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"Gender and Politics in the Horn of Africa: The Ethiopian Experience."

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"The law cannot be seen in the abstract but as it applies in everyday life....each of these infringements causes a large amount of individual suffering, despair, disillusionment and injustice. Yet discrimination continues everyday, because people are more concerned about traditional roles and personal interests than about the fate of individual women who suffer."

Gender and politics

It is often said: "If you do not take care of politics, it will take care of you anyway". Politics is in the public sphere because it is supposed to take care of defining, guiding and deciding the course of everyone's life. Whereas women contribute to society, their input is not recognized. They cannot be in charge of their own destiny because gender is artificially relegated to the private domain. Assuring domestic labor, raising children and feeding everyone is done by women all over the world, but this essential contribution is taken for granted. To share this burden which is essential to the welfare of any society as a whole, women must invest the political domain and be in the decision making spheres. They cannot control their own lives and bodies if they cannot influence legislature and the implementation of rights which have already been ratified. Women must participate at the grassroots level because that is the only way they can wage the daily battle and fighting for their own rights and assure a better world for their children.

Women in the World

Women's right is a human rights question. The relegation of women to a secondary status is characterized by its universality and longevity. It's indeed a man's world and it has been so from time immemorial. Today women work both within the house and outside to earn a living and contribute towards the betterment of all family members. Concerning the minority who live in opulent societies despite advances in technology and the existence of the rule of law; women still need to struggle for their rights. The recent ratification of equal salaries in the USA is a case in point, reminding us how incredibly difficult it is to right the wrongs women are submitted to. In

the world the vast majority of women live in poverty, illiteracy and with little access or not at all in regards to education and health services. In Africa women are among the poorest, have the least access to education and work, while being the most active and productive force in reality.

In general attitudes towards women haven't improved and one can say that a man however stupid still has the chance of being better heard than women however brilliant they may be. The battle is about making sure that we leave a better world for our children, especially the girl child, and attain a full recognition of women's rights and their contribution as a citizen in any land. Women must get organized and take their destiny into their own hands so that they can hammer the fact that they are equal citizens who do not simply exist only within the private family sphere. Women are the ignored, unsung contributors to all developments in history through their unrecognized work as generators, providers, caretakers and rocks to lean on.

On Being Black and a woman

If all women are doubly pushed by systems that abuse them as workers in any field and more specifically as women, black women are even worse off because of prejudices. Racism and racial attitudes are among the most pernicious behaviors that the world still needs to do away with. We cannot get rid of it if we at first fail to recognize it as a real handicap. Other than discriminations and biases based on gender, black women are still seen in a different light wherever they may be. The white supremacist hierarchy has produced a harmful culture with illogical standards and our world hasn't yet gotten rid of it. Sexual and moral harassments are endured by defenseless women in all countries of the world but because of the disdain for the darker skinned populations, women of color face additional handicaps. Male chauvinism being rampant and well implanted among black men as well, black women will always be woman before being black. The universality of women's oppression is underlined in this context as well.

Women of the horn

Apart from stating basic commonalities about the horn as a whole, I do not intend to delve into the larger reality in a familiar way as I do about Ethiopia. However, one can safely state that women's liberation, cultural emancipation and a bright future for all are not yet on the agenda. Ancient traditions are maintained compromising new policies made to the detriment of women. I will not dwell on outstanding women famous as models, actors, singers who are exceptions to the rule, because my concern here will be regarding the large masses of women, the poorest and weakest of all, and still victims of ancient traditions. It is true that in any given country the well being of citizens can be really appreciated by what happens to the weakest and the poorest of its members.

Violence against women, occur within the family, and the community at large. But the most revealing aspect of it being a very common practice is when the state and institutions are implicated too. Harmful traditions such as wife battering, rape, abduction, prostitution and trafficking, domestic violence, sexual harassment, Female Genital Mutilation and most of all early marriage are still scarring millions of women in the Horn of Africa. Marital rape and HIV Aids have broth to light that unless a woman owns her own body she cannot protect herself and her family from lethal sicknesses. Where can a woman turn to when police officers, government officials, school directors, religious leaders etc. are immersed in a culture that does not discourage the verbal abuse of women?

