed groups are consistently present, and when there is consideration to include women, these men are often paired with civilian women, usually from civil society organisations or intergovernmental bodies. Such practices disregard the political contributions of women who participated in non-state armed groups. The emergence of organisations led by former women fighters across the studied groups reflects a growing effort to challenge this exclusion in peace negotiations and post-conflict political arrangements.

- **Ethnonational political analysis, including on cross-border dynamics, is often articulated and dominated by male expertise.** Women’s analytical perspectives, whether as policy and government experts or as ethnonational actors in their direct or distant membership, are rarely sought and even more rarely included in policy analysis.

Introduction

Ethnic and ethnonational identities have long shaped political organising in Ethiopia, influencing both formal electoral processes and other modes of engagement in the distribution and contestation of power structures.[1] Ethnonational mobilisations—characterised by a strong sense of national and political identification, whether organised along ethnic, religious, or regional political identifications—tend to flatten and camouflage internal divisions, including gender hierarchies.[2] Consequently, although women have active ongoing contributions in ethnonational political organising and conflicts in Ethiopia, their engagement remains largely unexplored.[3] This report seeks to address this gap by examining women's participation in ethnonational non-state armed groups belonging to the Oromo, Somali, and Tigray communities—namely, OLA, ONLF, and TDF.[4]

The report engages women's contributions as consenting actors in armed groups, as understood and articulated by the women themselves. At the same time, the analysis recognises that participation is rarely fixed—particularly for women—often shifting along 'voluntary-involuntary continuum' and shaped by gendered and intersectional power structures.[5] Given the asymmetric nature of most ethnonational armed conflicts, which often blend elements of inter-communal violence, secessionist

[1] Martha K Kumsa, 'Oromo Women and the Oromo National Movement: Dilemmas, Problems and Prospects for True Liberation' in Asafa Jalata (ed), *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy*, p.155; Aregawi Berhe, 'The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front' (2004) 103 (413) *African Affairs*, p. 573.

[2] Rick Wilford, 'Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Surveying the Ground' in Rick Wilford (ed), *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Routledge 2004), p.15; Interview with a peace and security policy analyst (man), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[3] While the term 'women' in this report refers to biological females as perceived by their societies and the armed groups they participate in, the analysis employs a gendered (as analytical category) and intersectional power lens to make sense of their socio-political positioning. See also: UN General Assembly, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism*, A/64/211 (3 August 2009), para. 20.

[4] The three groups comprise roughly around 60 million of Ethiopia's total population of 116 million, with women comprising more than half (51%) of this figure. See: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ethiopia/ last accessed 11 July 2024. This report focuses on three groups (OLA, TDF & ONLF) because of their clear cross-border ethnonational dimensions and the organised and publicly promoted participation of women in their struggles. The ONLF's trajectory of women fighters, in particular, offers important lessons for DDR programming and implementation—a policy perspective this research seeks to inform. Fano groups and Gambella Liberation Front were also considered; however, the limited presence and public visibility of women in these groups, along with their nascent organising compared to the three, meant that adequate information was not available for analysis.

[5] Keshab Giri, 'Do all Women Combatants Experience War and Peace Uniformly? Intersectionality and Women Combatants' (2021) 1 (2) *Global Studies Quarterly*, p.3.

or territorial wars, and enclave 'bush' operations, women's participation is not incidental.[6] It represents a strategic choice, both for the women involved and for the armed groups that rely on them for survival and broad-based legitimacy. Understanding their motivations is therefore imperative to shaping effective ethnonational and border governance policies, including in contexts where armed conflict spills across internal and transnational borders. It also has direct implications for ongoing and future peace processes, including disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and transitional justice (TJ)—domains in which women from these armed groups remain chronically invisible.

This report proceeds as follows. The first section discusses feminist methods and methodologies used in the research. This is followed by a background section that contextualises the organising nature of each armed group without covering detailed histories, which fall beyond the scope of the report. By situating each group's identity formation, the report acknowledges that the trajectories of some armed organisations may be deeply rooted in long-standing struggles rather than in newer, reactionary formations—or may exhibit elements of both. Following this contextual grounding, the report presents its findings through a feminist peace and security lens, addressing three core research questions: (1) What attracts and incentivises women's participation in ethnonational non-state armed groups? (2) How do these women perceive and articulate their roles, agency, and contributions? (3) How do women navigate transnational and internal borders to facilitate armed organising? It closes with conclusions and policy considerations. The report embraces incompleteness both in its inquiry and conclusions, inviting further feminist explorations of the interplay between ethnonationality, womanhood, gender, and borders.[7]

Study design and methodology

What is feminist about this research?

Research is inherently political. Feminist research, in particular, is honest about the political nature of its work, as it sets out to challenge and make visible existing power structures through the research process itself.[8] Therefore, alongside other admissions you will encounter in this report, I did not present this research to participants as a 'neutral information-gathering exercise.'[9] With informed consent and continual feminist commitment to do no harm, I honestly communicated the political and policy nature of the output, its anticipated policy (and power-adjacent) audience, including the identity of its funders.

[6] Zoe Marks, 'Gender Dynamics in Rebel Groups' in Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward (eds), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), pp.437 & 442.

[7] Herman Wasserman, 'The Incompleteness of Knowledge Production: An Interview with Francis Nyamnjoh' (2022) 43 (3) *African Journalism Studies*, p.7.

[8] Maureen C McHugh, 'Feminist Qualitative Research: Working Toward Transforming Science and Social Justice' in Patricia Leavy (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd edn, OUP 2020), p.213.

[9] Audrey Macklin, 'Like Oil and Water, with a Match: Militarized Commerce, Armed Conflict and Human Security in Sudan' in Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (eds), *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* (University of California Press 2004), p.79.

Part of the feminist lens I carried into this research was an awareness of my positionality and how identities, including my own, are continually constructed. My identity—as an Ethiopian, as a woman, as someone shaped by class, education, ethnicity, and parental lineage (whether assumed by others or self-disclosed)—was constantly negotiated in the spaces I entered. For example, returning to regions where I had previously lived, worked, and have kinship ties (Oromia, Tigray) often positioned me as an 'insider', yet I was also treated as an 'outsider' depending on how I spoke of armed organising and violence.[10] As a former fighter once labelled me, I am a 'pacifist by (my) privilege' (and, in my defence, by my feminism). Nothing about my identity was fixed—not even my identity as a woman researcher. My gender (social) coding shifted depending on how much was known about me, how I moved through spaces, how I dressed, and which affiliations and credentials I presented.[11] At times, I was treated 'as a man' because of my gallivanting, free-to-travel way of moving and doing research. At other times, I was feminised—or I myself made 'split-second decisions to retreat into traditional "femininity"' when my safety required it.[12]

Moreover, my analysis of gender and gender structures in this report is not simply collapsed into a binary of women and men but also includes the nuances and differences among them. For instance, during field research in Tigray, a group of women fighters confronted a class issue that intersects with their gender—pointing out that they had observed and stopped by more funeral tents (ዓዲ, paying respect to what they called 'martyrs') set up along roads in poor, rural neighbourhoods more than in wealthier areas. This observation was quickly followed by an epiphany that many of their comrades came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, perhaps even true of the women from 'the enemy (side)' whom they had fought against.[13] In asking these questions and other similar ones, a feminist lens is actively woven into every stage of this research—from the framing of research questions, selection of people and sites to maintaining and negotiating the interviewee relationships, to the ethical approaches used during fieldwork, and the feminist scholarship guiding the analysis.

Methodology

The research centres the articulations and perspectives of women in armed groups and security institutions. Six target categories of individuals were identified for interview: 1) women (former)

[10] Here, my methodological choices, including ethics of engagement were informed by how the women themselves articulated their contradictory position—claiming space as agents of resistance and violence, while also disclosing their victimisation within broader society and even in their specific armed groups.

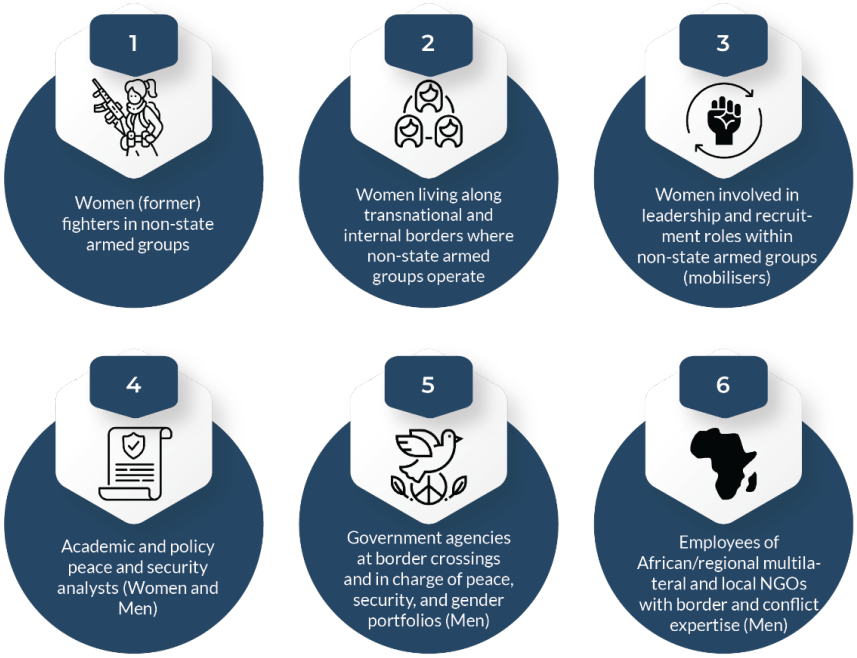
[11] For a discussion on how women researchers navigate local perceptions and power dynamics while conducting fieldwork in conflict-affected contexts, see: Zoe Marks in Peter Krause and Ora Szekely (eds), 'Conducting Research Amidst Conflict with Zoe Marks and Will Reno' (Stories from the Field podcast, 23 February 2021) https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/conducting-research-amidst-conflict-with-zoe-marks/id1550505169?i=1000510363538 last accessed 6 April 2025.

[12] Lori Handrahan, 'Conflict, Gender, Ethnicity and Post-conflict Reconstruction' (2004) 35 (4) *Security Dialogue*, p. 429.

[13] A group interview with three TDF former fighters (women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025; This class analysis about those who fight in the frontlines and those who do not is also noted by a former TDF fighter in his recent personal testimonial article, Serbi Netsanet, 'A Personal Testimony from a Combatant in the Tigrayan Defense Forces' (2024) 173(1) *Politique Africaine*, pp.38 & 48. This is not to suggest that women from higher-income families did not participate in the armed struggle but to highlight that women, including women fighters (as a category), experience mobilisation and war in non-uniform, intersectional ways.

fighters in non-state armed groups, 2) women living along transnational and internal borders where non-state armed groups operate, 3) women involved in the leadership and recruitment of non-state armed groups, who also had experience in conflict environments but not necessarily on the frontlines (mobilisers), 4) academic and policy analysts of peace, security and border dynamics, 5) government agencies at border crossings and in charge of peace, security and gender portfolios and 6) employees of African/regional multilateral and local non-governmental organisations with border and conflict expertise.

Among these categories, the author struggled to find women assigned to peace and security portfolios in the latter two—government bodies and African multilateral and local non-governmental organisations. The few women found in such structures declined to speak on the topic, citing concerns that it was 'too political' for them to comment on. As a result, no women were interviewed under categories five and six.[14] As such, the data collected from women across all other categories forms the basis for analytical anchoring of the research questions. Interviews with men in various roles, including in government, are only used to complement the information gathered from women.



Infographics 1 – Categories of interviews

The data collection process was performed in three phases. The first round of research from August to October 2024 involved interviews with 26 individuals, nearly half of whom were men (n=11). At this phase, finding women with expertise on cross-border armed aspects proved challenging, which is also reflected in the findings. Still, this initial phase helped shape the research question and served as an entry point to accessing women involved in non-state armed groups, both in past (former) and current working capacities, across all groups. Although questions were drafted even before entering the field, the initial interview participants had the opportunity to refine them. Beyond the content of

[14] This challenge in data collection, particularly the fact that many of the women had never previously been approached to share their perspectives on such topics, also informs the finding: women's analytical contributions, especially as policy and government-level experts on border and conflict issues, are rarely sought after or engaged. This points to another kind of border—the gendered border of politics and knowledge production, where women may be present within systems, but only up to a carefully delineated limit.

the questions, for instance, the participants challenged the appropriateness of designating certain actors, such as government-level experts and civilian women analysts, as key informant interviewees (KIIs) in this inquiry process. They challenged the research knowledge production mode by pushing the author to reflect on whose voices were being privileged and centred—women, but which women? Confronted with the question of whether such a hierarchical approach to expertise reinforces unfeminist ways of doing research, the author encountered what Kumsa et al. call 'sites of slippages',[15]—moments where feminist intentions were set but not fully realised, requiring reflexive course-correction. These adjustments included methodological changes, such as the removal of the initial KII category, [16] which allowed the author to centre the insights of those closest to the inquiry in tailoring policy considerations.

