

The Role of Educated/Intellectual Women in  
Ethiopia in the Process of Change and  
Transformation towards Gender Equality  
1974-2005

by

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## Summary

### **Title of thesis: The Role of Educated/Intellectual Women in Ethiopia in the Process of Change and Transformation towards Gender Equality 1974-2005**

This thesis is a critical review of educated women's leadership in their emancipation in Ethiopia. Did they provide leadership and to what extent? It is to be noted that educated women's leadership has been of great importance to women's emancipation worldwide. Strong leadership was also the driving force behind women's movements and feminism everywhere. However, the role of educated women in Ethiopia is hard to discern and their leadership efforts are largely invisible. On the other hand, many among the educated also lack the passion and desire to commit themselves in the fight for women's emancipation.

In this thesis I researched the settings and frameworks of women's leadership and discussed the factors that function as limitations and/or opportunities. Overall there were more limitations than opportunities. These limitations are often historically rooted in the country's religious, cultural, economic, political and traditional systems. And, as much as history and religion can be a source of strength and pride for many, they can also be a serious obstacle. The political regime of the Derg also scarred an entire population to the extent that despite the currently proclaimed 'freedom' of the EPRDF ruling party, women remain reluctant to step forward and claim their rights.

The ruling party appears to appropriate women's emancipation as a "private" interest and to use it for political gain, in the same manner as the Derg regime had done before it. Nowhere is there any sign of genuine freedom and equality for women in practice. Rhetoric reigns supreme through laws and policy documents, but they are not matched by genuine actions and concrete strategies. The traditional religious base of society is also making it more difficult to challenge autocratic tendencies of the ruling elite. The effect is that civil society is slowly being pushed to extinction, leaving the ruling party in charge as the main actor in all public services. This has serious consequences for the genuine emancipation of women in the country.

The thesis finds that women's leadership is not a luxury or personal demand, but a crucial step for the development of the country at large. It is encouraging to note that there are different sections of active women in the country waiting for strong leadership, leadership that can unite them into a movement and guide them on their unique emancipation paths. After all, it is only women themselves who, with their existing epistemic advantage, can transform their situation and change their status.

Key terms: educated women, Ethiopia, feminism, feminist discourse, leadership, women's emancipation, women's movement

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**THE ROLE OF EDUCATED/INTELLECTUAL WOMEN IN  
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TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY 1974-2005**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the degree PhD in Sociology  
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## **Contents**

Acronyms

Foreword

### **Chapter 1**

1.1 Background

1.2 Statement of the problem

1.3 Hypothesis

1.4 Methodology

1.5 Structure of the study

### **Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework**

2.1 Ideology and feminist leadership

2.1.1 Women's movements

The base of women's movements

2.1.2 Feminism

The ideological base of feminism

2.1.3 Feminist leadership and vision

2.1.4 African Feminism

Ideological differences between Western and African feminism: link to Ethiopia

2.1.5 Feminist subjectivity, agency and experience

2.2 Ideology and control: A feminist approach

2.2.1 The dominant ruling ideology and political culture influencing the position and status of women prior to 1974 in Ethiopia

Illusionary gender ideology

2.2.2 The state and women

Women, the state and representation

2.2.3 Education

Modern education

Role of educated women

2.2.4 Media and literature holding the key to women's emancipation

The strength of the media and women's representation

2.2.5 Religion and women

Religious and political ideology and women's rights

Religious indoctrination and women's agency

2.2.6 Freedom

2.3 Conclusion

### **Chapter 3 Historical overview on the status background of women in Ethiopia: locating women's agency**

- 3.1 The pride about Ethiopian history: The legend of a female queen
- 3.2 Empress Taytu's leadership roles
  - 3.2.1 Empress Taytu's stance on women's rights
- 3.3 Modernization in women's lives
  - 3.3.1 Empress Zewditu's short-lived legacy
- 3.4 Women's Associations and Leadership
- 3.5 First female students
  - 3.5.1 The road to (female) students' radicalization
  - 3.5.2 Student movement abroad
- 3.6 The 'Woman Question'
  - 3.6.1 The 'woman question' in Ethiopia: The first wave
- 3.7 Conclusion

### **Chapter 4: A New Political Era 1974-1991: the end of a beginning**

- 4.1 'Zemecha': An instrument to advance the 'woman question'
- 4.2 Women's Committee and the upsurge of a women's movement
  - 4.2.1 The end of MEISON and EPRP: Red Terror and its impact on the women's movement
- 4.3 Associations as social control agents
  - 4.3.1 Ethiopian Women's Work Association during the Derg
  - 4.3.2 Ethiopian Mother's Association
  - 4.3.3 Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association-REWA
- 4.4 A critique of Derg's policies and REWA
  - 4.4.1 International Women's Day in Ethiopia during the Derg
- 4.5 Women's leadership in REWA and the Derg
- 4.6 Conclusion

### **Chapter 5 A new political era: A new discourse on 'gender'**

- 5.1 The Transition: 1991-1994
  - 5.1.1 Background to TPLF/EPRDF
- 5.2 Encroachment on civil society
- 5.3 A new discourse on 'gender': The rhetoric of state-defined 'woman question'
- 5.4 National Machinery for the Advancement of Women or instruments of control?
  - 5.4.1 Problems with the NWM
- 5.5 The National Policy on Ethiopian Women (NPEW)
  - 5.5.1 Critical review of the NPEW
- 5.6 The Constitution, international treaties and affirmative measures
  - 5.6.1 A critical review on legislation regarding women's rights
- 5.7 The myth about decentralization and women's emancipation
- 5.8 Women's organizations and NGOs
- 5.9 Conclusion

## **Chapter 6 Overview of the status of women in Ethiopia between 1974 and 2005: What are the changes?**

- 6.1 Child marriage
  - 6.1.1 Child marriage in pre-1991 era
  - 6.1.2 Child marriage at present
  - 6.1.3 Single women's status
- 6.2 Division of labour
  - 6.2.1 Division of labour in pre-1991 era
  - 6.2.2 Division of labour at present
- 6.3 Health
  - 6.3.1 Health status of women in the pre-1991 era
  - 6.3.2 Health status of women at present
  - 6.3.3 HIV/AIDS: further crippling women's fragile status
- 6.4 Education
  - 6.4.1 Education of women in the pre-1991 era
  - 6.4.2 Education of women at present
  - Education curricula and state indoctrination
- 6.5 Employment
  - 6.5.1 Women's employment in the pre-1991 era
  - 6.5.2 Women's employment at present
- 6.6 Gendered poverty
- 6.7 Violence against Women
  - Magnitude of violence in Ethiopia
  - Social and economic costs of violence
  - Response to violence
    - 6.7.1 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
    - 6.7.2 Rape
    - 6.7.3 Abduction
    - 6.7.4 Domestic violence
    - 6.7.5 Trafficking in women
- 6.8 Women in leadership and politics
  - 6.8.1 Affirmative Action in politics: will that bring out feminism?
- 6.9 Conclusion

## **Chapter 7 Problems of educated women's leadership and actions in their quest for emancipation and change**

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Leadership problems among women in Ethiopia
  - 7.2.1 Symbolic leadership
  - 7.2.2 Problems of perceptions
  - 7.2.3 Authoritarian tendency and hierarchy
  - 7.2.4 Need for acknowledgement
  - 7.2.5 The generation gap

- 7.2.6 “Gerontocracy” syndrome
  - 7.2.7 Lack of organization and networking
  - 7.2.8 Co-optation and submission
  - 7.2.9 Depoliticization and deradicalization of the gender agenda
  - 7.2.10 Tokenism vs. vigilance
  - 7.2.11 Competition, schism and demise
  - 7.2.12 A deficient intellectual base
  - 7.2.13 “Suitcase” feminists
  - 7.2.14 Careerism and the issue of relinquishing one’s principles
  - 7.2.15 Brain drain
  - 7.2.16 Advocacy and intellect
- 7.3. Conclusion

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Women’s movement and feminism in Ethiopia at present
  - 8.2.1 The academic level
  - 8.2.2 The ruling party/political level
  - 8.2.3 The NGO/civil society level
  - 8.2.4 The grassroots level
- 8.3 Feminism in Ethiopia
- 8.4 Importance of leadership

## List of Acronyms

AAU	Addis Ababa University
A.D.	Anno Domini
ADLI	Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization Policy
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
BA	Bachelor of Arts
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women
CERTWID	Center for Education Research and Training on Women in Development
COPWE	Commission of Workers Party of Ethiopia
CBO	Community Based Organizations
CRDA	Christian Relief and Development Association
CSA	Central Statistical Authority
Derg	The Armed Forces Co-ordinating Committee
DPPC	Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Commission
EMA	Ethiopian Mothers' Association
EMWA	Ethiopian Media Women's Association
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLO	Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ESUE	Ethiopian Students Union in Europe
ESUNA	Ethiopian Students Union in North America
ETV	Ethiopian TeleVision
EUSP	Ethiopian University Service Programme
EWLA	Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association
EWWA	Ethiopian Women's Work Association
FAWE-Ethiopia	Forum of African Women Educationalists
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GAD	Gender and Development
GAW	Donor Group for the Advancement of Women
GER	Gross Enrolment Rate
GONGO	Government NGO
GPA	Grade Point Average
HSDP	Health Sector Development Programme
IGS	Institute of Gender Studies
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IWD	International Women's Day
MA	Master of Arts
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MEISON	All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (Mela Ethiopia Sosialist Niqinaqē)
MoE	Ministry of Education

MoFED	Ministry of Finance and Economic Development
MoH	Ministry of Health
NAPGE	National Action Plan for Gender Equality
NCTPE	National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia
NER	Net Enrolment Rate
NEWA	Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NPEW	National Policy on Ethiopian Women
NWM	National Women's Machinery
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organization
PA	Peasant Association
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
POMOA	Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
REWA	Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association
REYA	Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association
SELMA	Women's Consultancy and Communication Service
SEPDF	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front
SNNPR	Southern Nations and Nationalities Regional States
STD	Sexually Transmitted Disease
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
US	United States
USUAA	University Students Union of Addis Ababa
VaW	Violence against Women
WA	Women Association
WAB	Women's Affairs Bureau
WAD	Women's Affairs Department
WAO	Women's Affairs Office
WB	World Bank
WCC	Woman's Co-ordinating Committee
WDA	Women's Democratic Association
WDIP	Women's Development Initiative Project
WEAF	Women's Empowerment and Assistance Forum
WFAT	Woman Fighter's Association of Tigray
WID	Women in Development
WISE	Women in Self Employment
Woyane	EPRDF/TPLF
WSO	Women's Support Organization
W/zo	Woizero

## List of Tables

Table 1	Gross and net enrolment rates (%) by age group and levels of school
Table 2	Percentage Distribution of Population Aged 5 Years and Over by Status of School Attendance, Sex, Urban and Rural, Ethiopia: 1994
Table 3	Economically active population by sex and employment status, Addis Ababa, Census 1994
Table 4	Percentage Distribution of Currently Employed Population of Urban Areas aged ten years and over by Sex and Employment Status, country Total: 2006
Table 5	Gender-based violence throughout the female life cycle in Ethiopia
Table 6	Women's opinions on wife beating, Ethiopia 2000

## Annexes

### Annexure I

Women's Question

Seven Point Resolution on the Women's Question at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of ESUNA, August 27, 1971 (*SPARK*, 1971: 32-33).

### Annexure II

'On the women's Question' in the *Monthly Journal of the Worldwide Union of Ethiopian Students*, November 1975, "Political Resolution of the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE), Vol. 3, No. 3, Stockholm, Sweden, p. 32

### Annexure III

'On the Women Question in Modes of Production and Class Analysis in Ethiopia', in *Challenge*, A journal of the World-wide Union of Ethiopian Students, published by the Ethiopian Students Union in North America, Volume XII, Number 1, November 1971.

### Annexure IV.

Proverbs on women in Ethiopia (Yeshi Habte Mariam: 1995)

## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background**

Ethiopian society at present is marked by scant modernity dominated by traditional lifestyles. This gives rise to serious contradictions which can be observed not only between the traditional and modern visible influences but also at the level of ideology. In turn, these contradictions reflect a way of life of inhibiting double standards at all levels and in many forms. This includes state and religious institutions. Sincerity and genuine commitment have become far-fetched. For instance, in the area of women's equality and rights, numerous legislative measures and policies appear to be transformed into symbolic instruments and used as political decorations. There is no effort to assert their implementation as postulated. Moreover, women themselves are not ignorant bystanders in promoting such double standards.

Some feminists and women's groups on the African continent proclaim that women in Ethiopia are the most advanced in terms of the conduciveness towards women's rights of their legal and policy environment. But the reality in the country reveals otherwise. The presence of such a conducive system could have assisted in furthering advocacy and lobbying work on women's rights. However, in Ethiopia, the problems linked to women's issues still linger between rhetoric and practice. There is a tremendous inconsistency between laws on paper and the reality of practice where, often, they even end up competing against each other. This disjuncture is also observed among educated women.

This could be blamed on the successive political ruling groups and the traditional base of society embedded in high levels of religiosity. The dominant role of the ruling party in taking the lead on women's emancipation should be read very cautiously. First the Derg, and now the EPRDF regime, both brought their own agendas in which women's emancipation was sheltered under their unique paradigms of the "woman question". These paradigms were and still are embedded in the overall political rule where party interest precedes all else and where the advancement of any section of society is a calculated move to political interest. This makes women's rights a remote issue to be considered.

UN reports and studies claim that Ethiopian women's socio-economic status and position is still among the worst in the world (UNICEF, November 2004). Abebech (2003), who has been an active campaigner against harmful traditional practices in Ethiopia, lists many forms of traditional practices that are harmful to girls and women. These find justification in religion, cultures and traditions. Issues such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, incisions, scarification, marriage by abduction and so forth, mostly impact negatively on women. The range of violations of women's rights takes many forms, ranging from visible forms of physical abuse and torture to the psychological forms of deliberate discrimination, exclusion, terrorization, subjugation, subjection,

subordination and exploitation. Most of these are historically closely intertwined in women's daily lives as the norm through their cultural, religious or traditional identities to such an extent that they are not realized or recognized as violations. Anything considered part of the ancient Ethiopian traditional and customary heritage, including various forms of violations of women's rights, is often fervently defended. This explains how women's rights are often used as possessions to be bargained and used at will by the patriarchy whenever convenient.

Before continuing with this study, it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between women's differential experiences of subordination and oppression. Women in Ethiopia, belonging to various religious and ethnic groups and classes, have their own unique sense of subordination and oppression. While educated, middle-class women may have their own impressions of their status and position, rural women in the different regions and among the different cultural groups may have a completely different set of impressions. For example, issues relating to the implementation of gender laws vary from region to region and culture to culture. While some women in the Tigray region might have benefited from the implementation of some of the federal laws regarding gender equality in land holdings and inheritance, women in the Amhara regions remain culturally discriminated against in terms of land ownership. But within the Tigray region itself there might be distinctions between the various religious, ethnic and social class groups, with the result that not all women may be able to benefit from the application of this particular law equally. In urban areas, distinctions based upon ethnicity might not be such a major issue as class distinctions. Urban women do have a higher chance to be educated and claim their rights benefiting from the various federal laws than women in rural area.

This thesis will focus on educated urban women not as ethnic groups, but as an intellectual group that is in charge of the national women's and gender discourse or has a role to play within this. Among the educated in Ethiopia, ethnicity does not play a significant role (except in political circles) and educated women from different ethnic backgrounds are often found working together for the betterment of women's lives in the country in general or for some particular groups. For example, some non-pastoralist educated women research and promote the advancement of women in the pastoralist regions. The government's policy on regional and ethnic segregation might have added a dimension of segregation among educated women, but in urban areas this is minimized.

One may question why the focus on the already over-highlighted educated women, who appear to have everything? During my observations and interactive work with them, the pressure became stronger to look into the minds and thinking of this group of women and their attitudes on issues of gender equality. The propensity to question and challenge this group from the inside was overwhelming. Indeed, it often happens in liberal democracies that one assumes that educated women are more liberated and benefit more from state policies. This group is also seen, because of its class position, as enlightened, free and radical.

In the early twentieth century in the West, educated women were seen as the first group of women who managed to succeed, who were privileged, advantaged, and who were

able to radically change the mind-set of their societies regarding women's rights. In Ethiopia too, it was the educated women who initiated the various women's associations at the time of Emperor Haile Selassie and kept an organizational leadership role within those. At present, it is often assumed that educated women have a role to play in the betterment of the lives of grassroots women. It is therefore crucial to look into the factors that hinder or promote these educated women in putting these expectations into practice. Considering the uniqueness of nations and their histories, educated Ethiopian women also have a unique history. And it is the translation of this history to the present that can determine how and why educated women are proceeding as they do.

The scarcity of available recorded data on women in Ethiopia clearly illustrates the bias in male-centred recording. The "historical"<sup>1</sup> collection of data portrays the one-sided image of only a few elite women who at one time or another in Ethiopian history, have played such prominent roles that the "history" of the country could not be written without their inclusion. The "historical" documentation of the country starts with a legendary female ruler, the Queen of Sheba (who is also claimed by Yemenis) and the myth of her union with Solomon (King of Israel). The legend attached to the Queen is one of the major sources of pride in the country's 3000 years of history.

Many other females who came into limelight mainly documented in the past 2000 years (with data lacking on the 1000 years after Sheba's rule) of male-centred "history" and worthy of notice were similar. They also belonged to the ruling classes or nobility and elite women. They became visible at one time or another in Ethiopian "history" due to their roles and status as rulers or warriors (see Minale, 2001).

There is a huge gap in the documentation on how the rest of society functioned and what the gender relations were like at the time, or what types of societies existed at the time. The ruling elite's standard of living was not representative of the people who did not form part of it. For example, though the nobility and kingdoms proclaimed to be highly orthodox religious (which, among others, includes the practice of monogamy), the divorce rate under this group was quite high, including among women. This practice was not reflected among the masses.

Currently justifications on sidelining women and on their subordinate status in Ethiopia are often ascribed to the country's unique 3000 years of "recorded history". This history is questionable since not much was documented and recorded on or by women. There is also a vacuum for the period before the 3000 years of recorded data. It is as if it never existed, even though data from the African continent and retrieval of "her-stories"<sup>2</sup> reveal women's differential status and positions in matrilineal and more egalitarian societal set-ups (see Berger & White, 1990). Since the introduction of the major male religions globally around 2000 years ago, women have been pushed to the margins, almost

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<sup>1</sup> History is clearly defined in this thesis as the history of and by men. Considering the fact of missing words in our vocabulary, "history" is not neutral nor gender balanced, but should be read as one-sided views, impressions, observations and interpretations of the past by one part of society (men) in an androcentric manner.

<sup>2</sup> Her-stories refers to the experiences of women in the past.

rendered non-existent. The emergence of male-centred and dominated science at the time was also extensively used to justify the existing status quo (Walsh 1997, p. 1-2). Knowledge and information was produced to satisfy male consumers. Women, as has been stressed by many feminists, have been completely left out of this production and generation of knowledge and even the documentation of their own her-stories (Mies 1983, p. 118). They were also excluded as consumers of male-centred knowledge causing a distortion on what has been written about them.

A few scholars, such as Pankhurst (1990), have attempted to record the status and position of ordinary (non-elite) Ethiopian women in “historical” times. His work is extremely valuable as it reflects not only the given time frame of such observations, but also the continuity or changes taking place in women’s statuses and positions in different times. The work indicates how discrimination against and subordination of women have historically been treated as natural, given, universal and the norm. These observations date far back in Ethiopian recorded history.

Some authors have also concentrated on the exemplary women within these parameters and time frames, such as Minale Adugna (2001) and Tsehai (1984). They did not venture beyond the recorded time frame of the establishment of Orthodox Christianity in Ethiopia in 330 A.D. or the Queen of Sheba myth 3000 years ago (although there is historiography on women in the thousand-year gap between the Queen of Sheba and the introduction of Christianity in the country).

There is hardly any data on where, when and how the subjugation of women took root in the country prior to the introduction of Islam and Orthodox Christianity. Given the biased male-centred time frame where these religions were very powerful, it is obvious that justifications emerged from that corner that women’s subordination and inferiority was universal. In fact, Ethiopian history is intensely marked by the introduction of the patriarchal Orthodox Christian religion between 300 and 350 AD and patriarchal Islam in the sixth century A.D. King Ezana introduced monophysitism in 330 A.D. (Bahru 1991, p. 8; Markakis 1974, p. 13). This made Orthodox Christianity the state religion. All other religions faded through time or by force. A few practices of these religions though, might have survived the times.

Marking Christianity as the state religion and identity of the country (Bahru 1991, p. 8; Markakis 1974, p. 13) resulted in the aggressive action among all subsequent emperors in Ethiopia to engage in forceful and brutal Christianizing missions, converting non-Christians to Christianity. This is what a Falasha<sup>3</sup> Queen, Yodit (Gudit), and many others, resisted violently accounting for continuing internal conflicts within the country. Loukeris wrote that this trend of Christianization continued into the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example, “after the Battle of Adwa in 1896, Menelik continued to be engaged in Christianizing the southern nations and expanding his territory” (Loukeris 1997, p. 212).

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<sup>3</sup> Ethiopian Jews are often called by this name (Hancock 1992, p. 134).

Practising state religion is not unique to Ethiopia, as many pre-industrialized nations did the same. What makes Ethiopia unique though is that religion has continued to play a dominant role in Ethiopian politics up to the present. This could only be achieved due to the close link between religion and the state. Markakis (1974, p. 44-45) observed that: “Independent and mutually reinforcing, throne and church have been the twin foci of the forces of societal unity. For almost ten centuries these two institutions have dominated Ethiopian society, playing leading roles in every aspect of life and every phase of history.”<sup>4</sup>

Loukeris, citing Haile Mariam (1987, p. 5) also noted that: “Church and state are conceived as one organism with no rigid separation between the religious and the secular” (1997, p. 210). Clapham (1969, p. 2) explained how this link was even used as a criterion for appointment to state posts. According to him, “The Ethiopian Church and state have been linked in a very close alliance and conversion to Christianity has been an almost essential condition for admission to any important function in the government”. The forced Christianization and exclusion of non-Christians from state posts and their due marginalization had serious implications for other religious groups within the country. They not only “occupied a subordinate status within the country” (Markakis 1974, p. 33) but were also denied land ownership rights.

During the Derg regime, the power of the church as state religion was diminished. The Derg declared that the “Ethiopian Orthodox Church would no longer exist as the official church of the state” (Schwab 1985, p. 92) and proclaimed equal status for all religions. But the cruel forms of repression meted out by the Derg had a reverse impact on the followers of the religious groups. Though it was compulsory to attend weekend meetings of Derg officials on state socialism, people managed to practise their religions in secrecy or, where permitted, in the open. In this manner, both Islam and Christianity retained their influence among the masses.

After the Derg was ousted by the EPRDF, religion was actively and openly revived. Being silenced and almost pushed underground, it came back with renewed vigour and power. The level of tolerance practised by the new ruling party, the EPRDF, at the beginning of its rule in 1991, gave religion the freedom to grow and expand. And this it did overwhelmingly. This omnipresence of religion has a severe impact on its followers,

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<sup>4</sup> The intrusive role of religion in people’s life was documented as such in the Fetha Negest. The “Fetha Negest states the duties and responsibilities of people regarding the church where they had to observe all religious ceremonies and practice religious involvements of clerics throughout their lifetimes” (Pankhurst 1990, p. 37-47, p. 187-200). Markakis (1974, p. 98-99) explained this more clearly:

Every Christian has his own spiritual father who serves and counsels him throughout their lives. All personal and community affair requires the presence of the clergy. No social gathering is complete without the presence of a priest in the position of honour and no decision can be taken without their involvement. The priest is the indispensable guest at all social occasions, where he is fed.

Not only the Christians, but also the Muslims were taught religious obedience. Schwab observed that: “Under Islam, sovereignty belongs to God alone, with both rulers and ruled working for the glory of God, whose wishes and commands must be followed if happiness here and in the hereafter is to be achieved” (1985, p. 92). Given the time and the high level of illiteracy people literally lived according to their religious laws.

from ideological consciousness and psychological formation to the simplest requirements of how to live, what to consume, how to dress, how to speak and so forth. Religious influence is furthered through identity formation among its followers. People belonging to a religious group will identify themselves with and abide by the rules and norms prescribed within them. Competition between the various religious groups, especially among the Christians, should be seen as a serious determinant in fundamentalizing religious identity.

Historically, the church also held the monopoly over traditional education. Traditional education involved mainly memorizing religious texts (Pankhurst 1990, p. 128). Only a few were able to write (Pankhurst 1990, p. 5; Alemtsehai 1985, p. 46). This form of education was also reserved for boys from the nobility and remained so throughout the historical periods in Ethiopia (Pankhurst 1990, p. 3, 126). The church was not private, neutral or objective in its teachings. It had a strong interest in the preservation of the status quo and controlled the ideological base of the country by not only providing the state with religiously educated staff but also advising the state (or emperor) on political matters.

Women within the patriarchal Islamic and Christian religions had no access to church or Islamic education (Alemtsehai 1985, p. 46; Zenebework 1986, p. 3; Brummelkamp 1956, p. 193; Pankhurst 1990, p. 126). Instead, they found their individuality and independence curbed, a situation still prevalent at present. Critical thinking is sanctioned and women are denied freedom and rights. Educated or not, they are expected to fulfil their traditional primary roles as housewives, mothers and communal servants. Changing realities, including the legal environment and global exposure, have little impact on these traditional perceptions. They are in fact so embedded in the day-to-day lives of educated women that very few nuances remain that could eventually lead to change.

Given the barriers imposed by religion and political rule on women's development, few women in history dared to do what they felt was right and many more went as far as they could in their time. They contributed immensely to the security of women's and men's lives even though it meant taking part in the aggressions men were engaged in. Women<sup>5</sup> have been active agents, since the time of Haile Selassie's regime and the emperors before him, engaged in warfare and the smooth running of societies that were continuously being disrupted by conflicts and warfare. The division of society into strict male and female domains made women act within their given parameters. They were "excellent soothsayers, legal pleaders and reconcilers of husbands and wives" (Prouty 1986, p. 228). They also held the monopoly in singing at funerals (Ibid. p. 232). According to Pankhurst (1990, p. 263) "Women formed also the dominant group in sorcery, spiritual possessions and prophecy". Besides these areas, women organized

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<sup>5</sup> The generic term "women" is used due to the nature of data available. "Women" here refers to all the women in the country although they could be divided along ethnic lines (Amhara formed the dominant group). The Emperors were continuously in conflict with other religious and ethnic groups, often forcefully imposing Christianity and Amhara culture on them. Once converted, these groups allied with the Amharas in the never-ending new conflicts against "others".

themselves into social groups or associations, often in addition to male groups such as the religious women *mahbers* or work-sharing groups.

With the introduction of modernization during the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie foreign servicemen were invited to assist the country in this process (crafts, trade, communication and translation, among others). This influx of foreigners contributed to the demand in local professionals, leading to an expansion of the local modern education sector. This elicited fierce resistance from the patriarchal Orthodox Church that saw its monopoly slipping away. And although there was a strong resistance to modern education from these patriarchal religious corners, especially against the education of women, some inroads for women's education were created, benefiting a few noble, elite women.

The irony of modernization and modern education was that it was seen only in terms of benefiting the state and its policies, not the masses. Emperor Haile Selassie was content with the state of the feudal system extracting taxes and exploiting the serfs, the peasants, thereby enriching the propertied classes, warriors and the patriarchal Orthodox Church. This trend was justified as being sufficient for the country. The first batch of educated people was all absorbed into state posts. Education curricula were designed to provide the state with non-critical technocrats who would continue with the preservation of the existing status quo. Independent thinking and consciousness development among scholars were not promoted nor encouraged. The goal was to teach students how to preserve the status quo by serving state interests and become state instruments instead of critical thinkers. Messay (1999, p. 339) clearly states the emperor's aims on education: "Haile Selassie wanted to champion modern education only insofar as it provided trained manpower in the service of his autocracy". Bahru (2002, p. 179) adds that the educated were "included in government bodies more as a decoration than for any meaningful influence they might exert".

As education continued expanding during 1908 and 1935 (prior to the Italian invasion), the first girls' school was opened in 1931. But also in this terrain, female scholars were not spared the ideological control mechanisms of state policies. In fact, girls' education was seen merely in terms of extending their already traditional roles, in making educated women into better homemakers. Their education curriculum was heavily injected with the subjects of home economics and management – since that was considered to be part of Ethiopian culture – in order not to alienate what was traditionally expected of educated females.

Women and men of the lower strata did not, and could not, benefit from modern education as it was widely inaccessible. Their lives, therefore, remained largely untouched and continued in isolation of changes that took place at state level. Women, especially, were the most disadvantaged in this regard. Men could join the public workforce in the newly developed public and service sectors whereas women remained domesticated and excluded.

After the end of the Italian occupation in 1941 education resumed its expansion and a university was opened in 1951 with 25 male students (Balsvik 1985, p. 21). But during the late 1950s this expansion started to slow down. With this limited expansion, especially of higher education, compared to the increasing numbers of students and saturation to opportunities of state employment, unrest started to grow. This led to conflicts of interest between the ruling elite and the masses resulting in the emergence of social groups, such as the student unions. Students' increased awareness expanded in various directions including awareness of the deplorable socio-political and economic status of the country and its people.<sup>6</sup> This contributed to mass agitation whereby students staged demonstration after demonstration against the regime in the late 1960s and beginning 1970s. Combined with other organized groups (such as trade unions and teachers' associations) the demonstrations boiled over into a revolution that reached its peak in 1974.

Before the revolution many Ethiopian students who were sent abroad for further education remained there, revealing their disagreement with the Haile Selassie government. These students formed an extension of the students' unions within the country, and two major ones known in the late 70s abroad were the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) and the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE) (Biseswar 2000, p. 11). These students published newsletters and conducted regular meetings and annual conferences on issues in Ethiopia.

Female students had remained on the sidelines of events taking place in the country for a long time. Their political and social consciousness remained low and their involvement in most of the male students' activities was insignificant. This started changing during the late 1960s when female students started to become actively engaged in politics through the student unions. They took part in many students' demonstrations and campaigns not only at national level, but also within the university itself, trying to fight sexism among their male colleagues. The most radical of the female students called themselves "reform seekers" (Balsvik 1985, p. 59). An example of female students' increased involvement in student union activities is found in Balsvik (1985, p.58): "Female participation in the demonstration against Ian Smith regime in Rhodesia reportedly created 'immense pride' in the student body". However, although their level of political consciousness was noted to be on the increase, their level of awareness regarding their own social status as women<sup>7</sup> was absent and women were not organized.

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<sup>6</sup> Many factors contributed to students' radicalization during the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie in the late 1960s. For instance the scholarship students from Africa brought with them their radicalism and political agitation, influencing the Ethiopian students on issues of freedom and democracy (Balsvik 1985, p. 74-76). The Ethiopian University Service Programme (EUSP) also added its share on consciousness raising of students. The EUSP was introduced as a compulsory part of the university curriculum (ibid, p. 141). According to this programme, students had to live and work among the rural poor in the various parts of the country for one academic year. This meant that students had the opportunity to see the miseries of the peasants and the magnitude of poverty in the rural areas at first hand. This disturbed many to such an extent that they started to demand changes. Their increased awareness was not calculated into the education curricula. But this eventually led to the downfall of the emperor.

<sup>7</sup> Women's emancipation was not an issue until the late 1970s. Even then not many women were fully aware of the issue. During Haile Selassie's regime a few women from the noble and elite class had access

At the beginning of the 1970s, the group of female students residing abroad encountered the social upheavals in those countries. These upheavals came at the peak of the second wave of the women's movement in the US and in Europe. Radical demands were put forward by feminists who started to question and challenge patriarchal ideologies in these countries. This did not leave the Ethiopian students untouched and its influence was so dramatic that these students initiated discussion groups on the "woman question", looking at it through a Marxist lens. The year 1971 marked the first time that the "woman question" was discussed. That was at the eleventh congress of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (Biseswar 2000, p. 11).

This was in fact the very first time that "issues of women" were recognized and realized to be a problem within the whole political context and it became an eye-opener to many Ethiopian students residing abroad at the time. They formed an Ethiopian Women's Study Group in the US and a similar one in Europe. The "woman question" became an integral part of the student union abroad (*Reflections 4* 2000, p. 11). The active engagement of students on the issue led to initiatives to transfer the issue back home through newsletters and calls.

Meanwhile the students' and societal revolt in Ethiopia reached a peak, transforming into a massive uprising against the emperor in 1974. This is when the military arm, the Derg,<sup>8</sup> took advantage of the revolution and took over the control of the country, imprisoning the monarch and its ministers. The immediate policies and proclamations of the Derg were loaded with extensive repressive mechanisms, leaving little room for the radical students to continue their struggle for democracy and socialism.

The educated in Europe and especially France formed MEISON (the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement) while the American returnees and some European Ethiopians organized themselves into the EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party) together with the radical students at home (Clapham 1988, p. 52). The EPRP and MEISON debated together on the "woman question". For instance, at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the students abroad, a seven-point resolution was adopted by the various student unions (Annexure I). And in 1975, the student union in Europe wrote a political resolution on the "woman question" condemning the Derg's interference in the formation of an independent women's organization (Annexure II).

During the revolution members of MEISON and EPRP returned to the country, taking the "woman question" with them. MEISON allied with the Derg taking some ministerial and administrative posts (ibid, p. 53) while the "The EPRP became the main rallying point for all those who wanted nothing to do with the military government" causing it to clash with

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to education. Among these, only some became prominent though the issue of women's rights and emancipation was not prominent yet. Sylvain (1970, p. 198) lists the names of twelve women during this time who received higher or tertiary education. Most of these women attended missionary schools at home or abroad and ended up in the service of the monarch at the time.

<sup>8</sup> The Armed Forces Co-ordinating Committee – called the Dergue, the Amharic word for "committee" ('Ethiopia's Kremlin Connection', 1985, p. 4).

the ruling elite of the Derg and MEISON. This led to it being declared an “enemy of the revolution” (Lefort 1981, p. 175).

The Derg did not remain immune from the “woman question” as that was promoted by the socialist regime of Russia, from which it borrowed its political ideology. It formulated its own discourse aimed at weakening the independent movement in the field. The independent movement was led by the left-wing EPRP group that consisted of individual members aiming to emancipate women following Marxism. The ensuing “Red Terror” in 1977 killed or exiled an entire generation of these intellectuals and activists, almost wiping out the EPRP (Lefort 1981, p. 257). With this, activism on the “woman question” also disappeared from the scene.

In 1975, the Derg established the POMOA (Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs), using it as an “ideological, political and organizational police force” (Babile 1989, p. 52). Within POMOA a Woman’s Committee was set up (Halliday and Molyneux 1981, p. 144) promoting the Derg’s vision on the “woman question”. Until late 1977, this vision was led by the EPRP’s focus on women’s double oppression, as workers and women (ibid, p. 145). By 1978, this vision changed into an adapted version from Russia where women faced only class oppression.

At the time of the Derg taking over the country, there were a few women’s associations operational in the country, formed before and during the Ethio-Italian war at the time of the emperor’s regime. One of these was the Ethiopian Officers Wives Association. This mutual-aid association was small. Its aim was to care for its members in times of grief and need. Other associations emerged out of existing organizations such as the Women’s Volunteer Service Association, emerging from the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the Ethiopian Women’s Patriotic Association, which emerged out of the Ethiopian Patriotic Association. These women’s associations were actively engaged in relief work that was needed during the war, and women joining these associations worked as “nurses, cooks or even as soldiers, while women of the court were responsible for the supervision of the work” (Seltene 1994, p. 37). During the five-year colonization by the Italians (1936-1941), these associations went underground and continued to support the resistance against the Italians. Their main activities included providing shelter, food and clothing, spying and smuggling weapons and other items to the resistance army.

Princess Tsehai, one of the daughters of Haile Selassie, started the Ethiopian Women’s Work Association on 20 August 1935 (Seltene 1994, p. 29). This association grew in magnitude and in number after the war and its areas of work expanded including opening schools, providing literacy and vocational training to women, maternal and health clinics, orphanages and assistance to widows and destitute children and mothers. It had branch offices in five towns.

The Derg regime marked the end to its growth and forced it almost into non-existence. It lost almost all its property (schools and restaurants among them, due to the nationalization scheme of the Derg) and was instructed to work on programmes concerning women only (Makda 2000, p. 63). Some of its programmes, such as the health

clinics, were taken over by the government while the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA) took over the rest, such as the women's vocational training centre, the Addis Ababa restaurant, their office building and so forth (ibid, p. 66). When the EPRDF regime came to power in 1991, EWWA hoped to revive its pre-Derg era position. It requested a return of its property. Regrettably, the newly established Women's Affairs Office did not return the property, claiming it belonged to them since they were now "responsible for the co-ordination, facilitation and monitoring of all government programmes that concern women" (ibid, p. 69).

The Revolutionary Ethiopia's Women's Association (REWA) and the Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association (REYA) were established in September 1980 by the Derg (Halliday & Molyneux 1981, p. 145). All independent women's associations were banned from then on and existing women's associations falling under the peasant associations or rural development associations came under control of REWA. REWA had branches all over the country and claimed over five million members. As a political instrument, REWA was mainly set up to serve the party's interest, and was ordered to "collect contributions to producers' co-operatives, famine victims, and other official campaigns, and expected to turn out their members for official occasions like the welcome of visiting notables" (Clapham 1988, p. 140). "The promotion of women's rights issues was not part of REWA's agenda, nor was REWA in any position to influence any policy regarding women's rights" (ibid, p. 139). REWA existed until the overthrow of the Derg in May 1991.

During the Derg regime, women's education received a boost. But this did not contribute to their emancipation, because education in this time frame also served political ends aiming to support the creation of a new status quo in accordance with the Derg's policies. The Derg was trying to establish a new society based on its class-biased perceptions of socialism and attempted to set up systems to support this ideology. In 1981, the Commission of Workers Party of Ethiopia (COPWE) passed a resolution on education which stated that: "It was mandatory that political education and Marxism-Leninism courses would be given at all levels of educational system. Teachers of the various levels of the educational system would also participate in continuing ideological education" (Zenebework 1986, p. 14). Critical or independent thinking was not welcomed and the education curricula only reflected political indoctrination aimed at promoting the Derg's perceived form of "socialism".

In May 1991 there was another political change. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power after ousting the Derg leaders. The EPRDF suffered its own crisis prior to 1991<sup>9</sup>, struggling for legitimacy among various factions,

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<sup>9</sup> During the Derg, the EPRDF was founded by the TPLF (Tigray Liberation People's Front). The EPRDF was an umbrella party of the four major regional resistance parties, such as the Amhara opposition - the Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (EPDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and later by 1994 also the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF). With such strong regional parties, it was expected that political differences would arise, including on who would head the leadership of the Transitional government. Meles Zenawi had strategized this in advance securing himself a position as the chairman of both the TPLF and EPRDF. In this manner he became the first president during the Transitional Government. But the conflicts did not end there. The parties distanced

each wanting to take power (Pausewang, Tronvoll & Aalen 2002, p. 14). It was established in 1975 and had a long history of resistance against the Derg. At that time, the woman question was already in circulation among the elites of the various factions of resistance groups. But, as mentioned above, being underground did not help to popularise the subject to the masses. The EPRDF thus similarly did not have a clear agenda on the “woman question” at the time. By the time it took power, this changed. The “woman question” was integrated within the overall party politics and the liberation of women was directly linked to the liberation of the people. In fact, it became instrumental in gathering support from the masses of women until the EPRDF came to power in 1991.

After the take-over, women were pushed back to the kitchen, out of the public domain of politics. Apparently the EPRDF’s version of the woman question did not differ much from that of the Derg, namely to use women when they were needed for sustaining male power. Even though women contributed equally to the defeat of the Derg, they were sidelined when political positions were to be allocated.<sup>10</sup> And it is not only the positioning of women within these government institutions that was deliberately ignored, but also issues of women’s emancipation and liberation. The transitional government that was formed under EPRDF leadership led the country until the first ever elections were held in 1995. Within this transitional time frame, the EPRDF embarked on a path of establishing its own control systems to retain power. Policies were designed in various areas including a National Policy on Ethiopian Women in 1993. This policy was instrumental in leading the EPRDF towards full control of the “woman question”. To evade challenges on its implementation, a mechanism was set up to control demands. The public was excluded from all these.

The mechanism of the EPRDF, the Women’s Affairs Office, fell directly under the Prime Minister’s office. This mechanism was instituted in the remotest government administrative bodies, including the ministries (Women’s Affairs Departments), regional governments (Women’s Affairs Bureaus) and local administrative organs within the *kebelles* and *woredas*. This initiative, initiated by the federal EPRDF party government, aimed for ultimate centralization of the women’s affairs under its direct control. It was a clearly imitation of how the Derg had set up REWA. With such instruments in place, the ruling party was free to design its own ideological manipulation of the “woman question”, thereby defining women’s emancipation in narrow terms. The establishment of the Federal Constitution in 1995 also showed how ideology was borrowed from the Derg on women’s equality and rights (See Article 35 of the EPRDF constitution and Art. 35, 36, and 37 (1) of the Derg constitution of 1987 (Fisseha-Tsion 1991, p. 167). The practical situation on the ground is evidence of the inaction and gross betrayal of women.

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themselves from the EPRDF and its repressive politics. On the other hand they also faced repression, discrimination and exclusion from the TPLF which treats them now as opposition (Pausewang, Tronvoll & Aalen 2002, p. 14-15).

<sup>10</sup> There have been a few women in political posts such as the minister of education, or the house speaker. Also the government spokesperson and a few deputy ministers were women. Many of these women enter such posts due their party membership and expressed loyalty to the ruling political party and not because of their gender.

## 1.2 Statement of the problem

This thesis combines critical sociology with a phenomenological approach, where feminism is used as a social movement through which the role of (educated) women in the Ethiopian past and present is critically reviewed. The thesis also contains a critical analysis of knowledge to challenge the taken for granted societal, political and cultural practices in Ethiopia and explain how those influence and subject women's agency and hinder their emancipation.

Husserl divides phenomenology between transcendental and psychological where the first is *a priori* and can explain the essence of being, while the latter is based on the subjective realities or facts of experiences. Phenomenology attempts to create conditions for the *objective* study of topics usually regarded as *subjective* or as Morrow (1994, p. 12) puts it: "It is a social inquiry". To explain further, it is a study of the structures of consciousness that looks at the conscious experiences from the person's point of view, the subjective experience (Woodruff Smith 2008). Experiences are conscious acts, also called 'intentionality' by Husserl and can include perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, action, etc. Intentionality has a base that grants it familiarity often related to previous experiences or rooted in history, culture, politics or religion. Subjects act consciously within these given conditionality.

The aim of this thesis is to conduct a phenomenological study or critical analysis *a priori* of the subjective thought and actions (agency) of educated women who are conditioned by culture, religion and politics through historical reference. Phenomenology is the most suitable framework to explain why women's actions, guided by their independent conscious agency, remain preconditioned by socio-religio-political realities.

In this thesis I also investigate the disjuncture between theory and practice with regard to women's emancipation in Ethiopia. Because it is not only about rights granted on paper but also how these rights are interpreted and manipulated in patriarchal terms to serve the state and religious interests. It is about double standards from government to the women themselves. Policies and laws cannot be translated into action when there is a lack of political commitment to develop strategies not only for their implementation, but also to put monitoring mechanisms in place that ensure that implementation. When the government ratified the many conventions with regard to women's rights, transformed laws (such as the Family Law in 2000) that benefit women and drafted a National Policy on Ethiopian Women in 1993, it left structural issues untouched. These, however, are the most fundamental barriers hindering proper implementation of those legal reforms and actions. Perhaps the government relied too much on the trickle-down effects of legal reforms, assuming that those would automatically become practical and domesticated.

In this thesis I entertain the notion of how women's private, subordinate lives have remained unchanged over the past decades even when the political agenda of the state has claimed otherwise. I highlight how cultural and religious laws have been given the upper hand to control women's lives and political goodwill has diminished. The status of women has not only remained static over the past decades (Pankhurst 1990) but has in

fact worsened due to the influences of globalization, modernization and state-induced policies. State intervention and control has not eliminated women's subordinate and oppressed status in society but has in fact exacerbated it. Above all, it actively prevents women from becoming active change agents of their own emancipation.

For instance, during the Derg period, the contradictions were clear. Issues of national development were closely and continuously monitored against the freedom of the people. How much freedom was granted and to whom was of paramount importance in the understanding of individuals' capabilities to develop critical thinking and express their rights. Freedom was scarce and accessible only to a few men loyal to the Derg. The lack of freedom also arrested women's development as independent human beings. It curbed their thinking and consciousness, which was dictated by others and undermined their capabilities. Above all, it deprived them of space to take action on their emancipation.

The EPRDF government did not alter the Derg's policies on this and continued monopolizing the "woman question", imbuing it with state legitimacy and dominance. Though appearing democratic in its international politics, internal politics are still heavily marked with repression and lack of freedom among its citizens. Women remain excluded from charting their own emancipation. The control mechanisms put in place are visible disguises of the government's suspicion of any civic initiative in the field. These include the women's affairs machinery, but also its decentralization policies. Decentralization is one of the most serious concerns where federal and regional (customary and religious) laws often clash regarding women's rights. But no attention is paid to this, because women's rights are not a "priority concern" of the ruling party, or the political opposition.

This granting of equal rights to women on paper but failing to create space for women's freedom to claim those rights reveals that the semantics of women's issues was never a concern when ethnically delineated federal regions were granted autonomy. The ruling party further cripples women's emancipation demands through its top-down, no-tolerance approaches. According to the party policy, women's emancipation is to be achieved only in accordance with its own dictated course and if necessary through intimidation and repression.

Gripped by memories of state terrorism during the Derg regime and the risks many took when designing their own programmes of action in any field or even trying to speak out on their own behalf, women remain muted. The level of intolerance by the Derg created a state of terror among the people. This fear is still present among the majority in society, including among educated women. Many continue using this experience to justify their inaction at present, seeing EPRDF rule as equally repressive.

This research shows how independent thinking regarding women's issues and gender in general is curbed by state and religious interest. The development of women's consciousness and consequent agency formation is trapped within the parameters of state and religious ideologies. These historical political and religious processes will be subjected to a phenomenological analysis. Already demoted and invisible, women become further marginalized by state paternalism. This is the gist of this thesis. It shows

how state and religious ideologies have historically been used to manipulate educated women and still continue to do so in the twenty-first century despite political change. Successive governments in Ethiopia have followed a system of mass control. Mechanisms put in place to curb individual thinking through the educational ideology formulated by Emperor Haile Selassie were enforced with renewed vigour during the Derg regime and now the EPRDF regime. The educated have always been either used as an instrument for the benefit of the state or seen as a threat to national interests.

This thesis affirms that Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world not only because it lacks resources, but also because it ignores the plight of more than 50% of its population. By treating women as second-class citizens, women in every sense are demoted and marginalized, ending up in poverty. Poverty in turn becomes an accumulative and structural factor increasing problems affecting women. The poverty women face is not only in material terms, where the feminization of poverty is rampant and most notable, but also in the invisible forms of culturally induced and politically condoned forms of deprivations, such as deprivations of freedom, rights, independence, and individuality. Many lack education, employment, health care, nutrition and legal aid in the names of cultural diversity and identity and heritage traditions. Issues such as violence and harmful traditional practices (abduction and rape, female genital mutilation, child marriages and so forth) having a direct bearing on women finding shelter under culture, condoned by religion and removed from legal interventions. All these have a significant bearing on the progress of the country, which the political party is unwilling to recognize.

In many of the rural areas, very few women are literate or aware of their rights and very few among these are willing to take the cases of their violated rights to court to demand justice. In reality justice is often denied to them and they rarely receive fair trials. Simple issues such as divorce, rape, abduction, denial of education, child marriage, harmful traditional practices, property ownership, land rights, abortion, control over one's own integrity, body and sexuality, HIV/AIDS infection and treatment, and employment discrimination, illustrate how patriarchal interests overtake women's interests.

Many reforms regarding women's equality were incorporated in the country's constitution and policies by both the Derg and later the EPRDF, without any input from women. For example, suffrage was granted to women at the time as men were granted the right to vote, starting with the revised imperial constitution of 1955, without sensitizing the public on what this entailed. Such legal rights were mere tokens and granted to women as a gift. Due to the absence of a women's movement struggling for such rights, their implementation suffered a great deal. Lack of demands by women meant ignorance on what they were and how to use them. In fact, this situation is still present today. For example (cited from a friend who was actively engaged in countrywide election training in rural areas in 2005) : "During the last national elections in 2005, a man in a rural remote village went to vote with his and his wife's registration cards. He said that it was not necessary for the wife to go since he could vote for both of them." This (mis) perception of voting rights reflects the tremendous inconsistency between granting rights on paper and the lack of a critical consciousness among women in exercising their right.

On both sides, the ruling party and educated women in the country, there is an inconsistency and lack of concrete vision on women's emancipation. Both have their own views remaining in a hostile relationship.

The educated continue to use the same approach as was prevalent during the Derg regime, namely make the best of what exists. Laws are thus in place but due to the lack of struggles preceding these by women, there is a colossal gap in understanding and interpreting these towards the formulation of a clear vision on emancipation. The tendency to overemphasize liberal approaches bordering on welfarism and relief aid is widespread. Many women believe that the laws are not a problem. The problem lies with their implementation. Such a narrow, passive approach is directly curbing their activism and muzzling their calls for emancipation. There is no need to struggle then!

According to the ruling party, women's emancipation lies in women's active participation in government programmes and policies. This implies that the party narrows down women's problems to mere economic issues where the economic empowerment of women will not only eradicate poverty, but also empower them and lead to their emancipation. This is a limited interpretation of what women's emancipation is all about from the ruling party's biased 'woman's question' paradigm. As an imposed paradigm, and not open to criticism, this is a vain tract where everything turns into a charade.

Meanwhile the ruling party keeps women disempowered not only through state laws and policies, but also through repressive control mechanisms. Women are silenced through the available state policies on, for instance, increased access to education, including higher education (with an affirmative action policy put in place) and the ability to enter equally remunerated paid employment as men in combination with the social practice of the provision of cheap household labour services in the form of maids, cooks, nannies, and so forth. These create a false sense of equality and empowerment. There are numerous educated women who can argue positively for their equality based on these available services and laws. It is regrettable that many fail to go beyond these. The ability to critically analyse the patriarchal systems of operations and recognize how they are kept silenced is totally absent.

The phrase from Simone de Beauvoir that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" reflects the social construction of becoming a woman or man in a given society. This has never been considered in traditional Ethiopia. Even feminist ideals are treated with suspicion and rejected as non-Ethiopian. It is sad to observe how state-led manipulation of equality by laws and policies, added to the comforts of middle-class educated women and the new religious interpretations of texts regarding women's status, give a powerful boost to the falsification of presumed gender equality, where many openly deny the presence of gender inequality, at least in their lives or families.

A persistent problem is the reluctance among some educated middle-class women to effect radical gender changes not only in their private lives but also in their communities, identifying these as alien, immoral and Western. They often refer to their customary and religious practices of historical heritage for justification. This conservative ideology

combined with the lack of a critical perspective (lack of critical thinking and resistance to criticism) hinders the development of a feminist consciousness. Lacking clear vision and scope on women's emancipation further aggravates this discourse. There is simply no discourse on women's and gender issues (no journals or newspaper coverage devoting pages to women, and no discussion and debate groups).<sup>11</sup> These problems are of major concern and directly connected to the most crucial aspect in women's and feminist movements; the issue of leadership. What could be the causes for educated women not pursuing the option for radical transformation with regard to gender equality?

Publicly debating and even privately challenging the influences of patriarchal religions and how those exercise control over people's minds, thereby directly contributing to the oppression and subordination of women, are definitely not popular subjects in the country, including among educated women. In fact, they are major taboos. The same holds true for the dominant role of the state in the area of the state-imposed women's agenda. Neither the ruling party, nor educated women, is ready to be confronted with their shortcomings. I assert in this thesis that it is time to unveil the truth. It is time for confrontation. Because only by confrontation can women's slumbering consciousness receive a boost in terms of which they become aware of the factors that hinder their emancipation and strategize for actions. This can help in critical agency development and the formulation of a vision for social change.

### **1.3 Aim of the study**

Considering the "historical" data available, women in Ethiopia have always remained on the sidelines with regard to the development of the country. They have been treated as marginalized and second-class citizens. They are marginalized by a religion that treats them as nonentities and state institutions that consider them incapable of leading their own emancipation. On the other hand, they have full rights in relation to education and employment opportunities although these have been heavily injected with patriarchal ideologies. Their lack of leadership, critical thinking, feminist consciousness and a clear vision for women's emancipation, has resulted in them continuing to be sidelined and manipulated.

Taking these into consideration, the main aim of this thesis is to analyse the ideological indoctrinations and how this influences educated women's consciousness (agency), looking at the question of why this group cannot play a proactive leading role for women's emancipation in Ethiopia. The aim is also not only to indicate that they should become radical change agents for gender equality, but how they can achieve that. Women need to shed the stance of passivity and nurture their critical agency. Choosing the path of radicalism in terms of concrete demands for equality is urgent due to the prolonged inaction of educated women and crippling measures from the government in the field.

### **1.4 Hypothesis**

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<sup>11</sup> The monthly Gender Forum that was run by Panos Ethiopia from 1999 until 2005 had a very short lifespan. The CRDA (Christian Relief and Development Association) initiated a bi-monthly gender forum in 2003 for its partners.

Despite their persistent patriarchal ideological perceptions, and their contained agency, educated Ethiopian women can overcome these and function as catalysts of change towards greater gender equality on the condition that they realize and recognize the obstacles and manifest their own visionary emancipation tracks.

Educated women in Ethiopia cannot function as a catalyst for change due to the absence of clear feminist views among them. Lacking discourse on their own emancipation, they do not have a school of thought that could guide and direct them. The main issue is that educated women do not engage in theorizing on their concerns and if they do so, they do not use it as such. Political consciousness raising sessions do not comprehensively touch structural barriers and actions do not follow to remedy identified problems. These are closely linked to the ad hoc actions without clear ideological or theoretical guidance. It is a prerequisite that reflections on ideological construction are taken as serious conditions for a feminist movement to emerge, because it will provide the feminist movement with the goals and strategies based on a clear vision. The question is: Why is there no feminist ideology among the educated women in the country?

The education system in Ethiopia, both formal and informal, is geared towards promoting the acceptance of women's cultural and religious subordinate place in society as heritage and thus given. The government plays a major role in this through its power to influence curricula. On the other hand, it is also actively promoting its own paradigm of women's emancipation through state interventions appearing to be genuinely representing women's interests. The oppressive rule of the Derg is used as a reminder not to engage in political decisions. As such, the educated, fearful of reprisals if they do not conform to the government's initiatives, remain muted. This in turn increases the ruling party's power and control over the gender agenda (the "woman question") and is also a representational issue. The ruling party also sees itself as the sole voice of "women" at local and international levels. The average woman is not even aware of what is being achieved, received or done in her name.

But it is not only the state that erects the barriers preventing educated women from advancing in their own rights and freedoms. Patriarchal religions are a major companion of the state in this. Together both complement each other to preserve the status quo. This mutual existence is reflected through religious and state abstinence to criticize or condemn each other's policies and practices. There is no structure within these institutions where the public can express its grievances against either of them. This adds to the increasing freedom among both institutions to follow their own paths of mass control and manipulation. Religion is omnipresent in people's lives with very few claiming atheism.

The close conformity of families and societies to religion leaves no room for individuality and independent thinking. People are part of a family structure, or community (*kebele*) and are denied the opportunity to venture anything on their own. Educated women, in order not to be excluded, end up conforming to traditions that

openly reflect their subjection, subordination, exclusion and discrimination. Due to religious indoctrination, educated women are unable to develop a feminist consciousness.

The issues crucial to the development of a feminist consciousness in a democratic society are linked to personhood: transformation, leadership, critical thinking and interpretation, organization and strategies for transformation. Women's organizations in the country's history have been deficient on women's rights and gender equality issues. This could be attributed to the time-frame. Initiatives by the students in the late 1970s to organize a mass women's movement did not materialize and the independent women's groups (individual women calling on other women to join in the agitation on specific issues such as calls for war, support to soldiers through food preparations and so on) during the wars and conflicts were hardly aware of gender or women's rights issues at the time. Those groups also did not continue after the wars were over. Moreover, the few women who were leading these associations were more active in supporting the wars than improving the lives of women.

The absence of a collective consciousness and understanding on feminist issues in turn affects how educated women perceive their own realities and how society observes those. The issue of being organized and developing a common consciousness based on women's experience as a denominator of women's movements is hardly present. The country lacks a concrete discourse, debate or discussion on gender that could assist in generating this consciousness. This in turn is difficult to achieve if women are divided among many ethnic and religious groups and the educated have different experiences from the illiterate or women with lower levels of education. Getting together and debating on their own issues among educated women was never an issue of concern, for that by itself is seen as a taboo subject and mocked. Single womanhood is also not appreciated and all women are expected to get married (even at later age) in order to disappear in the clusters surrounding married women's lives that include responsibilities, status, acceptance, the need for perpetuation of one's family, economic security, protection, recognition and many others. This lack of space and freedom negates women's personhood and the development of the "self". Women do not live their own lives but live their lives in the service of others. This means that their agency is not true to themselves as they live up to the expectations of others.

Organizational leadership is very important in feminism and one of the crucial missing links in women's emancipation in the country. There are women leaders in the business community, state institutions, or in traditional associations, but they lack a cross-cutting feminist base. It is a trying process to get women to network or organize on any feminist concerns (for example, Panos Ethiopia tried in vain in 2002-03 to get a group of NGO gender workers organized to meet on a regular basis). Educated women simply have no time and voluntary activism is not developed in the country yet. There has always been the helpless feeling of waiting for "others" to take the lead.

Given the above, educated women's lack of a feminist consciousness further aggravates the neglect and exclusion of women and gender issues from policies to practical levels. This is expressed through the gaps at these levels. The theoretical gist of a feminist

presence in the academic sphere is completely absent, even though the Addis Ababa University started a Gender Studies programme in 2005. This absence further adds to the lack of a gender and women's discourse in the country. Educated women are unable to place themselves strategically at all levels to advance women's concerns from the practical to the theoretical and from the political to the social. And it is precisely this that is deliberately nurtured and taken over by political cadres, mostly men who know "what is best for women". Given the repressive political climate at the moment in the country, the question is whether there is enough freedom and space for women to venture on the paths of feminism and whether they are willing to do so.

## **1.5 Methodology**

This is a study focusing on gender equality and women's rights in Ethiopia from a historical<sup>12</sup> perspective until 2005. To do this, it researches documents from the early nineteenth century on. As can be noted in Ethiopia, there is a huge gap in documented data on gender or women's issues. This gap increases when it comes to data in historical times or archives. Therefore, most of the written literature on the subject is recent (after the 1970s and particularly the early 80s). Among these written documents there are a few focusing on historical times. Ethiopia has a few archival documents among which the major one is the Fetha Negest, a document biased against women's rights.

Data collection therefore focused largely on recent literature, many of which remain unpublished due to their poor quality and also due to the lack of opportunities to do so in the country. These unpublished materials do contain a good collection of historical data on the actual situation of women in the 1970s and also further back in history. Almost half of the literature is dated between the 1970s-2000. This is understandable because it is also a time that the education level among students started to rise and with that also their engagement in writing. The other 50% of the literature is resources from the year 2000 onwards, where more was published and documented. 'Historical' data documented by a few scholars, such as Pankhurst, Prouty and Lishan Bekele, also provided the relevant information needed for this study.

This study is mainly a critical analysis of policies and procedures of the last three consecutive regimes in Ethiopia (Emperor Haile Selassie, the Derg and the EPRDF) from a feminist perspective, a perspective that is grossly missing in writings in the country. Major attention is given to the current regime of the EPRDF where I review available policies and laws on women 'against the grain', looking at how and whether women have been reaping the benefits of those. Given the rather strong religious status of Ethiopian society, I could not ignore studying the religious power base and its influence on women's advancement.

I have aimed to use data to measure progress or regress in the status of women from historical times to the present. Thus, I use both qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative

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<sup>12</sup> Read 'herstorical'.

data (wherever available<sup>13</sup>) or a combination of both. Quantitative data were taken from a few gender disaggregated sources (statistical authority). However, quantitative data only reveal changes in numbers and do not explain why and how. Therefore, qualitative data have been used to critically analyze quantitative data against indicators of progress and advancement, including on the development of critical consciousness among women. For instance, qualitative research assessing the quantitative increase of women's participation in politics revealed the lack of commitment and representation of women in society at large.

Next to the combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection, the majority of the study employed qualitative methodologies to conduct a literary critique. This includes the areas of legal and policy documents. Literary critique helps in reading against the grain from a feminist point of view, or from a woman's lens. There are many analytical studies on policy documents, but these are often from a masculine angle. This research intends to bring in a feminist angle of data analysis.

Finally, participatory methods have also been used to capture women's experiences, opinions, attitudes and feelings. Opportunities to do this were plenty, such as focus group discussions (gender forum), informal gatherings and interviews.

## **1.6 Structure of the study**

This study is divided in eight chapters covering the main elements of the study aiming at verifying its objectives and justification. Chapter One is an introduction that starts with the background on the historical role of educated women and shows how educated and intellectual women have so far failed to contribute towards the emancipation of women at large. This background is followed by a statement of the main problems this study will deal with, the aim of the study, the methodology that is used to conduct this research and finally the hypothesis this study is based upon.

The second chapter lays down the theoretical framework of this research. The theoretical assumptions are based mainly on the gist of feminist ideology as a form of critical sociology, what this entails and how educated women are being used and manipulated without their realization. The chapter will mirror the critical focus on issues of women's leadership during the various political regimes up to the present. Other issues to be discussed here are: the issue of women's movements and feminism as social movements and conflict theory, a phenomenological review of ideological control mechanisms that are used to keep women submissive and content, such as education and the media and how these are used by the leading institution of the state, and how religion is actively a

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<sup>13</sup> There are a few international indices providing relevant information on the progress of a country at global level on gender indicators. Among these are the Human Development Index, Gender Equality Index and the Gender Gap Index. According to the Human Development Index (2010) Ethiopia is among the low human development category at 169<sup>th</sup> place out of 177 countries. In 2010 this did not change much as the country stood at 157<sup>th</sup> out of 169 countries. The Global Gender Gap Index (Hausmann, Tyson & Zahidi 2010) also reveals that despite all the 'efforts' of the ruling party, Ethiopia ranked at the bottom end (100<sup>th</sup> place out of 115 countries in 2006, 113<sup>th</sup> place out of 128 countries in 2007 and 122<sup>nd</sup> place out of 130 countries in 2008, 122<sup>nd</sup> place in 2009 out of 134 countries and 121<sup>st</sup> place out of 134 countries in 2010.

cause of women's silence, promoting a patriarchal culture of male hierarchy and authority.

In Chapter Three I examine and analyse the history and status background of women in Ethiopia. This chapter describes how women have progressed or regressed in their emancipation. The review of the pre-Derg era is crucial in the understanding of the issues in the Derg era and cannot be left out. At that time the emergence of the "woman question" is one of the most important issues to be highlighted, combined with the engagement of female students in political activism. In Chapter Four I focus on the Derg era and the political developments on the "woman question" form the main stream through which it becomes clear how women's emancipation was perceived.

Chapter Five shows how the current ruling party's policy and practice are worlds apart regarding women's rights. It starts with an overview of the new political era of the EPRDF regime that brings in a new discourse on "gender".<sup>14</sup> In this chapter I use literary criticism to discuss the ruling party's approach including its machinery and policy on women's emancipation. These are all theoretical. The practice is the topic of the following chapter, which provides practical examples of the real status of women and the actual implications of the ruling party's policies and laws for women.

Chapter Seven is devoted to a critical evaluation of educated women's actions and inactions for their emancipation. It stipulates that women are also responsible for their own status and situations and should be their own change agents. It discusses the problems of feminist leadership among educated women and what the stumbling blocks are among women to take the lead themselves. In conclusion, in Chapter 8, I analyse the issues of why feminist leadership is crucial to their emancipation and how women could make a change. This is supported by an analytical review of prevalent indicators of women's movement or feminism in the country. The aim is that through the realization of such presence, academics, researchers, scholars, activists or individuals could be encouraged to build upon these.

As there is no one road to leadership, and definitely not to feminist leadership in traditional societies like in Ethiopia, the thesis concludes with indicators for change

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<sup>14</sup> The EPRDF uses 'gender' as a synonym for 'women' although they are two very different concepts. Women are biological female beings, while gender refers to the acquired and learned beings as male and female based on the expectations of society/culture. In the development context WID (Women in Development) and GAD (Gender and Development) are used as complementary approaches to solve women's subordinate status. WID emerged in the late 60s focusing exclusively on women's needs. Within this approach women were treated as a homogeneous group where their situations were analyzed exclusively and activities developed accordingly (Parker 1995, p. 10). The continued subordination of women, however, led to new approaches being sought to challenge the problems women faced. As such, GAD emerged in the 1980s. GAD uses a different approach based on two points of departure:

- (1) Inequality between women and men: the aim is to address the power imbalance between women and men and create an environment where women can be 'fitted in' such as creating equal access to education for both sexes, to job and economic opportunities, to justice, etc.
- (2) Structural factors determining the inequality between women and men: the aim is to challenge structural causes that directly inhibit women, such as patriarchal political, social and religious institutions (Parker 1995, p. 10).

where critical analysis is central because it can reveal hidden barriers. These include problems among the educated themselves. For instance, criticism is often taken as personal in the country, included among the educated, without realizing that it can be used constructively to the improvement of the “self”. If there is no room for constructive criticism, women may refrain from accepting their own shortcomings causing the continuation of problems and repetition of mistakes. As such, women’s leadership also needs critical reflection strategizing a trajectory of “individuation” (self-transformation and development) before it can take up the vast responsibility of leading women. The importance of intellect and passion in this should not be overlooked. The realization of common causes among women can help in identifying the best-fitting women’s, gender and/or feminist discourse for the emancipation of women in the country.

## Chapter 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Ideology and feminist leadership

A decades-long welfarist approach through micro-credits and relief aid continues unabated as the official mantra for women's emancipation in Ethiopia. In fact, these are still actively promoted as priority issues by the state. This stance, however, erodes any alternative calls for gender equality. A common argument used by officials in the country to justify this approach is that the alleviation of poverty precedes gender equality issues and therefore deserves priority. Such positioning, regrettably, fails to acknowledge that the issue of the rampant feminization of poverty illustrates the immediate need for a gender approach as a significant part of a broader approach to the alleviation of poverty in Ethiopia. It also fails to realize that women's economic empowerment is not a prerequisite for their overall emancipation. The government's perception of poverty is also questionable where it assumes micro-economic solutions to suffice in the mitigation of poverty, including among women. It refuses to recognize that women's poverty is not only linked to their lack of resources, but to a combination of deprivations in the fields of rights and freedom that inhibit their capability and agency development and which are social products. As Zygmunt Bauman (1976, p. 112) indicates: "The liberation of man can be promoted only in conditions of liberty." This implies, to a certain extent, that the emancipation of women can only be effective in conditions of freedom and liberty.

The persistence of a welfarist solution to achieve women's equality reveals that there is something amiss here. There appears to be a deliberate omission of the more crucial issues that could enhance gender equality more effectively. These include women's legal and political empowerment and their freedom. Given the historical, political, social and economic culture of Ethiopian society, it is important to analyse this particular stance. Because that may help to find out what is holding educated women captive to such an extent that they are either not able or not willing to take up a more radical position on the agenda of women's emancipation in the country. More precisely, it will assist in understanding why educated women are not able to assume a more proactive feminist leadership role. This is linked to a historical accumulation of perceptions that fail to budge from their rigidity. These will be critically analysed in this chapter in order to reveal the sources of women's agency formation that inform their actions.

The underlying assumption is that once women understand and realize what the problems and obstacles are in their emancipation they can strategize for concrete actions to overcome those. It is crucial that women themselves, as major actors of change in their own situations, become the owner of their emancipation. That is why it is important that they should recognize and accept critical reviews that can serve to enhance their understanding and help them in challenging the factors hindering their advancement.

This chapter starts with a critical reflection of the theoretical and empirical understanding of women's movement and feminism against the current prevalent EPRDF programme on the "woman question". Critical sociology is used as the basis for this study

questioning all that is taken for granted and used as common sense. From a critical sociological angle, women's and feminist movements are stressed as social movements emerging from society in conflict with existing societal frameworks aiming for change and transformation. These social movements, as Giddiness believed, offer the "utopian" possibility of changing the fabric and texture of human relationships (Tucker 1998, p. 148). On the other hand, the "woman question" paradigm among the students emerged from a political school of thought, Marxism, that was connected to the revolutionary calls to liberate the working class, including women. It did not get the opportunity to mature and become internalized as their own. And revolutionary actions implied that they would be sudden, carrying the risk of not including structural changes. The "woman question" from both the Derg and EPRDF did not emerge from society, but from their political framework. Such a top-down approach certainly was not geared towards changing anything.

As a conflict theory, feminism aims to explain the position of women in society, focusing on the causes of women's oppression and the superiority of men. Feminists' challenge to patriarchy and the taken-for-granted brings them into conflict with the status quo where they concentrate on changes that can take on revolutionary form, such as their demands for cultural reforms that negatively impact on women. Feminism is thus an important school of thought in critical theory because it is interested in the emancipation of women and men from the constraints of society and domination (Horkheimer cited in Held, 1980, p. 192). It aims to understand, analyze, and enact in its very structure the subjective ground of society; since society is not an objective entity (Held 1980, p. 217). Through the challenging of the taken-for-granted and givenness of issues, feminism has opened new ways of looking at society and life as a whole. It raises some of the most fundamental questions about contemporary societies (Tucker 1998, p. 187). Its method includes focusing on factors that hinder self-consciousness and the free development of people (Held 1980, p. 224).

However, the "woman question" of the recent past and current regimes in Ethiopia was not aimed to distance itself from the dominant political systems but, in fact, emerged from within those. It was created to monopolise women's emancipation after the repressive rule was established and looked for a fitting approach on women within the political system. It is thus not in conflict with the social order, but mainly serves the ideas of the ruling party. In this, women are surrendered to the state that claims to advance their emancipation.

As a building block of this research, this chapter starts with a discussion on the importance and need to bring about gender equality. The chapter concentrates on the crucial components that are central to women's movements and feminism, because these are important indicators of critical consciousness development. The aim is to provide clarity on these and link them to the Ethiopian context through an analysis of the emerging women's movement in the 1970s there. The link will also be extended to the present EPRDF/TPLF rule, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

The second part of this theoretical framework is crucial to understanding the background to women's activism or inactivism in the country. It discusses those factors that are seen as inhibiting the emergence of feminist agency among educated women and that could assist in the nurturing of radical feminist leadership in the country. Among the factors are the internal factors among educated women themselves such as their subjectivity, agency and experience, and external factors such as the role and influence of the state, education, media, religion and the issue of freedom.

### **2.1.1 Women's movements**

Documenting histories of women's movements can add much support and strength to them. This is so in the main because they would not only help with the identification process, but also assist in the link to and continuity with the struggle. They can function as a bridge from the past to the future. Generally, the prevalence of the histories of different women's movements implies that the groundwork has already been done, that the country has already been subjected and made aware of the demands of women's rights and, most importantly, that the traditional perceptions on gender have been challenged at least in the past.