Positively, though when thinking of women and men of the Horn of Africa, I can say that Nuruddin Farah, a writer from Somalia stands out for making Somali women at the center of most of his writings in almost all of his books, for example *From a crooked rib*, *Secrets*, *Gifts*, *Maps* and the latest concerning a Somali woman's return from exile, *Knots*. In the Horn of Africa we've had civil wars, 'liberation' fronts, military dictators, ethnic warlords, failed revolutions and political parties that are still men's clubs. Discrimination and violence against the girl child is manifested by the lack of consent, by early marriage which disregards a young woman's freedom of choice, right to work, to education, to health.

Women have been the most affected both directly and indirectly, for being the poorest; the least educated and forced to fend for themselves on their own. The forced conscription of young boys and men especially in the countryside leaves the family's needs and welfare on women. They are bereaved; they bear and nurture children who end up fleeing the land, and untold contributions both physical and material towards the so called war efforts are expected from them. It's up to them to pick up the pieces right after every disaster and go on with life still taking care of those who've survived.

The Ethiopian Experience

Imperial Ethiopia

In those days women, who were not yet in the public picture were solicited for handicraft and all sorts of baking capabilities rather than their opinions, knowledge of country or the world at large. These activities themselves were organized either under the auspices of the Empress, the Red Cross or associations of the ruling class aptly named Soldiers' Wives who organized radio programs for transmitting the messages of soldiers' wives. Almost all of the girls' schools had programs preparing them for being housewives by acquiring household skills. The target of all training and preparation is to give total service to the husband within a typically patriarchal society.

By the mid 60's, students in Ethiopia started demonstrating for issues beyond their own secular interests and started expressing their anger and demands concerning the general well being of citizens in general. Their most famous slogans during the birth of the student movement were 'poverty is not a crime', 'land to the tiller' (40 years later unfortunately this slogan is still a valid battle cry).

A new kind of era dawned for women too because young girls started joining the ESM (Ethiopian Students' movement). University students disrupted a fashion show within their campus expressing their outrage at the frivolousness of fellow students. This action was one that inspired a lot of discussion on women's equality and their rights.

The 60's were years of decolonization in Africa, the end of the British and French domination. Independence wars in Vietnam, Algeria etc. and student unrest the world over coupled with cultural emancipation; the live stars of the day were people like, Che Guevara, Ho chi minh, Angela Davis. More importantly for black people the world sees the civil rights movement in the USA and Black consciousness movement in South Africa.

Awareness about women's rights

Galvanizing change and even upheaval in certain places was the order of the day. The world over students, massively participated in study groups, debates, big meetings and huge demonstrations. With slogans like 'it's forbidden to forbid' the youth were demonstrating, throwing stones in the west and taking up their guns in areas where armed struggle seemed to be the only way towards acquiring human rights. Within the ESM young men were keen and active in

giving a hand in support of the few women who were caught up in the effervescent movement to do away with all sorts of cultural fetters. In the seventies Ethiopian women both at home and abroad were involved and busy reading about the struggles waged by women in other parts of the world. The Ye Ethiopia Setoch Astebabari Committee (Ethiopian Women's Coordinating Committee) was formed in Addis Ababa and the World Wide Ethiopian Students' Study group in Europe and the USA.

These platforms enabled women to discuss amongst themselves, organize meetings and produce brochures and leaflets. It was within such a context that we learnt how to voice our opinion freely, how to organize study materials and finally produces texts, poetry and studies. These got printed in view of propaganda and agitation to reach out to women and push men into acquiring other ways of dealing with women, see them as indispensable allies in struggle and change their attitudes in many ways. Those were very interesting times for Ethiopian women because their upbringing and education were always based on tradition within a context where men had all the advantages. It also meant that within the ESM both men and women had to see their roles in society and behavior towards each other in a different light. Everybody wanted to do away with the past and there was something like magic in the air.