The second round of interviews happened between October 2024 and January 2025, during which 37 individuals were interviewed during intermittent field visits—32 women and five men. The author also conducted 'research by correspondence,'[17]maintaining contacts with interviewees during February and March 2025 to seek clarification on some political developments. For example, two weeks after fieldwork in the Moyale region of Kenya and Ethiopia, from which a substantial aspect of the report's findings is drawn, the two governments launched an attack on areas they suspected harboured the OLA[18], which border community members later described as 'crackdown on non-problems.'[19] Some government officials who had previously denied interview requests in September 2024 and then again in January 2025 were, at this point, open to discussing the Kenya-Ethiopia border and security matters, which led the author to conduct one new interview in February 2025.[20] The author also attended International Women's Day virtual events hosted by these ethnonational armed groups and their mobilisers, providing an opportunity to hear directly from more women fighters from inaccessible regions of Ethiopia.[21]

[15] Martha K Kumsa et al., 'Catching the Shimmers of the Social: From the Limits of Reflexivity to Methodological Creativity' (2015) 15(4) *Qualitative Research*, p.425.

[16] Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) designations are increasingly falling out of favour within feminist research for the way they elevate certain individuals to positions of 'extraordinary-ness,' thereby shaping whose knowledge is valued and prioritised. See discussions by: Michelle Lokot, 'Whose Voices? Whose Knowledge? A Feminist Analysis of the Value of Key Informant Interviews' (2021) 20 (1) *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1–8.

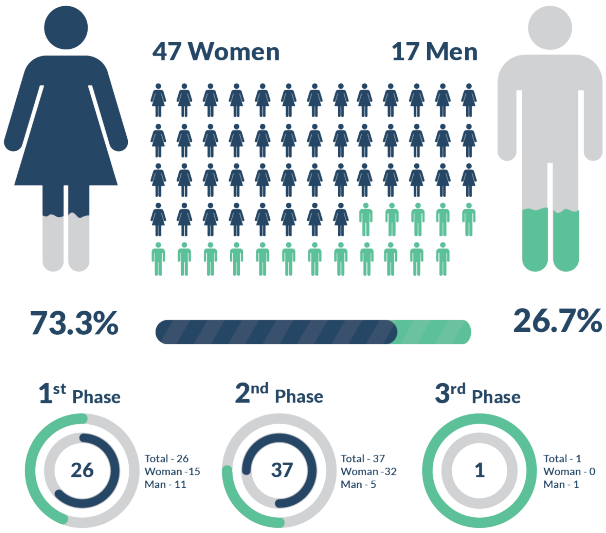
[17] Bev Gatenby and Maria Humphries, 'Feminist Participatory Action Research: Methodological and Ethical Issues' (2000) 23 (1) *Women's Studies International Forum*, p.93.

[18] 'Kenya Launches Security Operation Targeting OLA 'Hideouts'; Armed Group Denies Criminal Links' (*Addis Standard*, 10 February 2025) https://addisstandard.com/kenya-launches-security-operation-targeting-ola-hideouts-armed-group-denies-criminal-links/ last accessed 6 April 2025.

[19] Virtual correspondence with a Kenya-Ethiopia border community member and an NGO leader—a woman and a man—living in Marsabit County, Kenya, in February 2025.

[20] Interview with a Kenyan government official (man), virtual, February 2025.

[21] The author attended March 8th virtual events hosted by mobilisers and supporters of OLA. The sessions were led by those based in the diaspora but included voice calls from women fighters on the ground, from several OLA fighting bases (undisclosed locations).



Infographics 2 – Gender composition of interviewees

The majority of interviews were conducted in person an on a one-on-one basis, in Nairobi, Moyale and surrounding areas on both the Kenyan and Ethiopian side, Addis Ababa, Mekelle and Shire, with open-ended, semi-structured interview questions. Some interviews were conducted in groups of not more than three participants. Group interviews were conducted as a memory work exercise, and upon request by the women interviewees themselves, as this approach allowed them to recall and reflect on shared experiences while also navigating different accounts of the same incidents.[22] In-depth individual and group interviews, as well as participant observations, provided primary data. Observations included the movement of armed actors, sometimes openly and at all hours; a large number of Ethiopian students crossing borders to attend Kenyan schools, showing cross-border sharing of resources; symbolic and physical markers such as communities divided by tarmacs (Oromia on the Western side, and Somali on the Eastern), political symbolism, graffiti, and provocations *(የብሽሽቅ ፖለቲካ)* in places like Moyale, Ethiopia, as well as burned tires from protests, heavy security presence at borders, and frustrating experiences of (everyday) surveillance. Secondary data was drawn from organisational manifestos and political programmes and the social media presence of armed groups (which often features attractive, heroically posing photographs of women fighters either alone or positioned prominently in the front row alongside men) and women associated with them—all of which contributed to an understanding of how women's participation in these groups is perceived and positioned.

[22] The author conducted interviews with former TDF fighters, both individually and in group settings, as the women were gathering for informal support-group meetings. While the group interview was suggested by the fighters themselves, certain social dynamics (such as the presence of senior women in army rank and age) shaped what could be openly discussed and what the author was allowed to hear. Therefore, the author arranged additional one-on-one interviews. These follow-ups, some conducted after a few days' break, allowed the author to discuss injustices that were difficult to address in a group setting—particularly those considered internal to armed groups—and how for many women fighters and mobilisers, discussing them could feel like a betrayal of the meta-cause.

Which woman counts as a fighter?

Among the categories of interviewees, the author struggled with setting clear-cut definitions of who (former) fighters are.[23] Initially, definitions of women combatants from DDR programming in UN documents were used, which limited the category to those who carried combat weapons and were deployed in combat fronts.[24] However, this proved to be a problematic and rather masculine-centric categorisation, especially given the nature of mass mobilisation in these armed movements where the distinction between 'front' and 'rear' is blurred, and women's contributions take on diverse forms.[25] The next best definition was inspired by an ONLF former fighter who spoke of 'Naftii Hure', defining participation as a fighter as being 'willing to pay the ultimate price.'[26] Where, in the words of a former (deceased) OLA fighter, every fighter is fully prepared for the possibility of joining their comrades in the struggle at 'Fuula Dhugaa'—the Place of Truth.[27] Drawing from these perspectives, the author deduced that the definition of fighters should include everyone involved in the armed groups, from radio operators to intelligence gatherers. However, the women interviewed under Category 1 distanced themselves from this broader definition and by extension, from other women who in their words, 'helped.' They repeatedly highlighted three things: (1) their military training upon entry, (2) their decision to take up arms, fully convinced of the use of violence and (3) of being caught and confined within the conflict zone, often referred to as 'the bush' (as opposed to other women who moved in and out of the bush on a 'visiting basis').[28] Therefore, despite the author's best efforts to use a broader definition of fighters, every woman interviewed—or those suggested through snowballing—still met these three criteria. So, the question of 'which women' and representation of fighters in this research is partly shaped through such contestations and navigation of rigid masculine gender norms that, even during times of conflict, were strictly upheld. [29]

---

[23] The report will use the term 'former fighters' instead of 'ex-fighters,' as the label 'ex' is often perceived within feminist discourse as an erasure of the extended association these individuals maintain with their fighter identity, even in post-conflict contexts. See also: Francesca Baldwin, 'A Soldier and a Woman: (Re)Negotiating Gender in Female Narratives of Civil Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia' (2022) 28 *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, p.30.

[24] Reed M Wood and Jakana L Thomas, 'Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participation in Violent Rebellion' (2017) 54(1) *Journal of Peace Research*, p. 37.

[25] Siphokazi Magadla, 'Theorizing African Women and Girls in Combat: From National Liberation to the War on Terrorism' in Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021), p. 570.

[26] Interview with an ONLF former fighter (woman), virtual, September 2024.

[27] Jaal Bilise Diidoo Duubaa (woman), an OLA fighter from the Southern Zone (Kenya-Ethiopia borders), as quoted in The Oromo Democratic Revolutionary Party (ODRP) 2nd Edition Position Paper by Soreti Kadir, Former Country Press Representative of the OLA in Kenya (woman). The Oromo Democratic Revolutionary Party, currently in its formative grassroots organising stage, calls for 'complete liberation' and embraces a vision of 'People-Centered Pan-Africanism,' working to connect Oromos across borders.

[28] Collated from interviews with women former fighters from the OLA, TDF, and ONLF.

[29] Note that despite their insistence on being 'arm-bearing fighters,' the interviews revealed the fluidity of their roles in the 'bush,'—taking on many different roles in tandem with fighting—which, to the author, mirrored the fluidity in the 'push' and 'pull' factors that drove their participation in the armed organising. Therefore, the report will not differentiate between the two factors when discussing the 'why' of their participation in subsequent

What this study adds

Common frameworks for understanding cross-border conflict dynamics primarily derive policy knowledge from men's experiences. When women are included in analysis, their roles are often confined to 'gender' sections or framed in fixed (rather than fluid) and descriptive terms, often through victim–survivor narratives. Anchored in a feminist analysis, this report challenges these conventional knowledge approaches by centring the diverse roles and political articulations (agency) of women in ethnonational mobilisations. As the first XCEPT study to explicitly adopt a feminist approach in research processes and analysis, it extends the programme's knowledge base into new terrain and advances understanding of borders through a feminist lens. Importantly, applying a feminist lens does not limit the findings to 'women's issues'; the report generates insights into the broader functioning and organisation of armed groups, including those about which little has been written, and thus into the dynamics of wars in Ethiopia itself. Drawing on real-time experiences from active conflict settings in Ethiopia and its border regions, the study offers a nuanced and empirically robust analysis for cross-border peace and security policy dialogues.

What is next for future research?

Although the author interviewed mobilisers of the Fano groups in the Amhara region and the Gambella Liberation Front (GLF), the number of interviews and the structural insights were not as robust as those of the groups included in this report. These groups were therefore not included, so as not to treat their organising identities as mere add-ons. Future research could address this gap and examine these and other active non-state armed organising in Ethiopia, by applying a feminist lens that interrogates not only the participation of women but also that of men and the masculine intra- and inter-ethnonationalist ideologies that shape transnational and internal border armed movements.

Background and context of insurgencies

Geographical scope of the research

The research analysis in this report covers the Ethio-Kenyan border regions, including the twin towns of Moyale (one in Kenya and the other in Ethiopia), as well as Marsabit Central in Kenya and the Tigray and Somali regions of Ethiopia. It is worth noting that ethnonational groups like the Somali and Oromo are found in more than one country. Consequently, their armed struggle is often supported or based in neighbouring states with populations of the same groups present—making inquiries into their ethnonational armed mobilisation inherently transnational. Moreover, in the context of heightened ethnonationalism and the fickle and fluid relationships between borders, nations, and states, conflicts within national borders and administrative boundaries of sovereign states have become as salient as those across international borders.[30] Recognising these dynamics,

sections; see also Hilina Berhanu Degefa, *Gender and Violent Extremism in Ethiopia* (European Institute of Peace, 2021), p.14.

[30] The report includes internal borders in analysis, as most contemporary conflicts and salient border contestations—particularly in contexts such as Ethiopia—occur within sovereign states, that is, between administrative or constitutionally designated 'regional-state' boundaries rather than between sovereign states.

the report also incorporates data from the Tigray-Amhara border regions within Ethiopia. Although the author could not physically access these areas, some of the women interviewed in Mekelle and Shire shared accounts of the military mobilisation aimed at protecting Northwestern Tigray, particularly along the internal border with Amhara region.[31] Among them were women who led community-calming efforts, strategically using assumptions about womanhood to ease potential resistance in 'enemy' communities during military invasions, advances to the Amhara region by the TDF at the peak of the conflict.