Women's movements were a sign of conflict or critique between women and others (society, patriarchy) resulting in the formation of a social group (women) to look after their interests. Marx espoused that critical theory outlines the tensions between different classes/groups in society, which eventually headed for revolutionary changes (Morrow 1994, p. 97). Emanating from society thus, women's movements expressed a disagreement or tension with the existing situation demanding change. There were many women's movements throughout the world emanating from within their own unique contexts and with their own demands. Giddens, like other scholars, believes that women's movements offer the best means of institutionalizing "bottom-up decision-making" and democratization of the modern world (Tucker 1998, p. 147).

Many Western societies have written histories of women's movements dating back to the end of the eighteenth century. Africa too, has a long history of women's movements. Most of the recently documented histories of African women's movements include the colonization period in the early nineteenth century, when women actively protested against their enslavement and domestication among the colonized nations. Examples are the Igbo and Ibibio women's war in 1929 in Nigeria (Tamale 2000, p. 8; Amadiume 1976, p. 50) the Dancing Women's Movement in 1925 and the Spirit Movement in 1927 (Amadiume 1976, p. 50). There are also numerous other accounts of women in various resistance, anti-colonial and liberation movements throughout Africa such as those in Kenya, northern Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania where women formed groups and protested against increased taxation, forced domestication, loss of leadership positions, loss of property rights, trade and market options and so forth (see Berger & White 1990, p. 20-29). These movements were independent of other forms of social movement and the women's main aim was not to introduce changes in their status, but to struggle for the reinstatement of what they had lost.

Many of the most recent African women's movements, however, appear to have emanated from existing social movements such as independence movements, wars and conflicts (Jayawardena 1986, p. 10). In similar manner, the first Ethiopian Women's Movement was closely linked to the existing student movement at the time in the late 1970s. It was, however, contained as a separate chapter of this movement and not independent.

### ***The social base of women's movements***

At the time of their emergence, most women's movements were similar to any of the social movements of the time. However, they were marked by specific characteristics through which they were identified. Why were they different and what formed their ideological base? Analytical findings revealed their distinction from other social movements and are discussed below. These discussions will simultaneously also touch upon the situation in Ethiopia.

The first distinctive characteristic of women's movements is their identity. Identity emerges from their members: the majority of members are women. This identity as a group is based on their having a shared experience of being female. Rosalind Delmar (2005, p. 29) explains this more explicitly as: "an external situation in which women find themselves that includes economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination, and so on; and an internal response they developed against these, such as the feeling of inadequacy, a sense of narrow horizons". This potential identity between women, according to Delmar, contributes to the unity of the movement. Women's movements are thus engaged in identity politics.<sup>15</sup>

The emerging women's movement among the Ethiopian students abroad could not be classified in terms of this form of understood identity, as there were also many males among those. The women's study groups of the political parties might have been overwhelmingly women, but they were instigated and led by their male comrades. This changed when the "woman question" paradigm was brought into the country during the revolution in 1974 by some of the returning students. These students started to strategize through the existing channels of the Zemecha Campaign<sup>16</sup> to get women organized in the country during 1974-1975, focusing on women only. A movement was thus in the making. This did not last long though. The Derg stopped it before it could mature.

After the EPRDF took over the country, women's movements again deteriorated. During a few occasions, women jointly took actions (International women's day celebrations (Ella 2000, p. 64-65) or the campaign against violence against women in 2000 (Reflections 5, 2001, p. 34-43) without interference from the ruling party. This could have signalled the presence of a women's identity sharing common goals. These

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<sup>15</sup> Lauretis, cited in Alcoff (2005), sees identity politics as using one's identity as a point of departure while at the same time recognizing identity as a construct. For example, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and so on, can be used as a position from which to act politically (Alcoff 2005, p. 434-435).

<sup>16</sup> 'Zemecha' or "Development through Cooperation Campaign" was launched by the Derg on 21 December 1974 (Markakis & Nega 1978, p. 133). The aim of this campaign was to dispatch students to the remotest corners of the country to explain the objectives of the 'Ethiopia Tikdem' campaign to the people.

movements though were not strong enough to surmount political pressure and faded. At present, any action of women in a collective needs clear “cooperation” with the government’s women’s ministry.

The second feature unique to women’s movements is what Peggy Antrobus (2004) refers to as being *grounded* in the understanding of women’s relations to the wider social conditions. Groundedness implies not only being aware of the political, economic and social factors that affect women, but a realization of the level of sexism and patriarchy embedded in them (Antrobus 2004, p. 13-14). It means that women’s movements have an analytical base that caused their emergence. They have come to realize their social setting and positioning within it and use that as an incentive to get organized to do something about them.

As an analytical framework, the Ethiopian students abroad had already theorized extensively on the “woman question” from a Leninist angle. Their writings reveal how the theoretical framework was directly adapted from Lenin’s views on the “woman question” where they linked it to the Ethiopian context.<sup>17</sup> The groundedness of Ethiopian women’s problems can be read from Gobena Wale’s paper where the economic, social and political dimensions of women’s oppression were described (1971). But this was all theoretical.

When the students returned to Ethiopia with their Marxist theoretical knowledge, something went amiss. It appeared then that the theorizing was done abroad from a perceived reality that was not closely linked to the realities in the country. Even the radical calls for change seemed too general and were fitted into Leninist theory, missing the link to translate those into practice in the country. The students failed on two fronts: they had not conducted a new analytical study among the different groups of women in Ethiopia or identified the real concerns of these women and they were aloof from the actual situation on the ground.

Another concern could well be the reason that the theoretical base of the “woman question” (used by both the Derg and now the EPRDF) is not connected to a separate women’s movement, but forms an integral part of a political ideology characterized by class and ethnicity, respectively. Without the presence of Marxist ideals (socialism) in the political system, the “woman question” is an illusion. How can one realize the revolutionary changes of communal kitchens or all women employed in productive labour when there are no such ideals in society or at the level of the polity? At present there are many papers written by students touching on the practical problems women face, but they remain merely descriptive. They do not reflect groundedness as they lack feminist theorizing that uses strategic approaches and challenges structural issues.

The third basic characteristic in women’s movements is the issue of organization. Movements are not a one-person ideal, but are seen as a joint, collaborative action by many. Boneparth and Stoper express this view that a women’s movement should be

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<sup>17</sup> See Annexure I, II, III

considered as the organized arm of sisterhood<sup>18</sup> (a universal concern and an individual caring for women as a group everywhere: a compassion, an understanding, an empathy) (1988, p. xii). Organization simply refers to a group of women joining their efforts together to gain maximum results.

In Ethiopia, this parameter was still in its infancy among the students who belonged to political parties where the “woman question” emerged. They were organized as party members and not as part of a women’s organization independent from the party. And their aim to get women organized in the country with the purpose of starting a national women’s movement was also in its infancy. It means they were still plans and ambitions. The students were engaged in the initial stages of consciousness-raising to motivate women to form associations. The emerging women’s associations under the many cooperatives in the country during the Derg regime were not oriented towards the emancipation of women. They were mainly a tool for exploitation by the military regime. The same can be said at present of the EPRDF regime as organization is at a minimal level. The few women’s associations are used as political instruments to seek political legitimacy while the women’s machinery is engaged in getting women organized to serve political ends. Women organizing for collective action are absent and there are no initiatives to organize women with the aim to establish a women’s movement.

The fourth issue important in women’s movements is closely linked to the element of being grounded. Analysis of women’s situations can contribute to the formation of goals, objectives, strategies and visions. Visions vary according to perceptions of analytical discourses. They provide movements with their ideological bases and the intersectionality of women’s issues. This leads to the many schools of thoughts in feminism. And, as women are divided along the various lines of class, race, age, ethnicity, and so on, so too will be their understanding of their own unique situations, leading to many ideological discourses.

Did the Ethiopian students have an ideological base? They did indeed and operated from a Marxist paradigm. Their aim was to remain loyal to this school of thought and they warned others against diversion (‘The Woman Question in Ethiopia’ 1973, p. 4-5). As such, the “woman question” was a clear imitation from this school of thought, forming the same framework of class analysis. At the time, there were no other schools of thought in the country. In fact, this Marxist (Leninist) view remained central for nearly two decades (60s and 70s) among the students. Leninism provided the main framework for the solutions to many women’s problems.

When the radical political parties were defeated, the Derg initiated its own ideological base of socialism where a new form of “woman question” took shape. This “woman question” was devoid of Marxist or Leninist ideals and became instrumental to the Derg aimed at the exploitation of women. The framework needed to enhance women’s “active participation” in society according to the Leninist theory, were not in the remotest sense considered as important (such as establishing communal nurseries or creating mass employment).

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<sup>18</sup> Sisterhood could be understood as the same as gender identity.

The EPRDF also failed grossly on this front. The political regime is dubious, bordering on capitalism and socialism, calling itself liberal democracy, but practising the Derg's political ideology of control and repression. Here again, the ERPFD devised its own "woman question" program that fitted in with its political ethnicized ideology but is deficient of the much needed reforms to genuinely advance women's interests.

Lastly, the most crucial element in women's movements, as a social movement in conflict with the status quo, is the issue of "change". Women's movements emerge due to a social problem that is experienced by many women. The goal of such a movement is then also to try to change or transform the undesirable condition. Change is actually the ultimate vision women's movements do aspire for.

The Ethiopian students, engaged in a hefty battle against the ruling monarch and emerging military ruler, envisaged socialist changes at all levels but with a focus on a socialist ideological base. They had inspirational calls to end women's discrimination and subordination. The status of women was so deplorable at the time, that revolutionary change was the ultimate goal. So, indeed, they were all in favour of revolutionary change, but only change in accordance with Marxist, Leninist and Maoist principles.

The Derg, and later the EPRDF, unfortunately captured women's emancipation and steered it to a situation where it does not upset the status quo and the quest for changes remains at a minimum. It is in this context that revolutionary changes are urgently needed because state paternalism is repressively smothering women into silent puppets. There are no strong women to shoulder the challenges and call for radical changes. The "women question" from the ruling party is a huge stumbling block to independent movements mainly because it is assumed to be national. This is, however, an imposed program carrying severe sanctions against violators.

These five pillars lending women's movements their unique identity, shape and strength, vary between the different women's movements in different locations and settings and add to an understanding of why there are so many diverse forms of women's movements. It has to be realized that women's movements are not static, but continuous processes, strongly influenced by external and internal factors. This lends them a diverse and flexible character. Amrita Basu (cited in Antrobus 2004, p. 10) sees women's movements as "a *range* of struggles by women against gender inequality". In this range and diversity and complexity lies the ability of women's movements to be flexible and deal with the differential women's issues in different ways.

In Ethiopia it is difficult to discern the presence or absence of a women's movement in the early 1970s. What can be concluded is that there had been the beginning of a women's movement. Some characteristics matched the identification of it, such as the presence of a nascent ideological framework and the vision for change. On the three most crucial factors comprising identity, groundedness and organization, it can be summed up that they were in their infancy and initial phases. It is not known whether they might have succeeded if not repressed by the Derg.

During the current regime of the EPRDF, the trying task is to discern whether there is a women's movement and what informs its ideological base. With repression peaking in many forms, the "woman question" programme of the ruling party is read as the only path to women's emancipation. Whether that includes the presence or absence of a movement is discussed in Chapter 5.

Over time and through the increasing academic and intellectual developments in the field of women's movements, these are currently being subjected to scrutiny on their feminist base. Some scholars have started to caution on the interchangeable use of women's movements and feminist movements (Castells 1997, p. 137; Delmar 2005, p. 29; Antrobus 2004, p. 12) arguing that they are not the same. They explain that women's movements might not necessarily be present in feminism and feminism may not always take the form of a movement. This issue that divides both, according to Antrobus, is feminist *politics*.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.1.2 Feminism

What is feminism and why is there now such a fixation on its differentiation from women's movements? Since its conceptual emergence,<sup>20</sup> the word "feminism"<sup>21</sup> and its meanings have been continuously and intensively debated among scholars and non-scholars from Western and developing countries alike. In the late 1980s, there were many discussions on what constitutes feminism. The distinction was based on various factors that were seen as adding a unique identity to feminism. These factors will be discussed below. The aim is to shed some light on feminism as distinct from women's movements and through that, help in the identification of the absence or presence of any form of feminist school of thought in Ethiopia.

Emerging as a vocabulary in the late 1890s, feminism as a conceptual identity clearly started marching a distinguished course of its own during the second wave of the women's movement in the West (1960s and 1970s). It gained ideological prominence due to the divisions that emerged during this time among women in the women's movement in the West. These divisions in turn created ideological divergence, which led to the emergence of various schools of thought. Some of the major feminist schools of thought are: liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, Freudian feminism and postmodern feminism.<sup>22</sup> And, though all these schools of thought were

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<sup>19</sup> Feminist politics is seen by Antrobus as the engine in feminist movements. It is a "consciousness of all the sources of women's subordination, and a commitment to challenge and change the relationships and structures which perpetuate women's subordinate position, in solidarity with other women" (Antrobus 2004, p. 16).

<sup>20</sup> Feminists have proven by now that many of women's actions in historical times could be labelled as what is understood now as *feminism*.

<sup>21</sup> The origin of the word "feminism" is French derived from the word *femme* which means *woman*. Feminism could thus be directly translated as meaning *womanism*, a word adapted by African feminists, though interpreted differently.

<sup>22</sup> There are also many smaller groups, e.g. Amazon feminism, eco-feminism, libertarian feminism, material feminism (see Moore 2006).

feminist, “radical” feminism should be credited to have laid the root of *feminism* (Delmar 2005, p. 29), or “injected life” to it. They did this by calling for radical reforms at all levels. This included challenging the patriarchal societal structures and institutions, raising issues considered taboo in most societies (such as women’s sexuality, religious misogyny, issues of domestic abuse and violence against women), and challenging notions of the universality of women’s subordination and the “taken-for-granted”, including language and culture.

It is due to the radical approach of this group of feminists that feminism transformed into a political front, linking the personal to the political. “As Giddens argues, feminism has connected the personal and the political in new ways. Rather than becoming a form of narcissism and self-absorption, the new personal politics can lead to a democratization of individual life, and to a recognition of the importance of human rights and democracy at the international level” (Tucker 1998, p. 208).

Given the different schools of thought on feminism, it is not surprising that it has varying definitional understandings. Based on the scope and area of work it can be defined as an identity, theory, school of thought, practice, intellectual discourse or simply used as a course subject in education. This ability to have so many outlooks substantiates feminism into a unique discipline on its own, independent from the “malestream”.<sup>23</sup>

However, despite its variations of use, feminism maintains some common conceptual perception. This perception, in its most simplistic form, is that feminism has something to do with the defence of women’s rights. Castells (1997, p. 195) sees this as the bottom line. How this defence is carried out, can vary and be interpreted differently. For instance, Crawford and Unger (1996, p. 6) see feminism as “a *movement* to end sexism and sexist oppression”, while Delmar (2005:30) sees it as an active *desire* to change women’s position in society (emphasis author’s). Chris Weedon (1987, p.1) adds political dimensions to the defence and protection of women’s rights. She states that “Feminism is politics directed at changing existing power relations between women and men in society”. Kenneth Tucker (1998, p. 185) believes that feminism has made people cognizant of the interconnections between personal life and political and social issues.

In short, feminism opens dormant and suppressed issues for debate and scrutiny. It takes the daring road of questioning and challenging everything it encounters, from tangible issues to ideological perceptions and the universe. This challenging emerges from its perceived conflict with reality where inequality, exclusion and dominance reign supreme under patriarchal social structure. Feminism is thus contributing to the development of a new (critical) consciousness leading to new realities.

In this regard Boneparth and Stoper (1988, p. xii) see feminism as a *strategy* for the women’s movement. This strategy is meant to direct the movement and keep it focused.

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<sup>23</sup> “Malestream” is an alternative word used for “mainstream” (ideas and opinions considered normative due to their being shared by most people) that tries to show how mainstream thinking is androcentric and that the male understanding of the world is a biased perception of considering realities as normative, universal and gender-neutral.

It implies that there is a need for intellect and knowledge. These add to the image of feminism and have been gaining prominence and seen as its stronghold. They also make feminism more challenging than women's movements, making it into the preserve of a small group (Pareira 2002; Castells 1997, p. 187). Feminism as strategy contributes to differing views because it is based on analytical findings of problems affecting particular groups of women. These differences in turn cause for the emergence of new feminist schools of thought. And this in turn explains why feminism remains in flux.

With the analytical findings of women's movements, it becomes more and more clear that not all women's movements are feminist. This raises doubts and questions such as Is a women's movement a feminist movement? (Delmar 2005, p. 30), or Can an action be 'feminist' even if those who perform it are not? (ibid.). Indeed a challenging and just concern. Feminism may have emerged from women's movements, but not all women's movements contain a feminist base and not all feminism is connected to a women's movement. Feminism contains some basic characteristics that inform its ideological base and lend it its unique identity. Some of these might overlap with women's movement to a certain extent.

### ***The ideological base of feminism***

The first rather major element in feminism is the issue of identity. This identity is different from what is understood under that of women's movements. It does not refer to a group identity of being female, but refers to the subject being, the individual person's identity.<sup>24</sup> It is seen as the inner self that formulates and guides one's thinking and action (the very elements used in feminism to achieve changes). It is not inborn or natural. As bell hooks (2005, p. 53) states: "Feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into". It is the transformation of the self into a feminist identity. Castells (1997, p. 7) explains this emergence of feminist identity as a process of "individuation".

Individuation is closely linked to the second factor in feminism. It takes place through the development of critical thinking which is clarified by Linda Alcoff (2005, p. 436) as: "When women become feminists, the crucial thing that has occurred is not that they have learned any new facts about the world but that they come to view those facts from a different position, from their own position as subjects". After all, as David Held (1980, p. 204) stipulates: "Thinking is praxis". It is the psychic reflection of realities linking that to one's own status. This rather unique personhood development and transformation explains why not all women can be called feminists and not all feminists are women. It is a form of intellectual insight that is cultivated and therefore remains the preserve of a few. Identity and intellect combined are crucial elements in feminism.

When reflecting on this in the Ethiopian context of the 1970s, it can be argued that the process of individuation and "self" development was actively prevalent among many of

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<sup>24</sup> Identity can be seen at two levels, one being the subjectivity or personhood of an individual and the other being the issue of institutional or ideological identification. Institutional identification is when women identify themselves as belonging to a certain institution (religion, club, party, group etc.) and internalizes the values of such institutions as their own (author).

the students in the 1970s. However, this was not in the field of women's concerns, but more politically focused. The students identified themselves through their political affiliation. Among the first writers of the "woman question" one could but wonder whether such critical insights were present due to their situatedness (many were abroad at the time of the second wave of the women's movement and other social movements) or whether they had been influenced by their environment to analyze the status of women in Ethiopia drawing upon the existing Marxist-Leninist framework. It looked simple to translate the theory step by step to the local situation of Ethiopian women. However, this does not explain individuation, self-transformation or high levels of intellect.

Among the students taking part in the Zemecha campaign (1975-1976) the situation was different. Those students were developing themselves by being engaged in the field and their presence in the politically unstable times assisted their insightfulness on how to manoeuvre their agendas. These students combined their activism and self-development to pursue their goals. At present, a few activists have emerged on women's issues, but they lack a theoretical or feminist base. There is no process of self-development and no proof (written or documented) on their insights and embeddedness. It is thus not clear whether they have a feminist identity that had the chance to mature through praxis. There is politically no room for individuation, though many travel and are exposed at great lengths. If there is the presence of feminist identity, then it is hidden.

The third feature of feminism, and one of the most crucial ones, is radicalism. What feminism retained from the radical school of thought was radicalism in the form of rage (Antrobus, 2004:121). Such rage in turn fuels further radicalization and critical thinking among feminists who, in the process, not only transform their inner *self* but also their agendas.

Radicalization was present among a few of the Zemecha students who were energetically and actively engaged in trying to get their message across and reach the masses of women through all means possible. They were very daring and courageous. Unfortunately, their radicalism did not last long and many were silenced during the Red Terror (1977-79).

Radicalism is absent at present in Ethiopia among educated women and even those who claim to be activists. Many leave the country when opportunities arrive and are not engaged in discursive practices on women's emancipation. There are no recorded data on women's radicalism linked to their rights, such as is being observed in Uganda, for instance, or Iran. If there is no radicalism, it implies that women either do not experience their situation as unsatisfactory enough that could erupt in conflict, or they refrain from radicalizing themselves due to their perceptions of political intolerance, or they simply remain silent, waiting for the right moment.

The fourth distinctive feature of feminism is when intellect is combined with radicalism to be transformed into political activism. This is seen as a form of effective strategizing to gain sustainable solutions to women's problems. As such, all feminist schools of thought are aimed at political engagement. bell hooks duly mentions this when she challenges

women to “leave behind the apolitical stance sexism decrees is their lot and develop political consciousness” (hooks, 2003:52). Other scholars equally admit the strategic importance of political activism (Weedon 1987, p. 1; Antrobus 2004, p. 60). African feminists have added political activism as an important ingredient in their outlook and approach (McFadden 1997; Pareira 1999).

The political component of women’s emancipation was embedded in the socialist agenda of the students. Socialism, focused on Leninism and Marxism, is about state involvement in women’s lives. It is a revolutionary form of transformation of old structures into new forms. Women’s emancipation was thus to be realized through their active engagement in productive work and reduction of their domestic workloads, to be facilitated by the socialist state. It means that the state was responsible to see women’s demands were met and solutions found to many problems. For example, communal kitchens and kindergartens were to be established to relieve women’s workload so that they could work at equal level with men in productive work. In fact, socialism had its own hidden agenda where women were expected to be indoctrinated to take up this mission as their own and strive for socialist goals. This rather vanguard dictate did not consider any other challenge from women and did not envisage any problems in its ignorance of patriarchal cultural and religious presence.

The students, however, did not engage the Derg in their agenda, but were working outside of and in opposition to the state. They made use of the existing Women’s Coordinating Committee to advance their own agenda rather than confronting the Derg with it. This strategy was used in the main to avoid repression by the Derg. But it also implied that political activism was absent in this regard. Perhaps political confrontation was envisaged once women had been organized, but it is not known whether that was their plan.

Once the Derg initiated its own “woman’s question” programme, there was no need for politicization of women’s emancipation because it was simply subordinate of the political system. The same situation is applicable at present with the EPRDF regime. The current “woman question” program is a political program aimed at emancipating women in accordance with state directives. This does not mean that everyone in society is content with this approach. But educated women refrain from pursuing political confrontation. They rather work along with political bureaucrats as that is their only way to survive. Some manoeuvre their depoliticized agendas through enforced cooperation with the state, others just refrain. Without political confrontation it means that feminism is not active in the country.

And finally, there is the issue of what feminism truly strives for given its doses of radical intellect and political activism. Their ultimate vision is not just change in the form of women’s status, but an all-encompassing form of transformation that starts at the individual level. Through the development of critical consciousness and radicalism, women are expected to be transformed into feminists whose main goal will be to bring about sustainable transformations in the status of women. Their aim is thus not only to

play the games by the rules, but also to change the rules of the game (Rao & Kelleher 2000, p. 74; Antrobus 2004, p. 166).

Coser (1957, p. 205) sees change as comprehensive when it is forwarded as a group action that can result in deviance leading to new patterns and structures. Without a group, change is superficial. One can argue about the presence of a group among the students in Ethiopia. But the group lacked strong cohesion, structure and strategies. Their conflict aiming for revolutionary changes that carried the risk of leaving traditional structures intact (ibid, p. 202). This is what happened when the Derg took power in 1974 through a revolution and later when the EPRDF did the same in 1991. Patriarchal structures were not affected by the revolutionary transformations. “There is always some sort of continuity between the past and the present, or a present and a future social system” (ibid, p. 201). If changes in structures do not accompany the radical political changes, they carry the risk of being used for continued forms of exploitation and repression.

Thus, despite the actions of the Zemecha students aiming for revolutionary changes, they failed to bring changes in their own structures. Feminists as a group were absent in the country and group cohesion was weak. Besides mobilizing women, they lacked strong organization. Their self-transformation was in the pipeline, but did not have the time to mature. They did not have enough time or opportunity to focus on structures and strategies.

During the current EPRDF regime group cohesion among women along conflict-inducing issues is also absent. There are a few women’s organizations and networks mainly engaged in apolitical (social) issues lacking radicalism. There are no radicals organizing women on their emancipation at the moment (a few years ago there were initiatives such as the organizing of the celebrations of the International Women’s Day, the campaign against rape, or the signing of a petition against the regional Oromia government on polygamy). In the absence of strong women’s movements and clear visionary discourses on women’s emancipation, change cannot emerge]. There are many areas in which women can become mobilized to demand changes. For instance, the issues of poverty alone can be used as a source of mobilization because of its inherent inequality features and resulting forms of deprivation. Deprivation alone in turn can be a cause for rebellion or conflict (Oberschall 1978, p. 304). There is simply no political confrontation. Women do not get organized on strong issues challenging the ruling party.

Based on the discussions mentioned above highlighting the distinctive characteristics of feminism, it becomes clear that the simultaneous and interchangeable use of the terms women’s movements and feminist movements is incorrect.<sup>25</sup> Ethiopia knew an emerging women’s movement which showed some feminist features, but never grew into a solid women’s or feminist movement. Elements of political activism, intellect and

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<sup>25</sup> Feminism (as a banner) continues to be used as a term to include all those working with and for women (Castells 1997, p. 184). Delmar challenges this notion, stating that “the usage of feminism as a blanket term to cover all women’s activities urgently needs to be questioned” (Delmar 2005, p. 29). The questioning remains at a minimum because women are ignorant of the conceptual distinctions. Especially when academic theorizing remains insignificant.

transformation were rather low and delinked. This situation is still prevalent today. Everything the students did in the 1970s was part of their party agenda and not a women's agenda per se. Everything women do at present is either part of their individual career or politically imposed by the repressive regime, again missing the link to a visionary goal of women's emancipation.

Given the specific features of feminism, there is no room for feminism in the country. Politically, the "woman question" is advanced as the strong pillar of the ruling party on engaging women and making them internalize (through repressive means) that as the just approach to their emancipation. When the term "gender" is suspiciously evaded as too radical (due to its demands for structural changes), feminism is automatically targeted as alien. The "woman question" is not a social movement that is in conflict with the political system, but a product of the system and used for selfish ends in the name of women's emancipation. When there is no conflict, change is also minimal, merely cosmetic. So, while feminism as critical theory is aiming to critique and change society as a whole, the "woman question" aims simply at interpreting and explaining it and uses soft approaches to improve situations without changing anything. And this is the major role of the ruling party's "woman question": It is not out to change anything, but just fits women in, patches up women's situations here and there (education, health), assuring the maintenance of the status quo while at the same time keeping women's demands suppressed.

### **2.1.3 Feminist leadership and vision**

The presence of women's leadership<sup>26</sup> is crucial for feminist concerns to become visible. From historic times, women's leadership has been of great importance in the women's movements. Peggy Antrobus points out that "Without leadership, no challenges can be met, no matter how good the strategies will be" (2004, p. 164). However, women's leadership is not simply a matter of taking the lead or control. It needs clear vision and missions, goals, objectives and strategies in order to actively pursue a feminist agenda. It is, as Mendez-Negrete argues, leadership that "demands justice, equality and fairness" (1999, p. 26). "It is not something meant for personal gain and status, but having a clear vision for the common good of the whole group..." (ibid, p. 29). Feminists strive for a collective, durable good. According to Oberschall (1978, p. 307), "A collective good is a good that once supplied to one member of the group cannot be withheld from any member of the group". It is thus a few feminists who gain the benefits for the larger group.

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<sup>26</sup> A study by the UN on Women in Leadership and Decision-making, conducted in 1992, reveals that there are various reasons why women should be in leadership: (1) they are equal human beings comprising half of the world's population and deserve, from an egalitarian perspective, to share in leadership responsibilities; (2) a genuine democracy should treat women as equal members with powers, rights and freedom, as citizens; (3) women's differential focus or interests can enhance effective politics; (4) women's marginalized status for centuries and their overrepresentation in certain areas of life can cause the politicization of those areas under their expertise; and (5) women are part of society's human resource capital that causes great financial losses if they are excluded. For instance, in many countries, the non-profit sector is becoming feminized like certain professions. When calculated in monetary terms, the optimum use of all labour power would save the country a lot of money (United Nations 1992, p. xii-xiii).

The history of Ethiopia reveals the scarcity of such unique, daring female leadership in the country. There is simply no woman who can be credited for having provided strong leadership to the emancipation of women. In early times, Empress Taytu stood out as a female leader but not for feminist concerns. Her leadership was connected to her belonging to the ruling class or as wife of the emperor. She might have raised a few concerns regarding women's rights but she never emerged as a champion on concretely tackling those.

During the students' movement, there were a few prominent female students who emerged as outstanding as part of their student unions, but again, none emerged as strong advocates for women's rights. In fact, the very first time the debate on the "woman question" was tabled among the student unions it had come from a male colleague. Among the Zemecha Campaign students, there had been many females who bravely endured the harshness of the regime to promote their parties' agendas or tirelessly travelled around the country to conscientize women, but none have been mentioned as champions. Only one woman was mentioned as outstanding in the EPRP party leadership, Abebech Bekele, but not for her feminist principles.

At present, among a few activists who have done some work on women's emancipation were those at the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association (EWLA) taking the lead in some concrete actions. This leadership was short-lived and did not get sufficient time to develop into feminist leadership. The resulting network initiated by EWLA, the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), is also contained and de-radicalized. If it intends to survive, it has no option. There are a few active individuals who do not take up leadership roles, but work behind the scenes, often frustrated in their ideals and efforts. Leadership for the emancipation of women or to form a women's movement is thus far from becoming a reality yet. The educated could play a prominent role in this. It is crucial that they go through the process of individuation.

Given the above, feminist leadership is more challenging than women's leadership. It requires more than the specific qualities that are context specific such as skills, traits, experience and intellect (Tucker 1977, p. 383, 385). Actually, the distinction between women as leaders and feminist leadership is very clear (Sweetman 2000, p. 2). Women's leadership is simply devoid of a feminist base. This means that these women may "act no differently from their male colleagues". According to Antrobus (2004, p. 164), "Most of the women in political leadership owe their position to their conformity with male models of leadership and their acceptance of the status quo. They can be trusted to play the game according to the rules, trusted not to rock the boat." Within male politics, they have the room to be creative, innovative and aggressive, as long as they remain within the status quo.

Feminist leadership on the other hand, implies a changed personality on a mission to change the world in a sustainable manner. Peggy Antrobus (cited in Sweetman 2000, p. 6) relates the changed personality of feminist leaders as "transformational feminist" leadership. Transformational refers to not only the changed person, but also how that

person will operate with a changed outlook. It is someone who is seen as being able to transform agendas in any setting from within (at organizational, political, regional, and international levels) to ensure that they reflect the concerns of feminists. Antrobus (2004, p. 166) adds to this transformational leadership passion for justice and commitment to change that would begin with oneself. Rao and Kelleher (2000, p. 74) append to this the transformation of the structures and rules, the foundations of their surroundings. Feminist leadership is thus not just leadership for the sake of leadership, but leadership with a huge responsibility to bring about transformation at all levels. This means that feminist leadership is clearly political with a mission to political activism in order to achieve comprehensive transformations at the political, social and economic levels.

The risks involved in feminist leadership are also tremendous. Once they become visible, they also become easily targeted by governments or other conservative groups who are not pleased with their demands. Many women in history risked their lives taking up leadership positions and struggling for women's rights. Some were executed, imprisoned or silenced. And the battle continues. Silencing is still used as a strategy by many governments and institutions all over the world. Recent examples include the assassination of women's rights activists in Iraq and Afghanistan and the silencing of women's rights activist, Wajeha al-Huwaider, in Saudi Arabia, who was forced to sign an oath, pledging not to protest or participate in any human rights activities (Feminist Daily News Wire, November 1, 2006). In Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association was shut down in 2000 in order to silence the leader. The larger group benefitting from the gains achieved by feminists remains free from prosecution. One could state that the mass beneficiaries of the actions of feminists (changes from which all women benefit) are thus free riders (Oberschall 1978, p. 307).

#### **2.1.4 African feminism**

There is a clear lack of any feminist discourse in Ethiopia. "Discourse should not be understood in social research as concerning only propositional statements: i.e., what actors say, or can be persuaded to say, in the forms of expressed beliefs. Humour, wit and irony and other discursive phenomena are also vital features of human knowledgeability" (Giddens 1983, p. 76). Knowledgeability is closely connected to the processes of consciousness raising where information is exchanged and where through reflective praxis, understanding and consensus is cultivated. Giddens argues that many of the things people do in their day-to-day actions are more practical rather than discursive reflections. Practical actions sprout from practical consciousness. They are often impulsive and automatic and cannot be put in words (Giddens 1983, p. 76). Discourses, on the other hand are what actors say and can put in words. They are linked to communications, when people talk, share their views and ideas and discuss.

In this section I aim to discuss one of the most prominent feminist discourses on the African continent, mainly because it is widely written and reflects features applicable to the Ethiopian context. Through the discussion, I intend to explore how it is connected to Ethiopia. Perhaps there is a feminist discourse in the country not realized yet. The discussion can assist in the local discourse formulation, encourage further dialogue and

eventually reveal the interconnection between the country and other African countries in the region. Ethiopia is after all, not an island on its own in such a huge region.

The African continent also does not have any clear-cut gender or feminist discourse such as those in the West. Some discourses have started to gain momentum, while others could still be said to be in their infancy. This includes the introduction of women and gender studies at the academic level in existing institutions during the 1970s and 1980s (Ethiopia started in 2005).

To begin with, the word feminism as a concept and content is strongly resisted by many African “feminists” who refuse to be associated with it. This could be due to many reasons such as the level of radicalism embedded in it or the misperception of its founders, among which many were lesbians, or its discourse. It could also be resisted as a form of Western imposed jargon to which many African countries do not feel connected.

The most crucial issue about resistance is that people go searching for alternatives. African feminists have been doing the same. They have been actively engaged in theorizing their own experiences into alternative feminist discourses. These include some of the known ones such as *womanism* (Pareira, 1999), or *Africanist feminism*, or *Afrocentric feminism* (Collins 1997, p. 249). While these concepts may aim to function as an alternative to Western feminism, the fact is that they have also been injected with completely different ideological outlooks, based on the realities of African women. For example, while feminism implies an active desire and movement to change the position of “women” (Delmar, 2005:30), *womanism* is understood as women striving for the “collective good”. This is considered from the perspective that “society is a ‘groupthink’” (Janis 1972, cited in Oberschall 1978, p. 293), common in African countries. And the more conflict-ridden the setting (some societies use identity markers to distinguish themselves from other groups, tribes or ethnicities), the stronger the group thinking. Individual thinking simply has no place in such societies (Oberschall 1978, p. 203).

Alice Walker (cited in Collins 1997, p. 256) describes *womanism* in this regard as “A womanist is when one is committed to the survival, and wholeness of entire people, male and female. A womanist is not a separatist, except periodically for health and is traditionally universalist.” The theoretical implications of *womanism* will be briefly analysed below, as it seems to be among the popular feminist discourses in Africa.

*Womanism* follows a distinctive path promoted by some while rejected by others. For instance, the issue of collective interest can be subjected to analysis. Why don’t individual women have a voice in *womanism* chasing their own dreams and desires? Why are the subjective identity of women and their sexuality not of concern in *womanism*? Patricia McFadden (1997) explains how: “African women have no personhood or bodily integrity as an established and recognized norm in any of our societies”. According to McFadden, “They do not even own themselves as females or as socially constructed personhood”. This is why women are always identified through the men in their lives (from father to husband) (Ibid).

*Womanism* was thus constructed from this angle of women's non-existence. But, as feminism stands for the promotion of women's rights, *womanism* seems to ignore such desire among women and stresses their collective responsibility. Collins (1997, p. 250), for example, explains how educated women would operate from two levels of knowledge in order to join them into one. They would utilize their commonsense, taken-for-granted knowledge based on their everyday experiences and the more specialized academic knowledge to do what is expected of them. And, though both are treated as independent where women apply different strategies of operations, the end goal should be steered towards the common good and embedded in the collective, not the individual desires.

To this end, Ethiopian women too live under conditions where group identity is strongly promoted. They are expected to abide by their cultural practices and strive for the common good of all women and men in society and not individual women's desires alone. Cultural distinctions between the different ethnic groups are often enforced through collective actions where individuality is not condoned. The overarching identity as Ethiopian nationalism, i.e. "Ethiopiawinet" is a good evidence of this. Educated women, fearing isolation and sanctions if they fail to conform to societal expectations, refrain from individual actions. Below follow some critical reflections on "womanism".

This issue of collective approach places some serious constraints on its practitioners. First of all, it could be read as not being an independent choice, but rather a product of patriarchal control and supervision. This is closely embedded in the African family structure passed on from one generation to the next, by women themselves. Perhaps it could be a remnant of the past where women relied on the group of women for support and identity.

The second problem could be in denying women active agency. This means that many women would not divert from what is expected of them, fearing the risks. It could be a "free choice" women make from within their contained agency to support collective goals negating their own desires and feelings, but that does not prevent one from looking at such actions from an objective perspective when it comes to women's rights. How can women fight for the collective good when their rights are violated daily?

A third problem could be in the ignorance of the acts of the individual woman that take the courage to start the ball rolling on any given issue. It is always the individual woman who starts rejecting or protesting against violations (domestic violence, rape, divorce, inheritance, property ownership, and so on) that can eventually contribute to the benefit of many. Above all, it is the individual woman with her unique experiences that can generate a feminist consciousness. How can individual "self"-transformation then reconcile the common good if the common good is against individualization?

A fourth concern is that self-transformation can lead to changed consciousness, developed into critical thinking and eventually cause changed personality (expressed through language, behaviour, attitude and actions). This process of individualization can cause feminist tendencies to emerge among women. The question is then, what will happen to such individual feminists who fail to stay connected to the collective in pursuit

of their own ideals? In many developing countries, they could be pushed to the margins and remain underground. This is what was observed by Mikell (2003, p. 109-110) who stated that “to a large extent, much of the emerging feminist consciousness and the current movement toward a feminist agenda in each country remain hidden”. A visible problem in Ethiopia where a few, rather conscious activists remain hidden and silent. Individual approaches reveal how these activists would like to radicalize their agendas, but feel compelled to refrain from doing so. In many African countries, the first feminists face the wrath of religion, families, neighbours, friends and even their governments. They become ostracized and ridiculed. It is only recently and in a few African countries that individualism is being acknowledged (ibid, p. 109-110).

A fifth problem noted with African feminism, including *womanism*, is what is stated by Collins (1997, p. 251), that African feminists are seen as not being engaged in raising consciousness, but affirming and articulating a consciousness that already exists. This implies that they are not developing critical and new insights on issues (such as ethnicity, kinship, class, motherhood, division of labour, and so forth) like Western feminists through intensive theorizing and then raising consciousness, but in fact stick to the existing areas of focus within the parameters of women’s domains and areas of work. This is the most visible sign of operations in Ethiopia. Consciousness raising or meetings and workshops are endlessly engaged in a repetition of the same issues, such as female genital mutilation, micro-credit schemes for women, the implication of HIV/AIDS, and so forth. At the academic level, not much has been forthcoming to engage society on feminist epistemology or theorizing. No new or radical insights are provided on the problems women face or their emancipation.

Perhaps this kind of approach might be used not to upset the status quo, and remain within given parameters though actively trying to improve the lives of women. This can best be illustrated through the increasing political participation of women on the continent. Though their numbers have been rising steadily (Mikell 2003, p. 105), very few can be credited with a feminist agenda. And those who do so do not dare to cross given political borders. The result is that politically sensitive issues affecting women become shelved, ignored or evaporate. These include an active promotion of women’s individual freedom and rights, their reproductive rights and choices, social empowerment and so forth. In Ethiopia too, politically sensitive issues are evaded and omitted.

*Womanism* is also challenged on its notion for promoting women’s essentialism. This means that women are seen from their unique female essence, womanhood and motherhood. This essentialism can be a source of criticism. According to Beccali (cited in Castells 1997, p. 198) it is seen as playing “into the hands of traditional values of patriarchy and justifies keeping women in their private domain, necessarily in an inferior position.”

Finally, one of the most serious and controversial issues in *womanism* is its strong focus on motherhood. This focus could be linked to the historical prevalence of marriage as the ultimate destination for all women. However, while in the past motherhood might have bestowed on women some sort of power and independence (in most of the dual societies

where matri-centrism was practised) (Amadiume 1976, p. 40-41), at present it is not the least of that. In fact, motherhood is actively used by the patriarchy, in Ethiopia, as an instrument of violation and exploitation of women's rights, such as denial of education, employment, restrictions on their movement, isolation, control over their sexuality and labour, and so forth. Marriage of women is still seen as the ultimate destiny and placed at the centre of their emancipation. After marriage, young brides are taught to become mothers soon as that will confer some respect on them. However, this idolization of motherhood is directly playing into the hands of patriarchy. There is already a huge increase in female-headed households. Can that be translated as a source of female empowerment? It is very important to create further discussions on what motherhood means to women and why. This is critical as women all over Africa (including Ethiopia) refuse to budge from the belief that women gain in social status and become empowered once they are mothers. They obviously do not recognize the patriarchal control of their consciousness and agency and fail to interpret the realities on the ground.

The "womanism" discussed above as an African feminist school of thought, reveals that Ethiopian realities closely illustrate its discourse. "Womanism" is also the prevalent discourse in the country, though never analyzed as such or written about. There is not much divergence to how educated women undertake their actions on women's rights and it would be interesting to take this discourse into the country among them for deeper reflection and theorizing. At least there is thus one discourse, albeit hidden.

Beyond womanism, there are a few African feminists who, despite all the barriers, have experienced the paths of self discovery and exploring their subject being. What they call themselves is not difficult to grasp. Many call themselves simply "feminists". Considering the above-mentioned, these daring feminists might already be going through trying times and labelled outcasts in some countries. Ethiopia too has its own heroines in this regard. But they are not visible yet. It is time that these women come out into the open and share their views and visions.

### ***Ideological differences between Western and African feminism:<sup>27</sup> link to Ethiopia***

The emergence of different schools of thought on African feminism calls for an interrogation of their origin. This origin can help to illustrate how feminist discourses emerge and why. This in turn can help in identifying whether there are any such discourses overtly or covertly present in the Ethiopian context.

In contrast to Western feminism, which emerged as an offshoot of the second wave of the women's movement, African feminism seems to have emerged out of independence movements or conflicts. And, while Western feminism started off from an educated and intellectual angle, most African women at the time were neither organized nor highly educated. Though low education levels might have provided part of the explanation of why the emerging women's movement was weak in many African nations, the expectation that educated women could have done better does not automatically follow. This was visible among the Ethiopian activists in the 1970s, among whom many were

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<sup>27</sup> I will continue using African feminism to identify feminism in Africa instead of using any other schools of thought, unless specifically relating to them.

educated. Their awareness of the status of women did not emerge out of their educational status, but was more a product of their student unions or political parties that followed a Marxist school of thought. In that, the “woman question” played a prominent role and was adapted and fitted into the Ethiopian context. Ethiopian activists at present are a product of the time, educated, aware of the repressions and self-defined. They do not form part of any party or group (yet).

The difference of Ethiopian women’s activism from that in African countries was also the limitations the liberation struggles exerted on the emerging women’s movements. In most African countries, those sporadic feminist calls among women were often silenced and ridiculed by their male colleagues. This caused reluctance among these women to push for their agenda. Amina Mama (1996, p. 6) notes that “Women were more inclined to support the male-led nationalist struggles than to organize autonomously to fight for more equal gender relations”. Many believed the arguments used by men that they would weaken the movement and create division if they continued with their demands for equality of rights. Some even assumed that once the struggles were over, women would automatically gain rights. This intertwining of feminism within the nationalist movement had several implications. Because they emerged out of the nationalist movements where males were powerful and influential leaders, they lacked independence. This demotion could also be attributed to the novelty of feminism at the time.

In Ethiopia though, the female students in 1970s were rather more advantaged than their African sisters as they had been given room within their political parties and were encouraged to expand their women’s study groups. However, they were not independent of their parties and their overall mission was first to gain political victory for their parties. Many lacked a clear feminist consciousness and did not strongly pursue feminist goals. They thus had the space, but failed to utilize it optimally. Again, this could have been attributed to the novelty of feminism at the time, or to be more specific, the novelty to relate Marxist, Leninist and Maoist theories to the lives of Ethiopian women.

And, with the coming to power of the EPRDF, women’s movements could have been given a boost in the initial years. But before women even had the time to strategize their actions, or take advantage of the conducive political climate (after seventeen years of the Derg’s repressive rule women were very cautious), they were silenced. The EPRDF embarked on its own repressive path refusing advocacy and rights-based approaches from civil society; the emergence of civil society itself is in great peril.

Another difference is the focus of feminism that caused further rifts between African feminism, Ethiopian women’s activism and Western feminism. This could be linked to the different cultural environment African and Ethiopian women found themselves in. Some of the issues could be linked to the level of economic and political development of their countries and areas of prioritization. For example, while in the West the level of education and employment among women is high, creating room for demands that are directly related to the comforts and satisfaction of individual women’s needs, in Ethiopia the level of poverty, especially feminization of poverty, is extreme and education levels

among women are very low. This creates demands within these areas to uplift the economic status of women.

The most important location of cultivating feminism is in the academic sphere. This area has seen tremendous advancements in the last decades in both the West and in Africa. Women's studies in the West can be credited to have germinated the increased number of women in the academic field and the women's movements in the 1960s. In Africa, however, "women's studies are undergoing their own distinct evolution" (Mama 1996, p. 3). Many African countries still do not have programmes on women's studies. Ethiopia has initiated a gender studies department in 2005 but it has not undergone any forms of enlightenment yet that could challenge its grounds.

Within this academic field the feminist discourse being pursued is also diverse. While the West may engage itself in more radical forms of feminist courses, nurturing critical thinking, "African women's studies (also noted in Ethiopia) may remain deradicalized to gain acceptance among their people and governments" (Pareira 1999). And the intrusive state control of the institutions of higher learning also causes their depoliticizing. This means that gender study is weak and muted instead of active and radical. And there are many more such differences that may need further exploring.

This theoretical discussion shows that at present, feminism as a construct for the struggle for gender equality is widespread, but feminism as an ideological political base is still weak in Ethiopia and the rest of Africa, including its intellectual and strategic components. The worst is that the denial of the active elements in what makes feminism leads to the labelling of all actions on women as feminist. Even the engagement of many governments (such as Ethiopia's national women's machinery) in activities that they presume as promoting gender equality, is treated as feminist action. The risk is that such a diluted or "toned down" outlook of feminism<sup>28</sup> deliberately attempts to mute women. These motives are highly questionable and should be challenged. Unfortunately, those members of the very institutions (such as the university) that could lead the way in such challenging, are also silenced, and contained.

### **2.1.5 Feminist subjectivity, agency and experience**

One of the most important elements in women's and feminist movements is women's agency. How is this agency informed and how does it express itself? What are the contributing factors that determine the development of a feminist agency among some women? This is a very important, but rather neglected area (Klatch 2001, p. 792). Once the issue of agency formation is understood, it will also become clear why there is the presence or absence of leadership and what kind of leadership is there in Ethiopia? The issue of how that agency can transform into a feminist agency is also discussed. If women's leadership remains insufficient to start a feminist movement, the main question

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<sup>28</sup> "Toning down" implies removing the specific elements of feminism that are seen as a threat to the patriarchal power base (radicalism, political activism, respect of women's rights accompanied by equal freedom, and so on) and diverting it to a direction found desirable and beneficial to the male order.

could be; how can it be steered and directed to such a goal? The aim of the discussions on agency formation is also to understand how women take action.

Agency is at any time seen as an active conscious-subjective action. Giddens' position on agency is that the individual is able to monitor her experience and give reasons for her actions. It is defined as reasoning and knowledge, where experience involves social learning and applying the knowledge in particular contexts. Through reflexive monitoring (praxis) people rationalize their social conduct (Tucker 1998, p. 80). Consciousness raising and development are the first steps in the formation of women's subjectivity. It emerges when women start questioning their realities and reflecting on their experiences and feelings.

At present there are different means through which women can raise their consciousness, which include joining movements, groups, or networks, through work, education and information and through experience and exposure. What takes place during consciousness raising and development is the transformation of the "self", the mind and thinking process. It is directly linked to situating oneself at the centre of a broader setting. It is thus "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Ramos, cited in Freire 1972, p. 15). As conscientization is a continuous process (individuals find themselves surrounded by different and changing time frames, localities and situations), it can be called a praxis (a continuous process of reflection and action) (Antrobus 2004, p. 19). Within this praxis, Freire adds that it is also seen as a process in search of self-affirmation (1972, p.:16). Tucker (1998, p. 186) explains: "identities are fluid and changing and their definitions are sites of contestation". The individual woman is in a constant state of negotiation to relay her consciousness to her specific realities, thereby finding her place within it. Self-reflection brings to consciousness the determinants of cultivation and self-formation (Held 1980, p. 317). And this is what feminist consciousness comes to realize. It recognizes the subordination and subjection of women within the issues of sexism and patriarchy (Antrobus 2004, p. 110).

Consciousness-raising sessions among Ethiopian female students in their women's study groups could be cited as an important parameter in helping to galvanize critical thinking among them. It is not known how often these study groups met and what the outcomes were because, in the end, it was still void of a feminist consciousness. Activities of these study groups were motivated by their political party and their prime mission was to advance the party's interests due to the high level of competition present at the time from other parties. The current forms of consciousness-raising through workshops, education, networks and so forth, are also devoid of feminist ideals and focus on issues that are not in conflict with the EPRDF's political system. As mentioned under *womanism*, they do not intend to bring in new ideas but discuss what is already there (Collins 1997, p. 251).

It needs to be understood that women's agency is a historical, patriarchal product which places great restrictions on their freedom aimed at maintaining the status quo. It is encoded in their subjectivity. This causes the independent choices women make to lack

freedom, and is influenced by the patriarchal setting that determines what is normal and just. Consequently their agency is not independent, but highly indoctrinated.

Fortunately, what is constructed can be deconstructed, as post-structuralist feminists have come to realize (McCann & Kim 2003, p. 15). Various feminists have taken up the task of analyzing the construction of women's subjectivity (Weedon 1987, p. 32, 33, 88; Alcoff 2005, p. 433; McCann & Kim 2003, p. 20) in order to better understand their agency and find solutions to the many problems women face. This requires critical thinking that negates patriarchal boundaries and rejects the taken-for-granted. According to Freire (1972, p. 19), critical thinking comes from a radical mind, and radicals are those "who are not scared to face the enemy or to confront it and those who are not afraid of dialogue but rather make bold moves to challenge existing oppressive realities for that is the only way to change it". He sees radicals as those who can move and change things due to their high level of commitment. The question is, are there such radicals in Ethiopia? Such de- and reconstruction is not considered or taken up as a challenge in Ethiopia yet. Many educated women lack an objective outlook on the issue.

One crucial component in the emergence of feminism is the use of women's experiences (Ryan 1992, p. 54). Historically, women have used their experiences in consciousness-raising sessions as a backbone to their agency transformation. And experiences continue to be the guiding force of feminism (McCann & Kim 2003, p. 16). Lugones and Spelman (2005, p. 21) explain how experiences give meaning to women's lives and that "accounting for one's own experience implies accounting for what is happening to her or what she is doing and how she is doing it and why and so on". Consciousness-raising sessions can provide for the means to share and explore those experiences from a broader angle. Antrobus (2004, p. 93) explains how this is still helping women even at present. Women sharing their personal experiences during participatory and interactive sessions on issues such as female genital mutilation, domestic violence, or war crimes, have added weight to the politicizing of those issues at international level.

Experience is interpreted against the taken-for-granted consciousness. Taken-for-granted consciousness is a historical product of dominant discourses and culturally derived. They generally constitute the woman's "stock of knowledge" (Kasper 1986, p. 35) against which (new) experiences are measured. The distinction between the stock of knowledge and experimental knowledge (experience) is that "Culturally-imposed meanings are deep-rooted, taken-for-granted, unexamined and dominant. Experimentally-acquired meanings are closely felt, experienced, intimate and uniquely interpreted" (ibid, p.:451). In this section interpretive theory is used to explain how the individual self is formed.

According to Kasper, the "self" is formed through social interaction (1986, p. 31, 33). During social interaction the individual reflects her actual experiences against her stock of knowledge which have no meaning by themselves (Schutz 1967, p. 69, 71, as cited in Kasper 1986, p. 32). It is an essential process whereby she confers meaning on her lived experience. It is necessary to note that "stock of knowledge" is transmitted through socialization which expands with her newly gained experiences that accumulates in her stock of knowledge.

Consciousness-raising is thus geared towards interpreting women's lived experiences against their stock of knowledge aiming to find a balance. This is not often the case and there can be conflicts between what the person knows and experiences. Feminist consciousness emerges as a result of continuous praxis where the woman interprets her experiences against her stock of knowledge, adding new knowledge. The consciousness-raising sessions in Ethiopia were, and still are, not sessions in the sense of sharing experiences, but more in the form of speeches, meetings, workshops, lectures and so forth. These are on the one hand a one-way transmission of information spreading to the masses in a top-down manner which can result in many women feeling alienated, and on the other hand affirms what women already know without critical reflection. There is a need to reflect upon how women's lived experiences are a learning process and contribute to concrete action and theorizing.

Women's experience can be used in many ways and it seems to also form the centre of feminist theorizing and epistemology. bell hooks (2005, p. 37) explains how women are continuously engaged in theorizing without realizing it and states that: "Women's lived experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis already form the base of feminist theorizing". McCann & Kim (2003, p. 16) equally agree that experience is the principal concept in feminist theorizing.

Given the enormous diversity of women in Ethiopia, their wide range of experiences can be the source of many schools of theorizing (feminist or otherwise). These women have an *epistemic advantage* over others. This means that they, who are directly affected by a particular problem, have a better critical insight into it (Narayan 2003, p. 315). They are better positioned to reflect on their experiences, which contributes to the generation of theorizing. This reasoning does not mean that those "who are not equally positioned, including men, cannot adequately represent women's interests" (McCann & Kim 2003, p. 17), even though there is a risk. Perhaps this could explain the failure of the campaign among the Zemecha students to galvanize women's consciousness. Most of these students, after all, were privileged, had lived abroad, were educated and obviously removed from the experiences of the different groups of women in the country. They tried to organize women from their perceived reality.

The lack of a theoretical base also creates problems of the bifurcation of consciousness. This means that there is a disjunction between how women find and experience the world from their perspective and the concepts and theoretical schemes available to think about it (Smith 1974, p. 7, 9 cited in Kasper 1986, p. 44). Therefore, if women's emancipation needs a base, theorizing on women is urgently needed, in order to create a vision or goal. The best way to achieve this is to start debating women's lived experiences, not just documenting people's stories, but debating them in order to critically investigate the whole issue.

This section investigated the elements of the formation of women's agency from the angle of consciousness-raising and experiences among which women's experiences should be seen as the most profound element in feminism, whether for theorizing,

epistemology, or strategizing. These are extremely weak in Ethiopia and it can be asserted that neither are contributing yet to the formation of assertive and radical agency among women. These are areas in which women can invest. Many women activists around the globe still use their personal experiences as the motivating basis for their feminist activism. However, consciousness-raising and experience-sharing are not the only factors contributing to the formation of women's subjectivity and agency. The real agency formation takes place through rigorous socialization and indoctrination by external forces that constitute the women's stock of knowledge. It is important to discuss the formation and rigidity or fluidity of this in order to grasp educated women's inability to become proactive.

## **2.2 Ideology and control: A feminist approach**

After having discussed the importance of understanding the formation of women's agency, which is crucial in the generation of a feminist consciousness, in this section I discuss how that agency is influenced and moulded by external factors. This is crucial because what is often taken as women's conscious free choices needs to be understood within the context that influences and inhibits those choices. After the discussions, it will be clear that women's choices are not free at all, but are manipulated by many factors. This manipulation is so extensive, that it prevents the emergence of feminism among women in Ethiopia and inhibits their radicalization.

Byrant and Jary (1991, p. 7) refer to societal structures that influence and direct the formation of women's agency at the same time that women exert influence on those structures. In traditional societies, the role women play in exerting influence on external patriarchal structures is minimal, though they are active in enforcing what they assume as taken-for-granted. Considering this engagement of their agency, it is clear that their agency is a historic product rigorously cultivated for centuries through a hierarchical construct (social pyramid<sup>29</sup>) where everyone was designated their own place in society and where a small group dictates its terms to the larger masses. These dictates are not only channeled to the masses through various means (directly from the ruling elite, or the media, or education, or social support institutions such as religious institutions), but also rigorously guarded through repressive instruments such as the women's affairs machinery.

Women's agency is thus not inherent but cultivated and nurtured through a historical process of competitive dominant discursive systems that are products of existing dominant forms of ideologies.<sup>30</sup> And though ideologies (such as the Amhara/Tigray ideology) are socially constructed and subjected to boundaries (linked to ethnicity, religion, race, class, gender, politics, economics, organizations, and so on), they seem to

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<sup>29</sup> Society divided in classes in ancient times in Egypt were also called the social pyramid of society; available online at [http://www.aldokkan.com/society/social\\_pyramid.htm](http://www.aldokkan.com/society/social_pyramid.htm) and <http://carlos.emory.edu/ODYSSEY/EGYPT/people.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Jinadu (1976, p.122) explains this as a body or system of ideas about how society should be organized and ruled. Cornforth (1954:68) defines ideology similarly though he stresses its limitations as being historically specific, evolved by definite social groups in definite stages of social development.

surpass those boundaries through a process called *naturalization* (Bourdieu 1991, cited in Williams 1996, p. 372). Naturalization helps ideology to make sense of people's lives and actions and takes place through the various processes of socializations. In the end, their internalization leads to their being granted eternity, seen as universal and taken-for-granted.

In historical times, all political and societal discourses were patriarchal, finding justification through science.<sup>31</sup> This provided the rationale on how women should lead their lives (Ryan 1992, p. 60). In Ethiopian society, two dominant mutually supporting systems play a prominent role in laying down the country's historical cultural foundation. These are the state and the Orthodox Church. They are not competitive, and used to be fused into one. That is how they both end up promoting similar forms of cultural ideology.

In this section I discuss the role of this dominant ideology from historical times up to the present. The explicit aim of this is to illustrate how the country has been historically in the grip of this political culture, which has not changed much, and how it exerts great influence on women's agency even in the twenty-first century.

### **2.2.1 The dominant ruling ideology influencing the position and status of women prior to 1974 in Ethiopia**

Ethiopian society has a strong religious base. Since ancient times, the political culture has derived its strength from those religious beliefs. Orthodox Christianity was the dominant religion at the time forming the ideological base of the ruling monarchs. The ruling monarchs also belonged mainly to one particular ethnic group in society, the Amhara.<sup>32</sup> The Amhara had their own specific cultural traits which in time came to dominate social and political relations in Ethiopia despite the many different ethnic groups and religions. The Amhara language also became symbol of Ethiopianness and was proclaimed as the official language of the polity. "Making Amharic a national language was critical for consolidating central power and promoting the bureaucratic efficiency Haile Selassie Desired" (Smith 2008, p. 217).

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<sup>31</sup> Gould (cited in Walsh 1997, p.1) points that "many of the early "scientific" studies sought to prove that women, along with people of color and the poor occupy their subordinate roles by the harsh dictates of nature". Walsh gives some examples of how men used scientific arguments whenever they could to oppose the advancement of women. Dr Horatio Storer for instance opposed female physicians, claiming that their menstrual cycle would render them temporarily "insane". Dr Charles Meigs stated that women had a head too small for intellect. Edward Clarke, a scientist, also used the menstrual cycle of women to warn against educating them because it would be too dangerous to their reproductive organs. The female brain size was also extensively used by scientists to justify their stance on women's alleged inferiority. For example, Max Funke wrote a book titled *Are Women Human?* stating that women's small brain must be considered a sort of "missing link... making her into a semi-human" (Montagu 1999, p. 119). And even though it has been proven that brain size has no impact on intellect, there are still many who hold the view that women's brain size determines their "inferior" intellect.

<sup>32</sup> Amhara culture is derived from one ethnic group, the Amhara, whose language Amharinya or Amharic has been promoted as the dominant state culture and language for centuries.

As noted by Mackonen, “Amhara exists as a distinct ethnic group and is a dominating and oppressive class. For the past millennium the Abyssinian/Ethiopian state has identified with the Amhara ruling class and this has led to Amhara defining itself through Ethiopian nationalism” (2008, p. 397). Aggressive missions were carried out to not only homogenize this Amharic language and culture throughout the different regions in the country, but also to impose the Orthodox Christian religion as part of this. The Amhara culture valued hierarchical stratification and respect for authority as ultimate values of society (Markakis 1974, p. 101; Clapham 1969, p. 5) and has been actively promoted and advocated by the ruling elite to the masses and the church for centuries. In a similar manner, Islam also had its own stratification system (Brummelkamp 1956, p. 161).

Within the stratification system of the dominant Amhara system, women<sup>33</sup> were not only placed at the lowest hierarchical level, almost equal to children, but were also expected to show utmost respect and submission to men and never question the motives of their husbands, fathers or male relatives. This hierarchy was also explicitly stated in the Fetha Negest (1968, p. 249-50):

First, he [the judge] must be a man... The requirement of being a male is based on the consideration that man is the master of a woman, as said by the Apostle [Ephesians 5:23]. The office of a judge belongs to the superior rather than the subordinate; because a man is more intelligent, he must judge.

And, as has been noted, people not only took this hierarchy very seriously, they also succumbed to their fate without challenging it (Balsvik 1985, p. 48). Once internalized, challenging or questioning superiors’ motives were thus extremely rare or completely absent (Clapham 1969, p. 6).

Over centuries, such indoctrination became further integrated as part of culture. In this manner, women’s “inferior” status became established unchallenged as universal within the traditional patriarchal ideology. With the revolutionary changes at the polity in the country in the past decades, it needs to be stressed that the gender ideology remained untouched, in fact reinforced by the new regimes in accordance with their own political ideologies.

What did this all mean for the few educated women in the country during the time of the emperor? Women, like men, were subjected to such powerful autocratic ideological control that none considered challenging the emperor. The repressive systems did not leave room for defiance. This means that there was no support to independent thinking, critical consciousness development, freedom or rights. In this environment, the education of women was cautiously steered, guarded and controlled without disturbing the status quo. They fared worse than men, given the authoritarian political climate that was felt even at the root of gender relations, which was cultivated through rigorous socialization. They lacked the opportunities to reflect on their own problems or status. Given the

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<sup>33</sup> “Women” refers here to all the women in the country without distinguishing between their class or ethnicity. Although, it should be kept in mind that the different groups of women were impacted differently, depending class or ethnic group to which they belonged.

political culture of society at the time, the emperor would never have tolerated the development of a critical consciousness among women, something that was also not expected among men. But since such initiatives were totally absent at the time, it is not known what the reactions would have been if women had been given those opportunities.

When the Derg took political power in the country in 1974, it dramatically changed the political course from monarchy to socialism. Trying to limit religious influences on the masses, it embarked on massive forms of state indoctrination actively promoting its political agenda. However, as Assefa Endeshaw (2002, p. 14) observed while comparing the political administration of the Derg to that of his predecessor, “the Derg never made any revolutionary departure from the laws it had found already in place, nor did it intend to make any systematic changes in so far as they did not affect its status and functions”. This same revelation was confirmed by Merera Gudina (2003, p. 78-79). Babile Tola was more concise, stating “they echoed the old kings who blatantly said the kings rule and the people obey” (1989, p. 11). Beside the radical changes in land ownership laws, the system of hierarchical stratification and respect for authority was taken as the ultimate political culture of society despite its socialist visions. As such, the Derg had become another monarch, a harsher one that did not tolerate any discontent. Its centralist rule and imposition of Amharic as official language (explicitly stated in the 1987 constitution), continued the Amharic traits of dominance (Smith 2008, p. 220-221). Women were thus again subjected to the same ancient norms and rules and further demoted.

Things looked more promising when the EPRDF/TPLF took political power in the country in 1991. Many new laws replaced the abundance of state proclamations of the Derg, creating opportunities for society. Initially, these laws promised much freedom and space to the people. But that was not to be. They turned out to be new forms of control. Detailed political analysis reveals a continuation of dominant Amhara cultural traits (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 32) which had been carried over from the Derg and were a remnant from monarchical times. The constitution of 1995 also stressed that Amharic would remain the working language of the federal government (Smith 2008, p. 223). This includes the practice of hierarchical stratification of society and political influence. At present, it is still expected “that everyone from an early age know their place in the hierarchy with respect to one another and is expected to show appropriate degree of deference” (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 33).

Vaughan and Tronvoll speak of vertical ordering of the state versus society and/or opposition and state that this can directly inhibit dialogue (ibid, p. 5-16). The lack of dialogue has already been manifesting itself in the country where the ruling party assumes complete control and monopoly over almost all services. This overt evidence is also marked by a threatening slogan upheld by the party: “if you are not with us, you are against us” (ibid, p. 120) preventing civil society organizations from working independently or going against the party’s rule. Such a suspicious nature has disastrous consequences for the independence of civil society that includes women’s organizations. How can women stand up and have their voices heard?

### ***Illusionary gender ideology***

A word on the prevalent gender ideology (societal perceptions on what women's roles and responsibilities are) is in order here. It is to be noted that despite modernization at political and economic levels, women remain locked within and denigrated to an ancient culture that continues to undermine their development and contains their agency within its parameters. The existing gender ideology in the history of Ethiopia was closely linked to biased religious perceptions of women. Women were measured against Biblical women (Lishan n.d. p. 2) and expected to remain invisible, without a voice, in utmost subservience and subordination to men. They are seen as inferior and treated as second-class citizens, domestic slaves and property of many men. Orthodox Christianity, ever intrusive in the lives of the masses upholding a dominant political status as state religion, had clearly demarcated the feminine and masculine domains of their existence. These social domains were also hierarchically ordered and placed within the overall dominant cultural system where critical thinking and independence had no room. This division was actively used as an instrument to maintain the status quo.

Given the historical base of the traditional gender ideology, it can be said that it was illusionary. The gender ideology was illusionary mainly because it was firmly rooted in the manipulated unconsciousness and devoid of critical investigation. Women and men have been rigorously socialized in this illusionary ideology to such an extent that it has become fully internalized as a system of norms, taken as universal and accepted as habit. Reaching this stage, the gender ideology becomes lacking in critical investigation or verification (Cornforth 1954, p. 75) and accepted as truth. Illusion has thus taken over objectivity, presenting a distorted and incomplete view of the reality (ibid, p. 75). And, since illusion informs the obvious, the hinted, the taken-for-granted and the intuitive, it becomes more difficult to challenge such perceptions.

All subsequent rules in the country emerged from within this gender ideology in a society that is very rigid on its masculine and feminine domains. And though ideologies are time and context specific, they can be extended beyond these to other groups and time frames. When this happens, they secure survival and universality. The gender ideology is thus fully established as universal mainly because of its continuous use where women conform and consent to its practice and where it is not considered as a significant issue to be challenged. How is this ideology transferred from one polity to the next and why do women abide by it despite its exaggerated biases against them? In the following sections I discuss how women are coerced by the state through its instruments (education and media) to conform to its dominant political ideology that directly promotes the sustenance of the traditional gender ideology. I also look at how women willingly consent to the practices that grant them a secondary status in society (through their religion).

### **2.2.2 The Ethiopian State and women**

The state in most of the African countries, including Ethiopia, is seen as a national structure of rule, power, authority and to some extent, legitimacy. Although emerging from society it is given an identity and autonomy of its own. Whitehead (1975, p. 1, cited in Randall 1982, p. 196) sees a state as a “centralized, hierarchical organization which ...

claims ultimate control over the use of force within a given territory and which possesses some command over resources and administrative capacity”. Randall’s (1982, p. 196) addition of the increasing abrogation of authoritative political decision-making powers to the state would be appropriate here. Rhode (1994, p. 1182) summarizes the state as all of the “administrative, legal, bureaucratic, and coercive systems” that structure social relations.

### ***Women, the state and political representation***

How do Ethiopian women deal with the state? Does the state provide them with opportunities for change or does it contribute to their increased marginalization in society? How women deal with the state in Ethiopia is closely linked to how the state exerts its dominance over them and defines their emancipation. Emperor Haile Selassie had no such agenda and did not consider women’s advancement an issue. Besides his actions on their education as part of its general education policy affecting both women and men in society, the emperor did not design special measures for women’s emancipation and also did nothing to alter traditional gender perceptions in society. There was nothing that could be credited to him in the area of women’s rights. Most of the educated women (at the time there were very few) were also not sensitive to their own problems and functioned as part of society, abiding by their feminine roles. Some found employment in the emperor’s bureaucracy.

The Derg was a difficult regime. Upon coming to power, the Derg made it clear that it would not tolerate any resistance from anyone to achieving its own goals. In the first year of its power, women activists from the EPRP engaged the state structures (peasant associations and women’s commission) to advance their agenda on mobilizing rural women in some regions. They exploited the available opportunities at the time. But that did not last long. After the Red Terror, the Derg assumed complete monopoly on the emancipation of women, dictating its course and actions from a distorted “woman question” paradigm. Within this “woman question”, there was no indication of altering the traditional female and male domains. In fact, these were found to be enforced and exploited to the maximum by the institutional arm of the Derg representing all women in the country, namely the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women’s Association (REWA). Cooperation with women was coerced on the basis of sanctions and there was zero tolerance of defiance. REWA did nothing to alter the traditional gender ideology and promote women’s rights. Fear for reprisals made women reluctant to venture on their own. As such, the development of their agency was confined.

The coming to power of the EPRDF in 1991 also brought hope to women, who started to explore cautiously their opportunities for progress. This did not last long and this regime also took control of the women’s emancipation agenda claiming monopoly. The ruling party set up its own national women’s machinery in the form of women’s affairs offices and bureaus to keep women’s actions under close scrutiny throughout the country. Interventions are closely monitored and clearly directed, based on its National Policy on Ethiopian Women which is promulgated as the ultimate instrument for women’s emancipation. Harsh repression is meted out against anyone resisting the party’s dictates. There is no room for dialogue and cooperation with state departments as they become

compulsory and forced (see Chapter 5 for more on this). These all create numerous limitations and restrictions on women's freedom to initiate independent actions and inhibit their agency development. History is repeating itself.

Given this repressive political environment, how do women deal with the state? In general they can deal with the state in two major ways; work with it and try to alter the dominant patriarchal ideology from within or ignore it.

Working with the state and from within the state has been used as a strategy from early feminist times and implies infiltrating the state and trying to reform it directing it towards women's interests (Rai 1996, p. 7). Early liberal feminism had used this strategy intensively, believing in the importance of working through the state to achieve its goals (Sharp & Broomhill 1988, p. 7). This approach still appears to be quite popular among women in many countries, including in Africa, where increasing numbers of women have been entering the complex world of politics. These women are called *femocrats*. The roles of femocrats are crucial to influence policies from within in order to make them more gender responsive (Turshen & Holcomb 1993, p. xiii). However, women enter politics only where they have the awareness and space to do so.

In Ethiopia, women have been nominated to political offices as a gesture of the ruling party with specific purposes. These women thus did not enter politics to strategize for feminist actions. They are not femocrats but bureaucrats. They were given specific mandates to closely monitor the actions on women's rights issues in the country from a party perspective and act as political instruments and watchdogs against civil society women's actions on their emancipation.

