



WOMEN IN CONFLICT: THE STRUGGLES OF YOUNG MOTHERS IN TIGRAY

In early November 2020, when the Tigray region was plunged into conflict, its population was scattered across the region. This placed enormous economic strain on communities and aggravated Tigray's already dire food shortages. With eighty percent of the population typically relying on agriculture for their livelihood, the conflict left millions in acute food insecurity.

The fighting erupted during the harvest season, destroying crops, livestock and tools needed to grow food, forcing farmers to harvest in meager conditions. For women who had lost their husbands and sons, the changes meant stepping outside of traditional roles and going against all odds caring for and supporting their families.

Hunesh Hagos is one of many women who now carry the sole responsibility of supporting a family. At just twenty-four years old, the mother of two described how the dynamic of her family has changed.

"Before the conflict, my husband had a good job as a mechanic at a private organization but when the owner was killed, he was forced to leave and stay home."

With little money, Hunesh quickly made the decision to travel to nearby markets to buy vegetables to sell to her local community.

"I travel to the market three times a week," she says. "I wish I could go every day but the market is far, and I can't afford the transportation cost."

The risks associated with travelling long distances are very high for women like Hunesh.

"Just last week, when I went to the market, the roads were open, but when I returned in the afternoon, they were closed, and vehicles weren't allowed to pass through. I was very worried because I needed to return home to breastfeed my daughter. I couldn't wait - it took me two hours to walk home."

Meaza Negussie, a widow who shares Hunesh's story, having lost her own husband in the conflict, now lives alone with her two children, aged 4 and 9.

“It took me many years and a lot of money to obtain a civil engineer degree,” she says. “I worked as a data clerk and later as a site supervisor for private contractors and got paid well. Yet now I have lost both my husband and my job.”

The conflict destroyed ongoing infrastructure projects, forcing contractors to freeze operations, and lay off many employees.

“With a degree, before the conflict, I had no problem getting a job, there used to be many opportunities. Now I can’t even get a low-level administrative job. No one wants to hire me in these difficult times because they too are facing their own hurdles,” Meaza says.

The turn of events left Meaza as sole breadwinner, she now earns a small amount of money washing clothes for her neighbors.

“Paying for rent and covering my children’s school fees was never a problem, but with my husband gone and without a steady income, I find myself choosing between feeding my children or paying rent.”

Since 2012, Catholic Relief Services, under the Joint Emergency Operations Program (JEOP), has been providing emergency food assistance to food-insecure families in six out of ten regions of Ethiopia. Since the start of the conflict in Tigray in November 2020, the project scaled up support, to cover 58 districts in the region (up from 12 in October 2020) and reach 71% of the region’s population with food assistance. Approximately half of the people reached are women living in extreme poverty, internally displaced or survivors of rape or other abuse. The principle implementing partner in Tigray for joint project is the Relief Society of Tigray (REST).

The project provides wheat, yellow split peas and vegetable oil to households in times of crisis.

“With the current situation, I could have never afforded to buy these foods. But now I can make injera (traditional flatbread) with the wheat and use the peas to make stew for me and my children” Hunesh says.

“It was never easy saying no when my children asked for food,” Meaza says. “Especially after they got used to the life my late husband and I had offered them. However, with the food we received from JEOP partner REST, I can continue feeding them without worrying about the next day.”

Women play prominent roles in post-conflict settings, taking on new responsibilities for family income and becoming heads of households. They often assume the primary responsibility for ensuring the survival of families when their spouses have lost their jobs, have died, or been displaced. It is therefore critically important to support women in these times, so that they are able to mentally and physically resume day to day activities.

The joint operation project’s efforts to highlight the perspectives of women in conflict remains a priority while it continues to circulate mass food distributions and improve resilience among vulnerable communities.

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