The politics of naming

The names of armed groups and conditions of 'war', 'oppression', and 'colonisation' used in this report are how interviewees self-identified. After all, labelling is a political exercise[32] and groups and conflict contexts can be named many different things depending on their standing vis-à-vis the labellers, often the state. All groups covered in this report—OLA, ONLF, and TDF—have, at various times and through different designations and political affiliations, been labelled as terrorist organisations by the Ethiopian government and its various regimes.[33] However, they have also been removed from such lists during times of political transition and peace agreements. Whenever this 'terrorist' labelling came up during interviews, the participants fiercely opposed it and explained their involvement as a necessary exercise in the liberation of their land/respective ethnonational groups.[34]

The author argues that this focus warrants attention in XCEPT's research engagements. A similar point was raised by Ethiopian workshop participants, notably Hallelujah Lulie, during XCEPT's Dissemination and Policy Engagement Workshop in December 2024, in Addis Ababa.

[31] While contested areas of Welkait T(s)egede and Humera *woredas* (administrative districts) in Western Tigray were occupied by Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) early on in the Tigray war (2020), the TDF later had a special unit, Army 1, assigned to defend attacks coming from that area (according to fighters, this includes the Tselemti area, stretching from Shiraro to Endabaguna and bordering Eritrea, as well as the area from Tselemti to Humera, all under the leadership of General Migbey Haile (a man)).

[32] Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (Routledge 2009), p.4.

[33] At present, the OLA is the only group among the three that has a terrorist organisation designation, a label first assigned in May 2021. See: 'Ethiopia to Designate TPLF, OLF-Shene as 'Terror' Groups' (*Al Jazeera*, 1 May 2021) https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/1/ethiopia-to-designate-tplf-olf-shene-as-terror-groups last accessed 6 April 2025.

[34] Interviews with women former fighters in ONLF, TDF and OLA, August 2024 – January 2025.

A brief background of the armed groups

While a detailed historical analysis of Ethiopia's ethnonational armed groups is beyond the scope of this report, this section provides a brief overview of the political percolation of OLA, TDF, and ONLF, situating them within the broader political context of Ethiopia and its borders, where they have emerged and continue to operate.

All three groups are currently characterised by splinter factions, fluctuating alliances, and fast-changing political positions vis-à-vis the Ethiopian state. Their origins are rooted, among other factors, in historical claims of colonisation, as well as enduring and emerging oppressions from forces such as the Ethiopian empire and European colonial powers. For example, many Borana Oromos found across both Ethiopia and Kenya, speak of historical experiences shaped by the subjugations of both the British and Ethiopian ('*Habesha*') forces.[35] Some armed groups have also considered these subjugations in their political visions, even highlighting their layered impact on women. For instance, the ONLF's political programme (July 2018), *barnaamijka siyaasadeed*, states that 'women and the elderly have suffered disproportionately under Ethiopian colonialism', thus calling on their active participation in the struggle for self-determination. Sentiments regarding these complex pasts were repeatedly mentioned by interviewed academic and policy analysts associated with ONLF and OLA, with some references dating back to 1970s.[36] In contrast, those linked to TDF focused on Ethiopia's post-2018 political configurations.

Respondents also emphasised the uniqueness of their respective struggles, cautioning against simplistic comparisons and reductive attempts to find common ground. For example, interviewees from both the OLA and ONLF stressed that their movements emerged in response to a long-standing and systemic political exclusion extending beyond the tenure of any single regime.[37] As an Oromo academic explained, reflecting on the distinctiveness of the Oromo struggle: 'The scale of our oppression is perhaps swallowed in our numbers because we are many; we may have absorbed the shocks more quietly than other groups who are now more visibly voicing their oppression.'[38]

With these contextual and historical differences, the author still finds a common orientation: each is mobilised around a politicised collective identity, and their political loyalty is anchored not in the Ethiopian state, but in their ethnonational constituency (as Oromos, Somalis, Tigrayans). However, as Kumsa has observed, these affiliations are not static, with individuals and groups frequently moving 'in and out of' nationalist iterations.[39] For instance, in a participatory research encounter, Kumsa (in 2005) recounted the account of a young Tigrayan who expressed a strong identification with Ethiopian national identity and was irritated by Oromos rejection of the identity—a stance that

[35] Kenya-Ethiopia border community members (women), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

[36] Taken from several interviews with academic and policy analysts from the Somali/Ogaadeen and Oromo communities in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Nairobi, Kenya, and virtually, during the period of September through December 2024.

[37] Interview with ONLF affiliated analyst (Woman), Nairobi, Kenya, September 2024.; Interview with former OLA-OLF fighter (Woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024.

[38] Interview with an Oromo academic (Man), Nairobi, Kenya, September 2024.

[39] Martha K Kumsa, 'Shifting Spaces of Justice and the Poetics of Be-Longing' (2005) 4(2) *Currents: Scholarship in the Human Services*, p. 9–10.; Martha K Kumsa, 'At Issue: Learning Not to Become Oromo—Chasing the Ghosts Chasing John Sorenson' (2002) 9(3) *Northeast African Studies*, p.170.

many Tigrayan interviewees (in 2025) acknowledged had dramatically shifted as political conditions changed.[40]

The sections below provide brief background summaries of the armed groups covered in this report.

Oromo Liberation Army (OLA)

The OLA traces its origins to the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), established in the early 1970s with the objective of liberating Oromo society and its land from what it characterised as Ethiopian settler colonialism and imperial domination.[41] The OLA was initially formed as the armed wing to the OLF (the political wing) in late 1973. However, internal disagreements emerged, particularly surrounding the implementation of the 2018 Asmara Accord between the OLF and the Ethiopian government, culminating in a formal split between the OLA and OLF.[42] Currently, OLA or *Waraana Bilisummaa Oromoo* (WBO) maintains an active armed mobilisation occupying different territories in Ethiopia and in Marsabit and Isiolo counties of Kenya.[43]

Tigray Defense Forces (TDF)

According to the commonly accepted framing of the insurgency, the Tigray Defense Forces (TDF) emerged in late 2020 in response to a military attack launched against the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and Tigrayan population by the Ethiopian government alongside Eritrean and Amhara regional forces.[44] The formation of the TDF was largely driven by mass mobilisation among Tigrayan communities, encompassing both critics and supporters of the TPLF, to counter these attacks. In its early formation, the TDF also drew from Tigray's regional security force, which provided part of the armed structure on which broader mobilisation was built. To some, the TDF's mobilisation cannot be fully disentangled from the political trajectory of the TPLF itself, which began as a guerrilla movement in 1975 and later became the dominant party within the previously ruling Ethiopian

[40] This sentiment was widely shared by many Tigrayan interviewees, who, in post-2018 Ethiopia and even more sharply after the 2020 war, increasingly identified with the rejection of Ethiopian identity and with calls for an independent Tigray (Hagere-Tigray); Group interview with former fighters of TDF (women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[41] Asafa Jalata, 'The Oromo Liberation Front and Its Long Journey: Achievements, Challenges, and Resilience' (2024) *Humanity & Society*, p.27.

[42] Getaneh W Chemeda, '"OLA Is the Shield of the Oromo People": The Uses of Violence and Regime-Making in Oromia, Ethiopia' (2024) 173 (1) *Politique Africaine*, p.125; 'Ethiopia signs deal with Oromo rebels to end hostilities' (*Al Jazeera*, 7 August 2018) https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2018/8/7/ethiopia-signs-deal-with-oromo-rebels-to-end-hostilities last accessed 6 April 2025.

[43] Interview with Former Country Press Representative of the OLA in Kenya (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024. Moreover, while some factions of the OLA demobilised in 2024, interviewees noted that mobilisation is on the rise and is reinforced by a 'taste of area control and governance', most notably when certain factions exercised *de facto* control over a woreda in East Wollega while the Ethiopian government was preoccupied with the Tigrayan war, and by their continued access to and control of some areas in Ethiopia.

[44] Interview with Tigrayan political analyst (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, November 2024; Interview with former fighters of TDF (women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition for nearly three decades.[45] While this link was not clear in the initial stages of mobilisation, it became evident by early 2021 as the TPLF leveraged its control over the *tabia* apparatus using state-party overlap to mobilise youth en masse into TDF.[46] The Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) in November 2022—signed under the name of the TPLF—further blurred this distinction between the party and the armed movement; as it was then that the TDF, recast as an extension of the TPLF, formally entered DDR processes. As of March 2025, renewed tensions and political fragmentation within both the TDF and TPLF have begun to emerge, raising the risk of further splintering and fresh conflict.[47]

Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)

The ONLF was founded in 1984 as a political and social movement representing ethnic Somalis in Ethiopia.[48] It transitioned into an armed insurgency in the 1990s, with the collective goal of achieving self-determination through a referendum in the Ogaden region, transcending traditional Somali clan lines. The ONLF framed its struggle as anti-colonial, targeting both Ethiopian central rule and historical injustices. The armed conflict in the Ogaden formally ended in October 2018 following a peace agreement signed in Asmara between the ONLF and the Ethiopian government.[49] Although this marked the end of nearly 25 years of conflict, developments as of March 2025 indicate a growing risk of renewed instability and resurgence of the ONLF insurgency.[50]

While the OLA, TDF, and ONLF each reflect distinct histories, ideologies, and geographies, they share some commonalities: a foundation in ethnonational mobilisation, marginalisation based on ethnic identity and the central analysis of this paper, which is the participation of women in their armed mobilisations. Drawing on these ethnonational elements, this report uses women's experiences to produce insights into ethnonational cross-border dynamics.[51]

---

[45] Aregawi Berhe, 'The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front' (2004) 103 (413) *African Affairs*, p. 569.; Interview with a Tigrayan political analyst (Woman), Nairobi, Kenya, November 2024.

[46] Interview with a Tigray-based researcher and academic (man), conducted virtually in December 2024 with follow-up virtual correspondence in March 2025. In these exchanges, the interviewee emphasised that the TDF was not organisationally monolithic; some units had TPLF-like political training, others didn't. Note that *Tabias* are the lowest political administration level in Tigray, equivalent to kebeles, elsewhere in the country.

[47] '"No-one Can Handle Another War"-Tigrayans Fear Fresh Ethiopian Conflict' (*BBC News*, 18 March 2025) https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq8ywlk8n4yo last accessed 6 April 2025.

[48] Tobias Hagmann, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The Search for an End to Conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia* (Rift Valley Institute 2014), p.38.

[49] 'Gov't, ONLF Sign Peace Deal' (*ReliefWeb*, 6 September 2018) https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/gov-t-onlf-sign-peace-deal last accessed 6 April 2025.

[50] 'From Truce to Threat: New Path to Insurgency Looms Over Somali Region Amid Unmet Peace Deal Promises with ONLF' (*Addis Standard*, 17 March 2025) https://addisstandard.com/from-truce-to-threat-new-path-to-insurgency-looms-over-somali-region-amid-unmet-peace-deal-promises-with-onlf/ last accessed 6 April 2025.

[51] The report does not capture the percentage of women across these non-state armed groups. This is partly due to the fluid spectrum of roles women hold within these groups, making precise statistical recording challenging. Additionally, when armed groups keep data on women fighters, it is often incomplete (due to the reasons noted

Findings

The findings section pulls out insights from the three research questions:

1. What attracts and incentivises women's participation in ethnonational non-state armed groups?
2. How do these women perceive and articulate their roles, agency, and contributions?
3. How do women navigate transnational and internal borders to facilitate armed organising?

If the violence crosses borders, so must women

Cross-border ethnonational mobilisation is not a singular event; it is an evolving, gendered process shaped by, among other issues, historical injustice, inter-generational marginalisation, and complex state-border community relations.[52] For example, in communities like that of the Borana Oromo (or parts of it), whose homelands span the Ethiopia-Kenyan border, these mobilisations or support for them are rooted in a convergence of cultural, political, and security factors. As a Borana policy analyst observed: 'Cross-border Oromo nationalism is not an event; it is a process that has unfolded across historical transitions and regime changes.'[53]

The Borana occupy a culturally and politically significant place within the broader Oromo identity, often referred to as angafticha—the eldest among the Oromo.[54] Yet, on the Kenyan side of the border in particular, this community and the larger region it inhabits with other ethnic groups often claim longstanding government neglect. A Borana elder residing at the border reflected:

> It feels like we are living in the side of Kenya the other side doesn't know about. These (border) areas have faced deep marginalisation, including persistent poverty and infrastructural neglect. Leadership only looks for us during elections; we are treated as voting machines and our exercise of citizenship ends there.[55]

This exclusion is felt by women in similar as well as layered and gendered ways, as even within performative gestures of inclusion around elections, they remain, in their words, 'the last to be listened to.'[56] Moreover, the marginalisation of border communities is further worsened by the thinness of the border and the cyclical nature of cross-border violence. The proximity between these communities means that militarisation and conflict on the Ethiopian side inevitably spill over into Kenya and vice versa.[57] The Borana people, in particular, find themselves sheltering their own kin

above), contested (both internally and externally) or politically inflated to serve strategic narratives, and may fluctuate across different phases of conflict, as explained by interviewees.