The number of women in politics in the country has steadily been increasing over the years, but this is not a guarantee that women's interests gained a boost. The general perception is that when there are only a few women in politics, they could become the subjects of discrimination, exclusion and manipulation. Parpart and Staudt (1989, p. 9) explain how having a few women in politics makes them vulnerable to the male-dominant political game. These women then, as a common strategy of survival, tend to absorb the male political style, thereby becoming part of the male-dominated political elite. This, of course, does not help them to pursue a feminist agenda. Remedying this by increasing the number of women is often advanced as the best strategy. Feminists in many African countries have therefore embarked on this path to increase the number of women in politics in order to gain the critical mass needed for advancing women's interests.<sup>34</sup> The main problem though is not the issue of getting more women, but which

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<sup>34</sup> Until recently the drive to increase the number of women in political posts, with or without the required skills and capacities, was observed as one of the priority actions among women's groups on the African continent. This is slowly changing now. Women in many countries are expressing reservations about this approach. In Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya and South Africa, women realize that more women in politics is not a solution to all the ills that befall them. They are not yet bearing fruit (Basu 2005). In some countries they have "started a mass exodus to start their own independent organizations and work more effectively" (science.jrank.org 2009). Examples include Uganda's Miriam Matembe, Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre, Women's National Coalition in South Africa, and so forth. Ethiopian women have also made

women? If an increase of women in politics means that the majority still come from the ruling party, such as in Ethiopia, it means that nothing will change their approach. And, what is increasingly being observed is that despite all the efforts of increasing more women into politics, the gender agenda remains devalued.

This is why a new approach has been envisaged by Rhode (1994, p. 1207) According to her, numbers are not the solution for women to advance their agendas at political level. She notes “the obvious truth, but one often overlooked... is that in order to institutionalize a feminist agenda we need to elect *feminists*, not just females”. And here lies the clue. There is a need for just that one feminist and not hundreds of females. The Chilean female president, Michelle Bachelet, is a clear example of this (Gallardo March, p. 2002). When looking into Ethiopian politics, not a single voice of a feminist can be found echoing around the political arena; neither in the past, nor at present. The majority of women in politics remain hopping along government initiatives or directives but none dares to shake up the system.

What can women do when working from within the state does not offer opportunities for betterment and working outside the state brings repression? They can use alternative means to express their concerns such as defiance, confrontation, ignorance, avoidance and even “withdrawal” or “exit” (Fetton 1989, p. 59; Moore 1998, p. 183; Parpart & Staudt 1989, p. 11). And this is exactly what has been observed in Ethiopia. Women display different forms of political apathy and do not wish to be associated with the government or work with it and definitely would not like to be identified with it.

However, their exit does not imply that they become passive. In fact, they continue looking for alternative ways of dealing with their issues, often taking care of them by themselves (Rai & Lievesley 1996, p. 2). Examples include the numerous female community-based associations in the country (for example female idirs, mahbers, work associations and credit associations).

Besides exit and cooperation there are other ways women may opt to deal with the state. They could confront it through international instruments on women’s rights which Ethiopia is signatory to. They could also use the state’s decentralized power base<sup>35</sup> (where that is the case) to advance women’s agendas. Decentralization, as noted by Boneparth & Stoper (1988, p. 8), can provide leeway enabling women to manoeuvre through the maze of state bureaucracies and institutions to have their voices heard. For example, Randall (1982, p. 205) noted that the “decentralization of governmental

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similar moves. A few active women in the women’s machinery in Ethiopia left to start their own NGOs to be more effective outside the choking bureaucracy. This action could be linked to the relative freedom and independence women have outside the bureaucracy and the ability to exert more pressure on the government (for instance lobbying) from the outside. This could also contribute to the further radicalization of women in the civic sector.

<sup>35</sup> Decentralization in many African countries is the reverse of what is seen in the West. While some Western decentralized states might be more liberal and grant women more rights, in the African context, decentralization means that power is handed to the various regions of the country to manage their own political affairs. These regions are generally less developed and advanced than the capital and more conservative and traditional in outlook. Women thus tend to lose out in decentralized Africa.

authority between Congress, the President, the judiciary and the fifty state legislatures, together with the explicit and legitimate competition between different interests and groups for political influence in the United States, have provided feminists with a tremendous range of access points and alliance strategies...". Similarly, Rai (1996, p. 5, 19) points out that by regarding the state not as a unified structure of power between its different branches, cracks can emerge for women to dive into with their agendas. Decentralization in Ethiopia has not created any such opportunities for women to advance their interests. An analytical review of this is presented in Chapter 5.

### **2.2.3 Education**

The state also exerts its power over women through its mass instruments such as education and the media. Let us see how education, from traditional to modern, is used to contain women's agency development. As an instrument for change and/or preservation of the status quo, education in Ethiopia was used mainly towards the latter in historical times. Ethiopian historical education had its base in religion. This means that in the Christian areas education was controlled by the church and in the Muslim areas by the mosque. In both, education was a lengthy process (Pankhurst 1990, p. 128) and extremely biased against women to the extent of their complete exclusion. The country's highest book on the laws of the kings, the Fetha Negest, clearly stipulated that

Women shall not teach nor be made members of the clergy and none but clergy can act as judges, and, nuns, pious widows and virgins must not raise their voices when they speak, or quarrel or sue someone for worldly objects (cited in Prouty 1986, p. 229).

The traditional education policies of the church at the time were summarized by Trudeau:

... the Ethiopian church first of all trained the youth for the services of the church. It educated its own clergy, monks, debteras, deacons, etc. This is why in practice education is in Ge'ez, the language of the church and not in the vernacular. The church educated the men, not the women. The church stressed the religious subjects such as liturgy, liturgical music and dance, religious arts, theology and scripture. No secular subjects such as science, history and geography were known, and they are still not taught except in a few church schools, influenced by modern curricula (Trudeau, cited in Zenebework 1986, p. 3).

However, despite the many restrictions imposed on women's education, some women of the nobility did succeed in becoming educated (many of the empresses in the past had received some form of religious education). Beside religious education, there were also foreign missionary schools in the country offering education to a few. Some of these schools also offered opportunities for young converts to study abroad (Bahru 2002, p. 15, 17). They were also the first schools that included a few girls as students and were involved in teaching adults basic professional skills such as teacher training and health education.

Religious and traditional biases continued to be upheld in the education of girls. Arguments often used were that since women were destined to get married and the duties resulting out of this, such as child-bearing and rearing, including the domestic reproductive tasks, did not require education or training, there was no need to educate them. Even activities that were marked as feminine such as spinning, basketry and pottery were generally taken as menial work not worthy of education (Alemtsehai 1985, p. 46). Another argument often used was that “women did not need to acquire the skills of writing as the art of writing was meant to be used in the management of administrative affairs of the state and ecclesiastical duties – an area which was not viewed as the proper place for women to indulge” (ibid, p. 47). This thinking that women’s tasks did not require training because they were meant to be born with the broom in their hands, was not the same for men whose tasks as warriors did not imply their being born with a spear in their hands. Such biases were meant to grant men more privileges at the expense of women. It was an open form of hostility and discrimination, and also indicated that nothing was to disturb the traditional female and male boundaries.

### ***Modern education***

The introduction of modern education continued in the same way as traditional education, treating female students as temporary visitors without career prospects besides becoming housewives. It was also deficient in cultivating women’s agency to become active agents of change. The first modern schools emerged during the rule of Emperor Menelik (1889-1913) in 1908 (Yalew Ingidayeh 1997, p. 406). The educational policies at the time mainly focused on the introduction of trained manpower for the modern administrative structure and the education of the sons of the chiefs and nobility (Zenebework 1986, p. 7). No girls attended this newly established school although a proclamation<sup>36</sup> was made by Emperor Menelik in 1907 to include girls in education.

Eventually, the first girls’ school was opened in 1931 by Emperor Haile Selassie, named after Empress Menen, his wife. The school started off with 50 students, mostly belonging to the nobility (Bahru 2002, p. 28-29). The entrance of girls into the education system brought a shift in the education curricula. This shift became further refined with the introduction of specific subjects to cater for them. These subjects were in line with the traditional expectations of women to become housewives and mothers. And, though more and more women started entering schools, their curricula remained interlocked with traditional perceptions that perpetuated women’s natural inferiority.

It was globally observed that such biased forms of traditional education did not deter women from entering schools. Education was seen as the source of information and offered women a lot in terms of freedom, enhanced consciousness, critical thinking capacity, knowledge and space for self-expression. The early education of women was geared towards making women better housewives and mothers. But this goal was completely changed. It was among the first educated women in the West where the first feminists were born. For these women education offered “a chance for them to improve their own lives, as well as it was seen as a vehicle for changing traditional views of

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<sup>36</sup>This effort was seen by Chris Prouty as very innovative and she assumed that such a proclamation could only have been influenced by the Empress Taytu, who was literate (1986, p. 296).

women held by the rest of society” (Ryan 1992, p. 14). One could question whether traditional education contributed to enhance a critical consciousness among the few educated women in Ethiopia. As far as is known, it did not, because the first women activists emerged only in the late 1970s among those who had access to modern education and lived abroad. A few women who benefitted from traditional education tried to encourage and promote the schooling of more girls. However, that did not alter traditional perceptions on women’s expected roles in society.

Emperor Haile Selassie developed a new education policy that emphasised building more schools and giving education an “Ethiopian character”. This included, among others, to incorporate Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and home economics in the curriculum (Trudeau in Zenebework 1986, p. 9). This expansion of modern education in the country brought great advantages of access to girls. By the late 1950s there were more than 500 schools offering primary education with about 56,000 students (Markakis 1974, p. 147). Of these only 9,000 were girls. Secondary schools had over 1,800 students with 150 girls (Brummelkamp 1956, p. 200). In 1968 the proportion of girls in primary schools was 29.7%, at the junior level, 26.7%; at the secondary level 18.3% and at the university level 7.0% (Markakis 1974, p.150). By 1973/74 there were more than 6,236 primary and secondary schools in the country with an enrolment of more than three million children.

Girls, however, remained under-represented in all forms of education. Brummelkamp (1956, p. 201) blamed this on the continuing traditional views on educating women. Discussing the traditional beliefs against educating women, Mérab (cited in Prouty 1986, p. 296) states:

A saying of the people assures that the husband of a woman who knows how to read will not live long, for the woman who can read would have recourse to maledictions and malefices at the least reprimand from her spouse. A lettered woman would not take care of the house. An Abyssinian of my acquaintance said, when I asked why he did not have his only daughter take instruction, “Where would I get the money to pay the priest to teach her, and then, how would I buy a eunuch to keep an eye on the priest?”

Overall, the expansion of education in the mid-nineteenth century was accompanied by significant drawbacks at the level of educational policies, where one could clearly see how women’s agency development was kept in check. Considering the subordinate and discriminatory status of women in society, women’s attendance remained low at all levels of education. For example, the male-female student ratio was overtly biased towards the former (Bahru 1991, p. 221). This was blamed by Alemstehai on Emperor Haile Selassie’s lack of commitment to change the status of women even though he showed positive attitudes towards them (Alemstehai 1985, p. 48). He did practically nothing to enforce the education policy. This was also pointed out by Teshome Wagaw (1979, p. 135 cited in Alemstehai 1985, p. 48) who, while discussing the plan of the Ministry during the period between 1951 and 1960, noted that “the ten year educational plan recommended almost no specific measures regarding women’s education”. Alemstehai linked this inaction of the government to the gender insensitivity of the then Ministry of Education who obviously did not see anything wrong with it because the aim of

education at that time was to produce functionaries who ran the political machinery of the state, where women definitely had no role to play (Alemstehai 1985, p. 49).

School curriculum was another area that inhibited women's agency. As was common in those times, the traditional patriarchal gender ideology on women's subordination and the subsequent strict gender division of labour remained intact and was in fact promoted on a continuous basis through the differential school curricula offered to girls and boys. The traditional gender stratification of society into feminine and masculine domains had thus officially been integrated into the education sector. In 1948, a serious attempt was made to "Ethiopianize the educational curriculum" (Teshome 1979, p. 72 cited in Alemstehai 1985, p. 51). This meant to free it from foreign influences and emphasize, among other things, the cultural aspects of the country. The committee in charge of this review even suggested that courses on this subject of culture should be provided for female students (Teshome 1979, p. 123, cited in Alemstehai 1985, p. 51).

Most of the efforts of the patriarchal committees were geared towards discouraging girls from going to school. Education curricula were so dramatically transformed that they reflected how girls' education had only one objective, namely to limit their options and relegate them to the kitchen. Many parents became reluctant to send their daughters to school when the subjects taught could be learnt from the family and society through socialization. The education committees were thus actively engaged in trying to show that it was futile to spend money on the education of girls. This did not deter some parents from sending their daughters to school. There were not many educated women at the time, however.<sup>37</sup>

One historical issue of great importance at the time of the Emperor was that the urgency and need for trained people was so great that the Emperor started to send students abroad for education in 1920. Through the years the numbers increased dramatically from a few to thousands by 1960. Through exposure, leading to a transformed agency, many of these foreign Ethiopian male and female students played a prominent role in the country's revolution in 1974, giving it its ideological base. These students should also be credited for having initiated the "woman question" at the time. But it needs to be kept in mind that the overall education system in the country did not manage to alter the traditional gender ideology of women's inferiority and subordination.

After the revolution in 1974, women's agency was yet again to be contained through the Derg's education policies. While women's education gained a boost due to the Derg's "education for all" proclamation, the consequent curricular reform crippled their independent thought development. And although there were flattering records that the literacy level of women had increased during this time, only a quarter of all school-age girls were enrolled at primary level and less than half of those were found to continue their education to Grade Two. These numbers did not mean that the traditional perception

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<sup>37</sup> Sylvain (1970, p. 200- 202) listed the names of a few educated women at the time, providing a detailed account of these women's educational background and engagement in public life as a consequence of their education.

against girls' education had changed. The military government upheld its predecessor's stance of not intervening in cultural matters. Using flashy slogans such as "without women's participation the revolution will not reach its goal", "women's equality shall be assured in socialism", or "Ethiopian women shall struggle for the fulfillment of the Workers Party of Ethiopia objectives" to attract girls' and women's attention to education throughout the country (Ministry of Education 1989, p.2) appeared to be aimed at securing increased female involvement without having to make any concerted effort in the field.

Education curricula also did not show any commitment to bring about gender equality or change the gender biases. Though a curriculum change had taken place in 1981, it was literally devoid of any intention to cultivate radicalism or critical thinking. In fact, it was actively used as a powerful tool for government propaganda. And albeit society showed remarkable changes in the perceptions of women's participation in public life, these were not equally accompanied by changes in stereotypes, traditional and cultural perceptions and so on (ibid, p. 49).

Despite all odds, a small number of educated women began broadening their horizons. Among these, some started to challenge the low levels of female education in the country. Senedu Gebru (Pankhurst, 1991:74-84), for instance, was a known fighter for girls' education. However, she did not challenge the structural issues at the time and remained rigid on the cultural and traditional responsibilities of women.

Given the historical role of education to serve state interests – also called society-oriented<sup>38</sup> education by Ishumi (1976, p. 46) – the trend was continued by the EPRDF regime who came to power in 1991. By 1993 there was a new education policy outlining how education would be geared towards producing "problem-solving" citizens, implying that education would serve the generation of critical consciousness. By 1995 there was a new education policy outlining clear strategies for the increase and special attention to girls' education (see more on this in Chapter 6). The second education policy of 2000 continued with the emphasis on improving female education. In 2003, a new civic and ethical education curriculum was established that included eleven priority areas of intervention, and gender equality was one of them. The government has instituted more measures to show the international community its commitment to advance female education. These include the affirmative measures at institutes of higher learning, allowing more girls to be enrolled and changing the quota in some typically male dominated disciplines where girls are encouraged to choose technical careers.

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<sup>38</sup> Ishumi (1976, p. 46) identifies education as oriented towards any of the three objects of society, the discipline (subject matter as in a market-led education), or the individual learner. He specifically stresses society-oriented education as education that is viewed by critics as essentially paying little or no attention to the needs and interests of the individual learner. Society-oriented education is used as a propaganda tool where people are seen as blank puppets who can be molded and taught how to carry on the ideology or philosophy of the society. It is as an instrument in the hands of the powerful and manipulated towards specific ends mainly to benefit themselves. Given this understanding, society-led education ('controlled' or the traditional conservative forms of education) is thus education that is strictly controlled and carefully directed towards specific ends. Ishumi explains how such a kind of education can lead to the "educated becoming an unquestioning slave of society and a mouthpiece of the politicians" (Ibid).

All these lofty interventions have not produced the desired results. Girls' education is still lagging behind and the absence of a critical consciousness among the educated is glaring. The most serious problems are in the areas of implementation and political will. The periodic review of the education curriculum is usually merely cosmetic and political. Practice reveals that the traditional gender ideology remains untouched and despite more girls being educated at present, they regrettably remain demoted and subordinated in their social and professional lives.

### ***Role of educated women***

The central focus of this thesis is to look at the role educated women have played and can play on the emancipation of women in Ethiopia. In historical times (such as during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie), the educated were a class apart with special privileges and rights (Markakis & Nega 1978, p. 49). They also had specific duties such as working in the political administration and growing state bureaucracies and had a specific role to play (Halliday & Molyneux 1981, p. 71; Alemtsehai 1985, p. 21; Bahru 1991, p. 109-110). They were further expected to promote the existing dominant political ideology and defend and protect the status quo. In short, they were part of a functionalist system. Everyone knew their place and tasks to maintain the status quo. Educated women were part of the educated elite and had to equally abide by these expectations.

Through the years and with the growing consciousness of women, this traditional expectation underwent some changes. Since not many women are highly educated, the general trend among the masses of women in the country is that they look up to these few educated women and have high expectations of them. They are expected to take the lead in their own emancipation. Unfortunately, not all educated women are committed to the gender agenda. This is not surprising as not all women are radicalized or feminist. There are many educated women who do not identify themselves in such roles and rather cater for their independent careers.

One could question whether the educated have a responsibility towards women's issues at present as it used to be in the past. This might not be necessary in countries where the education of women has increased and more women are able to demand their own rights or represent others to achieve their goals. But in a country where the emancipation of women has not reached the same level as its neighbours, the lack of a responsibility among the educated is a serious concern. There is a lot to be done and the question is: why are educated women in Ethiopia not playing a more proactive role in the emancipation of women? And if they had the opportunity to do so, what would that entail? "Should they become like the ones in France during the eighteenth century or those in Russia in the nineteenth, become path-breakers and champions of a progressive turn in world history; or, like the German intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, should we become helpless victims, will-less helpers of a barbaric reaction"? (Lukács 1973, p. 276). In Ethiopia, this line between the spontaneous path-breakers and collaborators with the regime is not clear at present due to the political system in the country. The other issue is that women also remain divided among their own classes,

racess and ethnicities and may have different goals in mind that might not necessarily be one of representation.

What remains crucial though is that the educated have a responsibility because they belong to a small privileged group. They are being looked up at by the masses and expected to struggle for the rights and freedom for all. The educated have two advantages in doing so: their education that provided them, at some level, with a capacity to reflect, and their situatedness, because they are part of a system (political, social, cultural, and economic).

#### **2.2.4 Media and literature holding the key to women's emancipation**

Media have the most profound impact on women's thinking, attitudes, behaviour and actions. As the major source of news and information, it comes in many formats including news, advertisement, campaigns, propaganda, drama, music, literature and so on. It is a consumer product, which implies that women purchase it in order to access it with the aim of expanding their knowledge and information base.

Ethiopia has a public and private media system where the public media is supposed to serve the public interest and focus on national and development issues. However, due to the nature of mass outreach, it has become an instrument of mass control and abuse by the respective rulers in the country and is called the "state" media. State media means that it belongs to the state and is used for the purpose of promoting state interests (Herman & Chomsky 1988, p. xi). It, therefore, lacks neutrality, objectivity, independence or autonomy in its dissemination of information and functions as an instrument of mind control and thought reform heavily injected with state ideology. Herman & Chomsky (1988, p. 298) speak about a *propaganda* model of the media when the mass media stops serving a "societal purpose" but instead "inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state". Control and monopoly are thus used as strategic means to control, direct, and mould the minds of its users. It is a form of the *battle for minds* (Hamelink 1994, p. 27). That means that it actively tries to take control of opinion and attitude and manufacture consent among consumers (Chomsky 2003, p. 6). This is done through a continuous repetition of a one-sided version with the aim of reforming consumers' thinking process or giving it direction.

The mass media in Ethiopia include radio (Radio Ethiopia and Radio Fana), television (ETV), and the Ethiopia News Agency. Radio and television are known to be two of the most accessible and powerful forms of media that are intensively used to influence people's behaviour, lifestyles, identity and thought formation. These media channels are the direct mouthpiece of the government and the *de facto* direct political arms of the government (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 72), through which the government is in charge of most transmissions and distribution of news. This distribution is hierarchical (Alem Seged 1999, p. 77). Herman & Chomsky (1988, p. 4-5) see this hierarchy as based on a tiered system, where "the top tier ... defines the news agenda and supplies much of

the national and international news to the lower tiers of the media, and thus for the general public”.

The promotion of selfish interests is done through various means. Herman and Chomsky stress, among others, the concepts of creating ‘blackouts’ (ibid, p. xxxviii), critical information that would harm the polity (simply remaining silent and bringing other sensationalized news to make the public forget or not even think about it),<sup>39</sup> ‘demonizing’ (ibid, p. xxvii) enemy groups (women with feminist demands in Africa are always ridiculed and mocked as “non-African”), ignorance of crucial information (ibid, p. xlv) and when they are reported “accidentally”, they will be “petered out quickly” (ibid, p. 33) (some major gender issues are simply ignored or disappear quickly from the media), suppression of issues, agenda setting and so on. These all are applicable to the Ethiopian context. And, though new legislation was passed in the country paving the road for private radio stations to be opened, nothing has materialized in concrete terms as the government continues delaying such efforts.

### ***The strength of the media and women’s representation***

Given the reality in Ethiopia that the media is a male preserve, the media clearly reflect the patriarchal ideologies prevalent in society simply because “they do not stand independent” of this social system (Randall 1998, p. 2). Their biases and prejudices filter down in their work. For example, issues that are seriously harmful to women might be seen as positive. This can be illustrated with an example. During a programme debating abduction as a harmful practice against young girls, at break time the media were found playing a song that romanticized abduction (Agaredech 2002, p. 106).

Media are definitely agents that can direct the thinking of women. They can do this by diverting women’s attention away from more radical feminist issues that are seen as a threat to the patriarchal order or upset the traditional gender ideology to forms of material well-being. Plenty of evidence on this has surfaced in the Ethiopian media. They have the tendency to portray educated and employed women as emancipated when they indulge in materialism and consumerism. The free and independent woman is one who can buy her own car and has all the electric household gadgets in her home. It seems that the media, obviously in silent agreement with the dominant powers of society (state and religion), are actively engaged in diverting the demands for equal rights to material benefits.

Most often, the ideal image of women that is created by the media causes serious problems among its female consumers. Many try to live up to the distorted images of beauty and perfection at the cost of their health and economic status. The false images also contribute to the persistence of women’s images in their traditional roles and status as wives and mothers. Even working women are portrayed as the perfect housewives and mothers who will manage all their increased tripled and quadrupled roles smoothly without challenging the patriarchal order. The aim is thus to show that women remain

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<sup>39</sup> Isabel Hilton wrote an article in the *Daily Monitor* (March 6 2007), titled “Forgotten Women”, where she accused the ‘conventional’ media of not paying attention to the huge women’s event that was taking place in New York at the time. The 51<sup>st</sup> Commission on the Status of Women was attended by 45 governments, 4,000 women and hundreds of NGOs but the media was silent on the issue.

content and happy with their increased workloads, do not neglect their feminine duties and responsibilities and in fact still manage to look good and consume modern goods.

The patriarchal dominance of the media also confines women and censors their programmes to what they assume to be appropriate for women to consume. Trying to contract a media source to sensitize the public on gender issues is an excruciating experience while religious institutions can easily start their own media channels to preach 24 hours a day in many African countries. For example, the issue of media under-coverage on gender issues was so serious during the Beijing Plus Five Conference that many female media producers decided to set up their own media channels to give coverage of the events, such as *WomenAction* and *Flamme/Flame*.

Regrettably, progress has been slow on all fronts and women continue to be misrepresented and under-represented in the media in Ethiopia. Misrepresentation occurs when women are depicted as seductive, greedy, vicious, or hysterical (Alem Seged 1999, p. 80) or only portrayed in their traditional roles as housewives and mothers (Agaredech 2002, p. 93-95). For example, young women will be often used to sell commodities by exploiting their half-covered bodies (Rowbotham 1973, p. 110). Commodification of women sends degrading signals to consumers. The misrepresentations of women are found in all the different forms of media such as literature, television programmes, drama, films and songs, thereby enforcing existing biased gender perceptions.

The misrepresentation of women added to the challenge to increase the number of women working in the media. However, even though more women have found employment in the media sector, they remain isolated and excluded from decision-making positions. This means that they have no influence on media production and programs. And there are many women working in the media who did not necessarily join it to promote the rights of women. In 1999, SELMA, a Women's Consultancy and Communication Service, conducted a survey and revealed that of the 586 people employed by Radio Ethiopia, 198 were women, with 48 working as programme staff. Of the 124 employees working in Radio Fana, 43 were women, 16 of which were among the programme production staff. Of the 80 newspapers, three were owned by women. There were seventeen woman columnists (Alem Seged 1999, p. 82). The issue is that even when women were placed in charge of production of programs that would not mean that they would produce gender sensitive programs.

Beside the issues of the misrepresentation and under-representation of women, there also is the problem of women's access to the media as consumers. In the Ethiopian context, more males than females are media consumers. According to a study conducted by the World Bank, less than 11% of women listen at least once a week to the radio compared to 24% of men. Altogether 73% of men and 86% of women have no access to mass media (World Bank 2005, p. 43). Such limitations have to do with the traditional perceptions that women do not need to worry about public affairs but have to concentrate on their families and domestic chores. Even among educated women, few access and use the media due to multiple gender roles. Limited access to the media also has serious

implications for the programs produced as they cater in the main for male consumers' demands.

Some changes have been observed with the introduction and increase of programs on women's issues organized by many Non-governmental Organizations (Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association, Panos Ethiopia, International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, Action Aid, and so forth). These include program transmissions on TV and radio, in articles and newspaper columns. The content has also undergone tremendous transformation and thus, whilst early programmes on women mainly focused on the areas of feminine concerns such as marriage, cooking, childcare, family planning, hygiene and fashion (Rahel 1991, p. 68), current programs relate to the more strategic issues of women's rights, challenging patriarchal domination in marriage, such as violence against women, traditional harmful practices, women's role in development programs, and so forth. These programs aim to create awareness and in the long term alter biased gender perceptions. However, their range of subjects remains censored and limited.

Despite its patriarchal base, the media should be seen as a powerful agent of change. It is due to the media that many women's problems came out of the taboo sphere into the open. Randall (1998, p. 120) states that if the media wants to make an effective contribution to a given issue, the best way to do it is to set a positive example. Thus, for the media to advance gender equality issues, it needs to first rid itself of its patriarchal outlook and androcentrism. Regrettably, such a demand appears to be beyond the reach of the Ethiopian media, public or private and the promotion of traditional perceptions in general remain thus unchallenged.

### **2.2.5 Religion and women**

In addition to education and the media, religion adds its own limitations to women's agency. Guaranteed freedom of expression,<sup>40</sup> the country has many religions among which Orthodox Christians and Muslims form the major groups. Muslims account for 45-50% of the population while Orthodox Christians account for 35-40% (Cline 2004). Other religious groups including Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, animists and traditional religious groups together account for 10 to 15% of the population. There is some controversy regarding the accurate proportions of the two major religions, with each claiming to have more followers than the other. Recently, the fast-growing Pentecostal religion has claimed to have an expanding following exceeding 10%. This competition for followers will continue as long as religion needs followers for its own survival. Considering this magnitude of religious affiliation, it can be positively stated that almost 99% of the population adheres to one of the forms of religion and "Although precise data is not available, active participation in religious services is high throughout the country" (ibid.), with women forming the major proportion. This affiliation has clear implications for their agency and subjectivity.

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<sup>40</sup> Art. 27, FDRE Constitution.

Religion plays an important part in women's lives in Ethiopia. It encompasses their spiritual being and has an ancient history in the country. Eck and Jain (1986, p. 3) note that the English word "religion" comes from the Latin *religio* which means "to bind". They see religion thus "as the bond of kinship which binds together, or binds people to god". They add that religion includes meaning-making, image-making and the creation of an ordered world, a cosmos. This ordered world includes various forms of social relations, including castes, classes, and gender.

Gemetchu Megerssa (2002, p. 35) sees religion as an aspect of culture. It is that part of culture that gives meaning and formulates rules and regulations legitimizing existing ideological boundaries. Religion as an aspect of culture means adherence to a religious culture<sup>41</sup> as is the case in many traditional societies such as Ethiopia. It is the intertwining of every aspect of people's lives with religious overtones where religious discourses have spilled over into their day-to-day lives.

### ***Religious and political ideology and women's rights***

Ethiopia is often seen as a very traditional society. This tradition borrows its characteristics from religion; Orthodox Christianity to be precise, because of the latter's dominance in the past. In addition to Christianity, Islam also played a significant role in forming a religious culture. The historical background of Christianity and Islam indicates that both emerged quite early and have managed to establish themselves as strong cultural powers in the country. For example, Christianity was brought to Ethiopia during the reign of the Aksumite King, Ezana, in 330 A.D. The timing of this should be seen as critical due to the gender-biased canonization of religious texts (that had taken place between 100 and 400 A.D.) and the removal of women from religious posts at the time (Bem 1993, p. 44-46). Islam, the second most widespread religion in the country, also entered Ethiopia around the time of its emergence in the sixth century (Brummelkamp 1956, p. 34). Within Islam, women were equally marginalized and removed from public and religious lives. They were segregated into separate quarters for prayers, kept religiously illiterate and not allowed to take up leading roles in Islam.

As the dominant religious group in Ethiopian society, Orthodox Christianity was proclaimed the principal source of religious cultural identity of the nation (Bahru 1991, p. 8; Markakis 1974, p. 13; Halliday & Molyneux 1981, p. 55). In fact, it was seen as closely fused with the political powers of the state (Haile Mariam, cited in Loukeris 1997, p. 210; Markakis 1974, p. 44-45; Clapham 1969, p. 2). Both were seen as mutually reinforcing. For example, being proclaimed state religion meant that the Church was given great economic and political privileges. Beside land grants, the Church could also collect taxes and rents from its tenants working on its land (Pankhurst 1990, p. 33). In return, the Church showed utmost loyalty to the Crown and traditional elites and rarely spoke out against them or their political (mal) administrations. In fact, it provided

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<sup>41</sup> Culture is defined by Hirut Tereffe (2002, p. 7) as "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another". She sees culture as the learned, socially acquired traditions and life styles of society, including their patterned repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Williams sees culture as the sense-making tool people use to create the social world and interpret the natural world (Williams, 1996: 371).

religious and divine justification for everything the kingdom did including increased taxation among the peasants, or poverty among the people (Kidane 1990, p. 52; Getachew 1991, p. 188; Loukeris 1997, p. 215). Getachew (1991, p. 188) observes that “The church as an institution rarely spoke out against the king and his administration. On the contrary, the rulers used the Church to suppress popular revolt.” The state also effectively exploited the Church as an important ideological and instrumental weapon (Loukeris 1997, p. 210) to keep the masses suppressed in their miseries. The fusion of Church and State resulted in a common ideological base of operations that was seen as mutually reinforcing. From this angle, the formation of women’s agency becomes much clearer. Their indoctrination in a biased traditional and religious gender ideology clearly has a historical base enforced through the centuries by political rulers.

### ***Religious indoctrination and women’s agency***

Given the powers of religion that were protected by the state, its influences on women were all-encompassing. For example, there was no area in women’s lives over which the church or mosque did not exercise control or dictate its course. Markakis (1974, p. 97) notes that every Ethiopian Christian was known to have her or his own spiritual father who served and counselled her or him throughout her or his life. Brummelkamp (1956, p. 144, 160) similarly remarked how the power of the priest or sheikh was felt in every household where their presence was required for every occasion in a woman’s private and community life such as marriage, birth, death, and so on. The overwhelming intrusion of priests was characterised by Markakis (1974, p. 98) as follows: “No social gathering is complete without their presence in a position of honour and no decision can be taken without their involvement”. He further stressed that priests were seen as an indispensable guest at all social occasions and they were presented with gifts and fed (ibid, p. 99).

These kinds of privileges for the clergy were clearly stated and defined in the Fetha Negest that also laid down people’s explicit responsibilities in this regard. Some of the responsibilities included the requirements to “pay reverence (obedience, silence, proper behaviour, and so forth), attend all church services, and take part in the various religious obligations of confession, observe fasting and abstinence, take part in the various religious festivals such as Easter, temqat, saints’ days, church festivals (Meskel) and practice religious involvement of clerics in people’s life times such as during circumcision, baptism, weddings and funerals” (Pankhurst 1990, p. 37-47, 187-200). It was thus an obligation, not a choice, for Christians to involve priests in their private lives because it was encoded as such in the Fetha Negest, the book on the laws of the kings of the country at the time. This intrusive involvement of priests in the lives of women left little room for them to take on issues related to their emancipation. In fact, religious imposition on women’s lives actively discouraged them from extraordinary cultural expectations and behaviour. The very fact of religious omnipresence marked a continuous monitoring and guidance of women into what was traditionally considered appropriate behaviour for them.

It was not only the omnipresence of the priests in women’s lives that kept women in check. The major issue was the indoctrination strategies in the form of powerful

preaching and teachings. Religious indoctrination is intense and widespread in Ethiopia. It takes the form of mind control.<sup>42</sup> It is not strange to come across converted women who are so totally absorbed in their religion that it turns them into blind followers. This means that their subjective agency, capacity for critical thinking and identity becomes surrendered to their religious identity. In this regard Antrobus (2004, p. 100) accuses religion of robbing women of their agency and making them into mere puppets who act in accordance with biased internalized religious social norms reproducing their own subordination. Religion denies women individuality and denies them an independent opinion. The worst part of indoctrination is not only that converted women will believe anything they are told by their religious leaders, but they actively start defending those. Such total surrender and devotion often emerges from the “fear” cultivated by religion, where people become afraid to challenge or question it (Gemetchu 2002, p. 41). A fear that is deliberately constructed with the specific goal of assuring unquestionable loyalty. This is exacerbated by women’s level of religious illiteracy that results in further manipulation. In fact, religious illiteracy is also cultivated where even educated women are prevented from accessing sacred text by themselves (ibid, p. 42).

Religious illiteracy is further used to indoctrinate women on their ascribed roles and responsibilities in society. Mukhopadhyay (1995, p. 15) notes how “religion is often told as forming the basis of many cultural values which prescribe what women are and how they should behave, how they should relate to each other, and what is permissible or impermissible for women to do”. This imposition of social codes regarding women’s roles, behaviour, and relationships with men is interpreted by Walker (1998, p. 15) to boldly preach women’s subordination. Many religious scripts are found among the patriarchal religions that degrade women specifically because of their biology, treating them as mindless minors who need disciplining and domestic confinement in order to reach salvation (Carmody 1979; Gemetchu 2002, p. 36 – 37).

Religious illiteracy combined with intensive indoctrination results not only in the total surrender of women’s agency; it also turns them into religious agents. This means that women are among those found actively promoting and continuing religious practices that are totally restrictive and biased against themselves. For example, Berger and White (1990, p. 32) describe how, despite all the changes in the country, poor market women in Zambia still continue to raise their daughters in a “ ‘traditional’ manner... and instructing them in the need to subordinate themselves to their husbands...”. The same is noted in Kenya by Dolan (1998, p. 26): “Young girls continue to be taught how to be good Christians, obedient, submissive, and accommodating, to attract a suitable man for marriage”. And the same is happening in many rural communities in Ethiopia where young girls are taught how to be good, hard-working wives, who are married off at very young ages. Recently, up to 50,000 people took to the streets in Mali, protesting against women’s rights, claiming these to be “un-Islamic” (BBC, 23 Aug 2009). Regrettably, as Turshen and Holcomb (1993, p. xvi) observe, this deliberate isolation and confinement of

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<sup>42</sup> Mind control or brainwashing is focused on how to change people’s mind and behavior. For instance cult groups use many persuasive techniques to strip the personality from a victim and build up a new, group pseudo-personality (Flesher 2005).

women within tradition and religious culture, is often used to praise them for being culturally “pure”, while at the same time they are accused of being “backward”.

Despite thus all the open hostility against women, they are the majority among the religious followers. Walker (1998, p. 17-18) notes this among the Christian Base Communities of Latin America, while the same can be said of the various Christian groups in many African countries, especially among the Born Agains (Dolan 1988, p. 26). The same is noted in Ethiopia where women are seen as forming the major group of religious followers (Wright 2002, p. 51). The reasons for this vary from place to place but generally it is said that religion offers women an identity, sisterhood, empowerment, freedom, answers to their many social problems, escape from oppressive relations, emotional solace, meaning and purpose in life, and even explanations and justification for their suffering (Walker 1985, p. 15; Dolan 1988, p. 26; Sweetman 1998, p. 5). It is also seen as an “identity marker” (Williams 1996, p. 369) offering a sense of belonging and psychological support (Hashim 1998, p. 8) to many.

There are also women who have found alternative means to express their spiritual being. These include the many *women’s religions*<sup>43</sup> such as forms of spirituality and witchcraft. Most of these belief systems are remnants of “traditional relics” that existed prior to the introduction of the patriarchal religions and survived evolution and competition with the major religions. The dominance of women in such “traditional” forms of religion has also been noted by Eck and Jain in Ghana (1986, p. 77), Hay and Stichter in Nigeria and South Africa (1984, p. 89), and Pankhurst among some communities in Ethiopia (1992, p. 156). Analyses reveal that these religions offer women more freedom, leading roles, freedom from gender bias and comfort.

Besides opting for alternative forms of religion women should, as McFadden (1997) stresses, “interrogate the identities they are inheriting and/or constructing...”. Antrobus (2004, p. 175) calls on women to “liberate ourselves from the internalization of our own oppression”. These actions need experts on literary criticism in order to analyse texts from a feminine or feminist lens. There are a few female theologians who have started the task from within religion to challenge the interpretation of religious texts and scripts (Sweetman 1988 & Hashim 1998). Others search for the lost women in their religions (Heinrich Böll Foundation 1996 and 1997). However, in Ethiopia there are no such female intellectuals daring to take up such a momentous challenge.

Considering these all-encompassing aspects comprising the ideological make-up of women, it becomes clear how the state, in partnership with religion, controlled their thoughts and actions. A process which took hundreds of years eventually become deeply ingrained and internalized by women as normative, taken-for granted and universal. Their

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<sup>43</sup> All belief systems that are created outside the dominant patriarchal religions are stigmatized as cults or sects or negatively labelled as satanic, spiritual, witchcraft, voodoo, and so on. Even if these archaic belief systems existed prior to the patriarchal religions, they are stigmatized. This is because the patriarchal religions consider themselves the first and only ones who have seen their “male” Gods receiving their true message that gives them the authority and legitimacy of being labelled as “religion” with monopoly rights.

agency is so firmly rooted that even the revolutionary military regime could not succeed in diluting or transforming it.

The revolution could be credited with bringing some serious and lasting changes to the Christian monopoly and Islamic influences in 1974. It dismantled many of the privileges of the Church (Loukeris 1997, p. 215) and reduced its power base, treating all religions as having equal status before the eyes of the state (Schwab 1985, p. 92-93). The Derg also tried to discourage some religious practices such as fasting and the honouring of far too many saints' days through work prohibitions (Pankhurst 1992, p. 149), but failed. It wanted to rid the people of the false consciousness that had completely enveloped them (ibid, p. 93) and tried to change people's perceptions into accepting a new way of life that would promote development and prosperity based on hard labour. However, centuries-old belief systems could not be dismantled easily.

At present, the EPRDF government continues the secular policy of the Derg regime as stipulated in the new Constitution<sup>44</sup> which means separating the state from religious influence and affairs (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 60). It also maintains close vigilance over religious powers and does not employ religious institutions to implement any state policy or programme (ibid).

Despite the separation between state and religion, religious influences are historical and form part of women's stock of knowledge. Such consciousness is difficult to counter and this explains why women willingly abide by practices that prevent their emancipation. As women are the major group among religious followers, their agency is captured within religious parameters. Combined with political repression, it becomes easy to grasp why there is no leading action on their emancipation. However, in many neighbouring African countries, women are also very religious. But activism for women's rights is found to be very high among these countries' women (Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Nigeria, and others). This could be linked to their strategic way of engaging their governments, which might not be as repressive as the Ethiopian. One could then wonder why Ethiopian women do not use their oppression to take action to counter their problems. Is religious internalization perhaps not the main issue, even if it has surrendered women's agency? Could it be that women are using religion to abstain from action (specifically action that would demand radical changes and therefore carry many individual risks)? Is the political regime then the main barrier? This could be an explanation though there are many repressive regimes in the world where women are active. Then the only response could be: Did the Red Terror regime of the Derg cause more harm than one can assume? If that is the case, how can women overcome their past and move forward? More exposure and learning from neighbouring countries is very important in this. It is about time that Ethiopian women nurture regional sisterhood for collective action and solidarity.

## **2.2.6 Women's freedom**

Given the many limitations in the development of women's agency, the most prevalent issue is their freedom. The conceptual understanding of women's freedom has always

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<sup>44</sup> Art. 11, FDRE Constitution.

been subject to state, religious and cultural values and norms of society. Male and female access to and understanding of freedom are worlds apart. Freedom remains conditioned by the society or community one belongs to (Cornforth 1954, p. 196). Cox (1948, p. 229) notes that: “No society will ever be able to secure unlimited, abstract freedom for all its members”. Gideonse (1937 cited in Cox 1948, p. 229) adds that “freedom always meant 'freedom' within a given framework of social institutions, legal standards and regulatory practices”. People’s freedom is thus subject to limitations in order to impose the orderly functioning of a given society, whether that is democratic, autocratic, socialist, religious or military, and where men’s freedom extensively limits women’s freedom. Freedom is also seen as relative in regard to a situation, person, or group. It is not an autonomous entity which exists independently of other people’s freedoms. On the other hand, “A single individual has a limited range of freedom; a group can create a wide range of patterns of meaning and activity” (Menzies 1982, p. 39). Freire (1972, p. 24) argues that freedom should be and is acquired by conquest. It is not a tangible gift or an ideal located outside people but should be pursued constantly and responsibly.

Given the above, it becomes clear that it is very difficult for women, especially women in Ethiopia who live in extreme traditional patriarchal settings, to pursue their freedom. Here, women and men do not have equal access to freedom because women are more than men subjected to powerful customary and religious norms. Such norms are often found to contradict state laws. For example, while women may be granted equal rights and freedoms in the pursuit of education, cultural and religious observance may prevent them from progressing.

The main thing about freedom is that it is a constant pursuit. This makes it harder for women due to the risks involved. However, if women could pursue their freedom on an equal level with men, it would have a dramatic impact on the status quo. This would be mainly because it would place tremendous challenges on the existing social order (state, religions and traditions). Many women are found evading the pursuit of their freedom, even at the cost of their well-being. This evasion is often based on the possibility of conflict. When women are aware that their pursuit for rights and freedom will bring about conflict with others (religious and political institutions, men and their families), they refrain from their pursuit and sacrifice their rights. They continue living in relative unfreedom. It is disconcerting that the guarantees placed by international instruments (Universal Declaration of Human Rights) could not remove the cultural and societal limitations on women to claim their rights.

The emerging and growing feminism on the continent of Africa illustrates that freedom is a basic right if women are to pursue their agency development. Freedom is a prerequisite for women’s self-exploration and feminism. As Bauman (1976, p. 3) indicates: “To be free is to know one’s potential” and “Freedom means choice” (1976:29). A few feminists have realized this, such as McFadden, who explains how her feminist agency is closely entwined with the joy of being free (2003). This perception that feminists are linked to being “free” women is not a lie. Feminists reach an internal state of mind that makes them free from any form of oppression. It is a form of psyche that is freed from patriarchal boundaries of thinking which are seen as normative. It is associated with a

new way of thinking and action. This internal expression of freedom among women can only then be translated into practice when women are genuinely recognized as equals to men in rights and freedom, which is not the case in Ethiopia yet.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

The discussions above explore a better understanding of the agency formation of women in Ethiopia. It is an agency that is strictly limited, lacking the freedom to develop and grow. Within their existence, women's agency is dominated by patriarchy that exerts its influence through a combination of political ideology and culture. These in turn form women's stock of knowledge. As a result, many women can be found enslaved to their own oppression and subordination. This is not a conscious process, meaning that women do not realize that they willingly play into the hands of patriarchal rule and powers. They cannot realize that because patriarchy is overwhelming and embedded in every fibre of the societal fabric from schools, to workplaces, to societal gatherings and families.

It is what Gramsci called 'hegemony' referring to two forms of political control: power and consent. Burke (1999, 2005) stated that by hegemony, "Gramsci meant the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations". According to Chandler (2000) "Gramsci used the term *hegemony* to denote the predominance of one social class over others. This represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and 'natural'". Women thus willingly maintain their own subordination as natural and universal. And there is no sign of their weakening. Women stand little chance of changing their situation unless some revolutionary transformation takes place. But, as was seen during the Derg regime, even revolutionary repressive systems could not transform the dominant hierarchical culture of society, or alter the traditional gender ideology.

The issue is that women are also weak in their own agency development because they lack discourses, and are not engaged in consciousness-raising and experience-sharing to strengthen their analytical base. Among the educated, especially those exposed to other ideas and who have travelling widely, there are some exceptions. However, not much is forthcoming from them to trigger activism and take the lead on women's emancipation. An analytical review on educated women's problems in providing leadership on women's emancipation is provided in Chapter 7.

It is from this context of indoctrination of women's agency by the external mediums, including the political state and its education and media channels, and the spiritual power of religion, that it can be understood why women willingly take part in the preservation of a patriarchal oppressive system that directly inhibits their advancement. Lacking role models and female leaders who can claim otherwise, they are subjected to ancient practices and gender ideologies. Given the high levels of illiteracy in the country among women, such compliance does not come as a surprise. Feminism, indeed, faces a challenging environment in Ethiopia. The issue is how to identify those who do not

conform to patriarchal limitations and are radical enough to challenge the political status quo.

In this chapter I also discussed the concepts of feminism and women's movements and analysed those in view of the situation in Ethiopia. It is encouraging to note that a prevalent feminist discourse has emerged in the African region and fits into Ethiopian reality. It is regrettable that there is no theorizing or feminist epistemology on that or on any discourse, not even at the level of gender studies.

The lack of critical analysis on the "woman question" program of the ruling party is also disheartening. It is a program that is similar to the Derg's in terms of state domination and policy definition. The EPRDF followed similar procedures in defining its "woman question" program outside the Leninist theoretical context, establishing its own policy (National Policy on Ethiopian Women) and machinery (WAO) to see to its effective implementation. The rest, including the constitutional guarantees of women's equality and freedom, affirmative measures in education, employment and politics, and different policies (e.g. educational policy aiming to eradicate cultural practices negatively affecting the girl child) are just on paper for foreign consumption. In Chapter 5 I will critically discuss the ruling party's track record on women's emancipation and show how its detailed set-up is in fact doing the opposite.

## Chapter 3                    **Historical overview on the status background of women in Ethiopia: Locating women's agency**

Historically, Ethiopian women have played prominent roles in the country's political, economic and social spheres. Regrettably, not much is documented on this. This paucity of data, however, is not only a product of the past. Even at present the critical shortage of data on women is glaring. The little documentation which does emerge is often influenced by international actors and remains invisible or out of reach and unpublished. One positive development is that more students at the academic level have started to conduct research on gender issues. Most of these, however, remain unpublished and many do not reflect a critical and in-depth analysis of gender issues in the country.

This chapter is a historical review of women's roles and status analysed from a feminist perspective. The aim is to find out whether there were feminist tendencies among the actions of women in the past and what forms those had. What has to be kept in mind is that women's agencies, in the past and at present, were strongly influenced by the political and religious culture of society that continues unabated. Taking this into consideration, the aim is to discuss women's agency in the history of Ethiopia.

### **3.1     Pride in Ethiopian history: The legend of a female queen**

Ethiopian history has an ancient base derived from a mythical legend. According to this legend the Queen of Saba (South Yemen) called Sheba or Makeda (in the *Kibra Negast*<sup>45</sup>) or Belqis (by Arabs) was the cause of much consternation about 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. She settled on the coast of Eritrea and was said to be the ruler of "Ethiopia"<sup>46</sup> at that time (Belai 1992, p. 7).

It is crucial to consider the time frame here. Well-documented research into the history of many African nations shows different roles and responsibilities for women and men at the time. In these early societies, women were treated as equally competent with men. They were found to be actively occupying various roles in their community or country's administrative positions. As such, it was normal for them to become chiefs, conduct wars and engage in power struggles to the throne, provided they proved to be equally competitive and aggressive in taking care of the needs of the community or tribe. Ethiopia too had its own matrilineal societies where women were treated differently from what they are today. For example, Forbes (1925 cited in 'Towards an Analysis of the Ethiopia Student Movement and the Split in the Ethiopian Student Union in North

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<sup>45</sup> The *Kebra Negest* or 'Glory of the Kings' (Markakis 1974, p. 29) is a compilation of Old Testament, Rabbinical, Christian, and Arabic literature and legend. It was written in Ge'ez by the hand of one Yishaq, *Nebura Id* (Head Priest) of Aksum. The *Kibra Negast* was the book legitimizing the Solomonic dynasty as created by the order of God.

<sup>46</sup> Neither the country nor the people originally held this name (Brummelkamp 1956, p. 31-33). As the country was continuously engaged in internal wars expanding its territory, many parts of the country might have been annexed through time and were not originally part of what is known as "Ethiopia" today. Markakis (1974, p. 13) also states that claims of the existence of an earlier "Ethiopia" were mythical.

America' 1973, p. 25) described the existence of matrilineal and matrilineal societies among the "primitive" people who originally inhabited the highlands of Ethiopia. Among these people, paternity had no value at the time and the family, as is known today, did not exist. In such matrilineal societal set-ups, the mother's bloodline was seen as the main line of inheritance. Evidence of the existence of matrilineal societies was thus found along the southern regions of the country.

Berger and White (1990) explained the existence of such matrilineal societies throughout Africa and a study carried out by Reed (1975) similarly showed the existence of maternal clans and sex segregation in early societies throughout the world. Vivante (1990) was more specific, providing details on egalitarian societies in some West African nations such as Ghana, Senegal and Mauritania, dating from 3,000 B.C. Vivante posits that many ancient West African civilizations had a tradition that begins with an original female ruler or founder (1999, p. 200). Somewhere in history though, women lost their privileges due to various influences, including the introduction of patriarchal religions and systems. The time when this took place varies from country to country. For example, many African nations shed their matrilineal existence much later, during the influences of colonization and its imposed patriarchal religions in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Only a few societies might have survived the patriarchal aggression and intrusion, such as Kerala in South India Meghalaya in north-east India or the Asante people of south-central Ghana.

The queen of Saba lived at this time and was a competent ruler. During one of her visits to Israel, she resided with the Israeli King, Solomon. From their union a son was born, named Ibn-al Malik (son of the king), or Menelik I (Belai 1992, p. 11). Years later the son travelled to visit his father but refused to stay there upon the request of King Solomon. He "returned to Ethiopia stealing the Holy Ark with him" (Schwab 1985, p. 5). The king then decreed that from then on only his direct male descendants would rule the country (Brummelkamp 1956, p. 36-38). Although this myth is documented in the Fetha Negest, the traditional legal code or Laws of the Kings, which was written in Ge'ez in the 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D., there is no way of verifying the said decree through other sources. And although the decree states that only the direct male descendants of the Solomonic dynasty should rule the country, various female rulers also ruled the country directly or indirectly as regents in historic times.

It is this union between the Queen of Saba and King Solomon that is often treated as the cradle of Ethiopian civilization, now estimated to be about 3,000 years old. During her stay in Israel, the queen converted from her traditional religion to the religion of King Solomon, which was Judaism. Upon her return, she proclaimed Judaism as the official religion of Ethiopia until Christianity emerged in the middle of the third century (Belai 1992, p. 11). Most of this mythical saga is documented in the Kibra Negast, which, among others, mostly documented elite ruling women in the polity of the country. However, after the Queen of Sheba not much is known about the country or its women until the emergence of the Axumite kingdom about 1,000 years later.

There were numerous other prominent elite women on the political scene in Ethiopia vying for control and power in historical times. Many of these women were privileged due to their status as wives or mothers of powerful men. Some became rulers either through direct placement by men, or through indirect linkages of being married to a ruler, or as regents (see Seltene 1994). There were also women who became famous in their roles as warriors such as Queen Yodit (Teshale 1995, p. 15; Minale 2001, p. 8) and Bati Dil Wenbera (Minale 2001, p. 10).

Queen Yodit (Judith) was the daughter of the leader of the Falasha. Yodit is said to have ruled for 40 years (Teshale 1995, p. 15). She was a strong woman who combined her forces and brought utter destruction to the Aksumite kingdom (Minale 2001, p. 8). Even though Christian writers deliberately try to omit this daring female ruler from history, labelling her as a rebel and evil against Christianity, her saga could not be ignored for it almost destroyed Christianity in Ethiopia.

Bati Dil Wenbera was another famous woman. Upon the death of her husband, the Muslim leader Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim Al Ghazi or “Gagn Muhammad” (the left-handed) in 1516, who is also said to have almost destroyed Christianity in Ethiopia, she took over his army. Christianity was saved with the help of Portugal, but Dil Wenbera continued the struggle against the Christian campaigns of the then ruler Gelawdeos. Gelawdeos (1540-1559) ruled together with the queen mother, Seble Wengel (Belai 1992, p. 143). These two women made history by braving each other and fighting for their own cause (Minale 2001, p. 10). A well-known example of female rule came from Emperor Zara Yacob (1434 - 1468) who appointed his son-in-law as his principal courtier. But, believing him to be disloyal, he placed the government of almost the entire country in the hands of his daughters and other female relatives. Nine of his daughters were appointed as governors at that time (Pankhurst 1990, p. 18).

And there were many more such elite women who at one time or another, either directly or indirectly (as regents of their minor sons or grandsons), ruled parts of the country or led armies to fight in the continuous conflicts of the country (see Minale 2001). They were described in male-centred language as able rulers, influential, knowledgeable on political and military affairs, brave and often commanding their own armies (Seltene 1994, p. 21-22; Prouty 1986, p. 137; Minale 2001, p. 7-20). For instance, Minale (1996, p. 6) states that “During the first Italian invasion (1895-1896) Empress Taytu was described as a ‘valiant warrior’ and appraised to have done a task ‘not usually that of a woman’ and ‘She was seen as an excellent diplomat dealing with foreigners on her own’”.

The clear details of Empress Taytu provide some useful insights into how elite women exercised their roles and responsibilities and what those entailed in their kingdom. Taytu was the wife of Emperor Menelik II and while Menelik was her fifth husband, she was his second wife. She was noted to have received some religious education, was very conservative and a strict follower of the Orthodox Christian religion (Prouty 1986, p. 39-40). Given her status, she possessed her own property and controlled her own army.

Of great interest was her role in the arrangement of dynastic marriages<sup>47</sup> for clear political purposes. Having no children of her own, she gathered her relatives, cousins and nieces around her, using them to create alliances with other rulers through the arrangement of their marriages. She would not hesitate to force the dissolution of a stable marriage or to force her relatives to divorce and re-marry women or men of her choice. As child marriage was a common practice at the time, some of her nieces as young as seven years old were married off to men as old as in their fifties. Empress Taytu thus used her relatives as pawns in a power game of building loyalty around her (ibid, p. 219-225). However, since she was a product of her time, given her status this was considered a normal practice.

### 3.2 Empress Taytu's leadership roles

Empress Taytu's unique leadership skills became visible during the war with Italy in 1896, in which she took an active part. Commanding her own troops and female camp followers<sup>48</sup> (Prouty 1986, p. 137), she was actively engaged in encouraging men to go and fight. Not only did she command her own troops on the battlefields, she also provided leadership to the thousands of women camp followers, supervising their tasks. The parade of groups going to the Battle of Adwa was described by an Italian, Antonelli, in 1887 as follows:

Imagine 70000 – 80000 mules and 20000 – 30000 women burdened like the beasts themselves with utensils to grind flour, make bread and cooking jars of liquid strapped by two leather thongs to their shoulders and waists. These women, bent under their loads, dressed in torn clothing, go along singing, laughing and frolicking as if they were at a party (Prouty 1986, p. 142).

Taytu's active engagement in this war earned her the title of "valiant warrior" (Minale 1996, p. 6). In fact, it is this documentation of Taytu's life and her consequent role during this war with the Italians in 1896 that is credited with having brought visibility and recognition to women's roles in wars (Minale 2001, p. 18). This documentation also revealed the historical role of elite women during previous wars where many were found

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<sup>47</sup> Dynastic marriage was a historical practice in the country among the rulers, kings and emperors of medieval Ethiopia where marriages were arranged among different religious or warring groups to build solidarity, ease tensions, create alliances among warring nations, define levels of cooperation among states (Pankhurst 1997, p. 206; Bahru 1991, p. 118) or confirm power relations (Markakis 1974, p. 40).

<sup>48</sup> The groups of women, and some men, joining the fighters to the battlefields, were called "camp followers" and were unique to Ethiopian history. The majority of camp followers were women (Pankhurst 1990, p. 68; Minale 1996, p. 17), which included women from the court, such as concubines, female relatives of the emperor and noblemen, but also servants and slaves and the many women accompanying the soldiers. Camp followers were responsible for the transportation of all food and drink that could not be carried by animals. Minale Adugna (2001, p. 17) described in detail the lives of such camp followers and how they marched, carrying heavy loads and doing all the work to serve the soldiers. They were seen as worse than beasts of burden because, once reaching the camping site, there was no rest for them. They would put their loads down and engage in various activities such as making tents, collecting water and firewood, preparing pots and pans for cooking and starting the laborious cooking process. There was always a clear division of labour among the camp followers. One group would be in charge of baking injera (Ethiopian bread) while another would prepare the *wot* (stew).

commanding their own armies (*ibid*, p. 12) and providing leadership roles to the camp followers. These include Itege Elleni, Seble Wongel, Mentwab, Menen, Tewabech, and others (*ibid*, p. 6).

After the war of 1896 there was one more war during the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie, the Italian invasion in 1936. This invasion lasted for five years, until 1941. During this war, women were again seen taking the lead in various war-related activities, although, due to the length of the invasion this time, their strategies changed from open warfare to guerrilla warfare (Seltene 1994, p. 28). This included various forms of underground and secret activities, espionage and smuggling, where women played important roles. Women of the court were again seen providing leadership and supervision to the many activities in which camp followers were engaged. According to Minale (2001, p. 31), “An official document produced by the Ministry of Defence contains the names of about 277 women incorporated in the list of patriots that earned medals from Emperor Haile Selassie I on 20 January 1945”.<sup>49</sup>

### **3.2.1 Empress Taytu’s stance on women’s rights**

Although Vidailhet (cited in Prouty 1986, p. 209) has noted that Empress Taytu was hardly seen in the company of other women, Prouty is of the opinion that she was the forerunner of women’s rights in the country. She provides some examples of this. One is the views of the Empress on premarital acquaintance between women and men among Western couples. She had observed this from her foreign female contacts. She thought it worthy of replication in Ethiopia because it would grant both partners mutual respect and increase their affection for each other (Prouty 1986, p. 235). This though did not seem practical considering the entrenched and highly prevalent cultural practice of child marriage in the country, and where marriages were always arranged by parents and/or relatives without the couples’ knowledge. Further evidence was Taytu’s call for divorce damages to be paid to women (*ibid*). This call emerged after an incident at court. More evidence was found in Taytu’s persistence to motivate the emperor to include the education of girls in a proclamation he made in October 1907 (*ibid*, p. 296). This proclamation, however, was symbolic and no girls attended school for at least two decades. A more noteworthy observation made by Mérab (cited in Prouty 1986, p. 235) was that the Empress was protective of her sex. According to Mérab, “She listened willingly to complaints that women lodged against their husbands, brothers, fathers or sons”. This was indeed innovative as women’s lot was never discussed or described before. However, it is not known whether the Empress took any action to support those complaints or act as a mediator between the couples involved.

Most of these concerns of the Empress, however, directly targeted elite women or the women related to her. This should come as no surprise given the context and time. Even elite women struggling for an expansion of their property or army, never considered extending their struggle to fight for other women’s rights (Tsehai 1984, p. 6). It was obvious that their interests overruled those of other women because the concept of power

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<sup>49</sup> Some of the female patriot names were also listed by Salome Gabre Egziabher, and included 64 names (Salome, n.d., p. 78-79).

stood high on their agenda. It should be noted that this was also the case among the first feminists in many countries where elite women first looked at their own problems and issues affecting them instead of issues affecting working class or poor women or women of colour.

In short, Empress Taytu could genuinely be considered unique and the predecessor of women's rights in the country because she initiated the consideration of some serious women's issues. Her willingness and patience to sit and listen to women and give some private advice to them could mean that she directly contributed to sharing their problems. This was not common in those times and was indeed often seen as taboo. She must have created a trusting environment and provided room for discussion for women to come forward. Her stubborn persistence in promoting girls' education was another pioneering example. She obviously realized the need for and importance of girls' education and this was the first step she could undertake in achieving that. Her observation of problems in arranged marriages was also remarkable. In similar manner she came up with the idea to introduce a kind of divorce compensation to women. These issues show that the Empress started to reflect on many issues linked to women and that her agency was in the process of self-transformation and change. Given the time, she perhaps lacked the capacity or intellect to take those issues further. But they definitely marked a beginning. It was unfortunate that her efforts were not continued among the next generation of elite women.

### **3.3 Modernization in women's lives**

Modernisation, like other change, was slow. It was not only in the field of technology, education and knowledge or radicalization of minds, but also in politics that change was not openly welcomed. The introduction of the very first changes created strong resistance and an outcry from the country's conservative forces, such as religious leaders and other conservative elements. Empress Taytu, for example, was seen as disliking any new device and even shunning new ways of doing things (Prouty 1986, p. 245; Tsehai 1984, p. 6). Any introduction of new technology was actively sabotaged (Prouty, p. 111, 237).

Most of the major changes that were introduced eventually had significant impacts only on the polity. Since women were excluded from this, they were found outside the margins of these changes. No attention was paid to change any aspect of their tremendous workload or improve their living conditions, something that is still prevalent at present. In fact, there has been a high level of continuous resistance to any forms of change that would benefit women at large and the Orthodox Church stood at its centre. An example is that, when Emperor Yohannes introduced a labour-saving device for women, a water-driven flour mill, in 1843, it was dismantled by the priests. To evade a religious clash, the Emperor halted the importation of a corn grinder using the argument, "What would we do with the arms of women?" (ibid, p. 238). It was Emperor Menelik who persisted and finally achieved the introduction of a flour mill for women in 1888 (ibid), although this only benefited women at the court.

Admittedly, a change in status and perception might have occurred through time as more women started to become educated during the time of Emperor Haile Selassie. Many were also employed in the state bureaucracy. But this only applied to a small group of urban or elite women. The majority were never part of the changes taking place at court or among the elite groups. Their lives continued for centuries in a similar manner as if time stood still. As such, being deprived of freedom and liberty, how could they even imagine cultivating any form of leadership skill?

### **3.3.1 Empress Zewditu's short-lived legacy**

After the death of Emperor Menelik, Empress Zewditu, his daughter, was placed in charge of the government, holding the title of Empress for 14 years. She was the first woman to be crowned in her own right in Ethiopian history (Tsehai 1984, p. 6). But, beside this, there was nothing during her rule that could have been attributed to her. She was found to be more concerned with religion than politics.

Empress Zewditu was followed by Ras Tefari Mekonnen, the son of Menelik's cousin, Ras Mekonnen, in 1930 (Clapham 1969, p. 16). He was married to Empress Menen, who had already married several times before marrying him (*ibid*, p. 59). Not much is known about Empress Menen, except that she had an equally traditional upbringing and was extremely devoted to the Orthodox Church. These two followers of Empress Taytu grossly failed to show the same type of affiliation or concern for women's issues that Taytu had.

### **3.4 Women's associations and leadership**

Any form of political and civil organization in the country was actively discouraged before the 1930s by Emperor Haile Selassie who was extremely wary of any intention among members of society to become organized, fearing them as a competitive political force (Clapham 1969, p. 75,187; Balsvik 1985, p. 81; Markakis, 1974, p. 177). But this situation changed with the looming threat of the Italian invasion in 1935 and led to the formation of a few associations such as the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the Ethiopian Patriotic Association. Within these associations, elite women (mainly women from the court such as the daughters of Emperor Haile Selassie) took the initiative to start their own women's branches. Their main aim was to mobilize women for the impending Italian-Ethio war-related activities. Princess Tenagnewerq (one of the daughters of Emperor Haile Selassie) became the association's honorary president.

Another daughter of the emperor, Princess Tsehai, was more ambitious and initiated the first nationwide women's organization known as the "Ethiopian Women's Volunteer Service Association" in 1935 under the patronage of her mother, Empress Menen (*ibid*, p. 29). This association had similar goals, namely to use women and exploit them for war-related activities. And, though it was the longest surviving women's association of the time, it did nothing to emphasise the plight of women or strive for the improvement of women's rights. After the war its name was changed to the Ethiopian Women's Work Association (EWWA) (Zenebework 1976, p. 49).

A critical review of this association reveals many shortcomings and even questions the nature of its existence. It was found to be dominated by educated and elite women who used the association to advance their own interests. Gebriel (1986, p. 27) argued that many women did not benefit from EWWA's activities because it failed to embrace the oppressed and downtrodden and in fact only catered for a small group of women in Addis Ababa. Its members were also noted to belong to the educated group of women in the country. The association was characterized by Zenebework Tadesse (1976, p. 49) as at worst reactionary, and at best philanthropic. The leadership of this association was devoid of any political activism due to their close links to the ruling family. This means that it not only refrained from challenging the Emperor's laws and policies, but also failed to galvanize political consciousness among women or encourage female leadership (Semagne 1986, p. 27). What was even more puzzling was that it remained reluctant to deal with sensitive issues, specifically those dealing with women's rights, while it claimed to have achieved women's emancipation. "This was a far cry from the reality" (Zenebework 1976, p. 49).

### **3.5 First female students**

Given the historical participation of women in the country's political, social and economic affairs, it was only in the fifties that the first woman managed to gain access to higher education in the country. After 1952 the number started to climb very slowly. In 1954-1955, there were five and by 1960 there were 40 female students. Between 1960 and 1970 the number further increased to 356 females (Balsvik 1985, p. 54). However, this increase was not indicated to be significant by Sylvain (1970, p. 197), standing at a low 5% by 1965.

It should be understood that the education of girls in a traditional society like Ethiopia did not take place without resistance. The general perception was that the place of a woman was in the home, married and submissive to her husband. Therefore, their education was resisted and seen as being destructive to the traditional values of society and a direct threat to patriarchy. Educated girls were also seen as Westernized, undermining men's natural superiority. But, despite this unquestioned and assumed superiority of the male sex, the idea also existed among some families that girls were not intellectually inferior and should be educated. This was shown by the increased enrolment rate of girls in primary and secondary schools between 1955 and 1970, which rose from 18.6 to 31.4% and 10.4 to 21% respectively (Balsvik 1985, p. 54).

Entering the education system was not an end in itself. Most girls entering school were very shy, passive and isolated. This only started to change around the late sixties when the increase of female students in the university encouraged active female participation in university activities such as student unions and sports clubs. The negative perceptions of their roles, status and image, however, remained a colossal challenge. It was innovative to find these perceptions subjected to discussion in the student bodies and papers at the time (ibid, p. 54).

The late sixties was also a critical time of student radicalization in the country with political agendas such as “land to the tiller”, specifically among the male students. Feeling their female colleagues lagging behind, being misled and deliberately kept ignorant by the school administration (Kiflu 1993, p. 46), they also initiated a “battle against ignorance and exploitation” (Balsvik 1985, p. 57) to enlighten their female colleagues. The aim was to inform female students “to discard their old ideas and values and adjust themselves to the demands of the twentieth century Ethiopia” (ibid, p. 57). The timing was also critical because the University Women’s Club<sup>50</sup> was actively busy organizing a fashion show in March 1968. According to Balsvik (1985, p. 216), this battle had ensued through the student newsletter, *Struggle*, where a few male students had taken up the task to write articles on the event of the fashion show, expressing their concerns. One such article was entitled “Message to Our Sisters”. Walleign Makonnen, one of the student leaders at the time, also wrote on this issue criticizing the Western cultural influence on women and how female colleagues were being brainwashed into succumbing to subordinate roles and remain on the sidelines of politics at the campus.

On the day of the fashion show male students harassed the organizers and the participants to such an extent that the show was cancelled. In general, the implications of the intended fashion show and the male students’ activism to create awareness among the female students should be seen as a major breakthrough for female students’ activism.

### **3.5.1 The road to (female) students’ radicalization**

The whole process of engaging female students in a conscientization process through the male students’ actions after the fashion show in 1968 contributed immensely to radicalization among a few female students, specifically with regard to the political climate of the country. The University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA) also took up the cause of the “liberation of women” in its election campaign speeches, urging women to fight for their liberation. This led to a more active engagement of these female students in the various school and union activities. There were not many female students who could be labelled activists at the time. Among the students, female students accounted for only 9% (Kiflu 1993, p. 46). Many had become members of the student union and supported it without being radicalized. And although they were not found among its formal leadership, they were present as student congress members. The student movement at the time had two levels of leadership, one being the official structure through the unions and the other the real leadership from behind.<sup>51</sup> Among these there were only a few women.

Before 1968, some female students had already been active in the student unions. These included some of the most prominent women of the time such as Martha Mebratu (killed in a failed plane hijacking in 1972), Netsannet Mengistu, and Tadelech Kidane Mariam.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The Women’s club was composed of staff members, wives of lecturers, secretaries, and female students of the university. The show was organized by this club and the wives of expatriates.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Melakou Tegegn, one of the activists in the student union at the time in the 70s, 8 March 2007, Kampala.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Melakou Tegegn, Ibid.

They were found equally competent, ardent and radical as political activists as their male counterparts. Their activism, however, remained centred around the political problems of the country and not on issues of women's rights.

One interesting means of student expression in the repressive political climate of the country was poems. Poetry had been historically used as an effective means of expression. It was also actively encouraged by the emperor and integrated in the education system. However, students started to use their poetic abilities to express their discontent regarding the political rule in the country. They wrote on many social and political issues which included the lives of soldiers, the political and economic power of the state, the underprivileged position and exploitation of man by man, the Christian Orthodox Church<sup>53</sup> and so forth. And, female students did not lag behind in this. In fact, the female poetry club<sup>54</sup> survived the many years of political turmoil and is still operational.

### **3.5.2 Ethiopian student movements abroad**

Meanwhile, among the students who were sent abroad for education, many did not return. This included some female students. Many others left the country due to the repressive political climate. Settled in American and European countries, these students formed various student unions (i.e. the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe (ESUE) and the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA) in the 1960s (Fentahun 1990, p. 49-50; Bahru 1991, p. 225). At the time, both unions followed the same ideological base, namely Marxism. In 1968 the All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement (MEISON) was founded among some members of ESUE and ESUNA while the Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization (EPLO)<sup>55</sup> took the stage in the early seventies initiated by some radicals in Algeria recruiting members among the European, American, Ethiopian and Middle Eastern groups of Ethiopian students (Kiflu 1993, p. 78).