The creation of women's organization dates to this period. The Ethiopian women's coordinating committee, world wide Ethiopian women study groups came to be during the 70's when radical change was on the agenda and the youth were being mobilized in an un precedent way. Women were studying gender issues and publishing their own journal (Tenesh, organ of the EWCC, Tagey, Dereb Tagaywa etc.)The Ethiopian Student movement had all sorts of political debates and one of them was the importance of getting organized, of assuring grassroots participation and encouraging all sectors to formulate their own specific demands.

Pioneers of change and the Military junta

Those were the years that saw the 1st political parties of the land and they naturally got involved in the revolution that got rid of absolute monarchy. The EPRP will stay in the opposition while Meison ended up giving a critical support to the military junta that usurped power by derailing the popular revolution. This is the reason why the women's organization, the student's movement and other groupings were highly politicized and very radical throughout the 70's. The intellectuals that joined the military junta ended up justifying repression, and then they participated in tortures, and organized killing and some of them were so overzealous they had excelled in these shameful acts. The civil war that ensued will mark Ethiopia for generations to come.

The Ethiopian Women's Coordinated Committee, like the Ethiopian student's movement gets divided in light of the division that came to be, because the choice was between supporting the military junta and condemning it. Since the target of all changes was the demise of absolute monarchy and the feudal system within a revolutionary situation, ideologically the majority of the organized groups were radical. The women of that generation studied what patriarchy was and its impacts on women's rights. We studied and wrote about the kind of harmful practices and traditions that still prevailed in our country and of course how one can do away with all these fetters which hamper women from having a better life.

Although we were getting organized in the hope of taking our destiny into our own hands, it was just a beginning of a colossal task that must one day realize the dreams of Ethiopia's modern women. Combating male chauvinism and overcoming it meant that one must give a central place to the importance of cultural emancipation for both men and women. Those years produced very conscious men and women who tried to live up to their principles and women who were discovering and relishing empowerment, there was such a strong sense of commitment to the people's cause and discipline that many paid the ultimate price, with their lives

In 1974 hope for a better Ethiopia was a palpable thing in an incredible way. Militants who were already organized got busy organizing more and those who were away from home rushed over leaving unfinished business behind because they felt this was a moment to be seized. The professional revolutionaries, who had been nurtured with the history and recent experiences of people in battle for their rights, felt they were ready to move on and act. They were needed for organizing the masses, for engaging themselves in the battles of the day and taking care of whatever task that awaited them back home. The right to organize, to practice free speech, to raise all problems that had to be done away with, the hope of overcoming poverty, illiteracy, diseases and access to education and health. During this time women will join the zemecha, which meant campaign for including the vast countryside into the radical upsurge in urban areas. This was the 1st time ever that women had the possibility of going away from home for an activity along side with men, life for many will never be the same again. Women's liberation, the celebration of March 8, demonstrations of taxi drivers, students, for mayday and workers' rights, movements for religious equality etc. were at the center of discussions.

The military junta will derail the revolution and with the help of its supporters, intellectuals from within and the socialist camp from outside. Those who hoped for a real change in Ethiopia will discover that Africa is seen in a different light, disdain, racism, paternalism etc. will hamper the forward moving believers and the international solidarity will be expressed with the dictators. The Ethiopian opposition will not give in to the socialist camp despite ideological affinities because they knew the situation of their country better.

Repression and women

Ethiopian Women's participation was unprecedented and much enjoyed by the actors of change who in fact had given their lives to assure their commitment for the cause of a better Ethiopia within which women will have a say. They were killed, maimed, imprisoned, tortured, their breasts mutilated, raped because their transgression was not only their activism, they had to be debased, abused and humiliated in public because they were women. In almost all cases where women have been tortured rape is in the picture, just like that is the case when soldiers invade any village anywhere in the world. In that instant these men have no mothers, no sisters or any other female relation that may come to mind to stop them from regressing and becoming a beast. During this years of horror and sadness many mothers will be imprisoned when their children were no where to be found or as a means of torture to break the wills of those who do not give in easily. Among those who survived the ordeal many mothers, sisters young and not so young were forced to flee and escape. Most of them will be marked forever while some may never regain their sanity.

Women and the regimentation of the society

Once the military were done killing and maiming they started to organize all sectors of society in order to control everyone and use all the social forces of the country as they saw fit. That was when different organizations with identical structures and commands were created. REWA, was the women's organization, REYA the youth, REPA regrouping the peasants association and REWA for the workers, and there might be some more.

These were organs of intimidation; people had to join them because unless they did so their neighborhood organization will exclude them from getting basic food stuff, permission to go somewhere or any kind of recommendation that might be useful for any individual. Ethiopia was officially within the socialist camp and thus participated in events organized within that camp. The officials copied institutions, texts, explanations and what not while what mattered was the fact that the military had the upper hand everywhere and there was no free space anywhere. The country was stifled and any hope of having freedom of opinion, of association, of the press existed no longer.

The Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Organization came to be after the Ethiopian Women's Coordinating Committee was forbidden to continue its activities. In 1975 when hopes for change were still very high and there was really a revolutionary situation, the EWCC had its office within the parliament and was sending delegates to reach out to women. They had many occasions for preparing large meetings of women in their working areas, large assemblies and they got delegates elected from all over the land.

Ethnicity and women

Ethnic politics does not sit well with the women question because once women become aware of the possibilities of their rights they are bound to question traditional practices and even age old traditions. The glorification of ethnicity reached its eight when the ethnic federation was set up in Ethiopia after the coming to power of a one ethnic based liberation front in 1991, a minority group. Endeavoring to dominate by diving all other regions, the tigrean front has been undermining the country's unity and still is to this day.

Women's place in any society demands a fight, a struggle concerning almost all aspects of life because they are always relegated to a secondary status. To advance from there and dream of having a better condition for women, the question of human rights and equality, any woman must inevitably question the traditional norms of society. This is the reason why women's struggle against harmful traditions does not sit well with ethnic organization. In almost all regions of Ethiopia highest virtues such as courage, strength etc. are attached to masculinity whereas docility, weakness are attributed to the feminine. In the same manner an ethnic group that is dubbed of being "golden" inculcates not only imagined superiority to its adherents but also disdains, hatred and uncalled for rivalry.

Many studies about the different cultural behaviors and how they are pernicious to women have been carried out in Ethiopia both in the 1970's and even more so since then due to the interest generated by the predominance of Ethnic politics this past decade. Although his writings have had controversial debates since his book's publication in 1974, Donald Levine has translated many sayings to come up with detailed descriptions about how women's confidence had been undermined.

“ The Amhara depreciate women's activity and talk as inferior, and disparage women's character as unreliable and treacherous. The Gurage consider the woman to be inherently immoral, and a constant source of contamination of men unless she performs cleansing rituals after childbirth, menstruation, and sexual intercourse. Kefa males regard women as weak, sharp tongued and lazy, and highly dangerous both because they may infect men during their menstrual periods and because of their avid sexual desires which rob men of their strength.”

The ethnic regime had at first hidden its nature by making speeches and declaring policies that promised better days. They were unmasked by the reality of their divisive work. Lifeless policies on paper that are too good to be true, official Discourse about equality, democracy, the free press and the rule of law, to mention but a few, solely intended for the consumption of donor countries or the friendly super power of the moment are but misleading cover stories. Ethiopia

has signed all the conventions of the UN and is among the most updated concerning the international instruments and more specifically human rights, until recently when NGOs and civil societies were targeted in view of discouraging debates about grassroots participation and real empowerment.

The ethnic regime had started by excluded organizations with a national vision and the sovereignty for Ethiopia. They had already started by denying people they had imprisoned by keeping them in secrete prisons and enforcing disappearances. A militant woman who has disappeared in Addis Ababa, Aberash Berta is one of the victims of enforced disappearances along with many others. Abera Yemaneab who had gone back home to participate in a peace and reconciliation conference in 1993 is still in jail. Human rights organizations within Ethiopia fear of raising the names of those deemed to be most wanted. On the international arena human rights organizations are often biased and must be questioned by their supporters at the grassroots level.

Killing was carried out in broad day light, journalists, people from the teachers association and within the ethnic regions people were dispossessed, killed in total impunity. The election of 2005 unmasked the regime even better, a state of emergency was decreed on the very day of the election when they realized that the votes were not at all as they had expected. Thousands were imprisoned even the elected deputies, the well known ones were freed after 2 years of incarceration, but the vast majority of prisoners are still languishing in jail.

Giving lip service to women's equality and rights is the easiest thing to do for dictators, especially for those who pretend to address the democratic rights of their citizens in an abashed way. Ethiopia has ratified almost all of the conventions of the UN and international instruments have been accepted without a fight. The point is not in accepting and recognizing rights because they are useless if they cannot be implemented. Despite their claims, the ethnic group in power must one day be confronted because of the deliberate neglect of the country's needs. Our souvrainty has been betrayed as never before, it's been as if there's no one in charge of protecting Ethiopia and Ethiopians. A case in point is that of Ethiopian women being victims of modern day slavery, human trafficking and neglect concerning Ethiopians who've been found dead after being maimed and mutilated. Modern day slavery has been enhanced because a lot of women are forced to flee in search of a livelihood. Many agencies have been set up for encouraging women to go and work in the united arab emirates and saudi arabia supposedly for a decent employment. These go betweens often mislead the young girls deliberately in view of gaining illicit money. Once they are stranded in a foreign without any support or even a contact person, they are pushed towards prostitution. In those countries working conditions do not really exist, the working hours are not defined, the lodgings never really considered. Those women who go to work as house maids are not only abused by all the male members of the family, they also

face the hatred and wrath of the wives who themselves live like prisoners. These are the reasons there are so many casualties since these african women are not treated like human beings at all. The Ethiopian Embassies show up only for repatriating the loads of dead bodies from the morgues, whereas these young girls are thrown from windows, beaten and suffering from acide burens for some.

The way forward

Women must be encouraged to get organized through whatever form may come in handy wherever they may be to make sure that their rights are respected and the future of the girl child protected. Women have to learn not only from their own experience but also through sharing the experiences of other women in the world who have been struggling to make a difference. The universality of women's oppression and the never ending battles for their rights are very good premises for stimulating international solidarity and cooperation.

The world Social Forum created to forge alliances and counter the Davos summits, has very interesting and enriching information about the hopes and fears concerning the future. Many forums were used as think tanks and for creating a people to people network on common agendas. Its different continental branches that have already carried out many workshops and large gatherings in different regions of the world have produced useful materials. The workshops on gender issues produce very interesting perspective concerning women's place in society and on the battles that need to be waged both at the global and local levels. The woman question could not be resolved without the advent of a fundamental change that will really put the rule of law in place and pave the way for the implementation of social justice. To get there more and more women should join in the resistance movements and be a part of the forces that will bring about the desired change.

Women as mothers must make a difference, if we have the chance of learning and reading about our world, we must think through the kind of education we give to our children. Let us begin by asking ourselves to what kind of world, what kind of future we are preparing them. In the interest of both the girl child and the boy, we must consciously try to make a difference by imagining a better world for both. Women are at the center of life, of a home, of rituals and this reality can help them weld a strong positive power so that they will no longer perpetrate traditions that are harmful to themselves and to their daughters. A better world is possible once the awareness is there.

The International Ethiopian Women's Organization (IEWO/AESED) was created in the fall of 2006, after being in gestation for a few years. Women started by reaching out to each other based on past histories, experiences and political involvements. It took many years and even sympathizers are still striving to be active because everyone's past was a complicated one, some women were underground in the cities, some in the guerilla zones and others in exile. Their main concern was bringing women towards the political sphere where decisions concerning a country's future were made www.aesed.org . Unless more women join political parties and movements to prepare themselves for becoming conscious, strong and active citizens, women's specific interests are bound to be neglected.

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