[52] Interview with a Moyale-Ethiopia border resident (Borana woman), Moyale, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[53] Interview with a Borana policy analyst (man), Nairobi, Kenya, January 2025.

[54] Interview with an Oromo policy analyst (man), Nairobi, Kenya, September 2024.

[55] Interview with a Borana policy analyst, Moyale border resident (man), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

[56] Interview with a Borana elder, Moyale border resident (woman), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

[57] 'Why is Kenya's Government Silent on Ethiopia Crackdown?' (*Human Rights Watch*, 24 March 2018) https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/24/why-kenyas-government-silent-ethiopia-crackdown last accessed 17 April 2025.

from Ethiopia or Kenya when inter-ethnic violence erupts, as it did in 2013/14.[58] Community members also claim that regimes, such as the EPRDF, have also historically securitised the border communities on both sides, treating them as 'suspect [threat] groups and old-regime sympathisers.'[59] These dynamics created hyper-vigilant and militarised zones, often marked by joint security operations carried out by Ethiopian and Kenyan forces.[60]

This securitisation has also shaped everyday cross-border interactions, including trade. While percentages vary, women constitute a significant portion of small-scale traders at the Moyale Ethiopia-Moyale Kenya border.[61] Yet, unfriendly security measures rooted in these suspicions have limited their access to formal, state-led crossing points like that of the Moyale One Stop Border Post (OSBP).'The OSBP is for the big boys,' explained a border resident and trader. 'You mostly see big companies with their cargo trucks parked there. But for us, our trade relies on the *panya* [rat] routes [informal routes], because those [official] doors are not friendly to people like us.' [62]

This form of extended unfriendliness and violence on the livelihood of women has forced them to rely on local, gendered knowledge of navigating informal [unpatrolled] cross-border routes. As a result, they often deal with precarious routes where armed groups—claiming affiliation with the same 'putative ethnonational communities'[63]—exercise significant control.[64] According to security forces at the border, armed groups have in the past co-opted women's mobility and market networks for intelligence gathering and the trafficking of weapons, cash, drugs, and people.[65] 'These women do not appear on the formal rosters of the armed groups [building on a previous conversation about

[58] 'Partnerships for Peace: Success in Marsabit County' (*Saferworld*) https://www.saferworld-global.org/en-stories-of-change/partnerships-for-peace-success-in-marsabit-county last accessed 16 April 2025.

[59] Interview with a Borana policy analyst (man), Nairobi, Kenya, January 2025.

[60] Ethiopian and Kenyan security forces have launched joint military operations targeting bases suspected of harbouring OLA fighters as recently as February 2025, with online records tracing such operations back to the early 2000s. See: 'Kenya Launches Security Operation Targeting OLA 'Hideouts'; Armed Group Denies Criminal Links' (*Addis Standard*, 4 February 2025) https://addisstandard.com/kenya-launches-security-operation-targeting-ola-hideouts-armed-group-denies-criminal-links/ last accessed 23rd April 2025. Ethiopia and Kenya signed a Mutual Defence Cooperation Agreement on September 24, 2025, covering joint military exercises and targeting, among other areas, cross-border threats, including efforts aimed at combatting terrorism, human and drug trafficking and contraband. See: 'Ethiopia and Kenya Sign Defence Cooperation Agreement Covering Intelligence Sharing, Joint Exercises and Border Security' (*Addis Standard*, 24 September 2025) https://addisstandard.com/ethiopia-kenya-sign-defense-cooperation-agreement-covering-intelligence-sharing-joint-exercises-and-border-security/ last accessed 24th September 2025.

[61] Hassan H. Kochore and Insene Bagaja, *Informal Trade, Gender and Conflict Dynamics on the New Kenya–Ethiopia Trade Corridor* (Rift Valley Institute, January 2025), p.20.

[62] Interview with Moyale border resident (woman), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

[63] Zoe Marks, 'Gender Dynamics in Rebel Groups' in Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward (eds), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), p.443.

[64] Orly Stern, *Evidence Synthesis: Women and Cross-Border Trade in Africa During Times of Conflict* (XCEPT, June 2024), pp.13 & 15.

[65] Interview with a Kenyan government official (man), virtual, February 2025.

OLA], yet they are central to their political survival,'[66] noted one government employee. 'Sometimes they may smuggle fresh produce banned by Ethiopian authorities and other times, with the same hand, they transport logistics for these groups.'[67]

Therefore, in such heavily militarised communities, support for ethnonational organising and particularly armed mobilisation has emerged not from ideology alone, but as a reactive strategy to prolonged cross-border violence, including targeting of livelihoods and survival means. As an OLA former fighter explained:

> Violence against Oromos is cross-border and routinised. It comes with constant suspicion and securitisation of who we are, what we carry, how we live. A foreign [Ethiopian] military has even operated on Kenyan soil targeting these [Borana] communities. That's why our organising is partly based here, it had to be cross-border because the violence is.[68]

These organising efforts are also grounded in transnational ties.

> We share the same culture, the same way of life, and kinship networks—including families spread across both sides of the border. Some of us vote in both countries, and our traditional leader, the *Abba Gadaa*, guides decisions on both sides. We even share schools, hospitals, and marketplaces. We feel closer to them more so than we do to our co-citizens across other counties [in Kenya].[69]

Within these zones, Oromo nationalist messaging has taken root, and armed groups like the OLA (still referred to this day by many in the Borana as the OLF) have settled across borders to areas with (newer) sympathies for their identities.[70] The OLA/F has brought what one analyst described as 'both the hard and software of Oromo identity' to the lowlands, a message that had not struck a chord as deeply in earlier (pre-EPRDF) years, with the two countries operating under different systems of political and socio-economic order.[71] In the face of state neglect and systemic marginalisation, armed groups like the OLA have emerged as 'reserve [alternative] powers.'[72] Within parts of these

---

[66] Interview with Marsabit county employee (man), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Interview with former OLA fighter (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024. She also mentioned that in these border communities, civilian women—particularly widows and divorcees—have been targetedly harassed and accused of OLA affiliations by Ethiopian and Kenyan governments. Armed groups, aware of this vulnerability, also approach these same women for mobilisation, in the hopes of using their homes as 'resting bases' 'pit stop' or, at times, the women as army concubines, showing how intersectional gender identities are (re)produced by both state forces and non-state armed actors.

[69] Interview with a Borana CSO employee (man), Moyale border resident, Moyale, Kenya, January 2025. This interviewee described an incident in which the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Abiy Ahmed, attended the inauguration of the Moyale one-stop border (2020). During the event, the President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta, asked Abiy, who is a native Oromo speaker, to address his people (the Oromo) in his own language, hinting at the oneness of the Borana people across the border. See starting at 12:56, the then President Uhuru is heard saying "You speak in your language…" https://www.facebook.com/StateHouseKenya/videos/inauguration-of-the-moyale-one-stop-border-post/384538736183298/ last accessed April 16th 2025.

[70] Interview with a Borana policy analyst (man), Nairobi, Kenya, January 2025.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Interview with an Oromo development worker from Ethiopia (man), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

communities, they seem to provide what states on both sides fail to offer: presence and identity-based political recognition (belonging-claims).[73] 'The OLA doesn't have a sticker on the forehead,' noted a Gabra analyst. 'They live within the people—as sons, daughters, husbands and wives.'[74] Even when support wanes or political tides shift as it did since 2018 with the rise to power of Abiy in Ethiopia, where some on the Kenyan side no longer see the value of such resistance, the armed groups still exist. As a community elder explained:

> When the Kenyan Oromo community began to feel the project had ended, they couldn't simply ask the OLA to leave. What can we do? You wouldn't cut off a festering finger just because it stinks [*Qubb khanke kha ajae ufirra khute ingatu*].[75]

Similarly, in the Somali region of Ethiopia, the ONLF has both provided refuge and relied on women who have faced political and economic displacement due to broader repression by the EPRDF, including a regional (cross-border) blockade.[76] 'During the armed struggle (post-1994), women smuggled supplies, using the tactical disguise of the stereotypical Somali mother—*Hooyo*— who is seen as harmless and too overwhelmed by her many children to be considered a threat.'[77] Therefore, in such spaces, borders are shifting socio-political zones, operating not just through state-imposed laws and formalities but the ways people imagine, navigate, and resist them. This is especially evident among ethnonational communities like the Oromo and Somali (and the *Ogaadeen clan),* who are divided across colonial borders that have since hardened or softened depending on the regime in power.

In Tigray, women similarly leveraged gendered stereotypes, including cultural and religious covers, to navigate oppressive, militarised environments in support of the TDF. [78] While the army leadership, predominantly male with few exceptions, has been linked to profiting from smuggling arms, gold, pharmaceuticals, people, and cash—both during the height of the Tigray war and continuing today—civilian and military women are also claimed to have supported the on-the-ground operations of these activities.[79] Often, their involvement is driven by a desire to support the community out of the severe

[73] Interview with a Borana policy analyst (man), Nairobi, Kenya, January 2025. Interviewees often noted that this does not apply to the entire Borana community, with such sentiments being more pronounced in some parts of Marsabit County than in others.

[74] Interview with a Gabra political analyst (man), Marsabit, Kenya, September 2024.

[75] Interview with a Borana elder, Moyale border resident (woman), Moyale, Kenya, January 2025.

[76] Interview with a Somali academic and policy analyst (woman), virtual, January 2024. On blockade, see also: 'Ethiopia Is Said to Block Food to Rebel Region' (*The New York Times*, 22 July 2007) https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/world/africa/22ethiopia.html last accessed 23 April 2025.

[77] Interview with a Somali academic and policy analyst (woman), virtual, January 2024.

[78] Interview with former residents of bordering communities between Amhara and Tigray (women), Shire and Mekelle, Ethiopia, July 2024. While interviewed women shared how they subverted their everyday routinised, culture/locality-specific gendered roles to navigate violence (and borders), and to conceal support roles within insurgent groups (in what the author tentatively calls, and hopes to theorise more fully in future work, as 'strategic womanness'), these details are intentionally withheld out of a feminist ethical commitment to their safety, given that all regions in this report continue to host active elements of conflict.

[79] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025. On the few exceptions: During interviews, both former fighters and community members, assigned a liminal, third gender-like identity to the few women in political and military leadership who are allowed into the financial and political gains of insurgent

forms of violence they have endured and to contribute to hopes of liberation.[80] Some women were also key figures in military operations, such as the invasion of towns during the same conflict [often considered enemy territories], like parts of the Amhara region.[81] In these contexts, they became the face of the army and its advances, playing a crucial role in liaising with and calming civilian communities. As one former fighter explains, 'It was often us who built rapport with local communities during military advances, led community-level conversations to calm tensions and guarded public infrastructures such as banks and other service-providing organisations.'[82] Women were believed to have better rapport with local communities, and civilian populations were also quite receptive and cooperative towards them.[83] In these situations, women fighters navigate complex roles that blend military strategy and gendered mediation, positioning their womanhood to navigate inter-community relations during periods of intense conflict and military advances.[84]

Yet, these forms of participation are rarely seen as 'political' by state actors, and even the ethnonational movements themselves.[85] When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed explained his decision to make peace with Tigrayan forces, he referred to events in the region (likely based around incidents in 'Tselemti'—near the Tigray-Amhara border—as explained by a TDF former fighter). In his speech, he remarked, 'Fighting the fighters was easy. It was the women with ladles [ማማለያ] and chili powder [በርበሬ] we couldn't handle.'[86] This seemingly casual comment speaks to: 1) how the state feminised

economies. Phrases like 'she is not one but four women' or 'she is like a man' [እሷ እኮ ማለት ወንድ ናት] were used revealing how ወንድ/*wend*—being a man—serves as an anchoring reference for power and exceptionality, allowing these women to transcend gendered expectations/permissions. On claims of rebel economies, see: 'Deadly Gold Rush: Military Commanders, Former Combatants, Foreign Players Scramble for Tigray's Bullion' (*The Reporter*, 13 July 2024) https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/41076/ last accessed 23 April 2025 and interview with community members in Tigray, Ethiopia, July 2024 and January 2025.

[80] Many former TDF women fighters said the dream of a free and independent Tigray [*Hagere-Tigray*] was what sustained their participation. Most said they did it for the collective, to free the people. A few admitted meeting women who seemed more in it for themselves, but those stories were rare and often seen as going against what it meant to be a woman in the struggle.