Female students were represented in both MEISON and EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party). Some of them were Genet Girma, Aster Wudneh, Hebrat Agonafer, Teyint Mekonnen, Nigist Adane, Abebech Bekele, Fikirte Gebre Mariam, Tadelech Haile Mikael and Emebet Bekele.<sup>56</sup> Like their male counterparts, these women were actively engaged in organizing new members abroad for their respective unions and promoting its agenda. One of the specific roles of these female students was also to mobilize women

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<sup>53</sup> For example, one poet dared to criticize the Church, expressing its characteristics at the time. These included "innumerable priests, like swarms of locusts, who made a virtue of ignorance and laziness; who could never answer a question but were ready to condemn the one who asked, quoting irrelevant passages from the Bible. They taught moral behaviour they did not themselves practice, mixing the divine spirits with drink whenever they could. On 150 holidays of the year they asked peasants to leave their work and bring food and drink to the churches, and on 180 days they asked people to fast; that was the essence of their preaching. Holidays and fasting were weapons the church used to trap people into laziness, submission, and poverty" (Balsvik 1985, p. 108-109). And the state was accused of protecting such vices.

<sup>54</sup> There is an association of women writers in the country at present that is also engaged in poetry writing and reading.

<sup>55</sup> Later renamed Ethiopian Revolutionary Party (EPRP).

<sup>56</sup> Interview with Melakou Tegegn, *ibid*.

and get them organized in the women's study groups which had emerged in the late seventies and in which the "woman question" had gained entrance. But even then, most of the female members of these unions were more active on political and party issues than on women's issues. During a debate on the Ethiopian Student Movement, Netsanet said that "As university students, the word 'gender' meant to us nothing more than a grammatical term. In fact, it was then known not as such but the 'Woman Question'!" (Netsanet Mengistu 2010, p. 117).

Both within and outside the country, the students unions were engaged in setting up different political arms of their organizations. Abroad these were in the form of study groups such as the study group on the national question, on the "woman question", on the youth, on land distribution, and so on. In Ethiopia, these were in the form of political education programmes, study groups, university women's groups, discussion forums, formation of networks throughout the country, as well as politicizing and organizing high school students ('Towards an Analysis of the Ethiopia Student Movement and the Split in the Ethiopian Student Union in North America' 1974, p. 8-9). It is during this time of getting organized and having a clear orientation that the "woman question" emerged among the student unions abroad around 1971.<sup>57</sup> Prior to this there was no notion of the woman's question among the students abroad or at home. When the revolution broke out in 1974, some of the members of the EPRP and MEISON decided to return to the country. And that is how they brought with them the discourse on the "woman question" into the country (see Annexure I).

### **3.6 The "woman question"**

The "woman question" emerged at the end of the eighteenth century in communist and socialist literature and was defined from a socialist perspective. As a discourse, it set out to correct the exploitation of women by capitalist (and feudal) countries turning against anything imperialist or bourgeois (Vogel 1995, p. 25). At the time, all writings and calls for women's emancipation in socialist countries focused on liberating them from the drudgery of exploitative labour and leading them to another form of labour without exploitation. The aim was not to remove women from the labour force, but to change the political outlook of that labour from capitalist to socialist.

According to Vogel (1995, p. 25), "The woman question has never received the theoretical attention it requires, with the consequence that Marxist theory remains especially weak in this area". Despite this, it was adopted by socialist feminists as a starting point. The basic issue in Marxism in this sense was that he believed that no revolution could succeed without women forming an integral part of it (Marx *et al* 1951, p. 42). This idea was seen from various angles, such as women's participation in the labour force, women's education, women's participation in the various associations and organizations, and so on. It is this active engagement of women in public and political life that has been used as an important indicator of their emancipation. Because, as Vogel (1995, p. 27) stressed, "Socialism was based on the premise that the active participation of both women and men in the revolutionary struggle and eventually in the

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with Melakou Tegegn, *ibid*.

socialist state building will make women and men realize that their goals are the same and lead to more equality between the two”. This was the general vision and a lofty ideal in Soviet socialism. It was almost the same as the thought behind the liberation struggles of many developing countries against colonialism in the 1950s. During these struggles women were forced to demote their agendas for equality and their emancipation. They had hoped that all would be settled after independence merely because they had envisaged that struggling side by side to men would make men realize that women were in fact equal to them. And this, as they assumed, would then automatically translate to more equality in practical terms. However, such has never been the case.

With capitalism providing the framework for socialism, the “woman question” aimed at removing all the ills of capitalism. The “woman question” centred on the areas of work, the family, and equal rights. Calling for women’s active participation in the labour force was aimed at integrating them fully into the economic development of their country and addressing the specific needs and obstacles they encountered while doing so. Frederick Engels, for example, placed enormous stress on the importance of women’s participation in socialist politics and saw their domestic slavery as a major obstacle to achieving this (ibid, p. 31). The freeing of women from this domestic slavery was meticulously analysed.

Recognizing the inequalities within the family, the “woman question” targeted all other forms of inequality in society affecting women and pursuing democracy at its highest form. The thinking was that once women start participating equally with men at all societal levels, democracy would prevail and women would be treated equally. In this regard, socialist feminism tried to address women’s oppression in its dual format of class and sex. However, there are many socialist feminists (including those adapted later on in Ethiopia by the Derg and EPRDF) that still see class oppression as the correct framework with which to understand women’s position and who feel that sexual oppression should not be allowed to interfere with class solidarity (Hartmann, cited in Vogel, p. 51). Having a class position has its own repercussions as such an approach is mainly derived from a materialist point of view based on the division between the haves and have-nots. It means that the minimization of class differences would solve all of society’s inequalities. However, the ignorance of non-class-based approaches is one of the main reasons that other forms of inequality, among them the non-materialist approach, are overlooked and remain unchallenged. This is one of the main reasons that all the socialist frameworks emerging at the time frame failed to bring gender equality, because they failed to acknowledge the ideological power base of patriarchy.

The Soviet “woman question” was used as a model by many new emerging socialist countries. It was well developed and tried to wipe out all aspects of discrimination that made women inferior including in marriage, divorce, domestic slavery, religious prejudices, and so on. It basically assumed that women were crushed in household drudgery and intended to release them from this scourge (Marx et al. 1951, p. 43). The assumption was that once women were removed from the household, they would be totally emancipated (ibid). This is the main reason for the emergence of the various working women’s movements in the socialist countries (Genotdel, the Communist

women's Organization in Russia, All-China Women's Federation in China, Revolutionary Ethiopian Women Association in Ethiopia). Their aim was to concentrate specifically on drawing women into socially productive labour using the argument that no struggle would be successful without the full participation of women.

The Soviet government even went further, trying to draw women into the labour force by offering social services that would help in the reduction of women's domestic workloads, such as legal reforms, setting up nurseries, dining rooms, laundrettes and so on (ibid, p. 53). This helped the country in boosting its high numbers of women in leadership positions such as chairmen of collective farms, members of management boards, group leaders and tractor drivers (ibid, p. 85).

Granting women all this equal access and rights carried one major risk. That was the loss of women's independent agency. They were to become active converted state agents promoting the socialist cause. Marx *et al.* (1951, p. 89-90) were clear on this: "We must win over to our side the millions of toiling women in the town and villages. Win them for our struggles and in particular for the communist transformation of society." It was thus not only forcing women to work, but at the same time, what was more important was to convert them in such manners as to brainwash them into accepting the socialist struggle as their own fight (ibid, p. 91). Women's full devotion was sought.

How was this to be achieved? Numerous strategies emerged, such as the setting up of various bodies, working groups, commissions, committees, bureaus, and so forth in which women would take an "active" part and help "arouse the masses of women workers, to bring them into contact with the party and to keep them under its influence" (ibid, p. 90). In this manner, socialist indoctrination includes massive and continuous, often coerced forms of 'education' to affect the psyche of women and convert their thoughts (ibid, p. 64). The idea was that once women were 'educated', they would educate their children along the same lines to support the system. Politically ignorant women were seen as a threat to socialism. Above all, although socialism took the lead in assisting women to break free from their domestic drudgeries, it stressed that women themselves would carry the torch of the socialist ideology and not divert from its causes.

### **3.6.1 The "woman question" in Ethiopia: The first wave of the women's movement in the country**

The "woman question"<sup>58</sup> in Ethiopia emerged for the first time during the student movement in the late 1970s, charting its own course, though drawing heavily on Marxist-Leninist-Maoist discourse. During the student movement at the time some students in the country and abroad had started to concentrate on and debate Leninist works, injecting it into Ethiopian realities. They discovered many similarities between the capitalist forms of exploitation in many Western societies and the semi-feudal, semi-capitalist system of the

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<sup>58</sup> According to Yeraswork Admassie (2010, p. 127), when the student unions abroad split, there was a rush to get women on board to expand the new parties. As such, the "woman question" was introduced in the party programs and used as an instrument. "All the propaganda extolling women's cause was a thinly disguised mechanism to access women's vote."

Ethiopian mode of production. At the same time, the students abroad encountered the upheavals of the “woman question” actions and debates in the countries in which they were residing and were exposed to the prevalent women’s emancipation agenda in the middle of the second wave of the Western women’s movement. This second wave of the women’s movement emerged in the sixties and was all-encompassing and overwhelming mainly because of the heavy doses of radicalism injected into women’s issues at the time. Ethiopian students abroad were thus obviously overwhelmed with different views on women’s emancipation. Reflecting on their own situation in Ethiopia from a Marxist lens, they realized that women’s liberation in the country could only come through a political revolution and socialism.

Female students in the various student unions abroad started to set up intellectual study groups or study chapters with the main objective to study the conditions of women in Ethiopia.<sup>59</sup> Some of the women who initiated the women’s study groups were Dr Nigist Adane (she was said to be very active and prominent, but was unfortunately killed during the Derg regime), Fikerte Gebre Mariam in Europe, Gera Gebre Meskel in France, Gudai, Abebech Bekele in the US, and others.<sup>60</sup> These study groups formed part of the political parties that emerged at the time, the EPRP and MEISON. For example, Fikerte was an EPRP member while Nigist Adane was a member of MEISON. The EPRP was also known to have a women’s wing that emerged in 1972.

Between 1971 and 1974 the “woman question” became highly debated among various study groups consisting of 20 to 25 students. After 1974, some of the returning members of these study groups exported the “woman question” to Ethiopia.

The first paper ever written on the subject was by Gobena Wale (a male student) in 1971 who was one of the Ethiopian student leaders in Algiers. In that paper Gobena tried to link the problems of peasant and working women in Ethiopia to the Marxist-Leninist discourse, following the same pattern of analysis and thinking as the Russian socialists. He quotes Engels and Lenin extensively throughout the paper to explain the women’s issues in Ethiopia to show their similarities of oppression and exploitation. For example, discussing the institution of marriage and the family, he identified them as the main obstacles restricting women’s development and active participation in the production process. Within this family structure, he dwelt on the marriage system in the country, specifically focusing on the issues of arranged marriage, child marriage and marriage by abduction, which he criticized scornfully as “feudal”, backed by religious conformity. He also stressed how the division of labour perpetuated women’s oppression and exploitation contributing to their enslavement. The Bible and Quran did not remain immune from his criticism. He accused them of being strongly anti-women. He blamed them for supplying the ideological base and justifying the oppression of women by portraying them as weak, satanic, cruel, cunning, dishonest, weak, soft, imbecile, cursed, poisonous, diabolical, and so forth (Gobena 1971, p. 5). Feudalism was accused of instigating, encouraging and promoting this infamous act of women’s oppression (ibid, p. 6).

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Kiflu Tadesse, one of the activists in the students’ movement in the 1970s, on 17 March 2007, Kampala.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Kiflu Tadesse, ibid.

Gobena extensively discussed the issues of domestic violence against women, male promiscuity, problems of prostitution, the impact of divorce on women, their economic exploitation, women's sexuality, the plight of urban bourgeois women and their economic exploitation, and the "scourge of private property". His conclusion was (as Engels and Lenin suggested) a call for a socialist revolution where women would be fully engaged in social production. He also agreed to Lenin's call to have women politically educated so that they would become active agents of the socialist state. Ironically, he also espoused the provision of services for women in order to reduce their workload, just as Russian socialism had envisaged. He envisaged the transformation of private housekeeping into a social industry of collectivizing the domestic economy, setting up crèches and kindergartens, popular restaurants, making consumer goods such as ready-made clothes available, and introducing labour-saving devices in the kitchen such as electric cookers, laundry machines, electric house-cleaners, and so on (ibid, p. 11). These are still not available in the country in the twenty-first century. Overall, he believed in the socialist struggle and was convinced that once women were fully integrated into the economic process and gained economic independence, the nature of the family structure would be affected, male domination would vanish with prostitution, and monogamy would become a reality, improving women's sexuality (ibid, p. 12).

One exception in Gobena's thinking was that he believed that women had to be engaged in their own struggle and fight against all humiliating, degrading and backward customs (ibid, p. 11). According to him, women had to fight their own battles on two fronts: fighting male chauvinism and combating their own servile and defeatist mentality. They were called to build a strong assertiveness and put up resistance against ancient taken-for-granted perceptions that informed their subordination and inferiority. Gobena did not make any secret of the hurdles ahead for women due to their high level of illiteracy, but instead encouraged women to get organized, calling on the few educated girls to take the lead. He also called for a nationwide revolutionary women's organization or movement (ibid, p. 12). This call to women to take up their own struggle for their emancipation was refreshing and obviously influenced by Western feminism at the time. This call was also stressed in the different journals<sup>61</sup> on the "woman question". It was realized at the time that men could assist in the cause and create a conducive environment, but in the end it would be women themselves who had to make their own demands and develop their own strategies.<sup>62</sup>

As the Ethiopian women's movement was growing abroad, so was its outlook and language. The level of consciousness among the female students abroad advanced to such levels that it posed challenges to the structural problems among those leading the student movement. Male students were accused of paternalism and androcentrism ('The Woman

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<sup>61</sup> SPARK, August 27 1971, p. 32-33; Worldwide Union of Ethiopian Students, November 1975, Vol. 3, No. 3, Stockholm, Sweden, p. 32; *Challenge*, Volume XII, Number 1, November 1971, p. 62.

<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, this specific call has been ignored by the different governments who took the lead in developing the agenda on women's emancipation. Although it was recognized that women should take the lead, the Derg or even the current EPRDF government for that matter understood it as women of their choice and under their vanguard.

Question in Ethiopia' 1973, p. 41). But identifying the problem is not all that was discussed. Female students also called for action. They demanded an immediate overthrow of all backward, obsolete, reactionary views degrading women such as "women are inferior," "a woman's place is in the kitchen," and above all, the religious stance that women were cursed because they were a descendant of Eve (ibid, p. 4).

Being exposed to the many emerging schools of thoughts on feminism at the time, these female students consciously pushed their members to take a correct stand on the Ethiopian "woman question", stating: "We have to understand the present world situation and the concrete experiences within progressive movements in the struggle for the emancipation and equality of women. We have to understand the correct handling of the woman question and wage a resolute struggle against male supremacy" (ibid, p. 4-5). This radical and rather innovative stance of female students represented a unique high level of consciousness. Realizing all the women's problems in the country as unique to certain groups of women, though affecting most women, albeit in different forms, and linking the core of the problems to the wider societal and political context of the country, was indeed a framework to be reckoned with. It diverted a bit from the socialist countries in the sense that women's problems in Ethiopia were far more extensive and deep-rooted due to its ancient heritage. The women's movement had become more comprehensive and was the first of its kind in the country, albeit initiated abroad. However, as some of the women of the time remarked, there was no form of feminist awareness among women yet that could be translated into radical forms of action.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

Given the historical overview until 1974, it can be stated that Ethiopia too produced its female heroines. The country knew many prominent women that went into history as brave warriors or rulers of the country. But only one emerged as a champion on women's rights, Empress Taytu. And that is of great value.

It is crucial to understand the time and traditional setting of Ethiopian society in history. Many data reveal the recognition of women as strong pillars of society. They were in charge of many things. For example, men could not have gone to war if women had not provided for them in terms of food and other needs. This included carrying their weapons to the battlefields and taking care of the wounded. It also included remaining behind in the villages and taking care of everything so that the warriors had a place to return to. However, they were effectively kept in a disempowered state and prevented from developing critical thinking capacity. They were denied education and isolated to the domestic sphere, which retained a traditional base. It was as if traditional culture which defined their roles and responsibilities within given patriarchal parameters with the main goal to keep them occupied, busy and exhausted, was constructed on the back of women. That would leave them no time to reflect on their status or develop a critical consciousness. But, given time and especially in the last century or two, they have proven to be achievers at whatever cost.

Empress Taytu was the first woman showing unique signs of a critical consciousness that should be marked as a new beginning for women. She should be credited as the forerunner of women's rights and might have taken those further if circumstances were different. It is crucial to realize that despite her conservative upbringing and access to traditional religious education, and despite her conservative religious outlook, her agency was under transformation. It was very promising to see that in Ethiopia too there was such a woman who managed to negate patriarchal expectations and started to care for other women's concerns.

Amazingly, this aspect did not receive much attention among scholars and still remains hidden and silenced. Educated Ethiopian women in the country still do not try to analyse this amazing woman's achievements as part of their own history. The current time frame may have its own limitations as most actions on women are steered by the government on practical issues and not on theorizing the past.

What followed after Empress Taytu also deserves some credit, although the women's association that was set up under Empress Menen served specific goals. The aim of this association was not to upset the status quo and thus not to deal with politically and culturally sensitive issues affecting women. Such an association for women could also serve as a positive example as being an association set up by women for women. Its exploitative intentions, selfish interest of the leadership, and achievements could be subject for debate.

It is during the students' movement that some dramatic changes started to emerge in which women were gradually carried away by the stream of changes in the country although those were political and economic in nature. Around the beginning of the 1970s the first visible female leadership started to emerge in the various student unions in the country and abroad. It is also the critical time that the "woman question" took root presaging the first ever discourse on women in the country.

The few articles written on the "woman question" illustrate the growing level of consciousness and confidence among female students. Although most appeared to be rhetorical in content, imitating socialist frameworks in the field, the article in *Challenge* ('The Woman Question in Ethiopia' 1973) was the most elaborate at the time. The writer, although it is not known whether female or male, showed feminist inclinations by calling for the transformation of oneself in order to transform society, to abolish oppressive structural settings that include the state and religious ideological bulwark and, most importantly, to mobilize women to such an extent as to uphold a uniform stand on the "woman question" envisaging solutions along a unified line. This last call was peculiar as there were many differing schools of thought on feminism at the time in their country of residence such as liberal feminism, post-structural and post-modern feminism, radical feminism, eco-feminism, black feminism, and so on. Fearing the probabilities of becoming divided along these differing visions, they were firm in calling for a common approach and outlook and evading pitfalls.

Being exposed to the radical wave of the women's movement in the country where they were residing, the leadership in this first wave of the women's movement was theoretically well-equipped to challenge the problems women faced in Ethiopia linking those to their personal experiences. However, the writing did not prove the prevalence of any feminist action on the ground. The debate on the "woman question" emerged abroad among the students. There was no activism at the time on the issue. There is also no evidence whether these students joined the local women's movements of the countries they were in and whether they gained some experience on feminist activism. The writings could also have been influenced by the social setting of the students and not necessarily a product of feminists. Many admit that there was no feminism among Ethiopian students at the time. On their trip back home during the revolution, many of those women activists<sup>63</sup> decided to join their parties with the aim of creating a mass women's movement along socialist thought. The revolution of 1974 was obviously seen as the best opportunity to do so. Perhaps feminism could finally take centre stage in the country. The next chapters will attempt to show whether this beginning has grown into a solid women's movement with feminist concerns.

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<sup>63</sup> Women activists are not necessarily feminists as their actions could be limited in promoting the party agenda. Though many women activists of the existing fronts showed concerns for women's rights at a theoretical level, not much was forthcoming at the practical level. Women were mentioned often as active agents of their party, but this should not be mistaken for making them "feminists".

## Chapter 4 A new political era, 1974-1991

The political transition of the country in the early seventies marked the beginning of a new time frame for women. It means that centuries of monarchical rule had finally come to an end. The country entered into a new period, which was revolutionary in every sense. This could have brought many benefits to women. For instance, the demand for their active involvement in productive work, or compulsory literacy classes for them, or even their engagement in the various state-led associations could have contributed to changed perceptions and accelerated the entrance and domestication of feminism in the country. After all, there was already a beginning. Regrettably, it was not to be. This was largely due to the kind of political ideology that was being pursued by the military regime in the form of state control and vanguardism. It was ultimate dictatorship practised at its peak and read as an instrument of deprivation. The military regime refused to give women any room or freedom to strive for their own emancipation. In fact, it initiated a vanguard position on this aimed at capturing and silencing women's demand.

In this chapter I discuss the political ideology of the military regime starting in 1974 and lasting until 1991. I specifically investigate whether the newly born "woman question" among the students was to mature and grow. I also emphasize the various political instruments at the time that were specifically erected to muzzle this. These state instruments formed impenetrable barriers to women's advancement arresting the emergence of any form of women's movements beside the state-led.

### 4.1 "Zemecha": An instrument to advance the "woman question"

The Zemecha or "Development through Cooperation Campaign" was initiated on 21 December 1974 (Markakis & Nega 1978, p. 133). The aim of this campaign was twofold: to remove all the hot-headed students from Addis Ababa and other cities where they had started to form a direct threat to the regime and dispatch them to the rural areas, and, to use them to win over mass support for the Derg's revolutionary "Ethiopia Tikdem"<sup>64</sup> campaign (Clapham 1988, p. 49; Markakis & Nega 1978, p. 133). Forced to participate, many of the students initially resisted the move. However, the fear of sanctions forced them to give in. It has been noted that approximately 60,000 students and teachers were mobilized to take part in this campaign.

Some of the students, especially those forming part of the EPRP, but also from MEISON, started to realize the political potential of the Zemecha and decided to use it towards their own advantage. That is how the Zemecha became instrumental in the spread of the "woman question" to some of the remotest corners of the country. This was done by a few of the EPRP and MEISON female students. The ultimate goal of these students was to initiate a national mass women's movement. Due to their small numbers, their work was minimal and insignificant at the time. However, all their intentions were brought to

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<sup>64</sup> "Ethiopia First".

an abrupt halt when the Derg realized this “abuse” of the Zemecha and ordered its immediate closure in July 1976 (Markakis & Nega 1978, p. 151).

## 4.2 Women’s Committee and the upsurge of a women’s movement

After the revolution, there was still no tangible evidence of any writing on the “woman question” in the country, except for what was brought in from outside. Even the first pamphlet on the “woman question” entered the country in 1974 from Holland.<sup>65</sup> With this pamphlet and the presence of the EPRP and MEISON women activists (who had brought the knowledge in the issue with them), one could say that the first wave of women’s movement started to take shape.

Embarking on different discourses, EPRP members were noted to be more active and organized in the country than MEISON who worked clandestinely. The female members of this party were found engaged in numerous activities such as mobilizing women at workplaces and schools, holding party meetings, recruiting other women, and so forth. They were not at the leadership level though. Nevertheless, the Zemecha provided excellent opportunities to these students to pursue their agenda.

During the first year of the Derg’s rule,<sup>66</sup> a Women’s Coordinating Committee (WCC) was established in 1975 within the Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs (POMOA). This committee was composed of fifteen to sixteen women from both EPRP<sup>67</sup> and MEISON affiliations, among which the EPRP members were noted to be more active, except for Nigist Adane from MEISON. These women were known to have travelled widely to get women mobilized<sup>68</sup> and agitate for their organization. They had approached all existing mass organizations such as the Peasant Associations (PAs) and unions.<sup>69</sup> One of the major strategies used by them was their conscientization schemes in the form of lectures, seminars, and political educational forums for women (Zenebework 1976, p. 49). It is indeed due to these that a huge proliferation of women’s associations was noted within all the established associations of the government and should be clearly credited to these Zemecha campaign students (ibid, p. 29). Beyond these, the WCC was also spreading its wings by setting up branch offices in the different regions of the country in order to accommodate the increased demands of women and facilitate a better outreach and approachability to women.

The EPRP women of the WCC held their last conference in Assefat, Tigray. “It was regrettable because at this conference the EPRP women had discussed the future of their

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Melakou Tegegn, 24 April 2007, Kampala

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Kiflu Tadesse, 17 March 2007, Kampala

<sup>67</sup> The EPRP was opposed to the POMOA, but realized its potential to promote its own agenda. That is why EPRP women became members of the WCC, not as EPRP (because the party was clandestine) but as individuals. No one knew the appointed people and members were not even known to belong to EPRP or MEISON at the time. Interview with Melakou Tegegn, 24 April 2007, Kampala.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Kiflu Tadesse, 17 March 2007, Kampala.

<sup>69</sup> Ato Kiflu Tadesse for example, had access to the unions and factories and recalled being approached by this Committee. He facilitated the Committee’s access to women in factories for its conscientization scheme.

activities. They had made great plans and strategized on how to advance their agenda on the initiation of a national women's movement."<sup>70</sup> The closure of the Zemecha campaign brought an abrupt halt to all these plans. Many of these members had to flee the country in the ensuing Red Terror. However, the Women's Coordinating Committee was not abolished. Its leadership was replaced by the Derg.

Thus, it can be stated that the Women's Coordinating Committee could be categorized as an old and a new one, where the old one did not last more than a year, staffed by radical and conscious female students from the EPRP and MEISON. The new committee, on the other hand, which emerged after mid-1976, was fully staffed by Derg appointees among whom many lacked radicalism or any level of awareness of women's issues. Since the old WCC had already done much of the groundwork, the new WCC just decided to continue with existing projects.

The new WCC's initial focus on the "woman question" was a dual oppression – class and gender (Abebech 1983 in Merera 2003, p. 111), which was noted from their official documents in 1977 that were left behind by the EPRP. But, as the country moved into closer relations with the Soviet Union, this outlook also changed. By 1978 the new WCC upheld class oppression as superseding gender oppression, as was the case in the Soviet Union (interview with Tiruworq Waqeyehu, Chairwoman of the Women's Co-ordinating Committee in POMOA, Addis Ababa, Feb. 1978) (Halliday & Molyneux, 1981, p. 144).

It can be concluded that the old WCC functioned for only one year. This was a very short time considering their achievements which included the conscientizing and mobilizing of women and opening up branch offices. "And they had planned to do more."<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, that was not to be due to the ensuing war.

The radicalism among the EPRP female members was well-observed. One well-known and outstanding woman was Abebech Bekele, a leader in the EPRP. She had a very radical, committed, active and outspoken personality and was very daring. There were also a few other women in the various political departments of the EPRP, but this woman stood out. A similar note can be made on Nigist Adane, an outstanding woman in her own party at the time, very daring and active. During the Red Terror campaign, many of the WCC members fled the country, but unfortunately Nigist did not survive it. Some tried to remain committed and continue the struggle from abroad, while others tried to reform their visions and struggles. Regrettably, the radicalism was edged out and diluted and the "woman question" ended up in a silent mode (interviews with Melakou Tegegn and Kiflu Tadesse, 17 March 2007 and 24 April 2007 respectively, Kampala, Uganda).

#### **4.2.1 The end of MEISON and EPRP: the Red Terror and its impact on the women's movement**

There is a common denominator to women's inaction at present in many areas. That denominator is often traced back to the Derg. Most women continue to blame this

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Melakou Tegegn, 24 April 2007, Kampala.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Kiflu Tadesse, 17 March 2007, Kampala.

shadow of the past for their reluctance to take the lead or initiate an agenda of action for the emancipation of women, withdrawing in a state of fear. What has scarred an entire generation of women's psyches to such an extent that they are still haunted by the thought of that time?

The problem started with the split between the members of MEISON and EPRP (Kidane 1990, p. 133). The EPRP, made up of urban intellectuals, and college and secondary school students, maintained that a Marxist revolution could not be directed through a military machine (Schwab 1985, p. 38), a stance that was not shared by MEISON. With MEISON further allying with the Derg, the rift became so large that "From then on, it was only a matter of time before the two organizations would resort to attempt to liquidate each other" (Melakou 1991, p. 140). And so it happened. During these attacks and counter-attacks, the Derg launched its own mass offensive called the "Red Terror" in November 1977 (Schwab 1985, p. 40; 'Ethiopia's Kremlin Connection' 1985, p. 4) targeting anyone who was opposed to it. It became a series of executions and liquidations in which thousands of EPRP and MEISON members are said to have been victims, while thousands of others were confined to "political re-education" camps (ibid, p. 4).

Lefort explained the magnitude of this Red Terror that was specifically unleashed against the young and educated: "Simply knowing how to read and write and being aged about 20 or less were enough to define the potential or active 'counter-revolutionary'. The authorities were even to institute a law authorizing the arrest of children between eight and twelve" (Lefort 1981, p. 202). He estimated that out of ten civilians who had actively worked for the radical transformation of Ethiopia, only one might have escaped arrest, imprisonment, torture, execution or assassination (ibid, p. 257). It meant that an entire generation of Ethiopian intellectuals, including many women, was wiped out. The terror made no distinction based on sex, religion, class or nationality.

Whatever the aim of this terror,<sup>72</sup> it left the country's population scarred for generations to come. People felt helpless in the face of all the atrocities committed against their children. Babile Tola (1989, p. 158) described this as follows:

The Red Terror had reduced the whole nation to indescribable levels of fear and trauma. It was more than sheer death, pain or humiliation – it was a deliberate attempt to break the spirit of a people. The aim was to crush the living by showing them the cost of dissent. The Red Terror in action was mass murder, brutal torture, mutilation of corpses, massacres, summary executions, throwing live persons into graves, pitting parents against children and vice versa, spreading mistrust, fear and helplessness.

Being hunted, the radical female members of the EPRP<sup>73</sup> also had to abandon their cause and seek refuge abroad. A few were killed during the Red Terror. The ensuing atrocities against members of each household managed to instil tremendous fear and trauma among many conscientized women who did not dare to speak or think independently anymore.

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<sup>72</sup> Halliday & Molyneux 1981, p. 153; Clapham 1988, p. 62; Babile 1989, p. 163.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Wolde Giorgis, One of the student activists in the 1970s, 26 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

Being further controlled and checked through the state mass control instruments (*kebelles, woredas*, mass associations) they refrained from initiating or taking the lead in any activity regarding women's emancipation. Many developed cautionary methods on their actions and even thoughts, for fear of reprisals.

It was thus the Red Terror that succeeded in subjecting women to state control. It instilled such tremendous fear in them that many became apathetic. After the Red Terror, women and men were turned into silent, non-challenging and apathetic observers of state orders. As Melakou Tegegn describes this state of affairs so eloquently, "The individual became callous and lethargic, completely insensitive to politics. Voluntarism gave way to involuntary expressions of support for government endeavours. Responding massively to government calls became the safety net left for the individual. State violence had turned the individual into a robot, obeying government orders and calls, whether labour, money or even offspring for conscription into the army" (Melakou 2010, p. 164).

The question that could be raised is: Did the takeover by the Derg of the WCC mark the end of the emerging women's movement? The response should be positive. Arguments from both the external factors causing this and the internal limitations of the WCC itself can be used to support this view. The most serious obstacles were the external factors which could be directly attributed to the political culture of the Derg. The autocratic and repressive forms of rule simply did not allow the emerging women's movement any room or space to grow. Its Red Terror was used as an effective strategy to silence even the most radical and conscientized women in society. This means that the relatively short-lived women's movement did not mature beyond the initial stage of getting women conscientized and organized.

The question also is, if they had been given more time, would they have succeeded in achieving their goals? To respond to this question, one first has to analyse the WCC itself and it appeared to have its own set of limitations. These could be linked to the relative inexperience of the leadership, their perceptions of how they perceived the problems of women and their approaches in solving those. The problem of ideological divergence between the EPRP and MEISON members and the continuous conflicting problems with other political groups in the country, such as the *woyane* (TPLF/EPRDF) could have placed serious strains on their vision.

But, most significantly, there were serious flaws within the "woman question" paradigm itself. There seemed to be a gap between theorizing and practice. Theorizing was drawn from the Russian experiences and fitted into the Ethiopian context. The lack of sufficient analytical research on the ground was already showing signs of deficiencies. Envisaged solutions did not match the particular problems of the different groups of women in the country simply because they were unfamiliar with the magnitude of their problems. This was growing into a major stumbling block (Zenebework 1976, p. 32). As one of the interviewees, who was one of the students at the time, admitted: "We did not analyse the women's problems as such."<sup>74</sup> This was very serious. Such problems could be directly linked to the level of awareness, knowledge, education and intellect of the leadership and

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

others working in and with the WCC. It also showed their lack of embeddedness where they operated from a perceived reality.

Finally, the leadership striving to get women organized was equally short-sighted in their approach. Missing out on further reflection and theorizing, short cuts were sought to put force and strength in their work. This included the use of flashy and catchy phrases and slogans as a means to alleviate women's problems. Some of these included: "The revolution cannot succeed without the full participation of women", or the most prominent phrase of the time: "*yesetoch chikona dirib diribrib*" (The oppression of women is double and multiple: class and gender).<sup>75</sup> Lacking any alternative approach to their socialist agenda, they had obviously assumed these slogans to leave lasting impressions among women and lead to an automatic solution to their problems. They had failed to delink slogans from the practice and to take concrete measures.

The overall balance though was rather positive. The old female leadership of the WCC achieved much in such a short time (barely one-and-a-half years). They deserve a lot of credit for having engineered and steered this first wave of the women's movement in the country. And not all was lost. Some of the issues that were initiated by these students such as cultivation, poultry raising, hygiene, building of latrines, basic mother and child care, were taken over by the Derg-led WCC.

### 4.3 Associations as social control agents

One achievement of the Derg was its ability to get the masses organized. This was rare among all of the previous regimes. However, the very issue of organizing people into different sections by the Derg served only one purpose – to exert control over them. This was done through the compulsory membership requirements. As a result, every household was registered within their own *kebele*<sup>76</sup> association and every member of the household was to become a member of the numerous mass associations. Some of the associations included the Peasant Associations (PAs), *kebelles*, development cooperatives, women's associations and youth associations. According to Schwab, these auxiliary structures were important political units of the revolution charged to carry the revolution to the people (1985, p. 65). Thus they functioned as political instruments exerting control over the masses by dividing them into different sections.

Women were conspicuously absent from many of the major associations such as the peasant associations, *kebelles* and development cooperatives. Perhaps an excuse for their exclusion was found in the emergence of women's associations (WAs) within the PAs, as it was assumed that all women would find shelter under them, literally confining them. These WAs, brought under the newly emerging branches of the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA), were not only confining women, they were also removing them from effective participation in other associations. REWA's branches themselves were placed under direct supervision of the PAs and *kebelles* and regarded as of little importance (Clapham 1988, p. 160). Placing women under such associations that

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> *Kebelles* were equal to community associations.

lacked autonomy and recognition actively contributed to the marginalization of women from other areas of influence.

### ***Ethiopian Women's Work Association during the Derg***

It is interesting to follow the traces of the EWWA through history as it was the longest surviving women's association in the country. During the Derg regime, EWWA was completely marginalized and on the brink of extinction. With most of its leadership in exile or in prison, the association lost not only most of its property (schools, restaurants, and others, due to the nationalization scheme of the Derg), but was instructed to work on a limited scale on programmes concerning women only (Makda 2000, p. 63). Many of its more vibrant programmes such as the health clinics were taken over by the government. The Revolutionary Ethiopian Women Association (REWA), in turn, also claimed its share of EWWA's properties, such as the women's vocational training centre, the Addis Ababa restaurant, their office building, and so on (ibid, p. 66). These were used to generate income for REWA. EWWA was thus effectively reduced to a symbolic form of women's association and could not fully operate as its members were obliged to serve in the various programmes of REWA and the *kebelles*. It is even more puzzling why EWWA was allowed to exist next to REWA, which was set up to look after all women's affairs. However suspicious, it survived up to the overthrow of the Derg in 1991.

### ***Ethiopian Mother's Association***<sup>77</sup>

A relatively more radical (clandestine) women's association which had emerged during the time of the EPRP-led Women's Committee in 1976 was the Ethiopian Mother's Association (EMA).<sup>78</sup> In fact, there was not one central organized EMA, but many EMAs in different parts of the city. They all had one major objective, which was to protest against the atrocities committed by the Derg against children. They were also seen as the "guardians of the revolution".<sup>79</sup> Among all the EMAs, the strongest and most vocal EMA was located in an area called Teklehaimanot, Addis Ababa. Mothers within these associations were found to be active in many areas of resistance and protest. For example, they tried to protect all children, irrespective of whose children they were, hiding, sheltering and feeding them whenever the Derg's soldiers were on the march looking for them. They also carried leaflets to the marketplaces in their baskets campaigning against the Derg and agitating for support among others. Due to its clandestine character, it was easy for women to work in this manner, not risking capture.

The EMAs were indeed innovative and radical. They did some extraordinary things worthy of recall. During the Red Terror Campaign in 1977 they formed an *U-uta*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> It is interesting to document this association as there are no written records. Data were collected through interviews.

<sup>78</sup> The EPRP was known to have various wings under its party such as the youth and women's wings. All these wings interacted closely with each other. Within the youth league, there was also a women's wing. And it is among these wings that the first EMAs were established in Addis Ababa and some other regions.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Wolde Giorgis, 26 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

<sup>80</sup> *U-uta* is referred to as the scream of women – with the aim of calling for help. It was used as a rallying call to bring other women together and become strong force.

Committee composed of older, illiterate women.<sup>81</sup> This committee was quite daring. Its main goal was to engage in psychological warfare against the Derg. For example, whenever the soldiers would come to conduct house searches, the mothers (committee members) would get out of their houses and make the *u-uta* calls. They would use additional instruments such as their pots and pans to bang and shout. This high level of noise drew many people out of their houses, sometimes preventing the soldiers from proceeding, thus helping children to escape. One of the most remarkable activities organized by the EMAs was in 1977 when its members marched to the Derg office demanding a halt to the atrocities committed against their children. It should be noted that in 1977 the Red Terror was at its peak. Regrettably, that demonstration was dispersed by the army and the Red Terror continued killing thousands of youths. Many mothers were also brutally killed during this raid. This act, tragically, resulted in the complete demise of the EMAs.

### ***Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association-REWA***

In the countryside, the establishment of PAs was accompanied by the setting up of local Women's Associations (WAs) in 1975 for all women above the age of fifteen. By 1980 nearly all women had been integrated into these structures. These WAs were very ambitious at their initial stages when they were introduced by the EPRP activists and campaign students in the old WCC. Some of their objectives included securing the rights of members, monitoring their social, political and economic problems and establishing professional associations (Fellows 1987, p. 20). Unfortunately, these ambitions were drowned and the strength of the women's committee collapsed when most of its active members fled the scene after 1976.

Losing out on such powerful, ambitious leadership, the women's committees were taken over by the government, restructured along its political ideology and manned by its own selected personnel. They were turned into an instrument of control. In fact, the agenda on women's emancipation took a dramatic turn when the government took over its leadership and charted its new course. This course was to be directed and protected by state institutions. That is why in 1980, the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association, REWA, was established (Halliday & Molyneux 1981, p. 145). REWA emerged with specific mandates and goals, and those were not linked to women's emancipation and advancing their interests (Abebech 1983 cited in Merera 2003, p. 111). In fact, REWA targeted all women above the age of fifteen with the intention to educate and indoctrinate them with the political ideology of the country (Lishan n.d. , p. 9). It also envisaged an increase in women's productive activities (Alasebu 1988, p. 5).

According to the proclamation number 188 of 1980, REWA had the following tasks:

- to propagate the theory of Marxism-Leninism with a view to raising their political consciousness and cultural standards;
- to prepare women to occupy their appropriate positions in society and to take an active part in socialist production;

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<sup>81</sup> Interviews with Ato Kiflu, 19 December 2007, Kampala, Tadelech Debele and Wolde Giorgis, 26 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

- to make every effort to ensure that the rights of women as mothers were recognized and that they are properly cared for;
- to prepare women to join hands with their class allies and to take an active part in the struggle to build a socialist Ethiopia.

(Semagne 1986, p. 35; Fellows 1987, p. 21; REWA 1989, p. 6)

#### **4.4 A critique of the Derg's policies and REWA**

During the Derg regime women, for the first time in Ethiopian history, were given the opportunity to become organized beyond their domestic boundaries (Semagne 1986, p. 34). This, according to Schwab, brought them a level of freedom never before experienced (1985, p. 65). Merera Gudina interpreted this as a path-breaking experience. He argued that the revolution succeeded in challenging the ancient tradition of confining women to the domestic sphere (Merera 2003, p. 111). Even though it was compulsory, women's participation in the many associations should be read as a sign of their liberation (Yeshi 1994, p. 60). This included compulsory literacy classes, which might have benefited them tremendously. Through this, many women developed the capacity to read or sign their own names or even start their own businesses.

But, compared to the many well-meaning intentions of the Derg and REWA, not much was forthcoming in practical terms that could have changed women's position. REWA as a women's association did nothing to contribute to this and Clapham (1988, p. 140) argues that it was difficult to discern ways in which this association could have done so. Kebede (1990, p. 58) critiqued the so-called positive changes in women's lives and conditions as mooted by REWA. In fact, the level of boosting and the spread of misinformation by the Derg and REWA were simply incomprehensible. This was done at all their meetings, gatherings and indoctrination sessions. During these sessions, the Derg and REWA kept on repeating their claims of positive contributions to the emancipation of women. They continued reminding them of their past oppression under feudal and monarchical rule and how they should be grateful to the Derg for freeing them from those. These claims reached such a level that they became a mockery.

Women and men were also repeatedly fed with empty promises which even included the eradication of cultural practices that kept them backward (Yeshi 1994, p. 60). The use of the state-controlled mass media made matters worse by continuously using the same rhetoric (ibid). As a result, men started joking about women already being emancipated and equal, and refused to help them with anything. Women too became reluctant to believe the Derg or REWA because they did not observe any changes in their lives.

One major achievement of the Derg was its legal reforms, in which the rights of women were incorporated in a separate article in the country's constitution for the first time in Ethiopian history.<sup>82</sup> According to this constitution, women were granted equality at all levels, including the economic, political and social. Article 6 of the National Democratic Republic Programme in the Civil Code, for example, stated that "there will not be any

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<sup>82</sup> The 1987 Constitution of the Derg regime was the first to enshrine the rights of women into law (Fisseha-Tsion 1991, p. 167).

sort of discrimination against religion and sex”, and article 8 granted women legal equality with men (Lishan n.d. , p. 7). Van Kesteren (1988, p. 17) was so impressed by these reforms that the Derg’s government was praised for confirming its commitment in 1984 to abolish all forms of discrimination against women and to enforce the equality of women and men in civil law, education employment and in the social, economic and political life of the country. Commendable and pioneering indeed, had they not been turned into a political instrument. Despite such a genuine legal instrument, the balance sheet in the end showed no major changes in the status of women and in fact specifically reflected the prevalence and continuation of cultural practices that prevented women from taking advantage of state policies, directives or decrees.

REWA emerged as one of the many controlling arms of the Derg. This means that it lacked a constituent base. It received its directives from the Derg and followed orders. Among its many roles, the major ones were extractive and exploitive. For example, because the country was in a continuous state of war against rebel and guerrilla groups, it was in dire need of materials and food. And since all women in the country were brought under the leadership of REWA, REWA was shouldered with the responsibility of providing food, dry rations and drinks to the government militia (Merera 2003, p. 111). In order to compel women to take part in this, quotas and rations were set in which each woman had to meet her own quota (which was a laborious and time-consuming task). This compulsory requirement added a tremendous workload on women’s shoulders when they were already overburdened by their domestic responsibilities (Hanna 1990, p. 62).

But there was more to this. As REWA was also put in charge of making contributions to the producers’ cooperatives, to famine victims, and to official campaigns, all the work also fell on the shoulders of women as part of their feminine tasks. Women were expected not only to contribute their time and energy working in fulfilling REWA’s demands; they were also expected to contribute their scarce resources to it. All these extractions of labour, resources and time from women were in addition to their obligatory monthly membership fee contributions to REWA. In the end, all outputs were channelled by REWA to the government to support its military operations (Fellows 1987, p. 21). This illustrates clearly how REWA served as a political instrument (Yeshi 1994, p. 61).

It becomes clear that the government saw the masses of women as its private pool of free labour and financial or material extraction. REWA was instrumental in this, making sure that the exploitation of women went smoothly and that no one was left out. Its control of women was so extensive that no one could escape their obligations. In fact, it was noted that REWA controlled every move every single woman made (Tadelech 2000, p. 72). Failure to comply with these mandatory obligations carried sanctions and fines (Yeshi 1994, p. WS-61). This left women with no option.

This level of autocratic and centralized control of women’s lives gave full expression to the Derg-led “woman question”. This could best be understood as keeping the entire female population in the country hostage to the government’s own extravagant needs, forcing them to work for the state without payment. This particular “woman question” was thus not meant to improve women’s status or promote their rights. It could be

defined as a new form of exploitation, this time by the collective arms of the state forcing women into slavery. It was completely disconnected from Leninism, because it served the Derg's political ideology which also was far from being any form of socialism. The "woman question" was thus merely a political instrument given shape by the dictator, translated through its proclamations and implemented by its watchdog, REWA.

And there were many more areas where questions could be posed about the Derg's and REWA's alleged achievements regarding women's emancipation. For example, there was the visible issue of women's mass mobilization. At every campaign, meeting or lecture, thousands of women would attend. This was read as a form of success by some (Fellows 1987, p. 21; Clapham 1988, p. 139). Such an acknowledgement meant a critical failure to see the repressive overtones underlying such actions. Women's participation at any of REWA's calls for mass mobilization was compulsory. Failing to join these calls carried serious sanctions. As each household member had become visible through the intrusive record-keeping by *kebelles*, every single woman's whereabouts was known. Systems of signing attendance registers were also instituted, whereby each household was registered as having participated in certain activities or not. For example, failing to contribute labour power by the head of the household to PA activities forced other members to fill up that time or work longer to make up for the lost time. Sanctions were in the form of losing one's privileges in the community, such as food rations, land, house, employment, *kebele* services in addition to being fined. This illustrates that mass mobilization should be read critically. Women had no choice and were forced to participate. In similar manner, their mass participation at weekly indoctrination sessions studying Marxist ideology, or engagement in income-generating activities that were labelled as "voluntary" carried the hidden agenda of force and repression.

REWA's positive role in the promotion of women's literacy and education was also dubious. It did not advocate women's education with the aim of their emancipation and empowerment (Tsehai 1984, p. 19), but mainly focused on how to use their literacy for its own benefits. Literate women, for example, became easily accessible by REWA because they would be able to read campaign materials and political slogans or decrees. Beyond this, women's education received no attention. This is why in most rural areas, women's education stopped after they could sign their name or read.

The trend of women's employment in low-income, low-status jobs also continued unabated during the Derg regime. Since the professional sphere had equally undergone gender stratification, once women started entering this domain, they were employed in limited feminine areas of work, mainly in the soft sectors of teaching, nursing and secretarial services. The majority of women were employed in the informal sector, such as construction work, factories, sales and marketing services (Hanna 1990, p. 64). Employment within these sectors meant low income capacity, barely at the level of subsistence. Hanna Kebede noted that equal terms of employment did not apply to work, which was classified as an exclusively male function (*ibid*, p. 63).

But the Derg never stopped bragging about bringing women into gainful employment and liberating them from the exploitative character of feudalist employment. The very issue

of women's gainful employment was read as a sign of their emancipation. The actual situation showed the opposite. Women's situation had actually worsened and many were forced to work longer hours and without pay. They were not employed gainfully but had entered a new form of slave labour.

As a state puppet, REWA further refrained from challenging any issue that could be sensitive to the state. It is, therefore, not surprising that it never dealt with the more serious structural problems of the subordination and inequality of women. This included the sexual division of labour, land rights for women, violence against women, control of women's sexuality and fertility, the cultural and traditional practice of FGM, early marriage and abduction. In fact, REWA seemed to be devoid of any critical thinking capacity and took the Derg's misconceived views for granted. It perceived women's economic equality to be the solution to all women's problems, including sexism (Yeshi 1994, p. 61). Taking such a limited stance and lacking its own clarity on the "woman question" it even radically resisted believing otherwise. Those daring to advocate anything else would be ridiculed, called traitors, reactionary, and accused of causing a diversion to the socialist cause.

Despite the repressive Derg rule, some forms of resistance were noted among a few remote rural communities. Living in relative isolation, the Derg's policies did not disturb their traditional ways of life. They even dared to ridicule many of the Derg's proclamations, calling those unethical compared to their own customary values and norms. REWA, as a women's association, had to endure the most among such communities. For example, in Gobicha (pastoral village in the South of Ethiopia), REWA's call for women to attend meetings or take part in activities fell on deaf ears. In fact, the REWA branch office there was seen as a useless enterprise, a waste of time and money. Since it had not managed to improve women's lives in the region, women did not expect anything from it. Instead, REWA leaders were called "uncultured hooligans" who tried to spread "immoral concepts" among the women. REWA was also accused of introducing practices that were seen as incompatible with the Islamic and patriarchal norms of the Garri society (that adhered to Islam), such as asking women to participate at equal level in meetings, thereby ignoring it that women were not allowed to do so (Getachew 1991, p. 13).

#### **4.5 International Women's Day in Ethiopia during the Derg Regime**

One of the issues gaining prominence in the lives of women in the country during the Derg regime was the celebration (or observation) of International Women's Day (IWD) on March 8. The first IWD was observed in 1975, more than 65 years after it was introduced at a global level (in 1910/11), initiated by a small group of women which included female students<sup>83</sup> and a few women from different parts of the country. This group organized a programme called "Ediget Behibret"<sup>84</sup> with the aim of raising the awareness of women. They intended to introduce the culture of observing March 8 as an IWD from the grassroots level. However, as soon as the Derg seized the WCC, this event

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<sup>83</sup> These students could have been from the EPRP that took part in the Zemecha campaign.

<sup>84</sup> Development through cooperation.

was “hijacked” and turned into another instrument of the Derg’s propaganda. For example, the first IWD observed by the Derg was in 1979 with a conference calling for the attainment of its revolutionary objectives instead of women’s emancipation.

REWA continued these kinds of abuse of IWD. After its establishment, “IWD has been observed in a very strange way in Ethiopia” (Ella 2000, p. 61). The objectives of the Derg-led IWD diverged from the global agenda and instead of women demanding equal rights and opportunities from the state, they were used to promote the selfish purposes of the military government (ibid, p. 62). Reactions from many women<sup>85</sup> showed their disappointment in IWD in the country. It was interpreted as a national day where they were forced to participate and listen to endless meetings of the government and REWA bragging about their achievements and efforts and all the things they had done to improve the lives of women. After these dull speeches, women would be forced to clean their *kebelles* and neighbourhoods. One woman during the debate on the IWD in Ethiopia in 2000 angrily remarked; “Imagine IWD coming every year where you end up doing the most disgusting things. It would not be surprising then that many women wished for that day never to come, or that they would not be part of it” (ibid, p. 52).

#### **4.6 Women’s leadership in REWA and the Derg**

The political landscape of the country was male-dominated and under the Derg, with its own political agenda, women had no chance of reaching equal status, especially not in the political domain (Semagne 1986, p. 38). Though the Derg had tried to follow a socialist doctrine based on Marxism/Leninism, it failed to incorporate the practical implications of the doctrine. This means that women remained removed from leadership posts.<sup>86</sup> In fact, the Emperor had done better by appointing the first woman vice-minister in 1966 (Clapham 1988, p. 138). Clapham noted that “By 1987 no woman in the post-revolutionary period had surpassed the rank reached before the revolution, and the proportion of women in important positions remained at least as low as before 1974” (ibid, p. 138-139).

Considering the new political ideology of the Derg utilizing socialist slogans such as “Without women there can be no revolution”, it was ironic that nothing was forthcoming to appoint women to senior political posts. This included the legislative and administrative bodies of the country. In 1987 there were no women among the government’s 20 ministers and only one female vice-minister. Besides the gender imbalance and biases in leadership, Clapham found other preferential treatment of those in political posts based on their ethnicity. He found that among the few women in the

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<sup>85</sup> This researcher spoke to many women who had taken part in the Derg’s compulsory IWD observations.

<sup>86</sup> In the PA leadership, for example, there were only a few women (0.44 % at the local level, 0.003% at Woreda level, 0.0004% at Awraja level, 0.0002% at the regional and none at the national level) (Semagne 1986, p. 39). Clapham observed that “Although Addis Ababa in 1984 had over 52,000 more women than men and 33.6 per cent of households had female heads, the representation of women among kebele leaders seemed at least as meager as on the Central Committee. Among the 136 full members of the original WPE (Worker’s Party of Ethiopia) Central Committee there was only one woman who was married to a WPE regional first secretary. She was put in charge of women’s affairs in the WPE central secretariat (Clapham 1988, p. 138-139).

government or in the leadership of REWA, they all had an Amhara or Tigrean name, “...reflecting both the pre-eminence of Amhara/Tigrean society in any event and its comparatively favourable treatment of women” (ibid, p. 139). These gender imbalances were also noted by other scholars, affirming that Ethiopian politics had been for centuries the exclusive domain of men (Merera 2003, p. 111).

Leadership in the mass movements was male and party-affiliated. Clapham, who studied the leadership within the PAs, found a mirror reflection of societal structures within these, with all leadership positions occupied by men (1988:159). This male bias was also visible among the members of these associations, who were predominantly male. According to Clapham, “Across the country as a whole, only 12.72 per cent of association members in 1982 were women, with a tendency for the percentage to be greater in the Amhara-Tigrean plateau regions” (ibid, p. 160). Despite this stark reality, the Derg continued boasting that it “...was easy to find women leaders on revolution defence squads, as cadres, on literacy campaign committees, in city councils, discussion forums, in production brigades and in various artistic and cultural endeavours” (ibid, p. 138).

A few women’s affairs units were indeed established in some government offices such as the Ministry of Labour and Social affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health and in the Ministry of Economic Development and Co-operation Office of the National Committee for Central Planning (Almaz 1991, p. 1). But they were all geared towards specific welfare-related programmes of women such as training in home economics, hygiene and sanitation and did not have any decision-making power.

REWA carried all the powers and was also instrumental in representing Ethiopian women at international conferences and summits. During such occasions, it would often be found beating its own chest, praising its own actions and making empty promises. Failures in their own achievements were always located externally and blamed on persistent traditional, cultural and religious belief systems. Ironically, these same practices would be repeated by the Women’s Affairs Offices and the EPRDF/TPLF government.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

Towards the end of the Derg’s regime, societal problems reached a peak with poverty being the most serious. Gender equality had not moved up one iota and women continued to be subordinated by law and in practice.

The Derg regime effectively brought an end to the beginning of a women’s movement in the country. This end was not only an end to emerging forms of radicalism and activism; it also spelt an end to the critical thinking and consciousness that had been in the making. And, given the long duration of its rule (seventeen years), many remaining enlightened women gave up or left the country.

However, it is puzzling that after the Derg took over power and the EPRP fled abroad, there was nothing but silence on the issue. Those same students that had been radicalized abroad, returning to Ethiopia to become change agents, changed. Obviously they had

been traumatized so tremendously that even after returning to Western societies, they refrained from pursuing their radical political agenda again. This eventually led to the demise of the “woman question” from their side.

One could have hoped for a revival of this “woman question” among the educated women leadership. They could have given a renewed boost to the “woman question” and continued rigorous theorizing and writing on the many problems of women in the country or even document their own experiences. In that way, the “woman question” might have survived and matured. With the overthrow of the Derg, they could have brought a much better feminist framework back into the country.

Regrettably, not a single article or journal can be mentioned in this regard after they fled the country. Sources recall that a general sense of apathy engulfed the thinking among the few remaining members who had fled abroad. This was enforced by the weak political structures of their parties. Some tried to renew their organization and commitment to continue the struggle. But, many others changed their views, ideology and visions and lost their radical stance. The internal division among the student unions abroad added to the accelerating collapse of the EPRP. Only a few managed to sustain their ideological discourse and formed small committees where they met regularly to discuss and reflect on the situation of the country (interviews with Melakou Tegegn and Kiflu Tadesse, 22 December 2007, Kampala).

The question that was already raised in this chapter could be answered here in conclusion: Did the Derg really cause the demise of the women’s movement? Or was it the weakness of the movement that in the end brought about its collapse? One could respond in the affirmative to both. When looking at the situation in the country, the political repression of the Derg is definitely to be blamed for its end. But, if some of the engineers of that movement managed to flee and survive, should that not have been some reason to hope for a return? And, since this was not to be, one could but wonder whether they had been ill-prepared all along and that the “woman question” was not theirs, internalized as their own. It was an imitation, as if imposed by outsiders. Lacking a strong base, the students leaped forward with it without giving it an identity of their own or without fully integrating it into their agency and cause. Low levels of education and academic competence could also be blamed for the lack of continuation. The result was that the foundations of the “woman question” were very shaky and collapsed under the least bit of turmoil. Since it was not their own product, after the students fled the country, nothing was heard again on the “woman question” paradigm. One could also wonder whether women’s emancipation was their prime mission. Were the women’s sections in the parties (EPRP, MEISON) a genuine initiative of women for their emancipation or was it mere party politics and ideological borrowing?

What did the Derg do with the adoption of the “woman question” from the students and its own socialist gurus, such as Marx, Lenin and Engels? That was not difficult to grasp. The rhetoric of Leninist vanguardism took the lead in defining women’s emancipation according to state interests. REWA became instrumental in this to promote those interests. In the main this included women’s exploitation and abuse by the state. This new

identity of the “woman question” paved the road for future misinterpretations, such as by the EPRDP/TPLF government. The Derg thus created the distortion and manipulation of its conceptual meaning through the provision of justifications based on its unique social and political context. This strategy has been adapted by the current regime and is prevalent today.

Meanwhile the number of educated women increased during the Derg rule, though at a low pace. Their education, however, did not help them to develop critical thinking or gain independence. The Derg’s societal structures left little room for educated women to explore their agency and pursue their own emancipation independently from the state-led “woman question” paradigm. The few who dared to raise issues of women’s sexual oppression often found themselves sanctioned as counter-revolutionaries. Such repression actively contributed to the silencing of many activists in society and forced many to remain on the sidelines. As a result, it can be concluded that there was no trace of any form of feminist leadership or activities in the country during the Derg regime. If there were any among civil society actors, they were equally silent and perhaps the change in government could open up new doors for these feminists to mature and become visible. That will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5 A new political era: A new discourse on “gender”**

### **5.1 The transition: 1991-1994**

What was the end result of seventeen years of political rule by the Derg, and women being organized since 1975 into various state-led mass associations? One might assume that the generation of women who played an active role in the Zemecha campaign and others who were part of the EMAs might have been active underground all this time. They might have been waiting for this moment to make a return. Regrettably, there was no such return. It was as if everything was wiped from women’s minds. There were no remnants of any women’s movement or “woman question” for that matter. Could it be that the Derg’s systems of subjection and brutality succeeded in converting women? It was not surprising that the EPRDF/TPLF banked on the misery of women and pretended to be the saviour of their rights. It promised to move beyond rhetoric and make women’s rights practical.

And yet, under EPRDF/TPLF rule (1991-present), women have found themselves submerged under renewed forms of repression, seen their status further deteriorating, and feel robbed of their agency. Chapter Two revealed how the political culture in the country has not changed despite changes in political school of thought. It maintained many of the historical characteristics of ancient times which had been actively upheld by the previous ruler. This includes the hierarchical structuring of political offices, posts and people, deference to authority, centralized forms of control and dominance and extensive forms of repression. The very issues of deprivation under the Derg regime have again become subjects of deprivation. These include women’s rights, freedom, justice, and so forth.

In this chapter, the intention is to show the current reality as compared to what the ruling party proclaims. It illustrates how illusionary democratic political rule inhibits structures of control and repression. These are discussed to show how they apprehend women’s independence and muffle their radicalism. The aim is not only to study how women’s agency is captured and contained. More importantly, the goal is to unravel the reasons behind this through discussions. These can then reveal the course that is being pursued by the party and assist in the further identification of any forms of women’s movements or feminist tendencies in the country.

#### **5.1.1 Background to TPLF/EPRDF**

A brief review of the background of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front/Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (TPLF/EPRDF)<sup>87</sup> coalition reveals that it has a history dating back to 1975. Its emergence coincided with the student radicalism and activism that was being fanned by the Zemecha students’ campaign at the time, which was aimed against the Derg regime. During this time it also drafted its first manifesto in

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<sup>87</sup> The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF, was founded by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front, TPLF, in 1989, which itself emerged around 1975.

1976. This manifesto became its major political document when it, through continuous warfare against the Derg, finally succeeded in overthrowing it. As a political document, it informed the political direction and rule of the party. Focusing on democratic centralism, it included “universal suffrage irrespective of sex, nationality, property, religion” (TPLF 1976, p. 26). This means that women were automatically included in this right. However, it did not mention the word “women”. This is ironic since women were an integral part of the party. They were equally active in the party’s work and participated at an equal level with their male compatriots in the armed struggles against the Derg which lasted for many years. The manifesto did mention the word “sex”, albeit only in relation to its social and cultural programmes. For example, in the social programmes, this was translated as “eliminating all forms of social inequality (sex, religion and others) and social problems (unemployment, destitution, ignorance, poverty, disease, and others)” through a class struggle (ibid, p. 27). And, in the cultural programmes the aim was to destroy all existing reactionary culture and replace it with a new culture of “revolutionary upsurge as part of socialist culture” (ibid). Many of the articles in this manifesto were eventually included in the Transitional Charter of 1991 and finally taken up in the Constitution of 1995. These legal documents were of great value to the regime and formed its building blocks.

Given the time and the dominant discourse on Marxism-Leninism which was prevalent among the Ethiopian students at the time, the TPLF was also caught up in this school of thought.<sup>88</sup> Through building alliances, it constructed an umbrella party, the EPRDF.<sup>89</sup> All the parties under the EPRDF were hierarchically integrated within the main structure in a top-down manner and administered by TPLF leadership (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 16; Merera 2003, p. 132). The Transitional Charter which was written by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) and emerged out of the TPLF manifesto lasted for five years. Initially, this charter enshrined hopes for a peaceful and democratic society (Pausewang, Tronvoll & Aalen 2002, p. 29; Merera 2003, p. 129). Regrettably, none of the promises were fulfilled (Merera 2003, p. 129).

It is during this time that the first visible signs of the TPLF/EPRDF’s autocratic and centralized tendencies emerged (ibid, p. 121). This means that it was in power for barely a year before it started to change course. The many promises and laws that came into existence within these first years are a clear illustration of this. This time was one of

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<sup>88</sup> Varying interpretations of this political framework created great divergence among the different student groups. For example, the perceptions of the EPRP on different issues were very different from that of MEISON, or the Derg. And the TPLF also had its own interpretations of the same political discourse. This led to differing views on political rule in the country, although all the parties adhered to Marxism and Leninism.

<sup>89</sup> This EPRDF integrated most of the major regional resistance parties under its umbrella which included the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Movement (EPDM), later renamed the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO), and the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Front (SEPDF) that was established as a coalition of different southern-based parties in 1994. In addition to these parties, the EPRDF further helped to establish numerous ethnic parties both at regional state level (such as the Afar and Somali parties) and, for minor ethnic groups, at a zonal and woreda level. These parties were all affiliated to the EPRDF and Meles Zenawi was the chairman of both the TPLF and EPRDF, becoming the first president during the Transitional Government. He is still the Prime Minister (Pausewang, Tronvoll & Aalen 2002, p.14).

freedom and joy. It was relaxed and offered hopes for democracy. At this time, women too became carried away, feeling encouraged and safe. That is when the first women's organizations emerged.

Alas, history was in the remaking. The events of this promising time frame also had a very short lifespan. The ensuing repressive strategies employed by the TPLF/EPRDF within its first years of rule caused the withdrawal of many opposition parties from the coalition of the EPRDF. The political landscape was becoming polarized (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 127). This was further enforced by the two consecutive elections in the country in 1992 and 1995. These elections paved the way for centralized rule in the country. To ensure its dominance, it went into open forms of intimidation, oppression, confrontation and harassment of opposition members and parties. Many were arrested, beaten or even killed (Pausewang, Tronvoll & Aalen 2002, p. 32). One could wonder whether a one-party state was in the re-making.

Centralization of political rule had serious implications for the emerging women's actions in the country. Given the relatively democratic agenda of the regime in the beginning, women came out into the open to get organized and start their own organizations. There were renewed forms of activism. How the EPRDF/TPLF government slowly started to contain this enthusiasm and how its vanguardism is taking shape is now discussed.

## **5.2 Encroachment on civil society**

While assuming "democratic" rule, the EPRDF/TPLF government did everything to shelter its true intentions of centralized rule. Immediately after the fall of the Derg, many NGOs emerged, presupposing a conducive political climate. These included the first women's associations and organizations. But, as the transitional government became more entrenched, it shed its tolerant stance and embarked on similar repressive forms of control to the Derg. It saw itself as the vanguard of the country's development and was open and blunt in this. Strategies were formulated on how to channel everything through its own bureaucracy, especially in the area of service delivery to the masses. Everything reaching and benefiting the masses, especially the rural masses,<sup>90</sup> was taken as state domain. Such control served its political agenda of gaining legitimacy and sustaining power.

When civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations, started to increase in numbers, the party grew impatient. To curb their spread, it started policies meant to establish many hurdles and loopholes. These policies contained specific requirements that were aimed at making it practically impossible for them to operate. Dessalegn (2002, p. 117) explains how these laws and policies described in detail what NGOs can and cannot do, thereby creating numerous hurdles.<sup>91</sup> These hurdles can be

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<sup>90</sup> The rural population in Ethiopia comprises 80 to 85% of the population. The EPRDF/TPLF realized this mass potential and embarked on strategies how to use it for its own benefits, which included votes.

<sup>91</sup> On 4 January 2009 the EPRDF adopted a new NGO law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation law (CSO law), designed to further control and monitor civil society organizations ('Ethiopian parliament adopts repressive NGO law' 2009).

found in the areas of their registration and re-registration requirements, submission of proposals and audited reports, requirements of budgets and training for government partners and so forth. NGOs are also subjected to government influence and intervention, monitoring, evaluation, and scrutiny. They are even required to work increasingly through government structures (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 20).

Probably the worst requirement is the coercion to sign operational agreements with the Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Commission (DPPC). This requirement lends the commission tremendous powers which it exploits diligently. For example, the commission has come up with its own set of requirements and demands. One of those is that NGOs are obliged to sign a partnership agreement with a given government institution in line with their work before their proposal can be considered (Melakou 2010, p. 205). For any activity on women or gender issues, it is thus a prerequisite to sign not only a partnership agreement with the Women's Affairs Office, but also to get the approval of this office. This partnership agreement carries coercive overtones as the organization becomes manipulated to change its proposal to fit the WAO's demands, engage them actively in their planning and implementation processes, and assist in their capacity building. Such requirements directly undermine and negate the independence and freedom of NGOs. However, any organization emerging outside the government is regarded with suspicion and is spied on.

### **5.3 A new discourse on “gender”: The rhetoric of the state-defined “woman question”**

EPRDF/TPLF's history dates back to the students' revolt in the 1970s. During that time, students' consciousness was increasing by leaps and bounds and many of the students' unions in and outside the country had begun to set up women's study groups. The outcome was that the EPRDF/TPLF, as an opposition group, also had an organized women's section among its cadres, similar to the other resistance groups. The long history of this party reveals that its leaders were coached during the Derg regime. This means, as the Derg was in the process of formulating its own proclamations, the TPLF was actively forming resistance against those. But were all those really rejected?

The Marxist/Leninist framework gave shape to its political ideology, just as it had done for the Derg. It was all a matter of interpretation and fitting the theory in to Ethiopian realities. So, while both governments might have had different views on many issues, apparently there was not much diversion from what they perceived as the “woman question”. This could be illustrated through the TPLF's vision on women's emancipation. The party held similar views to the Derg that women's active participation in the revolution was a sign of their emancipation. This is why women were actively recruited as combatants and commanders. At the time, the TPLF had also endorsed the formation of a separate women's organization in Tigray, the Woman Fighter's Association of Tigray (WFAT) (Merera 2003, p. 111), as long as the revolutionary goals remained clear. The party further actively de-linked the social aspects of gender by treating the “woman question” as a product of class within Ethiopian society. Therefore, it should not come as

a surprise that the party sees itself as the supreme authority on dealing with women's issues with primary focus on the ethnic/national question.

Currently, without a revolution in sight, the revolutionary roles of women have changed but the general objectives remain the same. Operating from a vanguard position the government upholds the myth that women are emancipated if they actively participate in state-directed and designed development programmes and other state-ordered initiatives. This is tantamount to a new form of slavery,<sup>92</sup> with policies even more repressive than those that were put in place during the Derg regime. The emancipation of women outside this party-induced goal has never been (and still is not) considered an important issue.

Ironically, this viewpoint seems to be shared even among the emerging opposition parties in the country, especially those with a Marxist background (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003, p. 140). During the 2005 election, the opposition parties taking part in this election, also displayed gross misperceptions regarding women's emancipation. Many did not even nominate woman candidates to stand for elections and others were totally ignorant and did not have the experience to voice the concerns of women. The general belief prevalent since historical times is that women are expected to support men in their endeavours and not venture to take any purposeful initiatives on their own.

After the TPLF/EPRDF assumed political power in 1991, its own formula on the "woman question" started to take shape. This started with the demotion of many prominent women who had played an active part during the liberation struggle. They found themselves removed from their political posts and excluded from the distribution of political power after the war. Their demotion was so serious that, without a revolution in sight, the TPLF/EPRDF even went further and limited their rights in armed struggle. For example, during the war with Eritrea in 2000, Vaughan & Tronvoll (2003, p. 140) pointed out that "Ethiopian women were even prohibited from assuming fighting positions". Such limitations brought a dramatic end to this ancient practice in the country. And it also undermines women's equality. A close scrutiny of government's policies and programmes reveals the pattern that is being pursued by the EPRDF/TPLF regime regarding women's emancipation and rights. Below follows a discussion of how government initiatives in the field should be carefully read as signs of appropriating complete control.

#### **5.4 National institutions for the advancement of women or instruments of control?**

It was obvious from the beginning of EPRDF/TPLF rule that civil society had no meaningful place in its framework and would never be considered as an equal partner as far as collaboration was concerned. In fact, women were and are still treated as passive, ignorant recipients without an agenda of their own. The normal political practice of the EPRDF/TPLF is top-down rule. This means that all policies, plans, orders, and directions

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<sup>92</sup> During the Derg regime the REWA exploited women for the Derg's benefit without payment, using them as a labour pool and extracting financial gain from them. Quotas and rations were set to which each woman had to comply. Women were treated as private property akin to slaves of the state.

move from the top hierarchically ordered political cadres to the lower rungs, finding their way from there to society in similar manner. In such a hierarchy there is no place for dialogue, discussion, or critical questioning. Society is supposed to display blind obedience.

In order to effectively impose its plans and policies on the female masses, a national institution for the advancement of Women or Women's Affairs Office (WAO) was set up as early as 1992 by the EPRDF/TPLF regime. This was seen as a welcome move by the international community because the United Nations had endorsed it as early as 1975.<sup>93</sup> The WAO was thus set up in Ethiopia as a strategic instrument. To dazzle the international community, this institution was mandated to coordinate, facilitate and monitor women's affairs at national level and to strive for the enactment of new policies and the improvement of existing ones in the area of women's concerns.

According to Byrne *et al* (1996, p. 5) the aim of establishing the National Women's Machinery (NWM) is to ensure an effective implementation of the Platform for Action and promote gender mainstreaming in development policy and planning and to:

- include gender in development plans;
- prepare guidelines and checklists for planning and evaluation;
- provide gender awareness training;
- create inter-departmental linkages through committees and focal points;
- link up to and consult with independent women's organizations and NGOs (this last depends on the relative autonomy granted to NGOs to operate within a given state).

The roles and responsibilities of the WAO in Ethiopia revealed a completely different picture. This included the structuring of nationwide control through setting up regional branches all over the country, including in the various government administrative focal points such as in *kebelles* and *woredas*, and in the ministries. All these new structures had clear roles which in the main included the advancement of the ruling party's interests. They were mere instruments to facilitate government directives and policies. This was given shape in the form of a National Policy on Ethiopian Women.

#### **5.4.1 Problems with the NWM**

Globally, expectations were high during the International Decade of Women (1976 to 1985). It was genuinely believed that the establishment of NWMs was the answer to all women's problems. After all, they would be established specifically for women and run by women who would be politically empowered and *free* to pursue a radical agenda on

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<sup>93</sup> The NWM was in fact a clear requirement from the first World Conference on Women in 1975 and it was endorsed through the World Plan of Action. At the time, expectations were high and the assumption was that such machineries would be a temporary measure accelerating the achievement of opportunities for women and their full integration into the mainstream of national political, economic and social life (Moser 1993, p. 111, cited in Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 8). The United Nations defines the national machinery as: "...a single body or complex organized system of bodies, often under different authorities, but recognized by the government as the institution dealing with the promotion of the status of women" (Ashworth 1994, p. 5 cited in Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 8).

the emancipation of women. However, by the end of the women's decade it was becoming increasingly clear that these objectives could not be met. Various evaluations carried out by the UN on the operations of NWM in many countries revealed the numerous problems these institutions faced (Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 8). These were of such magnitude that one could wonder whether they could lead to a new approach or the demise of the NWMs. But, neither happened, mainly because the Beijing Platform for Action stood actively behind these organisations. The successes in some countries (such as the Philippines and Chile) also encouraged treatment of the problems instead of a new approach. However, the universal imposition of this instrument on all countries irrespective of the unique political and social realities of those countries makes one question such acts.

Given the results of the evaluations, it was expected that the creators of these institutions were aware of the risks of insisting on their continuation. They knew, for example, that NWMs could be co-opted by political parties and used for different ends, such as becoming bargaining chips for donor loans and funds. They were also aware of the operations in non-democratic societies, such as in Ethiopia, where hierarchical approaches do not benefit civil society at all. Such autocratic systems tend to either neglect the machineries, slow down the pace of women's emancipation or steer it into a direction that has nothing to do with women's rights (ibid, p. 3).

Not surprisingly, the situation in Ethiopia is among the most deplorable for the NWM or Women's Affairs Office. This office faced so many problems that it simply became incomprehensible why nothing was done to amend those. Why did the ailing and crippling WAO and Women's Affairs Bureaus (WABs) continue to exist? Could it be because they had a different mission? The gravity of the problems they faced is discussed below.

The first major problem emerging from the WAO was directly embedded in its manner of emergence. Emergence should be seen as a key factor in determining its credibility (ibid, p. 11) and level of cooperation in society. The WAO was without doubt a political instrument emerging from the ruling EPRDF/TPLF party. This particularity immediately raised suspicion in civil society (a suspicion that could be traced back to the emergence of REWA as the political arm of the Derg regime). As a political instrument, the WAO was first and foremost dependent and accountable to the government. History was in the re-making!

The second problem linked to the WAO emerged from its placement or location within the whole political structure. Placement is crucial, because it can determine freedom, independence, commitment and effectiveness of operation. The WAO in Ethiopia was placed directly under the Prime Minister's Office. Given a democratic regime, such a placement would have been the most strategic and ideal positioning because it would imply that it stood at the heart of the state. This in turn would provide the WAO with the much needed influence and power to "function as a 'watchdog' and be instrumental in influencing the planning process across all development sectors" (Byrne *et al* 1996, p.

13). It could also exert stronger influence while it links with other government organs and departments throughout the country.

Theoretically, any other location would jeopardize the influence of the WAO. For example, if it had been placed under the umbrella of another ministry or executive organ of the state, the problems it might face could be huge – such as competing for scarce resources; co-option by the department; or being forced to change its agenda. As a separate ministry, it might gain some independence and autonomy, but may face other problems. For example, in its efforts to compete with the other ministries for the government's scarce resources and trying to keep the ministry competitive and floating, it may lose on its effectiveness. Or, it could become unable to influence mainstream policies and plans of other ministerial departments (ibid, p. 13). Probably the worst problem a separate ministry could face is the threat of not being taken seriously by other departments which can result in the further marginalization of women's concerns.

So, the WAO was well-placed. Why did it then fail to generate any of the listed positive outcomes? Why did it not play a more comprehensive role to advance women's emancipation? Analysis reveals that the placement of the WAO under the Prime Minister's Office did not lead to more acceptance or trust among women and that the level of suspicion had remained unchanged.

A third problem facing the WAO involved its structuring, which exacerbated its already fragile image in society. With autocratic tendencies guiding the political culture in the country, the WAO was equally hierarchically structured. This means that the ministerial Women's Affairs Bureaus (WABs) and regional Women's Affairs Departments (WADs) were positioned at a lower level, taking orders from the WAO. But it did not end there. The hierarchy was further extended to civil society. The WABs and WADs extended this hierarchy into their roles in monitoring and cooperating with NGOs in their respective fields. This was destructive to their relations and led to tensions.

One of the more puzzling problems of the WAO was directly linked to its low capacity. The initial staffing in the WAO, WABs and WADs was conducted through the appointment of party cadres, where being a "woman" and a party member was treated as sufficient to head such desks. Their academic expertise, level of education and qualifications in gender issues was never considered significant. This ineptness was to be remedied by on-the-job training. With such low levels of gender awareness, commitment to the genuine concerns of women's emancipation was completely missing and instead there was blind obedience to government's misguided policies. Why was this strategy inherited from the Derg by the EPRDF/TPLF party?

A fifth problem makes one question the plans of the ruling party. It concerned the understaffing of the WAO offices, a situation which placed additional constraints on their institutional capacity. Many of the offices were staffed by only one person who was directly appointed, and one "expert". The respective departments were expected to deal with the recruitment of their additional staff. Some regional branches were even found to lack a focal person. Others were at loggerheads with recruited staff who refused to

become the government's puppets, claiming that they were given misguided instructions on gender and women's rights. Yet other staff members were reluctant to join government organs because of the undemocratic, authoritarian political culture and repression. Remuneration in these government posts was also particularly low and demands for increases were simply ignored.

Problem number six continued adding up to the mystique of the ruling party's intentions. It was associated with budgeting. Most NWMs in other African countries were adjudged by the UN to be under-budgeted and this was also the case in Ethiopia. Government budgets remained limited and funds were often diverted to issues of national priority such as HIV/AIDS, poverty reduction, and so on.<sup>94</sup> The WAO and respective WABs and WADs were often left with marginal budgets to manage their affairs. This low budgeting made them dependent on external donor funding which had its own implications. For example, since most donors were concerned with short-term result-oriented activities, certain longer term activities such as lobbying tended to lose out (Moser 1993, p. 125, cited in Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 14). Donor dependency also carried the risk that the WAO could not exert any meaningful influence on government policies and plans. The WAO had become heavily dependent on donor funding, receiving funds from external donors such as the World Bank, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Population Fund (UNFPA). In general, low budgeting reflected something else. It showed the low status that was imputed to the WAO, as if it was a symbolic surrogate only meant to control women and keep them muted, stringently checked, monitored and silenced. The Derg had done this more overtly.

One of the most serious shortcomings of the WAO lay in its focus. After its formation it embarked on a welfarist approach (immediate basic needs relief and service delivery). This approach addressed women's issues in isolation from the rest of society and was quite popular in the 1960s. After the 1980s some NWMs in other countries shifted to a Gender and Development (GAD) approach although, given the situation of each country, many just made a rhetorical shift and continued to practise Women in Development (WID) (Uganda, Jamaica, Philippines, etc) (Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 11). This could be attributed to various factors which generally boiled down to the kind of funds available (most donors and governments are not keen on GAD due to its radical demands for structural changes), capacity (NWMs are often staffed by poorly qualified staff who lack the capacity to move beyond the WID understanding), the unique situation of women in each country (where many are not ready yet to jump the WID-ship), or simply because of the radicalism embedded in GAD that makes it undesired for fear of a backlash. The persistent WID use in the Ethiopian context has led to an increased ghettoization and marginalization of women's concerns. Even gender mainstreaming tends to be absorbed within this approach (reformist) while in fact its prerequisites are more radical.

The eighth problem found within the structure of WAO was the lack of a feminist base. Many employees in this machinery simply lacked the level of critical consciousness and independence due to being mere political appointees with low academic qualifications.

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<sup>94</sup> These issues are often approached from a gender-neutral angle and were donor-driven (where issues for funding keep on shifting).

Quick-fix training courses were sponsored by the government in an attempt to remedy this situation and treated as a form of capacity building. However, such moves carried serious consequences in terms of loyalty and accountability. Their accountability was directed to the ruling party, instead of the women whom they were supposed to represent (Setegn 2003, p. 12). These women not only grossly failed to commit themselves to the WID/GAD agenda but they would never dare to take up a radical stance on GAD simply because they cannot challenge the government. For example, they “cannot be seen to align themselves with protest movements against another arm of the state” (ibid, p. 27). This made their advocacy role highly questionable.

These listed problems are still prevalent after 2010 and they are not exhaustive. Some additional problems, enumerated by a number of scholars, are the lack of autonomy of the WAO; lack of accountability; low level of collaboration between WAO structures and civil society organizations; lack of commitment; lack of women’s organizations, etc. (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 105-106; Aster *et al* 2002, p. 76; Abraham, Ayalew & Paulos 1997, p. 27).

In sum, the entire existence of the WAO raises serious questions. Did its mandate really differ from REWA? Critical analysis reveals otherwise. As a party instrument, one goal seems to clearly pop out, which is its controlling function. For that they do not need any of the above mentioned issues of budgets, skilled human power, commitment, a gender sensitive outlook, feminism, and so forth. To keep disillusioning the donor community, policies and plans have been developed with lofty ideals. Closer scrutiny of those makes one wonder why they are not recognized as “project failures” and instruments of diversion. Let us take a look at the policy which gives meaning to the state ideology on women’s rights.

### **5.5 The National Policy on Ethiopian Women (NPEW)**

#### ***The formulation of the ideological base on the “rural woman’s question”***

In order to give the WAO a meaningful existence and show the international community its commitment to bring gender equality to the country, a National Policy on Ethiopian Women (NPEW) was issued in September 1993. The *de jure* aim of this policy was to assist women in the attainment of gender equality throughout the country. The *de facto* aim was different. It narrowed its focus to a particular group of women in society, namely rural women, and gave only lip-service to urban women’s needs and demands. Educated women’s needs were not even considered. This rural focus might have served well with its agenda of emerging as the saviour of rural women’s needs, but a close scrutiny of the document revealed its biased top-down approaches, imposing things on women where many were wondering about their intentions.

In fact, the NPEW is a very narrow document. However, what matters more is perhaps how it is interpreted, just like the TPLF manifesto. This document is often praised as an excellent work and ambitious. It “is intended to provide an implementation instrument to mainstream gender into policies and programmes for more gender equitable poverty

reduction outcomes” (Development Planning and Research Department and Ministry of Finance and Economic Development 2005, p. 18). The WAO and World Bank (1998, p. 1) state that the overall aim of the policy on women is to “institutionalize the political, economic, and social rights of women by creating appropriate structures in government offices and institutions so that the public policies and interventions are gender-sensitive and can ensure equitable development for all Ethiopians”. This policy has three main objectives:

- Facilitating conditions conducive to the speeding up of equality between men and women so that women can participate in the political, social and economic life of their country on equal terms with men and ensuring that their right to own property, as well as their other human rights, are respected and that they are not excluded from the enjoyment of the fruits of their labour or from performing public functions and being decision makers;
- Facilitating the necessary condition whereby rural women can have access to basic social services and to ways and means of lightening their workload;
- Eliminating, step by step, prejudices as well as customary and other practices that are based on the idea of male supremacy and enabling women to hold public office and to participate in the decision making process at all levels (National Policy on Ethiopian Women, 1993, p. 25-26).

The policy is also clear on its implementation strategies and implementers, which are of course, the WAO, WEABs and WADs (National Policy on Ethiopian Women 1993, p. 29-33). The roles of civil society and donor agencies are also laid down as requirements, where they are expected to do their share of duties for its effective implementation.

### **5.5.1 Critical review of the NPEW**

Like many of its policies, the NPEW shows many discrepancies between its *de jure* postulates and the *de facto* practices. First is the question of its emergence. It emerged during the early days of EPRDF/TPLF rule. That means that it lacked civil society input, and was a product of party cadres. Second, the analytical findings of this document show its strong focus on the WID-welfarist-approach matching the party’s “woman question” paradigm. This means that women are seen as passive recipients attaining emancipation when and how the party chooses. This includes a narrow focus on relief and service delivery. Thirdly, the hierarchical structuring and placement of this policy in the hands of the WAO illustrates its power, which is often used to exert control and exercise repression among the masses.

Given the many years of existence of this NPEW since 1993, what has been achieved? One could say a lot if seen from the ruling party’s agenda. There have been efforts to introduce and expand micro-credit schemes to strengthen women’s economic empowerment linked to the overall poverty reduction scheme of the government. These schemes that were introduced in 2000 had come to a grinding halt by 2005. Other

achievements should equally be read cautiously such as the increased enrolment rate of female students in primary schools, improved efforts to bring down maternal and child health problems in the country, and specifically issues around women's organizations and their political empowerment. These all intend to cover the real work that has been going on all along.

The NPEW was a masquerade, meant to keep women occupied and diverted. It faced so many problems that it remains a mystery why it remains operational. For example, the World Bank, together with the WAO, carried out a study in 1998 to identify the many shortcomings this NPEW contained. Despite these findings nothing has been done to either amend these or rid the policy of them. The policy remains silent on the key components of women's emancipation. These include the development of women's critical consciousness, nurturing their independent agency, promoting their social and political empowerment, gender justice, and taking care of structural reforms to ensure sustainable gains on women's rights. Its agenda seems to be overwhelmingly focused on service delivery either to cause a diversion from the real issues or engage women to the extent of exhausting and frustrating them until they give up, or work on a strategic path as designed by the ruling party with specific goals in mind.

Let us discuss some of the problems encountered with the NPEW. The first problem, ironically to be noted by the WB/WAO, was the new ethnic federal system of governance itself, which was seen as a serious obstacle to effective implementation of the policy. This decentralization served as a clear ploy of misdirection and diversion. It provided the ruling party the means to transfer its responsibility to the shoulders of the regional governments, fully aware that those did not have the capacity or means to ensure its implementation. More discussions on this will ensue in the section on decentralization below.

A second problem, equally amazing in the sense that the WAO was part of this discovery, was linked to the top-down approach and hierarchical structuring of the NPEW. This structuring had failed to take into account the real concerns of women at grass roots level, whereas these were the very women it was targeting in its framework. The top-down approach also implied that the policy was not demand driven, lacked transparency and was not accountable to the people. The study inferred that the NPEW in fact pushed women further away, making them suspicious of taking part in any government-initiated policies and programmes (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 104-105). Such levels of hostility created an enormous rift between the WAO and civil society, rendering co-operation minimal if not completely lacking.

Additional problems identified by the WAO /World Bank evaluation were the prevalence of cultural practices that denied women their inherent right to land; the denial of justice and the right to a fair trial, and the lack of grassroots women's organizations (ibid, p. 105).

Since this was a major study of the NPEW, undertaken by two prestigious bodies, one even including a government body in charge of its implementation, its findings should be

taken seriously. According to Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003, p. 106) this assessment revealed that “the government’s policies on women have failed to deliver substantial and radical progress towards change”. In fact, the overall policy is a gross failure and does not address the plight of women at all. This is clearly evident in that women are still “a heavily disadvantaged group in terms of social, cultural and structural discrimination” and proof of this can be found in “numerous sectors of society ranging from education to health, violence against women and legal regression and so forth” (ibid.). Unfortunately, the government has shown no inclination at all to overhaul this policy and draft a new one. The aging document which was drawn up in 1993, is still used as the official mantra on the government-directed “woman question”. There is not the slightest intention to take notice of the problems mentioned above.

The NPEW has not been implemented for too long. This is due to the absence of a strategic document. The initiative for a National Action Plan for Gender Equality (NAPGE) was taken in the year 2000 by the WAO and the Donor Group for the Advancement of Women (GAW) in the country, almost seven years after the NPEW was established. After revisiting the first draft, the plan was rejected by the WAO and GAW and a new consultancy team was assembled to redo the plan, which was not ready yet in 2005, though a considerable amount was spend on consultation fees and draft preparations of action plans.

In the NAPGE, the WAO selected its own priority areas of intervention as per the government’s directives. Among the twelve areas selected in the Beijing Platform for Action the NGOs and donor agencies together with the WAO came up with five critical areas as national priorities in addressing women’s needs in Ethiopia. These are:

- Poverty reduction and economic empowerment of women
- Education and training of women and girls
- Reproductive rights and health of women
- Human rights of women and elimination of violence against women/girls
- Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women in decision-making

The WAO’s selection of these five critical areas of concern is being incorporated in its operational action plan to which all those working on gender issues in the country are directed. Civil society organizations equally are co-opted to work on this agenda as the state defined discourse. Most of this discourse is also internationally driven by the global agenda such as the Millennium Development Goals and CEDAW, where women’s education and reproductive health are given high priority. Others are donor driven such as those based on the poverty reduction programmes. In order to comply with international conditions for loans, debt relief or simply recognition, governments take up these agendas and integrate them into their development plans as priority issues. This by itself is not a problem. Problems emerge in the manner in which the government tends to pursue their implementation. That is where contradictions emerge that hamper their success.

As a government instrument, the WAO also plays a crucial role in the representing the country’s women abroad, just like REWA had done. On these occasions many of them

will be found patting each other on the back and claiming to have done a great deal while NGOs prove otherwise. For example, during the various workgroup sessions on thematic areas of the Platform for Action during the sixth regional Conference on Women in 1999 “government delegations were more concerned about putting on record what their various governments had done than in assessing the relevance of such interventions in promoting gender equality” (Mensah-Kutin 2000, p. 6). Ethiopian delegates can be criticised on the same grounds. However, the WAO admitted in the national progress report in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing +10) that there is a low level of leadership of women in politics (Prime Minister’s Office/Women’s Affairs Sub-Sector 2004, p. 25) and affirmed the absence of a national action plan at the time. It also admitted that there is a serious lack of awareness of the Beijing Platform for Action, and shortfalls in both finance and qualified staff (ibid, p. 34).

Regrettably, these acknowledgements never seem to imply that action will be taken to remedy the problems identified. They are meant to satisfy the international community and remain at that. Admitting the problems, but lacking the mandate, willpower, capacity and resources to overhaul them seem to be sufficient to gather pity for themselves.

## **5.6 The Constitution, International treaties and affirmative measures**

### ***Being a step ahead, taking control of the legal environment***

Beside the women’s machinery, the EPRDF/TPLF government also initiated numerous other well-intended efforts to enhance the rights of women within the first years of its rule. These include the promulgation of a very liberal Constitution containing women’s explicit rights, the signing of international treaties regarding women’s rights and the introduction of affirmative measures to promote women’s advancement.

The Federal Constitution of Ethiopia was promulgated in 1995. According to Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003, p. 53), it is an excellent document enshrining democratic standards and respect for human rights. Of its 106 articles, 31 are devoted to human and democratic rights, providing a detailed and comprehensive list of fundamental rights and freedoms that are assigned to individuals and groups. Its chapters on human and democratic rights are comprehensive and according to Article 13(2) “shall be interpreted in a manner conforming to the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenants on Human Rights and International instruments adopted by Ethiopia” (ibid, p. 53).

This constitution can also be said to have renewed the commitment to the gender policy and clearly expresses legislative support for women through its various articles. For example, Article 25 prohibits discrimination on grounds of gender. Article 35 is the most comprehensive law regarding women’s rights and consists of nine sub-provisions.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup>Women were granted the right to vote, together with men, by Emperor Haile Selassie in his revised constitution in 1955, without any public demands. At the time, this right was merely symbolic. The 1987 Constitution of the Derg regime was the first to enshrine the rights of women into law (Fisseha-Tsion 1991, p. 167). Again, such rights remained on paper. The EPRDF’s constitution seems to have copied much from the Derg’s in terms of rights and freedoms for the people, including Article 35 on women’s rights.

These are stipulations on the equal enjoyment of rights; equality of rights in marriage; entitlement to affirmative measures; freedom from harmful traditional practices; maternity leave; equal participation in programme planning and implementation; equal rights on property ownership; equality in employment; and full access to reproductive health care. A number of other constitutional provisions, namely those embodied in Articles 7, 33, 38, 42, and 89, also have a direct bearing on the protection of the rights of Ethiopian women.<sup>96</sup>

Beside local efforts, the government in Ethiopia has always been among the first to become a signatory to the many international conventions on the rights of women which include:

- The Convention on Discrimination of Employment and Occupation (ratified in 1966).
- The Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1969)
- The Convention for the Suppression of the Trafficking of Persons and of the Exploitation of Prostitution of Others (1981)
- The Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1981)
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991)
- The Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (ratified in 1969).

(Source: Yikanu 1999, p. 7; Jelaludin *et al*, 2001, p. 7)

Ethiopia is also known to have signed other international conventions that have direct bearing on the rights of women. Some of these, such as the Convention against Discrimination in Education and the Convention concerning Equal remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Equal Value, are still awaiting ratification. Furthermore, the Convention on Maternity Protection and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have both been adopted but neither has been signed nor ratified. In a similar vein, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights was adopted but has not yet been signed or ratified (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 7).

Ethiopia is also a signatory of many of the regional and continental conventions such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which includes provisions that protect women. As women's rights in general were largely excluded from this Charter, a Draft Protocol containing specific articles regarding African Women's Rights was added in September 2000 (Biseswar 2004, p. 12) and ratified in July 2003 in Maputo, Mozambique. Among the 15 countries that had ratified this protocol by the end of 2005, are Togo, Cape Verde, The Comoros, Djibouti, The Gambia, Lesotho, Libya, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa and Benin. Ethiopia has not yet done so.

It did not stop there. It was quite promising to see that the ruling party had included an article in the constitution meant to domesticate these international treaties. Article 9 (4) in

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<sup>96</sup> The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, FDRE, 1995.

the 1995 constitution stipulates “that all international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land”.<sup>97</sup>

Many other steps undertaken by the TPLF/EPRDF government on women’s rights include revision of the family law in 2000; revision of the penal code in 2004; revision of the labour law; launching of a social welfare policy in 1997; an educational policy; the formulation of a national health policy in 1993; the promulgation of a national population policy, an HIV/AIDS policy, and many more (Yikanu 1999, p. 5-7).

The government has also introduced affirmative measures<sup>98</sup> for the equal representation of women in employment, education and political leadership. Of these, the education sector can be cited as the only one to take affirmative action seriously. In the other areas (employment and politics), it is facing serious setbacks (Meaza 2003, p. 31). Ironically, resistance against affirmative measures is mounting, specifically from ruling party woman cadres, including the WAO. They challenge its democratic nature and how beneficiaries would simply lack representation and the capacity to deliver (Meaza 2003, p. 31; Lenesil 2006, p. 139).

### **5.6.1 A critical review of legislation regarding women’s rights**

The legal reforms that were introduced by the EPRDF/TPLF regime also started to reflect shortcomings (*Reflections* Number 10, Discussions on the Paper by Allehone 2004, p. 50). From the onset, the constitution has been drawn up in such a manner that even the legal experts will find it difficult to admit that it contains loopholes favouring conservative ends and centralized control. But it does. For example, the very constitution that grants women equal rights also includes laws that infringe upon these rights. This is because there is simultaneous recognition of cultural/customary laws<sup>99</sup> due to the TPLF/EPRDF’s decentralization policies (Melakou 2004, p. 17).

Article 34 (5) stipulates:

This Constitution shall not preclude the adjudication of disputes relating to personal and family laws in accordance with religious or customary laws, with the consent of the parties to the disputes.<sup>100</sup>

Such inclusion of regional autonomy in the constitution gives due recognition to the rights of customary and religious laws to define, regulate and adjudicate personal relations in terms of marriage, divorce, property ownership, child custody, inheritance

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<sup>97</sup> FDRE Constitution, 1995.

<sup>98</sup> Article 35(3) of the Ethiopian Constitution, 1995:93 reads: “The historical legacy of inequality and discriminations suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them to compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in politics, social, and economic life as well as public and private institutions.”

<sup>99</sup> “Customary laws are laws that are informed by customs and cultural ways of life of traditional societies and that includes attitudes of that particular community on gender relations” (Melakou 2004, p.17).

<sup>100</sup> FDRE Constitution, 1995.

and adoption, in short, the very domains of women's culturally defined existence. Gopal and Salim presented a paper on "Gender and Law" in East Africa studying the impacts of law on women. They presented the paper at a conference in Ethiopia in October 1997 that examined legal and regulatory reform as a critical tool to promote gender-sensitive human development in Africa. They found that the Civil Code in Ethiopia had little or no impact in the last 38 years on the majority of Ethiopian women in rural areas where ethnic groups continue to apply customary and religious laws (Gopal & Salim 1998, p. 9). These applications are seldom fair and just to women who lack the level of legal literacy to access the constitution. Decentralization should have provided room for better legal representation of women. Unfortunately, what is in fact happening is precisely the opposite, where local councils are found reinforcing damaging attitudes and customs towards women, using them as identity markers and thereby directly violating women's constitutional rights (World Bank, 2005, p. 44) with impunity.

Gopal & Salim (1998, p. 143) question the motives for the retention of customary laws in the constitution and find it rather puzzling that the EPRDF government has done so. Could it be because it meets international standards and norms? Since the response is strongly in the negative, this is simply incomprehensible. Ironically, while the same constitution affirms the subordination of such laws when people's rights are negatively affected,<sup>101</sup> in rural contexts these customary laws have greater influence on gender relations than the formal system (World Bank 2005, p. 44). They are simply taken as superior to the constitution.

One of the most serious problems of the constitution is implementation. It is often found to be "weakly enforced and in many cases provides contradictory or incomplete coverage in its protection for women... Existing laws are often applied by judges in a manner that does not take account of women's rights" (ibid.). Implementation is also cited as one of the major hurdles preventing gender justice. Injustice is often meted out by law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judges. Presiding judges have often been found to give differential treatment to persons who have committed similar crimes. These incidences illustrate how women's rights are compromised when the laws are implemented in a biased form.

A third problem with the laws is linked to the implementation of international conventions that have been ratified by the Ethiopian government. Though they are supposed to be treated as the laws of the land, the reality is often otherwise. Until a law is published in the country's *Negarit Gazetta* (the government gazette) it cannot be considered as the law of the land. The Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has never been promulgated as such. Then too, many judges are not even aware of CEDAW or how to apply it. So, although CEDAW states that governments who have become members of the CEDAW cannot use religion or culture as an excuse to make women enjoy less rights than they should or infringe upon the rights of women (*Reflections* 10, 2004, p. 53), the reality is that this indeed happens in Ethiopia, where culture and tradition are upheld as almost divine by some of the highest judges in the country.

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<sup>101</sup> Art. 9 (1), FDRE Constitution, 1995.

A further problem concerns legal literacy and sensitization of women to gain information on their rights if they are to gain from these amended laws. Unfortunately, there is no commitment on the part of the government to promote or provide legal literacy to the population or the law enforcement bodies (Meaza 2000, p. 6). The few NGOs operating in the field find themselves harassed and intimidated; they are discouraged from proceeding. Nor does lobbying result in the government taking any meaningful action or heeding societal concerns (ibid, p. 10) causing a wider rift between state and civic organizations.

Despite significant changes in their *de jure* rights, women thus remain disempowered and marginalized (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 46). Ironically, the EPRDF/TPLF has been imitating many of the repressive strategies that were employed by the Derg to silence the masses. It also tirelessly uses the same excuses to defend its failures, inaction, inefficiency and undemocratic rule. It is not uncommon to hear the regions and conservative forces receiving all the blames for not implementing government policies and laws, or the resistance to change by rigid traditions and cultures, or the need for more time to transform the country's political culture and society. Such acknowledgements are used strategically and purposefully and recited far too often.

## **5.7 The myth about decentralization and women's emancipation**

As mentioned above, there are other aspects of negligence by the government as far as women's rights are concerned. An explicit example is its decentralization policy. In a democratic society decentralization should be seen as offering hope and material gains to women. It carries the notion of bringing the state closer to people and people closer to the state. This practice can translate into giving women more space for their voices to be heard and to provide a greater degree of political representation. Given the mandate of regional governments, their focus is mainly on the areas of consumer services and the implementation of policies. Within these, they directly touch on the lives of women and can play a crucial role in addressing their immediate needs (Hirschmann 1991, cited in Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 29). In such societies, women also appear to have more influence on local government policies and laws, especially those directly affecting their lives. It offers them space and opportunities to play an active role in politics and hold the local authorities accountable through greater transparency (Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 28).

On the other hand, decentralization can mean further losses for women, especially in autocratic societies that are run by one-party states, such as is the case in Ethiopia. This can be illustrated in many ways. For instance, the agenda that is intentionally designed to emancipate women, the NPEW has turned into a political pawn. It is delegated from one office to another. This means that while the state is unwilling to take action in the central organs of power, it delegates regional states to take up the matter. This delegation takes place with the full knowledge of institutional incapacity of these regional governments. It is a form of "passing the buck" on issues to which there is little or no commitment (Kardam 1995 cited in Byrne *et al* 1996, p. 29). Through delegation, the EPRDF/TPLF central government absolves itself from any blame that it is inactive. Delegation provides

it with the arguments to openly accuse these regions of malpractice, something that might have been intentional all along. Besides, blame does not result in sanctions, illustrating the ploy behind it.

The implementation of the NPEW becomes thus delegated to the WABs, who are situated in regional offices. But these structures are totally ineffective, lacking human resources, capacity, independence, a clear mandate, a budget and the power to implement anything on their own unless directed from above. This means that the party's women's agenda becomes further denigrated.

Further problems are added by the traditional setting of most of the regional governments, where many continue to be ruled through customary and religious law. One could but question such moves by the EPRDP/TPLF government. Was it meant to be removed from actual implementation? This form of delegation results in what Longwe calls the disappearance of the policy in the patriarchal cooking pot<sup>102</sup> (Longwe 1999, p. 69). Delegating the policy to the regions is literally meant to send it to an early grave. Meanwhile, the very existence of the policy suffices in functioning as a symbol of party's political pride.

Besides "passing the buck" and "policy evaporation", there are more problems associated with the decentralization policies of the ruling party. These are linked to the level of conservatism and resistance displayed by many of the regional governments, especially in the areas of change and women's rights. In fact, the few gains women might have made during the Derg era appeared to have been rolled back under the EPRDF/TPLF regime. With its ethnic/linguistic decentralization policy being avidly pursued, the country's regions have been divided along major ethnic lines. Ethnic division thrives on cultural diversity. It finds expression through particular cultural practices, many of which fall under the domain of women. The party's policy on ethnic federalism can thus be read as a revival and strengthening of ethnic consciousness and cultural/traditional practices treated as ethnic boundary markers (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 21). These often include those that are harmful to women's advancement and hamper their emancipation. Examples are the practices of early marriage, abduction and female genital mutilation (Berhane-Selassie 1998, p. 31, cited in Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 48). It is clear that the decentralization agenda of the ruling party directly contributes to the strengthening of paternalistic and patriarchal attitudes towards women. In line with these findings, decentralization should be seen as deliberate attempts to disempower women.

And there is more that can be blamed on the country's decentralization policies. For example, even though repressed, the country had maintained a rather traditional religious base throughout the Derg regime. With the EPRDF/TPLF taking political control, religious revival appears to have no limitations. It includes the re-emergence and reinforcement of the traditional gender ideology due to a lack of strong challenges from women. Among the many forms of religion that are practised in the country (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Pentecostal, Judaism, Catholicism) women are found to be the major

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<sup>102</sup> Longwe (1999, p. 69-72) explains how the "patriarchal cooking pot" operates in terms of policy evaporation especially when the patriarchy feels threatened.

group of followers. If the NPEW in particular, is felt to be a threat to the preservation of such cultural and religious belief systems, it will automatically be shelved or selectively implemented in order not to disrupt the traditional settings of the regions. However, such practice is condoned by the government because of the constitutional guarantees of cultural and religious preservation.

Decentralization also affects party women who are placed in leadership posts such as in the WABs. Conservatism often dominates regional agendas and there is little understanding and support for women taking up roles other than those ascribed to them within their demarcated domestic gender domains. The delegation of the NPEW to such regions is therefore bound to fail if it is not accompanied by adequate training and sensitization. The few party women who have entered such political arenas might find themselves in the cave of the lion where they become submersed in political pressure to give up their gender interests or subordinate them to class or party interests (Byrne *et al.* 1996, p. 7). Many would not dare to challenge their superiors. How then could they advance a radical approach to the problems of women?

In sum, decentralization in Ethiopia has not only strengthened the ruling party's control over rural women, it has left them at the mercy of regional conservatives. It seems to be used as a tool to subject the masses of women and prevent their advancement for maximum exploitation. It is a support for patriarchal discriminatory practices that are counter-productive to women's empowerment. Decentralization has compartmentalized women to such an extent that they find it harder to seek legal redress.

## **5.8 Women's organizations and NGOs**

Given this rather grim overview on how the EPRDF/TPLF dominates women's agendas and life, one might wonder what civil society and educated women are doing about it? Are they daring to become proactive? Most importantly, do they have an agenda of their own on women's emancipation with a clear mission, vision and strategies? Or, are they like the students in the Zemecha campaign, who had failed to make the struggle for women's rights their personal mission?

Since the new party took political control in the country in 1991, civil society organizations, although small, have increased dramatically. The numbers of local NGOs were estimated to have increased from 34% in 1994 to 67% by 2000 (Dessalegn 2002, p. 107). But numbers don't explain everything. What can be observed is that many lack gender sensitivity and do not have a radical agenda to transform women's lives. The country actually only has a few organizations that focus specifically on women's issues. These include the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association and Women Aid Ethiopia, which were among the first to be established. After 1995 a few more emerged, such as Women in Self Employment (WISE); Kembatta Women's Self Help Centre, Ethiopia; SIKE Women's Development Association; Forum of African Women Educationalists; Ethiopian Media Women's Association; Women's Empowerment and Assistance Forum; Women's Support Organization; and so forth. Most of these, especially the local NGOs, have a strong focus on mother and childcare programmes and health and social welfare

services. Among the most active agents on gender equality are those situated within NGOs that operate strong gender desks. These are mainly international organizations, but there are also a few local ones, including Panos Ethiopia; Action Aid; Care International; Pact Ethiopia; and the Canadian International Development Agency. (For details see the Directory of Women's Social Services run by NGOs, prepared by the WAD in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 1999; the Directory entitled "Who is Doing What on Gender" issued by Panos Ethiopia 2001; and a brochure on "WID/Gender Activities Supported by Donors in Ethiopia" by Yewubdar 1999).

The ruling party began its onslaught against civil society organizations as early as 1995. This included an attack on women's organizations. This urge to control them and keep them in check may be read as the party perceiving them as a direct threat to its political order. The result of such suspicion is that the designed policies curb and stifle their activities. These acts are rather puzzling. The issue is not that the EPRDF/TPLF party has its own agenda on women's emancipation. It is in fact its national duty to do so. The issue is when this agenda becomes imposed on others and when those others are prevented from initiating actions in areas neglected by the government. Unfortunately, those who dare to do so find themselves seriously harassed, intimidated and silenced. An example is the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers association (EWLA), which was closed down when it dared to take the government to court for failure to uphold the laws in 2001. (For more information on this, see the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, 2001: Special Issue on EWLA's suspension, in *Dimtsachin* 2001).

And while civil society is prevented from beginning any new interventions, it is not uncommon to find its promising proposals and ideas being whisked away for trumped-up reasons and summarily handed over to parallel NGOs (government NGOs or GONGOs<sup>103</sup>) set up by the ruling party. GONGOs are national NGOs, "nominally non-governmental but clearly EPRDF-driven" (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 65). They include the various women's associations formed in the different regions by the government such as the Women's Democratic Association (WDA),<sup>104</sup> the Amhara Women's Association, the Tigray Women's Association, and the Oromo Women's Association.

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<sup>103</sup> Parallel NGOs set up and controlled by political cadres

<sup>104</sup> The Addis Ababa Women's Association is an arm of the TPLF/EPRDF government and emerged in 1994. It contains excellent *de jure* objectives such as to facilitate the economic empowerment of the region's women, to find and facilitate ways of improving their education and health, and to sensitize them about their constitutional and political rights" (Mitike & Kidest n.d., p. 22). Actually, it is imitating the footsteps of REWA in membership (women above the age of 18 are eligible to become members), fee contribution and structure. It is estimated to have more than 73,000 members and is structured along the government local administrative organs, namely at the regional, zonal, woreda and kebele levels. The association is instituted along various divisions that include the economic, social and mobilizing and organizing divisions (Zenebework, Eshetu & Konjit 2002, p. 44). And, though the AAWA claims to be independent of the government, it is working in close collaboration with the WAO in identifying target groups for given WAO programmes (micro credits, training and education, health care and so on).

The establishment of government-led NGOs or GONGOs carries many risks for civil society. First of all, they have “effectively succeeded in channelling all national and international resources to the ruling party’s coffers” (Merera 2003, p. 174). This has impacted on the availability of funds for independent NGOs. Secondly, GONGOs are known to enjoy more privileges and freedom from the government while NGOs are scrutinized on a regular basis and risk the withdrawal of their licence to operate. Thirdly, the very presence of government players in the domain of civil society creates further loss of credibility and suspicion among the people (who may not differentiate between the two), a hostility that is also directed towards genuine civil society NGOs. Fourthly, GONGOs largely contribute to the general apathy among people who have lost their sense of trust in the work of NGOs. While the government made many promises to uplift their lives, the repression that followed and obligations that were imposed upon them created further rifts and more withdrawal. The result is that many women prefer not to be associated with the state in any manner (Wright 2000, p. 49, cited in Merera 2003, p. 112-113). Finally, the low standard of work performed by ill-qualified, inexperienced party cadres in the GONGOs undermines the quality of service delivery in the country. Scrutiny of GONGO projects and organizational documents confirms that service delivery is extremely poor and that activities are carried out in a top-down manner. Indeed, one wonders how they remain accredited.

Few NGOs are engaged in high-level advocacy and lobbying. Those that are include the Ethiopian Women’s Lawyers Association, Action Professional Association for the People and, until a few years back, Panos Ethiopia). And even then, their advocacy work centres around politically neutral areas of concern such as promoting the rights of the child, campaigning to end violence against women, or working for the eradication of harmful traditional practices (Dessalegn 2002, p. 109). This clear avoidance of politically sensitive issues is linked to the government’s intolerable stance and frequent expressions of hostility. An example is the petition campaign signed by various NGOs against the removal of the law on polygamous practices in the Oromia region (Melakou 2010, p. 390-391). Many of the signatories were individually harassed and threatened. Under these restrictive circumstances, many organizations simply refrain from challenging the state; some have even stopped airing their views on policies imposed by the government. It is, therefore, regrettable that there are not enough women’s NGOs in the country and that among those that are indeed operational, only a few speak out on the rights of women (EWLA 2000, p. 5). If this situation continues, how can the government become sensitized to the reality that there is a strong and urgent need for feminism in the country? Will they ever see that women’s issues are a legitimate area of political activism?

In 2005, in an effort to address the lack of academic training on gender-related issues, Addis Ababa University pioneered in starting Ethiopia’s first graduate program on gender studies. However, the ruling party maintains a firm grip on its curriculum, which is not new. There is sufficient evidence that the ruling party takes an active interest in censoring what is being taught in the high schools. For example, Prof. Abigail Salisbury was interviewed in this regard by Ethiomedia on how the state controls academic freedom in the country (Abraha Belai in Ethiomedia, April 24, 2008). She observed that academic freedom was very limited. She said that she was provided with a book of lecture notes

from an Ethiopian professor and told to teach from that and that she was not allowed to use her own notes. She also said that her employment contract required that she does not advocate any political views whatsoever. Her contract also included a clause that she would “never say anything against the government or ruling party”. And although Prof. Salisbury was a lecturer at the law faculty at the Mekele University, the same trend is observed in other universities throughout the country in other departments. If the gender studies department would venture into radical territory and develop critical thinking among its students, it would without doubt become subject to policing.

The exercise of academic freedom is decidedly unwelcome among lecturers. That is why many lecturers are recruited from India. Many of these Indians have little or no insight into the extent of political repression in the country and are happy that they have been offered employment while they could not get jobs in their own country. Some are great teachers, but many more are amateurs, lacking any formal training in the given discipline they are expected to lecture in (Belay 2007, p. 12). Perhaps this corresponds to the party’s intentions of keeping well-educated Ethiopians at bay and preferably unemployed. Playing an instrumental role, these Indian lecturers also promote political acceptance, as many will become grateful to the government and support its policies. Transferring these biases onto the students is obviously exactly what the government envisages.

### *Networking*

A very serious problem among Ethiopian-based NGOs is the issue of networking. This is one of the most crucial components that NGOs must address because it will not only make their demands visible, but also boost their capacity to take up leadership roles and challenge the state. Networking in the country at present is extremely weak. According to Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003, p. 71) this may be because “a culture of collaboration and co-operation has never been the hallmark of the voluntary sector in Ethiopia”. The planned voluntary establishment of networks in different areas of women’s interests routinely collapse because of lack of commitment and collaboration efforts. There is one network under the umbrella of the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA)<sup>105</sup> with a membership of over 160 NGOs. These member organizations are mainly engaged in the areas of relief, rehabilitation and development activities particularly in rural areas (Hadera 1999, p. 31). Another network, aimed at functioning at a higher skill level, is the National Ethiopian Women’s Association (NEWA), initiated by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association in 2000. This network, however, equally faces serious obstacles in its operations and is unable to motivate its members into becoming radical agents of change.<sup>106</sup>

Besides the issue of networking among civil society actors on gender matters, an even more serious concern is the low level of co-operation between the government and civil society NGOs. This mutual hostility is part of the political climate in Ethiopia, where the

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<sup>105</sup> Currently (2011) this organization is called Consortium Christian Relief and Development Association (CCRDA).

<sup>106</sup> After the 2010 elections and the adoption of the new NGO law, this network, like many other NGOs, has seen its independence curbed where the intrusion of the ruling party in its organizations have led to loss of freedom (‘Ethiopian parliament adopts repressive NGO law’ 2009) .

ruling political party functions with the motto of: “either you are with us or you are against us” (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p.120). This sinister “with us”, implies close collaboration with all government plans and policies and toeing the line as far as state directives are concerned.

And even though some NGOs might be consulted in the government’s policy planning process, their concerns and suggestion are never honoured. This not only illustrates “the inadequate co-operation between NGOs and the government” in the gender field, but also the growing distrust between them (EWLA 2000, p. 6). Abraham, Ayalaw and Paulos (1997, p.30-31) claim that this relationship is rather flimsy because both fronts spend as little time as possible in each other’s company (mainly attending meetings, workshops or seminars). This level of hostility does not promote tolerance or cooperation and furthers the enmity between the two sides.

Rahmato (2002, p. 118) sums up the abovementioned constraints facing civil society in the country in a comprehensive manner. He lists these as their location and concentration in Addis Ababa and other urban centres, the cloud of uncertainty surrounding their existence (never knowing when one’s license can be revoked), the lack of a democratic culture and level of tolerance among civil society organizations (inhibiting internal and structural problems), lack of dialogue between state and civil society (one of the most serious problems creating hostility) and the lack of a medium to reach the masses. The result is that the growth of civil society is steadily being arrested and curbed.

## ***EWWA***

Whatever happened to the Ethiopian Women’s Work Association under this new regime? Did it manage to revive its lost glory and gain recognition? It is known that EWWA was demoted during the Derg regime and stripped of many of its activities and property, which were confiscated by REWA. After the EPRDF/TPLF assumed political leadership in 1991, EWWA tried to restore its image. It focused on a return of its lost property and activities. However, after making several requests to the EPRDF government, it failed to achieve anything. The newly established Women’s Affairs Office did not consider it strategic to return EWWA’s property, claiming that those belong to them now since they are “responsible for the co-ordination, facilitation and monitoring of all government programmes that concern women” (Makda 2000, p. 69). In similar manner, most of EWWA’s activities such as hairdressing and tailoring were taken over by REWA, while handicrafts also found their way into the hands of the WAO. As such, EWWA has been diminished in its status and operations and it is not known whether it is still operational.<sup>107</sup>

## **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has critically examined the mechanisms and instruments that were put in place supposedly to advance women’s rights. It reveals that the EPRDF/TPLF party in fact never departed ideologically from the regime it ousted in 1991. This should come as

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Genet Asheber, 23 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

no surprise. Many of its members were teenagers when the Derg took over the country. These teenagers grew into late adulthood waiting for seventeen years to take political power. This means that they were fully integrated into the repressive strategies that had been used by the Derg. The result is clear now. They have done more than the Derg. They have sophisticated and refined those strategies to fit the current time frame and at the same time have learned how to manoeuvre those strategies under the guise of democracy, a liberal constitution, great social policies and a huge load of confidence.

The ruling party sees itself as the vanguard of every sector of society. It assumes quite unashamedly to be the sole beneficiary and provider of all people's needs and demands. This stubborn short-sightedness leads to its refusal to budge from its views and vision. Whatever those might be, women's emancipation has never formed a serious part of its agenda. Taking over the "woman question" paradigm from Marx/Lenin/Engels, the EPRDF/TPLF party continued the Derg's visions and actions. That is how the WAO emerged, taking the place of REWA. With the WAO in charge, the exploitation of women continues unabated. They are forced to comply with the demands of the ruling party in terms of attending *kebelle* and *woreda* meetings, or government campaigns, or take part in "development activities" in their communities without pay. These so-called active engagements of women in government-designed endeavours are still read as a sign of their emancipation. In fact, the increased access of women to education is also taken as an end in itself, so that educated women are seen as liberated and free.

State domination of women's emancipation looks a lot like the Nordic approach where women have gained high levels of equality at certain levels due to the economic policies pursued by these countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark), not gender equality policies per se,<sup>108</sup> and where gender equality was thus a by-product of economic policy (Allen 1996:323). The outcome of such approach though is that more women enter paid employment causing further segregation of the labour market. Women also increasingly become dependent on the state (Allén 1996, p. 324). In the Nordic countries, this dependency is based on the use of a welfare system through which women receive support in times of difficulties. As Allen indicates (1996, p. 323) "the model of the welfare state and that of corporatism have been parallel to the model of 'state feminism' in Nordic countries".

Perhaps the EPRDF aims for this approach. However, this seems unrealistic at the moment because of the party's policies. Corporatism is party-oriented instead of being left to the free market. The EPRDF might assume to be the main actor on women's emancipation; it definitely lacks the basis to support the welfare system. Its economic policies and programs that include women's economic empowerment schemes are not supported by a welfare system as in the West. And the weaknesses of the Nordic model in terms of the trade-off of gender equality to economic policy seems also to be ignored or perhaps not. This could explain why gender equality is one of the most neglected areas

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<sup>108</sup> These policies were supported by a combination of growth-oriented economic policy, high demand for labour power, strong welfare system, corporatism and strong trade unions and helped women with early integration in the labour market, high participation rate and high union density, low unemployment, relatively small wage differentials, high segregation and so forth (Allen 1996, p. 323).

in the country. The question is: is the ruling party aiming to imitate Western models because it assumes those to be correct for Ethiopia, or is it, as is the case with many of its policies, injecting its own version to them in order to shield the imitation, fully aware of their failure?

In this twenty-first century, and at a time of increased consciousness on gender issues, the EPRDF/TPLF government has an intractable perception of the “woman question” in the country. It is of such a nature that there is no place for “gender”. This omission is deliberate and only used for foreign consumption. Within the country, party cadres have received clear directions to continue using the word “woman”. This narrow perception is further pushed upon society and justified as befitting its traditional make-up, where there is no room for “gender”. The government genuinely fears the radicalism that comes with a gender approach and blames Western radicals for attempting to inject alien habits into the country in the name of “gender” reform. Perhaps it fears the implications of radicalism for women who might become too critical of its rule.

The result is that the country is steering a completely muted focus on women’s emancipation. It is stripped of its radicalism and political activism. De-politicization implies that women’s emancipation is seen in terms of service delivery and the fulfilment of their practical needs, far away from the political domain. The elements of nurturing a critical agency so that these women can come up for their own rights and identify their own desires, needs and demands are taboo.

This de-politicization and deradicalization of women’s issues has found backing by the leadership of the party as the country’s women and their concerns are isolated, insulated and further enforced by the establishment of the WAO. The tasks and roles of this WAO illustrate the struggle it has to endure to prove otherwise, if it would have intended to do so. It is not uncommon to hear political remarks on how much the party has done for women (in terms of constitutional rights and international conventions) and that it is up to the women themselves to take up the challenges of doing something with those instruments. Such perceptions show the party’s unwillingness to recognise women’s issues as political issues. The rationale is obviously that as long as women’s issues remain isolated from the rest of society, they will not be a threat to the political rule of the party or status quo. This diversion is kept firmly on track in terms of placing great emphasis on small achievements in “soft” issues affecting women (maternal health, education, and employment). Such emphasis is meant to not only mask the real needs of women’s empowerment, but to divert focus away from the demands for radical reforms.

The main mission of the WAO is to uphold the party’s agenda and plans. This means that the tokenistic gender mainstreaming is a mere façade. Gender mainstreaming is often seen as an end in itself. It is still carried out in terms of “making a plan to accommodate women”, or “fitting them in”, instead of considering a complete overhaul of the system. Actually, it is a mechanism to dilute the demands and rights of women to such an extent that they are perfectly fitted in into a context that does not clash with the ruling party’s interests. To oversee this smooth fitting in, the WAO is placed in charge clearly mandated to contain any demands for a complete “overhaul”. This makes one question

the perception of the government on what is understood under cross-cutting, especially since most plans, policies and programmes remain deficient of any ground-breaking “gender” (women) concerns.

The above discussion illustrates the ruling party’s vision on women’s emancipation. It is a rather different form of “woman question” than that in Lenin’s theory. It is part of a political programme, emerging from a repressive ruling party, aiming for maximum control and exploitation (like the Derg had done).<sup>109</sup> It is a National Women’s Programme given shape through the ruling party’s policy and decentralization mechanisms and closely monitored and guarded by its instruments (WAO, WABs and WADs). Diversion and violations are not accepted or tolerated.

But, this is not the end. That the party remains stubbornly on its mission to continue exploiting women and their emancipation does not mean that all civil society women are passive recipients to this. Civil society is advanced and growing. Their consciousness is expanding. They are buzzing with activism. There could be a new form of agenda brewing among these women. Could it be possible that the country has a new discourse on gender next to the state imposed programme? Chapter Seven will provide answers to this query.

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<sup>109</sup> There is no significant difference between the EPRDF’s and Derg’s “woman question” rhetoric.

## **Chapter 6                      Overview of the status of women in Ethiopia between 1974 and 2005: What are the changes?**

Considering the issues mentioned in the previous chapters, the status of women in Ethiopia was and still is deplorable. As a traditional society, the country is overtly religious. This implies a religious cultural setting that is very hard to evade when dealing with gender issues, which includes women's agency as a societal product. Women's agency has remained relatively undisturbed through time, which can be attributed largely to religious influences, but also to the dominant Amhara ethnic culture.

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the status of women from the time of the last emperor until the present in order to illustrate how they have been faring through these times. Pankhurst discussed how women's lives were remote from the changes that were sweeping the country at the level of the polity. This was mainly due to the monarchal ideology of the time that had remained relatively stable for centuries. But, when the monarchy was overthrown in 1974 and a new regime came to power, some changes were finally observed in women's ancient roles and status. It is imperative to analyse these changes because they can function as indicators of feminist traits and transformation of women's agency.

Changes are in general induced or influenced by global and local forces, but in the Ethiopian context, they seem to have been determined by the "selfish" interests of the ruling parties. Therefore, most changes in women's lives tend to take a paternalistic form and treated as tokenism leaving women feeling increasingly marginalized. The EPRDF/TPLF is actively engaged in this form of imposed, but contained, changes, determining the direction of women's agency development. This has serious consequences for the emancipation of women at large. The discussions on the status of women under this regime will most probably reveal all these and show how women's agency remains captured and manipulated.

It is only recently that women's issues in Ethiopia are gaining prominence among scholars. Issues that were considered insignificant in historical times are currently subjected to detailed analytical scrutiny. This is the reason why in the past, the documentation of women's issues was very limited while at present there seems to be no end to it. Increased education and awareness is adding more in identifying many of the issues that are seen as a problem to women. Many of these are found to be closely related to the cultural and religious fabric of society that has been taken for granted as the norm for centuries. That is why intervention in them was treated as taboo. The cultural and religious fabric of society includes issues such as child marriage, female genital mutilation, abduction, rape, domestic violence, marital rape and so forth. In early history though, these were not considered problems due to lack of education and awareness. These are changing now. The first steps have been taken and many more taken-for-granted cultural and religious practices are coming out of the taboo sphere into the open for reflection.

Not much had been documented on women's lives or issues in historical times. Marriage and division of labour were the primary issues among the few that received some attention. A few other issues deserving attention at the time were maternal health, education and employment. The first scholar to document anything on women was Pankhurst (1990). He is a remarkable scholar with great insight. He recorded the status and roles of women through the different historical time periods in the country covering the time from the Gondarine Period (approximately 1636) through the Middle Ages up to the nineteenth century. Within these time frames he noted that the position of women remained basically unchanged even though several interesting developments took place at court. He described women's traditional gender roles, mainly those related to their domestic responsibilities as static, barely touched by the modernization processes at court.

During the Derg regime (1974-1991), the same was noted even though the government established a separate association for women, the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association. Through this association it proclaimed revolutionary changes in the lives of women. However, a detailed scrutiny revealed that not much changed in either women's lives or their status. In spite of the lofty socialist struggles to draw women into the public sphere and reduce their workload, in reality they were betrayed and exploited. Their lives actually remained traditionally centred around their roles as wives and mothers (Tsehai 1984, p. 3).

The EPRDF/TPLF began its rule in a more promising vein in 1991. It allocated women their own departments and offices in the form of Women's Affairs and even drafted a policy framework of operations. However, as a result of the radical changes at the polity, these were obviously by-products, executed in a paternalistic and tokenish manner. Radical changes have never been envisaged by the regime. Its only aim is to exert maximum control. It is disappointing to admit that somehow "women" have been left behind. The discussions below will emphasise the visibility of women's status and aim to locate the changes that might have emerged through the last three decades and analyse these in the context of whether women's agency might have been given a boost.

## **6.1 Child marriage in the pre-1991 era**

Historically, the status of women was generally centred around marriage and the sexual division of labour because these were seen as their universal destination, irrespective their class or ethnicity. Brummelkamp (1956, p. 219) found that Ethiopian girls were married at a very young age at the time, which included the empresses. Girls were married at the age of seven or even younger, while men married later in life. It was common to find a couple with an age difference of 40 to 50 years, where the men were much older than their wives. All first marriages were arranged by parents. It is only when this marriage was dissolved that the girls were allowed to choose their own next husbands (ibid, p. 220). The issue of child marriage was accepted as the norm at the time. The documentation of this practice also illustrates that it was only mentioned as such and that there had been no critical analysis of its implications.

This destiny has not changed much through time (Fellows 1987, p. 2). Given the empty promises of the Derg and REWA to rid society of negative cultural practices that harm women, it remains puzzling how this was not considered a harmful practice. It continued undisturbed, encouraged and reinforced by religious systems (Alasebu 1988, p. 12).

Ironically, the emperor initiated the country's revised constitution in 1955 and civil code in 1951 that proclaimed women's equality at all levels, including granting them voting rights. This gesture was further taken up by the Derg regime that expanded the areas of women's rights. Regrettably, these gestures were merely symbolic. Both rulers did not know how to make those rights practical. They left the patriarchal setting of society relatively undisturbed, and conveniently remained ignorant of its implications. In fact, they simply refused to intervene in the socio-cultural practices that affected women negatively.

Given this and considering the many atrocities committed directly against women, these rulers should be held accountable. But, were those atrocities at the time even considered to be a problem? Glancing through the legal documents during these times, child marriage was considered a norm instead of an exception. And this was then reflected in the legal systems which made no pretension of who the boss in the family was.

Some of the articles were:

- the husband is the head of the family
- the husband can demand obedience from his wife
- the husband has control over his own and his wife's salary
- he establishes a common residence and administers common property
- property is registered in the name of the husband
- if he is unable to provide servants then the wife must do all household duties herself
- he guides family management
- he protects and guides his wife's conduct and restricts her choice of occupation
- the wife obeys him in all lawful things which he orders
- injuries inflicted on the wife which render her companionship less useful or less agreeable to the husband entitle him to claim damages against the accused.

(Sources: Fellows 1987, p. 3; Semagne 1986, p. 30; Alasebu 1988, p. 4; Zenebework 1976, p. 9; Semagne 1986, p. 19; 'The Woman Question in Ethiopia' 1973, p. 31).

Recent analyses reveal how much has been hidden or deliberately ignored in this practice and how much young girls have been suffering. These studies on child marriage might not be all-encompassing, but at least they have started to critically analyse the negative implications of the practice.

In the first place, child marriage has been blamed for many ills befalling women in terms of health and their further oppression, subordination, discrimination, subjection,

exclusion and marginalization. Child brides are just children, making them extra vulnerable. After marriage, child brides were placed directly under the supervision of their much older husbands and recognized as such in the Civil Code of the country. This implied that a child marriage was not one between equals due to its paternal-child nature. Child-brides started their marital lives as lives of absolute obedience, subjection and subordination. Eventually, it would not matter how many children these women would have throughout their lives or how old they would become, once the relationship started off on such a wrong footing, it would never recover sufficiently to become a relationship of two equals.

The second issue with child marriage<sup>110</sup> is that it is always arranged by parents and relatives. The reasons for doing so vary from economic to social status. Some scholars describe how young girls were used as a commodity (Semagne 1986, p. 20) to be sold, as private property (Zenebework 1976, p. 9), as bargaining chips ('The Woman Question in Ethiopia' 1973, p. 34), or for the unification of two families (Fellows 1987, p. 2). Child marriage also carried the hidden motives of controlling women's labour and sexuality. Virginitly was (and still is) highly valued and prized. This perception emerged mostly from religious sources where women's sexuality was seen as the worst possible evil that needed to be tamed and controlled before women even become aware of it themselves in puberty. Child marriage was thus fully endorsed by all the religious belief systems.

A third problem with child marriage was that it served as a tool to silence women's voices. Young girls and women were thus effectively robbed of their agency. Lured by the prospect of gaining respect, independence and love, many young brides would find themselves enslaved without a right or voice. No matter what form of marriage a woman contracted (church, civil and customary), all followed more or less the same pattern based on very restrictive rules for women as wives, stressing their roles and responsibilities, which multiplied overnight after their weddings. The only difference between these different forms of marriage was perhaps the marriage age for girls and boys. The lowest age of marriage set for girls was twelve and twenty for boys (Fetha Negest), followed by the civil code with fifteen for girls and eighteen for men (Lishan n.d. , p. 3). Customary practices often ignored these minimum age standards and marriages were found to be conducted among much younger children, even while they were still found on the back of their mother ('The Woman Question in Ethiopia' 1973, p. 31).

The practice of child marriage with all its consequences continued during the Derg regime. Tsehai Berhane Selassie (1984, p. 11) observed how marriage symbolized the direct subordination of women to men, which makes the ultimate assertion over their fertility and work. Alasebu Gebre Selassie (1988, p. 3) pointed out that "Women may be discriminated in various levels in different settings of the economic, political, social, cultural and religious environments, but, marriage seems to carry it all in a bundle".

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<sup>110</sup> This practice is found among all the major religious groups in society.

### 6.1.1 Child marriage at present

The emergence of a new political era in 1991 brought some hope for women. But these were not shared for long. It has become increasingly clear that historical, religious and cultural practices are hard to overcome, especially in traditional settings. The practice of early marriage or child marriage thus remained widely neglected and ignored, and has indeed been given a boost due to the EPRDF/TPLF's decentralization policy.

Marriage is still treated as the ultimate destiny for women, with variations among the urban educated. The minimum marriageable age of girls is eighteen (it used to be fifteen until the revised Family Law in 2000). In the Civil Code, traditional practices often override such laws. The Fetha Negest put the marriage age for girls at twelve centuries ago and Sharia law upholds an equally discriminatory position against the age of marriage of girls (in fact it has no age restrictions), while boys' age for marriage is set at sixteen (Tesfu 1996, p. 15). Regrettably, these outdated laws still dominate rural communities' perceptions of marriage. Girls are married as early as nine years (Adey 1998, p. 6).

The practice is still widespread and according to a baseline survey carried out by the National Committee on Traditional Practices in Ethiopia (NCTPE 1998, p. 66), 60% of marriages at national level take place below the legal age of marriage. These figures show strong regional variations with the Amhara region standing at 82%, Tigray at 79% and Benshangul Gumuz and Gambella at 64%. Some recent reports reveal that early marriage occurs at a rate of 54.6% at the national level (Tilahun 2005, p.13).

The main reason for its prevalence is that it continues to find justifications from conservative and traditional corners. Most of these carry economic motives among the many rural poor (not able to pay the bride price), or moral reasoning (control of sexuality and virginity). Under these banners, young girls are sacrificed in the name of traditions. And, even if it is a gross violation of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Federal Constitution and the newly introduced Family Code, the silence surrounding the practice prevails suspiciously.

The implications of early marriage are finally receiving attention and reveal the many hidden problems that had been ignored for a very long time. It appears that child marriage is devastating to young female children, literally robbing them of their lives. Beside health-related problems (heavy workload causing back problems or physical ailments, smoke inhalations from traditional stoves causing respiratory problems, domestic violence leading to health implications) it has a serious impact on their reproductive well-being. Engaging in early sex often results in child or teen pregnancy leading to complications that range from prolonged labour to difficult child birth. These in turn lead to fistula<sup>111</sup> among many young brides; 95% of fistula is said to emerge due to this (Yetenayiet 1998, p. 8-9).

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<sup>111</sup> Fistula is damage to the birth canal resulting in the unstoppable flow of urine and feces.

Early marriage halts the growth and development of young female children. Many become stunted due to poor nutrition, early sex and pregnancy which rob their small bodies of nutrients, negatively impacting their own growth and well-being. It is also associated with high levels of death (foetal, infant, child and maternal) (Tesfu 1996, p. 16), loss of educational opportunities, poverty, marital breakdown, and so on (Bogalech 2003, p. 12; Rakeb 1997, p. 4). Jelaludin *et al* (2001, p. 10) summarise the impacts of early marriage as the worst form of deprivation for girls in terms of denial of childhood and adolescence, curtailment of personal freedom and lack of opportunity to develop a full sense of selfhood as well as the denial of psychological and emotional well-being, reproductive health and educational opportunity.

And, as the years pass, more such data surface. One could assume the EPRDF/TPLF's massive women's machinery would take serious action against this practice. Regrettably, nothing is being done. Those data have been there for a decade or more and are piling up, but the ruling party remains fixed with an agenda that has no room for such diversions. In fact, what is appearing very clearly is that the decentralization policy of the government directly condones such practices in the name of cultural diversity where many ethnic communities use the practice as their identity marker.

### **6.1.2 Single women's status**

Beyond their destiny to get married, women had neither an existence nor an identity. Society had no image of single women. A few women found outside this institution of marriage were labelled as "prostitute,"<sup>112</sup> including girls who were not married at a given age in some communities.

The marriage system in the country showed many problems in historical times. When female children were married off at a very young age to men almost four times their seniors, some of their ages even being equal to their great grandfathers, it was bound to have a psychological impact. Regrettably, no studies have been carried out on this or on the impact of such age gaps in marriage or even on the issue of child marriage trauma on the women themselves. What has been documented (around the seventies) was the increase in single women in the cities (Tsehai, 1984:9). This increase was directly traced to the practice of child marriages that resulted in high divorce rates, widowhood or women who were not married. Zenebework Tadesse (1976, p. 10) had observed that an "estimated 60 per cent or more of Ethiopians are divorced...". Lishan Bekele (n.d., p. 6) had also encountered similar kinds of increase of single women in the towns. Beyond this statistical overview, there were no analytical references to the reasons for this increase.

Other studies later during the Derg regime also showed the same increase in divorce rates mainly because of the continued prevalence of child marriages and denial of women's rights (Tsehai 1984, p. 3). The estimate provided by some authors was around 60% of marriages (Fellows 1987, p. 4). High divorce rates in rural areas led to mass migration of divorced women to urban centres where many hoped to find employment. That would be a far-fetched reality as all of these women were married at very young ages lacking any

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<sup>112</sup> 'Sharmuta' (Amharic word for prostitute).

skill or training. Urban life would be equally harsh to them and in order to make ends meet, many ended up working in various menial jobs in the informal sector, or as domestic workers, or as prostitutes. The embellished articles on equal rights for women in the laws were nowhere to be found when these women were in desperate need of help. Lishan Bekele (n.d., p. 3) angrily points out that in such a case, the laws might as well as not have been there.

Single mothers accounted for almost a third of all the households in these urban centres (Alasebu 1988, p. 12). In 1978, it was found that 27% of the households were female headed by single, divorced or widowed women in Addis Ababa alone (Tsehai 1984, p. 16). No alimony for sustenance was expected of any type of marriage that ended in divorce. Not being able to find employment, women often created their own employment such as in petty trading, selling cooked food, drinks<sup>113</sup> and so on or working as domestic servants, daily workers in construction, prostitution or worse, ending up as beggars on the streets. With the mounting pressures of society, priests and their families, some divorced women would end up remarrying in order to feel “protected” and “safe” from stigmas and violence.

Most of the single women in historic times were thus divorcees, as it could be assumed that they were married according to the custom of their society. Given the traditional setting of Ethiopian society and the strong religious influences, it was even amazing that women would opt for a divorce. Divorce was seen as ostracizing divorced women who were seen as objects of social contempt and held in low esteem (Zenebework 1976, p. 10) by society. They would be blamed for many things, including witchcraft, and accused of prostitution. This perception of divorced women was actually a learned and cultivated reaction of society by patriarchal powers. Single women were not tolerated, not even when they could not be blamed for it. Divorce was always actively discouraged even if the wife would be subjected to daily tortures and abuses by her husband. Ironically, even the Fetha Negest stated that divorce was justified on the grounds of bodily harm (Prouty 1986, p. 228), but society refused to accept divorcees. It was therefore very traumatic for women to file for divorce. Given the patriarchal setting of protection of male interests, women opting for divorce would be blamed for it. This often resulted in divorced women ending up without any share in property division and shouldered with the responsibility to take care of their children. Many had no marketable skills and had been economically and psychologically dependent on their husbands. Understandably that many would opt for divorce as a last resort.

It can be said that a country's divorce laws are in fact a clear reflection of the country's level of emancipation of women, because divorce means that women dare to challenge the patriarchal shelter they are put under. Divorce shows the true colours of a government's intentions on women's liberation. Though women contribute the bulk of reproductive work (they carry almost 80% of all tasks involved in the maintenance and upkeep of their families and societies through their various roles), society literally and deliberately dooms them. The cultural intentions of child marriage can be read as denying them any form of education with the aim of keeping them in ignorance and as

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<sup>113</sup> Tela, tej and Aragi (home brewed traditional beer, honey drink and liquor).

unquestioning slaves of men. Religion also thrives on this ignorance of women to maintain its grip on their lives and thereby securing its own survival. There is a persistent denial of the realities of the time or the facts of high divorce rates. Politics and culture continue seeing women as either married or non-existent. The legal structures illustrate how there are no laws that address women's rights and issues as a part of their individual being. Most are sheltered under the family law where women are married.

At present there is more gender segregated data on population issues and many recent figures show an increase in female-headed households throughout the country. The numbers vary from a quarter to a third of all households between the different regions (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 39, Central Statistical Authority 2005, p.2) with up to 54% in some urban areas (Mamo 1995, cited in Tizita 2001, p. 58). Regrettably, the current ruling party remains void of any concrete measures to assist these women and the country's constitution does not deal specifically with this group. Though divorce laws might have improved, they do not guarantee protection, alimony for children and equal sharing of property. Many female-headed households imply women living alone with their children and/or parents and the latter being responsible for their well-being. It means that these women are mostly divorcees. The traumas of divorce often cause these women to find a means of living in desperate conditions where many live in abject poverty. The feminization of poverty takes root here. As many of these women lack any education and skills, one can but wonder why the government keeps turning a blind eye to their plight or existence. Once women are extremely poor, they are desperate and will take part in any initiative to relieve their suffering. The major thing is to trace this poverty and tackle it from the root. That includes the practice of child marriage and the problems associated with political decentralization.

## **6.2 Division of labour in the pre-1991 era**

Ethiopian society has a severe division of labour that is unique and harsh. Forbes (cited in 'The Woman Question in Ethiopia' 1973, p. 26) observed that it was not just labour that was demarcated along feminine or masculine lines, but that every aspect of women's and men's lives was divided along these lines. There were no neutral grounds (Semagne 1986, p. 23). These feminine and masculine areas covered all tasks, professions, festivals, funerals, cultural events, religious observations and so on. In short, they covered all human and social existence. Even in churches, places were reserved exclusively for women and men ('The Woman Question in Ethiopia' 1973, p. 26).

When observing and analysing this division of society and tasks, one cannot avoid realizing its exploitation of women. Historically, women's domains accounted for the heaviest work in society, without any luxury, leisure or reward. Most of their tasks were performed in a laborious, primitive manner due to a lack of innovation. For example, food preparation was often the most arduous task, very laborious, consuming lots of energy<sup>114</sup> and impacting women's health negatively because they had to spend long hours

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<sup>114</sup> This high-level energy consuming food preparation in a poor country where many rely on firewood as the only form of energy, has cost the country dearly in environment problems. The national forest level is said to have reduced from 16% in 1950 to 3.6% in the early 1980s and further to a mere 2.7% in 1989.

in smoke-filled kitchens. In this regard, Plowden (cited in Pankhurst 1990, p. 253) remarked that “Women’s involvement in such activity was so culturally ingrained that men would starve, rather than do this work”. A perception that has stood still through time.

The question posed could be who defined this division of masculine and feminine domains, when was this done and why? Considering the religio-social setting of Ethiopian society in historical times, it was obvious that the dominant ideological powers of the monarchy and religion combined have played a crucial role in this. In the previous chapter it was revealed that religion entered the country in its early days of canonization where religious texts had already omitted the importance of women’s roles in society. Ever since then, religion has played an influencing role in the lives of women defining their roles, responsibilities and behaviour in details.

All women’s tasks were thus read as naturally becoming them. At the same time those tasks were used against them. This was done to deprive them of any power base or change. This ideology of “naturally becoming” based on their biological roles labelled everything that women did as simple, natural and without any value, despite the fact that women could spend up to fourteen hours a day on those activities labelled as “no work”, sacrificing their health and even lives. For Ethiopians, the heavy load on women’s shoulders has never been considered an issue. It is mostly foreign visitors who started to take note of this and write about it. For example, Forbes (cited in Semagne 1986, p. 21 and in ‘The Woman Question in Ethiopia’ 1973, p. 26) explained how the lives of peasant women were such a dreadful drudgery that one could not avoid noticing it as an outsider. Her remark was that “To the Abyssinian woman falls the hardest of communal tasks throughout her life which prematurely ages and destroys her.” A Swiss missionary, Gobat (cited in Pankhurst 1990, p. 248) also noticed this, stating that the country’s women were “far more active and industrious than members of the opposite sex”.