[81] A group interview with former TDF fighters (three women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[82] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[83] In an interview conducted for a book chapter (currently under review) on Ethiopian women's rights CSOs, co-authored by the author of this report, and with the interviewee's consent to bring the discussion here, an Amhara women's rights CSO leader reflected on how TDF women fighters guarded their organisation's offices during the war, mentioning the CSO's reputable work (on women's rights). This account, read alongside interviewees of TDF women fighters cited above, calls for a deeper analysis of what it means to be a woman fighter—considering whether such actions reflect an instinctual commitment to protecting women's (rights) spaces even under conditions of war and dealing with the 'enemy', or whether they are tactical civilian posturing of armed groups.

[84] See also: Baylee Harrell, 'Can't Live with Them or Can't Live without Them? How Varying Roles of Women in Rebel Groups Influence One-Sided Violence' (2023) 49 (6) *International Studies Quarterly*, p.882.

[85] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[86] Although the author was unable to locate a weblink to this speech, including on the PMO YouTube page, many interviewees as well as those she discussed the research with also referred to and analysed the speech.

defeat through its (sexist) discomfort in confronting domestic, perhaps even motherly, ladle-carrying women, while also recognising their insurgent capacities; and 2) the shifting nature of war fronts, where domestic tools become tactical, and homes/communities are treated as the frontline.

In this environment of shared ethnonational struggles, women navigate a dual burden—bearing the weight of collective marginalisation alongside gender-specific, layered oppressions and the frequent downplaying of their contributions. Yet, their resolve remains firm: If violence crosses borders (and as in the case of 'Tselemti women', war-front boundaries), so too must resistance—and the women who carry it.[87]

'I joined because . . .'

The word 'joining' suggests free choice and agency—an assumption that does not always neatly map onto the lived experiences of women in ethnonational mobilisations. While many women used the term themselves—'I joined,' 'we joined,' the story that followed often blurs the implied choice. For some, it reflected a belief-driven political response; for others, a relief and refuge from the unbearable socio-political conditions their identities were subjected to.[88] Even among women within the same ethnonational armed group, reasons for joining are diverse. Discussions show that women's reasons for joining are political, communal, and personal (after all, 'the personal is political'[89]), overlapping with men's but also distinctly gendered. For example, sexual violence targeting women, from documented or looming incidents, features heavily in women's trajectories and survival choices. Furthermore, women's survival choices are also shaped by (communal) obligations as bearers of life and genetic continuity.[90] Overall, reasons for joining are frequently rooted in long-term thought and prolonged oppression; and, in some cases, such as with TDF fighters, as a response to a more immediate, acute repression.[91]

For many women in ONLF, their decision to join (particularly in early 2000s) was shaped by widespread arrests, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, and other oppressive tactics used by Ethiopian security forces. As a former fighter recounted:

> I joined, and most women in my battalion joined, because our families were detained, tortured, and our community base was torn apart. I was 15 when I was first arrested in *Jiic kebele* then I was transferred to *Elhar* under *Kebridahar woreda* where many Somalis, especially women, were subjected to the worst possible treatments. I escaped from detention after a year and joined the army in 2002. People ask, 'Weren't you too young to join at 16?' I say—if I was old enough for my body to be violated, then I wasn't too young to defend it.[92]

The reasons women joined the ONLF were mostly shaped by the intense surveillance and repression their communities faced, same as their male counterparts. Still, women's paths to armed mobilisation had distinct gendered aspects. For example, across the Somali community, cautionary tales circulated: those who stayed behind at home risked facing sexual violence. These were not abstract

[87] Interview with former country press representative of the OLA in Kenya (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024.

[88] From interviews with women former fighters in ONLF, TDF and OLA, August 2024 – January 2025.

[89] See: Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal Is Political' in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (1970).

[90] Interviews with women former fighters in ONLF, TDF and OLA, August 2024 – January 2025.

[91] Interviews with former TDF fighters and Tigrayan analysts revealed that, for many, joining was rather a reactive response, jolted from their 'normal' lives into a war that came fast and unexpectedly.

[92] Interview with a former ONLF fighter (woman), virtual, December 2024.

threats, such incidents were widely reported and documented.[93] For many, joining the ONLF was a form of escape from these atrocities. One woman recalled how her entire family was harassed after rumours of her parents' involvement with the ONLF surfaced. She knew it was only a matter of time before she too would be 'arrested or worse'. [94] With her brothers fleeing to the bush, she faced a choice: cross the border and become a domestic worker in Hargeisa [commonly suggested line of work to women in her community] or join the ONLF's enclave cross-border bases. She chose the latter, explaining:

> I could have crossed into Hargeisa to work as a maid—that is what many girls did. But even that did not feel safe. As an Ogadeeni woman, who is to say I would've been safe in Hargeisa anyway? Joining the ONLF, carrying arms, at least meant I could fight back.

For her, like many of her comrades, joining was not a leap into violence but a relatively safer retreat from it. These stories reveal two gendered patterns: the politicisation and securitisation of women's bodies (both in the form of violence subjected and in the 'domestic/civilian' work that was commonly suggested as a form of retreat) and the fickle nature of agency where such (gendered) desperation is shaped into pathways for resistance.

Similarly, a former OLA fighter said:

> It was not some kind of addiction (*suusii*) to the struggle, like people assume. I was in the bush because it felt safer than being at home. Our identities, our homes, our communities were under routinised attack and so the bush felt like a relief.[95]

Amongst OLA (and OLF) affiliated women, joining the armed group, was often cited as 'a refuge from a state that persecuted Oromo womanhood and identity-based organising dating back to the 1970's.'[96] In a context where male members of ethnonational political parties often claimed to 'shield' women from such political spaces partly out of fear of state harassment and partly to justify the ease with which women were excluded, many women still found way into an even more dangerous space: armed groups. [97] In fact, women often fled from political organisations like the OLF to armed groups like the OLA after facing persistent harassment by the state (including post-2018) that had already cast them as 'dangerous.' Reflecting on her move from such a space to the bush, a former OLA fighter said:

> I felt most welcomed in my Oromoness when I took the *erbuu* [oath] with bullets and our flag in the bush [somewhere in Marsabit county]. The small, shared moments of struggle outweighed the discomfort of the space. At least in that moment, I was safe in my belonging.

---

[93] 'Ethiopia: Army Commits Executions, Torture, and Rape in Ogaden' (*Human Rights Watch*, 12 June 2008) https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/12/ethiopia-army-commits-executions-torture-and-rape-ogaden last accessed 24 April 2025.

[94] Interview with former ONLF fighter (woman), virtual, December 2024.

[95] Interview with former OLA fighter (woman), virtual, November 2024.

[96] Interview with a former OLF/OLA on-the-ground organiser and recruiter (woman), virtual, January 2025; 'Sexual Violence with Special Emphasis on Sexual Aggression in Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia' (*Advocacy for Oromia*, 6 February 2015) https://advocacy4oromia.org/forum/sexual-violence-with-special-emphasis-on-sexual-aggression-in-oromia/ last accessed 28 April 2025.

[97] Interview with an Oromo political analyst and political party affiliate (man), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 2024.

She added that this was no romanticisation of women's lives in armed groups, but a reflection on the constant trade-off between safety, survival and getting a voice in that women had to navigate.[98]

Women's participation in these armed groups may also be a culmination of their ongoing political engagement and exposure at home and in their community. A former OLA mobiliser shared, 'I knew I was born into a social justice struggle; I've never had an identity or childhood separate from this oppression. My development, at a basic level, was formed around Oromoness.'[99] Similarly, many women in TDF mentioned growing up in nationalistic or previous fighter (*woyane*/TPLF) homes. For these women, family histories of resistance had already helped with ideological continuity, 'My mother and father were *woyane* fighters….and I knew if my community was attacked, I could defend it just like they did.'[100] Here, the siege and economic blockade during the Tigray war not only reinforced their existing political orientation but also added a sense of urgency to their decision to join. Recalling her experience, a former TDF fighter said:

> We had no electricity, no phone connection, no cash, no food supply, and the shop I was running was repeatedly looted by ENDF, who took whatever little I had. I knew it was only a matter of time before I joined the fighters because I had lost all hope.[101]

In essence, the opportunity cost of joining an armed group was lower for women with limited life and economic prospects, as the same woman explained: 'The poverty [during the war] was as unforgiving as army life, if not more for us women.'

Another woman, a former educator, recounted how she left without telling her family, walking for days to find the armed group (TDF).

> At first, they (army leadership) told me I was too educated for this, that I should go home and make something of my life. But what was I supposed to do? I told them I had been fired from my job because of my Tigrayan identity and had nothing left to live for. My comrade [pointing to the woman next to her] was also told to return home and be with her children since she is a single mother. We both refused. We couldn't imagine going back. So, when people ask us, "Where did the TDF find you?" We say, "We didn't wait for them to find us. We found them."[102]

This search for armed groups, political refuge, as articulated by TDF fighters and others in OLA and ONLF, speaks to women's political becoming within ethnonational organising. Their accounts reveal that their decisions were not only shaped by the violence that pushed them into action, but also by the political agency they claimed in response and the convictions they had long harboured within themselves (as politicised beings). These stories help us to ask: What does it mean when women seek protection not from the state, but from non-state actors? When joining armed groups becomes a refuge? When the bush offers safety and a voice than formal ('opposition') political parties?

---

[98] Interview with former OLA fighter (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024.

[99] Interview with former country press representative of the OLA in Kenya (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024.

[100] Interview with former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[101] Interview with former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[102] Said by one fighter in a group interview with former TDF fighters (women), speaking on her experience and the experience of her comrade present in the interview, Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025. The fighter also mentioned in passing that some women, particularly mothers, married women (and therefore those assumed to be on the path to reproduction) were sent back and not actively recruited, as society could only afford to lose a few 'wandering' women, who were considered more disposable than others.

Understanding why women join ethnonational armed groups therefore requires more than looking at the collective community experience; it demands a gendered analysis of the nuanced lived experiences, survival strategies, and the continuum of political convictions that shape and reinforce women's decisions. Not to endorse or romanticise them, but to incorporate their articulations as critical elements of conflict analysis.

'I see my role as . . .'

Ethnonational organising, whether armed or unarmed, often flattens hierarchies, subsuming distinctions of class, ethnicity, and gender into a single collective identity.[103] As the experiences of women in the OLA, TDF, and ONLF show, this flattening of identity is deeply gendered, hiding the specific experiences of women in these armed groups. The analysis in this section recognises that the women fighters and mobilisers interviewed were neither passive participants nor pacifists; rather, they accepted violence as a needed form of political expression.[104] However, it was only through their mobilisation and often, more sharply in its aftermath, that many developed political consciousness around gendered power dynamics, both within armed groups and in broader society.[105] This section captures women's reflections of their roles during armed mobilisations, while the next will turn to their experiences of the 'after'—a temporality the author resists calling 'peacetime or post-conflict,' given the unfinished nature of these conflicts.

Many women described their role, first and foremost, as co-liberators, committed to a shared labour of freeing their communities from the weight of ethnonational oppression.[106] The call for collective liberation carried immense weight, which often required shedding of individual needs and experiences, particularly those shaped by gender, beneath the moral urgency of the national cause. As such, many women internalised the belief that raising gender-specific concerns would constitute a betrayal of the collective (meta) cause itself.[107] As a former TDF fighter reflected:

> We fought as fighters, not as women. There were of course times when things felt unfair, yes, but raising a "women's issue" felt like a luxury, a second. We believed we were making the same sacrifices, and whatever needed to be fixed, we would fix it together—after liberation.[108]

This vision called for a kind of genderless solidarity, an arrangement that often silenced the specific challenges women faced within ethnonational organising, common also in other contexts.[109] For this reason, even when they faced blatant sexism and discrimination, women rarely questioned or left armed groups.[110] This loyalty was celebrated by ethnonational groups and their affiliates, often romanticised as proof of women's selflessness.[111] Yet, as will be examined in the next section, this

[103] Rick Wilford, 'Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Surveying the Ground' in Rick Wilford (ed), *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Routledge 2004), p.15.

[104] Interviews with women former fighters in OLA, TDF and ONLF, August 2024 – January 2025.

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid.

[108] Interview with former fighter of TDF (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[109] Maria Hadjipavlou and Biran Mertan, 'Cypriot Feminism: An Opportunity to Challenge Gender Inequalities and Promote Women's Rights and a Different Voice' (2010) 22 (2) *Cyprus Review*, p.252

[110] Interview with women former fighters of TDF and OLA, Ethiopia and Kenya, January 2025.

[111] Interview with an Oromo policy and political analyst (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, September 2024.

admiration rarely translated into meaningful political recognition. In the TDF, for example, former fighters and analysts recalled that women's participation rose—from an initial 5% at the start of the war in November 2020 to roughly as much as 40–50% during final campaigns [in summer of 2022], including the military advances to Debre Berhan and Adi Berah.[112] A former fighter recounted:

> [….] especially during the last rounds and our March 8th celebration that final year (2022), it felt like we were 50%, maybe even more. Our numbers just kept growing, and at that point, even the leadership could not ignore it, so they had to make a space to celebrate us. We kept hearing that men were abandoning their posts, but women just kept joining in masses.[113]

A similar pattern of behaviour was mentioned by OLA affiliates and Oromo analysts, where women rarely abandoned ethnonational political ideals, even at great personal cost. A telling historical example is Ethiopia's first death sentence for a woman, handed down to Addee Asli Oromo, for her suspected affiliations with the then-OLF.[114] Addee Asli faced interrogation and torture in prison cells during the EPRDF regime, 'without breaking', and was freed after 18 years. As an Oromo political analyst explained, women's loyalty to the struggle—even to the point of sacrifice, as in the case of Addee Asli—is normalised, even expected.[115]

However, this idealisation of women's sacrifice does not mean that their presence, particularly on the armed front, was always accepted. Notably, in the case of the ONLF, the idea of a mixed-gender insurgency in the early 2000s was a highly unsettling development and, as a result, received harsh social backlash. After the loss of some women fighters, resistance to women's participation in combat capacity deepened, ultimately leading the ONLF leadership to halt recruitment into their all-women battalion, initiated in 2002.[116] A Somali analyst recounted:

> Men felt they had to protect the women, even in battle, and that this protective instinct made them less effective soldiers. Protection and fighting were always seen as a man's responsibility, so when women joined and were killed on the front lines, it unsettled the entire community.[117]

---

[112] Interview with a Tigrayan political analyst (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, November 2024; 'Ethiopia and Tigray forces resume hostilities' (*CNN*, 24 August 2022) https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/24/africa/ethiopia-tigray-resume-hostilities-intl last accessed 23 April 2025.

[113] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[114] Interview with an Oromo political analyst and political party affiliate (man), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 2024. See also, 'Sexual Violence with Special Emphasis on Sexual Aggression in Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia' (*Advocacy for Oromia*, 6 February 2015) https://advocacy4oromia.org/forum/sexual-violence-with-special-emphasis-on-sexual-aggression-in-oromia/ last accessed 28 April 2025.

[115] Interview with an Oromo political analyst and political party affiliate (man), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, July 2024.

[116] Interview with a Somali academic and policy analyst (woman), virtual, December 2024.

[117] Interview with a Somali academic and policy analyst (woman), virtual, December 2024; See also: Remco Van Hauwermeiren, 'The Ogaden War: Somali Women's Roles' (2012) 25 (2) *Afrika Focus*, p.17; Based on interviews with Ogadeeni and Somali women former fighters, this article documented the nuances of discomfort shared by both the women fighters and others in their community, including the refusal of women in the army to be treated by male nurses or to spend nights alongside men in the bush—disruptions that heavily unsettled the everyday elements of gender.

Despite the discomfort, women's participation in the ONLF became crucial to sustaining the armed groups—both materially and symbolically.[118] The presence of women fighters suggested that the stakes were so high that even the traditional 'bearers of life and care' had taken up arms.[119] The mere image of women fighters in the ONLF also triggered a gendered response, which was also common for other groups: their participation stirred ethnonational/community outrage, spurred male recruitment (because 'even women have joined'), attracted sympathetic diaspora support, and drew international media attention.[120] As a result, armed groups and their supporters often aestheticise women fighters, circulating curated images of attractive female combatants on social media to legitimise their cause and soften the public perception of their operations.[121] Yet, to some analysts, the sympathy (and softness) extended to women fighters is not evenly distributed; intersectional biases shape international and local perceptions. TDF women, for instance, often received more positive international media attention compared to OLA fighters—an intersection of gendered expectations and the geopolitics of ethnonational identity, where 'some struggles are feminised and humanised, while others remain portrayed as irredeemably brutal.'[122]

As a result of these views, the women fighters understood their symbolic roles all too well. Many recounted how their presence on the frontlines inspired male fighters, as one former TDF fighter expressed: 'When they saw us fighting alongside them, they felt they had no excuse to back down.'[123] However, the demands placed upon women extended far beyond combat. Women were expected to fight, perform domestic tasks, and provide emotional support—a tripling of their responsibilities similar to a 'triple shift' in formal office politics terminology.[124] Some women resisted these layered expectations, refusing to cook or clean, as they saw it as a regression into the gendered subordination they were unwilling to return to, not at least with a weapon in hand. Others embraced these duties as a survival strategy, or a means of restoring a semblance of normalcy, and fragments of the homes they had left behind amidst the chaos of war (their way of seeking and performing normalcy).[125] Therefore, as noted in the group interview, views towards this 'triple-extra shift' labour were sharply divided: one woman's sense of comfort and normalcy was another's discomfort, a slippery slope of gender inequality.[126]

---

[118] Note that the political programme document of the ONLF explicitly states: 'We shall not discriminate based on gender in the administration of our organisation and that we shall actively seek out and recruit women to take their rightful place in our struggle for national self-determination.'

[119] Interview with a Somali academic and policy analyst (woman), virtual, December 2024.

[120] Interview with a peace and security policy analyst (man), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 2025. See also: Zoe Marks, 'Gender Dynamics in Rebel Groups' in Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward (eds), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017), p.441.

[121] See for example: https://x.com/goobanaafaaraa/status/1897361658160509424?s=48; https://ethiopia.me.uk/tigray-defence-forces-female-fighters/ last accessed 3 March 2025.

[122] Interview with an Oromo policy analyst (man), Nairobi, Kenya, September 2024.

[123] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[124] 'Women in the Workplace 2024' (*McKinsey & Company*, 2024) https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace last accessed 28 April 2025; Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[125] A group interview with three TDF former fighters (women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[126] Ibid.

Women's involvement in violence (one aspect of the 'shift' indicated above) also required a careful renegotiation of femininity itself. They were often celebrated in ways that naturalised their bravery: Tigrayan women were called *Wa'ero Tat* ('female lioness') in TDF or, in the past (TPLF), *haras nebri* or *harasat anabir* ('breastfeeding tigress').[127] These names framed female violence not as a departure from femininity, but as its natural extension—a fierce, maternal defence of the community. Yet, in some groups, beneath these framings lurked assumptions of inferiority. Oromo analysts, for example, spoke of women fighters in OLA being called as *Qaama Dadhaboo* ('weak body'), indicating that even armed and active, women's bodies were still seen as less capable, less legitimate. The fragility of women's lives and bodies was visible even in small, charged moments. One former TDF fighter recounted an incident where a male comrade, panicking during an enemy encirclement, demanded her weapon, assuming she would be less able to use it—even though she was 'the one with training and he was not properly trained.'[128] To her, this moment, and similar others, show how many women were treated as 'disposable' during their participation.[129] Yet, raising these issues was not easy. For months during the research, many women were unwilling to 'taint' the image of their respective groups, fearing that speaking out would only reinforce the dominant narratives that already maligned their ethnonational identity. It was not until many months and numerous interactions later that they began to speak candidly about the internal silencing they faced. They shared how raising grievances, particularly gender-related ones, often led to demotions, being moved to deadly frontline assignments (silencing through death), arrest (under humiliating and scary conditions) or dismissive comments such as, 'You did not come here to protect me; you came here to escape rape (by the enemy forces).'[130]

Because of these potentially deadly implications, a TDF fighter reflected on refusing to take a 'women's (rights) desk' position in the army, despite her passion for gender equality. She understood that accepting the role would mean battling against the system and the powerful men behind it. She further spoke of fearing the sense of institutional collusion she saw among male fighters across ranks, noting that even in the face of injustice or administrative complaints, men instinctively stood in support of other men. At the same time, however, she observed that any semblance of unity and sisterhood amongst women, which some of her comrades showed in the early days of the mobilisation, was seen as a threat and, depending on the leadership of the army unit, even punished for being contrary to military ethics. Choosing survival over confrontation, she shared:

> I learned to stay away from those [women's rights] topics and started using the language I picked up from my training (*te'alim)* and indoctrination (*hintset)*, to call out some of the disrespect. I remember one time when I questioned a man in leadership, and he asked me, "Whose daughter are you?" He thought I could only be this bold if I had a well-connected father or one in army leadership. Since I didn't have anyone to back me up, I quickly learned to code switch. I started using cut-throat (ደምሳሽ) cadre-language,[131] accusing any sexist

[127] Ibid. See also: Francesca Baldwin, 'A Soldier and a Woman: (Re)Negotiating Gender in Female Narratives of Civil Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia' (2022) 28 *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*, p.25.

[128] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[129] Ibid.

[130] A group interview with three TDF former fighters (women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[131] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025. She mentioned using terminologies such as 'ፀረ ዲሞክራት፣ጨቋኝ (anti-democracy, oppressive)' had more political weight and response than 'ሴት ስለሆንኩኝ ነው ወይ (Is it because I am a woman)?'

> member of the army being against our collective liberation, struggle. And you know what? That got me serious attention and response.

A former OLA mobiliser shared a similar experience, recalling how the early promise of egalitarianism that drew her into the group buckled under the weight of patriarchy and sexism: 'You learn quickly—you are a foot soldier, and you are expected to stay a foot soldier, or a hair (*shurrubbaa*) braider. I realise our group was carrying the same value system we claim to be fighting against', She added:

> Women could carry a gun, be spokeswomen, or mobilise for the group under risky conditions, but we were never allowed to contribute to the struggle in meaningful ways. Our liberation was always limited, up to a point. To me, this "our (collective) cause first, your (woman) cause second" mentality is what's costing us our collective liberation, and that's why I chose to leave and fight for my rights from the outside.[132]

These comments highlight how women were encouraged to fuel and bear the weight of resistance, but only up to a certain point. Though the expressions of this marginalisation and gendered negotiation varied, sometimes in names and sometimes in practices, such sexist experiences were shared across these ethnonational armed movements. Taken together, women's participation in ethnonational armed groups in Ethiopia reveals a complex interplay of agency and containment, visibility and silencing, loyalty and disposability. While women played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of these groups, their aspirations for gender and other intersectional equalities were frequently deferred and internalised as being at odds with the larger (male-defined, 'malestreamed') goal of collective liberation.

Fighters first, women later—then women first and fighters no more

This last section of the findings examines whether the latent forms of inclusion that women in ethnonational armed groups experienced during mobilisation continued into the 'after'—however fragile that 'after' may be. While the conflicts examined in the Somali region, Tigray, and Oromia are not fully resolved, the gendered contours of their transitions are beginning to take shape in similar ways.

In contexts where the guns are silent or conditions of peace are being negotiated, and communities are working toward DDR, transitional justice, or peace agreements, men in ethnonational armed groups frequently exhibit what has been described as 'a collective and convenient memory loss' regarding women's contributions.[133] Peace negotiations are almost invariably brokered by men, in what Fionnuala Ní Aoláin calls 'gender-based cooperation between seemingly oppositional elite men

[132] Interview with Former Country Press Representative of the OLA in Kenya (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024. The interviewee now leads the Oromo Democratic Revolutionary Party (ODRP). She continues to speak and write about the challenges she believes have held the OLA back from fully reaching its liberation goals—concerns she explores in more detail in her article here: https://medium.com/@soretika/until-the-former-takes-place-to-a-satisfactory-standard-i-rescind-all-of-my-support-for-the-oromo-a5c3df118890 last accessed 29 April 2025.