But women were not only fully immersed in their household chores. They were also found actively engaged in numerous other tasks, such as the collection of firewood and water, grinding corn and cereals, preparing local alcoholic drinks such as *tej* and *tella*, and so forth. In most of the rural areas, they were found performing most of the agricultural tasks which included weeding, reaping and winnowing, while men were only engaged in plowing activities. Women also actively worked in other sectors of society such as trade, agriculture, handicrafts, pottery, weaving and spinning (Pankhurst, 1990, p. 248), or working as tattooists, hairdressers, poets, minstrels, dancers and singers at a funeral (Prouty 1986, p. 232) or in sorcery and prophecy.

This strict masculine and feminine demarcation galvanised the oppressed and subordinated status of women. As the religious forces were active in defining these distinctive areas, they were also active in allocating values to those. Given this traditional biased base, women’s feminine domains were seen as one of subordination and

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Estimates are that this has further reduced to 2.2% in 2000 (Million Bekele 2002, p.12, cited in Ayele Kuris 2003). On the other side, the laborious forms of food preparations often drained women’s energy leaving them exhausted and tired, negatively affecting their health status.

inferiority. It was placed at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy leaving them and their most laborious section of life invisible and unrewarded. In fact, one could question such placement. What was thus observed by many foreigners was actually the effective enslavement of women to the male dominated culture, politics, religion and economy.

Given this unjust division, femininity was used as a weapon and instrument. As a weapon it was used to justify women's absence from influential roles, the denial of education and their consequent arrested development and employment. In short, it was used as a weapon to deny women their basic human rights. As an instrument it was used to control women's behaviour, sexuality, labour, dress code, movement and so forth, in order to convert them into accepting the status quo as natural and universal. It means that women were kept busy to the point of exhaustion and they would have no time or energy left over to do anything else.

This discussion reveals that femininity was not seen as naturally becoming women, but, that it was a purposeful social construction. This can be better explained with the examples of how modernization and radical political transformations have deliberately continued to ignore women. While men had been carried away by modernization from their traditional roles and responsibilities, women were left behind and confined through sanctions. The trend that has been found among many traditional communities is that women usually carry the torch of their own exclusion and confinement. What makes women so willing to continue such practices that are openly hostile to their own advancement?

One of the main factors making women succumb to becoming submissive slaves of the patriarchal order is their socialization. Socialization has been, since ancient times, a form of teaching and educating the next generation into the cultural values and codes of society. The aim often is to preserve and enforce the status quo. Socialization is, however, flexible and subject to the dominant ruling ideological powers. If, through time, this ideological base does not change, but remains more or less static, it is obvious that a permanently biased socialization process emerges. And this is exactly what has been taking place in the Ethiopian context, where for hundreds of years one ideological perception has dominated the scene, namely the Amhara/Tigray culture. This culture left no room for independence, freedom, dialogue or democracy. The low status accorded to women at the time was not a unique phenomenon affecting only a particular group. It was aggressively promoted among all other ethnic groups in society.

Therefore, women had been rigorously socialized on their prescribed roles and responsibilities as naturally becoming them. Such distortion was the key to patriarchal control and rule and even preached as a god-given fact by all the religious groups in society. Given the time frame, women never dared to challenge or question its origin or base. Consequently, this low and subordinate status of women was observed among many of the ethnic groups in the country. Some of the ethnic groups treated women as even less than human or worse than slaves. For example, in the Amhara of Gondar, the husband was not only husband, but also the "master" of his wife (Semagne 1986, p. 18). Among

the Gurage, women lived in utmost servitude to their husbands, not even eating with him or being around him (ibid). With religion taking an active role in people's lives, it could easily be blamed for genuinely encouraging these practices and even daring to provide supernatural justifications for them.

Besides ideological indoctrination, girls were also taught on their feminine roles and responsibilities. And, this is where women played a leading role. Women as mothers, who had been deprived and discriminated against throughout their lives, were willingly passing their slavishness on to their daughters. They would provide skills training to their young daughters from a very tender age to carry on heavy domestic responsibilities. In fact, age formed no barrier and three-year old girls would be seen carrying wood and water with their mothers or helping with other chores of cooking and grinding. Mothers also taught their daughters the many cultural and social practices of the family and community, some of which were openly painful to them.

Why did women take this role upon themselves to pass their own suffering on to their daughters as norm? At the time, one could consider the lack of choices, or the lack of knowledge and awareness, or the traditional settings of society where violations were severely sanctioned, or the relative comfort and protection patriarchy misleadingly offered to women who complied obediently to their expectations, or worst, the coercion, force, repercussions, punishment or supervision meted out by male relatives as a form of control. So how could women defy something when they did not know any better, and when all seemed so natural? The intrusive presence of priests in their lives also made deviations unthinkable.

Girls' socialization was encoded with stereotypes and stigmatization. Stereotypes in Ethiopian society had a profound and powerful impact on women's behaviour and actions. Almost everything they did was the subject of stereotyping (see Annexure IV) which was specifically put in place to direct, guide and control women. Stereotypes were thus instrumental and used to enforce socialization of a new generation of young girls into the next generations of disciplined, silent protectors of the patriarchal status quo. This illustrates how stereotypes had been a product of patriarchy itself, which derived its power from the strict sexual division of labour. Within this, women were degraded among many of the ethnic groups in the country.

Women are socialized into accepting and internalizing these negative thoughts and beliefs that they are not worthy (Yeshi 1994, p. 59). They are also encouraged to know themselves through others and through their feminine tasks that forms the basis of their identity, which in turn deny them an integrated and autonomous identity of their own (Kasper 1986, p.40). Amazingly, most of the stereotypes circulated among women themselves, who used it as an effective tool to check and control each other's behaviour and actions. This practice of women using their own degrading culture against each other is stressed by Landman (2000, p. 185) where she explains that most of the degrading traditional practices against women are in fact practised and enforced by women to gain acceptability in a male-dominated culture. Issues such as female genital mutilation, widow inheritance, use of negative stereotypes against women who deviate from cultural

norms and traditions, and so on, are in fact perpetuated by women. Women are also known to instigate violence where mothers inform their married sons to divorce their barren wives or bring in another wife or have the wife beaten simply because of her clumsiness.

Given the time frame and context of Ethiopian society, women rarely deviated from the norm. The risk of becoming an outcast in their community contributed to their compliance to practices that directly undermined their own rights. They simply had no choices. The community (often within a religious cultural setting), was after all seen to provide security and protection. Compliance brought small rewards in the forms of help and assistance from neighbours in times of need, grief, or work sharing.

### **6.2.1 Division of labour at present**

As a historic product, this societal sexual stratification has been difficult to overcome. It hasn't undergone any transformation at all, not even among the urban educated. This is mainly because it has become intensely entwined in the cultural fabric of a traditional society. These traditional structures include the various traditional associations (Mahbers, Iqubs, Idirs and so on) that remain segregated. Most important is the role religion still plays in maintaining this status quo.

Educated or not, women abide by these cultural expectations, fearing ostracization and exclusion. Many are religiously active, implying a continuous monitoring of their actions and responsibilities either by their respective religious leaders or by themselves. This can also explain why many educated women refrain from openly challenging the status quo or venturing out independently. The strong persistence of religious pressure and traditional expectations makes them abstain from upsetting the given setting.

However, it is not only stereotypes, religious indoctrination or fear of alienation that keeps such traditional and cultural perceptions of women intact, it should also be attributed to the women themselves who have failed to make an ideological departure from this and transform themselves. It is known that women abide by social control (obey social rules) even when no sanctions would follow. It is a matter of an internalized hidden audience that enforces the rules (Becker 1960, p. 34 cited in Etzrodt 2008, p. 163). Many educated and working women still carry the sole responsibility of their feminine domains of responsibility and have to make sure that with or without their presence, those areas remain undisturbed within the patriarchal order. This includes their domestic and community responsibilities. In short, men are not supposed to feel or miss women's presence in the field. This has led to the proliferation of nannies, housemaids, cooks and laundrettes for assisting educated and employed women in their feminine responsibilities. One can assume that even in a rather modernized environment, such as in urban centres, not much has changed in the traditional feminine perceptions of masculine expectations.

And thus, while men's areas of work have seen tremendous technological advancement, women's work remains excluded and confined to traditional forms of operation. Kagoiya, Chesoni and Wanyeki (2000, p. 11) call this the heterogenization of male work and

homogenization of female work. Heterogenization means that male domains of work have been diversified, transformed and expanded, while homogenization implies that women's work remain the same, unaltered and continuous. For example, food preparation methods have not undergone dramatic changes and remain laborious and time consuming. The combination of high fuel prices and lack of alternatives still sees urban women actively using firewood and charcoal for food preparation instead of electric or gas stoves. Traditional food preparation also includes grinding and making one's own spices, one of the most laborious activities, instead of purchasing those ready-made from the markets. The (completely unfounded) argument often used is that men are fond of the way their wives prepare the food. Such flattering keeps wives imprisoned in the patriarchal paradigm.

And, with more and more women employed in the professional or informal sector, many have seen their days extended, sacrificing all their time, while their contributions remain invisible, undervalued and unrecognized. This all contributes immensely to their lack of time to be engaged in activities linked to their emancipation.

### **6.3 Women's health in the pre-1991 era**

Considering the low status of women and their extremely heavy workloads, it would come as no surprise that they suffered greatly in their health. Being married at very young ages and exposed to hazardous forms of work, young girls experienced the worst forms of health complications imaginable. Carrying loads on their backs literally contributed to the vulnerability of their back, legs, necks and arms, cooking in smoke-filled kitchens affected their breathing capacity and lungs and further complications of early pregnancy and childbirth all caused their health to deteriorate rapidly. However, these health issues were not considered an issue. The only health issues getting any form of attention was maternal health linked to women's expected roles as mothers.

These other health issues, though, were not a mystery or secret. Some of the health concerns included malaria, tuberculosis, venereal diseases, intestinal parasites, and so on. Added to these were women's extreme heavy workloads that required lots of physical energy, compounded by a lack of proper nutrition, traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage and related sexual intercourse, pregnancy and complications at very young ages leading to fistula problems, severe domestic abuse and violence, abduction and rape, discriminatory diets during pregnancy, removal of front teeth, and so forth. Indeed, the status of women was one of deprivation leading to high levels of early mortality. It was also known that the country had a serious problem regarding health care and nutritional status. And women's poverty exacerbated their already vulnerable status. But despite all this knowledge, nothing was done to remedy these problems. There were not even enough health centres in the country.

#### **6.3.1 Health status of women at present**

By 1991, data revealed that the country had one of the world's poorest health status. Services were poorly allocated, inequitably staffed, underutilized and underfunded.

Within this paucity of health services, women were at the losing end even though their health was seen as a major parameter to the health of their families (especially children) and that of society at large. Health determines the production and activity rate and is crucial for the well-being of women themselves in order to pursue their goals.

The traditional make-up of society continues to confine women's health status to their maternal well-being. Nothing else is considered beyond this domain. This means that unmarried women's health is seldom treated as an issue of concern and left out of statistics and data. These include health complications due to violence, or exposure to harmful working environment, or health implications due to their heavy workload or taking care of HIV/AIDS infected partners and sick and ailing family members, or contracting communicable diseases. Health is also not measured in terms of women's culturally discriminatory treatment in regard to harmful practices and definitely not calculated in terms of a package of factors that determines the state of well-being for women. This includes adequate nutrition, safety and security, respect and value, freedom from violence, intimidation and harassment, bodily and sexual integrity, freedom of oppression, and so on. The psychological implications of restrictive cultural and religious practices are certainly never considered as a health problem where many women might suffer severe forms of depression and mental problems.

The EPRDF/TPLF introduced its first National Health Policy in 1993 around the same time as the Population Policy, Education Policy, or Women's Policy. According to the Ministry of Health, this health policy gave appropriate emphasis to the needs of deprived rural people (Women's Affairs Department at the Ministry of Health 2003, p. 19). Five years later, in 1998, the Health Sector Development Programme (HSDP I) emerged with much greater emphasis on the health care needs of the rural population, including women. This was a five-year programme. However, despite this extensive focus, a mid-term review revealed that the health status of women had further deteriorated instead of improved (ibid, p. 20). Perhaps this could be blamed on the gender insensitivity of the programme. High priority was placed on disease prevention (MoFED 2002, p. 98) translated into mass immunization programmes. This short-sightedness failed to address the specific health problems associated with women's reproductive roles, malnutrition, shortage of drugs, patriarchal culture where men deny women access to health care, lack of medical facilities and medical personnel, workload related health problems, health problems due to the trauma of rape, abduction, violence, abuse, and so forth.

Despite these shortcomings, a second HSDP was developed for the period between 2002/03 and 2004/05. It is as if the mistakes and shortcomings mentioned in the first health programme were never there, because this programme makes the same mistakes. Its goals have remained unaltered, focusing on the improvement of the overall health status of the population (rural population in specific), again stressing only preventable diseases. An innovation has been the introduction of a "health extension package" which aimed at effective prevention and control of communicable diseases with community participation (MoFED 2002, p. 99; Women's Affairs Department at the Ministry of Health 2003, p. 27). But this is also not sufficient to address the real health concerns of women.

It can be convincingly stated that this health programme of the ruling party suffers from the same problem as its other policies, namely the problem of inaccurate strategizing to put those policies into practice. It is a problem that can be associated with its top-down approach and a political agenda that has different goals in mind rather than the well-being of its population. For example, the accurate implementation of this health programme would require much more in terms of training of new health workers, facilitation of medicinal and equipment supplies, accessibilities and information, gender strategizing of health care, and so forth. But there is no evidence that the ruling party has plans in that direction to make its strategies concrete.

The basic measurement of women's health status through their maternal well-being looks very grim at present. With the national fertility rate dropping from 6.74% in 1994 (with 4.5% for urban and 7.2% for rural areas) to 5.9% in 2000 (Assefa 2004, p. 17), the population in 2005 was 78 million people while the annual population growth was 2.7%. Urban women are found to have significantly fewer children (2.4 children per woman) than their rural counterparts (6.0 children) with regional variations ranging from 3.3 in Addis Ababa to 9.8 children for women in Somali (Central Statistical Authority 2005, p.4). This high fertility rate can be attributed to the lack of access to contraceptive methods combined with the high prevalence of religious and traditional values. Though knowledge of family planning is high (88%), contraceptive use increased marginally from 2.9% in 1990 to 6.3% in 2000 (Hiruy 2004, p. 21; Bogalech 2003, p. 11). This use, though, shows strong urban-rural differences with the majority of users found in urban centres.

Of the enormous population, the majority (44%) are found in the age category under 15. The median age of first marriage is stated as 16.4 years (Ermias 2003, p. 2). This shows the high prevalence of child marriages. Thus 62% of women between the ages 25 and 49 are married. Urban women tend to marry later than rural women. The median age for first marriage is highest in Addis Ababa (21.9 years) and lowest in Amhara (14.2 years). Men enter into first marriage almost eight years later than women with a median age of 23.8 years at first marriage for the age category 25 to 59 years (Central Statistical Authority 2005, p. 4). Life expectancy has shown a slight improvement, increasing from 44 years in 1970 to about 52 in 1994. However, this trend declined again to 42 years due to the high HIV/AIDS prevalence by 2000 (Assefa 2004, p. 17).

Maternal mortality rates are extremely high in Ethiopia standing at 1,400 per 100,000 live births or 33,000 annually in 1990. In 1996 the estimate was 560-850 per 100,000 live births (Women's Affairs Department, Ministry of Health 2003, p. 18; Negussie 1996, p. 5). In 2005, the World Bank (2005, p. 187) estimated it at 790 to 3,200/100,000. Infant mortality rate is equally high, standing at 166/1000 in 2005 (ibid). The country continues to score low on the Gender Development Index, being ranked 142<sup>nd</sup> out of 162 (Ermias 2003, p. 2).

Most of the maternal deaths (about 53%), according to the national program of action for children and women (1996-2000), are caused by direct obstetric-related problems such as

abortion, haemorrhage obstructed labour, and ruptured ulcers (Bogalech 2003, p. 11). Abortion ranks among the highest causes, standing at 32% (Ermias 2003, p. 3). The widely practised system of early marriage also contributes dramatically to the high rate maternal and child mortality. Early pregnancy is one of the leading causes of health problems among young brides where the problem of fistula is one of the most serious (Adey 1998, p. 6).

### **6.3.2 HIV/AIDS: further crippling women's fragile status**

A new problem emerging in society is HIV/AIDS. Its spread since it was detected in 1984 (Negussie 1996, p. 6) is massive. The country accounts for nearly 9% of the global infection rate. In 1999, the registered HIV/AIDS incidence rate was about 10% of the adult population between the ages 20 and 49; 50% of these were women (Bogalech 2004, p. 42; Fekerte 2004, p. 11). The infection rate for pregnant women in Addis Ababa, was 15.1% while in Bahr Dar it was 20.8% (Ministry of Health 2002, in Fekerte 2004, p. 9).

Though the risks for infection are equal for both women and men, women are more susceptible to the disease. This is due to their biological make-up (larger reproductive area), socio-cultural (biased perceptions, women's subordinate status and women's inability to negotiate), gender (discrimination and exclusion), economic (dependency, poverty), and political and legal factors (laws discriminating against women, lack of decision making power) (Fekerte 2004, p. 12-15; Sehin 2000, p. 16). These factors combined illustrate the relative inability and powerlessness among women to protect themselves. And, being aware of the socio-political climate in the country, it is very obvious where the problems lie.

Traditional practices whereby women are directly coerced into unequal relationships (through early marriage and abduction) tend to affect women more than men. Many other practices, such as rape, FGM, multiple partners of husbands who refuse to use condoms, polygamy, widow and wife inheritance, lack of economic and educational opportunities, also put women at greater risk (Fekerte p. 2004:10; Bogalech 2003, p. 13). For example, while male promiscuity (including among married men) is culturally condoned and widely accepted, women are severely sanctioned when doing the same. This is why the infection of men with the HIV/AIDS virus is seen as an unfortunate incident, while women are victimized and criminalized for it. They are accused of promiscuity and unfaithfulness. This often seriously affects their social standing in society, even when they are not to be blamed for it, leading to their hesitation to come forward when infected. And, besides becoming victims, women are also burdened with the care of HIV/AIDS victims.

A discouraging issue in the country is the lack of sex education in schools or even in private homes. Teenagers, who are at higher risk of contracting the disease, often find out that they are infected when it is too late. In a Behavioural Surveillance Survey, carried out in 2003, it was revealed that the knowledge level about HIV/AIDS is lower among female youth than among males (Fekerte 2004, p. 15). In similar manner, misconceptions about contracting the disease circulate widely, so that many assume they are not at risk.

The strong religious setting of society also contributes to a level of denial among religious followers. Many refuse to believe that their children are sexually active or that their partners have concubines.

Some disheartening information was shared by the participants of the Gender Forum in 2004 on how HIV/AIDS is used as an instrument for other purposes. For example, there is the incident of deliberate infection by HIV/AIDS infected people, the prevalence of sexual intercourse with minors in order to cure the disease, or the increasing trend among the poor to sell drugs that were provided to them for free, in order to purchase food (*Reflections* 11, 2004, p. 28-29). The most worrying issue is that female victims of HIV/AIDS still find themselves misinformed, excluded and discriminated when it comes to treatment and access to HIV/AIDS drugs and information.

#### **6.4 Education of women in the pre 1991-era**

One of the most crucial areas of measurement of change in women's status is their education. As the country transformed itself at the political level, education was used as a crucial instrument. Chapter Two revealed that in historical times, very few women had access to education. Those were mainly women from the elite, noble and ruling classes. The majority of women had never received any form of education.

This changed during the fifties when more girls started to join schools. However, their numbers continued to be marginal. When the Derg assumed political power, education for women formed an integral part of its mass literacy campaign. Many women joined these literacy classes and it could be safely stated at the time that the literacy level of society increased from eight to 62% (Lishan, n.d., p. 9). However, drop-out rates, especially among women, also started to climb towards the end of the first decade of the Derg's rule. This in itself revealed that nothing was done to relieve girls of the traditional cultural chains of practices, demands and obligations. Despite the repressive political climate during the Derg regime, where education was compulsory for all women and men, women's enrolment started to decline very soon after the initial boosted increase. An illustration of this can be provided through the percentage of girls' enrolment in 1974 which was reported to be 32%. Fifteen years later that figure had increased slightly to 38%. Similarly at the junior level the percentage had slightly increased from 30% in 1974 to 40% in 1988 while at secondary senior level the increase was from 24% to 38% (Tesfu 1996, p. 42).

##### **6.4.1 Education of women at present**

More data on women's education started to emerge after the Derg regime, when the EPRDP/TPLF party had taken over the country in 1991. It introduced a new education policy in 1993 which was very promising and well-adjusted to the global demands on education. This policy aimed to correct many of the ills in the education sector that had emerged during the Derg era. Its general objectives were to transform the masses into genuine critically thinking citizens with problem-solving capacities focusing on human development through the cultivation of a critical and questioning psych ('Education and

Training Policy' 1993, p. 3). It further aimed to make the public productive members of the community with respect for human rights and democratic values (MoFED 2002, p. 92). The policy had also clearly outlined strategies for implementation which included a revision of the education curricula, non-formal education and training, teachers' training and so forth. However, at this early stage in the TPLF/EPRDF rule, girls' education was not significantly addressed.

The education policy of 1994 (promulgated for five years) was more promising in this regard. It embarked on the same path as the first one using more or less the same language as the first policy of 1993 with similar goals and strategies.<sup>115</sup> But it started to pay attention to girls' education and the numerous problems in the education sector. To counter the problems of the low enrolment rate of girls in the education sector, the policy outlined some strategies, such as the construction of toilets in rural schools, increasing the number of female teachers and preparing teaching materials that would be free of gender biases. And there were more such lofty promises.<sup>116</sup> It was also overzealous like the Derg in promising to tackle the cultural factors that form an obstacle to girls' education. This by itself illustrates the presence of an awareness of such problems because the ruling party even outlined which of such problems it intended to tackle. These were mentioned as the heavy workloads of women and the factors demanding the girl-child's labour, such as water and fuel and wood carrying over long distances that take a lot of their time. The ruling party even promised to provide guidance and counselling for female students in order to encourage their attendance at technical and scientific courses. Further initiatives included the introduction of affirmative measures for female students at admission for tertiary level education and reducing their entrance qualifications (Aster *et al* 2002, p. 79).

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<sup>115</sup> The education policy had set out four major goals:

- To produce good citizens who understand, respect and defend the constitution, students who respect democratic values and human rights, develop attitude for research and work and capacity to solve problems, develop skills in various professions and with a sense of citizenship to participate in and contribute to the development of community and the nation
- To realize the goal of universal primary education through expanding access and coverage of primary education with equity and improved quality
- To meet the demand for manpower at all levels for the socio-economic development needs of the country, both qualitatively and quantitatively, through the vertical integration of the secondary, technical and vocational and higher education programmes, and
- To build capacity within the education system for sustainable development of the system through organizational capacity building for programme implementation continuous innovation, and quality leadership at various levels (MoFED 2002, p. 92).

<sup>116</sup> The policy also emulated, among others, the following initiatives to encourage girls' education:

- Ensure that the curriculum developed and textbooks prepared at central and regional levels, are based on sound pedagogical and psychological principles and are up to international standards, giving due attention to concrete local conditions and gender issues (3.1.3).
- Special attention will be given to the participation of women in the recruitment, training and assignment of teachers (3.4.10)
- Special attention will be given to women and to those students who did not get educational opportunities in the preparation, distribution and use of educational support inputs (3.7.7)
- Educational management will be democratic, professional, efficient and will encourage the participation of women (3.8.3)
- The government will give financial support to raise the participation of women in education (3.9.5) (Etsegenet 2003, p. 9).

However, detailed scrutiny of this policy reveals many shortcomings. And these shortcomings are not of an insignificant nature. For example, it has failed to acknowledge the problems of education resources and equipment. Schools are poorly equipped and staffed, running on low budgets and causing extremely poor quality services and delivery. Constructing more schools without the accompanied resources (material and manpower) spells disaster. One of the major problems is the failure of this policy to recognize the crucial link between education and employment, between rural and national development and macro-economic market demands, and so forth (Habtamu 1999, p. 1). This is very important because such failure can lead to dire consequences in the future. For example, the educated will be ill-equipped and incompetent to tackle the numerous development problems of the country, a problem that is already surfacing everywhere.

In the end, what matters more than *de jure* intentions is the *de facto* reality on the ground. The irony with this promising policy is that, even though strategies have been outlined for its implementation, the level of girls' education does not show any dramatic change between 1994 and 2005. Girls' enrolment ratios remain low and the gender disparity between the different regions and between the rural-urban divide also seems to have increased. Out of the total population<sup>117</sup> of the country above 10 years in 1994, 23% were literate. From this, 30% are men and 17% women. Between the urban-rural divide, 69% of the urban population is literate against 15% of the rural population (Central Statistical Authority 1998, p. 9). Again, among the urban gender divide, 77.4% males and 60.6% females are literate against the rural gender divide of 21.3% males and 8.6% females (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 14). The World Bank (2005, p. 43) has observed that throughout the years of the existence of this education policy, the illiteracy rate among women remains stable, hovering around 75%, and 50% for men.

The general enrolment rate though, shows a rapid increase all over the country. For example, the primary school enrolment has more than doubled from 24% in 1994 to 57 % in 2000 for grades one to eight. This can be attributed to the massive new entrants at Grade 1 during the years 1994-1996. After 1997 this pace has slowed down a bit (World Bank 2005, p. 197). By 2001/2002 the figure was 69.3% (75.6% for boys and 64.2% for girls) in Addis Ababa while in some regions such as Somali and Afar, the figures are 2.6% (3.9% for boys and 1% for girls) and 4.2% (4.2% for boys and 4.1% for girls) respectively.

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<sup>117</sup> In 1994 the population was estimated to be approximately 53.5 million. By 2005 this number had already reached 78.986 million. The majority of this population (about 86.3 per cent) lives in rural areas. The total population is said to grow at 2.92% per annum while the urban population grows at an average of 4.38% per annum (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 3). The population of people below the age of 15 years makes up 45.4% while the elderly (above 64 years) only constitute 3.2% (*ibid.*).

**Table 1: Gross and net enrolment rates (%) by age group and levels of school**

Urban/Rural Sex	Age = 7-12 (in primary)		Age= 13-14 (in Junior)		Age= 15-18 (In senior)	
	GER <sup>118</sup>	NER <sup>119</sup>	GER	NER	GER	NER
Urban + Rural						
Both Sexes	25.1	12.2	21.7	5.0	11.3	5.1
Males	28.7	12.9	23.5	4.9	12.7	5.1
Females	21.3	11.5	19.9	5.2	9.9	5.2
Urban						
Both Sexes	95.3	59.2	88.0	25.7	53.7	27.0
Males	96.7	60.3	90.2	26.0	62.0	28.8
Females	93.9	58.3	86.0	25.4	46.8	25.5
Rural						
Both Sexes	15.7	5.9	9.2	1.1	3.0	0.9
Males	20.0	6.9	12.1	1.2	4.3	1.0
Females	11.0	4.8	6.0	0.9	1.7	0.7

(Source: Table 3.5, The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia, Results at Country Level, Volume I, Statistical report, 172-173, in Jelaludin et al 2001, Table 3, p. 25)

Gross enrolment was very low in 1994. Only about 25% of children aged 7-12 in the country are enrolled in primary education. This number is 21.7% for children aged 13-14 and much less at the age group 15-18, where the number of students at senior secondary school stands at 11.3%. The net enrolment, compared to the actual number of children in school, is very low. It stands at 12.2% for the age group 7-12, 5% for junior secondary school and 5.1% at the senior secondary levels.

By 1999/2000, primary enrolment had increased tremendously. For males it was 60.9% against 40.7% for females, in 2000/2001 the figures were 67.3% for males against 47.0% for females and in 2001/2002 the figures were 71.7% for males and 51.1% for females. At secondary level the numbers remained more or less the same with a jump by the school year 2000/2001. In 1999/2000 the figures showed 12.0% males against 8.5% females, 2000/2001 had 14.7% males against 10.9% females and as late as 2001/2002 showed an increase of 20.5% males against 13.7% females. At university level there were also some positive outcomes with an increase of female enrolment from 19.7% in 1999/2000 to 21.0% in 2000/2001 and further to 28.8% in 2001/2002 ('Shadow Report' 2003, p. 11-12).

<sup>118</sup> GER (gross enrolment ratio in primary education is defined as the ratio of students in primary education divided by the total number of children aged 7-12 years (per cent) in the country (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 25).

<sup>119</sup> NER (net enrolment ratio) is defined as the ratio of students in primary education aged 7-12 divided by the total number of children aged 7-12 (per cent) in school. The same is for the other grades (*ibid.*).

**Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Population Aged 5 Years and Over by Status of School Attendance, Sex, Urban and Rural, Ethiopia: 1994**

Urban/Rural	Status of School Attendance			
	Attending Now	Attended in the Past	Never Attended	Not Stated
Country Total	9.59	12.53	77.44	0.44
Male	11.43	16.11	72.07	0.39
Female	7.74	8.91	82.86	0.40
Urban Total	33.73	34.28	31.37	0.62
Male	35.93	39.12	24.42	0.52
Female	31.71	29.85	37.73	0.71
Rural Total	5.55	8.89	85.16	0.41
Male	7.55	12.48	79.60	0.37
Female	3.49	5.20	90.85	0.45

(Jelaludin *et al* 2001, Table 1, p. 21)

On the educational gender differences, Table 2 reveals that school attendance is very low. Almost 77.44% of school aged children never attended school which is divided among urban and rural where even in urban areas more than 31% never attended. The situation is worst in rural areas standing at 85.16% (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 22).

Regional differences remain stark where there are no significant difference in enrolment in Grade 1 in Tigray, Amhara, Dire Dawa, Harari and Addis Ababa. In Afar, Oromia, Beninshangul, SNNPR and Gambella, girls' enrolment remains far less than the national standard. In the academic year 2000/2001, in the senior secondary schools in Addis Ababa, 50.4% of the students were female while Gambella, Somali, and SNNPR had 18.3%, 28.6%, and 31.4% female attendance rate respectively (Aster *et al* 2002, p. 79).

With still less girls attending school, the problems of the education sector remain manifold. The worst deficiency is noted in its quality which is supposedly caused by badly qualified teachers, large class sizes, and shortage of teaching materials. A further dip in quality comes from the shift system, where the schools are run on a shift basis due to the shortage of schools and the increase in enrolment. This shift (introduced by the Derg regime to accommodate the expanding student population due to lack of schools in many areas including urban centres) causes cuts in education time, reducing it to a few hours a day. A final blow comes from the policies that have placed extra burdens on families and include the non-repeatable grade terms after Grade 8 and then again after Grade 10. If students fail during the state exams that are given in these grades, they are not allowed to repeat the year. Many youngsters therefore drop out at the tender and most vulnerable ages of 15 to 17. Those, whose parents can afford to catch up on this poverty-threatening device, send their kids to private schools or training institutions. The majority, however, among which are millions of girls, remain out of school.

According to the World Bank, although the number of students has increased dramatically at all levels of the education system, especially in urban areas, the harrowing

scenario is that the urban average completed grade for male adults remains at 5.5 years in 1999 (World Bank 2005, p. 69). This explains the hypocrisy of boosting massive enrolments at primary Grade One and the neglect of the same at higher educational levels. It shows complete negligence on the impact of policies that gravely affect youngsters at the peak of their educational careers when they are not allowed to repeat.

From the above discussions it can be concluded that this education policy plays a direct role in the increased level of poverty in the country. And this is not only due to children dropping out of school, but also to its incompatibility with the demands of the labour market. And, the longer this policy remains functional, the more problems it will create. In fact, it is already becoming evident. The country lacks a serious adequate educated and competent work force. High enrolment and perhaps even increased completion rates should not be read as signs of quality. Among the educated, only a small group may find employment due to the lack of sufficient jobs. According to Habtamu Wondimu, among the educated, where more than 57,000 graduates enter the labour market on an annual basis, only a fraction of them actually gain any form of employment (Habtamu 1999, p. 2). And, most worrying is the academic excellence of the students where many graduates display serious flaws in knowledge and skills.

This Second Education Policy of 2000 also leaves room for improvement of female education. In this regard, the Women's Affairs Department (WAD) at the Ministry of Education is given the responsibility to tackle the problems associated with the low level of female education and improve their enrolment rates. Its mandates include working closely with the ESDP (Education Sector Development Programme) core group to make sure gender is mainstreamed, give assertiveness training to female students in various higher education institutes, organize gender sensitizing workshops for individuals writing textbooks, and so on. Interventions have also been made to enhance the enrolment rate of girls through the publication and apparent distribution of a handbook on guidelines on the preparation of gender sensitive teaching and learning textbooks by the ministry of education in March 2000 (Etsegennet 2003, p. 13). In December 2001 another such publication was circulated on "Gender Perspective Guidelines/Checklist for Programme/Project Planning in Ethiopia" by the WAO in the Ministry of Economic Development and Co-operation (MEDAC) (ibid, p.17). But again, as has been mentioned above, the WAD faces many problems of its own and is not capable to undertake the implementation of the education policy, including its mandates.

However, considering that none of the interventions were bearing positive results in achieving the education policy's objectives and goals, several new initiatives were introduced. One of those is the introduction of a new civic and ethic education curriculum in the education system within grades five to twelve in 2004. According to Amare Bizuneh (2004, p. 128-129), this curriculum is set out to contribute positively to the development of the country by enabling

...youngsters to become aware of democratic values and principles as exercised in the country and become active participants in their communities, to engage them in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of development policies, to create awareness on gender equality issues and tackle

the problems of traditional practices that discriminate against women, and to create problem solving citizens” (emphasis author’s).

This curriculum gives priority to eleven values and principles that include democracy, the rule of law, equality, equity and justice, patriotism, responsibility, industriousness, self-reliance, savings, active community participation, and the pursuit of wisdom (ibid, p. 137). Within the sections of equality and equity gender emerges as one of the subjects, but remains fragmented and marginal. As this curriculum is new, it may take a few years before its outcomes will be visible (Etsegenet 2003, p. 16).

A second initiative undertaken by the ruling party is the introduction of affirmative measures to promote girls’ education at tertiary level. In fact, the Ministry of Education had already introduced such measures in 1991/92 during the transition period. This was done through the lowering of the Grade Point Average (GPA) requirement for female students by 0.2 points for entering institutions of higher learning. It led to a slight increase in female enrolment among the undergraduate and post-graduate programmes.

But, enrolment was not the only problem in girls’ education. More troublesome were their areas of interest, where many were found to be concentrated in colleges of social sciences, business and economics, teacher education, and health education (Aster *et al* 2002, p. 79). To remedy this and encourage girls’ enrolment in other studies, a quota system was introduced in the 1996/1997 academic year. This quota required 20% of seats at some departments with a low female enrolment such as law, economics, accounting, were to be reserved for female students (Emezat Hailu 2001, p. 56).

It is therefore disappointing to note that these initiatives are not bearing fruit. Girls’ enrolment rate at higher education continues to remain low. Indeed, the rate has declined during 2002/3 and 2003/4 (Ministry of Education 2005, p. 5). Seen against the perspective of a rapidly growing student population, this is of serious concern. What could be the causes? Various studies have burrowed through this problem and analyses reveal that there are too many causes that are equally complex to deal with. The causes can be found among all societal factors and include economic (poverty), political (lack of enforcement mechanisms), social (demand for the girl-child labour), cultural (traditional, religious and customary perceptions and practices such as early marriage, attitude, and so on), and in-school factors (school distance, few female teachers, lack of role models, lack of mentorship for women in universities, scarcity of study materials, harassment and coercion, gender insensitive regulations and attitudes, no special assistance and support for girls) (Etsegenet 2003, p. 6-7; Amanuel & Mulugeta 1999, p. 19-24).

Besides these factors, the role of the political, economic and social environment in restraining girls’ education should not be ignored, especially their higher education where their drop-out rate is of serious concern. Politically, the government could be blamed for directly or indirectly defeating its own policies and laws regarding girls’ education. For example, besides its failure to change negative cultural and oppressive perceptions and practices against girls’ education, it looks as if it promotes those through its decentralization policies. Decentralization is based on the premise of promoting and protecting the cultural and religious diversity of the different ethnic groups. These

cultural and religious diversities are often expressed through norms and values that are very detrimental to women's advancement, emancipation and education, often contributing to high drop-out rates among female students in many of the regional states. The federal government though, remains silent and refuses to intervene to guarantee the rights of women. This results in the illiteracy rate of women remaining at an all-time high of 75 per cent despite the lofty education policy and government's efforts (Ethiopia National Action Plan 2000, p. 128).

Economically, poverty can be cited as the main scourge of girls' education. Parental economic status determines whether girls are given the opportunity to attend school and remain there. Poverty is also decisive in determining whether girls will be able to continue higher education and do not get absorbed in social obligations to help their families or are married off at young ages.

Socially, the very issue of girls attending higher education is seen as a source of concern among many in traditional settings. Higher education implies older girls attending school. And this seems incompatible in a society where girls' marriages still take precedence over their continued education. The guiding perception on women's identity remains interlocked with being a wife and mother. It is with this in mind that one could relate to the reality of only a few girls entering higher education and with the high drop-out rates at this level.

### *Education curricula and state indoctrination*

What about these few educated women then? Could they not take up a strong leadership role and demand changes in the representation of women in all sectors of society? This question is very dubious because, for women to claim their rightful place in society implies an education system that could cultivate the qualities of critical thinking and consciousness and pave the road for their leadership. This seems to be missing even though the ESDP stipulates such intentions. Analyses reveal that the problems are not in the laws and policies, but in the implementation of these. What is being taught and what the laws and policies proclaim seem to be two completely different things.

The education curricula in the country have been subject to many revisions, starting at the time of the emperor, who had introduced education in the country. Curricula have been historically seen as the pawn of the power holders. It plays the dual role of preservation of the status quo and change. From its onset, it has been in the hands of the ruling class, transforming from its traditional outlook which was dominated by the church, to more modern forms. Emperor Haile Selassie was meticulously involved in defining what society could learn or not, barring political courses from the education curricula. Consequently, the Derg injected its own philosophy in the education curricula which included intensive indoctrination on socialism. The EPRDF/TPLF does not remain far behind and has immediately taken control of this powerful instrument to advance its own political agenda. Lectures remain censored and the new civic and ethical curriculum voices overtly its intentions of misinformation and distortion.

The EPRDF/TPLF regime is charming when convincing outsiders of its plans and intentions to develop the country and its people. As such, the inclusion of gender in the education curricula might have been one such intention that was never meant to move beyond rhetoric. Etsegennet Wondimagegnehu conducted a study in 2003 on the inclusion of gender in the education curricula. It was not surprising that she found many disparities and deficiencies. She discovered that certain gender expressions, stereotypes and biases had been retained in some of the textbooks (Etsegennet 2003, p. 20-21) in spite of the intention of the Ministry of Education to rid the curricula of them. Such retention spells doom as curricula revision is a scarce and a very costly exercise. It means that once a problem is detected in it, there is no guarantee that it will be corrected immediately. As such, biases and misinformation continue to be taught as correct. Unfortunately, the gender paradigm in the education curriculum remains a pawn to be shifted, used and exploited at will by those in charge of such exercise. The exclusion of gender experts in such an exercise and the lack of expertise and goodwill among the political members could be blamed for such grave omissions.

The issue is thus not that the education policy failed to achieve its objectives, or that the newly introduced civic and ethic curriculum did not manage to fill in the missing gaps, the issue is much larger. It shows explicitly how education has become politicized. For example, the education policy is not geared towards the demands of market forces or the employment market, but follows a clear party-led agenda that is highly politically motivated, as was the case during the Derg regime. This is why laws and policies do not reflect the practice on the ground. It is as if the EPRDF/TPLF party is handling a double or hidden agenda.

For example, the issue of gender is cited in most policy documents (Poverty Reduction Papers) as a cross-cutting issue. One could but wonder what is understood as cross-cutting when even in general courses on for instance human rights, development, agriculture, ethnic and religious equality, justice, environment, poverty and HIV/AIDS, gender is nowhere to be found or included as centre of analysis. Instructors and lecturers are left to elaborate on it on their own goodwill. Given the novelty of the inclusion of gender in the education system, many teachers and instructors are ignorant and biased on the issue. Lacking the capacity and skills to elaborate on it, many neglect and omit it from their curricula. It was found that not sufficient time is allocated for a full course on gender issues (Bayuligne 2006, p. 46-50). While conducting a survey in two institutions of higher learning, Adama University and the Kotebe College of Teacher Education, Bayuligne Zemedagegnehu concluded that gender issues are totally marginalized from the entire education curricula in terms of percentage and hours of study time. If one would consider that this could be a general trend among other learning institutions as well, one could but question the motives of the Ministry of Education for its *de jure* inclusion of gender in the education curricula.

The problem in female education is not only low enrolment, but also the quality of education. Low enrolment may inhibit a critical mass formation of female students who could come up with radical demands for equality. However, quantity is no guarantee for feminism to emerge. What matters more is the quality of education or education that cultivates critical thinking. Critical thinking can then assist in the creation of assertive

agency, the kind of agency that does not need others to become heard or seen. Critical thinking also needs the presence of freedom and political democracy in order to grow. Ethiopian women are deprived of all of these. The outcome then is that with the lack of radical minded and committed instructors the current gender courses in the education sector are a façade, a showcase or cover-up to silence critics.

The introduction of a graduate course in gender studies initially has been received as a great sign. It is the first step to the cultivation of feminism in the country. However, what matters more at this academic level, is not just the provision of such a course, but the quality of the instructors. As the country lacks radical feminists to take up such a challenge at the academic level, many instructors are brought from abroad among which many lack a critical insight into the repressive regime of the ruling party. Among these, what has become troublesome is the retention of specific instructors who not only lack a gender background or affiliation to the theme, but worse, lack academic skills and professionalism. The fear is that such lacks may doom the course to passivism where it will hop along with other disciplines striving to fit in instead of radicalizing its presence.

## **6.5 Women's employment in the pre-1991 era**

There is a direct link between education and employment. As more women are educated, their employment has seen a sharp rise in the last decades in the various sectors. Most of these educated women, however, remain over-represented in many of the lowly qualified, low skilled soft/pink sector occupations (informal sector, factories, housemaids and nannies, secretaries, administrative workers, nurses, teachers, and so forth). Habtamu Wondimu noted that about 90% of the labour force (male and female) is working in agriculture and related sectors while the professional and technical workers comprise only about 1%, which includes women and men. Of these only 5.5% are degree holders. According to him, this situation of low quality labour force hasn't seen any improvement in recent years (Habtamu 1999, p. 2).

Historically, the first educated women found employment in the government sector as bureaucrats or in the newly emerging professions of education and health. And as more women were getting educated, so was the expansion in the professions they could work in. However, the labour market started to show clear signs of gender stratification according to masculine and feminine work. Society was also not ready yet to accept women working outside the homes. The traditional perceptions guiding women's education seem to have gained entrance also in their employment. Many believed that there was no need for women to get a job since they would be provided for by their husbands. This belief largely informed women's low level of employment. Not all the educated women were employed and those employed remained small in numbers compared to men (Zenebework 1976, p. 15-19). Those who were employed found jobs in the soft sectors, such as secretarial jobs, nursing and teaching in elementary schools. There were also women employed in factories, in the informal sector and in most of the lowest, menial and tedious jobs (Semagne 1986, p. 23). They were discouraged from aiming high because it was assumed that their priorities should remain with their families and husbands (ibid, p. 26).

During the Derg regime, more women were employed, but not many occupied leadership posts. It cannot be stated that they had an equally high educational level because all placement by the Derg was primarily based on the criteria of loyalty and not on merit. The continuous boosting by the Derg of women taking up various posts in the numerous associations was mere a matter of speech. Women were generally found at the lower echelons of service and employment, not at the higher and leadership levels. The gender stratification in the employment sector continued dominating and informing female and male choices of occupation. Factors such as traditional biased perceptions and women's socializations equally contributed to the choices women made. Zenebework Tadesse envisaged this trend of the deliberate exclusion of women from meaningful employment to continue for a long time to come (Zenebework 1976, p. 46).

### 6.5.1 Women's employment at present

The education and consequent employment level of women shows a slight improvement during the EPRDF/TPLF regime. The formal employment market sees 23% of women employed. This includes employment as physicians, lecturers, teachers, lawyers, nurses, and so on (Tesfu 1996, p. 52). The majority of women have little education and find employment in the lower sections of the formal employment market. For example, in 1999/00 there were only 30.75% of women in the Civil Sector ('Shadow Report' 2003, p. 14) among which the majority, 98.2%, were concentrated in low status and low paying jobs (Aster *et al* 2002, p. 69). The level of unemployment is higher for women than for men among any section of society. In 1998, the Bureau for Labour and Social Affairs estimated the percentage of female unemployed at 58.6 and for males 41.4 in Addis Ababa (Alemnesh 2001, p. 97). According to age group, the unemployment level is higher among women than men in the age group 15-19 years with 16.8 % for women and 6.4% for males. This percentage increases slightly among the age group 20-24 with 17.8% of women and 7.4 % of males (Teshome 2004, p. 27).

**Table 3: Economically active population by sex and employment status, Addis Ababa, Census 1994**

Employment Status	Males	Females	Total	F/M
Employer	2.2	1.5	1.9	0.68
Self employed	27.9	20.0	25.1	0.72
Government employee	36.4	32.4	35.0	0.89
Private employee	25.5	37.3	29.8	1.46
Member of Co-operative	0.4	0.2	0.3	0.50
Unpaid family worker	1.9	2.6	2.1	1.36
Others	1.0	0.8	1.0	0.80
Not Stated	4.7	5.2	4.9	1.11
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

(Source : Jelaludin *et al* 2001, Table 15: p. 38)

Table 3 reveals that approximately 35% of the economically active population of Addis Ababa were government employees, 29.8% were employed in the private sector and about 25.1% were self-employed. The situation is different in rural areas where the

highest proportion employed is unpaid family workers (37%) followed by self-employed (30.1%) and in the private sector (14.1%) (CSA, 1995, cited in Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 38).

The Shadow Report, which was compiled by the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association and the Network of Ethiopian Women Associations on the platform for action of the Beijing +10 Conference, revealed that the majority of Ethiopian women are employed in the informal sector (64.93%) ('Shadow Report' 2003, p. 14). This includes petty trade, handicrafts, selling food items, vegetables, locally produced drinks, domestic services, charcoal, firewood, second-hand clothes and so on ('Shadow Report' 2003, p. 14, Aster *et al* 2002, p. 70, Alemnesh 2001, p. 98). The dominance of women in this sector illustrates the many societal factors leading to this. For example, childhood deprivation of education, the prevalence of harmful cultural practices such as early marriage and abduction, high levels of poverty, violence against women, the myth of husbands as providers and societal taboos preventing women from achieving high goals, force many such women to find employment in this sector, especially when they end up alone with their children. This informal sector carries its own risks and problems such as continuous threats, evictions, police harassment, confiscating of one's goods, low level of organization and protection, lack of benefits, lack of credits, and so forth (Alemnesh 2001, p.99).

Given these sad realities, one could wonder how the situation is at the academic level or in institutions of higher learning. After all, that is where feminism is expected to be born as a source of knowledge and epistemology, giving women's problems a theoretical boost and negotiation power. However, the situation is very depressing. This is not only due to the small number of female students; it is more glaring due to the shortage of female lecturers, and feminists in particular in the field. For example, at Addis Ababa University, among the teaching staff of 1275, only 127 are female (less than 10%). This low presence is observable throughout the ranks (Academic Staff List 2006, p. 4). The number of females with degrees is also very small. Twenty per cent have a BA or equivalent, 10% have the equivalent of an MA, and only 5% have PhDs (*ibid*, p. 50). But among these few highly qualified staff, none are specialized in gender studies and research. Those who do engage in gender research, do so mainly from different disciplines. This means that there are no academics yet devoting their time and learning to developing gender epistemology or feminist theorizing.

The Gender Studies department which became operational in 1995 still has a long way to go to become a centre of feminist activities. Currently it is fully endorsed as a mainstream academic institution of the university as long as it remains depoliticized and deradicalized. The lack of radicals is glaring as the department is seriously understaffed. There is also no commitment yet to be engaged in feminist research and theorizing from the point of view of Ethiopian women's conditions. In the end, instead of playing a facilitative role to transform patriarchal setting of the institute and providing the umbrella to co-ordinate gender research and epistemology, this institute seems to do otherwise.

**Table 4 Percentage Distribution of Currently Employed Population of Urban Areas Aged ten years and over by Sex and Employment Status, country Total: 2006**

	Total Employed Population		Employment Status										
			Paid employees					Self employed	Unpaid Family workers	employer	Members of co-operatives	Apprentice and others	NS
	No	%	Govt Employees	Gov't Parastatals	Private Org. Employees	NGO's employee	Domestic employees						
Both sexes Oct-03	2,858,031	100	18.3	2.1	15.6	1.9	9.9	42.0	8.6	0.6	0.1	0.9	0.0
Apr-04	2,854,322	100	19.4	2.1	16.5	2.0	9.5	41.3	7.2	0.6	0.2	1.2	0.0
Apr-06	3,836,812	100	17.1	1.7	18.25	1.9	6.5	41.8	10.0	0.7	0.5	1.2	0.4
Male Oct-03	1,628,529	100	21.9	2.4	19.7	2.4	4.6	39.9	7.0	0.7	0.2	1.2	0.0
Apr-04	1,625,559	100	22.8	2.5	20.6	2.5	3.7	39.9	5.2	0.7	0.3	1.8	0.0
Apr-06	2,099,626	100	20.4	2.0	21.8	2.3	1.6	40.5	7.8	1.0	0.6	1.7	0.5
Female Oct-03	1,229,502	100	13.6	1.7	10.1	1.2	17.1	44.8	10.6	0.4	0.1	0.5	0.0
Apr-04	1,228,763	100	14.8	1.5	11.1	1.3	17.1	43.2	9.9	0.4	0.1	0.4	0.0
Apr-06	1,737,186	100	13.2	1.3	13.8	1.4	12.4	43.4	12.7	0.4	0.3	0.7	0.3

Statistical Bulletin, Table 5.2 p. 28

Table 4 reveals that at country urban level, the majority of employed in 2006 are self-employed (41.8%), followed by those employed by the government and government parastatals (18.8%) and those in private organizations (18.2%). The table also shows that the total number of employees in 2006 in urban areas was 45.45% (government employees and parastatals, private organization employees, NGO employees and domestic employees) (Jelaludin *et al* 2001, p. 27).

## 6.6 Gendered poverty

Women's problems and poverty are closely linked. Ethiopia is known to be among the poorest countries in the world, ranking 169 out of the 174 countries in 2005 in the United Nations Development Index. With such a low ranking, it means that many in society are deprived of a basic human living standard. This was revealed in a 1999 national estimate of the government that indicated that 45% of the population in the country fell into the category of "absolute poor" (Tizita 2001, p. 56).<sup>120</sup> The intensity of poverty varies per region and is determined by gender, location, ethnicity, employment, age, among other things. Poverty in rural areas, for example, is much more prevalent than in urban areas, with 45 versus 37% respectively falling in that category in 1999/00 (World Bank 2005, p. 15).<sup>121</sup> The situation has not changed since then despite efforts at poverty reduction by the government.

Poverty is often calculated from a gender neutral perspective. However, this approach is increasingly being criticized for failing to bring any tangible improvement to the lives of the poor. Realizing that poverty has different origins and magnitude for different groups of people in different contexts has led to its being categorized as such. The poor are divided into different groups that include rural, urban, male-headed, female-headed, child-headed, peasants, workers, unemployed, and so forth. This categorization makes women's poverty more visible and reveals the rapid expansion of the feminine face of poverty.

Female poverty in Ethiopia may vary between the different ethnic groups (an Afar married woman might be much poorer than a female-headed household in the Tigray region), but there are some general commonalities on their causes and experiences. These can be summed up in one word as their deprivation. Women's lack of independent decision making power and income earning capacity are chiefly to be blamed for their poverty and both are linked to societal, cultural and traditional perceptions. Their agency is contained to such an extent that it plunges them into destitution. For example, a community may actively resist and deny the education of young girls with the assumption that their husbands will provide for them. This persistence is often so dramatic that there is no consideration of the visible facts of divorcees, widowhood, abandonment, neglect and so forth. When married women do find themselves in such situations, they find a hostile reception from the same community that failed to acknowledge what can happen. These women are then left on their own to fend for themselves and their families. Without education and skills, many end up in abject poverty.

Poverty among women in Ethiopia is often identified from the angle of female-headed households. Though this has seen a sharp increase in the last decades, it is not the only

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<sup>120</sup> Absolute poverty is a situation of insufficient command over resources, independent of the general style of living in any given society. It is associated with subsistence, a situation of not having enough to get by or not having enough to meet one's needs (Tizita 2001, p. 55).

<sup>121</sup> Poverty in Ethiopia is measured through the 1995 and 1999 Household, Income, Consumption and Expenditure Survey (HICES) and the accompanying Welfare Monitoring Survey (WMS) in combination with Ethiopian Rural Household Surveys (ERHS) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). (World Bank 2005, p. 3)

means of identifying poverty among women. In Addis Ababa alone, female-headed households are noted to be on the rise standing at 37% of the city population among which the majority are poor (Tizita 2001, p. 57). The high prevalence of poor females in urban areas can be also attributed to the high level of immigration from rural to urban areas, the continuous state of conflicts and wars, HIV/AIDS related mortality, early marriage causing divorces and widowhood, or other harmful practices. Rural poverty could thus be directly linked to and even cause a rapid expansion of urban poverty. Migration of unskilled, illiterate women to urban centres often causes their fragmentation and marginalization. These women end up at the bottom end of the city eking a living out of the informal sector, working as daily labourers, domestic servants, and prostitutes or ending up as beggars on the streets. These all add up to the rapid expansion of urban poverty statistics.

It has to be noted though, that not all female-headed households are poor and that there are also women in male-headed households who suffer from poverty (see *Reflections* 6, December 2001, p. 168). For example, women in many poor households barely manage to feed their families and hardly have any extras. They often consume less in food and material terms in order to have more left over for the family and sacrifice their time (time poverty) to look after the well-being of their families (Aster *et al* 2002, p. 61). On the contrary, their husbands always have some extras to be used for themselves, such as buying alcohol, cigarettes, clothes, or other items.

Until recently, women's poverty has only been measured in terms of their economic empowerment where their income levels were seen as indicators of their poverty. This means that women are poor because of the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources and credit, land ownership and inheritance, lack of access to education and support services and their minimal participation in the decision-making process (Women's Affairs Department, Ministry of Health 2003, p. 15). Such macro-economic perspectives that measure women's poverty in sheer monetary terms, is supposedly meant to be solved through micro credits. In fact, micro credits are seen as the means to women's economic empowerment and equality. This is one of the main reasons for a rush to the numerous micro credit schemes to assist poor women to gain some income.<sup>122</sup> Those women are literally misled that this is the only road to their emancipation and empowerment. However its truth, the level of poverty in the country keeps on rising.

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<sup>122</sup> The latest hit was the introduction of the Women's Development Initiative Project (WDIP), offering economic opportunities to particular poor women to help fight their desperate situation. This project was launched in 2000 for five years and implemented in a few selected regions (Amhara, Afar, Dire Dawa and Addis Ababa) (Zenebework, Eshete & Konjit 2002, p. 28-29; *Reflections* Number 6 2001, p. 27). This credit scheme was funded by major donors including the World Bank and the Italian government and achieved some successes in changing the lives of its beneficiaries in some regions. Since it was a pilot project, the aim was to expand it beyond the given regions after it had proven its worth. Unfortunately, despite its success, the government refused to extend or expand it after five years, citing the need for World Bank funds for other government prioritized projects. Some of the successful projects were handed over to the WAO where the fear lies that due to their incapacity to continue it, these will come to an end (Interview with Tadelech Debele, ex-WDIP project worker).

The increase in poverty levels in Ethiopia is of global concern. The result is the introduction of active measurements to solve the problem such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). Although this document and program were supposed to be a joint effort of government and civil society actors, supported by the World Bank, it eventually emerged as a party document, with extreme limited civil society inputs. This means that this PRSP also started to reflect similar forms of deficiencies as all other policies have done in the country. The major one is the discrepancy between policy stipulations and the practice of implementation. Emerging from the top, it has failed to link up to the most affected groups in society, including women. In fact, the policy reflects a program of its own with building blocks<sup>123</sup> that seems alien to the poverty experience of many. The ruling party tries to connect or misdirect the issue of poverty eradication to its own agenda of development. And, despite the glaring reality on the feminization of poverty in the country, women's concerns are simply ignored. For example, the Agricultural Development-Led Industrialization Policy (ADLI) (one of the building blocks) is known to have increased women's workload so tremendously that their poverty levels seem to have grown. This illustrates the negligence of the ruling party to take existing patriarchal practices and gender imbalances into consideration especially those that exclude women from equal benefits.

The failure of the PRSP and micro credit schemes can be attributed to many factors. These include the low capacity of the Women's Affairs Office, the unwillingness of the government to engage and cooperate with civil society, and above all the broader political agenda of the party that often overrides more important issues. Given all the measures taken by the government to reduce poverty, mainly through its PRSP policy, the poverty incidence<sup>124</sup> declined only marginally between 1990 and 2004 from 38.4% to 36.2% (World Bank 2005, p. 9). This harsh fact proves that there is more than meets the eye that should be considered in the area of poverty reduction among women. Policies can be designed due to international pressures in line with realities on the ground. But they do not have to become a symbol of excellence. Such deviation has become an identity of this regime where laws and policies are completely opposite from the practice on the ground.

Amazingly, the ruling party is fully aware of its failures and has embarked on the use of similar strategies that were used by the Derg to excuse these and free itself from any blame. Traditional culture and lack of capacity are claimed to be beyond the control of the ruling party and blamed for all the failures in the implementation of policies and directives. The ruling party wants to give the impression that it has no influence on them.

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<sup>123</sup> The Building Blocks in the PRSP are Agricultural Development Led industrialization (ADLI), Judiciary and Civil Service Reforms, Decentralization and Empowerment, and Capacity Building. The Sectoral Development programmes are education, health, HIV/AIDS, infrastructure and Ethiopian social rehabilitation development fund (Haddas 2001, p. 104).

<sup>124</sup> Common methods used to measure poverty are based on incomes and consumption patterns. A person is considered poor if his or her consumption or income level falls below some minimum level necessary to meet basic needs. This minimum level is usually called the "poverty line". What is necessary to satisfy basic needs varies across time and societies. Therefore, poverty lines vary in time and place, and each country uses lines which are appropriate to its level of development, societal norms and values (World Bank 2010).

Examples of its failures are when it allocates insufficient budgets, assigns ill-experienced party cadres above qualified people to do the job, keeps conservative cultural practices afresh through its decentralization policies that directly undermines the implementation, pushes for top-down approaches, refuses to dialogue, and so forth.

Birke *et al* (2002, p. 50-51) are among the first in the country to advance a different approach to women's poverty. They identified three entry points that could explain the rampant spread of the feminization of poverty. The first is harmful traditional practices. These practices are generally encoded in societal cultures, traditions and religion, demarcating the borders within which women should operate, work, move and act. Such limitations are seen by Aster *et al* as "false and poverty causing beliefs". There are many examples of this. For instance, though the Constitution guarantees women's equal rights to own land ownership, in practice this is often prevented by cultural belief patterns that prohibits property ownership by women, thereby directly contributing to their poverty, especially among single, divorced or widowed women. In a similar manner, though there is a new family law now that has raised the age of marriage for girls, child marriage continues to be practiced in many regions. This and many other cultural practices directly and overtly contribute to women's poverty.

A second problem adding to the spread of poverty among women, as observed by Aster *et al* (2002, p. 50-51), is the negligence in collecting gender disaggregated data. Ashworth (1996, p. 66) explains how such a failure becomes "evidence of systematic bias, rather than neutrality, obscuring many other factors". The practice of collecting disaggregated data in Ethiopia is still in its infancy. Though some interventions have been made to change this practice, most visibly in the education and health sectors, not much is forthcoming in the other sectors, including agriculture, to make women's contributions more visible. The problem lies also in sensitizing researchers into collecting data according to gender. This is one of the major stumbling blocks as many do not realize that their supposedly gender neutral research, is not neutral at all but in fact gender blind. This means that research should be de-patriarchalized or removed from the male lens that is often still read as gender neutral.

A third reason advanced by Aster *et al* (2002, p. 61) is women's workload. As a historical product, and patriarchally defined as feminine, women's workload includes all the exhausting, energy-consuming, unrewarding, monotonous and demanding tasks. In fact, these are even categorized as part of their reproductive roles and naturally becoming them. Such blatant distortion of what is natural and what not has serious implications for women's health and status. Many are physically so exhausted that they have no time or energy for anything else and many women are found to be suffering from serious health problems. This overt bias also obscures their valuable contributions to the economic, social and material development of their families, communities and country at large. For example, beside freely caring for the sick, elderly and children, women are seen actively toiling in agricultural activities performing most of the laborious and time consuming tasks, solely responsible for home gardens, taking part in animal husbandry and poultry farming or engaged in numerical informal market related activities. Unfortunately, patriarchy continues labelling those as insignificant with no value.

The three arguments clearly illustrate how poverty among women is a social construct. It is constructed and manufactured by patriarchal social, cultural and traditional misperceptions and practices regarding gender roles and divisions. This means that poverty among women is not the result of a lack of education and economic opportunities, as is being upheld by the ruling party. It is in fact a system of systematic exclusion of women where their already constructed marginalization is used against them to further deprive them.

It is interesting to note that this critical insight into women's poverty is also catching up among the NGO community in Ethiopia. Many have started to reformulate their strategies. They realize now that "the lack of a democratic system that enables individual citizens to utilize their full potential constitutes the root cause of poverty" ('Non-governmental Organizations Summary Perspective on Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper for Ethiopia' 2002, p. 3). They also acknowledge the deprivation of women in terms of their ability to read, write, be healthy, have freedom of expression, live without fear, and so forth, as causes of their poverty (ibid.). These deprivation factors are all elements of women's well-being that include women's agency (Razavi 2000, p. 9-13). Therefore, women's social empowerment is imperative in reducing poverty levels among women. This empowerment will enable them to acquire skills and capacities that are basic to their self-respect and to their political standing and bargaining capacity (Kothari 1993, p. 73). This means that emphasis should be placed on women's agency development in terms of skills, assertiveness, capacities, freedom from oppressive ideologies and independence. It is only these forms of investment that will equip women to lead their own lives in a dignified manner free of poverty. Would such a radical approach befit the repressive system of rule in the country? Regrettably not. After all, the government is the main source of deprivation for women and such an approach on women's well-being could place serious challenges on the political system.

## **6.7 Violence against women**

As more and more research is being conducted on the lives of women, more issues emerge that have been previously ignored but which play a crucial role in determining the status of women. One such issue is violence. Violence against women is not a recent phenomenon. It is more noticeable now because of the current time frame where its practice is seen as a violation of rights.

In Ethiopia, violence against women is a serious crime and is often committed with impunity. It is so rampant and widespread that no expression would suffice to describe the pain and terror it inflicts on its victims. In this section I discuss some of the most serious forms of violence committed against women in Ethiopia and explain how these in turn not only inhibit women's advancement, but also arrest the socio-economic development of the country at large. The aim is to illustrate how violence against girls and women, as a social product, actively contributes to their disempowerment. Through the discussions on some of the major impacts of violence against girls and women, it will become clearer how women's agency is inhibited.

The discussions will also briefly analyse the economic and social implications of violence to remove the veil of society and the country at large, where it is still actively believed that it is a private matter that does not affect them. After the discussions, it will become comprehensible why many women do not dare to challenge the status quo.

A theoretical note on violence against women seems in order before investigating the practice of it. The prevalence and magnitude of violence seems to be rooted in historically formed societal structures. Through time it has become interwoven into the social and religious fabric. This means that it has turned into a specific part of culture that borrows its identity from it. Consequently, it becomes further codified in the existing patriarchal religious and state structures which in turn give it legal and divine backing. It is this historical component of violence that has contributed to its wide acceptance and tolerance, granting it a kind of leniency beyond words. This social manufacturing of violence against girls and women does serve specific purposes which in the main include the preservation of the patriarchal status quo. Such theorizing can assist in understanding why violence in Ethiopia becomes difficult to eradicate and why its manifestations continue to evolve in modern societies.

Ironically, initially the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was silent on this issue of violence against girls and women. It was not until 1993, at the Vienna Conference on Human Rights that women's rights were recognized explicitly as human rights (Behrendt & Klemp 2003, p. 13, 'The intimate enemy: Gender Violence and reproductive Health' 1998, p. 2; Terry 2004, p. 469). And out of this conference the United Nations adopted a new declaration, the Declaration<sup>125</sup> on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1993. In 1994 a Special Rapporteur on VaW was appointed by the Commission on Human Rights, with a mandate to: "Seek and receive information on VaW, its causes and consequences; and recommend measures to eliminate such violence and its causes and remedy its consequences" (UNIFEM 1999, p. 59). Taking note of the dominant role of traditional and religious institutions in the perpetuation of violence against girls and women, a further addition was made by this UN declaration in Art.4 asking states not to "Invoke any custom, tradition, or religious consideration to avoid their obligations" regarding violence against women (UNIFEM 1999, p. 57; Behrendt & Klemp 2003, p. 14).

### ***Magnitude of violence in Ethiopia***

It is noted that violence against girls and women takes numerous forms and shapes. These include different forms of domestic violence such as physical abuse, rape, battering and beating using fists, belts or other mediums (including axes and metal bars), physical and psychological torture, humiliation in public, denial of women's opinions and decision making at the domestic level, coercion, blackmailing women not to leave abusive relationships, denying women the opportunity to visit their relatives or seek medical care

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<sup>125</sup> This Declaration defines violence as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (Article 1) (UNIFEM 1999, p. 57; Panos Institute 2003, p. 3, UN General assembly 1993. cited in Terry 2004, p. 469; Behrendt & Klemp 2003, p. 6).

or go out to work, and others. Violence also includes the violation of girls' and women's rights and freedom to live their lives free of harassment, intimidation, coercion, force and aggression or any factor that infringe on their personal dignity. Such violations can be extended to rights to education, health care and dignified employment.

The many forms of violations of women's rights differ from region to region, locality, ethnic groups and class. For example, some forms of violence are particular to a given culture or community. These include rape and sexual violence; abduction with consequent battering and rape; incest; wife battering, abuse and torture; sexual harassment; marital rape; trafficking; murder; neglect; malnourishment; harmful traditional practices; female genital mutilation; and so forth (Tigist 2000, p. 14). Actually, the cycle of violence throughout women's lives, which has been documented in many countries, is also applicable to Ethiopian women because they endure different forms of violence throughout their lifecycle.

The table below summarises the situation in Ethiopia regarding gender-based violence where the author adapted the table of Bahrendt and Kemp according to the situation in the country. (The table is listed in Behrendt & Klemp 2003, p. 8-9 and in Heise, Pitanguy and Germain 1994, cited in Hayward 2000, p. 7.)

**Table 5: Gender-based violence throughout the female life cycle in Ethiopia**

Pre-natal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Battering during pregnancy</li> <li>○ Premature births</li> <li>○ Infant mortality</li> </ul>
Infancy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Female infanticide</li> <li>○ Unequal access to food, lack of nutrients</li> <li>○ Negligent medical care</li> <li>○ General neglect and abuse</li> </ul>
Childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Genital mutilation</li> <li>○ Child marriage</li> <li>○ Incest and sexual abuse</li> <li>○ Emotional and physical abuse</li> <li>○ Unequal access to food and medical care</li> <li>○ Deprived of education</li> <li>○ Exploitation (child labour and child prostitution)</li> <li>○ Trafficking</li> </ul>
Adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Psychological, emotional and physical abuse</li> <li>○ Rape</li> <li>○ Coerced or forced impregnation</li> <li>○ Forced and coerced marriage (abduction and rape)</li> <li>○ Sexual harassment</li> <li>○ Forced prostitution</li> <li>○ Exploitation</li> <li>○ Trafficking</li> <li>○ Denial of sexual self-determination and independence (agency)</li> <li>○ Deprived of educational and employment opportunities</li> </ul>

Reproductive age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Psychological and physical abuse by partner and relatives</li> <li>○ Marital rape</li> <li>○ Coerced or forced impregnation (during abduction)</li> <li>○ Dietary abuse, (forced to starve or eat disgusting food)</li> <li>○ Isolation during delivery</li> <li>○ Forced prostitution</li> <li>○ Sexual harassment and abuse</li> <li>○ Abuse and rape of women with disabilities</li> <li>○ Abuse and exploitation of young widows</li> <li>○ Heavy workload</li> <li>○ Isolation</li> <li>○ Deprivation of rights and health care</li> </ul>
Old age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Abuse of widows</li> <li>○ Neglect of older women</li> <li>○ Health care and food deprivations</li> <li>○ Exploitation</li> <li>○ Heavy workload</li> </ul>

The resultant trauma for victims of violence still does not receive much attention. Due to this, victims of violence internalize it as norm, knowing that it is culturally condoned, and do not foresee any change. Such fatalism causes that millions of victims suffer in silence where their agony remain hidden (Hayward 2000, p. 51). As part of their culture, families, friends, communities and even the state often refuse to intervene.

### ***Social and economic costs of violence***

The impact of violence against women is widespread. It affects every aspect of the societal, cultural, economic and political spheres. For example, a World Bank study on violence against women in Ethiopia not only found how widespread violence was, but also how that practice contributed to their disempowerment and had detrimental impacts on the development of the country as a whole and that of their families and children (World Bank 2005, p. 43). Such insights are crucial in helping the analyst to understand the implications of violence against women, which is still seen by many as a private matter, not affecting anyone other than the victim alone. This study is among the first to connect the practice of violence to the many ills of society which include high levels of poverty and underdevelopment. Unfortunately there are no accurate accounts or studies on the social and economic implications of violence in the country or on the victims themselves. There is a growing interest on the subject, but most researches are in their infancy, engaged in mapping the forms of violence in the country among the different ethnic groups. Analytical surveys are still absent and there are no studies found on the macro-economic implications of the vice.

The only area in which the impact of violence is documented is health. This is probably due to the physical visibility of its effects. Physical violence includes physical injuries, disabilities, scars, burns, cuts, bruises, broken limbs, and so forth. In ‘The intimate enemy: Gender Violence and reproductive Health’ (1998, p. 1), violence against girls and women is seen as a greater cause of death and disability among women aged 15 to 44 than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents or war. But health implications are more than just the visible bleeding and cuts. It places additional demands on the healthcare system in

terms of coping with new forms of trauma, emergency treatment, medical requirements, professional assistance, or provision for rehabilitation. These, however, are still completely absent in Ethiopia. The healthcare system in Ethiopia already has serious problems regarding general health care provisions in terms of staff, skills, equipments, and so forth.

The economic costs of violence against women and girls are yet to be measured. But it certainly is eliciting grave concern. For example, violence against women and girls directly contributes to loss of productivity resulting in loss of income among victims. They are not able to perform their daily chores as usual and those employed miss out on work. In a few countries such as Canada “a nationwide study revealed that 30 per cent of abused women give up work completely and 50 per cent are temporarily unfit for work. The costs amount to 1.6 billion dollars a year, including medical care and productivity loss” (Behrendt & Klemp 2003, p. 12). A study in Managua (Nicaragua) revealed that abused women earn over 40% less than other women (ibid, p. 12). In Chile, in 1997, women who did not seek paid work due to violence amounted to “lost earnings of US\$1.2 billion” (Terry 2004, p. 473). If such measures were included in the Ethiopian economy, it would add to billions of Ethiopian birr lost annually.

Besides the health-related costs and economic loss, the most profound impact is the emotional trauma victims of violence endure. The UN Population Fund notes how “Measuring acts of violence against women and girls do not, of course, describe the atmosphere of terror that often permeates the abusive relationship” (United Nations Population Fund 2000, p. 26). Such terror is simply immeasurable. Women and girls subjected to continuous forms of systematic abuse, battering, beating, rape and torture suffer serious forms of trauma and one can but wonder how they continue their lives. Some of the symptoms have never been linked to their daily subjection of violence. These include loss of self confidence (low self-esteem, shame, guilt, embarrassment), silence and withdrawal, and mental/psychological problems (fear, trauma, horror, depression, anxiety). These impacts remain hidden and are often overlooked.

However, invisibility should not be read as not damaging. Violence robs women of their agency and deprives them of an independent mind. A victim of regular abuse shows clear signs of post-traumatic depression, anxiety, fear, sleeplessness, lack of concentration and confidence, isolation, withdrawal, drug-abuse, and worst, suicide attempts. Prolonged and repetitive violence should be seen as long-term scarring instruments which turn women into passive subjects. Ironically, the violence that was committed by the Derg during its rule of seventeen years was recognized as seriously affecting people’s subjectivity and blamed for turning the masses into silent, muted, passive puppets. But, the violence that has been meted out against girls and women since historic times and still continues unabated remains neglected. The very society that cried out against the violence committed by the Derg, fails to see similarities in the violence being committed by men, society, and cultures against women. That women have turned into passive patriarchal puppets should thus not come as a surprise.

Violence against women and girls also has serious repercussions for the national development of society as a whole. For example, it is becoming increasingly visible that women are the change agents of society. Change can be in the form of reduced fertility, improved child well-being and education, health and nutrition, and women's increased agency. However, persistent forms of violence against women and girls tend to put a direct halt to these (Terry 2004, p. 475). The development of the nation is thus seriously hampered by the victimization of half of its most productive citizens who remain in unhealthy and unhappy circumstances. A quote from the Irish first female president serving from 1990 to 1997, Mary Robinson, could be a better explanation for this:

In a society where the rights and potential of women are constrained, no man can be truly free. He may have power, but he will not have freedom.

There is also a strong link between violence against women and the well-being of their children and families (Tigist 2000, p. 15; Terry 2004, p. 472; World Bank 2005, p. 43). For example, children experiencing domestic violence, either directly or indirectly, tend to show signs of withdrawal, failure in school achievements, absence from school, low educational performance, problems maintaining long relationships with peers and exhibiting violent behaviour. Such children grow up reflecting violent behaviour (among boys) and levels of acceptance (among girls) and remain in a cycle of low performance, low employment and low incomes. Families of violence victims are also not at peace due to the tensions, anger and stress. This means that the whole family suffers due to violence, including the perpetrator.

### ***Response to violence***

Society's perception of violence against women and girls is one of tolerance and acceptance. This acceptance though should be carefully scrutinized. It should be understood as a historic product which society has come to internalize as part of its cultural and religious identity. This perception, for example, allows a man to beat his wife wherever and however, without anyone intervening, because it is seen as a private matter. Such reasoning explains why many women do not report cases of [domestic] violence. Hayward (2000, p. 123-125) sees non-reporting as an outcome of many factors which include fear, seeing it as destiny and fate, accepting it as part of the culture one grew up in, economic dependency, for the sake of children, fear of stigmatization due to divorce, lack of protection and shelter, feelings of inadequacy and helplessness, protecting the violator because of being related, excusing his violent behaviour (being drunk), tolerance, self-blame and so forth. For example, a recent example of an acid attack on a young student by a male stalker was blamed by some members of society on the victim. They automatically assumed that she must have done something to cause his act. This is an informal form of response to violence. Informal responses include those coming from the family, neighbours, people on the street, peer groups, and so on (Tigist 2000, p. 20). The extent of apathy is tragic.

But the formal responses (the legal and policy environment and the law enforcement agencies) are equally ignorant how to act in cases of violence against women and girls.

Despite the protection that is being offered to victims of violence by the constitution, the reality shows how it is subject to selfish interpretation and how loopholes have been integrated within it. It is the typical characteristic of this regime. Documents postulate completely different ideas from that which is being put into practice. Examples of this are the laws that make women's most basic human rights negotiable (ibid, p.18) and tradable, as they deprive women of fair justice and equal access to the laws. Victims then become used as instruments to protect criminals, abusers, and rapists to escape prosecution. This is clearly illustrated in the case of rape and abduction where criminals are set free of prosecution if they decide to marry the victim (Article 558 (b) and 599 of the penal code). Cases of domestic violence are often dismissed as private matters and victims are sent back to their abusive partners to reconcile. Many victims are also forced to withdraw their testimonies and forgive and forget that the incidents ever took place. There are sufficient cases where victim's rights have been sold off, sacrificed or surrendered and where they become effectively rendered as *persona non grata*.<sup>126</sup> Injustice is often meted out by law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judges. Presiding judges have often been found giving differential treatment to different persons committing similar crimes.

Below I discuss a few of the most serious forms of violence against women and girls in Ethiopia at present under the EPRDF/TPLF rule. They will be investigated from the point of view of their magnitude and social implications.

### **6.7.1 Female genital mutilation (FGM)**

According to the National Committee on Traditional Practices in Ethiopia (NCTPE), FGM is practised among the Muslim and Christian communities in Ethiopia and is estimated to affect approximately 90% of the female population (Tesfu 1996, p. 5; Rakeb 1997, p.3; Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 21; Bogalech 2003, p. 12). It is performed in two major forms: the sunna type (removal of the clitoris) and the pharonic type (most severe type involving the removal of all the outside genitals and the labia minora and the tightening or sewing of the vaginal opening) with variations in between. At present, most middle-aged and older women are circumcised while among the younger generations the trend shows some variations. There is also great disparity between urban and rural women. Many urban girls are not circumcised while in rural areas it is hard to find a girl who is not circumcised. FGM is often not a choice and strongly influenced by older women and women at the grassroots level (a clear sign of women who have internalized and are promoting patriarchal practices that are harmful to their own health and well-being).

The reasons for female circumcision vary from region to region and while some attribute it to religion, culture and tradition, others look at more specific reasoning such as that uncircumcised girls would not get married or that uncircumcised girls are "loose", out of control, promiscuous and unfaithful. Other mystifications are that FGM is a means to

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<sup>126</sup> There are numerous documented cases of injustice against women by the legal system (Emebet 2004, p. 77-81; Original Wolde Giorgis in the *discussion on the paper presented by Emebet* 2004, p. 86-97; Original 2000, p. 113-126; *Dimtsachen*, Special Issue p. 16-18, *Berchi*, 2002, EWLA's booklet on selected cases, n.d. Vol.1 & 2).

protect the virginity of girls (which does not explain the many teenage pregnancies which occur among circumcised girls). Obviously the best suited feminist explanation of the practice is that it should be seen as a serious and effective form of patriarchal control over women's sexuality. In traditional societies women are portrayed as a-sexual beings, passive recipients, showing no sexual urges or pleasures. FGM is meant to deprive them of the sensual sexual parts of their sexual organs and literally dooms them to a life without sexual sensation or pleasure. The consequent trauma and pain associated with FGM indeed causes many circumcised women to dread sexual intercourse.

The health risks associated with FGM are numerous and range from shock, tremendous agony and pain, deformity, complications during intercourse, urinating and delivery, infections, trauma, HIV/AIDS, anaemia, haemorrhage, incontinence, dysmenorrhoea (painful menstruation), infertility and death (Rakeb 1997, p. 3; Tesfu 1996, p. 7). Such findings should be fed back to the communities to create awareness on the seriousness of the implications and educate them. The difference is already becoming visible among the urban educated women where the practice is fading.

Beside FGM, there are many other traditional practices that are directly harmful to women such as uvulectomy, extraction of milk teeth, massaging the abdomen of pregnant women, drastic measures to hasten placenta expulsion, early marriage, marriage by abduction, incision of the eye lid, scalp or back of body, scarification of the face and body, feeding fresh butter to a newborn child, and many more (Abebech 2003, p. 3). All these harmful traditional practices are found to be deeply rooted in the history of the country's cultures and traditions. This is the main reason why they seem to be hard to overcome.

### **6.7.2 Rape**

One of the most degrading forms of violence against women and girls is sexual aggression or rape. Due to the current increased sensitization on the issue, many cases have started to surface and are being reported. However, many more still remain unreported. Under-reporting occurs due to the inherent fear and stigmatization of the issue which is closely linked to female sexuality, a relatively taboo issue. In this regard, rape is often seen as a sign of shame to the victim, dishonouring the family and a humiliation. Bringing it out into the open would thus, instead of being seen as a cry for help, expose such families and the victims in particular, to ostracization, stereotyping and scrutiny. It is in view of this that many cases of rape remain hidden and unreported, where the victims and their families suffer in silence. Many more victims of rape are actively persuaded by their families to remain silent, marry the rapist or settle the issue out of court.

Rape is one of the most degrading and humiliating experiences to women, causing physical injury and profound emotional trauma. The risk of unwanted pregnancy is substantial especially in Ethiopia where abortion is illegal, even in cases of rape. In situations where there is also a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, rape may be a death sentence for victims (Rakeb 1997, p. 5). Pregnancy in such situations often leads to

unsafe abortions that can result in the loss of life, permanent injuries or persistent gynaecological problems. The causes of rape vary from culture, poverty, war to unemployment, access to stimulants (drugs and alcohol) and the influence of globalization. Many people admit that rape is part of Ethiopian culture.

Some quotations of participants of the Gender Forum on the issue are:

Rape has always existed in the Ethiopian culture and still continues under the guise of “culture”; “rape has always been there. The major point is that people have never condemned it. This is because of the way people were brought up”; “In the countryside, our mothers and sisters used to be raped in the farms while going long distances in the bushes alone. After we became adults, we also came to know about different rape cases, but we never told anyone about them because we were not told that rape would hurt women, or that it was a crime. So we accepted it and lived with it (Reflections 5, 2001, p. 28).

In contrast to the seriousness of such a heinous act, laws on rape show discrepancies in interpretation. Rape is interpreted differently for different groups of girls and women where issues of virginity and age play a crucial role. As such, the rape of a married woman or a non-virgin woman is treated more leniently than the rape of virgins and minors (below fifteen years). Rape is a more serious crime if it is against minors and dependents. Here the rapists should be convicted up to ten or fifteen years in rigorous imprisonment. In practice however, these laws have never been applied as stated and not a single rapist has received the sentence as stipulated by law, even if minors have been raped (Original Wolde Giorgis 2004, p. 86-97; Sara 2001, p. 20-22). Emebet Kebede (2004, p. 77) listed a particular rape case that illustrates the leniency of the law enforcement bodies regarding rape. It involves a 70-year-old guard in a certain kindergarten who was found guilty of raping ten little girls, six of them four years old. Legally, the offender would have been given ten times the rigorous imprisonment of fifteen years. Unfortunately, due to reasons advanced by the offender’s lawyer (old age, being the only provider of his family, ill-health, and no previous criminal records), he was released after spending only six years and four months in prison. Such leniency is very disappointing. Tadiwos (2001, p. 15) asserts that the law treats rape victims as if they are there to protect the rapist not the victims.

Rape victims can be found among the young and old. Age categories vary from a few months old to old women in their 60s. In similar line, rapists are found among all categories of men and at all ages. They can be guards, students, labourers, peasants, petitioners, tenants, health workers, police officers, priests, neighbours, or fathers (*Dimtsachen* 2001, p. 6; *Reflections* 5, 2001, p. 25).

Reality shows that it does not matter who the rapist or victim is and whatever the unique aggravating situation might have been. Even if the victim is a toddler, offenders get away with undeserved lesser penalties and are released on bail, even if they have previous criminal records (*Dimtsachen* 2001, p. 6). In view of this outrage the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, together with other NGO partners, organized a rally against rape on February 10, 2001. Many rape victims find it extremely hard to convince a patriarchal

judge that they are violated. The discriminatory treatment meted out to them is so discouraging that many shun legal redress because they do not feel adequately protected or are treated as criminals themselves. Courts are known for doing their utmost to protect rapists by meticulously trying to find fault with the victims looking at their dress code, being alone in a given place at a given time, being a virgin or not, and so on.

Given the issue of rape being part of societal culture and committed by offenders who are often protected by their families or even the court, the seriousness of its impacts on the victims has seldom received much attention. There are practically no counselling or trauma centres for the rehabilitation of rape victims. This is further exacerbated by the silence of victims and their families. This silence though, should not be interpreted to have no impacts on them. In fact, those are tremendous and too many to enlist. They can include psychological (fear and phobia, repressed anger leading to overwhelming depression and anxiety, feelings of guilt, self-blame, shame, loss of control over oneself, immense shock and disbelief, confusion, difficulty in making decisions, hatred towards men, diminished self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, fear of being alone, disobedience, aversion to sexual intercourse, thoughts of suicide and desire for revenge), social (stigma, alienation), economic (loss of future income due to missing out on education, loss of manpower for national development, financial costs of rape), and health (unwanted pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and STDs, fistula, damage to sexual organs, persistent gynaecological problems, illegal abortions with consequent risks, and so forth) (Sara 2001, p. 11-12). In short, rape is destructive to girls' and women's well-being. It is a violent form of robbing their lives and freedom and instilling traumatic forms of fear and terror. Many rape victims often find themselves further criminalized by society, their families and the legal system and become muted, apathetic and lose hope. One could wonder whether the ruling party has any commitment to sense this suffering of women. Regrettably, the loopholes in the legal system prove that rape is still not considered a serious offence.

### **6.7.3 Abduction**

Next to rape, abduction of young girls is the most serious offence committed. It is highly prevalent in Ethiopia, especially in some rural areas. Culturally it is condoned and seen as a traditional form of contracting marriage. This means that abduction carries the overtones of rape in order to secure the claim on an abducted girl.

Marriage by abduction is practiced throughout Ethiopia with regional variations. Most common are in the Southern Nations and Nationalities Regional States (SNNRS), Arsi in the Oromiya region and Afar (Bogalech 2003, p. 12). It is rarely found for example in the Amhara region (Konjit 2000, p. 3). One study reveals that its occurrence rate at national level is 69% (Tilahun 2005, p. 12). This widespread practice still finds many supporters not only among rural illiterates, who could be excused for not being aware of the country's constitutional laws, but government officials and professional people like teachers and policemen (Konjit 2000, p. 4). It has never been analysed from the angle of its impact on the victims and their families, or from the perspective of its legal repercussions. Most often, the reasons are cited in a positive manner that romanticizes the

act. This includes instances in which a man wants to marry a girl but fears that she will be given to another man, or the girl's parents do not agree with him and the victim plots to run away with her abductor. Other often cited reasons include the inability to pay the increasing bride prices, or worse, power relations and pride that make men feel that they are entitled to whatever they want.

Many young girls are found to be abducted on their way to school or when collecting water or firewood at the ages of ten to fifteen. This is the age limit set in the Penal Code as referring to minors. Rapists accused of raping a minor risk imprisonment for up to fifteen years. Unfortunately, this law is a façade because the prevalence and recognition of abduction for the purpose of marriage among many rural communities, as stipulated in the constitution, is not contested. This is due to the fact that the various regions in the country are given the legal autonomy to maintain their own cultural, customary and religious identities and laws. As a consequence, the impunity of forceful marriage of under-age girls and subsequent rape and marriage in some of these regions remain unchallenged.

Just like rape, the impact of abduction followed by rape on young girls is simply too grievous to account (the author can only describe the trauma and pain that these victims suffer, but cannot fully express their feelings). Except for the physical harm (beaten unconscious, physical injuries due to intense struggle, pain of violent and aggressive intercourse among circumcised girls), the psychological impacts are more enduring. These include shock and trauma, confusion, feeling unloved and unwanted (parents refuse to listen or feel their pain and force them to marry the abductor or send them away because they have shamed them), guilt, depression, fear, sleeplessness, hatred, anger, loss of self-esteem and confidence, and so forth (Konjit 2000, p. 15). But the worst loss occurs in the deprivation of the female-child's rights, freedom and education resulting in their arrested development and imprisoned agency for the rest of their lives.

Abduction has high socio-economic costs. For example, when a relation starts off with violence (beating and battering), it is often found to continue in the same trend. In such relationships, wife abuse becomes a patterned and systematic practice. They do not foster love, affection and understanding, but in fact add to the miseries of women. Some abducted women eventually find the courage to divorce and leave their abductors and abusers. Others realize that there is no power in the world to help them (not their families who push them to marry their abductors only to save their own honour, or the society, or religious leaders, or even the state and its well-versed rights of women), and endure their trauma in silence.

The financial loss is enormous. Economic loss can be measured in terms of the accumulated capital that is being lost when a young girl is abducted. These can be calculated in many ways but mainly includes the deprivation of education. Education is such an important tool in women's empowerment that its deprivation should be seen as bringing down a chain of future deprivations that can last their lifetime. For example, lack of education means no access to gainful employment and income, which in turn means deprivation of information, opportunities, health, well-being, and so forth. And

these all are the leading causes of the poverty, especially in the feminization of poverty. There has been no study yet on the economic cost of abduction in terms of loss of productive power, viable to the country's macro-economic development and accumulated loss of capital. Once abducted, many young female children find themselves imprisoned, chained in domestic responsibilities and dependent on their husbands' incomes for survival. It would be worthwhile to conduct a study on how much human capital is lost due to such practices.

The impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of abduction emerges from society where, in many regions, the practice is seen as a cultural practice. This practice is even used by some communities as their identity marker. And, due to the decentralization policy of the ruling party, such practices become further enforced and encouraged. Legally, abduction is recognized in the penal code as a crime, punishable by rigorous imprisonment not exceeding three to five years, depending on how serious the crime. However, the same law offers lenient approaches to such punishment when the abductor agrees to marry the victim (Rakeb 1997, p. 7). As a cultural practice, most family members push for the conclusion of marriage (Gopal & Salim 1998, p. 145).

The incidence of rape is often not taken into consideration when abduction cases go to court and victims have to file a separate injunction against rape. This is patriarchal protection of criminals at its peak. It is as if the court simply refuses to acknowledge the publicly known fact that abduction is not a mere incident but a form of sexual aggression and a crime. Every single case of abduction has been accompanied by rape because of the simple reason of contracting marriage. However, victims have to prove that they were raped.

This is the one law in which one clearly sees women's rights subject to negotiation and traded off. Young female children, barely ten or twelve years old, have no voice or right to speak against the wish of their parents. These parents, feeling dishonoured, force their minor children to marry their abductors, rapists and abusers. The conclusion of marriage is then seen as restoring the girls' and their families' honour and respect, while at the same time protecting the abductors against prosecution. The magnitude of its impacts on the victims in terms of trauma, shock and pain are ignored and seen as irrelevant. They have to face their abusers on a daily basis and be treated as an unworthy human being. The thought of having to marry and take care of one's kidnapper (cook and clean for him, wash his cloths, have sexual intercourse and bear his children, and run his household), should be read as the worst torment meted out to young girls, simply because they are born as females.

#### **6.7.4 Domestic violence**

Another serious form of crime is domestic violence. Domestic violence speaks for itself. It means it takes place in the closed confines of the private homes, the place where women are supposed to feel safe and protected. This should be seen as domestic aggression that implies that in relatively peaceful times women have no peace (Ashworth 1992, p. 8). Some call domestic violence a form of war between the sexes (invisible,

shadow or sex war) (Jacobs, Jacobson & Marchbank 2000, p. 46). Rakeb Messele (1997, p. 9) sees it as the most endemic form of violence against girls and women in Ethiopia. This could be due to its historical roots which have become so strongly intertwined with religious and traditional perceptions, that it is seen as not only part of the culture (World Bank 2005, p. 43; Rakeb 1997, p. 9), but as a form of ethnic marker. It has been firmly and with impunity institutionalized into the social fabric.

Due to its embeddedness in customs, culture and traditions, domestic violence is highly accepted and tolerated among the victims and perpetrators. It is therefore also the least reported crime. Most cases of domestic violence even go unnoticed, unreported and remain hidden. Treated as a private matter, the legal system refrains from intervention. It is only recently that domestic violence is becoming a subject of debate in the country and research is being conducted on its prevalence. A nationwide study on domestic violence was carried out among eleven major ethnic groups in the country. This study revealed that on average every man beats his wife seven times in a period of six months.

The role of women in inflicting violence upon other women should also not be ignored. As guardians of culture, they are found to use violence on other women in the family and community and cases of mother-in-laws and sisters-in-law abusing and beating young, inexperienced brides are widely known. No studies have been carried out in Ethiopia to investigate this. Ashworth (1992, p. 6) states that in general, both “women and men have taken upon themselves the right to ‘legislate’ and judge women’s conduct, behaviour, work and so forth and based on that, give punishment if things are not done according to their rules”. Such is the case in many traditional societies where women have internalized their own oppression and subordination as just and willingly engage in acts that directly contribute to their own disempowerment.

The worst thing is when women accept domestic violence as part of their culture. Many women see domestic abuse and beating as a sign of love from their husbands. For example in Guji and some other societies, including in Amhara, women feel unloved if not beaten. They believe that the rage that leads to beating is caused by jealousy which, in turn, is caused by love (Tesfu 1996, p. 31).

**Table 6: Women’s opinions on wife beating, Ethiopia 2000**

Background characteristics	Reasons justifying a husband hitting or beating his wife						Number
	Burns the food	Argues with him	Goes out without telling him	Neglects the children	Refuses sexual relations	Agrees with at least one reason	
<b>Age</b>							
15-19	62.6	59.1	52.9	62.8	43.5	82.1	3,710
20-24	64.1	61.4	56.4	64.3	49.5	84.5	2,860
25-29	63.0	61.5	55.4	63.7	52.1	83.9	2,585
30-34	66.7	63.5	57.9	65.2	54.2	85.3	1,841
35-39	64.3	60.9	57.1	67.6	53.5	85.2	1,716
40-44	64.7	60.9	57.6	64.3	56.2	85.6	1,392
45-49	70.2	65.3	61.5	66.9	58.9	89.6	1,264

<b>Location</b>							
Urban	41.0	39.6	38.2	51.6	29.0	69.0	2,791
Rural	69.7	66.1	60.2	67.4	55.7	87.9	12,576
<b>Region</b>							
<b>Education</b>							
No education	69.5	65.6	60.4	67.0	56.2	88.1	11,551
Primary	61.6	59.6	53.0	65.8	44.8	83.0	2,425
Secondary and higher	27.4	28.3	27.0	41.8	17.1	56.9	1,391
<b>Employment</b>							
Not employed	63.7	59.5	54.8	62.5	49.6	84.0	5,630
Employed for cash	60.1	56.9	52.6	63.9	47.1	81.4	3,852
Employed not for cash	68.0	65.9	59.9	66.8	54.5	87.0	2,885
<b>All Women</b>	<b>64.5</b>	<b>61.3</b>	<b>56.2</b>	<b>64.5</b>	<b>50.9</b>	<b>84.5</b>	<b>15,367</b>

(Source: CSA and ORC Macro, 2001 in World Bank 2005, p. 42)

The table reveals that 82.1% of young women believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife. This percentage increases to 89.6% among older women. In urban areas 69% of women agreed to this, against almost 90% of rural women. In similar vein, the lower educated affirm the practice as agreeable against a hefty 60% of the educated. Among the employed the situation did not differ much between those earning cash incomes and those not.

Domestic violence, when taking place at a systematic and repeated level, tends to destroy women's spirit and morale and make them submissive and fearful (Gopal & Salim 1998, p. 144; Evenhuis 1992, p. 4). This could also be called the "taming" of rebellious or assertive women who dare to challenge patriarchal power and privileges. It is a psychologically tortuous process that turns into an instrument of control and subjection. Abused women become silenced and muted and conform to submission sacrificing their own needs and demands. In the end, their agency has been totally robbed of them.

The economic costs of domestic violence in Ethiopia are unknown and urgently need to be considered. It includes the loss of income in the families, productive and profit loss among employers and macro-economic losses to the state coffers. However, even if the intentions are there to estimate the economic and social costs of violence against women in the country, there is no guarantee that an accurate estimate can be made. This could be linked to many factors such as the reluctance to document domestic violence or report any other form of violence against women. The lack of skills and experience in how to document these can also contribute to problems in the estimation.

The legal system also remains silent on domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence have to consult other laws under the Civil or Criminal Code to take their case to court (Delelegne 1998, p. 144, quoted in Tigist 2000, p. 17; Hillina & Rakeb 2001, p. 96). The penal code is silent on wife battering or domestic violence. Such silence should be read as

being accomplice to the act.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps the commendable efforts that are made by countries in the region such as Kenya, Uganda and South Africa (Mulama 2005, p. 39-40) in terms of drafting domestic relations bills that criminalize such acts, might one day be implemented in Ethiopia.

In a similar manner, marital rape has never been considered an issue in Ethiopia. Once a woman is married, it is taken for granted that one of her main duties includes the sexual satisfaction of her husband at any time and however he pleases. This traditional expectation still rules out the occurrence of marital rape. As Rakeb (1997, p. 11) indicates: “Marital rape is not considered to be a crime and rape is only punishable when committed outside the wedlock”. If the act is not admitted as a crime, it has serious implications for the victims, who endure it on a daily basis. The consequences of marital rape are huge, including silencing, trauma, fear, anxiety, hatred, health complications, and so forth. The thought that women have to remain in relationships to experience such torment every single day explains how society also thinks about women.

No woman, no matter what her status or background, should be subjected to live in constant fear and anxiety due to societal taboos to challenge such problems. Women are not objects to be pushed into marriage at whatever cost and then conveniently ignoring that there are problems in that marriage, so that future generations do not shun marriage. The systems of marriage need to be urgently reflected upon and society needs to admit and take up the responsibility together with the state, to assure that such problems are solved, including the issues of forced marriage through abduction and rape.

### **6.7.5 Trafficking in women**

Poverty among women is a very complicated issue. Women will do anything to survive, even if it means selling parts of their organs, or body, or engaging in all kinds of odd work. Millions of destitute women have been driven out of rural areas to urban centres in search of livelihoods. Lacking skills or education, many fall in the hands of unscrupulous exploiters. The issue of poor women’s migration to urban centres or abroad has been turned into a flesh market where women are treated as commodities to be marketed. Many agencies have emerged functioning as trafficking agents of these poverty-stricken women. In ‘The intimate enemy: Gender Violence and reproductive Health’ (1998, p. 8), each year thousands of women and girls throughout the world are bought and sold, either into marriage, prostitution or slavery. The United States estimated that four million people around the world are trafficked each year and that 200 million people live in slavery today. With the feminization of migrant workers, many young women also end up as bonded labourers (Liao 1992, p. 17).

In Ethiopia, women migrating from rural areas to urban centres often find themselves being trafficked into prostitution, working in bars, raped, abused, beaten, and exposed to HIV/AIDS (Rakeb 1997, p. 9). There is also much female migration to Arab countries. Many are relatively young, school dropouts or only twelve grades completed,

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<sup>127</sup> “Silencio e cumplice da violencia” (“Silence is the accomplice of violence”) one of the banners during a procession in Rio de Janeiro after the murder of a woman by her ex-husband (Plantenga 1992, p. 13).

unemployed and poor. According to a report launched by the WAO and International Organization for Migration (IOM), between 12,000 and 20,000 Ethiopian women were working in Arab countries between 1995 and 1999 (*Dimtsachen* 2001, p. 3). Most of these migrants suffer inhumane treatment and are exploited in terms of being denied a salary for months, abused, raped, starved, overworked, beaten, imprisoned, and placed in solitary confinement. Many also found their passports and travel documents confiscated, subjected to harsh treatment, denied food and medical care or contacts with their families at home and accused of stealing. The report showed that due to such harsh treatment at least 67 women died between 1997 and 1999 in Arab countries (*ibid*, 2001, p. 3-5). It is not only the illiterate poor from the rural areas that are found being trafficked, but also the educated from urban and sub-urban centres. Desperate to find employment, they should be seen as a lost asset to the state.

## **6.8 Women in leadership and politics**

Women's emancipation requires the inputs of women themselves to gain prominence. Throughout the world, women have taken the lead in defining their own conditions of transformation and equality. They have emerged as a strong force against the patriarchal world to claim their rights and struggled on a massive scale at the national, regional and international levels. As such, their leadership has been gaining recognition and legitimacy around the world. Reaching out to the remotest corners of the world, it finds support not only through international declarations such as the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and other international instruments, but also at local levels where women's organizations have embarked on a crusade to increase the number of women in leadership posts, especially in political leadership.

This increased leadership is seen as paramount in tackling gender disparities and finding solutions to the many gender problems in a given context and time frame. It guides the perception that once a critical mass of women is put in place, their interests and rights will gain a boost and many women's problems will be placed on the political agenda, enforcing solutions. Disparities remain though between countries and while women in some countries have succeeded better in taking advantage of these opportunities (Uganda, Kenya, South Africa), others are still lagging behind.

Women's leadership in Ethiopia is quite a new phenomenon and the paths to the top remain difficult. Due to the absence of a feminist consciousness, women's leadership has been concentrating on quantity rather than quality of leadership in political office. Currently, the majority of women found in most government posts are mere political appointees because of their affiliation to the ruling party. Unfortunately, their occupancy of political seats is mistakenly read as them being in leadership. However, occupying high political seats in the country does not mean equal decision-making power. Most women in political leadership are part of the TPLF/EPRDF party where all decisions are taken by the top party leaders in a conjoined manner (Markakis 2001, p. 52 in Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 136). Independent administrators at the various ministerial departments, including the WAO and WABs, regional governments or kebele councils

are deprived of such decision-making power. As such, one could even contest the notion of “women in leadership” on this basis. Lacking decision-making power means lack of political influence and this correlates with a deficiency in their ability to pursue the interests and rights of women.

Nevertheless, the number of women entering political leadership posts has slightly increased throughout the historical periods of elections in the country starting 1965 (Majitu & Bedria 1999, p. 57; Semagne 1986, p. 27). The 1995 elections saw fifteen (2.74%) women elected to the House of Representatives among 547 peoples’ representatives, while this number almost tripled in the 2000 elections to 42 or 7.6%<sup>128</sup> and in the 2005 elections further increased to 21% or 116 out of the 546. Regional Councils, Woreda and Kebele Administrations also experienced small increases of women representatives. In regional councils the number of elected women went up from 5% (77) in 1995 to 12.9% (244) in 2000 and 12.5% (218) in 2005. Woreda female membership went down from 8.5% in 1995 to 6.6% in 2000 and showed a dramatic increase to 22.8% in 2005 while kebele membership went up from 1% in 1995 to 13.9% in 2000 and further up in 2005 to 20.6% (Meron 2005, p. 71, ‘Shadow Report’ 2003, p. 16, Lenasil 2006, p. 131). The problem of disparity between regions remains of serious concern as some regions (Gambela, Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions) still do not consider women as viable candidates for elections (Lenasil 2006, p. 131). Among the 30 members of the Standing Committee of the House of Federation only four (13%) are women and none of the committees are chaired by women (ibid).

### ***Affirmative action in politics: will that bring out feminism?***

There have been attempts by means of affirmative action to remedy the low levels of representation of women in political leadership. This course of action is clearly stipulated in the country’s Constitution that came into effect in 1995.<sup>129</sup> Affirmative measures to assist women has been one of the integral requirements of CEDAW<sup>130</sup> to which Ethiopia is signatory<sup>131</sup> (in 1981) and has seen gradual affirmative measures being put in place in education (mainly at tertiary level), employment (in the civil service sector) and political leadership (quota system or seat reservation). The quota system forms part of affirmative measures, seen as a form of positive discrimination. It is a kind of corrective measure to do away with the gender imbalances in power (Tsegaye 2005, p. 100). The ruling party, EPRDF, introduced a 30% quota for women candidates prior to the 2005 elections. This did not mean that it was compulsory for other parties to do the same or that the percentage would be achieved. This quota system has been under severe scrutiny even in the ruling party itself. It has been observed that most of the resistance in the field is mounted by the very women who were placed in political posts due to their loyalty to the ruling party. This includes the head of the women’s affairs department, who fails to realize its need (Meaza 2003, p. 31; Lenasil 2006, p. 139).

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<sup>128</sup> It is noteworthy that all of those elected women in 2000 (47) belonged to the ruling party, EPRDF (Shadow Report 2003, p. 16), while in the 2005 elections 107 out of 116 belong to the ruling party.

<sup>129</sup> Article 35(3) of the FDRE Constitution 1995, p. 93.

<sup>130</sup> Articles 4 and 7 (Meaza 2003, p. 30).

<sup>131</sup> Article 9 (4) stipulates that “all international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land” (The Constitution 1995, p. 79).

Despite affirmative measures, very few women are found to run for political office or even form part of party leadership of either the ruling party or opposition or heading their own (Berouk 2004, p. 87; Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 112; Merera 2003, p. 113). Women's participation in political activities remain marginal and though there are a few women who could be seen as occupying leadership and decision-making posts, the reality is that they are placed at the peripheries of political leadership and decision-making processes (Lenesil 2006, p. 129). The puzzling issue is why women themselves are not taking an active stance on their leadership and move out of the shadows of their patriarchal cover. Why are they not consciously pursuing leadership posts or transforming their political posts into genuine leadership representing women's interests? Perhaps such a deficiency is caused by the fact that the majority of women in politics belong to the ruling party where party interests supersede other interests.

A crucial feminist concern here is whether an increase of women in politics will translate into the realistic promotion of women's rights? Evidence reveals that this is far from what is happening. Party women's main concern is to advance their party interests, which, as has been discussed in part two of this chapter, are fixed on a depoliticized and deradicalized, welfarist "woman question" as laid down in their National Policy on Ethiopian Women. This NPEW is further enforced through the various policies of the government which are in line with the political ideology of the party. Priority areas of intervention are dictated and promulgated as part of government plans and intentions. This illustrates how the increasing number of women in political seats remains void of feminist concerns.

## **6.9 Conclusion**

The issues raised in this chapter are not discussed exhaustively or conclusively. They are meant to illustrate historical trends in women's status and lives. And there are many such transformations despite the rigid patriarchal setting of society. The main issue here is the coming out of the closet regarding many issues previously considered taboo. One cannot help but notice how they are being debated and strategized upon now. These should be seen as significant changes. The problem though is that not all aspects of women's lives have been subject to transformation. Some of the rigid areas remain unaltered. These include the perceptions and practical areas of the feminine domains of work and existence and their traditional ways of doing things. For example, food preparation has undergone the least changes, except among a small group of elite urbanites. Even then, the majority have cooks and servants to do the work in traditional manners.

Some changes are noted in the perceptions of women's education, employment and rights. These gain support through the increased level of awareness, which, when accompanied by gender disaggregated data, reveal the hidden miseries of women's lives. Many of these had been engulfed by the taken-for-granted beliefs and norm for centuries. One could question whether the slow visibility of women's problems is subject to evolutionary or revolutionary impulses causing for changes. Within either, the role of global influences should not be ignored.

The discussion was meant to not only show the gravity of the problems women face, but also what the ruling party is doing about those. It shows women's long lives of agony, pain and suffering and also reveals the particular actions that have been undertaken by the EPRDF/TPLF government. These interventions are also subject to scrutiny. They show how women's liberation from oppression has never been on the agenda of the government. Each problem (education, health, employment, trafficking and so forth) of women seems to have been taken over by party cadres and monopolized for biased political interventions. Policies and laws are evidence of the party's high level awareness on the issues. This awareness, though, is not directed to relieve women of their suffering. Instead, it is actively used to misdirect the intervention strategies and weigh those from the angle of their benefits to the party. If there are no benefits, the chances are that the problem will be buried, no matter how grave its implications are for women. When the government becomes cornered on this, it shows the utmost hostility and intolerance.

This is visible in the areas of women's social and political empowerment and leadership. These are areas where women could become empowered to develop a critical consciousness and agency and take their agenda of emancipation in their own hands. The government, though, does not allow for any room for women to venture in these areas, unless controlled by its cadres. The areas crucial for the cultivation of feminist agency, such as the academic sector and political arena, are suspiciously depoliticized. There are no femocrats yet in the political field who could take up such massive challenges and those women associated with the ruling party effectively assure that women's problems remain remote from politics while subjected to their supervision and control.

Despite all these hurdles and setbacks, there is still room for hope. For example, the number of educated women is on the increase and many more are exposed and travel widely abroad. This is already leaving its marks also on the kind of issues that are being discussed regarding women's rights. One only has to look at the expansion of concerns that are currently debated to realize the changes. Many of those concerns are determined by the cultural and religious setting of society and have been considered universal for centuries. To even question them implies questioning the very foundation of patriarchal ideology. That some women have taken up these challenges means that there is something on the move. Women may not yet realise that they have opened the gate for something. In the next chapter I will discuss this discourse among civil society-educated women and try to identify whether there is some school of thought on women's emancipation in the making that is distinctive from the "women question" program from the ruling party.

## **Chapter 7 Problems of educated women’s leadership and actions in their quest for emancipation and change: Is there a feminist movement?**

### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous chapters identified and discussed the many obstacles preventing women from achieving or advancing their independent emancipation agenda and influencing the development of their agency. They explored the historical time frame, seeking answers regarding deep-rooted perceptions and practices. Barriers were found mainly at the political and socio-cultural and religious levels. The masculine political culture is inherent in the traditional make-up of society where there is no room for women’s leadership. This trend is not only observed among the ruling party at present, but also among the emerging opposition groups. This was observed among educated active women who were co-opted by these parties.<sup>132</sup> They realized that they were merely symbolic and instrumental in securing female voters for the party while those parties were completely void of any agenda on women’s concerns and refused to acknowledge gender issues as a priority concern. One journalist wondered how such masculine perceptions in politics could ever be altered: “Do all the men have to be first before women will be considered?” (Esayas in the *Reporter*, 2005).

However, the political culture should not be seen as the only limitation to women’s advancement. There is also an absence of any significant women’s movement that could generate an emancipation agenda. Among the small group of educated, the level of consciousness had not reached the extent to promote and model a women’s movement in the past. Many problems at the time could have contributed to this. Otherwise, Ethiopian history is rich in positive role models of daring, even death-defying women taking the lead. There were women who took risks and endured. In many countries across the world at present, women can be found enduring and taking risks under extremely repressive political systems, such as in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is crucial to realize here that each time frame and context produces its own heroines. One could wonder whether there are any such prominent personalities at present in Ethiopia daring to take a leadership role and provide structure to a women’s movement.

The combined powers of the state and religion for centuries have added to the comprehensive internalization among women on the perceptions of their exclusion and subordination and on their leadership. With the influences of globalization, where Ethiopia finally could not isolate itself from, some changes have been filtering through causing for the defeat of some of these ancient perceptions, but more needs to be done to alter these. Some changes have started to surface, albeit very slowly.

At a global level, women’s leadership has been gaining prominence in the twenty-first century, reaching out to the remotest grassroots communities. Supported by the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination

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<sup>132</sup> Interviewed woman wishing to remain anonymous, June 2007, Addis Ababa.

Against Women (CEDAW), and other international instruments, an increasing number of women's organizations in many countries are setting up mechanisms to advance women's increased "enrolment" in politics. Centuries of discrimination are being revealed at an alarming rate where professional women have taken the lead in assisting and equipping their sisters in the process.

The reason for this is that women's leadership is increasingly being recognized as paramount in tackling gender disparities and finding solutions to the many gender problems in a given context and time frame. Relying on the patriarchal state apparatus to carry out this mission on its own has proven futile and women are increasingly carrying their own torch. The obvious expectation of increasing women's political leadership in numbers is that once a critical mass of women is in place, their interests and rights will gain a boost and many of their problems will be placed on the political agenda, enforcing solutions. However, as has been stressed by Rhode (1994, p. 1207), numbers are not enough to advance a women's agenda or achieve gender equality. What is primarily needed is feminist leadership: "elect *feminists*, not just females", because they are better equipped to alter the patriarchal political environment in order to institutionalize feminist initiatives. Disparities remain thus between countries and while women in some countries have succeeded better in taking advantage of political opportunities (Uganda, Kenya, South Africa), others are still lagging behind.

In this chapter I affirm how agency and leadership are connected. With a radical agency that develops into a critical consciousness, leadership has a firm root. But with agency still arrested within traditional parameters, leadership remains a remote ideal. I reflect on the challenges among educated women's leadership role in Ethiopia and discuss their approach (es) on women's emancipation in the country. It will assert that educated women in the country are not able to play a more proactive role in women's emancipation due to many reasons inherent in their own perceptions and actions that are linked to the boundaries of their agency. Formation of women's agency remains arrested under dominant patriarchal ideologies informing their thought, behaviour and attitudes. It is within these that limitations have taken root as norm. Otherwise, more women are educated at present and a few have even reached top professional levels. What is holding them back then to provide leadership on women's emancipation? This lack of a strong, independent feminist leadership is a serious handicap to women's movements and is not unique to Ethiopia. It is a serious challenge that needs urgent attention in this new millennium if women would like to secure sustainability for the little progress they have made so far. It is therefore important to reflect on what issues have been overlooked when analyzing educated women's leadership quest in the country.

## **7.2 Leadership problems among women in Ethiopia**

Women's leadership is a critical element in the long process of their emancipation. It defines strategies and directions and informs actions. Without leadership there can be no movement or agenda. Regrettably, women's leadership in Ethiopia has not moved beyond lip service. It is grossly absent at all levels in society (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 112). Little has been done to remedy this. Given the religio-traditional setting of

Ethiopian society, it was never considered an issue to be nurtured. Many women in leadership have emerged from outside these ancient structures. As noted by Scott (1981), women's leadership emerge from their inherent social experiences and organizations. In the Ethiopian context though, these have not produced path breakers yet (there have been no critical voices among the women leaders in idirs, mahbers or work associations).

The country is experiencing an upsurge of many new gender initiatives, often externally initiated. One of those related to the national elections in 2000. A few NGOs took the initiative to collaborate with donors and international agencies to promote women's leadership. This was accompanied by various seminars, discussions and meetings on the subject. Many of those, however, stressed similar points of focus and angles, namely: women's political leadership and the prevalent obstacles preventing them from gaining such positions. Plenty of solutions and ideas were forwarded to remedy those obstacles.

The main concern is, who will take up those ideas and accommodate the changes? Not the ruling party, where promotion of women's leadership does not fall within its margins of rhetoric on women's emancipation. Not the opposition, which is too weak on that front. Not civic actors, who lack the skills and capacity. And definitely not those who identified those obstacles because that is as far as their briefing went. The result is that many of those recommendations end up being shelved and forgotten, until new seminars are organized by different groups on the same issues discussing the same problems again.

This repetitive action reveals the absence of a critical consciousness to move beyond the results of the first studies. There are no signs of new approaches, paradigms or focus areas. There is also no initiation to take up the task of challenging the educated women themselves, although that is a very sensitive area. The lack of unity also diminishes such responsibilities as it is considered better not to air one's critical insights instead of having too many that would reveal the hidden divisions.

The majority of leadership studies in Ethiopia present more or less the same arguments and foundation. A few scholars have conducted studies on the problems of women's leadership and presented their analytical findings on the causes. The first studies were enlightening and promising. But as the studies on the subject increased, they started to reflect a repetition of what was revealed in the first studies with minor alterations. The uniform detection of causes in most of the studies points to the universality of the problem. They are listed here:

- Cultural, traditional and religious belief systems and barriers or ceilings (women's appropriate place and things they can do as dictated by their culture, tradition and religion)
- Patriarchy (male chauvinism, refusing to accept or recognize female leadership)
- Male control (husbands and other male relatives refusing to allow women to take up such roles)
- Socialization (hierarchical destiny where women are taught to be submissive, passive, unquestioning and so on)
- Women's perceptions of politics as a male domain

- Lack of confidence in women's capabilities by males and females
- Multiple roles of women (enormous workload)
- Lack of assertiveness among women (low self-esteem)
- Low level of education
- Economic insecurity (lack of control over and access to resources and work overload)
- Gender-based violence
- Lack of role models
- Poverty
- Professional glass ceiling (professional level of employment for women beyond which they are not supposed to move)

(Sources: Azeb 2003, p. 23-25; Meron 2005, p. 74-77; Berouk 2004, p. 93-95, Mintwab 2005, p. 10-13).

Each study tried to create greater understanding of the problems of women's leadership. However, they did not move beyond rhetorical presentations that could take the concerns to newer heights and depths. For instance, none of the studies considered the decades-long gaps in women's leadership and what consequences that has for the re-starting of women's leadership. The rhetorical issues that are reflected in all of them, such as blaming society and culture, are not unique to Ethiopian society, but found in many traditional societies across the world. They can be overcome (Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Nigeria, Iran, Kuwait, and so forth). In fact, Ethiopian women are considered lucky with their legal system in order regarding women's rights (by their sisters in neighbouring countries). Based on this one could question what have they achieved that could be seen as outstanding in the region or in their own country?

After so many studies and presentations/training sessions on women's leadership nothing is moving. If the problems were in policy, those have been remedied by now. If they were an outcome of low skills and capacity, even those are being taken care of through numerous training sessions for many years now. Then what is still missing and preventing women from claiming their leadership? This is very interesting and demands critical analysis.

There is a conspicuous silence among educated women on the real problems of leadership and many don't go beyond the barriers mentioned above. But these external problems that are already in circulation, have now all been identified many years ago. Then, what is remaining and/or overlooked? Perhaps the educated do not feel concerned with the enlisted problems assuming those not affecting them. But who do they talk about then when they speak of the barriers affecting women's leadership? Which women are supposed to take up the leadership?

Below follows a discussion on a set of new insights on problems of women's leadership among the educated in Ethiopia. Identifying and naming these could expose the real challenges and function as indicators for change. They could also contribute in the radicalization of agency transformation. But, above all, they can provide clarity on why,

despite the many conducive elements, educated women have not been able to take advantage of the available opportunities.

### 7.2.1 Symbolic leadership

Symbolic leadership is defined as leadership without any power, qualification or input. It is like a decoration, a symbol or a façade to occupy space and positions which could have been used by more suitable and qualified people. In Ethiopia, women appointed in political posts are seen as occupying symbolic leadership posts because they are merely symbolic in serving political interests. This is one of the reasons that they are often not taken serious by their male counterparts and constituencies (Africa and African Diaspora Feminism 2009).<sup>133</sup>

Linked to this, there is a serious flaw in many of the leadership studies that focus on the number of women entering politics. These studies fail to analyze that political positioning is not equal to authentic leadership. They only recognize the level of incompetence among the selected or appointed women and recommend development of their skills and capacities to remedy those. But none tangibly face the lack of decision making power (Markakis 2001, p. 52 in Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 136) and real leadership among these women. Real leadership is more demanding and includes experience, intellect, accountability, transparency, constituency backing and democracy. It definitely includes decision-making powers. Positioning is symbolic, shallow, arrogant and an imposition devoid of content. It has been a historic trait in Ethiopia to appease loyalists and exert control. It is a political gesture only to maintain the political status quo and secure the implementation of policies. This symbolic form of leadership is expected in the political climate of the country where one authoritarian ruler has replaced another for centuries. Therefore, those appointing women to any political post only do so with full knowledge and consciousness of these women's [in] competencies. After all, they would not allow for liberties that could jeopardize their (the ruling party's) own credibility or undermine the authority of those in charge. Below are a few examples of the recognition of such symbolic leadership in society:

1. In February 2005 the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association launched *The Women's Manifesto*. Recognizing the problems of women's leadership, this manifesto aimed to analyse the political programs of the different parties on their responsiveness to women's needs and aspirations stressing the particular issues in society that affect women most such as education, health, poverty, and so forth. This manifesto revealed the low participation of women in leadership and decision-making posts and identified the lack of a vibrant women's movement and gender-friendly civil society as some of the causes. The manifesto recognized the barriers women face and advanced solutions in the form of capacity-building and skills development to enhance their leadership. The quota system introduced by the ruling party is not recognized as a solution. According to this manifesto, the quota system of the ruling party has already put many unqualified women in

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<sup>133</sup> Website: science.jrank.org, 2009.

seats where they only function as symbols. The manifesto calls for women to become assertive and proactive ('The Women's Manifesto' 2005).

2. All political parties in the country have a low percentage of female representation. Having more women running as candidates in the elections does not guarantee their leadership. In all of them, men have monopolized or dominated strategic decision-making positions (Jalele 2005, p. 17-18). The women's machinery is also functioning as a political and symbolic instrument. And the women's committee in the House of People's Representatives hardly makes any impact. They are there not because of their gender interests. They are simply political figures with political ambitions and part of a very repressive ruling party system (*Reflections* 12, 2005, p. 33).

It is not only in the manifesto, but also among scholars that symbolic leadership is recognized at the political level. There is no recognition yet of women's *de facto* leadership. The positioning of women with few qualifications in political posts, and interpreting those as leadership also undermines the in- and outputs of these women in society. Many educated people with genuine interests in women's leadership spend most of their energy on this quantitative increase of women in high posts, failing to comprehensively research the sustainability of those or apprehend the issue of authentic leadership. Stigdill (1974, p. 159 cited in Scott 1981) states that the most crucial problems of leadership have been neglected. These include the issue of acquisition and retention of the role, maintenance of leadership under trying circumstances and the effect of that leadership on member satisfaction. These all add to the vast number of "drop-outs" among those once heavily invested in to take up such posts. Besides, despite industry and academics spending millions on leadership training and training manuals, not much is spent on evaluating the effectiveness of intervention methods. That might have revealed their shortcomings or problems long time ago (Scott 1981).

Political positioning of women takes the form of tokenism and therefore cannot serve as role model. This has a demoralizing impact on many who do not wish to be seen in such posts. After all, at the end of the political posts of those positioned many leave silently without having made a difference. Such actions create a further backlash regarding women's leadership aspirations and acceptance. In a similar manner, politically and internationally agreed introduction of quotas cannot represent genuine leadership and has already created many forms of resistance, even though, from a gender angle, they are justified. Symbolic leadership does not serve the awakening of feminist consciousness but works as a diversion. Could educated women and the global feminist movement have fallen victim to this? In a few countries, women have realized the weak capacity of women placed in political leadership and have developed programmes to aid those women through capacity development and training. This, however, is not the case in Ethiopia. Despite the training, one has to be cautious that training alone cannot instill feminism in women as feminism is a process of individuation.

### 7.2.2 Problems of perception

Perceptions are the most crucial determinant in women's rights. They are taught and learned through socialization and indoctrination within a given socio-cultural setting. Over time, these become the norm, taken-for-granted and natural. In turn, perceptions inform agency and direct thought. In the Ethiopian context, perceptions are a historical product emerging through continuous and persistent political, religious and cultural discourses, where certain ethnic traits have been elevated as reflecting national identity. These have left serious marks on the perceptions of people of many things. And, as perceptions inform and guide views and visions, they determine possibilities and trends on women's emancipation.

Indoctrination is a form of systematic teaching intended to transform a person in a short time and where the person is expected to accept the teachings without critical investigation or questioning. Indoctrination is often, but not exclusively, the backbone of perceptions. A well-known form of indoctrination is through religious teachings. But political education can also take the form of indoctrination, such as during the Derg regime. Both of these have been overtly present and active in Ethiopian society. Centuries of biased patriarchal and politically loaded indoctrination are still visible and present in current time frame. The question is, what are educated women doing to alter such biased perceptions? Do they realize that there is a link between their indoctrination and the formation of their agency? There are very few among the educated who are capable of stepping out of their ideological insulation that has locked them for centuries within biased perceptions.

#### *Religion*

In as much as religion is a source of misery to women, it can also offer them hope. Within this hope, there is always room for action. In some religious African societies (Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Tanzania, and so forth), women show that they can struggle for women's rights within religious boundaries. Some even claim that religion can be effectively used for change. The major issue is, whether women are willing to take up that challenge? As an integral part of their lives many religious women in Ethiopia would not consider it an issue to be discussed or questioned. Despite the awareness of its oppressive nature, even the educated are not ready yet to critically investigate it. Therefore, there is no voice against the sexist language of religious texts or the forms of patriarchal exclusion of women. There is no female theologian (either in Islam or Christianity) studying religion from a feminine or feminist angle. The most visible reasons could be the inability among many to critically investigate religious manifestations, teachings, influences and indoctrination.

Many among the educated religious women who are employed at gender/women's desks show extreme discrepancies. Some are not open for criticism of their religious views and consider it an offence to question those views. This relative inability or unwillingness to face the problems makes it harder to engage educated religious women into challenging traditional systems of oppression in order to strategize for changes. There is no investigation or deep reflection on the link between religion and the fabric of patriarchy.

This shortcoming further obscures the extent and role of religion in women's oppression. And, as religion provides believers with a vantage point through which they interpret the world around them (Shaheed 1989, p. 41), educated religious women too fail to realize that their agency has been robbed from them and that they are wearing religious lenses.

The main issue of concern in Ethiopian society is not whether women are religious or not, but their level of religiosity. This is a very important determinant in the approach and expectations educated women have of society and for the future. It also determines the emancipation course and speed. Many blame everything around them for their own shortcomings and lack of radicalism. Culture, history, tradition, government, the Derg, and occasionally religion, are not spared. This effectively puts a barrier around them, implying that they are not to be blamed for their inaction simply because they cannot.

Equally observed is the level of indifference among the educated in this group who have surrendered to their religion and expect their god to help them in everything, from passing exams to finding husbands, rich men, jobs, solving marital problems, and so forth. When even the educated remain intoxicated, one can but wonder whether a breakthrough would ever be possible, or whether any change or advocacy for change will be received positively by these women. A recent incident in Mali where Muslim women protested against women's rights is such an example ('Malawians protest against women's rights', 2009). Incompatibility of women's rights issues with religion often causes many to abandon the former while remaining faithful to their religion. Many educated women speak highly about their religion and the presumed gender equality embedded in it.<sup>134</sup> However, they fail to recognize the materialization of that equality outside the church. After all, as Gemetchu Megerssa (2002, *Reflections* 7, p. 41) notes, "no matter how one interprets any religion, there is simply no space for gender equality".

#### *"Ceilings"*

One of the major barriers in women's leadership is the perception of the cultural or professional ceilings to women's aspirations. These ceilings are invisible levels beyond which educated women cannot or do not move. They are embedded in discrimination and exclusion that prevents their advancement. Ceilings can be externally imposed or internally defined. Externally imposed ceilings are often found in professions where women are not promoted beyond a certain level. They are also found in societies, cultures, religion and traditions that accept as taken-for-granted that women will not aspire to more. When these are internalized among women, they are found not to aspire. Internalization is then closely associated with perceived social control even when there is no actual control. Leadership in traditional societies is a clear example of this where women affirm its masculine character and 'voluntarily' refrain from pursuing it.

Ethiopia too has fallen under the global hype on how women's leadership can bring gender equality. There is a lot of talk about it, but not many educated women have leadership aspirations. This was affirmed in a study conducted by Ababayehu 1995 (cited in Yalew Endawoke, 2000, p. 63) where it was revealed that educated women did not show any specific form of aspiration to take up leadership roles. Socio-cultural and

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with W/zo. Debitu Solomon, follower of Pentecostal religion, 29 June 2007, Addis Ababa

religious ceilings have become internalized and prevent women from making demands or challenging existing patriarchal perceptions regarding the height of the ceilings. Many do not even consider to defy the ceilings and demand their place at the top. This lack of motivation and inhibited perception is very serious because, though the barriers are identified at various leadership training sessions and seminars, no genuine efforts are put into removing the barriers. Facts and figures do not tell the real story. Among the appointed few in political posts, the ceiling obviously forms a serious stumbling block beyond which educated women cannot move. This is obvious because of the practice of positioning. When party cadres are positioned in their posts, they are not required to possess the required intellect or skills. Eventually this turns against them.

The issue of leadership aspiration is closely knit to women's perception on leadership. Many have a low esteem and self-confidence to take up leadership posts. Leadership has always been associated with the male domain and at present there might be only a few educated women who think otherwise. Wright noted in this regard: "Women are traditionally not actors in the public sphere and neither men nor women expect women to sit in decision-making organs" (2002, p. 48). Leadership demands to be the first in many ways, or to take the lead. When it comes to real action, very few educated women would come forward to be first. It is a historic perception and needs rigorous intervention to be defeated. For instance, during the discussions on the Ethiopian student movement, a comment was made about a male activist of the 70s, who had seen many forms of atrocities committed against women, but failed to write about it (Original, 2010, p. 125). Blaming men to take notice of women's epistemic experiences is not at place here because women can also take the lead in documenting their own stories?

Haddas Wolde Giorgis<sup>135</sup> noted that the educated "simply lack a proactive spirit" in this regard. The fear of visibility is tremendous. This brings into question the issue of leadership. While many among the educated, exposed women could play a meaningful role in providing leadership, they fail to do so. The issue could be not only whether they are gender sensitized, but also whether they lack the ambitions to become leaders. Many simply have never considered that option and leave it to "others", including outsiders and foreigners. This in turn contributes to the lack of local initiatives in the field. The almost indestructible cultural stereotypes add more weight to this inaction. And, though one can be assured that stereotypes can be overcome through education, when it concerns women's leadership in Ethiopia, education plays no role in influencing people's thoughts (Yalew Endawoke 2000, p. 62). The educated have not shown any action yet to counter this.

The main question here is: Do educated women perceive that they have a role to play in the emancipation of women in Ethiopia? Are they sensitive and most importantly, capable, of taking up those challenges and making choices? The number of women exposed to international culture, issues, trends, discourses and practices has increased dramatically. However, many travel abroad not to learn new things, but mainly to have holidays or visit families or go for studies. Among the students, many return but do not convey their knowledge within their own organizations or in the country at large. Given

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<sup>135</sup> Interview with W/zo. Haddas Wolde Giorgis, 25 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

the realities of exposure, some even state that Ethiopian society is not ready for those kinds of radicalism or that you cannot bring this or that from abroad to change the traditional mindset at home. Travelling thus does not necessarily translate into transforming a person into a critical catalyst for change.

### *Hypocrisy*

Hypocrisy is the practice of professing beliefs, views, qualities, standards or positions that one does not really hold. It is an act of falseness, hiding truth. In the repressive political climate of Ethiopia, it is not uncommon to hear leaders speak of policies, rules and laws to which the public should adhere, while they themselves refrain from doing the same. Lack of accountability and transparency add to such practices.

Hypocrisy is a major barrier to women's advancement. Among the educated, many are found possessing the tendency to place themselves outside their actions and activities. Perhaps this was a common approach earlier in Ethiopian history where women were forced to take part in activities without their consent, justifying their separation from the actions. But at present it is not uncommon to see gender workers in the field still placing their actions outside themselves. Examples include the women's machinery where women in leadership posts fail to realize that gender concerns start with oneself and that one has to be actively engaged in activism to embark on the road to feminism.

Similar perceptions are also found among educated women. Gender activists are found preaching practices they themselves fail to adhere to. If a gender desk worker from the government or NGO conducts training on gender roles and calls for an increased role for men in sharing domestic tasks, explaining why such is beneficial to society at large, why are they then hesitant to apply the same in their own lives? Among the older generation this is the most serious flaw observed which brings their credibility (and thus their leadership) into question. But among the younger generation similar forms of hypocritical perceptions can be observed where they use the country's rigid culture to excuse their own distance. This dual mask among educated women is quite misleading. Among the few there is again a small proportion who could be credited for being genuine, but they are so few that their impact is not making any significant contribution yet.

Within this dual perception there are those who assume themselves to be experts in women's concerns. The bureaucrats openly have a position of senior and junior women's experts. Some women in civil society also claim to be experts. Considering the country's educational status and lack of comprehensive gender training at the time, the word 'expert' is even questionable. Possessing the skills and knowledge does not automatically make one into a leader or activist just like speaking and lecturing does not make one into an expert. Calling oneself then a feminist<sup>136</sup> is totally misleading because of lack of self-transformation and radicalization.

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<sup>136</sup> According to a debate site, Red Polka, "The challenge with feminist identity is that you are not dealing with an intention; you are dealing with a political movement. According to Polka, "To take on the name while holding a perspective wholly different from the spirit of the movement is absurd" (2003).

Hypocrisy among women activists and bureaucrats seriously undermines their emancipation. These women may consider encouraging their constituencies to do something they themselves shun to take a lead in. They would not hesitate to agitate the masses but refuse to take the front seat. All these do not go unnoticed. The constituencies and targets are not blind or ignorant. Many are fully capable of reading behind the written or spoken word, because that has been the practice of Ethiopian historical oppressions. They thus realize the reluctance among the equality and emancipation preachers to really implement and hop along as long as there are no repercussions. Those who advance the many recommendations each time a study, workshop or training session is conducted in any field regarding women's rights and status should for once stand up and take those serious as their own.

### **7.2.3 Authoritarian tendency and hierarchy**

Ethiopia has a long history of authoritarian rule where the different groups of people (divided by ethnicity, religion, gender, age, race, and so forth) were hierarchically structured in society. Authoritarianism and hierarchy determined undemocratic approaches in political rule and also informed relations between the different groups, including women. Women of the nobility had a higher ranking than men from lower hierarchies. As an ancient heritage, these traits are still found to be prevalent. Undemocratic tendencies are observed at practical all levels of society, from the top (government) to civic groups (NGOs, CSOs). The historical prevalence of consequent authoritarian regimes upholding hierarchies did not leave much time to practise democratic rule. Most leadership positions are held by people who were present during the emperor or the Derg regime. This means that they grew up in undemocratic settings where authoritarianism and hierarchy were norms.

Women have not remained immune from these tendencies. As a product of society, they are initially in charge of carrying over the cultural heritage from generation to generation, they abide by these strict rules and divisions. Authoritarian structures and hierarchy are therefore also observed among women. These traits can be traced within organizational and institutional cultures.

Hierarchy and authoritarianism reflect top-down approaches. Within many institutions and organizations these are normal practice. For instance, among the bureaucrats in the government there is no doubt about the use of hierarchical ranking and top-down approaches. When one attends a meeting with the women's machinery, the atmosphere changes from relaxed to tense. There will be no use of critical language. Instead, one has to be very cautious not to offend them and turn to accommodating approaches. It is not surprising that final decisions or conclusions always rest in their hands. The enforced co-operation between women's desks in NGOs and bureaucrats of the women's machinery also reflect such top-down tendencies in which the bureaucrats impose their dominance.

Hierarchies are also present in different social settings and among different groups where those higher in the rank (for instance, directors, elders, males) have higher authority. This respect for authoritarian hierarchical structures is deeply ingrained among the masses in Ethiopian society and difficult to counter. In a top-down manner all societal relations and

activities are ordered accordingly. At any level except the very highest, there is one that is higher up the hierarchy whose interests gain priority.

As a cultural trait, it becomes difficult to challenge hierarchy. It forms a serious stumbling block to consensus-building and organizing for change. It also prevents equality, democracy and leaves no room for critical dialogue. Bauman (1976, p. 103) stipulates that “ Distorted communication constitutes a situation of inequality between the partners of a dialogue; the situation where one of the partners is incapable, or incapacitated, to the extent of not being able to take up a symmetrical posture toward his opposite ...”. He asserts that “If such a situation takes place on a permanent basis, by institutionalized domination, it “deprives some partners from those means and assets without which taking an equal stand in dialogue becomes impossible” (ibid). To think that this practice is common in Ethiopia explains women’s reluctance to take the initiative to tackle a problem, no matter how dire the situation.

The hierarchical system is devoid of criticism, especially directed against those higher in the hierarchy. Evidence can be found of criticism that is hardly welcomed or appreciated at any level in society. Instead, it is always understood as a personal attack, including among the educated. Among the ruling party, its lack of tolerance for criticism leaves nothing to the imagination: one is either with or against the party. Among civil society it creates divisions and factions. This adds to the lengthy procedures and repetition of the same seminars or sees a return of the same people making the same mistakes while none dare to challenge them.

In Ethiopia, authoritarianism or the excessive exercise of authority (whether political or social) and hierarchy offer no room for women’s leadership due to the lower positioning of women in the hierarchy. For women, to be born and raised within such culture, these top-down approaches form a barrier to the emergence of their leadership. The lack of critical insights also covers the shortcomings and problems. In such situations, what kind of leadership could best benefit educated women in Ethiopia to lead women’s emancipation? And how can this become a reality? Without critical dialogue and already existing divisions among women, such formations seem a remote ideal and it is questionable whether one feminist leader would be able to cater for the needs of all the factions and even be accepted by all.

#### **7.2.4 Need for acknowledgement**

So little is done in the field of women’s rights that whenever something emerges as a major achievement, the competition for getting credit increases. On average, the bureaucrats or women’s machinery are the dominant players in the field of taking international and national credit for actions and achievements on women’s rights in the country. Even when initiatives are undertaken in the form of enforced co-operation with civil society, the main acknowledgements go to the bureaucrats. This boosts their ego and confidence and encourages future exploitation.

This issue of taking credit or getting acknowledgement is disturbing. Working with the machinery is one of serious pretensions. The level of praise and compliments extended to it should actually indicate that something is wrong. It reflects the submission of civil society and helplessness of its actors. One has to be fully aware of such operations to grasp its depth and extent. However, as this is the only way to get approval for one's activities and obtain permission for implementation, many have no choice. Enforced co-operation also carries the risk of losing one's innovative ideas to the bureaucrats. It would not be the first time that genuine ideas have been whisked away by the bureaucrats and presented as their own (case of gender budgeting). Such practices are corrupt.

Acknowledgement is also demanded by educated women working in different areas on women's issues, who claim these as their monopoly. There are not many organizations doing the same, with the exception of the welfare areas of micro credit, literacy and healthcare for women. Given the dire situation of women, the level of competition is incomprehensible. The desire for credit or to be the first or the only one can defeat the whole cause of women's emancipation. It creates serious frustrations and divisions, causing some to abandon the struggle. This also hampers the formation of women's leadership because without humility leadership can become authoritarian and would not serve feminist ends. There is an urgent need to have many more women's organizations dealing with women's issues, due to the extent of the problems.

### **7.2.5 The generation gap**

Among the educated there are many serious issues which need to be viewed closely in order to grasp their action-inaction on women's emancipation in the country. One of the most visible and obvious concerns is the generation problem. The torch that was sparked by the now older generation in the late 1970s was not continued among the current generation. A generation ago women were actively striving to enter the education system and struggled for their rights. There were many women who contributed in the struggle to increase the school enrolment of girls (see Pankhurst 1991, p. 71-88; *Reflections* 4, 2000, p. 7-9). They persisted during that time to find their place in the masculine setting of Ethiopian society. These were educated women who were driven on their own to achieve and demand women's rights to education.

Those activists (called "initiators" of change by Tsing Loh 2008) have aged, and some have passed away. Many used the opportunities provided by the new regime in 1991 to initiate their own associations or NGOs geared towards improving the living conditions of women and children. Some did not move beyond the welfare paradigm, others failed. Their approach was not feminist oriented. They used mainly the existing legal framework for promoting women's rights in areas such as education or protest against harmful traditional practices. This generation was so absorbed in its work that it failed to pass on the torch.

The gap could also have been started due to the onslaught that took place during the Derg regime where an entire generation of young educated were killed during the Red Terror.

Those youngsters could have been the torch bearers and radicals to revive the women's emancipation agenda. But they are not there.

A generation later a new generation has emerged in a different political setting. This generation is very difficult to motivate or move. Many have personal ambitions where struggling for the collective is not one of those. They also surfaced at a time when the legal environment is very conducive for women's rights and provides them with many opportunities. Among this generation there is only a handful that can be considered sensitive to the plight of women in Ethiopia. It is a struggle against all odds. Evidence of their lack of interest is that they did not set up any new women's associations or organizations. Most of the existing organizations emerged 10–15 years ago.

One could question the approach of this new generation of women (supposedly inheritors of change) (Tsing Loh 2008). Many are more highly educated than their predecessors due to better opportunities. A few old activists mentioned their observation of lack of desire and will among the new generation to carry on the struggle. Many feel frustrated not to find the same passion among the youth and accuse them of having it too easy. But, according to a study conducted by Habtegiorgis Berhane, young women do have aspirations for equality. They expect to have a caring husband who shares in domestic chores and responsibilities. And they all expect to be married (Habtegiorgis 2000, p. 32). The same was noted by W/zo Bedria Mohammed<sup>137</sup> on Muslim girls. She stated that Muslim girls are becoming more assertive through education, but not in terms of changing the traditional perceptions and patterns in society or to become independent. Marriage remains their ultimate goal and they even uphold the traditional division of labour. Early marriage continues to dominate the practice in this community and is seen as a sign of status. The aspirations of young women is thus not to struggle for rights but to benefit from those already in place. Many expect to return to the traditional patterns of housewives and working husbands. According to W/zo Bedria, many Muslim women are not keen to discuss gender equality issues and defy women's rights (W/zo Bedria, interview, 2007).

The older generation could be directly responsible for the level of inaction among the youth. Mothers are known to be the link to the past and hopes for the future. They play a strong role in changing society through their children. On the one hand thus, at the time women struggled to increase the access to higher education for their daughters, they could not isolate them from the influences of Western culture. This has its own implications on the youth where many are focused on leaving the country and migrating. On the other hand, the older generation remained resolute in their faith to their religion, assuring the indoctrination of the youngsters from a very tender age. There are many youngsters at present with conservative belief patterns where change and transformation are not issues to be considered. This has left its mark on the continuation of the emancipation struggle of women. It is not an illusion to stress then that one is not born a feminist.

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with W/zo Bedria Mohammed, the Chairperson of the Addis Ababa Muslim Women's Council, 25 June 2007, Addis Ababa

### **7.2.6 “Gerontocracy” syndrome**

Gerontocracy is the practice where older women have remained at a given dominant position in their organizations/associations for a substantive period of time. Many explain that they have remained mainly because of ownership but also because there are no suitable candidates who would like to carry on their mission. Gerontocracy often promotes rigidity in which older women are not open to change and transformation and would like to continue their work at their own pace. According to McFadden, “Older women bring with them the undemocratic male traditions into the movement” (1997). Their organizations are often small, unprofessional and hierarchically structured in the sense that the boss takes all the final decisions. Many have low educational levels with low capacity and skills. Their strength, accordingly, is found in their years of experience and many would not hesitate to call themselves experts and professionals, professing to have a monopoly on a specific area of work. In reality, many linger around relief work, dependent on foreign donors and use a liberal approach to address women’s concerns (focusing on fitting women in instead of demanding structural transformations).

Although it could be argued that the older women have gained experience in their position over the years and have finally come to grips with gender issues in the country, the pertinent issue is that in the Ethiopian context this is not the case. The older women emerged and were raised in a time of continuous political repression and intensive religious indoctrination. They were socialized according to the dominant Amhara-Tigray cultural traits and have developed mechanisms to work on gender issues without upsetting the established political and cultural order of society. This means that they continue working with a de-radicalized and apolitical stance on gender, focusing on neutral areas of work and wary of upsetting the status quo. Feminism becomes a remote ideal among such women. For example, astonishingly, one of the women interviewed said that gender equality means that: “We don’t want to change the division of labour, we only want to reduce women’s workload”.<sup>138</sup> How she expects to accomplish that was not explained. This shows that the older generation is not ready for a radical approach to gender or to politicize it. They would rather use a reformist and liberal approach to avoid upsetting the status quo. This has serious implications for the course of women’s emancipation. Led by an older generation, there is no sight yet of new voices and new approaches.

### **7.2.7 Lack of organization and networking**

Women’s organization and networking are crucial in their quest for emancipation. Organization provides ideology, direction, mission and vision and most importantly, leadership. Networking provides critical mass formation, solidarity and consensus building. Both are linked to bringing women together for a common agenda and joint action. With over 80 local organizations catering for women’s programmes in the country, only 15 to 20 are fully women’s organizations. Their focus areas are mainly in health care, micro credits, education and training. Beside these, there are over 30 international organizations and at least eight United Nations agencies with a gender desk.

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<sup>138</sup> Interview with a bureaucrat, 22 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

There is one visible academic institution, the Institute of Gender Studies at Addis Ababa University and a few smaller department sections located in other universities such as Jimma University or at the Management Institute.

Among all these, one of the most serious shortcomings in the quest for women's emancipation remains the historically influenced lack of organization. There is no clear consensus on the importance of getting organized, forming networks or creating a critical mass. Sporadic efforts have been made to form women's networks for the purpose of forming different organizations, but many weaken after their initiation and fail. The longest-lasting non-formal associations of women are at community level. These include the idirs, mahbers and the numerous work associations. But these do not have a political or feminist base. Similarly, various professional associations, such as women's poetry clubs or women's entrepreneurs' associations do not entertain a feminist agenda or women's emancipation.

The bureaucrats are also divided among themselves. The Women's Affairs Office (WAO) is the head and the branches in the regions are women's affairs bureaus (WABs). The desk operators at the various ministries are women's affairs departments (WADs). At the lower administrative organs of the ruling party, such as the woredas and kebelles, there are women's desks often staffed by one person. But such divisions do not imply an organized structure. Many women's affairs staff are more accountable directly to their line ministries or local government bodies than to the WAO. Some even complain that they are never involved in discussions, only given instructions. At other times, the WADs admitted that they are not cooperating unless in exceptional circumstances. Such weakness in networking creates hostility and undemocratic tendencies. Lower officials just follow orders and do not play a role in how the decisions are made.

At the level of the United Nations and donor agencies, there is a small network, GAW or the donor group for the advancement of women. This group is mainly concerned with the distribution of funds to local initiatives and NGOs in the field of women's activities. They do not determine the agenda but instead, follow the agenda of the government where priority areas are marked for intervention. It is not a network of activism or advocacy for change, but more supportive to the government's plans.

Local organizations in the NGO sector are equally not active in forming networks. A few initiatives have been taken by some NGOs to form a network. These are the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) and the Consortium Christian Relief and Development Association (CCRDA). Among these two, CCRDA's network focuses mainly on the capacity development and enhancement of its members who work in the fields of relief aid and welfare. NEWA is much more promising, and after fighting many internal battles, apparently has defined its strategies. Since it is just a beginning, no clear outcomes are visible yet. It is not sure whether it will take a feminist road and accommodate political activism as a central part of its agenda, which includes the daunting tasks of lobbying. These would require intellect, transformation and capacity,

which are hard to discern at the moment.<sup>139</sup> With the educated leadership of the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association, there seems to be a vacuum in leadership. NEWA is not able to radicalize its agenda or challenge the ruling party. Networking is also a fragile and risky ground for many who fear visibility and political repercussions.

### 7.2.8 Co-optation and submission

Co-optation in this sense takes place where educated and radical women enter political or international institutions for work and then find their ideas and thought submersed under those of their employer. It is a form of toning down their activism and occupying them with so much bureaucratic work that they simply have no time to pursue their initial agendas. Many end up submitting to the new demands for different reasons, among them income and careerism.

Educated women are best placed to enter a relation with the state and influence policy making. Regrettably in the Ethiopian context, party affiliation rather than education is the main criterion for entering politics. This is why many women have been appointed to posts without the required intellect, skills or even experience. But, as long as the government is a relatively permanent entity changing once in 15 to 20 years, educated women realized the need to take action and work with whatever they have. And, if women genuinely want to work on women's issues, they have no alternative than to ally with the WAO. Many are fully aware of the implications of such co-operation on their independence and freedom. However, they know that they have to work according to the perceived realities of the ruling party and its bureaucrats (WAO).<sup>140</sup>

Such imposed relationships cause many activists to become silent. The government also actively pursues such activists to service its own agenda (mainly at the international level). This has been noted also in Uganda by Sylvia Tamale (*Arise* 35, 2003, p. 9). Co-optation results in the shelving women's emancipation and submission to political agendas. It literally undermines the independence of activists. The main problem with this collaboration is that it leaves oppressive structures undisturbed and carries the risk of losing ownership of one's projects.

A similar trend is observed among other employers such as the United Nations agencies and other international institutions who are also not innocent and ignorant bystanders. Many educated women working in these places end up surrendering their radicalism to the benefit of their employers, and if they do have a women's agenda, it is most often influenced and dictated by their organizations or donors. It is understandable that large employment benefits and salaries can make it attractive to relinquish one's radicalism and

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<sup>139</sup> NEWA was initiated by the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA). But the director of EWLA, Mahdere Paulos, left the country due to political repression (Jimma Times, 2009; EthioSun, 2009).

<sup>140</sup> An example of such enforced relation: When civil society organizations, together with the women's machinery, asked to change the conceptual wording from "women" to "gender", they were received with hostility. They were instructed to stick to the "woman question" paradigm of the ruling party. Such determination to enforce its own ideals despite its shortcomings and problems is the norm. This insistence on a biased approach shows a failure to address women's concerns (Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003, p. 139).

change one's perceptions. The result is that these co-opted actors often carry "responsibilities without corresponding authority" (Tsing Loh 2008) and sacrifice their own views. Not many realize the traps and some even hope that their actions will somehow make a difference in the long term. This has not yet happened in Ethiopia. Such forms of co-optation are disastrous for women's leadership, especially radical feminist leadership where women would be lobbying for structural changes.

### **7.2.9 De-politicization and de-radicalization of the gender agenda**

De-politicization is the tendency to remove the political aspect of something. This has become common practice on the "woman question" paradigm of the ruling party in Ethiopia where women's emancipation is defined as women's active engagement in government policies. It is also strategically used as an instrument to prevent women from political activism, lobbying and accusations against the government for its failures to advance women's interests. Though the agenda of women's emancipation is dominated by the ruling party, it is stripped of its political characters.

De-radicalization is the process of freeing something of its radical contents, goals, and elements. It is strategically applied to issues that are sensitive and which could jeopardize the status quo. With feminism closely linked to gender concerns, neither is welcomed at the moment in Ethiopia due to their radical demands which include structural challenges. The public is kept in a situation in which its focus points should remain within demarcated parameters, not upsetting the status quo.

De-politicization and de-radicalization are actively pursued and advanced as the correct approaches on women's issues and the ruling party's "woman question" program continues to be promoted as the official mantra for women's emancipation. Co-optation and submission of gender activists, combined with the oppressive political and religious cultural traits, causes serious forms of dilution and misperceptions of women's concerns. The political culture in Ethiopia is of such a nature that activists and their actions are often fitted into the dominant political ideology. Such ideology has no room for, and does not tolerate radicalism and political activism. There are no known political activists, except for a few members of opposition parties (who have been silenced during the past few years). Repression contributes to de-radicalization and de-politicization, but women have found ways to address their issues in non-threatening languages and manners.

De-politicization and de-radicalization of women's concerns is often an outcome of the general approach on gender at the internationally level where gender issues are converted into development packages or development issues. Women's rights are then read as their equal participation and contributions to the development processes and access to opportunities in doing so. Various leading international institutions (World Bank, UN agencies) have added to such diversions setting the agenda of global discourses and defining what strategies are best to assure women's equality.

As a development approach women's practical needs are overemphasized while their strategic needs are ignored. Focusing on strategic needs would require a complete

overhaul of systems and structures (Okech 2009). In this twenty-first century the overhaul of systems or structural changes is still not a desired approach. This international diversion of women's emancipation, away from structural challenges, does not go unnoticed among many political leaders, including Ethiopia. Within this diversion, the ruling party in Ethiopia wishes to be seen as the champion of women's emancipation through its woman's question paradigm mainly because the paradigm is void of radicalism and politicism.

Gender activists aiming to work through the government or international organizations often find their passions and ideals curtailed. Many end up sacrificing their radicalism in order to remain a player in the field. As a result, one often meets passionate women's rights advocates in the private who are silent at the professional level.

#### **7.2.10 Tokenism vs. vigilance**

Tokenism is a symbolic gesture to appease or silence demands. For instance, when the Emperor took the step to grant women voting rights in 1951, this was not only due to international pressure, but also because of awareness of global suffrage actions and movements in the field in different countries. Mass protests and demonstrations to demand equal voting rights had been the norm at the time among women all over the world. With the token grant for voting rights, such mass actions were forestalled. But this token action was purely symbolic because the government was fully aware that no one had voting rights due to the lack of a voting system at the time.

Vigilance is a state of alertness. It is a process of remaining alert, keeping a close watch on something. Vigilance is often practiced in times of activism where activists remain alert on the progress and outcomes of their actions and guard it against influences of policy transformations and formulations. When a group puts lots of effort into achieving something, it is obvious that it will keep watch over it to prevent its dilution.

The problem is that tokenism and vigilance do not go hand in hand. Anything granted as a token, did not go through the hardships of activism and struggle and thus also lacks the base and solidarity to remain vigilant. In similar manner, tokenism is patronizing and kills creativity and advocacy. It is an effective way to silence radicals because when there is nothing to fight for, why do women have to get organized?

Under tokenism, we can also analyse the phenomenon of donation of emancipation (as labelled by Mwanguhya, 2008). Emancipation, though distorted by the ruling party in Ethiopia, is handed to women in the form of tokenism or donation. Despite all efforts from the ruling party, women's rights are far from being achieved in the country. That is why a few organizations, such as the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association (EWLA), struggled for additional and relevant changes in existing laws and policies (e.g. family law). However, these changes were very demanding, resulting in temporary inactivity after their gains. This was caused by the great efforts that were put into it. Many among those activists were so drained that they moved on to different professions and did not continue to support the sustainability of the achievements. This is a serious concern and

setback for the educated. As Mwanguhya (2008) noted “While women allowed themselves to be swayed by the frenzy and blitz that followed their perceived progress, they forgot the building blocks for sustainability of the few achievements”. Without vigilance, the minor gains run the risks of being rolled back.<sup>141</sup> It is imperative that educated women remain alert and continue pursuing changes. But lack of leadership in the field and incoherence of actions prevent such actions.

### **7.2.11 Competition, schism and demise**

Competition is a contest or rivalry between different groups for resources, assignments, or other forms of gain. Women often form their own interest groups with friends or professional links. The different groups do not always find ways to cooperate and collaborate, and can also end up in competition against each other. Such groups might be small or big and can often undermine the genuine progress in given fields.

Groups can also lack cohesion, which leads to schisms. Schism is a split of existing forms perhaps due to different ideologies or objectives. When groups splinter into factions, the issues causing such divisions or competition also end up losing out. Often, they prematurely disappear. Batliwala (2008, p. 9) observes how the “conflicts and schisms within and between groups has led to fragmentation and increasing competition for limited resources...”. These include competition for recognition and acknowledgement.

Educated Ethiopian women are no stranger to competition and schism although their acknowledgement is taboo. One is not expected to point a finger. They are also engaged in rivalry mainly because many are employed as consultants and pursue high profile assignments on a competitive basis. The institutions (such as the UN and bilateral or international agencies) demanding such consultation also increase the rivalry among the women. But rivalry was also present before this consultation contest came into existence. With only a few highly educated women and even less gender workers, there have been incidences of monopolization, arrogation and struggles to take up chairpersonship or co-ordinatorship of actions linked to women (such as the Beijing +5 commission). Competition has been destructive to the already fragile women’s unity in the country. It can prevent the emergence of a national women’s movement.

Division and competition result in much pain and envy. There is a tendency to monopolize one’s area of work and sharing is a major taboo. Many become very suspicious of sharing their work. This could explain the repetition of the same events by different groups. There are some efforts now to remedy such suspicions where data and work of others are collected (by FSS, Action Aid Ethiopia or other libraries) and used by all under the condition of proper recognition. However, this is no guarantee that all research documents will be made available to other organizations or the general public. Some continue to monopolize the representation of women in respectable institutions

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<sup>141</sup> The political coalition in the Netherlands (2010) is a good example on this where fewer women are seen occupying political posts, the quota system is rejected and the emancipation policy of the government is shelved.

abroad, while a few have allied with the government. Such divisions do not go unnoticed and can be a source of exploitation.

Schism and competition have serious implications for dialogue, cooperation, solidarity and partnership on women's emancipation. It also works as a demise where prominent ideas can disappear. For instance, when women get together to form a committee on voluntary basis for a cause, the leadership of that initiative becomes a contest. Once this is placed in the hands of a dominant person or group, there is no guarantee of its continuance or for it to become representative to all groups. Other groups slowly retreat and the initiative comes to an end or low profiled.

### **7.2.12 A deficient intellectual base**

The most important element in feminism is intellect. Intellect is the key to activism and informs knowledgeable strategies. However, the intellectual base in Ethiopian society is very low. Very few possess academic competence. A few years back, very few of those heading gender desks or working on gender could be credited with having a degree in gender studies. The situation is worst among the appointees in the women's machinery. Many gender workers' placement occurred due to their gender and not academic qualifications. Being a woman was taken as sufficient criteria to head a gender desk. Due to time constraints most of these desk workers received short courses (five days to two weeks) on gender conducted by badly qualified "gender" consultants. This academic incompetence is one of the most serious hurdles to professionalizing the gender approach. With the great diversity in short-term gender training, many assume themselves to be gender experts while failing to acknowledge their intellectual gaps. Given the low capacity and skills among many, these training sessions also have serious shortcomings (Mulunesh 2003, p. 107-115).

This intellectual gap was the main focus when Ethiopia pioneered the establishment of a gender studies programme in 2005 at Addis Ababa University. Prior to the emergence of this department, the university had a research center called CERTWID or Center for Education Research and Training on Women in Development. This center emerged (Emebet 2007) during the emergence of the new regime. For years some of the coordinators of the centre tried in vain to establish a gender studies department. Its role at the time was merely facilitative in assisting other departments and students interested in gender research. It lacked a feminist base and was merely a substitute. In view of the years of its existence and its output it can be said that the department was very passive. A handful of research and publications cannot stand for active discursive development.

As a new institution, the Institute of Gender Studies (IGS) is still in its infancy and it lacks a proactive radical base. Institutionally it is weak, falling under the male leadership of the university. It also faces many challenges. For instance, it is slowly being co-opted and transformed into a silent department that should be grateful to be allowed the opportunity to exist. Radicalism is not allowed and it is toned down to appease the regime and conservative elements in society and find acceptance. The IGS is not alone in this fate. Similar trends have been observed in neighbouring countries (Uganda, Nigeria,

Ghana) (Pareira 1999). However, optimism remains that the IGS in Ethiopia can still fill in the gaps and develop a feminist epistemology. It can take a leading role on the feminist discourse. So far not much has been forthcoming. The department is not living up to its global identity yet and fails to produce feminist leaders. Perhaps time will tell whether there are such leaders among the students who have graduated.

The lack of critical mass is also observed among the small groups of academics and intellectuals in the gender field. Newly graduated gender activists intended to start a network, but the idea evaporated after graduation when they returned to their daily jobs. Many fitted neatly back into their old professions, this time as intellectuals. And while gender issues are the most under-theorized subject in the country, the academic institute lacks spirited personalities<sup>142</sup> to initiate and coordinate such networks and develop feminist scholarship. The whole institute of the Addis Ababa University has only around 10% female staff, among whom hardly any are found in top positions as heads of departments. The few committed academics on gender from the different disciplines also fail to design a framework of consistent fora or a commission of academic excellence on feminist theorizing and epistemology. This poverty in feminist epistemology and theorizing is rooted in a lack of time and commitment among the lecturers, especially among the Indian expatriates. All these also point to the public problem of organization. Lack of organization is basic to many women's problems. This is compounded by the lack of radicalism and leadership. Gender studies are supposed to provide the umbrella for such initiatives and become the centre of feminist thought. At present, however, it simply lacks the means and "woman" power to do so.

### **7.2.13 "Suitcase" feminists**

The suitcase is associated with travelling. To be called suitcase feminists implies feminists who travel constantly promoting women's rights. There are such individuals in Ethiopia. These are highly educated women, knowledgeable and extremely skilled. They prefer to work as "suitcase" feminists abroad instead of feminists in the country. During their travels, they sell their expertise, are surrounded by other suitcase feminists and spend their time discussing women's rights. Suitcase feminists prove to be excellent advocates for women's rights abroad.

Suitcase feminism is being scrutinized and has become subject to criticism. Touré, Barry and Diallo observe that these feminists are "recognized by their tendency to export the debate on women's rights outside Africa, and by their easy option for ideological borrowing" (2003, p. 2). Exporting is not a new phenomenon. These feminists are driven by the need to find recognition in the international arena. They carry their own perceptions (whether biased or just) on the status of women in the country in their suitcases. Because they work individually, there is no source of verification on what they are selling or claiming. Given the rather poor ideological base on women's status in Ethiopia, it is most obvious that instead of doing some intellectual feminist theorizing and

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<sup>142</sup> Except for the current coordinator, Dr Emebet Mulugeta, who struggled hard to bring the course in Ethiopia in the first place, but cannot motivate lecturers to share her passion.

analysis, many use an easy way out and end up borrowing from the regional or international areas to generate more credibility for their own paradigms.<sup>143</sup>

Suitcase feminists are virtually always out of the country and travel in and out following extremely tight and busy schedules. They have great potential but do not utilise it at home. Due to their business-like approach on the gender agenda, Touré, Barry and Diallo (2003, p. 2) also call this group “profit-seeking feminism”. This status is accorded to them because they use the sad status of women in the country to make profits. According to Touré *et al*, profit seeking feminists are intellectuals who are not concerned about the improvement of women’s conditions in general. In fact they reinforce the monopoly of a few women.

Touré, Barry and Diallo accuse them of ignoring the crimes of injustice that are inherent in their own practices. They explain that, for instance, “while struggling for women’s rights, these feminists would not hesitate to employ and exploit rural school-age girls as servants in their homes while their own children go to school” (ibid). This is a rather sinister reality for the middle- and elite-class women in Ethiopia, where many proclaimed gender activists do the same. That is why Touré *et al* assert that this profit-oriented intellectual feminism poses problems of which they are obviously not aware. They could be linked to the further bureaucratization of the emancipation agenda of which they have no control, but which is dominated by “higher” powers. Is profit-seeking feminism (linked to careerism) a product of the UN and international agencies, who have created the market for this gender marketing? One could but wonder, for even at the academic level, once feminism emerges, it becomes the privilege of a small group due to the language and jargon being used and the activities that are organized which are often restricted and limited to the “in-group” only. But they all claim to struggle for the rights of the ordinary woman. Would that ordinary woman consent to this or even grasp what they are talking about!

#### **7.2.14 Careerism and the issue of relinquishing one’s principles**

Suitcase feminism and career feminists are closely linked because these are highly skilled women who have the ultimate desire to pursue their own interests. Careerism can have negative implications if it is accompanied by relinquishing one’s integrity or principles. Women could be so driven that they become blinded and willing to give up their beliefs for the sake of personal growth and social status. Careerism is destructive to activism.

Many career women become immersed in huge international organizations. In such instances their main goal becomes to serve the best interests of these bodies rather than becoming active agents of change in Ethiopia. This drive to careerism robs the country of great intellectual potential at the same time as it transforms these women into silent puppets. Tamale (2003, p. 9) remarked in similar vein in Uganda that “careerism has eaten so deeply into the Ugandan women’s movement that many of us do not even practice what we preach as feminist principles”. It turns women into profit-seeking agents

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<sup>143</sup> This could also explain the feminist writing during the student movement in the 70s where the socialist analysis on the status of women in the country at the time was not reflected further.

whose main interests are to sustain the situation. Solving a problem permanently is not an agenda because it would undermine their careers. They run the major risk of becoming depoliticized and deradicalized. They willingly sacrifice their principles for their careers. For instance, women found actively campaigning for a cause might fail to do so again when career opportunities arise. Then too, in order to comply with the demands of high positions, some may shed their radical stance and become muted feminists in their eagerness to cater for their careers. They become softened and even start speaking a different language.

Among the educated in the country, there were a few outstanding radicals who could have taken leadership roles. But many have taken the path of careerism and disappeared in silence. Some continue working on women's issues in the country, others have left the country and others become suitcase feminists. The main thing is that careerism (not a bad thing given the dire poverty and employment status of the country) has robbed Ethiopia of so many potential feminists, radicals and leadership.

### **7.2.15 Brain drain**

A most serious concern in many developing countries, including on the continent of Africa, is the problem of brain drain. Brain drain is the emigration of highly skilled and educated individuals. The brain drain among feminists and woman leaders should not be taken lightly. As mentioned above, not every woman can become a leader and among this leadership there are even less feminists. With this scarcity, most of the radical elements leave the country to places of better intellectual opportunities. Others leave because of the repressive system and exhausting ways to move forward. Women have seen minor gains requiring enormous inputs taking decades. Such trying ways discourage many from continuing to waste their energy and time. It is not surprising that the majority may opt to seek better opportunities abroad. Very few educated women would think of returning to Ethiopia once abroad. The dire poverty and politically repressive situation are among some of the reasons for this.

Brain drain of gender activists entails a serious loss of human power and causes for an erosion in the quality of work. The departure of the highly educated leaves the country's gender problems to unskilled and undemocratic elements who lack sufficient radicalism to politicize the women's agenda. It also leaves women with a lesser education behind with great responsibilities for which they are not equipped. Many have barely a first degree but are found employed as experts in seats which would require high academic qualifications. This by itself negatively impacts the quality of work and reduces the level of efficiency. Brain drain, above all, has serious implications for the discourse on women's emancipation. Those who start something are not there to continue it. Genuine and vibrant initiatives become shelved or disappear because there is no one capable to continue them. With such realities, who will take up leadership and define its discourse when it is assured that, given the opportunity, she will also abandon the whole cause?

### **7.2.16 Advocacy and intellect**

Feminist intellect is intrinsically connected to advocacy (Science 2009).<sup>144</sup> Advocacy is a purposeful act to speak out or act on behalf of women, trying to influence policies and promote their interests in a given area. Feminism includes constant lobbying for women's rights. This is why intellect is a prerequisite. However, the average educated woman in Ethiopia does not engage in advocacy work. The few operating women's organizations in the NGO sector have other priorities. In fact, less than ten NGOs focusing on human rights, advocacy work and democracy were registered in 1995 (CRDA 1995, cited in Kassahun 2002, p. 125).

For an organization to be registered as an advocacy organization and to be engaged in advocacy work are two different things in Ethiopia. Advocacy has two main components: theoretical work (desk research) and action. Theoretical advocacy is often subtle and evasive. It lacks guts and is not confrontational. Among the ten organizations registered as advocacy organizations, only one doing advocacy work in a radical manner was active and visible. The others have remained hidden, refraining from focusing on politically sensitive areas. Most of their work centres on the neutral areas of education and health.

The lack of lobbying and advocacy could not only be blamed on low capacity, but also on lack of insight. It is a prerequisite to possess some level of critical awareness on the causes and consequences of the issue that is being advocated. To instigate advocacy work also demands personality transformation that borders on courage and willingness to take risks. Among the few knowledgeable women who possess a high analytical intellect there are again fewer daring personalities radically minded enough to take up the daunting task of taking the lead in advocacy work for women's rights. And while women dare in many countries and take up advocacy work while risking losing their freedom (Afghanistan, Iran) or even lives, Ethiopian women have not reached that stage yet. This has nothing to do with the state not being ready to accept activists. It is more about the educated and what they perceive as right or wrong timing. Perhaps the timing is not right for advocacy work. But then, the timing is never right to struggle for women's rights! It may take a long time for Ethiopia to find woman leaders daring to take up such challenges.

### **7.3 Conclusion**

Women's leadership is very complicated. It is not just electing or putting women in leadership posts that guarantee their leadership. There is a lot more involved. One of those is the expectation that the educated have a responsibility and role to play, especially in countries where there are not many highly educated women. This is a colossal burden calling for the detailed scrutinization of these educated women's actions and inactions by feminists and scholars in order to find answers. In many countries, only a small group of women are in charge of all the work that benefits the masses of women at large.

Given the time frame in which more women become more highly educated, such responsibility has been fading. Many educated seek their own interests and privileges.

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<sup>144</sup> Science.jrank.org, 2009.

This trend is mostly observable in societies where women have gained considerable rights and freedoms, such as in many Western societies and a few developing societies. The prevailing progress of these societies could afford such pursuits. But in countries where women are still a marginalized group without many rights or freedoms, and where the group of educated women is still too insignificant to make a difference, the expectations remain high for them to make a difference.

There are countries in the African regions (many of Ethiopia's neighbours) where women's activism started from scratch struggling for policy reform and rights under trying circumstances. Those have not been perceived as examples to be imitated by Ethiopian women. There has seldom been an issue that was picked from neighbouring countries to demand similar reforms or rights in Ethiopia among the educated. This passiveness is often blamed on the country's unique ancient history and political culture that is different from that of many African countries. But the pride of not being colonized for a long period has not left any significant mark, except that the country is one of the least developed and poorest nations on the African continent, where women's lives are subjected to ancient practices.

And thus, while the educated have barely started to surface, many have washed their hands of collective responsibilities and are pursuing their independent careers, even if that is based on the collective reality. Only a few educated women could be identified as struggling slowly or silently to advance women's interests and rights. They are not visible yet.

The repressive ruling party could assume monopolistic rule through silencing activism, but it fails to recognize the level of radicalism smouldering under its roof and visible among those departing (brain drain) or the suitcase feminists. Would these activists make a return when the political climate allows it? The activists of the 1970s did not return! The fear is that by the time this regime may fade, many of the new emerging radicals might be settled abroad with flourishing careers from which very few would think of departing.

That is why the above enlisted problems on women's leadership problems are serious issues to be considered if women's emancipation is desired. They are not to be seen as separate or isolated issues, but are in fact closely linked and have a common etiology. Taking up one challenge could illuminate the addressing of many simultaneously. The most important prerequisite among the educated is to realize and critically investigate these concerns among themselves in order to strategize for action. It is a critical reflection inward to the consciousness and agency. To nurture and enhance one's knowledge of realities, dialogue is crucial where subjective perceptions (Hardy 1999, p. 33) are debated to define collective solidarity, which in turn will guarantee a higher probability of delivery (Oberschall 1978, p. 308). The dire situation of women in the country calls for radical changes and committed measures.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this thesis I have attempted to inventorize the gaps in women's leadership in Ethiopia that inhibit the formation of a women's movement or provide answers to the deficiencies in directing the emancipation discourse in the country. In the previous chapters I critically discussed the many problems in women's emancipation and leadership from a historical past until the present and tried to find answers through analysis explaining why the educated have not been able to play a more proactive role on the emancipation of women in the country at large. Many of the barriers are slowly being revealed. They are historical and continuous. For instance, the socio-cultural and religious environment blended with political authority has been the norm in Ethiopia for centuries. Within these, women, have been always at a disadvantaged position, denied freedom and progress.

Many of the repressive systems and exclusions of groups currently found at the political level, find their origin in the rule of Emperor Haile Selassie (where the Orthodox Church played an important role). The Derg captured these and used them as instruments of control where women's agency was confined and its infant women's movement brought to a halt. The Red Terror that was meted out against the political opposition groups wiped out an entire generation of educated, among which there were also prominent active women. The ensuing terror instilled tremendous trauma and fear among the entire population causing for the silencing of any discontent.

Consequently, the EPRDF regime did not differ much on this form of control from the Derg, though packaging it more subtly within its state-led policies that aimed at deradicalization and depolitization of the "women's question" agenda. Quantitative data helped in identifying the gaps in women's status on different issues at the same time raising questions on those. It appears that women's status has not changed much since the time of the Derg, as is often proclaimed by the ruling party.

Both the Derg and the EPRDF took centralized control over the "woman question" leaving the most important target group, women, out of their discourse. This was obvious because their aim was not to promote the emancipation of women, but mainly to take control over it. And this control took shape in the form of a REWA, later WAO and now Ministry of Gender Affairs, which are mainly instruments to effect that control at the same time that they are used to spread and implement the party's policies in the field.

Were the educated able to circumvent all these barriers at the polity and choose their own path? As discussed, there was not much room for independent action and discourse. Women have been let down by the subsequent rulers who were too powerful, repressive and merciless.

It is interesting to add here that neither generations of witch-hunt nor generations of political and cultural harshness ever succeeded in domesticating women, either in the world, or in Ethiopia. Fortunately there have been always fighters. Experiences reveal

that women find themselves back, learn everything all over again and start agitating for quick progress to catch up on lost centuries. Ethiopian women too have proven that they can fight back at times, using their own causes (such as campaigns against violence against women). This is a promising sign.

The educated in Ethiopia have been hampered in many ways for decades to take the lead in their own emancipation. Many have not stood still to analyze the causes and barriers preventing their advancement to strategize for change. The majority are too absorbed in activities that aim to mitigate their day-to-day challenges, because those are the most visible. The important role ideological roots plays in these is not considered. This negligence is also enforced through global influences like donors with their own missions. Given these, diverse ways are created to instill a false sense of emancipation among women while the structural roots remain largely undisturbed. For instance, the active promotion of women's economic empowerment gains more prominence because of its immediate and visible gains. How these gains play out to the advantage of the macro-economic policies of the politically repressive system remains hidden. The beneficiaries also fail to see that they become marginal pawns silenced through economic gains. Their emancipation becomes narrowed down to economic empowerment that will mitigate all social ills and inequalities.

Such a narrow approach to women's emancipation reduces the urge for social transformation. Economic impulses silence and prevent demands for comprehensive overhaul of social systems. These so-called changes are misleading as they do not carry durability and are also not connected to structural factors. They can be easily rolled back, as happened with the stopping of the women's development fund. Regrettably, due to the high poverty levels in Ethiopia many women aim for financial security even if it is for a short time. These short-term remedies have become the norm rather than the exception. Feminist theorizing could play a meaningful role here in revealing the real impacts of the short-term economic empowerment schemes and demand concrete interventions to achieve genuine and sustainable solutions in such approaches.

It is noteworthy to consider that theorizing should not be the monopoly of the academic sector. In fact, the weakness of the educated sector could create a massive gap if action is not taken soon. Other sectors can contribute immensely through their analytical capacity and commitment. These include individual activists, social workers, female networks, and research institutions, among others, who could help in providing structures to participate in public discourses on women's emancipation. Not much focus is forthcoming yet, perhaps because theorizing is usually linked to the academic sector. The major aim should be to actively encourage academics and activists with critical insights to start documenting their analytical perceptions and thoughts. They have to start engaging in discursive practices, such as systematic writing, debating and documenting (journals) to chart the course on women's emancipation in the country. Such actions can galvanize theoretical discourses which can contribute to revealing the in-depth missing links to women's emancipation in the country.

I conclude this chapter by tracing the presence of the emerging women's movement and feminism in the country. This can help in the search for answers on women's leadership. Leadership is known to be the key in both. With the identification of relevant indicators, it becomes easier to find out where leadership can fit in. This in turn can function as a signal to the educated concerned with women's emancipation and assist them to define ways how to claim leadership and become the main actors on their own emancipation.

## **8.2 Women's movement and feminism in Ethiopia at present**

While studying the various issues inhibiting women's leadership in the country, one cannot evade the discussions on the state of women's movement and feminism. Is there any movement or feminism that has been overlooked because they are not explicit? Is it not recognized because of lack of the ability to do so? Given the historical initiation of what appeared to be an infant women's movement at the beginning of 1970s among the students and the EPRP and MEISON, it could have made a revival in the past decades. After all, the foundations had been laid and the first steps had been taken. And, with the increasing number of educated women now, someone could have carried on the torch of its growth and expansion.

The discussions in the previous chapters reveal the vague presence of some indicators in the field that need deeper reflection. Chapter 5 already provided evidence of the presence of a political programme and policy on women's emancipation among the ruling party. The discussions also reveal that this is not the only action in the field. Civil society women have been also active in their own ways. The following will be a conclusive summary aiming to provide structure to some of the nuances which might have been there for many years now but which have been ignored. This highlight could grant them recognition and realization leading to further studies. They can also serve as indicators of action among the educated.

There is a serious deficiency in research in such areas that could contribute to feminist ideology and there is no in-depth theorizing on the ideological parameters of women's emancipation, or on the "woman question of the government", or on the current flows of feminist and/or women's discourses, all requiring a critical mindset. History has revealed that there was no continuation of the initial steps to start a national women's movement among the Zemecha students during the Derg regime which had come to an abrupt end in 1976 during the Red Terror campaign. This lack of continuity displays a tremendous weakness in the area. No clear documentation or analysis existed by the time this thesis was written on the history of the "woman question" among the students in the 1970s and how that had transpired to a beginning of ideas to initiate a movement.

While reflecting on the history of women in Ethiopia, one cannot but wonder what happened to those women who stood at the centre during the emergence of the discussions on the "woman question" in the late 1970s. Where are they now and why have they remained silent? Not all of them were killed during the Red Terror of the Derg regime. There are survivors. Could it be that they shelved their ideas for greener pastures, waiting for the right time? But then, when the new regime of the TPLF/EPRDF had

created such space at the beginning of its rule, where were the old women's rights activists? Why did they not use the opportunity to revive their mission? These and many more questions continue to haunt the present.

It is with great assurance that I can state that while conducting this study, I stumbled across some issues which will be clarified and which, I believe, are needed in the emancipation discourse of women in Ethiopia. While critically analysing the women's programme of the ruling party, I found evidence of the emergence or presence of a vague awareness among different sections of society of the emancipation of women. This was very encouraging and exciting. It is within the context of this study that I felt the urgency to include them, because they are critical and can have great consequences in the formulation of schools of thought on Ethiopian feminism.

This study brought forth some clear indicators of four different forms of women's movements at the brink of emergence, vaguely present, covertly visible but not recognized. Though separate, they are connected by a thin or thick thread with one or more of the others. The four levels can be observed at the academic level, the ruling party/political level, the NGO/civil society level and the grassroots level. The conclusive discussions on these aim to provide some hints for actions among the educated to take them further and provide leadership on those.

### **8.2.1 The academic level**

It took a long time for the academic sector to have an independent women's department. The emergence of the Institute of Gender Studies in 2005 raised many hopes and expectations. It had a sudden start, pushed by top-level politicians but it was also about time considering the many years that it was in the pipeline. The course did attract a few feminist expatriate lecturers. Regrettably many were there only for one semester or two and slowly phased out. Except for a radical coordinator, the department has been stripped of its feminist base. This seriously undermines the development of feminist epistemology and theorizing based on the local or regional (mainly African) context.

A few lecturers from different departments (political, philosophy, sociology) have been actively pursuing a gender approach within their work. Most of the writings on women in those sectors could be credited to them. They, however, did not contain feminist theory.

At the academic level two streams emerge as indicators of a movement: the intellects and at the level of epistemology. The intellects define curricula and are engaged in passing knowledge on to the next generation (lecturing). An academic curriculum is taking shape, defining the agenda of women's emancipation in the country. It is here where young students are molded into future feminists, activists and researchers. It is also here where the agenda is set on what students should learn about women's rights and emancipation. Though this trajectory is not only closely connected to the ruling party's dictate, but also embedded in the real status of women in the country, it still has plenty of room to insert a feminist agenda cultivating critical consciousness.

The academic sector can use the main subjects of the curricula as injections for change, get organized, form a critical mass, design and set up feminist research and debate commissions, promote regular academic reflection on women's issues to generate theoretical discourses, link up with neighbouring countries' gender studies institutions and organize regular symposia, seminars, exchange programs or invite guest speakers and so forth. The mobile lecturers would then not become a problem, as now, but a strength in terms of which students would be lectured by prominent feminists from the different African countries. Such forms of lecturing could be stimulating and motivating and encourage commitment and involvement. It is thus not a bad thing that one critical person cannot overhaul the system, but she can become the pillar of it. There is an urgent need for expansion of the department with dedicated people who could actively pursue fundraising and networking in order to stay tuned to regional impulses. These could trigger powerful waves of insight and thinking and encourage further research and studies. This movement, as seen from the African continent, is usually limited to the academic sector and its inner circles, but it provides strong theoretical frameworks from which many in society can benefit.

The production of gender and/or women's epistemology through research is the next indicator. The research and theses of lecturers and students reveal an insight and often also new outlooks on the different women's issues in the country. We notice a shift from passive language that aimed only to highlight the status of women in a given context, to more radical choices of themes in which daring issues are taken up for reflection. This implies the presence of a huge potential. But with a deficiency in in-depth theorizing and analysis this potential is wasted. They are also hindered in this from the political and cultural environment that prevents them from moving beyond a certain ceiling of analysis. After descriptive overviews of the problem, analytical research ends up merely repeating the same ills and spills with a few recommendations to which no one adheres. Perhaps more academic freedom and space could help the intellects to mature because research is the engine of change.

Nevertheless, there is a visible shaping of an intellectual movement at the academic level. Its curricula provide the direction, and the scope of the research and theses are its potential. The descriptive forms of current research on women's issues reveal the need to create awareness. Each research endeavour brings new insights. This is inspiring considering the poor documentation record in Ethiopia where such data have been absent for a long time.

### **8.2.2 The ruling party/political level**

This section was discussed in Chapter 5 under the "new gender" discourse. Among the bureaucrats are women directly involved at the political level who support the status quo. They are women who work in the women's machinery from the highest to the lowest positions and in other political posts. Their mission is to promote the ruling party's "woman question" rhetoric as the ultimate mantra for women's emancipation. Above all, they are mainly symbolic and instrumental in the ruling party's political mission lacking decision-making power. As such, the emancipation of women is not their main concern.

Their political positioning allots them privileges that include power over civil society. They are at liberty to act on their own as long as that does not undermine the status quo.

The outreach of the bureaucrats is tremendous. This means that they can effectively oversee the imposed implementation of the ruling party's national policy on women. This is often coerced and enforced. Combined with hierarchy and authoritarian rule, paternalism reigns supreme when it comes to gain mass support. The ruling party sees women as passive, ignorant, backward, voiceless objects who will be emancipated only if they take part in the policies of the state and give those their full support. The policy on women is built mainly around the power and privileges of party cadres. This imposed policy is not stable and could be easily shattered the moment the ruling party departs because it is upheld through repression, sanctions, coercion and force. Of course there are always chances that it may survive the end of the regime among its most dedicated followers.

It would be grossly misleading to call the actions of bureaucrats "state feminism" because they have no link to feminism and there are no feminists occupying party political posts. It is in fact more a form of robbing women of their freedom to make their own choices and imposing on them what the state assumes to be best for them. It is therefore ironic that many of the occupants of the women's machinery dare naming themselves feminists. They could not remotely compare themselves to real state feminism as is the case in Chile (Michelle Bachelet as Chile's head of state)<sup>145</sup> (Gallardo 2008) where the ruling party is actively pursuing the rights of women. They could also not be compared to the Nordic state models of women's emancipation.

Beside the bureaucrats, there are a small group of femocrats.<sup>146</sup> The role of femocrats is a very difficult one. Due to the increasing complexity of women's demands, educated women enter politics aiming to play a more active role in influencing policies that affect them or particular groups in society. Such moves carry many challenges. For instance, once educated women enter politics, what is the guarantee that they will advance the interests of their constituencies? What is the guarantee that they won't be absorbed in their own political careers and swept away with the stream of privileges, advantages and power? At the moment there are no femocrats in Ethiopia, only bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, the ruling party, together with its watchdog, the Women's Affairs Office,<sup>147</sup> imposes its "women question" among not only the rural masses of women, but

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<sup>145</sup> A year into her term she has achieved the following: introduced breastfeeding at work, strengthened penalties for men who fail to pay alimony, increased the number of nurseries throughout the country, including domestic violence shelters, increased equality between women and men holding top administrative positions, made it possible for girls as young as 14 to access morning-after contraceptives.

<sup>146</sup> Femocrats are not just women in political posts. They are women committed to feminist principles who have strategically taken seats at certain political levels to make a difference and contribute to gender sensitive outcomes (Chappell 2002).

<sup>147</sup> Since the 2010 elections, the WAO is brought together under a Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, which basically is not much different from what the Women's Affairs Office was mandated to do, with the difference that it is an independent ministry now. As an independent ministry it is equal to other ministries where it lacks privileges as the WAO was under the Prime Minister's Office.

also among civil society groups, the donor community and international organizations. This leads to a wave of actions built on the women's policy, resulting in discussions, conferences, meetings, training, documentation, and so forth. Despite its imposition, it is thus a political movement (if movement is to be understood as everything people do to improve the lives of women). Whether the movement gains support from society or not, it is there and active. It has leadership, a clear mission, actions and actors all working for a common goal. The risk of such movements is that they are not durable and upheld through repression. That explains why it fails to be recognized as such. With the change of the regime, this movement will be immediately shattered. Aware of this, the ruling party is engaged in mass campaigns (policies, programs, education curricula, and so forth) to assure its internalization. Once internalized by women, they will automatically carry it on as the just and correct approach to their emancipation. It is a school of thought that is closely linked to "womanism". Therefore caution is advised to scholars when studying both. "Womanism" can be an independent school of thought on women's advancement in Ethiopia, but also part of a political program featured throughout the country and inhibited in the "woman question".

### 8.2.3 The NGO/civil society level

The most promising sector from which a genuine movement can emerge is the NGO and civil society sector. This sector can already be credited for some of the gains achieved during past years in Ethiopia with regard to women's rights. Evading political confrontation and remaining confined within given political parameters, some have managed to call for reforms. There have been hard-won achievements in the family law and criminal code. In order to proceed, the approach had to be stripped of its political and radical elements not to pose a threat to the regime. Twice where political confrontation was sought revealed what would happen in such cases. One led to the closure of EWLA<sup>148</sup> (when EWLA challenged the government on women's rights) and the other led to harassment and threats to all signatories of a petition on polygamy (by the Oromo regional government)<sup>149</sup>. Though silenced in Ethiopia, these incidences reveal the presence of a slumbering opinion among civil society.

The NGO sector is the perfect breeding ground for a prospective movement due to the activism taking place at that level. Perhaps that is why bureaucrats are opting to form their own NGOs due to its level of relative freedom. The "projectization or NGO-ization" (Website Science. jrunk 2009) of women's emancipation contributes to increased exposure and radicalism in this sector. Many NGOs work with their own mission and attend meetings, events and seminars. Some work with low capacity and knowledge, others are highly skilled. Among these there are many prospective leaders who travel widely and are exposed to regional and international discourses.

In general, the focus areas of the NGO sector reveal a trend that could be read as indicators of something in the making. For instance, the welfare levels of work and the

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<sup>148</sup> (For more information on this, see the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association, 2001. Special Issue on EWLA's suspension in *Dimtsachin* 2001).

<sup>149</sup> Melakou 2010, p. 390-391.

service delivery, though fitting within the political emancipation paradigm, are personalized touches of the NGOs carrying their own messages. The concentration on personal and economic empowerment could also be read as indicators of change. Their initiatives to form networks or work in collaboration are breeding grounds for activism. The main issue is who is in the game? Are they conservatives, the older more reserved generation, transitionalists, radicals, highly educated, or uneducated. These all exert influence on the prospective emergence and formation of a women's movement. The major issue is that despite the differences women need to overcome these and work together.

The NGO sector is the sector that is closest to the grassroots and masses which can be an advantage when identifying discourses and defining a vision. Despite political pressure to keep to the government's directives, NGOs have great potential to escape the pressure and choose alternatives satisfying both, their own and the repressive ruler's demands. Their approaches and targets are tools to aim for mobilization and transformation in subtle but direct ways. The main issues remain the will to do so, having strong leadership and defining a common vision to be pursued.

#### **8.2.4 The grassroots level**

People at grassroots level are not passive recipients as is often perceived. The party bureaucrats' explicit focus on rural women (the National Policy on Ethiopian Women targets mostly rural women and the government pressure on all urban organizations to work in rural areas) is bearing some fruit. Though the grassroots cannot display its potential at the moment due to limited freedom and repression, this does not mean that it is ignorant. The combined actions of the party bureaucrats and the NGOs in whatever form (even if it is on the improvement of maternal health care or increased school enrolment of girls) reveals that there is potential waiting to mature and become active.

Rural women have also shown that they are more direct in their approach and do not need complicated bureaucratic procedures to understand issues. The local social women's associations, such as women's *idirs*, *mahbers* and work associations, have served historically as a place of information exchange. These associations are currently also approached by many NGOs to reach women in remote areas. Through these associations women receive information, take part in training and become exposed to outsiders. This exposure is educational in itself as women learn to differentiate between the different actors and learn about their rights. They also learn to make their own choices and develop critical thinking. These traditional social associations do not have a political base, but they serve as good examples of women's organizations.

Depending on their efforts, rural women are developing in their own pace and according to their own perceptions. As a group particularly in the grip of traditions, culture and religion and where patriarchy is at its peak, it is encouraging to observe a new generation of young girls turning against negative cultural practices (child marriages, FGM, abduction). The women in the rural areas, who comprise more than 80% of the population, have the potential to create a movement much sooner than the urbanites and

academic intellectuals. They are struggling to access education and strive for professional careers in contrast to many of the urban youth who have different dreams. They have their vision unlike the educated and are also aiming for their targets. Perhaps they are waiting for the right leadership to take up their challenges.

The discussion above indicates the prospects of women's movements at different levels in society. They can also be combined because the levels are interconnected and seldom stand on themselves. For instance, the grassroots is closely linked to the NGO and government levels as both work with them. The academic sector is linked to the NGOs and the government where the NGOs provide feedback from the grassroots. Given that these levels are not overtly clear, they are not picked up for further construction by activists. Each sector is in need of leaders who can define the vision, mission and direction of the movement. The vagueness and the inaction reveal the absence of such strong personalities. There is a serious task here among the educated to define the course of action.

### **8.3 Feminism in Ethiopia**

Finding signs of women's movements is easier than locating feminism in Ethiopia. It is often misread as women's activism. According to a few of the old generation activists in Ethiopia (women who had been part of the emerging women's study groups among the EPRP and women who were students during the 1974 regime change), there was no feminism in the country at that time. Despite two initial documents produced on the "woman question" and socialist theorizing, there were no active feminists among the groups. One of the papers was in fact written by a male student in Algeria in the early 1970s. This could explain the absolute silence after the Derg decimated the EPRP. Had there been feminists around, they would have emerged again, because that is the identity of feminism: it cannot be silenced or contained.

When the Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association started to bring some visibility to women's issues, women's activism was being born. But this did not last long. The political confrontation was too short lived. Was it feminism in the making? Many of EWLA activists have now distanced themselves from politics. But this is not good for the feminist cause because it plays directly into the hands of the repressive ruler. The issue is that without political activism, there is a slim chance for feminism to emerge.

Among the educated, feminism is only recent, since the introduction of the academic course at the Addis Ababa University, being understood in its conceptual frame. Many in society may probably still perceive it as a Western concept linked to lesbianism, individualism and the wrong types of freedom for women. In addition, academic intellect does not automatically translate into feminism. Many among the educated lack the level of intellect, knowledge and skills to politicize feminist concerns.

On one side Ethiopia lacks a firm voice against the deep-rooted sexism in society or demanding for transformational leadership. There are also no "hard-core advocates of women's rights" or "brigade and paragons of intellect and courage who were the

forerunners of feminism...” as Barenzi observed in Uganda (Barenzi 2007). Perhaps there is the issue of silent feminism (as noted by Mbire-Barungi 1999) or introvert feminists. But how can feminism be silent or introvert when there is no political rage?

On the other hand, feminism is one of the most abused concepts in Ethiopia and this has nothing to do with its misinterpretation. Everything women do is read as feminist action. There are many who talk about feminism in situations where there is no trace of feminism. Perhaps this could be read as an encouragement to motivate women. But it is still inappropriate to allocate concepts for purposes that are not feminist in content.

There is often an unjust appropriation of the feminist ideology by the different stakeholders in society who have something to gain from it. This includes international distortion and co-optation and government bureaucrats, including powerful elites. Besides the ruling party, who seem to be implacably opposed to feminism, the wife of the ruler has different thoughts on this. Azeb Mesfin of Ethiopia sees herself, just like other first ladies on the continent,<sup>150</sup> as a champion of women’s rights. Mama (1995) calls this phenomenon “first-ladyism”<sup>151</sup> referring to elite women arrogating noble causes to their names without having the proper qualifications or experience, only their husbands’ power. They are not feminists but would not hesitate to call themselves so. However, given their power base, there are many educated women on the continent working with the first ladies. This could have many motives, among which perhaps to finally push women’s emancipation agenda forward through these women, or could it be also careerism?

At the moment the only visible school of thought is the vanguard “woman question” program of the ruling party. The invisible traces of historically cultivated “womanism” or “motherism” at all levels (government, civic sector, grassroots) are not realized yet. In these, the collective identity of women is stressed as precondition for their emancipation. In order for a woman in Ethiopia to be free and emancipated she has to free society first. She is burdened with the societal baggage. She has to assure that her husband has a job, that the child has food, that there is water in the community or health centres or that her extended family is taken care of and that everyone around her is happy.

This distortion deprives and robs her of agency and individuality. It also shows how her emancipation is dismissed. She will thus never be emancipated because the burden is considered to be too heavy. This means that the emancipation of that woman lies in the condition to make a conscious choice to continue subordinating her own needs to that of others! Fortunately, a few educated women have, in their own ways, come to realize that individual freedom is paramount to collective happiness. The one who starts struggling for the collective is the one who has found the liberty to free herself first.

Among the educated, very few have stipulated the trajectory of women’s emancipation and what that would entail in Ethiopian society. What is their vision of emancipation and

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<sup>150</sup> Lucy Kibaki of Kenya, Maryam Babagida and Mariam Abacha of Nigeria, Dr Turai Umaru Yar'Adua of Nigeria, Janet Museveni of Uganda, Zainab Kure of Niger, and others.

<sup>151</sup> Mama, 1995 cited in Science.jrank.org, 2009.

how would they like to achieve it? Some of the educated<sup>152</sup> focus on Western schools of thought and call for a combination of liberal and radical feminism. Liberal would be used not to change the status quo and radical would be to inject subtly, within the politically allowed space, issues for change. However, political confrontation is not mentioned as the most serious aim. How radicalism can then be used, is not given further thought. It is important that Ethiopian feminism matures and be discovered from within its own practices. It should not be an element of pleasing and filling gaps, or imitation and copying from neighbours. Above all, it should be a factor of active pursuit of self-realization and personhood based on one's own experiences and realities.

#### **8.4 Importance of leadership**

In this thesis, I analysed the problems caused by the absence of leadership from educated women in the long process of the emancipation of women in Ethiopia or in the generation of a women's movement or feminism. Why is such leadership, and feminist leadership *per se*, crucial? From the Beijing Platform for Action to the Millennium Development Goals women's leadership and participation are marked as important indicators of gender equality, democracy and transparency. There are global efforts to study different forms of leadership to analyse the gaps and problems in order to come up with leadership forms compensating for those. One of these is feminist leadership.<sup>153</sup> However, everything that is amiss with the current masculine forms of leadership might not necessarily be corrected by feminist or feminine leadership.

One can even question such demands. After all, all women are not born talented or gifted. There is no given statement that gender determines what kind of leadership is practiced and that due to women's nurturing roles, women would become more democratic and less corrupt. Feminist leadership can also have many shapes and traits like male leadership and yet not be able to solve all of humanity's problems.

The ongoing debates suggest that it is not feminist leadership as such that is important in women's emancipation, but a kind of leadership that answers to local needs and is context specific. The type of radical feminist leadership in the West would not be accepted among women in Ethiopia, nor would it be tolerated by the ruling party. It is necessary to study the type of leadership women need and for what purpose. Given the context in the country that knows severe political repression and religiosity, women's leadership could emerge in an intermediary form. This means that the leadership will have to reconcile the differences between the different fronts (state and women or religion and women, or society and women) in order to direct them towards a common goal. After all, women's emancipation is a desired goal for all as it contains many positive impacts for the women and society at large, including politics and religion.

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with a few educated in June 2007, Addis Ababa.

<sup>153</sup> Feminist leadership is expected to be transformational (Odhiambo-Oduol 2002, p. 61), equality seeking and power sharing (Williams 2008), as well as, for instance, nurturing, community building, non-hierarchical, participatory, transparent, accountable, prioritizing disadvantage sectors or issues, sustainability, collaborating, diverse, just, inclusive, accommodative, consensus-building (Tamale 2002), and consensus-building and capacity-sharing (Tsing Loh 2008).

Once the realization of women's emancipation is clear, the question how women's leadership can emerge, or be cultivated should be addressed. In Ethiopian society, despite the many changes at legal level, the problem is that women do not aspire for leadership. This is a colossal issue of concern and becomes more problematic when they project this on to the next generation. As Scott (1981) indicates: "Women continue to socialize girls away from male-dominated arenas, such as elective politics by public institutions." It is thus women who (perhaps with the aim of protecting their daughters and with the realization that the political culture in the country is unchanging due to its presence for centuries) continue socializing their daughters to be good housewives, obey their husbands and not aspire for more. This could also explain the desire among many of the youngsters not to enter into professional careers, get married and uphold the traditional division of labour. It could also explain why the younger generation does not start its own organizations or actions on women.

For change to start, this is where it could be initiated. The older generation has to let go and create freedom for their daughters to define their own destiny. They have to break the chains they have been carrying and not transfer them on to their daughters. The socialization of girls needs to be reviewed from the societal angle, not just within the family. If the social system is still pushing girls into domesticity, there will be no desire for leadership. Then one can conduct many sorts of training, but they will miss the link to reality. Leadership training for girls should be not only in the class, but also in practice where society should be prepared to recognize them.

And here there is an urgent need to highlight more role models; role models who can set the stage for future leaders, as path breakers in creating political stability in women's leadership. The trend at present is that women's political posting is granted as tokenism. When those women depart, so does their post.

Women's leadership is therefore not difficult to comprehend. Difficulties arise from social settings and cultures that fail to create a conducive climate for women to aspire to leadership. In Ethiopia, the patriarchal culture has marginalized women for centuries and successfully excluded them from politics and leadership. The subjection of women has taken centuries and is fully internalized as the norm. But this can be overcome. Women all over the world have undergone similar forms of subjection lasting for centuries. Still, they manage to break through. In this, their education, exposure, consensus building and solidarity group formation is crucial. Women cannot continue blaming others for their own inaction and need to critically interrogate their own identities and desires. They need to free themselves from the patriarchal mindset (which is often enforced through religion). And, there are already many among the educated who have successfully done so. There are many who can speak with passion about their dreams on women's emancipation. But, that is where it often ends.

Political leadership of women is important because it can provide women with the much needed support to advance their concerns. Regrettably, political positioning of women is not sustainable and women need to struggle anew every time they enter politics. This can

be very demanding, causing many to shun politics. It would be advantageous for women if they could move up from political entrance<sup>154</sup> to the next level of setting an agenda. For this to happen, their political roles should become standardised and the barriers to political entrance should be removed.

On the international front, women's political leadership is still actively promoted as an important precondition to their emancipation and empowerment. As Ethiopian society is still weak on accepting women's public roles, their leadership is not understood. Public campaigns and awareness-raising could alter this and women could take a lead in changing attitudes influencing opinion. This has already been started in the elections of 2000 where many women candidates took part in the elections.

Leadership for women's emancipation is a very challenging form of leadership. It demands the active involvement of critical personalities who have a clear vision on women's emancipation. Consensual visions can be led by strong leadership. The lack of such critical individuals is one of the most serious problems in Ethiopia. Perhaps they remain hidden due to political repression. The educated are also not eager to take up the challenges against the status quo. Lobbying for rights, injustices or policy reforms are actively evaded. And it remains unclear whether a change in the political environment would contribute to the emergence of more radicals among educated women. This is a serious concern. If the educated had more freedom to intervene in their own emancipation trajectory, would they be able to do so? This is a challenge to their capacity, will power and commitment.

A few radicals in Ethiopia pointed out that it is harder than just having the rights and freedom to change things. For instance, as W/zo. Original (2002, p. 169) stated: "...there is no voice against the discrimination of women. It is as if it is considered universal and a public knowledge that women are inferior while laws proclaim otherwise. When women are discriminated, no one objects, not even in subtle forms."<sup>155</sup> Another example: when a graduate student<sup>156</sup> from the gender studies took the lead to get women organized against the increased number of cases of acid burning in the country,<sup>157</sup> she was taken aback by the wave of negative attacks on her by a few women (not very highly educated). Many among these community women did not consider taking action on the alarming levels of acid attacks<sup>158</sup> against women and young girls while some even accused the girls of being at fault for causing such attacks. That the girls' rights are violated and their integrity torn apart is not taken into consideration by these women. Also that a young woman took the lead in some action was immediately discouraged, enforcing the insecurity among many to shun leadership.

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<sup>154</sup> The first time women enter politics

<sup>155</sup> Wording unchanged.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Tayechalem Girma, graduate of the Institute of Gender Studies, 27 June 2007, Addis Ababa.

<sup>157</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6498641.stm>.

<sup>158</sup> The increased rate of acid attacks is causing serious concern among international bodies. The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women organized an expert group meeting in 2009 on this wave of acid attacks in poor countries affecting mainly women and girls. They recommended that acid attacks be treated as criminal offences (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women 2009, p. 22).

A further issue causing diversion on leadership is the issue of over-emphasis on challenging the ruling party and its policies, programs and strategies. Not only opposition parties, but also women are guilty of this. This is a historical heritage of the country continued for centuries and most visible among the different factions of political groups. Each focuses in detail and with much rigor on the deficiencies of the other instead of defining its own programmes. To a certain extent, the focus can be a point of departure to design one's own actions, but should not become the prime mission. Regrettably, that is almost always the case. This excessive focus saps their energy and is extremely time consuming. And it is precisely this diversion that has contributed to the major lack of alternative models (political, economic, social, feminist, and so forth) in the country. This approach needs urgent attention. In the Ethiopian context, if feminism is to emerge, it should be a feminism that is not engaged in revealing what the ruling party is doing or not doing, but should focus on what works best for the target and how to confront that at a political level.<sup>159</sup>

There is evidence in Ethiopian history depicting strong leadership among a few women. Those women had stepped outside the traditional boundaries facing their own challenges of the time. Initially their daring acts might have stirred society, shocking many. But eventually they were embraced within the same society and used as good examples. Currently they are treated as heroines. Some had their own armies, others became powerful women in the nobility, and yet others possessed enormous property (all belonging to the elite). But they were individual personalities. They were exceptions.

Their approaches were very good and could be imitated by women at present because of their inhibited practice of shock approaches.<sup>160</sup> Shock approaches attempt to bring attention to a new, often socially or politically sensitive and taboo issue. They are comprehensive means to introduce radical demands and changes. Considering their initial unfamiliarity, the practice is to raise the issue in an audience and wait for it to be absorbed. The receipt of such approaches can cause a serious stir, an explosion or outburst of feelings and emotions. Many will be shocked, stunned, speechless, disgusted or even angry. This can be positive as it awakens consciousness on neglected issues. Such approaches can be effective in challenging rigid traditional structures, because they provide the opportunity to make a start. Once familiarity takes root, the issue becomes open for actions and debates. This is how feminist demands can also be initiated.

It remains puzzling though why there are so few radical educated women in Ethiopia despite the increased access to higher education and opportunities to travel. It is often expected that increasingly higher levels of education contribute to the alteration of traditional perceptions. But this is not so obvious. Here it becomes evidence that a rapid increase in the number of educated women should not be read as an indicator of equality and emancipation or of radicalism and critical consciousness.

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<sup>159</sup> This could also be addressed to the opposition political parties, if credibility is desired.

<sup>160</sup> For instance, when EWLA initiated changes in family law.

Among hundreds of educated, only a few emerge as radicals. This should be sufficient because it takes only one feminist to challenge the status quo. Ethiopia had a few radical activists in the Ethiopian Women Lawyer's Association. However, their legacy was short-lived. Upon finding themselves isolated and targeted, many have left the scene, either moving to less visible jobs or leaving the country. Once an organization has attracted attention from the ruling party in Ethiopia, it will be watched with long-term suspicion.<sup>161</sup> The enduring repressive political climate leaves no room for freedom and one cannot wait for decades to become an activist. The departure of many radicals to places of better opportunities leads to a continuing vacuum in the field of feminism and leadership. At the moment there is no feminist leadership in Ethiopian society demanding women's equality, rights, democracy, transparency and freedom.

A difference can be made by these departed individuals if they actively continue their work from abroad in documenting, critically analyzing and engaging in theorizing and discursive practices on women's issues in their country. Regrettably, there is absolute silence on that front. The diaspora has done little to create awareness on the dire situation of women in the country. Many have been detached from reality for decades. This distance creates idolization of the country and the relative perceived status of women. At informal gatherings abroad one will often encounter voices giving an unrealistic depiction of the real situation. Perhaps the pride in their history and culture makes women omit the negative aspects. Isolation in new homelands also causes many to cling to the memories of their original homeland and the relative intercultural competition between different races further adds to the biased representation of issues. This over-protectionism among the diaspora also causes for intolerance of differing views.<sup>162</sup>

It is only recently that a few former EPRP activists have revived their views after nearly four decades, and initiated the start of advocacy work for the rights of Ethiopian women.<sup>163</sup> This is a positive sign. The hope is that there will be some radical and demanding voices and actions on that front. It is not known how and who initiated this action and with what motives. It is also not known whether the members of this group are genuine old timers of the same EPRP or MEISON of the 1970s who left the country more than four decades ago or whether there are also new young members. In conclusion a citation:

Unless women themselves do not culturally evolve from their historical customary practices that uphold male domination, it is not possible that their rights will be recognized as human rights (Mbire-Barungi, 1999).

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<sup>161</sup> This has led to the fleeing of the new director of EWLA in 2009 due to continuous repression and harassment (EthioSun 2009).

<sup>162</sup> For instance, the denial of negative cultural practices among an Ethiopian living abroad for decades and not returning to Ethiopia and the evidence provided by a foreigner who recently returned from Ethiopia after living there for years.

<sup>163</sup> The International Ethiopian Women's Organization emerged in Washington DC where EPRP women have started this initiative because regime change did not augur well for women seeking emancipation and empowerment (IEWO, March 4, 2007).

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## **Interviews**

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2. Debitu Solomon, 29 June 2007, Addis Ababa
3. Genet Asheber, 23 June 2007, Addis Ababa
4. Haddas Woldegiorgis, 25 June 2007, Addis Ababa
5. Kiflu Tadesse, 17 March 2007 and 19 December 2007, Kampala
6. Melakou Tegegn, 24 April 2007, Kampala
7. Original Woldegiorgis, 26 June 2007, Addis Ababa
8. Tadelech Debele, 26 June 2007, Addis Ababa
9. Tayechalem Girma, 27 June 2007, Addis Ababa
10. Anonymous person, June 2007, Addis Ababa
11. Bureaucrat, 22 June 2007, Addis Ababa

## **Annexure I**

### **Women's Question**

#### **Seven Point Resolution on the Women's Question at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of ESUNA, August 27, 1971 (SPARK 1971, p. 32-33).**

##### **I. Noting that:**

- 1) Following centuries old primitive concepts, backward and barbaric customs, reactionary religions, and anachronistic teachings and an outmoded feudal and patriarchal culture; the masses of Ethiopian women are one of the most downtrodden and exploited groups in neo-colonial and feudal Ethiopia
- 2) Whereas women constitute a substantial number of the population; they are restricted to unproductive labor, discarded from participation in political and social life; treated as inferior to men in every aspect of social life; considered only fit for the kitchen and rearing children - Ethiopian women have been demeaned by crushing domestic slavery and are kept in absolute ignorance being subjected to untold suffering and backwardness.
- 3) Oppressed by feudalism and Imperialism, Ethiopian women suffer from both class and male oppression.
- 4) Considered as mere chattel resulting from centuries-old prejudices – demoralized, degraded, depersonalized and systematically crushed by the ideology of the ruling class – Ethiopian women have been absolutely discouraged from organizing themselves to demand their basic human and democratic rights.
- 5) Ethiopian young women have begun to say “Enough!” to the double class and male oppression, have started a serious study of the history of their oppression and have begun to organize themselves to demand equality between both sexes so that the toiling masses of women can lead a productive life in society and develop freely their person.
- 6) The oppression of Ethiopian women is rooted in the class structure of the barbaric neo-colonial autocratic- theocracy, and the women oppression is one of the manifestations of class oppression.

##### **II. Considering that:**

- 1) All jobs that can be done by men can also be done by women; that women have a great understanding of political and social problems although they are severely discouraged from social practice; that they constitute half of the country's labor power with immense creativity, initiative, independent activity and inexhaustible talent.
- 2) The heroism and patriotism of Ethiopian women is historically confirmed; their resistance to the unbearable women oppression is considerable; there can be no revolution without their active participation, and understanding their demand for the equality of the

sexes is just, democratic and reflects the genuine aspiration of the masses of Ethiopian women and genuine male democrats – it goes without saying that the women question is one of the most important aspects of the Ethiopian national democratic revolution.

### III. Condemns

- 1) The feudal regime for deliberately fostering the ideology of male supremacy and female inferiority; for suppressing women's creative ability by keeping their cultural and educational level low and for discarding them from active participation in the political, social and cultural life of society
- 2) The Haile Selassie neo-colonial regime for making prostitutes out of hundreds and thousands of our sisters by permitting American (Yankee) G.I.'s to degrade and dehumanize our sisters and for using them to entice foreign "dignitaries" to hold conferences in Ethiopia.

### IV. Supports unequivocally:

- 1) The Just and democratic demand of Ethiopian women for equality with the male sex in all spheres of life.
- 2) The formation of a disciplined and politically conscious women worldwide Study Group to educate and prepare the toiling masses of women to advance the class struggle in the national democratic revolution.

### V. Calls on all progressive Ethiopian women:

- to organize themselves to start revolutionary activities – the better to struggle for genuine equality between the sexes.
- to organize a world-wide Ethiopian women Study Group under the guidance of WWUES
- to make systematic studies of women oppression of the various nationalities in Ethiopia and to publish these studies
- to coordinate their activities with all revolutionary organizations in the Ethiopian-Empire State.

VI. Realizing that the complete emancipation of women is earned in revolutionary struggle and cannot be handed over by feminist philanthropists, reformists, non-political fraternity organizations, but through women's vigorous participation with all the laboring millions to smash imperialism and feudalism root and branch.

Calls on – all ESUNA members to help sisters in uplifting their ideological awareness; to purge their male chauvinistic outlooks and to support the struggle of the Ethiopian women for their full emancipation.

Calls on – Ethiopian student organizations inside and outside Ethiopia to follow ESUNA and support their women members in organizing Ethiopian Women Study Groups.

## VII. Mandates:

The Executive Council of ESUNA to give all assistance to our sisters in their efforts to form a world-wide Ethiopian Women Study Group and to make a concerted effort with ESUE and the student movement inside Ethiopia in propagating and fighting for the just demands of oppressed women to fight against all forms of oppression and male chauvinism.

## Annexure II

**On the Women's Question in the *Monthly Journal of the Worldwide Union of Ethiopian Students*, November 1975, "Political Resolution of the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE), Vol. 3, No. 3, Stockholm, Sweden, p. 32**

One of the particularities of the February revolutionary movement is the fact that women rose to fight for their rights and equality, and courageously participated in this movement. It is clear that the oppressed women of Ethiopia can further their struggle and take their appropriate place in the revolution of the Ethiopian peoples only when they get organized.

In realization of this truth and their historical responsibility, we have presently progressive Ethiopian women, who are actively struggling to form an organization of the oppressed women. One of the difficulties they encountered in his struggle was the interference of the armed forces Derg.

In view of this our union

- a) condemns the interference of the Derg in questions relating to the organization of the women in Ethiopia
- b) fully supports the struggle of progressive Ethiopian women to form a broad and democratic organization of the oppressed women.

## Annexure III

**'On the Women Question' in Modes of Production and Class Analysis in Ethiopia, in *Challenge*, A journal of the World-wide Union of Ethiopian Students, published by the Ethiopian Students Union in North America, Volume XII, Number 1, November 1971.**

1. The laboring masses of Ethiopia are oppressed and exploited by feudalism and imperialism. Within the ranks of the laboring masses, women are further oppressed and exploited on account of their sex. The Ethiopian Student Union in North America believes that, in its essence, the woman question is a part of the general question of revolution in Ethiopia. The oppression and exploitation of women is a question of class oppression and exploitation and as such cannot be looked at in an isolated manner from the class struggle in Ethiopian society. ESUNA firmly believes that the emancipation of women is part of the new democratic revolution and socialist revolution in the present era. Without the liberation of the

workers and peasants, there cannot be women emancipation. ESUNA solidly supports the laboring women of Ethiopia in their struggle against feudalism and imperialist exploitation.

2. The Ethiopian Students Union in North America reaffirms its commitment to the emancipation of women in Ethiopia. To this end, all chapters and members of ESUNA should resolutely combat male chauvinism and make a thorough study of the woman question. ESUNA encourages all the sisters in the different chapters to engage in women's study groups, publications, and the class struggle against feudalism and imperialism, and the bourgeois ideology of male chauvinism. ESUNA calls on the sisters throughout the Ethiopian students' movement to unite still more closely around the anti-feudalist and anti-imperialist program and wage a tireless struggle against the enemies of the Ethiopian workers and peasant-feudalism and imperialism. (Challenge, 1971:62)

#### **Annexure IV**

#### **Proverbs on women in Ethiopia (Yeshi Habte Mariam 1995)**

##### *Proverbial sayings on women in Amharic language*

1. You cannot trust a woman or home
2. Woman in the kitchen, man in the court
3. Women and horses eat what they are given
4. Women and hens get mad at least once a day
5. You cannot sort out a woman's talk
6. One man is more important than a thousand women
7. A clever woman, a horned donkey (do not exist)
8. One who loves a female is doomed to hell
9. One who believes a woman is like one who churns water
10. Female and asses become impossible unless whipped/beaten
11. Better a feeble male to a strong female
12. A modern woman looks only forward, ignorant of her past or what is behind her
13. Mills and females are never filled (both are always busy)

14. A pot and a woman are better covered
15. A house without a door, a promiscuous woman
16. She laughs at others' miseries, cries at hers
17. Who can tell the whereabouts of serpents and women
18. A coward is his mother's son
19. A woman's honour is her husband
20. Raised by a woman (insult)
21. A woman's courage/strength is her tongue
22. Even if a woman has the knowledge only a man gets it done
23. A woman is never short of excuses
24. If a woman is educated and if a mule is sated, their behaviour changes for worse
25. Women and hens on the roam never return home
26. A male where he is appointed, a female where she is married
27. A woman's advice (is dangerous) as thorny fence
28. A woman's life is from the living room to the kitchen
29. For a courageous/strong woman, a man is the medicine
30. There is no one (Man) who does not get satisfied by a female and water
31. Everybody (male) quarrels for a spinster's house
32. She went to the river (to bring water) without her pot
33. A wise woman's house has grace and beauty
34. A nagging wife and a leaky house are the same thing
35. Save us from a hesitant ox and a talkative woman
36. A house without a woman, livestock without a barn
37. Men for women, women for food
38. A good wife is a crown for her husband

39. A nagging woman cannot make a good wife
40. A horse and grain, a woman and gossip
41. A woman is destined to a man
42. She does not have legs, she want to have wings
43. One cannot tell the woman's minds or a male bird

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I declare that **THE ROLE OF EDUCATED/INTELLECTUAL WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGE AND TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY 1974-2005** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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SIGNATURE  
(Ms I Biseswar)

5 March 2012  
DATE