[133] Rick Wilford, 'Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Surveying the Ground' in Rick Wilford (ed), *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Routledge 2004), p.3.

whose patriarchal instincts are generally well aligned.'[134] In the rare instances where women are included in political arrangements, agreements, or benefits, they tend to be exceptional figures—women cast in third-gender-like roles,[135] those with close ties to male leaders, or elite civil society archetypes: urbane, educated, and unarmed.[136] An Ogadeeni woman reflected on this dynamic during the ONLF's DDR process, recalling how only one woman received a house through the DDR housing scheme for former ONLF fighters—'and it was not because of what she did or who she is, but because of who her husband is.' [137]

By women's own admission, their identity as 'women-politicised' came only in the midst or aftermath of their armed participation—not before it.[138] Ethnonational organising often flattened or camouflaged internal hierarchies, discouraging the articulation of gender differences as antithetical to unity.[139] Military ethics further positioned dual identification, as a woman and as a fighter, as divisive, even disloyal or unethical.[140] As a result, women learned to 'shed' their gender in order to fight for their nation. Yet in the aftermath, they are asked to pick it back up and return to their 'accustomed place'—regardless of the diverse experiences they bring with them or the lives they now wish to lead.[141]

Women's contributions are often quickly forgotten, but even then, their transgressions remain. Former fighters are routinely stigmatised: cast as promiscuous, unmarriageable, or as one former fighter described, dismissed as 'leftovers from a prolonged sleepover with men.'[142] The same communities that once cheered their participation now punish them for ever stepping outside prescribed norms. One former TDF fighter described her post-war experience as a return to *eneni* (a place in Tigray that literally translates to 'vicious cycle,' a terrain she had once navigated as a fighter): 'I navigated difficult terrains, spent days in hunger, and ate a Plumpy'Nut a day,' she said, referencing the calorie-dense ration used in combat settings. 'But the most difficult vicious cycle that I see myself up against at this stage is thinking this fight would pay off. It has not paid off for women during TPLF times and I highly doubt it will now.' [143] Her disillusionment is not with the war (alone), but with the

[134] Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, *The Relationship of Political Settlement Analysis to Peacebuilding from a Feminist Perspective*, University of Minnesota Law School Legal Studies Research Paper Series No 16-02 (2016), p.7.

[135] As mentioned previously, these are women often described as 'she is not one but four women' or 'she's like a man'—labels that mark their transcendence of conventional gender roles. One such example is Fetlework Gebregziabher (also known as Monjorino) of the TPLF, who is among the few, if not the only, prominent woman figures currently seen in a public representational capacity in Tigray's political space.

[136] Interview with an Ogadeeni policy analyst (woman), virtual, November 2024.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Interview with former OLA fighter (woman), virtual, November 2024; A group interview with three TDF former fighters (women), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[139] Interview with a peace and security policy analyst (man), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[140] Interviews with women former fighters in ONLF, TDF and OLA, August 2024 – January 2025.

[141] Rick Wilford, 'Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Surveying the Ground' in Rick Wilford (ed), *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Routledge 2004), p.2.

[142] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[143] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

betrayals of the (relative) transition to peace. Women who fought on multiple frontlines, up against the state and at times, even against their (sexist) comrades, are now rendered invisible. [144]

These moments of reflection are not isolated. Even women who were not politicised at the outset of their participation often develop a dual consciousness through the armed experience—gendered and political awareness formed in tandem.[145] Across movements, this has translated into a new wave of organising. Former ONLF fighters have formed the Hormud Women's Organisation. Former TPLF fighters created *Ye Hewanwa Rai*, and more recently, former TDF women have come together with their civilian counterparts under the *Ye'akel* banner (then, formally registered as Mardah Tigray Women Veterans' Association in May 2025). These initiatives represent more than women's support networks; they offer alternative political futures within ethnonational organising.

A former OLA mobiliser also described efforts to lay the groundwork for a Pan-African, gender-conscious political party within the Oromo, alongside other women comrades.[146] She noted, for instance, that the *namuusaa* document—OLA's internal code for engaging with broader society—contains no gender-specific provisions. 'Now, we are trying to build political spaces, articulations' she explained, 'where gender is not a postscript but a founding principle, whether the movement wins, loses, or endures.'[147]

Alternative spaces such as these are built on a later reflection that ethnonational non-state armed groups are unreliable sites of full liberation. This gender consciousness emerges from lived contradictions—women learn, through both war and its aftermath, that they are often the easiest to be forgotten. Former fighters also pointed out that this selective remembering is reinforced by external actors, funders, and peace facilitators, who tend to prioritise 'civil society' and 'pacifist elites' in post-conflict programming.[148] Yet former fighters are arguably among those most familiar with the complexities of war and capable of articulating meaningful alternatives to it.[149] To them, their exclusion from post-war processes reflects not the impartiality that development actors often claim, but a form of gendered gatekeeping—where they are the 'leftover women society tries to shed.'[150]

Post-war exclusions are of course not uniform. They are not only gendered but also intersectional. Muslim Tigrayan women, for example, face layered erasures. Speaking to recent news of a hijab ban in Tigrayan schools[151], a former fighter asked, 'How is it that Muslim women could die in hijab for Tigray, but now they cannot wear it in school?' 'How can the same community accept a hijab-wearing

---

[144] Ibid.

[145] Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (University of California Press 2014) 218.

[146] See the work of the Oromo Democratic Revolutionary Party, currently in formation: https://www.facebook.com/walaboomuu.completeliberation last accessed 20 January 2025.

[147] Interview with former country press representative of the OLA in Kenya (woman), Nairobi, Kenya, December 2024.

[148] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[149] Interview with former OLF and later OLA on-the-ground organiser and recruiter (woman), virtual, January 2025.

[150] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[151] '9 Million Children in Ethiopia Out of School; Hijab Ban in Tigray Adds Tension' (*VOA*, 7 January 2025) https://www.voanews.com/a/million-children-in-ethiopia-out-of-school-hijab-ban-in-tigray-adds-tension/7927557.html last accessed 30 March 2025.

martyr but not a hijab-wearing student?' To her, this betrayal revealed that liberation under ethnonational groups has boundaries, among others, gendered and religious. [152]

Women fighters' exclusion is also compounded by deep internal contradictions that saw their political labouring as selfless devotion. Some women who risked their lives in armed groups actively refused post-conflict leadership roles, fearing they would be seen as opportunists. As one Ogadeeni analyst explained:

> One of the women fighters mentioned to others that they should push to be included in the central committee. But many women were against it. They said, "No, we will be seen as using the cause to make a name for ourselves or get positions." They were more selfless in their contribution, unlike the men who were busy vying for political roles.

Today, despite being hailed as the backbone of the ONLF, only five women sit on its central committee, and just two hold executive positions—the majority of which, as she noted, in largely ceremonial roles.[153]

Women also became inconvenient reminders of a past that their ethnonational community and political elite now want to sanitise. Some of this post-conflict erasure and re-domestication is cloaked in the language of care and concern. In interviews, male DDR experts from Tigray and Oromia expressed similar sexist anxieties. Worried that these women had been away from home training for too long, one suggested they be taught traditional/local cooking, 'for the homes they were to build with [normal] men.'[154]

Another expressed discomfort at how women fighters might smell and considered that a good enough reason to push for their disarmament: 'I am not worried about male fighters as much but women, you see, they have their period and no shower or no perfume to put on… I worry about how they smell.'[155] He believed that their disconnect from '*Nivea* and perfume' would be a good selling point to demand their return and downplay their contributions: 'With periods, it would not be equal contributions anyways,' he said—revealing how post-war anxieties are mapped onto women's bodies in deeply visceral ways.[156]

To this, a former TDF fighter responded bluntly:

> These men did not worry about the hygiene of male fighters or even of rural women in the past (a background she came from), who, in the context of Ethiopia, navigate similar menstrual hygiene and health issues. It is the body of the politicised woman that unsettles them most — above all, our bleeding from the vagina [ናይና መሸኒ ምድማዩ እዩ ዘጨንቆ]. We were fighting equally while bleeding from many [other] body parts. Where was the concern then? I think this sudden anxiety that political elites and development workers in reintegration work have with bleeding women post-struggle is their way of undermining, even erasing our contributions.[157]

[152] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

[153] Interview with an Ogadeeni policy analyst (woman), virtual, November 2024.

[154] Interview with DDR facilitator, government advisor (man), virtual, July 2024.

[155] Interview with DDR facilitator, government advisor (man), virtual, December 2024.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025 and with follow-up virtual correspondence until March 2025.

Across the ONLF, TDF, and OLA, the trajectory is strikingly similar: women were essential to the struggle but expendable in the settlement. Their contributions are either silenced or sanitised, with the question of gender repeatedly deferred—first during mobilisations, where they are treated as fighters first and women later; then in the aftermath, where they are recast as an essentialised version of 'woman' only, never again as fighters.[158]

[158] Interview with a former TDF fighter (woman), Mekelle, Ethiopia, January 2025.

Conclusion

This report has examined women's participation in three ethnonational armed groups: the OLA, the ONLF, and their transnational cross-border dynamics, as well as the TDF and its local cross-border operations. By centring women's experiences and articulations, the report finds that their involvement is strategic, politically situated, and agentive, not passive or ungendered. From Moyale to T(s)elemt(i) to Ogaden, women counter the weight of collective marginalisation and violence, including gendered violence, not as singular events but as ongoing politicising processes. In navigating both transnational and internal, physical and social borders, including gender boundaries within armed groups, their participation in ethnonational armed mobilisations shape the contours of border relations and conflicts alike. Therefore, the intentional centring of their participation in this report is not merely an act of representational inclusion, but a means of seeking a full-picture strategic insight.

Key policy considerations

These policy considerations offer a feminist, inclusive understanding of ethnonational and security issues, spanning both transnational and internal borders. They target three key stakeholder groups: (1) the states where ethnonational mobilisations occur, (2) external states and intergovernmental bodies that fund and support peace processes in these regions and (3) ethnonational non-state armed groups undergoing political and civilian transitions. The author also hopes that sub-national governance actors, particularly those administering border communities, engage with these insights.

For states where ethnonational armed group mobilisation occurs:

1. Recognise and address structural drivers of ethnonational armed mobilisations

    1.1. States should acknowledge historical and ongoing structural grievances, including political marginalisation and identity-targeted security measures. Armed groups like the OLA, ONLF, and TDF often emerge in response to either long-standing grievances or short-percolating, identity-based triggers or insecurities, creating fertile grounds for broad-based resistance.

    1.2. States should attend to neglected internal and transnational border regions. This should include taking proactive measures to address questions of infrastructural development, political inclusion, and representational issues, the vacuum of which is often filled by and draws the appeal of ethnonational armed groups who are then seen as alternative or reserve powers.

    1.3. States should rethink security models, especially those targeting cross-border communities with shared ethnonational identities like the Oromo and Somali, whose kinship and socio-cultural ties are often treated as security threats. States should instead adopt security measures that are community-informed, accountable and trust-building rather than punitive.

2. Take gender-responsive measures in border and security governance

    2.1. States should adopt gender-responsive approaches to policing and border management that recognise women in border communities as valuable security and development

stakeholders including as economic drivers. These approaches must aid women's meaningful economic participation in both formal and informal sectors, rather than viewing them as insignificant actors and subjects of suspicion and surveillance.

2.2. States should work with neighbouring security apparatuses to uphold gender-responsive and rights-based approaches and hold each other accountable in managing cross-border dynamics. This should include accommodating the sociocultural identities of transnational ethnic populations, even in contexts of ongoing volatility, by prioritising inclusive, consultative and context-informed engagement.

3. Ensure inclusive and representative participation of women in peace processes

3.1. States should guarantee the participation of women from diverse socio-political backgrounds, including former fighters, mobilisers, and members of border communities, in national dialogues, ceasefire negotiations, reintegration efforts and post-conflict reconstruction. Where past processes have excluded these voices, as in the case of Ethiopia, they should take corrective action through measures such as dedicated quotas and targeted outreach to ensure that women directly involved in or affected by ethnonational armed struggles are not absent again.

3.2. States should acknowledge and support women-led post-disarmament/peace initiatives such as *Ye'akel*, *Mardah Tigray Women Veterans' Association* and *the Hormud Women's Organisation* as legitimate political actors emerging from ethnonational movements. These former fighters and organisers should be actively included in political recruitment pools and governance consultation spaces, not as tokenistic, symbolic additions but as part of the broader pool of political leadership and expertise shaped by conflict experiences.

For supporters and funders of peace processes:

1. Make your support and facilitation role gender-responsive by including women as key political stakeholders of their own peace. Peace processes, from funding to facilitation, should meaningfully include women from diverse backgrounds—as fighters, mobilisers, and borderland residents—not just urban civil society voices. This inclusion should reflect and engage with women's lived experiences and articulations to inform peace process frameworks. Particularly, in ceasefire and peace negotiations led by the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), or the United Nations (UN), there should be a deliberate effort to include women with firsthand experience in ethnonational armed movements such as the OLA, TDF, and ONLF, recognising their strategic knowledge and political stake in lasting peace. This same gender-responsive approach should be adopted by DDR funders, whether they are individual foreign donors or pooled funding mechanisms, to improve how they include women in their programming.

2. Support inclusive regional dialogue across borders. In contexts like the Ethiopia-Kenya-Somalia border regions, ensure that peace processes address all sides of the border and include cross-border ethnonational groups. These peace-making considerations should encompass cross-border security issues, including gender-based violence by state forces, lack of infrastructural development and other political marginalisation claims, as well as the spillover effects of conflicts—all through a feminist peace and security lens.

3. Recognise internal borders as critical sites of contestation in peace processes and conflict analysis in a conflict sensitive manner. As ethnonational identities become increasingly hardened and salient along these internal lines, these areas should be regarded as key zones of political contestation—requiring targeted research and policy attention.

For ethnonational non-state armed groups in transition:

1. Institutionalise gender-responsive leadership in transitional processes

    1.1. Ethnonational armed groups should mandate gender parity across all transitional leadership structures, including peace agreement delegations, DDR committees, and political recruitment steering bodies.

    1.2. Groups should reserve, or advocate for the reservation of, leadership quotas specifically for former women fighters—ensuring the fighters and their gender agendas are not represented merely by civil society or 'peaceful' proxies but recognised in their own right as political actors with lived experience of ethnonational political organising.

    1.3. Gender audits should be systematically applied to political appointments, decision making bodies, and resource allocations in the post-conflict phase. These audits should function not only as tools of accountability but also as corrective mechanisms for addressing gender inequalities inherited from mobilisation and pre-mobilisation era.

    1.4. Women's participation in post-conflict governance should be affirmed as a political right in both transitional frameworks/documents and governance practice. Former women fighters, political educators, and mobilisers should be intentionally integrated into the central political and institutional architecture, rather than relegated to marginalised or auxiliary 'women's affairs'-type portfolios.

2. Formalise and gender-sensitise recognition of women fighters in DDR programmes

    2.1. Ethnonational armed groups should ensure that DDR processes formally and explicitly recognise women's fighter status in all registries and eligibility assessments. Women should not be filtered through relational categories (e.g., wives, widows, lovers) that obscure their direct participation in armed struggle.

    2.2. Ethnonational armed groups should shape reintegration packages through gender-sensitive consultations with a broad cross-section of former women fighters and ethnonational political mobilisers. They should reject reductive portrayals of women as domestically bound and instead reflect women's own visions for their post-conflict trajectories—whether in public, political, domestic, or organising spheres.

3. Support autonomous women's political organising

    3.1. Political, bureaucratic, and material support should be extended to women-led organisations formed by former fighters (e.g., Hormud Women's Organisation of ONLF fighters, Mardah Tigray Women Veterans' Association of TDF fighters).

    3.2. Veteran organisations formed by former women fighters should be recognised as equal partners in national, regional, and international peacebuilding processes, including when they operate independently of parent armed groups. Ethnonational armed groups should actively facilitate, and where necessary advocate for their engagement with states, donors, and mediators as legitimate interlocutors in national dialogue, transitional justice, and DDR processes.

References

Alison M, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (Routledge 2009).

Baldwin F, 'A Soldier and a Woman: (Re)Negotiating Gender in Female Narratives of Civil Conflict in Tigray, Ethiopia' (2022) 28 *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* 30-45.

Berhe A, 'The Origins of the Tigray People's Liberation Front' (2004) 103 *African Affairs* 413-573.

Burgess G, 'A Hidden History: Women's Activism in Ethiopia' (2013) 14 *Journal of International Women's Studies* 101-120.

Chemeda GW, '"OLA Is the Shield of the Oromo People": The Uses of Violence and Regime-Making in Oromia, Ethiopia' (2024) 173 *Politique Africaine* 125-150.

Degefa HB, *Gender and Violent Extremism in Ethiopia* (European Institute of Peace 2021).

Enloe C, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (University of California Press 2014).

Gatenby B and Humphries M, 'Feminist Participatory Action Research: Methodological and Ethical Issues' (2000) 23 *Women's Studies International Forum* 89-103.

Giri K, 'Do all women combatants experience war and peace uniformly? Intersectionality and women combatants.' (2021) 1 (2) *Global Studies Quarterly* 1-11.

Hadjipavlou M and Mertan B, 'Cypriot Feminism: An Opportunity to Challenge Gender Inequalities and Promote Women's Rights and a Different Voice' (2010) 22 (2) *Cyprus Review* 247-268.

Hagmann T, *Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The Search for an End to Conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia* (Rift Valley Institute 2014).

Handrahan L, 'Conflict, gender, ethnicity and post-conflict reconstruction.' (2004) 35(4) *Security Dialogue* 429-445.

Harrell B, 'Can't Live with Them or Can't Live without Them? How Varying Roles of Women in Rebel Groups Influence One-Sided Violence' (2023) 49 (6) International *Studies Quarterly* 875-903.

Jalata A, 'The Oromo Liberation Front and Its Long Journey: Achievements, Challenges, and Resilience' (2024) *Humanity & Society* 27-45.

Kochore H and Bagaja I, *Informal Trade, Gender and Conflict Dynamics on the New Kenya–Ethiopia Trade Corridor* (Rift Valley Institute 2025).

Kumsa MK et al., 'Catching the Shimmers of the Social: From the Limits of Reflexivity to Methodological Creativity' (2015) 15 *Qualitative Research* 419-435.

Kumsa MK, 'At Issue: Learning Not to Become Oromo - Chasing the Ghosts Chasing John Sorenson' (2002) 9 *Northeast African Studies* 169-190.

Kumsa MK, 'Oromo Women and the Oromo National Movement: Dilemmas, Problems and Prospects for True Liberation' in Asafa Jalata (ed), *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse: The Search for Freedom and Democracy* (Red Sea Press 1998) 153-182.

Kumsa MK, 'Shifting Spaces of Justice and the Poetics of Be-Longing' (2005) 4 *Currents: Scholarship in the Human Services* 1-15.

Lokot M, 'Whose Voices? Whose Knowledge? A Feminist Analysis of the Value of Key Informant Interviews' (2021) 20 (1) *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 1–8.

Macklin A, 'Like Oil and Water, with a Match: Militarized Commerce, Armed Conflict and Human Security in Sudan' in Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (eds), *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* (University of California Press 2004) 79-102.

Magadla S, 'Theorizing African Women and Girls in Combat: From National Liberation to the War on Terrorism' in Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan 2021) 569-586.

Marks Z, 'Gender Dynamics in Rebel Groups' in Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward (eds), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Gender and the Military* (Palgrave Macmillan 2017) 437-452.

McHugh MC, 'Feminist Qualitative Research: Working Toward Transforming Science and Social Justice' in Patricia Leavy (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd edn, OUP 2020) 213-230.

Netsanet S, 'A Personal Testimony from a Combatant in the Tigrayan Defense Forces' (2024) 173 *Politique Africaine* 1-50.

Ní Aoláin F, *The Relationship of Political Settlement Analysis to Peacebuilding from a Feminist Perspective*, University of Minnesota Law School Legal Studies Research Paper Series No 16-02 (2016).

Stern O, *Evidence Synthesis: Women and Cross-Border Trade in Africa During Times of Conflict* (XCEPT, June 2024).

Tezcür GM, 'A Path Out of Patriarchy? Political Agency and Social Identity of Women Fighters' (2020) 18 (3) *Perspectives on Politics* 722-739.

Van Hauwermeiren R, 'The Ogaden War: Somali Women's Roles' (2012) 25 (2) *Afrika Focus* 9-30.

Wasserman H, 'The Incompleteness of Knowledge Production: An Interview with Francis Nyamnjoh' (2022) 43 *African Journalism Studies* 1-15.

Wilford R, 'Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: Surveying the Ground' in Rick Wilford (ed), *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Routledge 2004) 1-24.

Wood RM and Thomas JL, 'Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participation in Violent Rebellion' (2017) 54 *Journal of Peace Research* 1-37.

Online sources

'Conducting Research Amidst Conflict with Zoe Marks and Will Reno' (*Stories from the Field podcast*, 23 February 2021) https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/conducting-research-amidst-conflict-with-zoe-marks/id1550505169?i=1000510363538 last accessed 6 April 2025.

'Deadly Gold Rush: Military Commanders, Former Combatants, Foreign Players Scramble for Tigray's Bullion' (*The Reporter*, 13 July 2024) https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/41076/ last accessed 23 April 2025.

'Ethiopia: Army Commits Executions, Torture, and Rape in Ogaden' (*Human Rights Watch*, 12 June 2008) https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/06/12/ethiopia-army-commits-executions-torture-and-rape-ogaden last accessed 24 April 2025.

'Ethiopia to Designate TPLF, OLF-Shene as Terror Groups' (*Al Jazeera*, 1 May 2021) https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/1/ethiopia-to-designate-tplf-olf-shene-as-terror-groups last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘Ethiopia and Kenya Sign Defence Cooperation Agreement Covering Intelligence Sharing, Joint Exercises and Border Security’ (*Addis Standard*, 24 September 2025) https://addisstandard.com/ethiopia-kenya-sign-defense-cooperation-agreement-covering-intelligence-sharing-joint-exercises-and-border-security/ last accessed 24 September 2025.

‘Ethiopia and Tigray forces resume hostilities’ (*CNN*, 24 August 2022) https://edition.cnn.com/2022/08/24/africa/ethiopia-tigray-resume-hostilities-intl last accessed 23 April 2025.

‘Ethiopia Removes Terrorist Designation from Dominant Tigray Party’ (*Al Jazeera*, 22 March 2023) https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/update-1-ethiopia-removes-terrorist-designation-from-dominant-tigray-party last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘Ethiopia is Said to Block Food to Rebel Region’ (*The New York Times*, 22 July 2007) https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/22/world/africa/22ethiopia.html last accessed 23 April 2025.

‘Ethiopia Signs Deal with Oromo rebels to End Hostilities’ (*Al Jazeera*, 7 August 2018) https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2018/8/7/ethiopia-signs-deal-with-oromo-rebels-to-end-hostilities last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘From Truce to Threat: New Path to Insurgency Looms Over Somali Region Amid Unmet Peace Deal Promises with ONLF’ (*Addis Standard*, 17 March 2025) https://addisstandard.com/from-truce-to-threat-new-path-to-insurgency-looms-over-somali-region-amid-unmet-peace-deal-promises-with-onlf/ last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘Gov't, ONLF Sign Peace Deal’ (*ReliefWeb*, 6 September 2018) https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/gov-t-onlf-sign-peace-deal last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘Kenya Launches Security Operation Targeting OLA ‘Hideouts’; Armed Group Denies Criminal Links’ (*Addis Standard*, 10 February 2025) https://addisstandard.com/kenya-launches-security-operation-targeting-ola-hideouts-armed-group-denies-criminal-links/ last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘“No-one Can Handle Another War” - Tigrayans Fear Fresh Ethiopian Conflict’ (*BBC News*, 18 March 2025) https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cq8ywlk8n4yo last accessed 6 April 2025.

‘Partnerships for Peace: Success in Marsabit County’ (*Saferworld*) https://www.saferworld-global.org/en-stories-of-change/partnerships-for-peace-success-in-marsabit-county last accessed 16 April 2025.

‘Sexual Violence with Special Emphasis on Sexual Aggression in Oromia Regional State in Ethiopia’ (*Advocacy for Oromia*, 6 February 2015) https://advocacy4oromia.org/forum/sexual-violence-with-special-emphasis-on-sexual-aggression-in-oromia/ last accessed 28 April 2025.

State House Kenya, ‘Inauguration of the Moyale One Stop Border Post’ (Official Facebook page) https://www.facebook.com/StateHouseKenya/videos/inauguration-of-the-moyale-one-stop-border-post/384538736183298/ last accessed 16 April 2025.

‘Tigray Defence Forces Female Fighters’ (*Ethiopia Autonomous Media*, 12 October 2022) https://ethiopia.me.uk/tigray-defence-forces-female-fighters/ last accessed 3 March 2025.

‘Until the Former Takes Place to a Satisfactory Standard, I Rescind all of My Support for the Oromo Liberation Army.’ (*Medium*, 7 February 2025) https://medium.com/@soretika/until-the-former-takes-place-to-a-satisfactory-standard-i-rescind-all-of-my-support-for-the-oromo-a5c3df118890 last accessed 29 April 2025.

‘Why is Kenya's Government Silent on Ethiopia Crackdown?’ (*Human Rights Watch*, 24 March 2018) https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/24/why-kenyas-government-silent-ethiopia-crackdown last accessed 17 April 2025.

‘Women in the Workplace 2024’ (*McKinsey & Company*, 2024) https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace last accessed 28 April 2025.

‘9 Million Children in Ethiopia Out of School; Hijab Ban in Tigray Adds Tension’ (*Voice of America*, 7 January 2025) https://www.voanews.com/a/million-children-in-ethiopia-out-of-school-hijab-ban-in-tigray-adds-tension/7927557.html last accessed 30 March 2025.

UK International Development

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

XCEPT

CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS