

Participation of Women in Political and Public Decision Making in Ethiopia

FSS Monograph No. 5



Meaza Ashenafi

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Forum for Social Studies (FSS)

P.O.Box 25864 code 1000

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Email: fss@ethionet.et

Web: www.fssethiopia.org.et

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Acronyms

AGDI	African Gender and Development Index
AU	African Union
BDPA	Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Aid
CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party
EU	European Union
EWLA	Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association
EWVA	Ethiopian Women Voluntary Association
EWVA	Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
HTP	Harmful Traditional Practice
ICCPR	International Convention on Civil and Political Rights
NAP	National Action Plan
NEWA	Network of Ethiopian Women's Association
NRM	National Resistance Movement
OPCO	Oromo People's Congress
REWA	Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association
SADC	South African Development Community
SIDA	Swedish International Development Aid
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front

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Introduction

This monograph was originally produced as a Masters Thesis. It is based on the premise that women's independent organized activities, whether carried out at policy or community level, as well as women's formal political participation are both important and complementary. The question addressed in this research is what contributions have been made by women's independent organized activities and formal political participation, towards enhancing the empowerment of women and ensuring their participation in governance. The study examines the roles played by women in public decision making arenas.

The first chapter addresses important theoretical aspects of women's participation in decision-making. It will define formal and informal politics and assess the impact of women's participation in formal politics by highlighting experiences of Uganda, South Africa, U.S.A and U.K. This chapter also provides the theoretical basis of women's arguably unique leadership potential advanced by women politicians and feminist scholars. Furthermore, it reviews the relatively new definition given to women's organized independent activism as political work. The focus of the study is the status of women in Ethiopia, although, the chapter is based on broader global theoretical debates on the subject of women and leadership, on women's community activism as political work, as well as on women's experience in formal politics. This provides the context for understanding and analyzing the situation in Ethiopia.

Chapter Two will focus on the case of Ethiopia. It will provide a historical overview of the roles played by women in both formal and informal politics. This chapter is a prelude to the following two chapters that discuss the contemporary role of Ethiopian women.

Chapter Four provides a general overview of independent organizations in Ethiopia and the roles played by women's organizations particularly since the coming to power of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF). The chapter mainly provides a case study of Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), a prominent women's organization which has played a key role in the promotion and protection of women's rights in Ethiopia. Established in 1995 by a group of women lawyers, the organization has played a catalytic role in advocating for legislative reform, better enforcement of laws and participation of women in politics and other spheres

of decision making. This chapter documents achievements and challenges of the Association to illustrate the political and change-oriented activism of women's organizations.

Available literature shows that although participation of women has, in several cases, resulted in policy and legal reform, it has not succeeded in transforming the entrenched system of governance to make a meaningful difference in the day-to-day lives of women. Based on this general observation, two broad questions to be addressed by this research include: what is the level of women's participation in decision making in Ethiopia; and to what extent have women been successful in pushing for gender friendly agendas that could have a substantive outcome at the level of both formal politics and in the arena of independent organized activism?

These questions will lead to further specific queries such as:

- a) Is it difficult for women to make major advances in advocating for gender friendly agendas because they exercise leadership in the same way as men?
- b) Is the expectation too high of women, notwithstanding several other factors required to make a difference in this context, including the significance of the institutions in which women mostly participate?
- c) Are women influential as political actors, given the various limitations under which they operate?
- d) Do women who have obtained political office through their political party's affirmative action policy find it difficult to advocate for gender friendly agendas?
- e) What is the contribution of independent women's organizations to the development and implementation of gender friendly agendas in Ethiopia? What is their vision?

The research method utilized in this paper combines archival research, participatory observation and interviews with 14 men and women politicians and civil society activists. The study uses an interdisciplinary approach and applies a gender analysis to de-masculinize the issue of power, politics and decision making. This research will use feminist theory to analyze the central role of women's political agency to achieve the objective of gender equality as a goal and as an instrument for the larger societal good.

Chapter One

Theoretical Background and an Overview of Women's Experiences in Politics and Other Decision Making Positions

1. General Background

Women around the world have been organizing for greater representation and participation in politics and other decision making arenas. The right to vote has been one of the first themes around which women activists of the 19th century, known as the "suffragettes" mobilized to demand the right of women to vote on equal terms with men in the United Kingdom and the United States. Women gained their voting rights at different times – in the US in 1920 and in Britain in 1928. In the West, some countries guaranteed women their right to vote quite late. For example, in Switzerland women were only granted the right to vote in 1971, after an all male electoral referendum on the subject. A prior, analogous, referendum was unsuccessful (BBC October 15, 2006).

In 2005, Kuwait was registered as the last country in the world to allow women the right to vote. The law granting female suffrage was passed in 2005 in preparation for the Parliamentary election that took place in June 2006. Women were allowed to vote for the first time during this election and they represented 57% of the voters. Twenty seven of the 249 candidates were women though in this first attempt, no women managed to get elected to parliament (Reuters 30 June 2006).

Parallel and subsequent to securing their political rights various women's movements have focused on equal rights to education, reproductive rights, and equal protection of the law in economic, social and political arenas.

The struggle of women for equal rights can take various forms. It can be participation in the traditional electoral politics as voters or candidates, or it may be organized women's activism used by women to advance various agendas over the years. Women's organized, independent movements preceded, and even resulted in, women's formal political engagement. However, the latter type of women's independent organized work has not been recognized as political work.

Globally, in the past thirty years, the case for expansion and comprehensive realization of human rights by women in a comprehensive manner has been more or less accepted as legitimate. This is manifested in the growing number of movements and organizations advocating for the rights of women, by the adoption and ratification of international and national legal instruments intended to improve social and economic conditions, and by the participation of women in public life.

Since the 1980s the traditional narrow meaning of political participation has been challenged, and women's community work has been redefined as constituting political work. Feminist sociologists expanded this notion by reinterpreting women's experience through a gender lens. Accordingly, the important contributions made by women's community mobilization have been documented in academic and policy work at all levels. However, when discussing women and politics, feminist scholars still largely focus on the issue of women's access to state power and the potential roles of women in formal political leadership.

According to some social movement theories, groups organize around their respective interests when they realize that their social conditions are not necessarily their failings but are rather caused by structural inequalities (Springer 2005). Women get involved in community activism to change their working conditions, family relations, or for social or economic empowerment. Bookman and Morgen argue that "empowerment begins when they (women) change their ideas about the causes of their powerlessness, when they recognize the systematic forces that oppress them, and when they act to change the conditions of their lives (Brookman and Morgen 1988).

Traditionally, political participation was viewed within the narrow framework of formal politics and women's social activism was considered within the realm of welfare. However, feminist writers have increasingly challenged this narrow definition and argued that women's organizations are important sites of contestation, asserting that women's daily resistance is a political work.

Nancy Naples conceptualized the politics of community work as follows: "Doing politics included any struggle to gain control over definitions of 'self' and 'community'; to augment personal and communal empowerment; to create alternative institutions and organizational processes; and to increase the power and resource of the community" (Naples 1991,479). Patricia Collins also argues that, "men are more likely to engage in traditional politics of office holding whereas women have been more involved in the day-to-day

infrapolitics of community organizing. Moreover, because infrapolitics and traditional politics are interdependent neither is sufficient as a sole form of political resistance” (Collins 2005).

Robin Kelly argues along the same lines. According to Kelly, understanding political work requires emphasizing why, rather than how, a particular group organizes for a collective action, and whether this is done within or outside electoral politics. He argues that given that the majority of the population (in the west) has lost trust in formal political institutions, due to their lack of effectiveness and inaccessibility, it is necessary to revise the traditional definition of politics. He also argues that both formal and informal politics are motivated by human desire for economic and social justice (Berger 2004). A study done by Aili Mari Tripp on women's political participation in Uganda affirms the views of Naples, Collins and Kelly. Tripp demonstrates that Uganda is one of the leading countries in Africa by most standards of women's participation in politics. However, the author also affirms that patriarchal domination of politics has kept women in the periphery where they remain unable to influence politics in the direction they envision. Tripp proposes that women need to strongly rely on their organizational skills if they wish to address critical concerns (Tripp 2000).

The important contribution of women's independent organized activism has also been recognized by women who themselves are engaged in formal politics. A research report based on interviews with 200 women parliamentarians across the world confirms that women politicians believe women's organizations are the pioneers in highlighting the issue of gender equality. These parliamentarians expressed the need for continued collaboration between women in formal politics and those that organize independently. A member of parliament in Central Africa was quoted as saying, “NGOs help since the only women's political organization was broken up by the advent of democracy; it is difficult for us to bring all women together in one political organization. Since we are under-represented, solidarity must operate at all levels. I remain very attentive to problems that affect women and children (IPU 2005).

Diverse groups of women have made critical contribution to transform social and economic institutions that constitute the basic power relations in society outside electoral politics. Despite this, women have always been considered as passive and non-political. Brookman and Morgen believe that the most important conceptual barrier lies in the gendered definition and meaning given to ‘politics’. These authors argue that politics is wrongly understood as “the

activities of elected officials and the workings of government both out of the reach of ordinary people ... when there is an attempt to change the social and economic institutions that embody the basic power relations in our society – that is politics (Brookman and Morgen 1988).

In the process of challenging the conventional definition of politics, feminist writers have articulated and analyzed how gender structures women's political experience. In doing so, they have demonstrated how politics and the reality of everyday life are related. Captured in the slogan, “the personal is the political,” issues of violence, abortion, reproductive rights, childcare, sexual harassment, and housework have become part of the political agenda. Brookman and Morgen explain that, “politics can mean at least to some people, efforts to challenge entrenched power relations whether between individual men and women or between groups with and without economic and political power” (Brookman and Morgen 1988, 16).

The experiences of women activists and politicians in Ethiopia show a similar trend. Despite the active participation of women at the community level and their immense contribution with regard to sustaining the social, cultural, and economic fabric of their communities, contributions made by women are often disregarded and men remain as the major actors when it comes to leadership. This is the case even at the local level where women carry most of the burden and hard work that is required to support the family and community under difficult conditions. Participation of women in the traditional civil society setting or modern movement will be further discussed in this thesis.

2. Women in Formal Politics

While recognizing the important role of community activism, as well as acknowledging the challenge of accessing and transforming the patriarchal structure of formal politics, this thesis argues that women should try to access effective political power in order to further influence economic and political governance. The effective participation of women in decision making in politics, and other arenas, can potentially contribute to the realization of gender friendly laws and policies.

The compelling question here is how can women access political power and how can they play an effective role in governance structures that feminist thinkers characterize as masculine? D. Brush refers to Catharine McKinnon

who writes “the state is male in the feminist sense because it sees and treats women the way men see and treat women” (Brush 2003, 85).

Universal voting in free and fair elections has become more or less the norm in most countries of the world. However, it is also becoming clear that periodic elections alone do not meet democratic standards that, among other factors, require the equal participation of all citizens of a country. Periodic elections do not automatically guarantee the equal representation of the poor, women, and other marginalized sectors of the society or the protection of their respective rights. Democracy requires that the power of the government should emanate from the sovereign will of the people in order to represent their interests. Ideally those represented in government institutions should not only be those who are privileged or those who by some historical accident seize governmental power. We must not exclude the poor, women, and the less educated from government.

Participation of women in decision making in politics and other arenas is a civil right and a matter of justice and equality. It is also crucial that women are represented in decision making positions to represent, reflect and protect the interests of the female constituency. On the point of women’s representation, the former Speaker of the South African parliament, Frene Ginwala says: “The seed of democracy lies in the principle that the legitimacy of the power to make decisions about peoples lives, their society and their country should derive from a choice by those who will be affected” (IDEA 2005, Forward).

A number of studies have documented how women's activism outside the corridors of power has elevated women's issues to central forums at the regional, global and national levels. It is also recognized that the pressure applied by women's organized efforts, at the community and professional level, have created the impetus to facilitate change and inspire decision making at various levels. The fruits of these struggles have been particularly evident in legal and policy commitments made by governments worldwide, both at the international regional and national levels. However, gender equality and empowerment measurement indices, such as the UNDP Human Development Report (HDR) and the African Gender Development Index (AGDI), have made it clear that by and large, governments are falling short in their commitments to realize these extended legal and policy commitments.

In spite of the incremental progress towards women's participation in public spheres, it is generally recognized that women have largely remained outside

formal leadership roles, particularly in the political sphere. Factors accounting for such disparities include unequal socio-economic opportunities and inadequate access to mentors and support networks. Rigid workplace structures and gender stereotypes that relate socially defined characteristics with certain groups in most cases also dissociate women from leadership roles. Even when women have the opportunity to participate their influence is limited, as detailed below.

Women need power to advance their own development and that of other marginalized groups. However, power will not come on a silver platter and women must fight for it. Millar writes: “Power is a dirty word in some what the same way as 'sex' has been. For women especially it has been unmentionable subject. So they have to acquire economic, political and social power and authority. At present women wield virtually none” (Miller 1986).

Aristotle conceptualized politics as a supreme moral activity for which women have no virtue. On the other hand, in the post-Machiavellian world politics was understood as an immoral undertaking from which women should be protected. These understandings of politics create the belief that politics is a specialized activity beyond the reach of women and only accessible to a few people. Contemporary liberal democracy does not exclude women from politics in an overt manner. Rather, it assumes that any willing person is capable of participating in politics and can access power. Such an assumption is flawed since it considers all members of society to have equal opportunities without consideration of class, gender and other structural limitations that hinder opportunities for participation (Brookman and Morgan 1988, 22).

Historically, women have been blatantly excluded from politics and power, under the pretense of various justifications. Structural barriers have also systematically excluded women under an ideology that encompasses the public and private dichotomy. This exclusion has limited women’s public decision making roles.

In the case of Ethiopia, participation in decision making in political leadership has historically been the exclusive preserve of men, with the exception of the role played by a handful of prominent women who have been able to directly participate in the countries’ governance or indirectly influence decision making due to their marital or family relationships with leaders. However, participation of women in decision making has increased, as can be observed from the empirical data provided in Chapter 4.

3. Participation of Women in Decision Making Is a Woman's Right

This section will discuss the international, regional and national framework that provides the basis for the demand for women's participation in decision-making.

A number of binding international and regional conventions, as well as resolutions and declarations, provide for the equal participation of women in decision making as one of the most important civil rights of women. Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the right of every man and woman to participate in the government of their country (UDHR 1948). Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires state parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the country's political and public life. Article 7(1) specifically affirms the equal rights of women "to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government" (CEDAW 1979). Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the African Women's Protocol) under Article (9) requires state parties to take all necessary measures, including affirmative action, to "ensure increased and effective representation of and participation of women at all levels of decision making" (The African Women's Protocol). In addition to such binding instruments as CEDAW and the African Protocol, other important global, regional and sub-regional declarations have also called upon governments to ensure the equal participation of women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (BDPA) have identified women's participation in decision making as one of the 12 critical areas of concern. The Beijing Declaration called upon states and all other actors to "monitor progress towards the target of having women hold 50% of managerial and decision making positions by the year 2000." The South African Development Community (SADC) Gender Declaration item (H) stipulates that women should constitute 30% of individuals in political and decision making structures by 2005. The Outcome and the Way Forward Document of the Seventh African Regional Conference on Women (Beijing +10) and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa have both called for the promotion of the 50/50 gender parity principle adapted by the AU Commission. The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action under its Strategic Objective G affirms the following: "Women's participation in

decision making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interest to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace can not be achieved."

4. Are Women Adequately Represented in Decision Making in Africa?

Participation of women throughout the world has increased following the impetus created by the BDPA that clearly calls for the equal participation of women in the economic, social and political fields through setting time-bound specific targets, and the identification of various actors and their responsibilities in fulfilling the goal.

A higher representation of women in politics and decision making has become a sign of democratic governance. Women's participation has not reached the critical mass of 30% bench mark set as a standard for women's meaningful participation as a political group either globally or within Africa. At both levels few countries have made considerable progress towards meeting the 30% goal. Very few countries have surpassed the 30% benchmark. However, over the decades representation of women has increased. For example women's participation in the parliament has increased on the average from 11% during the last decade to 16% in 2005 at the global level (IPU 2005). The 30% target set by BDPA was reached in more than 20% of the parliaments elected in 2005. In Africa, two post conflict countries have achieved remarkable progress. In 2006, in a historic victory, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia was elected as the first African woman president. Rwanda has achieved the highest level of women's participation in parliament in the world. Women constitute 48.8% of Rwanda's parliament. Four African countries have fulfilled the 30% threshold: Rwanda, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania (IPU 2007).

Women also hold prominent positions in several parts of Africa. A woman holds the position of Prime Minister in Mozambique, Vice-President in Gambia and Zimbabwe, Deputy President in South Africa, Minister of Finance in Liberia and Tanzania, and Minister of Trade and Industry in Liberia (ECA 2007). The Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Mozambique, South Africa, Burundi and Guinea are also women (Network Volume 9 No. 3). Furthermore Wangari Muta Maathai became the first African woman Nobel Peace Prize

winner for her Green Belt environmental campaign in Kenya and across Africa.

Women's increased participation has largely been the result of legally enforced affirmative action measures adopted by governments, or voluntary measures adopted by political parties motivated by their own commitment or political gains. By 2006 around 40 countries had introduced gender quotas to the national parliaments through constitutional provisions or by amending electoral laws. In over 50 countries, major political parties have implemented gender quotas under their own regulations. Over 20 countries in Africa have either legislated, or through a party decision, introduced quotas for national elections. Such measures affirm that gender based quotas are an important policy measure to rectify past and present legacies of discrimination against women and recognize the need for a level playing field (IDEA 2006).

However, the practical implementation of quota systems is complicated and the principle is still controversial. For instance, the Lesotho Court of Appeal has dismissed an appeal opposing the reservation of one third of the local government seats for women as unconstitutional (IDEA 2006).

In addition to affirmative action measures various studies also confirm that electoral systems do make a difference in expanding women's opportunities for participation. Electoral systems define the structure of elections, the rules of the game about who is elected, how a campaign is organized and the role of political parties. Although the choice of an electoral system is one of the most important decisions in a democracy, the choice may be made deliberately to achieve specific outcomes. For example, the electoral system could contribute to fostering accommodation in a divided society (IDEA 2006). Between the two main types of electoral systems, proportional representation (PR) and Majoritarian/Pluralist system, the former is believed to provide better opportunities for women's participation. In the PR system, seats in parliaments are allocated in proportion to the votes each party receives. In the Majoritarian system, there is usually one seat per electoral area that will be taken by the candidate who gets the most votes. In a study undertaken in 23 democracies, the electoral system was identified as the most important factor for enhancing or blocking women's participation. The top 10 countries with the highest percentage of women's representation have a PR system or a system that mixes elements of the PR and Majoritarian systems. Two of these countries are in Africa.

Table 1. Countries with PR electoral systems

Country	Percentage of women	Electoral Systems
Sweden	42.7%	PR
Denmark	37.4%	PR
Finland	36.5%	PR
Norway	36.4%	PR
Netherlands	36.0%	PR
Iceland	34.9%	PR
Germany	30.9%	Mixed
New Zealand	30.8%	Mixed
Mozambique	30.0%	PR
South Africa	29.8%	PR

SOURCE: <http://www.wedo.org>.

On the other hand, the Majoritarian system, which is used by 40 % of countries, including the U.S.A., the UK, and former British colonies, hinders women's representation. Out of the nine countries where there is no women's representation in parliament, 7 of them use the Majoritarian system. These countries are Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Palau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu (The Women's Environment and Development Organization WEDO 2006).

Ethiopia employs a Majoritarian system. The number of women members of parliament has increased from 0.9 % in 1957 to 21.9 in 2005. Despite the constitutional provision that requires the government to take affirmative action to increase women's participation in decision making, there is no legislative guarantee in place to enforce this principle enshrined in the Constitution. However, the incumbent party in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), has adapted a regulation to include 30% women in the list of its candidates for the 2005 general election. The increase in women's participation during the last election in May 2005 is the result of this regulation adopted by EPRDF, although the number of women in parliament is not yet 30%.

African women's independent organizations provided the driving force for two major developments at the continental level in the recent past. Women

have campaigned persistently for the adoption of The African Women's Protocol in 2003 by the African Union and they have also been instrumental in the adoption of the principle of gender parity that culminated in the 50% representation of women at the level of the AU Commission. The Commission is the executive arm of the African Union and 4 of the 8 Commissioners are women.

Women's organized struggles have also increased the opportunity for women to participate in politics. Moreover, the move towards democratic governance and multiparty politics has expanded women's participation. Incumbent parties have voluntarily used affirmative measures to increase women's participation and such measures are made mandatory by law in some countries. In most cases the demands made by women are received positively for various reasons. Some governments may be truly committed to women's cause, while others do it with the political goal of attracting female voters or to meet the demands of Western donors.

4.1 Comparative View of Women Parliamentarians in African Countries

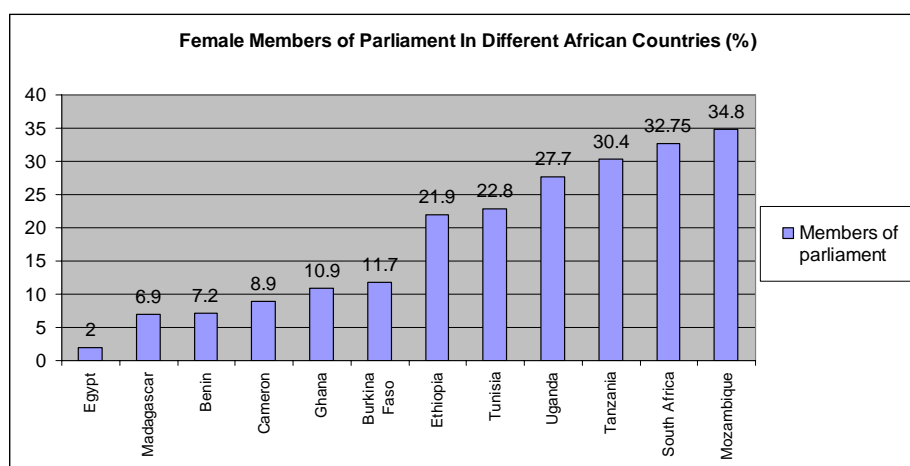
The African Gender and Development Index (AGDI) which compiled and analysed pilot studies in 12 Africa countries, provides recent data on the participation of women in decision making.

Some countries such as Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tunisia have made remarkable progress while in other countries progress has been very slow. In the most recent elections, all of the pilot countries have increased their number of women parliamentarians. Some have made significant progress and others have made a modest improvement. In all of the countries where progress has been made, affirmative action measures have been legislated or utilised by political parties as indicated above. There is no indicator with regard to the effect women parliamentarians have had in influencing laws and policies or improving performance in the AGDI.

The ECA's African Governance Report indicates that in most countries there has been little progress in critical areas such as violence against women. The ECA report states that women's increasing political empowerment has not brought about all of the desired results:

”Despite the encouraging trends in women’s political empowerment, one area that remains inadequately attended to is the reporting of violations of women’s rights and the taking of appropriate action by government agencies”(UNECA 2005).

Chart 1. Female Members of parliament in 12 African Countries



SOURCE: UNECA 2007

4.2 Comparative View of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) from African Countries

The African Gender and Development Index (AGDI) shows that participation of women in Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) leadership is better than all the other indicators related to women and decision making. This reflects women’s initiative in the informal movement. However, this sector is still dominated by men, except for South Africa where women represent 59% of the leadership of NGOs and Community Based Organizations (CBOs). Madagascar has the second highest level of representation of women with 33.4% women NGO and CBO leaders. Tanzania follows with 25.5%. Tunisia, Benin and Ethiopia are at the end of the spectrum, with less than 10% representation of women in the decision making echelons of NGOs and CBOs.

Of the 12 countries piloted by AGDI, five countries have provided separate data for female headed NGOs and CBOs. These five countries are Burkina

Faso, Ghana, Benin, Madagascar and Ethiopia. Participation of women in the leadership of CBOs is higher than NGOs in Burkina Faso and Benin. Women’s representation in NGOs is higher than CBOs in Ghana, Madagascar and Ethiopia. In spite of women’s active participation and their enormous responsibility within community organizations, women are not given leadership roles in CBOs in Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, women’s representation in leadership positions in NGO’s is low at 9%, but it is even lower at the community level with only 1.9% of CBOs being led by women.

Chart 2. Female heads of NGOs

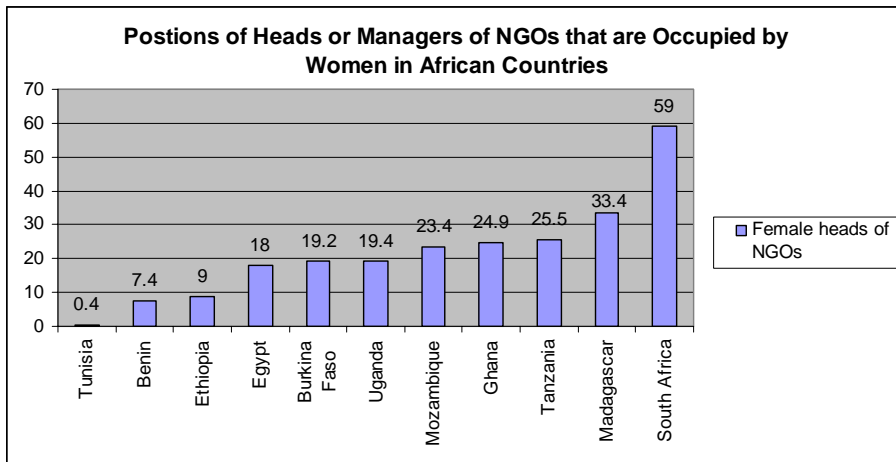
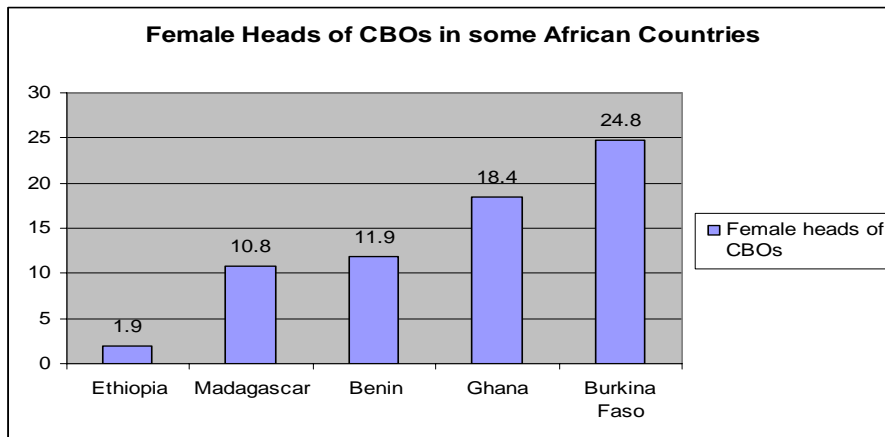


Chart 3. Female heads of CBOs



SOURCE: UNECA 2007

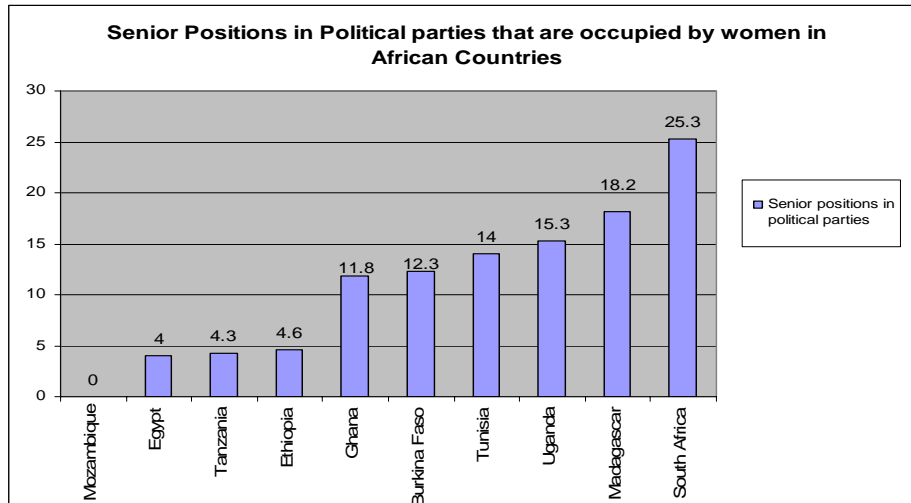
4.3 Comparative Overview of Political Parties in African Countries

Women's participation in political parties are critical for women's access to politics and elected offices. It is important for women to take on leadership roles in order to influence the general policy of their party, and to ensure the inclusion of gender friendly agendas. On the other hand, it is only through the transformation of political parties that women can participate effectively in politics. Thus, we must strive to have women included in politics in order to advance gender friendly agendas, but at the same time we must also strive to change the parties themselves so that women can enter politics more easily.

Even in those countries where a relatively high number of women are elected to office, their participation within party leadership is still very low or completely absent. For example, Rwanda has the highest percentage of women elected to parliament in Africa, yet there is not a single woman political party leader in Rwanda (UNECA 2007).

In general, participation of women in leadership positions in political parties is minimal. In countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia and Tanzania women's representation is below 5%. South Africa has the highest level of women in leadership positions among the pilot countries with a 25.3% representation rate, Madagascar follows with 18.2 % and Uganda is third with 15.3%.

Chart 4. Senior positions occupied by political parties in 12 African countries



SOURCE: UNECA 2007

5. Women as Political Agents: Can Women Make a Difference?

5.1 *Theoretical overview of women and leadership*

By the early 1990's there were over 500 programs in US colleges and universities, and 5,000 scholarly works, on women and leadership. The emphasis of most of the research works have been on why women face the 'glass ceiling' as they attempt to advance, what kind of challenges they face, the difference in styles of leadership, and effectiveness and priorities of men and women leaders. Rhode argues that the difference in women's leadership style is one of the most critical issues and it is also the most contested. The author defines leadership as "the ability to influence and inspire others, to act in pursuit of common goals, often beyond what their jobs or roles require" (Rhode 2003,5). Some feminist writers argue that masculine behaviors that have been identified as qualities of leadership, such as forcefulness, assertiveness, and authoritativeness, are becoming obsolete and a liability. The traditional conviction that the personal character of the individual should be afforded the highest premium has also been challenged lately. L. Rhode argues that successful leadership is dependent on factors other than the personal traits of individual leaders. The context of the engagement, the relationship between the leader and other members of the organization, as well as the needs and goals of the followers has to be taken into account (Rhode 2003).

Experts on women and leadership argue that women leaders prefer cooperative, nonhierarchical leadership styles, rather than vertical structures and zero sum approaches to decision making or resolution of conflict. Cases are also cited to illustrate that women leaders are more likely to support dialogue and negotiation than war and violence as a means to manage conflict. For instance, after the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution of the U.S. that affirmed the right of women to vote, Jeanette Rankin became the first and only woman to be elected in Congress from Montana. She is also remembered in history to be the only member to vote against the two World Wars (WWW.EthiopinReveiw.org 2006)

On the other hand, some leadership scholars contest that women do not have a different leadership style; they practice the same leadership that is structurally maintained and required in the competitive world of business or politics. Women politicians also express their discomfort with the workings and the

difficulties of pushing for “transformative leadership,” despite their desire and commitment to these objectives (IPU 2005).

Recent scholarship has addressed the opportunities and obstacles faced by women leaders (Rosenthal 2002). Many of the researchers agree on the difference gender makes for any social experience. Feminist writers are inclined to argue that although different groups employ different leadership styles in different contexts, the style of women's leadership is distinct and has far reaching implications. Others disagree with this view and maintain that leadership is not gendered.

Chin identifies the challenges faced by women in leadership positions, arguing that the style of women leaders in general, and feminist leaders in particular, gives due consideration to process and participation over outcome. It is collaborative and empowering. In this leadership style, emphasis on leading and following is less visible; leadership is more egalitarian and horizontal. Leadership is not one of the areas defined for women in the cultural division of gender roles. Women bring their socialized experience of caring and nurturing to leadership (Chin 2004). New leadership style theories glorify these less hierarchical leadership styles but they do not attribute these traits to a feminist style of leadership. In modern leadership theories that promote interpersonal relations, women face the double bind of being too “soft” or too “strident”. “Women are rated low when they adopt a ‘masculine’ authoritarian style. On the other hand individuals with masculine style are more likely to emerge as leaders “increasingly women leaders are trying to combine both traits” (Rhode 2003, 6).

B. Miller asserts that the traits highly developed in women are not necessarily useful for success in the world today, however these characteristics claimed to be possessed by women are most important for making the world a different place than it is now. But Miller also argues that women have a problem with exercising power. Her most important point is that due to lack of experience and fear of power women do not exercise power openly and assertively (Miller 1986).

Against the constraints facing feminist leadership, the authors argue that positive gender traits must be promoted, and more research and analysis should be employed to transform the homogeneous dominant leadership style to a more egalitarian leadership.

On a similar topic Rao and Kelleher discuss the type of leadership required to challenge institutional inequality and suggest directions for change. The authors explain that modern management courses offered to improve women's leadership capacity are focused on improving skills to improve negotiation ability and to help women better understand the context of their organization. According to the authors, this management training teaches women 'how to play by the game and not how to change it'. The authors argue that the central focus should be on how to change institutions and bring about social change (Rao and Kelleher 2000).

Other authors take a different position on the theory and practice of feminist leadership from what is advanced by the above authors. These authors contend that female management as asserted by feminist accounts is not homogenous and democratic; women's leadership style is multifaceted and not always in conformity with feminist assertions. These authors argue that female management is not different from male management. To a certain extent, the authors recognize the positive values of female management, but argue that it has not been able to influence and set a trend in democratic leadership (Ray and Bal 2004).

From the perspective of the West, the authors argue that it is not possible to essentialize women's leadership as progressive; in fact most of the female leaders are middle class women who are not necessarily progressive. On the contrary, those who succeed to power are conformist with no vision for change. On the other hand, even for those women leaders who desire change, the inherent nature of power and competition leaves no room for flexibility. Leadership is hierarchical and vertical, it requires fast decision making rather than a participatory process (Ray and Bal 2004).

Some other authors are more concerned about the justifications provided to explain women's leadership style. For instance A. Ackelberg warns of the problem of essentializing feminist leadership styles: "Many feminist theorists have focused their attention on 'women's values' of relationship, connection and nurturance suggesting that these, rather than the 'male values' of competition and achievement ought to be the basis of our political-social communities and theorizing. But the feminist strategy, which tends to define these values as rooted in biologically based sex difference, or, at best in women's capacity to 'mother' rather than in the complex social realities of many working-class women's lives, runs the risk of a biologist reductionism, of reinstating traditional male-female psychologist dichotomies in a new guise" (Brookman and Morgen 1988, 309).

As the debate on women and leadership continues the emphasis on potential positive traits of women's leadership are gathering momentum. Training that is focused on improved leadership and management programs are popularizing non-hierarchical, relational leadership styles, which feminists claim are adopted from the increased participation of women in leadership. However, some feminist writers continue to warn against essentializing women's leadership and call for caution.

Both promoters and critics of feminist leadership recognize the challenge faced by women leaders since they are expected to lead and to be co-equals, to be tough and kind at the same time. Hence, women leaders are continuously subjected to contradictory expectations. Even those writers who do not completely endorse feminist leadership do not completely disregard the possibility of reforms under women's leadership, depending on the positions they hold and the moral context. However, these writers reject the blanket assumption that leadership is completely gendered.

If the assumption in favor of feminist leadership is accurate, it is necessary to further investigate how this positive potential can be used to ensure gender equitable outcomes. This research is concerned with if and how women leaders can exercise transformative leadership that rejects hierarchical power relations and their expressions, leadership that considers work and family life, that focuses on process as much as outcome, and also that ensures gender sensitive outcomes to ensure the *de facto* equality of women with men in all spheres of life.

5.2 Experiences of Women in Politics

This section highlights the qualitative effect of women's representation in decision making, particularly at the national level in the political sphere.

A World Bank research policy report argues that a development policy that fails to take into account gender equality in social and economic opportunities, as well as in power and political voice, will only have limited success and effectiveness. The report further stresses that participation of women in decision making, in both formal and informal institutions, is a key indicator to establish equal rights and reform governance and development institutions (World Bank 2001). However, the effect that women leaders are having has been difficult to measure, and this is still subject to debate. This challenge still prevails even in established democracies.

While the numerical increment of women's participation in decision making positions, such as in parliaments, is desirable, it is also critical to assess women's challenges and opportunities with the intent of continuously monitoring the effect of women's representation. We must pay particular attention to the ability of women to advocate for gender friendly agendas and implementations. This challenge is not peculiar to developing countries.

This section provides a brief overview of the practical experience of women in political participation in two African countries, namely South Africa and Uganda, as well as two powerful democracies, the U.S.A. and the U.K. South Africa and Uganda are examined since the two countries have performed relatively well in the area of women's participation in politics and other spheres of decision making. For instance, South Africa is the leading African country with respect to appointing women ministers at 37.8%. Women also represent 59% of decision makers in South African NGOs and CBOs. While Uganda is ranked second in the appointment of women Ministers (23.9) it is the top country (with 41.7%) in participation of women in local government (UNECA 2007). Highlights of experiences in the U.S.A. and the U.K. are presented to offer an overview of the shared challenges faced by women decisions makers both in the developing and developed world. Moreover, a brief analysis of the U.S.A. and the U.K. also shows the pros and cons of affirmative action measures that have been taken to increase the participation of women in decision making. While the U.K. has recently introduced affirmative action to increase the number of women in parliament, the U.S. electoral system does not allow such measures. While there are several cases of affirmative action success stories, particularly in Scandinavian countries, the experience in the U.K is interesting since it shows some common challenges with the implementation of affirmative action in some African countries.

⇒ **South Africa**

South Africa is considered a progressive country with regard to ensuring participation of women in politics at different levels. In addition a deliberate step has been taken to increase the number of women in parliament and women are given leadership roles in the South African Parliament. Both the previous and current speakers of the South African Parliament are women, the Vice-President of the country is a woman and South Africa has also moved away from the stereotypical assignment of women in 'soft' ministries (UNECA 2005).

South Africans attribute this commitment to gender equality as a mechanism to reverse their historical experience of social and political exclusion. However, the national report prepared for the AGDI indicates that there has not yet been a breakthrough in gender equality despite the significant progress in the participation of women. The report observes: “The most striking challenge lies in closing the gap between women’s formal empowerment in the political sphere and to some extent in the upper reaches of the economy, and their poor economic position. In the longer term, gender equality has to mean a real change in the economic and social position of women in South Africa” (University of Witwatersrand 2005, 5).

The report further indicates that, except for the areas of inheritance and personal relation laws that accommodate religious and customary laws and practices, the country has performed relatively well with regard to putting in place gender friendly laws and policies. However, human resource capacity and negative attitudinal problems remain obstacles to implementation and delivery.

Even though women’s participation has increased at the formal level in governance institutions, the values, culture and style of these institutions are based on unequal gender relations. Frene Ginwala confirms this challenge as follows: “The patriarchal institutions that have been structured to ‘perpetuate inequality’ and ‘preserve privileges’... will either co-opt and swallow any blacks or women or frustrate them into resignation” (IDEA 2006).

⇒ **Uganda**

In the 2005 election in Uganda women won 27.7 % of parliamentary seat, placing Uganda as fifth in the regional gender parliamentary representation of 53 African countries.

Uganda’s National Resistance Movement (NRM) has taken positive measures to ensure women’s participation in parliament through reserved seats. Women have also been active participants in the process of drafting and adopting Uganda’s constitution, which is considered one of the most progressive constitutions in terms of guaranteeing equal rights to women as well as introducing affirmative action. The enabling environment has also encouraged women to organize around various issues (Tamale 1999).

Observers assert that women have also been able to raise the concerns of their female constituencies to a limited degree but the fact that most women were

elected to parliament due to their loyalty to NRM has made it difficult for them to push gender friendly agendas.

Despite the persisting economic and social challenges, women voters in Uganda seem to be pleased with the NRM government. In a poll taken in June 2003 on a third term for President Museveni 42% of women voted yes while only 22% men supported the third term (Hanssen 2006).

Hansen argues that multiparty democracy in Uganda is likely to reinforce women's support for the incumbent party given that women only won 12 of the 214 seats in addition to the 56 reserved seats in the 2001 election. Moreover, as the opposition has not yet proposed gender friendly policies, it is likely that women will remain loyal to the NRM government despite the concerns put forth by gender justice activists in Uganda. The latter argue that the government is only making political gain out of the rhetoric without bringing about substantive changes for women.

5.3 *How does African Women's Leadership Compare with That in the USA and UK?*

⇒ USA

In a book entitled *Transforming Congress* (U.S.A.) various authors collectively argue that congresswomen think and act differently from congressmen. They confirm that women members of congress brought with them particular policy agendas in areas such as reproductive health, breast cancer, and social welfare.

However, the authors were unable to establish if women congress members alone have been able to have a decisive influence on policy decisions, without the endorsement of congressmen. By synthesizing the contributions of the authors Rosenthal makes the following observation: "Evidence of influence is less compelling as matters such as party, seniority procedure and traditional patterns of decision making come into play. In this inside setting, the impact of the individual women legislator tends to increase" (Rosenthal 2002,5).

Moreover, the authors indicate that women's multidimensional interests as well as the broader interests of their constituencies may not allow a uniform position and view even among women members of congress. Women hold 87, or 16.3%, of the 535 seats in the 110th US Congress (House of

Representatives and Senate combined). Women hold 16, or 16.0%, of the 100 seats in the Senate and 71, or 16.4%, of the 435 seats in the House of Representatives (Center for American Women and Politics 2007).

⇒ **UK**

In the 1997 UK election, 101 (24%) women were elected in the House of Commons, while only 4% and 9% were elected in the 1983 and 1992 elections respectively. The outcome of the 1997 election was the result of the Labor Party's deliberate measure in favor of women candidates. It is unlikely that such a dramatic increase in women's representation would be possible under the American electoral system. In the U.S. system the political parties are weak and elections tend to be candidate-centered and supported by interest groups. Moreover, in each of the 50 States the political parties have their own procedure of election and it would be difficult to enforce participation of women candidates. Although affirmative action is used in the U.S. in educational and employment sectors it has not been used in the political arena.

In her comparative analysis of women in Britain and the United States, Joyce Gelb argues that dramatic increase of women members of Parliament in the British House of Commons in the 1997 Election of the Labor Party (cynically referred to as 'Blair's Babes') did not result in proportional influence by women. In contrast, the author notes that the progressive, incremental participation of women in the U.S. Congress is producing comparatively better policy effects and leadership roles.

Like several African countries, including the case of Uganda, the lack of substantial influence by women politicians in the U.K. is attributed to women's lack of 'access to political opportunity structures' that includes inaccessibility of institutional rules and values as well as networking and influence structures. The situation is exacerbated in cases where the party system is centralized and political agendas are articulated by a core group of party leaders; in most cases women do not belong to this critical inner circle.

A Global Action Plan adopted by the Win with Women Project of the National Democratic Institute contends that the best way to enhance women's effective participation in politics is through strengthening political parties. Unless political parties become modernized and inclusive at all levels, including their leadership echelons, it is not possible to make a breakthrough for women politicians. The Action Plan argues that to be inclusive is

advantageous for the parties themselves as most suffer from public apathy and lack of credibility. The Action Plan underlines that political parties must go beyond support for female candidates and educate the public on the importance of women's leadership to fight corruption, to create political stability, and accountability as well as to promote gender and child friendly policies. The Action Plan Promote the following 4 broad agendas:

- Removing restrictions on women's political participation, including restriction on women's suffrage and candidacy.
- Increasing the number of women elected officials at the national, provincial and local levels.
- Ensuring that political parties include women in meaningful leadership positions and in meaningful numbers.
- Encouraging greater participation of women in government decision making and advocating for legislation that enshrines the full equality of women and men (National Democratic Institute 2003).

Researchers and opinion makers may describe the value and consequences of women's participation in decision making in various ways. Some may argue that it is totally inconsequential; while others believe it is incremental and will eventually lead to institutional transformation that will effect change on a larger scale as women continue to sharpen their skills and expand their political clout. Such diversity of opinions raises more questions in addition to the ones indicated at the beginning of this chapter. These questions allude to the need for further research in this area.

The brief overview presented above shows that we do not yet have an evident correlation between the increase of women in decision -making forums, such as parliaments, and their effectiveness. This is particularly the case in terms of women's ability to influence the direction of policy making. There are several factors that determine the effectiveness and impact of women leaders. Moreover, progress and challenges differ based on various factors. However, there is a general consensus that women leaders in politics and other decision making positions have become a voice for women's rights advocacy in most cases. It has also to be noted that women's presence in higher echelons of power does not guarantee gender friendly outcomes. On the contrary there are women who gladly participate, or at best remain silent, when women's rights

and other human rights are being abrogated.¹ This shifting pattern makes the issue of women and leadership a complex subject.

In general the impact made by women politicians could best be described as mixed. Women parliamentarians and politicians have raised the concerns of women, children and other marginalized groups. However, in most cases they are unable to make a breakthrough in terms of ensuring major economic, political and social gains that transform the day-to-day lives of ordinary women. It has also been a substantial challenge to transform institutional cultures and rules that are highly gendered.

The specific socio-economic and political climate, women's level of education, economic independence, electoral system, party tradition and the political system, whether it is democratic or authoritarian, all play critical roles in constraining women's leadership potential. Authoritarian systems do not give consideration to diversity. In authoritarian systems men and women are both controlled by few, and if there is any forum for the participation of women, it is only to use women as part of the rhetoric for staying in power. The experiences highlighted above point to the need for continued research, particularly in the case of Africa. Further studies should identify progress and obstacles in various settings and assess the expanding role of women in public and political life across the world and in Africa. With this context and background the case of Ethiopia will be examined under chapters 2, 3 and 4.

¹ For instance women activists in southern Africa are debating whether it is appropriate to unconditionally support women leaders, such as the vice-President of Zimbabwe Njoki Ndungu, who kept silent when hundreds of women in Zimbabwe were arrested and tried only for participating in a peaceful political protest. (See Resource net. 11 August 2006, issue 287) This woman recently submitted her resignation to the Government of Zimbabwe who has so far declined to accept it.

Chapter Two

Women and Leadership in Ethiopia: An Historical Overview

1. Understanding Women and Leadership in Ethiopia: Proverbs as Discourse

Cultural practices that nurture and sustain patriarchy are revealed in an interesting study of the use of proverbs in Amhara, one of the dominant cultures in Ethiopia. Proverbs of this area portray women as lacking wisdom, being irresponsible, adulterous, and only capable of domestic chores. Analysis of compiled proverbs shows that their objective is to sustain stereotypical gender-based roles that reinforce perceived credibility and wisdom of men and the contrasting delicate emotional characteristics of women. These stereotypes contribute to women's inferior economic, social and political status. By extension, proverbs socialize both men and women to believe that men should play the public and political roles in society and women should be restricted to domestic chores (Yeshi 1995).

The findings of the aforementioned study confirm Foucault's argument about the link between knowledge and power where he observed that the locus of power is not necessarily visible and top-down. In his view, discourses of domination could be generated from various directions and they are not necessarily aggressive and crude. Hence, this seemingly harmless discourse of domination should be questioned (Foucault 1978). Yeshi uses Foucault's framework of power to analyse how proverbs emerging from society appear benign and true, while they are actually instrumental in maintaining patriarchal societies. Yeshi argued that discourses such as proverbs maintain domination as a neutral truth. In most cases, such demeaning proverbs are often understood as 'expert opinion and unchallengeable.' They are used widely and repeatedly. They command acceptance not only among men, but even among women themselves. Out of 285 proverbs collected and translated by Yeshi the following are directly used to diminish the role of women as leaders:

- A woman and "toffa" (clay cooking pot) should be in the kitchen
- The companionship of a woman is dispersed by a mouse

- A chicken in the coop, a woman in the kitchen
- My mother plans for the day; my father, for the year
- A shy priest, a blind donkey and a courageous woman are useless
- Even if a woman has the knowledge, only a man can utilize his knowledge
- To talk is womanly and to work is manly
- A male where he is appointed, a female where she is married
- A women's life is limited from the living room to the kitchen (Yeshe 1995)

I. Women and Leadership: An Historical Overview

Although there are women who played important political and leadership roles in Ethiopia, only a few are visible in the existent literature. Women have played important political roles mostly by wielding proxy power through birth or marriage. For instance Emperor Menilek's (1877-1913) first formal wife Bafena was controversial, cunning and powerful, going so far as to plotting to use her husband's power to undermine him (Heran 2002).

Emperor Menilek's second legal wife, Empress Taitu, stands out as the most prominent figure in contemporary Ethiopian history. Heran describes the comparison between Taitu and Bafena as follows: "Empress Taitu was similar to Bafana in terms of her assertive character and involvement in the affairs of government. Discussed in numerous scholarly studies, creative writings and accounts of travellers are details of Taitu's independent mind, her influence over Menilek, her military participation at Adwa, her strong suspicion of foreigners and pioneering interests in the progress of her country" (Heran 2002, 125).

Empress Taitu was the chief advisor to the Emperor with particular influence in the area of foreign relations. Taitu holds high profile in history for patriotism and uncompromisingly pursuing Ethiopia's independence. Taitu was not only a foreign policy architect but also a war General. Taitu played a critical role during Ethiopia's war to resist the invasion of Italy in 1896, when Ethiopia became the first African nation to defeat a European colonial power.

Furthermore, Taitu was a chief political broker who facilitated various political marriages in order to consolidate the power of the central government. Despite her vigorous and sometimes radical role in Emperor

Menilek's court, Taitu's aspiration to assume power upon her husband's illness and eventual death (1908-1913) remained elusive.

Taitu did not have a biological child nor did she have a wider political alliance. She was feared by most political players of the time and understood to be too strong and assertive. Zewde Retta, a retired diplomat who writes on political of the past, refers to her as the "lady dictator (Zewde Retta 2006). Dr. Zewde Gebre-Selassie, a historian who himself comes from a royal background, praises Taitu's strength and leadership abilities but criticizes her for being overly ambitious. He criticizes Taitu specifically for her lack of respect for the institution of marriage, as she promoted the divorce of couples in order to strengthen or weaken political alliances.²

However, during the height of her period of influence, Taitu was referred to as "*Birhan ZeEthiopia*" meaning "Ethiopia's Ray of Light." This phrase was even included in her official seal. When the Emperor fell seriously ill, he declared succession to the throne to his grandson Iyasu. Taitu attempted to undermine Lij Iyasu's power, yet neither Lij Iyasu nor Empress Taitu was to succeed in this political struggle.

Another woman political figure during this period was Emperor Menilek's daughter Zawditu Menilek who was married to Taitu's nephew Ras Gugsa Wele. Zawditu (1916-1930) was the first woman to be crowned empress in her own right. When it became apparent that Iyasu was unable to consolidate power, his aunt Zawditu Menilek was declared successor to her father's throne. She assumed her appointment upon return from exile where she had been sent by Iyasu. Given that Zawditu was a direct descendant of Emperor Menilek, Iyasu had felt threatened by her claim (Zewde Retta 2006) Upon being crowned empress, her declared succession to take the supreme authority of the country, Zawditu was requested by the political brokers to divorce her husband whom they assumed would act in the interest of Empress Taitu, ideally fulfilling the latter's original objective.

Zawditu had to divorce her husband upon being crowned, and a young, upcoming political personality, Tafari, was assigned as caretaker of her

² Interview with Dejazmach Zewde Gebre-Selassie. Zewde's father was a king-maker during the reign of Menilek and Taitu. Upon the death of Zewde's father, his mother who was 16 was made to marry Prince Asfawossen with the intention of consolidating central imperial power by building an alliance with the Tigrayan power. His mother was the granddaughter of Emperor Yohannes of Tigray.

government. Zawditu's overall political power and her day-today decision making was seriously undermined by Tafari. Zawditu remained essentially a figurehead until her death in 1930, when Tafari was crowned Haile Sellassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia. He would rule the country for the next 40 years, and would become the last emperor of the country (Bahru 2006).

These historical facts make it clear that despite their strengths, contributions and demonstrated leadership abilities, it has never been easy for Ethiopian women to ascend to formal political power. Taitu's case is a clear example. Taitu's contribution to Ethiopia's independence and modernization has never been contested. She was the *de facto* leader when the emperor was ill until he died. There may be other political reasons why Taitu was denied the opportunity to rule the country despite her plea to diplomats and the powerful leaders of the Orthodox Church. However the fact that she was a woman, and an assertive woman with a forceful personality, was likely a substantial obstacle for her.

Zawditu was also not the first choice to succeed Emperor Menilek. Though a direct descendant and therefore the obvious candidate, Iyasu was selected when barely 14-years old. Even after she came to power Zawditu never had the opportunity to exercise real power, and was only made a symbolic figurehead to appease the political forces that believed in sustaining the legacy of Emperor Menilek.

Another significant trend that should be taken into account is that while powerful women such as Taitu may have brokered political marriages, they themselves were victims of this political culture. For instance, Taitu herself was married four times and Menilek was her fifth husband (Z/Gebre-Sellassie 2007). The wife of the last emperor of Ethiopia, Empress Menen, was more or less abducted by Lij Iyasu from Ras Leulseged, who was one of Menelik's most important generals, and married to Tafari. Iyasu did this in an attempt to keep Tafari from power, as Iyasu was Menen's uncle (Heran 2002).

Political power struggles could have serious consequences for women. For example, Menen considered the power struggle between Tafari and Iyasu to be a power struggle between her husband and her uncle. On this point Heran wrote: "When Nigus Mikael battled on behalf of Iyasu at Sagale, it meant that her husband went to war with her grandfather. To add further twist to the story, the man who was sent to conduct the initial military campaign on the Shoan side was none other than Ras Leulseged, her former husband who died in the same battle (2002).

In a similar situation, Empress Zawditu was also caught in the crossfire of political power. Her husband, whom she was forced to divorce, was killed by her own government, under the leadership of Ras Tafari's who was then Regent and heir to the throne. Zawditu, who had been ill for some time, died a day or two after the death of her husband whom she had tried to advise to refrain from fighting on repeated occasions (Zewde G/S 2007).³

Emperor Haile Sellassie's coming to power legally confirmed the social and cultural gender biases in leadership. The Constitution promulgated by the Emperor in 1931 clearly limited succession to the imperial throne to male heirs.

2. Few among Pioneering Women

Although women's formal participation in the highest leadership positions was formally closed, it is documented that women played critical roles in times of war and peace as community organizers and activists.

Notable personalities that played a critical role during the second Italian invasion (1935) include Zenebech Woldeyes and Shewargeged Gedle. These two women surpassed the traditional role of support providers and served as full-fledged combatants. Zenebech continued to fight until Ethiopia's victory and independence, in spite of her husband's death on the same battle-field (Women's Affairs Office 1993).

Shewareged Gedle's persistence and determination were quite rare. Shewareged was known as the "supreme heroine" for her role as combatant and also for her determined refusal to disclose information as a war prisoner. After she was released, she was a significant participant in dismantling one of the major fortresses of the invading force in Addis Alem. Shewareged was sentenced to death during the time of Italian occupation. Even though both Zenebech and Shewareged have been recognized with military decorations, it is rare that contributions made by women are given due credit and appropriately rewarded. Rather women have always been expected to return

³ Dejazmatch Zewde Gebre-Sellassie said that Empress Zawditu died without knowing of her husband's death. Emperor Haile Sellassie had told Dejazmatch Zewde that she had died of pneumonia since her attendants refused to give her the medication prescribed by a Swedish Doctor.

to their traditional gender roles once a particular goal is achieved (Women's Affairs Office 1993).

One of my prominent interviewees expressed a similar view on this issue. He said: "with the victory of Ethiopia and the return of the Emperor from exile in 1942, women patriots such as Shewaregged were recognized but were not given an official position commensurate with their service and sacrifices to their countries. There has been consistency of such pattern; women are at the forefront of serving the country but have always been relegated to stereotypical roles once a particular national crisis is over (Andreas Eshete 2007).

In addition to these Ethiopian women, Britain's Sylvia Pankhurst was acclaimed for her crusade to expose the atrocities committed by Fascist Italy on Ethiopia. Sylvia Pankhurst was the daughter of Emmeline Pankhurst who was the leader of the Suffragist movement that 'convulsed' Britain between 1905 -1914 (www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk 2007). Following her mother's vision, Sylvia was also instrumental in the movement to secure women's equal rights to vote in Britain. Once this struggle was won in 1928, Sylvia began to fight Fascism by appealing for international support for the recognition of Ethiopia as a sovereign state. To this end, she founded a newspaper called *New Times and Ethiopian News*. In 1956, she moved to Ethiopia at the age of 74. She continued her service to Ethiopia on various fronts until she died in 1960 (Rita 2006).

In the period of attempted modernization of Ethiopia (1931-1960), few women had the opportunity to access modern education. Despite their limited numbers, women became agents and symbols of change through independent mobilization and by taking up political roles, including serving in the parliament. Sinedu Gebru was an outstanding woman of her generation. Born in 1907 Ethiopian Calendar (EC hereafter),⁴ Sinedu was among the first women to have access to modern education, studying not only in Ethiopia but also abroad. Sinedu attended post-secondary education in Switzerland for 5 years. Upon returning home, she became an educator and Director of the first girls' school - Menen Girls School (1937 -1949 EC). Sinedu was also the Vice-Chairperson of the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association (EWWA).

⁴ Depending on the year, Ethiopian Calendar differs by 7 or 8 years from the Gregorian calendar.

Among other things she was known for promoting girls' education and for encouraging women to participate in politics and decision making roles. Sinedu became a role model in the political arena when she decided to run for a parliamentary seat in 1957. Upon her election to the Upper House of parliament, Sinedu set even higher goals and ran for the presidency of the House. She succeeded in obtaining a vice- presidency position. Her election was made possible by the 1955 constitutional amendment that entitled all citizens to vote and elect their representatives with the view to reforming the system of absolute monarchy (Institute of Ethiopian Studies 1991).

In his book entitled *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia*, Bahru Zewde presents an interesting historical account of the contributions made by educated Ethiopians towards the modernization of the country. However, none of the intellectuals known for pioneering change in Ethiopia raised discrimination against women as a social ill. In fact some of their views reconfirmed stereotypical attitudes. For example, one of the foremost intellectuals, Gabra Heywat Baykadan, said the following, showing that he considered women to be at the bottom of the social structure:

“In our country it is shameful to earn your bread by the sweat of your brow. That is deemed unbecoming of a *Chewa* (a person of respectable parentage). The highest prestige is attached to being called a soldier, carrying an old gun following a chief like a dog. Everyone here claims to be a soldier - the blind, the lame, the leper, the old man walking on a stick, the little boy who has yet to learn to have a clean nose, even *women*” (Bahru 2002).

In his book, Bahru presents us with one of the early debates on gender issues. A woman called Baqqala Aallaqu criticized women of the nobility for covering themselves with long skirts and described them as an unproductive force in various articles she wrote in the local newspaper *Berhan ena Salam* in 1929. In response to these articles, Amsala Tebab Walda-Ab of western Wallagga wrote in defence of women, accusing husbands and the tradition for imposing upon women certain ways of dressing and behaving. According to Amsala, “Change of views of men is critical for women’s education and subsequent liberation” (Bahru 2002).

It is interesting to note that women are the ones who have advocated for the agenda of women’s liberation all along.

A recent radio program reviewed the life and work of a woman called Aster Ganno who was one of the early women intellectuals from Oromia region of

Ethiopia. The author of several books, Aster Ganno was one of the early advocates of girl's education and she mobilized support to establish a girls school in the Gulele area of Addis Ababa (FM 97 March 2007). Historical records show that Aster gave critical support to the highly recognized evangelical work of Onesimos Nasib. Bahru credits Aster's critical support for Onesimos as follows "Ably assisted by Aster Ganno, a native of Limmu (near Jimma), who exhibited an extraordinary feel for the Oromo language, Onesimos was able to accomplish the publication of the New Testament in 1893 and the Old Testament in 1899" (Bahru 2002,73).

3. Women's Associations

Women's community associations, in the form of traditional rotating credit associations (*Iqub*), burial societies (*Iddir*) and religious-based associations (*Mahiber*), have been the basis of women's community life for a long time. However, women's collective endeavour, for the good of the society, began in the mid-1930s on the basis of a relatively broader agenda than immediate family or community needs (Women's Affairs Office 67).

The Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association (EWWA) and the Ethiopian Women Voluntary Association (EWVA), otherwise known as the Ethiopian Women's Patriots Association, were established in August and July 1935. Both women's associations were established to provide support to victims of the 1935 war in collaboration with the Red Cross. While the EWWA was more focused on food preparation EWVA was focused on the provision of medical services for war victims. The patrons of the two associations were the two daughters of the Emperor. Princess Tsehay was the patron of EWWA and Princess Tenagnework was of EWVA.

Makeda's study shows that during the associations' early days most of the members were not seriously concerned about the objectives of the association, rather they were attracted to the forum as an opportunity to exchange information and show their sense of fashionable dressing. Service to the association was also provided by their servants and slaves at the time. However, there were some militant women among the leaders (Tekle-Mikael 2000).

Lady Barton, the wife of Sir Sidney Barton, the then British Ambassador to Ethiopia (1929-1936), played a critical role in offering informed advice in

various areas, including resource mobilization. Empress Menen also helped mobilize elite young women of Addis Ababa.

EWVA's activities were discontinued by an order from the wife of General Rudolf Graziani who was appointed Italian Viceroy in 1937. EWVA's activities were continued for a while during the resistance struggle. However, after the unsuccessful attempt on Graziani's life, EWVA also ceased to exist. In response to the attempted murder, Graziani massacred a large number of mostly educated Ethiopians. Women protested this action and refused to sell goods to Italians, at which point Graziani sent more than 1000 women into exile on two islands in the Mediterranean Sea, Azinara and Ponza (Makda 2000).

After the war, the leaders of the two associations decided to merge them under the name of Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association. Princess Tsehay died in 1942 and Princess Tenagnework became the president of the Association. Sinedu Gebru was elected as the Vice-Chair of the Board and Lule Tesfaye was appointed Secretary General. The organization focused on post-conflict reconstruction and also subsequently on skills training for young women and various income generating initiatives related to development activities. The most significant and lasting investments of the new EWVA included the construction of a multipurpose 9-story building that is still used as offices and the promotion of artefacts produced by women. It is also credited for starting the first lottery venture in the country. However, when the government recognized the profitability of such a venture, it established a National Lottery Organization, which is still a large and profitable enterprise (Berchi 2000).

Members and leaders of these organizations were mostly upper class women and those related to royal families. However, the services they provided including training in skills development, marketing, birth attendance, nutrition, literacy and formal education, health care, day-care, and other social services, were available to public, particularly to orphaned children and less privileged women. The decentralization of EWVA through its more than 40 branch offices at the provincial level is a demonstration of the commitment to reach out to those who needed the assistance.

Given the period during which these organizations emerged, it may not come as a surprise that their activities were limited to welfare issues. At the time most women's organizations around the world were focused on welfare activities, and it was only in 1948 that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. For their generation some of the women leaders took up

quite progressive stands. For example, Lule Tesfaye, who was the Secretary General of EWWA, refused to follow her husband to Sweden when he was appointed as the Ethiopian Ambassador due to her dedication to her job. It is expected both legally and socially that a woman should follow her husband and it takes serious commitment and dedication to go against such expectations. Cohabitation with husband is mandatory under the 1963 Civil Code, and the husband selects the common residence.

However, the Association did not shift its focus from welfare to strategic needs even in the 60s and 70s with the global women's organisation's shift at the time. Neither did the Association attempt parallel engagement with both basic and strategic needs. There are no records to indicate that the organization raised any issue related to women's rights, although debates on such issues were accelerated at the international level, leading to the first International Women's Conference in Mexico in 1974.

One of the key participants of EWWA, Mrs. Tseyon Amdom, now over 80 years old, still firmly believes that women should continue to play the traditional roles of mothering and childcare. She believes that there is an inherent difference between men and women, and that men were created before women. While recognizing the importance of girls' education, she continues to hold the view that women's priority should be family welfare (Tseyon 2007).⁵

In the 1950's other organizations, such as the Association of Spouses of Military Officers and the Ethiopian Women's Christian Association, were also established. The Military regime that took power in 1974 dissolved these organizations and nationalized their property. Regrettably, documents of the Associations were either hidden or destroyed during the change of government (Makda 2000).

4. Participation of Women in Politics 1974-1991

In the late 1960 and early 1970 female students in and outside of the country were active participants in the student movement that led to the 1974 revolution and overthrow of Emperor Hale Sillassie. Women were also active participants and actors in this struggle. Female political activists were among

⁵ Mrs.Tseyon Amdom expressed this view in various forums that I attended like the one organized by Forum for Social Studies on January 2006 at the Addis Ababa Hilton Hotel.

the actors that took part in some radical political engagements, including the airplane hijacking staged in 1972 to express political opposition to the imperial regime. Among the hijackers were two women, Martha Mebrahtu and Tadelech Kidane-Maraim, and four men all of whom were killed instantly, except for Tadelech who survived her injury (Andreas 2007). The revolution that was spearheaded by the student movement was unfortunately usurped by a military government that launched a 17-year long rule of terror from 1974 to 1991. During this period, it is estimated that about 200,000 people were killed (Reuters 2007). Unfortunately historians and political authors failed to document the level of women's participation, and the suffering faced by women, during the period known as the "Red Terror." Red Terror was used by the military regime to silence any form of political protest through arbitrary arrest, torture and summary execution. Young women were among those who were summarily killed, tortured and imprisoned.

Tadelech Haile-Michael, who herself lost her husband in this political struggle and was imprisoned for over 11 years, wrote as follows:

The extent of women's active involvement in this struggle was revealed later when the number of women political prisoners in the various Kebele prisons, both in the urban centres and rural towns, as well as in the central prison in Addis Ababa was reported to be in their thousands (*Berchi* 2000).

Available political documents and books do not address the specific experiences of women during the Red Terror. However, the activists I interviewed recount women's important role: one of them described the situation as follows:

Women were active participants in the student movement, we deeply believed in activism and sacrifices. With the conversion of the student movement into political parties, we carried on the struggle and we knew few women who held leadership positions within our party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP). Some of these leaders were killed. However, the structure of the party was not transparent and it was not possible to know exactly who was working at what level. When my husband left home to join the armed struggle, I knew that the government will imprison me instantly and I had to leave home leaving behind two children both under the age of 3. After 4 years of underground life, I was finally found and imprisoned for 6 years (Mengistu 2006).

Another survivor who also served a prison term for her political activism expresses her vivid memory of the struggle.

I am not able to state figures but I remember a substantial number of women who participated in the political struggle. I was a member of the EPRP. Looking back, I am amazed about the courage with which we embraced the struggle in the face of merciless torture and killings. Women who have not been on the forefront of political activism were committed to providing backup support, assisting victims of torture, sheltering those in hiding etc. I always believed in the energy and courage of the youth and the unfailing commitment of women in any context (Original 2007).

During the Military regime (1974-1991), there was only one national women's association known as the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA). REWA was answerable to the Marxist military government in Ethiopia. Membership in the association was mandatory for the majority of women and members were forced to make monthly financial contributions. As is typical in dictatorial regimes, women were on call at any time to rally around government propaganda on a regular basis. Women were required to give their time to all the internal and external conflicts that the regime was engaged in. Despite the constant state rhetoric regarding women's dual subjugation on the basis of sex and class, the public was generally fully aware that the regime used this rhetoric as an instrument to legitimise the military government. However the state sponsored rhetoric did play a role in raising gender awareness in rural and urban areas (Yeshe 1995).

REWA was the first forum to raise the issue of gender equality and women's rights in Ethiopia. REWA was influenced in this regard by the global women's movement that pushed rights based demands to go beyond charitable services.

This period was very critical for women at the global level and particularly for African women. It was a time of intense mobilization and demand for social freedom and greater political participation. The years 1975 to 1985 were designated by the UN as the Decade for Women. The UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was also signed and ratified by Ethiopia during this time (1981). The decade culminated in the adoption of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategy at the international conference held in Nairobi in 1985.

5. Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Role of Women (1975-1991)

Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) is a political party that launched an armed struggle against the military regime in 1974. The party was spearheaded by a few university students and was able to mobilize large support among the Tigrayan youth. Young women featured prominently among those who joined the armed struggle and women constituted an estimated 30% of the army. Female members of TPLF believed in their party's commitment to advance gender equality during the struggle. They realized that their own gender consciousness was developed during the struggle through efforts made by the party. This also had a larger impact in the communities where TPLF was actively engaged, by raising awareness of the population on gender issues (Roman 2005).

Even prior to the overthrow of the military regime, TPLF adopted gender friendly policies in liberated areas of the region. Examples of this include gender equal land redistribution policies in 1980 and 1987. The implementation of such gender sensitive land redistribution has benefited women in various ways. Access to land use gave women new financial capability that enhanced their empowerment with regard to domestic and community decision making. Moreover, the policy was useful to challenge the widespread practice of early marriage that prevailed in Tigray and most of northern Ethiopia (Roman 2005). However sustainability of the policy was constrained over time, due in part to the shrinking amount of arable land. One study on the land redistribution program found that "The innovative practice of distributing land irrespective of marital status and to each adult member of the community could be taken as the building block of gender equitable land reform policy. The goal of gender equity however requires complementary measures that ensures women's ability to be independent agriculturalists and to take up other forms of rewarding livelihood strategies" (Zenebework and Yared 2000).

Women played a critical role in the TPLF's struggle. Their roles extended from engaging in political mobilization to military leadership. The large majority of female members of TPLF were recruited from the rural areas and their participation in the struggle contributed to changes in people's perception regarding stereotypical gender roles. Furthermore, the Tigray Women's Association, a women's association affiliated with TPLF, was

established to articulate women's demands in the areas of health care, access to land, and in the fight against early marriage.

Nonetheless, former women fighters feel that they were betrayed after victory. They have not been able to enjoy equal access to education or attain the empowerment that they had anticipated while in the struggle. They have not been offered leadership roles that are commensurate with their sacrifices during the armed struggle.

Women fighters constituted 30% of the army during the struggle and some of them were leaders and heroines. However, female soldiers only constitute 3 to 4% of current government forces. While some former soldiers have been able to engage in a variety of other forms of livelihoods, other female ex-soldiers are unable to generate an income, even resorting desperate to sex work to make ends meet. In a recent newspaper article Sisay Abebe stated, "For many female ex-fighters the wait for results is proving to be too long. One of them Gebre-Kidan, stares hard at the floor when asked about the fate of her former women colleagues. "In fact, you feel sorry deep inside when you are thrown out like an old utensil", she states trying to control her emotions. "It is really a shame to see the heroines of Ethiopia begging on the streets and selling their bodies" (All Africa.com 2006).

During the liberation struggle, women members constituted 30% of the elected council called Baito, 38.7% of the political committees and 37.4% of the economic and social committees. Since TPLF's victory, the participation of women in the regional legislative body has increased and recently attained parity during the 2005 election. Despite the overall progress, Roman laments that the representation of women in the executive arm of the Tigray regional government reflects the general situation in Ethiopia. Women's representation in key decision making bodies such as the Education Bureau, Health Bureau and Finance and Development Bureau constitutes only 13%, 23.38% and 2% respectively (Roman 2005).⁶

During the entire 17 years of the armed struggle, there was only one woman in the TPLF's Central Committee. In 1995, two women were finally elected to the Central Committee, due in part to the expansion of the number of

⁶ EPRDF is the front constituted of TPLF and other ethnic based political parties. EPRDF was formed a few years prior to victory over the military government. Formation of the EPRDF was spearheaded by TPLF in preparation to take over governmental power in 1991.

members of the Central Committee from 29 to 35. There have never been women in either the TPLF's or EPRDF's Political Bureau (Roman 2005).

During research interviews for this thesis a former TPLF member and government official expressed her experience in politics as follows: "The representation and participation of women in decision making at all levels is unacceptably low. Even then the few women leaders in power may not sustain their position since women are not part of the inner circle of the "boys club" and they try to focus on their job rather than playing power games." Describing her experiences with party and formal government leadership, she said, "I am grateful for the confidence bestowed upon me by TPLF. However, in hindsight, I believe that I took a major role in a play that I did not understand adequately" (Zenebework 2007).

In the 14 years of EPRDF rule, the role of former women fighters has not been very visible. However, a handful of women play active social roles. Visible among women fighters, Azeb Mesfin is the wife of EPRDF party leader, also the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia. The First Lady has been visibly active in the last 4 years in the area of gender issues. She was one of the founders of the Women's Coalition against AIDS. During the general election in 2005 she ran for a parliamentary seat and currently chairs the Social Committee in the House of People's Representatives.

Some former women fighters protest that they were not rewarded according to their contributions and sacrifices they made during the armed struggle. Many of them have been demobilized and are struggling to survive without much support. Due to the centralized party structure and discipline this subject has not been open to wider public discussion. Nonetheless, the issue of women's representation and equal participation in decision making has been raised repeatedly by women fighters at various internal party meetings. Following such discussions and lobbying, an additional 6 women were elected to the Central Committee of TPLF increasing the total number of women to 10 out of 40 seats in total in 2006.

Lack of recognition of women in the post-liberation period is not unique to Ethiopia. In spite of their contributions in anti-colonial struggles and other forms of liberation movements, women have always been relegated to peripheral roles after victory. For example, studies show that, to combat this tradition South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) has been making a commendable effort to bring women to mainstream decision making positions.

In summary, it is clear that participation of women in decision making and leadership roles in Ethiopia is not novel although only a few women such as Empress Taitu demonstrated incredible leadership and were able to wield power through family networks. Women have also organized independently with the view to support Ethiopia's resistance movement against the Italian invasion in 1935. This group of women were also engaged in useful welfare activities, the legacies of which are still visible. Although inadequately documented, young women were active participants in the 1960s student movement that was transformed into various political parties in 1974. The sacrifices paid during the bloody years of the military regime did not spare women as narrated by some of my informants who themselves were victims of this dark period. Women have also been involved in armed struggle waged to depose the military government. Many believe that they have not been satisfactorily rewarded by their party (EPRDF) in the post-victory period as compared to the opportunities given to men ex-fighters. There were opportunities for empowerment and leadership. Very few Ethiopian women continued to be agents of change playing active political and social roles in various periods despite the obstacles before them. In the following section, we will examine what women have been doing over the past decade to forge ahead and sustain the struggle for equality, development and justice.

Chapter Three

The Status of Women's Participation in Public Decision Making in Ethiopia: Progress and Challenges

This chapter provides a general overview of the government's formal commitment towards including women in the decision making process currently. It assesses government policy, the legal framework and the persisting challenges and gaps between these formal instruments and their execution. The political parties' and government's commitment is considered based on interviews and available information. Empirical data is used to show women's participation in formal politics.

Two important issues are critical in evaluating government commitment to gender issues, particularly when addressing the issue of enhancing women's leadership roles. Firstly, it is important to see if government has formally committed itself in terms of laws and policies and has put in place institutional arrangements to implement the commitments. Secondly, the legal and policy commitments should be matched against outcomes.

1. Formal Commitment: Legal, Policy Environment and Institutional Mechanisms

A. *Constitution Making*

Prior to the promulgation of the 1931 Constitution, Ethiopia was largely a feudal state with very limited written modern laws and legal institutions. The 1931 constitution contained 7 provisions. Only one provision dealt with the rights of citizens, and also provided for equality before the law. The 1931 Constitution was amended in 1955. The 1955 Constitution provided for a limited number of civil and political rights for both men and women (Annaim).

The military government adopted a constitution in 1987 that guaranteed all of the internationally recognized rights of women including the right to equality in education, employment, family life and participation in decision making. Despite the rhetoric concerning public consultation and a participatory

process, there was no enabling political environment for women to pursue those constitutionally guaranteed rights (Annaim 2003).⁷

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE Constitution) that was adopted in 1995 provides for the equal participation of women in both public and private spheres of life, without any discrimination. With the view to correcting past legacies of discrimination, Article 35 of the Constitution also stipulates that the government should take affirmative action measures in employment, education and political participation.

According to Article 9 of the Ethiopian Constitution, all human rights conventions that Ethiopia ratifies become part of the domestic law. Moreover, Article 13 of the Constitution also requires all domestic laws, including the Constitution, to be interpreted in accordance with international treaties.

Ethiopia is party to all major human rights treaties including the most important women's convention, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Articles 7 and 8 of CEDAW call for the equal participation of women in public decision making. Ethiopia has also adopted international policies such as the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (BDPA) which require governments to attain a 30% benchmark for women's representation in all public decision making positions. At the regional level, African Heads of States and Governments adopted the African Women's Rights Protocol in 2003. The Protocol goes further than previous conventions in protecting various civil, social and economic aspects of women's rights. It also guarantees women's rights to affirmative action to ensure their participation in public decision making. As of April 2007 twenty African countries had ratified the Protocol. Unfortunately, Ethiopia is not yet a party to the Protocol.

B. Gender Policies and Institutional Arrangements

The government has made laudable strides in gender policies. A national women's policy was adopted in 1993. The policy outlines the major economic, social and political concerns of Ethiopian women and indicates broad strategies of intervention. Furthermore, the policy provides for the

⁷ I was a university student when the 1987 constitution was adopted. I remember hiding along with my friends when university youth Cadres were chasing students to come out for consultation on the draft constitution. This is clear evidence of lack of support of orchestrated processes that are undertaken to seek legitimacy.

establishment of a Women's Affairs Office under the Prime Minister's Office and for the designation of gender focal points in ministries and commissions. Accordingly, institutional mechanisms were put in place and have been in operation over the past decade. Under the auspices of the Women's Affairs Office, a comprehensive National Action Plan was initiated as a policy component of Ethiopia's overall poverty reduction strategy. Among the 7 areas for priority intervention, participation of women in decision making has been identified as one of the areas that require closer attention and further action (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2006).⁸

Pursuant to proclamation number 71/2005, a full-fledged Ministry of Women's Affairs has been created. Furthermore, policies on population, health, education, HIV/AIDS, environment, rural development, and poverty have included gender as a "cross cutting" concern that should be given special focus. However, the wide gap between these policy commitments and their implementation has persisted.

The socio-economic status of women is still much lower than that of men. Women represent the largest segment of the poor in the society. Studies show that women hold only 18.6% of the total land holding. Participation of women in formal employment is also lower than men. Women represent 32% of permanent employees in the civil service. Only 10% of women are engaged in scientific and professional positions. The largest proportion of women's labour is invested in the less secure, less profitable informal sector. Women represent 60% of the informal sector. (Women's Affairs Office 2004).

There has been increased access to primary education in absolute numbers at all levels. The most significant progress is the Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) in Primary schools. As a result of expansion of schools in rural areas as well as better awareness on education of girls at the community level, primary education, particularly first cycle (1-4) enrolment has increased significantly. GER was 22 percent for boys and 16 percent for girls in 1991 while it is 97.2 percent for boys and 85 percent for girls in 2006/2007. (Asmaru Barihun 2008). However, there are wide regional variations for women's enrolment rate in emerging regions and pastoralist areas. The national gender gap at

⁸ In addition to women and decision making the six priority areas identified by the National Action Plan includes the following: Poverty and Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls, Education and Training of Women and Girls, Reproductive Rights, Health and HIV/AIDS, Human Rights and Violence Against Women and Girls, Women and the Environment, and Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women.

primarily level was 20.2 percent in 1999/2000 and 12.9 percent in 2006/07, none the less this gap is still a cause for concern. According to the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) for 2005 is 673/100,000.

According to the 2004 UNAIDS report among people aged 15-24, female account for 76 percent of HIV infections in Africa. Those that are at highest risk are also those who are most socially and economically disadvantaged. The health status of women is further complicated by lack of education and life skills, violence against women and Harmful Traditional Practices (HTP) such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), abduction and early marriage.

C. The New Ministry of Women's Affairs

The Ministry of Women's Affairs in Ethiopia is a new structure established under proclamation number 71/2005. The Mandate of the Ministry also includes children. This Ministry replaces the former Women's Affairs Office that was under the Prime Minister's Office. The Women's Affairs Office was understaffed and did not have a budget of its own. The two previous women to head the Women's Affairs Office had the rank of Minister but were not entitled access to the Cabinet, as they were not classified as the head of a Ministry. The current Minister believes that the establishment of an independent ministry for women with its own staff and budget is a huge leap forward. The Minister notes, "Most importantly I sit in the cabinet and I have the opportunity to assess how far the other ministers have mainstreamed gender" (Delebo 2007). All ministries present their plans and progress report every three months. The new Ministry will have 196 employees. Half of them will be professional staff.

The Minister believes that the adoption of the New National Plan of Action is very important since it will serve as a road map to facilitate the work of the Ministry. Preparation is also underway to revise the Women's Policy that was adopted in 1993.

The Ministry adopted a strategy document entitled "Ethiopian Women's Development and Change Package" in July 2005. The Package has three parts. The first part defines the economic, social and political status of women in Ethiopia as well as successes and remaining challenges. The second part deals with visions, goals and strategy to change the situation. The third section identifies the necessary measures that need to be taken.

The Ministry is accountable to the House of People's Representatives and presents periodic reports to the Women's Standing Committee. The Ministry has plans to engage women parliamentarians in training and capacity building. The new Ministry also has a collaborative relationship with regional states and has plans to assist the regional gender bureaus in training and other technical support. Although the mandate of the Ministry covers the entire country the relationship between the Ministry and regional bureaus is collaborative due to the Federal state structure. Four regional states, namely Somalia, Afar, Harari and Gamebella, have yet to adopt their respective family laws. Three of these states are predominantly Muslim.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs believes that participation of women in decision making is critical. The Deputy Minister gave the example of Tigray where members of the Regional Council rejected the proposed regional cabinet members since there was only one woman on the proposed list. The Regional Council accepted the nomination only after they secured the appointment of more women. In Tigray women have been appointed as deputy bureau heads as well as judicial officials, including Vice-President of the regional Supreme Court and Presidents of zonal and woreda courts (Delebo and Mohamed). This is an example of how women can use their voice to influence decisions. It is believed that the Regional Council in Tigray asserted such a position due to the fact that 50% of members of the Regional Council are women.

The Minister of Women's Affairs recognizes the absence of women from the Federal executive (only 2 out of 21 Ministers), but emphasizes that women's capacity should be built to prepare women for leadership roles. She believes education is key in the promotion of women to leadership positions. The Ministry is planning to push for 50% representation of women for local elections, to be endorsed at least by the ruling party (Delebo and Mohamed 2007).

2. Putting Commitment to Action

The Ethiopian Government's adoption of women friendly laws and policies are cited as one of its good practices. Policies on education, health, population, poverty reduction, rural development and all other relevant social policies emphasize that gender mainstreaming is important and that it is "a cross cutting issue". However, the African Gender and Development Index (AGDI) findings persistently show that Ethiopia's performance is weak is

when it comes to defining specific implementation plans, allocating budgets, providing effective institutional mechanism of implementation, setting targets and monitoring and evaluating progress (UNECA 2004).

Establishing the necessary legal and institutional framework is one of the most important first steps to transform any social situation, including gender relations, and to improve the economic, social and political status of women in society. In the absence of clear, sustainable and advanced laws and regulations, and commensurate enforcement mechanisms, it is not possible to bring about meaningful and sustainable social, economic or political transformation.

However, establishing laws and polices alone will not suffice to ensure justice in marital relations, to eliminate violence against women, or to actualise the effective participation of women in development or governance. For instance in spite of the adoption of the Revised Family Code in 2000, it is still difficult for women to obtain their share of the common property expeditiously, although the situation is better than it was previously. Similarly administrative and judicial bottlenecks persist in criminal cases of rape and battery despite the explicit prohibition of gender based violence in the 2004 revised Criminal Code. Harmful traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), early marriage and abduction are rampant despite their criminalization.

These legal and policy commitments were not backed with effective institutional and enforcement mechanisms. Most of my female informants, particularly those who have been engaged in legal support provision, reiterate the same problem. One of them expressed her frustration: "Having laws and polices in place has only benefited to enhance the profile of the governments."

On the issue of law and policy enforcement a highly placed interviewee believes that imposing laws on society may not be the wisest measure. He noted for example that in some of the constituencies where EPRDF lost seats during the May 2005 election some voters indicated that they were displeased with EPRDF's insistence on girl's education and the eradication of harmful traditional practices, as they felt it challenged their traditions. Hence, my interviewee believes it is more useful to engage and convince the society on these issues instead of imposing laws and risking unintended political cost (Anonymous informant 2007). While I appreciate this candid view, I find this to be disturbing since some laws are put in place to fight dominant attitudes and cultural practices that affect the wellbeing and empowerment of women.

Here it looks like the concern of my informant does not really prioritize change but rather weighing the political cost of confronting communities. On the other hand, his view does highlight the irreplaceable role of social mobilization to change social norms and create an impetus to enforce progressive laws.

With regard to women's participation in development, poverty reduction and gender mainstreaming, various evaluation reports generated by the government, NGOs and donors repeatedly highlight the lack of adequate human and financial resources to implement policies at the regional and federal levels. The weak status of gender machineries, particularly the gender focal points that are run in some cases by a single person and are supposed to mainstream gender in ministries, are a clear example of weak institutional arrangements to realize policy commitments.

2.1 Defining the Commitment of Government and Political Parties

2.1.1 Government Commitment

The issue of measuring government commitment raised a wide variety of views among the individuals I interviewed. In most cases I have narrowed my study to assessing government performance in enhancing women's role in leadership. My informants expressed that the representation as well as effective participation of women in decision making is limited due to culturally maintained attitudinal problems towards women's leadership, lack of support and network to train and nurture women leaders, and the lack of adequate education. Furthermore, multiple roles assumed by women, insufficient political commitment from the government and lack of adequate alternative political platforms were mentioned as factors limiting women's opportunities.

While the interviewees held diverse views on specific issues, most of them shared the view that lack of education as a justification to exclude women from leadership roles was an over used excuse.

Ethiopian women were encouraged when the ruling party (EPRDF) passed a decision to increase the number of women candidates in the Federal Parliament to 30% and 40-50% at the level of the regional states for the May 2005 election and as a result, 107 women (22% of the seats) were elected to the federal parliament during the 2005 election. In some of the regional states

women now comprise nearly 50% of those elected as indicated in the table below.

Despite progress in women's representation at the legislative level, representation at the executive branch remains disappointingly low. In countries that are attempting transition to democracy, more meaningful power resides in the executive branch than with the legislative arm of government. Nonetheless, legislative forums could be a useful training ground for women to exercise leadership and to build a political carrier.

One of my highly placed interviewees told me that she was shocked that the government appointed only one women Minister out of a total of 21 ministries. The lone woman was appointed Minister for Youth and Sports. A second woman was later appointed, as Minister for the newly established Ministry of Women's Affairs. My interviewee said that her expectations prior to the election had been for an increase to 20% representation of women in the executive branch (Anonymous informant 2007). Unfortunately her expectations were not nearly met.

Currently four State Ministers (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Culture and Tourism, Minerals and Energy and Ministry of Justice) are women. There is one woman among the four government whips with the status of State Minister. The deputy minister for gender is also a woman, as is the country's Ombudsperson and Human Right Commission.

The second constitutional body with an oversight mandate is the Human Rights Commission. A woman has been appointed as the Deputy Commissioner in charge of Children and Women's issues.

While all my interviewees appreciate the appointment of women to formal leadership roles, they continue to observe the inadequacy of their numbers, the influence of the portfolios to which they are appointed, their independence, and their experience and track record on advancing gender issues. These criteria are quite relevant to all profiles. All these issues affect the effectiveness and the real influence of women leaders when one moves beyond symbolic and formal representation.

2.2 Political Parties

a. EPRDF

Some observers argue that given the increased opportunities for training and education that women have had during the last 15 years, women have accumulated sufficient capacities that would enable them to occupy at least 30% of public decision making positions at various levels. Interviews conducted by Roman during her study with male informants are quite revealing of this attitude. For example male respondents felt that thus far, women have not been strong advocates for their rights and emphasized that women should be at the forefront of the struggle for gender equality (Roman 2005). This view shows that women have obtained enough skills now and may only need to push to enter decision making positions. However this does not exclude the need for continued education and capacity building of women.

The Minister of Capacity Building, Mr. Tefera Wallwa, believed that the ruling party's view of women's equality is based on fundamental principles of democracy. The party has demonstrated its conviction of this principle since the early days of armed struggle, which it later confirmed by establishing adequate constitutional, legal and policy frameworks. During the struggle, the party educated both its male and female members on gender issues and women held high military and social positions (Tefera 2007). He emphasized, however, that women now occupy more decision making positions than they did during the liberation struggle. For example, EPRDF has a higher number of women in all of its central committees than ever before. The same is true when it comes to representation of women in the regional and federal parliaments.

Mr. Tefera admitted that the representation of women in the executive branch is not satisfactory by any standard. This emanates from two factors. One is the disadvantaged position of women, including lack of training, education and inadequate political experience. The second is the attitude of party members who are responsible for recruiting women. The interviewee emphasized the point as follows: "In most cases, it is men who are assigned to recruit candidates for various decision making positions and they might not be in a position to fairly evaluate men and women. We should not forget that gender biases linger among party members as they too are products of the society" (Tefera 2007).

Party and government officials believe that participation of women in decision making is important since it is a matter of democratic principle and it is imperative to effectively utilise 50% of the country's human resources. The government's policy is to focus on girl's education and to ensure women's empowerment in a sustainable manner. Men and women in power also believe that representation does not automatically mean empowerment. We should not assume that all women in power are necessarily gender sensitive or that they will pursue gender friendly agendas. It is the duty of both democratic men and women to collectively fight for gender equality. Often male officials and party leaders believe that women in both formal and informal leadership positions have a particular role to play in being persistent and pushing for women's adequate and meaningful participation at all levels (Tefera 2007). While education and training are key for women's empowerment, the issue of power sharing is a much more sensitive issue. Power sharing involves placing women in some of the positions held by men. It is thus not surprising that power will not always be shared freely. However, the Constitution and other laws of the country require us to pursue every available avenue in order for women to acquire decision making positions. It is up to the politicians to demonstrate adequate political will to fight all forms of bias that keep women away from power. The challenge posed to the executive by the Tigray Council is exemplary in this regard. We should also keep in mind that we have some men in power who are not competent so we should not assume that women are incompetent simply because of their gender. Women should be given the opportunity to prove themselves, contribute and learn through the process. Further ahead, we will examine the critical role that civil society can play in spearheading change in this regard.

Although the principle of affirmative action was enshrined in the constitution of 1995, EPRDF did not make a concerted effort or put concrete measures in place to enhance the participation of women in political decision making until 2005. In some instances leading female party members were against the adoption of what they viewed as positive discrimination measures to bring women to positions of power. On the other hand, women NGO's, such as EWLA, were vocally supportive of these measures.

With the debate emerging at the national level and the impetus created by the 2003 AU resolution, which confirmed the appointment of 50% women to head the AU Commission in 2003, the ruling party in Ethiopia decided to increase the number of women candidates to 30% during the 2005 election.

Since coming to power the EPRDF has been the dominant political force in Ethiopia. Opposition parties have made attempts to compete for electoral seats in the two previous elections without much success. Adequate political space to encourage and create an influential opposition did not emerge until the 2005 election (Berhanu Nega 2006). Open discussion and debate also only emerged in the weeks before this election. There was a live televised debate on various issues of national political significance. The large majority of the policy and party debates were organized by an NGO called Inter-Africa Group (IAG).⁹ Other debates were also organized by Addis Ababa University and various civil society organizations.

Representatives of the ruling party and two opposition parties extensively discussed gender issues during a debate organized by the Addis Ababa Women's Association. During the debate, all the representatives claimed that their parties had gender friendly policies. The ruling party, which had adopted a 30% female quota immediately before the debate, claimed that it had taken concrete steps to increase women's participation in decision making, and to change the status of women, particularly in the area of civil service recruitment and promotion and in girls' education. However, members of the opposition argued that EPRDF was not genuinely committed to women but was only interested in using the gender agenda for political gain (Tarekegn 2007).

In 2005 a number of women NGOs came together and produced a women's manifesto that was launched at another debate on gender issues between the political parties. Among its socio-economic components, the manifesto assessed the performance of various political parties.

In the women's manifesto the ruling party was commended for including women's participation in its policy objectives, but was criticized for lack of effective execution of its policy commitments. The manifesto noted that despite the opposition parties' stated commitment to increasing women's participation in leadership, it was difficult to get disaggregated data from these parties and they generally lacked clearly identified strategies to reach this goal (Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association 2005).

⁹ After completing my 8-year term as the founding Director of EWLA, I was appointed as the Action Director of the IAG which is a policy Dialogue Center on Peace and Development in the Horn of Africa.

A member of the opposition party explained that the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) does not have a policy on affirmative action, but that gender is a major area of focus for the party's Social Sector Program. Moreover, during the selection of candidates to run for the House of People's Representatives, gender was given an additional 15 points among the selection criterion in order to encourage women's participation. The party has set its target for women's participation in the platform at 50%. This is higher than the 30% target set by the ruling party.

Bertukan Mideksa, a prominent woman lawyer, who was also a well known judge, was recruited by the CUD and swiftly assumed a leadership role when she was appointed as Vice-President of CUD. Bertukan was one of the 131 opposition and civil society leaders imprisoned in November 2006 and facing trial for genocide and treason following the controversy over the May 2005 election result.

Almaz Seifu is another important leader from one of the opposition parties. A member of the Oromo Peoples' Congress (OPCO), she represented the party effectively in various forums until she disappeared from public life after the May 2005 election for reasons that are not apparent.

The post-2005 election crisis in Ethiopia resulted in loss of life and imprisonment of citizens and political leaders. It is unfortunate that it is not yet an engrained part of Ethiopian political culture to contend with differences within a framework of clear rules and institutional arrangements. In a situation where it becomes difficult to resolve conflicts peacefully, women bear the brunt of the problems. It is even more unfortunate that negative experiences keep women away from engaging in politics and public life. Rectifying the situation requires vigorous work in the area of making political rules clearer and building and strengthening institutions over time. This requires visionary leaders, an evolving political culture to cultivate unwavering commitment to the rule of law, and institution building to create an enabling environment for a more tolerant society. So far these objectives have remained elusive in Ethiopia's political culture.

It is necessary to build a culture of tolerance and expand the available political space in order to ensure participation of the voiceless sector of the society. Some individuals contend that we must be patient in this regard as it is difficult to build a democratic society and culture of tolerance in a short period of time. One of my interviewees comments that a tolerant political culture cannot be achieved prior to building a democratic society. He

emphasized that “this is a project for a generation”. The broader vision should be built on the understanding that nurturing a democratic culture requires various building blocks that evolve over time and that setbacks are likely. Simply relegating this question to the next generation absolves accountability. The issue remains what should be the contribution of this generation?

3. Women Parliamentarians

This section highlights the challenges and opportunities of women decision makers. This analysis will give insight into the significance of women’s representation in decision making, particularly to assess the effect and influence of women decision makers beyond their formal representation.

The first two women parliamentarians in Ethiopia were elected in 1957. The number increased to 4 in the 1962 and 1973 elections (UNECA 2004). After EPRDF came to power, women won 13 (7%) of the seats on the EPRDF ticket in the 1995 general election. The ruling party made further effort to increase women’s participation in the 2000 election. Accordingly, women’s representation in the 2000 parliament increased to 42 seats or 14% of the total seats. There was an encouraging increase in women’s representation in parliament in the 2005 election when close to 22% of the seats were won by women. This was due to the decision taken by EPRDF to implement affirmative action with a benchmark of 30% female representation in the Federal Parliament as indicated above. The ruling party proposed a list that had 30% women and 8% of these did not win their seats. Women’s roles in parliament have also gained importance. The Women’s Standing Committee was created during the 1995-2000 parliaments and it is one of 13 parliamentary committees. The major tasks of the Women’s Committee include: overseeing the planning and performance of the executive branch, training and capacity building of members of the committee, and advocating for gender friendly laws (House of Peoples Representatives, not dated).

Table 2. Representation of women in three successive parliaments

No	Parliamentary Period	Political Party	Number of House Seats by Gender			
			Male	Female	Total	
					No.	%
1	1995-2000	EPRDF	478	15	493	90.29
		Political parties other than EPRDF	45	-	45	8.24
		Independent	8	-	8	8
2	2000-2005	EPRDF	439	42	481	87.93
		Parties loyal to EPRDF	36	-	36	6.58
		Opposing Political Parties	17	-	17	3.11
		Independent	13	-	13	2.38
3	2005-2010	EPRDF	220	107	327	62.17
		Parties loyal to EPRDF	41	3	44	8.37
		Opposing Political Parties	146	6	152	28.89
		ANDO , SMPDUO & Independent	3	-	3	0.57

SOURCE: Office of Public Relations, House of Peoples Representatives.

Table 3. Representation of women from the regions in the House of People's Representatives in the Third Parliament, 2005-2010

No.	Region	Federal Parliament				
		Party	Male	Female	Total	Female%
1	Addis Ababa	CUD	21	2	23	8.695
2	Afar	ANDP	7	1	8	12.5
3	Amhara	EPRDF	58	29	87	33.333
		CUD	50	0	50	0
		ANDO	1	0	1	0
4	Benshangul	BGPDUF	7	1	8	12.5
		CUD	1	0	1	0
5	Diredawa	SPDP	1	0	1	0
		CUD	1	0	1	0
6	Hareri	HNL	1	0	1	0
		EPRDF	1	0	1	0
7	Oromia	EPRDF	73	36	109	33.027
		CUD	15	1	16	6.25
		UEDF	39	1	40	2.5
		OFDM	10	1	11	9.090
		INDEP.	1	0	1	0
8	SNNP	EPRDF	64	28	92	30.434
		CUD	17	1	18	5.555
		UEDF	12	0	12	0
		SMPDUO	1	0	1	0
9	Somali	SPDP	22	1	23	4.347
10	Tigray	EPRDF	24	14	38	36.842
11	Gambella	GPDM	3	0	3	0
Total			430	116	546	21.245

SOURCE: Ethiopian Election Board.

The Status of Women's Participation in Public Decision Making in Ethiopia

Table 4. Representation of women in Addis Ababa City Council and Regional Councils¹⁰

No.	Region	Regional Council				
		Party	Male	Female	Total	Female %
1	Addis Ababa	CUD	118	19	137	13.868
		EPRDF	1	0	1	0
2	Afar	ANDP	77	7	84	8.333
		APDM	3	0	3	0
3	Amhara	EPRDF	115	71	186	38.172
		CUD	95	13	108	12.037
4	Benshangul	BGPDUF	74	11	85	12.941
		CUD	11	0	11	0
		INDEP.	2	0	2	0
		EBPDO	1	0	1	0
5	Hareri	EPRDF	8	6	14	42.857
		HNL	12	6	18	33.333
		CUD	3	0	3	0
		UEDF	1	0	1	0
6	Oromia	EPRDF	196	186	382	48.691
		CEDF	105	5	110	4.545
		CUD	31	2	34	5.882
		OFDM	7	3	10	30
		GSAP	2	0	2	0
7	SNNP	EPRDF	171	85	256	33.203
		CUD	42	3	45	6.666
		SLM	7	0	7	0
		SMPDUO	1	0	1	0
		UEDF	36	3	39	7.692
8	Somali	SPDP	172	2	174	1.149
		INDEP.	10	0	10	0
9	Tigray	EPRDF	77	75	152	49.342
10	Gambella	GPDM	69	12	81	14.814
		CUD	1	0	1	0
Total			1448	509	1957	26.009

SOURCE: Ethiopian Election Board.

¹⁰ This data shows that 4 of the regional councils have passed the 30% threshold for women's participation. These are Oromia, Tigray, Amhara and Harari. Oromia and Tigray are getting very close to the 50% parity. Due to the May 2005 post-election controversy, CUD members did not take their seats in the Addis Ababa City Council. The city was administered by a Caretaker City Government.

While the first women's parliamentary group (1995-2000) was more focused on capacity building and familiarizing women with parliamentary procedures the second group (2000-2005) was more active. The research and advocacy works of independent women's groups such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) matured between 1998-2000 and the Women's Committee was actively engaged in organizing platforms to disseminate information and create forums. This is particularly true for the family law and penal law reform advocacy works. The Committee also organized training forums for its own members, and for all members of parliament.

The oversight function of the Women's Standing Committee is directed by a written guideline. The Women's Parliamentarians Caucus was also established during the second parliament. The objective of the caucus was to encourage networking among women, to build their collective capacity, and to sharpen the focus of women representatives. Although all the 42 women members were from the same party, they believed caucusing would give them a forum for free debate outside the party rules and parliamentary procedures. Unfortunately some members have expressed the view that the caucus was not very effective.

The third parliament (2005-2010) represents the largest group of women parliamentarians to date. In addition to participating in the Women's Standing Committee and the Caucus of Women Parliamentarians, women are more involved in various committees of the parliament. In the first two parliaments women were only members of the Women's Committee whereas in the current parliament women represent 27% of the parliamentary committee members across all committees. Moreover, three women are chairs of committees and two are deputy chairs.¹¹ The leadership role of women in parliament has improved compared to the last two parliaments, but this is by no means adequate.

¹¹ Social, Infrastructure and Women's Committees are chaired by women. The Deputy Chairs of the Legal and Women's Committee are also women.

Table 5. Participation of women in the Standing Committees of the House of People's Representatives in three successive parliaments

No.	Parliamentary Period	Political Party	Number of Standing Committee Members Compared by Gender				Remark
			Male	Female	Total		
					No.	%	
1	1995-2000	EPRDF	83	11	94	80.34%	2
		Political Parties other than EPRDF	23	-	23	19.66%	
		Total	106/90.6%	11/9.4%	117		
2	2000-2005	EPRDF	127	10	137	88%	2
		Parties loyal to EPRDF	13	-	13	8%	
		Opposing Political Parties	5	-	5	1%	
		Independent	1	-	1		
		Total	146/94%	10/6%	156		
3	2005-2010	EPRDF	71	38	109	70%	6
		Parties loyal to EPRDF	10	3	13	8%	
		Opposing Political Parties	33	1	34	22%	
		Total	114/73%	42/27%	156		

SOURCE: House of Peoples Representatives office of public relations.

Although the large majority of women parliamentarians are still from the ruling party (107 of 116), women opposition members are represented in the parliament for the first time in Ethiopia's history.

The Chair of the Women's Standing Committee has stated that the Committee is actively engaged in its executive oversight function. So far it has heard 22 reports from government institutions. However, the Chair stated that the Committee has not been able to closely follow-up its various recommendations made to the institutions. The Women's Committee has received 32 draft laws so far this year and provided gender related inputs for two of these draft laws, namely the amendment to the labour law and the civil service law (Abasiya 2007).

Individuals from the ruling party believe that they are adequately promoting women's interests. One of my interviewees stressed that it is their duty to do so, since women make up half of their constituency. Moreover, it is her conviction that women's progress is beneficial to all of society.

Members of the ruling party also expressed that women parliamentarians have adequate freedom to raise and advocate for gender friendly agendas, and that their party (EPRDF) puts no direct or indirect pressure on them to limit their vision. One interviewee stated:

Women parliamentarians have performed well so far and if we are short in some areas it must be our own weakness. Some of us might not have the requisite skills or do not make adequate effort to build our capacities and some may also display unwarranted fear to express their views not knowing exactly what the parameters of party discipline could be (Kifle 2007).

In her view, the government has made adequate commitment to gender issues, necessary laws, policies and structures are in place. Ethiopia is a poor and underdeveloped country where women should not expect the government to do everything. Wherever we are, we should strive to do our best. According to this interviewee, it is a bit naïve to expect to solve all of our problems through government intervention (Kifle 2007).

Despite the interesting conversations I had with parliamentarians I could not discern a concrete agenda that they are advocating on behalf of women, tangible recommendations that they have made to the executive branch, or any reforms that they have made to laws that are adopted by the parliament. An opposition woman parliamentarian, representing the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), who joined the parliament 4 months after its inauguration, expressed her disappointment with the political crisis and the attendant death and imprisonment of citizens and leaders of her party. She believes that had more women been in decision making positions on both sides of the aisle, it may have been possible to resolve conflicts more peacefully (Tarekegn 2007).¹²

¹² Dr. Mulualem said that she was dismissed from her job at the Ministry of Agriculture, although she was a very effective civil servant. She believes she was made to leave her job unfairly, since there are many other members of parliament who are engaged in full time employment. Besides, it is not outside the law to keep one's regular employment and be a member of parliament unless the work in which a parliamentarian is engaged is incompatible with the objective and honor of the parliament.

The parliamentarian from CUD was not aware of any agenda, or report, presented by the Women's Committee to Parliament since she joined Parliament, though she noted, "Since I am not a member of the Committee, there might be activities that I am not aware of." She said that women parliamentarians have been engaged in various projects initiated after the Women's Campaign International (WCI) training that took place in July 2006.¹³

The parliamentarian from the opposition party is the Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Women's Caucus. The Chair of the Caucus is the first female Deputy Speaker of the Parliament and is a member of the ruling party. According to the Deputy Chair, most of the executive committee members are from the ruling party and they are busy with various other commitments. As a result the Caucus did not achieve as much as it could or should. The opposition member said that she has proposed periodic interventions on women's concerns, since women do not get the opportunity to make interventions in parliamentary debates. The CUD member regrets that women parliamentarians did not have much success in advocating for women's rights. She feels that most women parliamentarians merely supported their party's platform in Parliament (Tarekegn 2007).

¹³ WCI is an American organization focused on building the capacity of women parliamentarians.

Chapter Four

The Role of Civil Society Organizations: The Case of EWLA

This chapter is premised on the assumption that women's independent organized activity is political work, and should be viewed as a way to transform social relations. Chapter One provided the overall theoretical background and conceptual framework on women's leadership, and formal and informal politics. Chapter Two provided a historical overview of women's participation in decision making at both formal and informal levels in Ethiopia. And chapter three provides a highlight of the current status of women and their role in governance at the formal level. This chapter provides an overview of the role of women in civil society.

The chapter begins with the overall context of the civil society environment in Ethiopia and highlights the general background and relevance of women's organizations. Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) is presented as a case study to support the argument that women's organized independent activities constitute political work that is critical to catalyze protection of women's rights and gender justice. As Executive Director of EWLA for 8 years, I was able to observe first-hand the organizational effort and I draw from this and various primary documents to highlight salient issues.

1. General Context of Independent Organizations

Voluntary organizations and social and economic self-help groups have existed in Ethiopia since at least the 20th century, though more advanced organizations with a larger public interest agenda, such as the Ethiopian Women Volunteers Association, was established in the 1930's.

Under the imperial and military regimes, however forming an independent organization with the objective of influencing any form of government agenda was nearly impossible. There were only a few international NGOs that came to Ethiopia during and after the 1984 famine. However the most respected indigenous NGO founded and led by a woman named Abebech Gobena has now existed for 27 years. The Abebech Gobena Center for Children's Welfare is a renowned home particularly for orphaned children. From a historical perspective, it could be said that women's organizations have flourished since

1995. It must be noted that compared to many African countries, civil society and particularly women's organizations in Ethiopia are small in number and less dynamic.

The term "civil society" is used to refer to a diverse range of social networks and groups. In most cases it is understood to include all organizations and associations mediating between the family and the state, with the exception of commercial firms. For the purposes of this chapter, the term civil society is used more narrowly to refer to organizations set-up as NGOs and membership associations. In the current Ethiopian context, NGOs are understood as organizations with few members that are governed by a Board. Associations, on the other hand, are organizations with large membership whose leadership is elected by its members.

The emergence of independent associations is a relatively new development in Ethiopia that is related to the adoption of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution. Freedom of association is enshrined in Article 30 of the EFDRE Constitution. This right is also guaranteed in other covenants ratified by Ethiopia, including the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Regarding civil society, the challenge remains the lack of clear legislation and policies that elaborate the principle of freedom of association enshrined in the constitution. Draft NGO legislation has been on the horizon for close to 10 years now. The government circulated the draft in 2002 and the civil society sector provided comments and recommendation on the draft law (Inter-Africa Group 2002). The law has yet to be adopted by the Parliament.

According to a press briefing given in November 2006 by the Minister of Justice, Assefa Kessito, there are currently 3,737 NGOs operating in the country. The number of NGOs that operated in the country from 1951 to 2005 stood at 1,656, whereas 1,567 NGOs were registered during the last three years alone.

Out of the 3,737 NGOs, 1,681 are local, 262 foreign development organizations and the rest are faith-based, professional, civic and other organizations (The Ethiopian Herald November 2006). Unfortunately the number of NGOs focused on women's rights or gender issues is not disaggregated. The Ministry of Justice and Christian Relief Development Association (CRDA), an umbrella organization with 270 members, are now developing a database of NGOs and associations under various profiles,

including a list of those focusing on gender issues (CRDA and Ministry of Justice telephone conversation December 2007).

Despite the improvements over previous regimes, the creation of a fully enabling environment to facilitate a vibrant and effective civil society sector has not been achieved in Ethiopia. Organizations engaged in advocacy are few and still nascent. The following statement was made by a civil society leader at a national conference in 2003:

Despite the fact that the number of CSOs have increased in the country in recent times, many of them are still limited to gap filling role focusing on immediate provision of services. Their involvement in fundamental agendas such as democratic development, social justice, participation and policy performance evaluation and policy advocacy is at an infant stage (Zewde 2003).

Between 2000 and 2005, NGOs have been trying to consolidate their efforts by establishing networks with the view to strengthening policy advocacy and implementation. The establishment of the Network of Ethiopian Women's Association (NEWA), and the Civil Society Union are examples of this effort. Moreover, organizations such as the Inter-Africa Group played key roles in facilitating the political party debate in preparation for the May 2005 election. A notice released by the Ministry of Justice in 2003 announcing that registration of organizations will be valid for three years, instead of one year, has been encouraging for NGOs and associations (Ministry of Justice 2003). However, during his press briefing in November 2006, the Minister of Justice stated that NGOs must sign agreements with the ministry which operates in the same sector as the NGO, in order to obtain an operating certificate or to renew the ones already issued. Monitoring is to be undertaken by a committee composed of representatives from eight ministries, and will be chaired by the Minister of Justice.

This new regulation might make it difficult for some organizations to function freely depending on how its implementation is going to be undertaken. Observers also believe that civil society organizations have been more careful in selecting their program agendas and discussion forums since the May 2005 election and its aftermath, which resulted in the imprisonment of civil society members. NGOs now tend to focus on less sensitive and neutral topics. A restricted environment for organizations may result in reversal of the gains made among fledgling civil society organizations.

2. Women's Organizations

Women's organized activities at the community level, as CBOs or NGOs, have been crucial for the promotion of women's rights. Independent women's organizations will remain critical as women struggle to secure space in the formal political arena. An independent women's movement encourages and supports women in obtaining legitimate space in governance. It also supports women's effectiveness in formal political leadership roles.

As indicated above, with the EPRDF coming to power in Ethiopia, women secured enhanced rights to freedom of association. Freedom of association and other economic, social and cultural rights were guaranteed through universal human rights conventions, and later endorsed by the FDRE Constitution adopted in 1995. Women have collectively advocated for various agendas including fair representation in political decision making, legislative reform, and economic and social agendas such as education, micro-finance and healthcare services.

Government supported or sponsored, mostly region based membership associations have also flourished. These organizations have also called for women's equality before the law and access to economic and social services.

The overall goal of most of these organizations is to improve the economic, social, political and legal status of women. The Tigrayan Women's Association, established during the TPLF armed struggle, has been in operation the longest. The groundwork to organize women under the umbrella of the Addis Ababa Women's Association also began in 1992-1993, through the active support and encouragement of the ruling party. The organization began formal operation in 1995 (Welde-Senbet 2007). That same year, a group of women lawyers took the initiative to establish the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA). Many other associations have been established or become visible after the adoption of the Constitution in 1995.

The objective and focus of most of the women's groups revolve around provision of micro-finance, adult education, skills training, awareness raising and capacity building. Most women's groups focus more on women's "practical needs" than on "strategic needs". One of my interviewees, who was working with various women's organizations as director of the UNICEF's Child and Women's Program, believes that practical needs are important but strategic needs are more sustainable. She believes that the two should

complement one another for utmost benefit. Some feminist thinkers argue that it is not possible to neatly separate “practical” and “strategic” needs. According to this view, women have to engage in strategic political and organized work to secure practical needs for themselves and their families. Securing these needs for their families has an embedded political question. Trying to secure the right to health care, safe drinking water, access to affordable housing, energy, and food security raises political questions that address issues of power relations and equal rights to resources (Discussion with Naples 2005).

There is a link between the discussion of practical and strategic needs, and the debate surrounding women’s and men’s roles. On this point, Dorothy Smith argues that domestic work, which is identified with women, is understood as subordinate and subservient. In reality the highly valued public role of men could not be sustained without the devalued work of women. Patriarchal systems could not function if women abdicate their role classified as “reproductive”, and claimed the domain of knowledge production. Smith explains:

The dichotomy between the two worlds organized on the basis of gender, separates the dual forms of consciousness; the governing consciousness dominates the primary world of a locally situated consciousness but can’t cancel it; the latter is subordinated, suppressed, absent, but absolutely essential ground of the governing consciousness. The gendered organization of subjectivity dichotomizes the two worlds, estranges them, and silences the locally situated consciousness by silencing women (Fargais 2004).

EWLA is a pioneer organisation in directly addressing women’s strategic needs, and women’s rights issues, such as violence against women, woman’s political participation, demanding the removal of discriminatory laws and condemning harmful traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), abduction and early marriage.

In Ethiopia women’s groups that began activities in areas such as micro-finance or skills training have built their knowledge and confidence to reach the point of increasingly addressing issues of women’s rights in addition to service provision.

Opinions are varied on the challenges and achievements of women’s organizations in Ethiopia. Some of my interviewees believe that much has been accomplished, particularly in the area of advocating for progressive laws and raising awareness on women’s rights, given the relatively short history of

independent organizations in the country. Others believe that civil society, including women's groups mostly operate within the given parameters of government tolerance, instead of boldly advocating for government accountability on issues of gender equality. These individuals contend that women's organizations have not actively expressed their concerns on government policies or decisions, except on a few occasions. One of my prominent interviewees believes that in order to bring about profound and lasting change in any struggle for social transformation, it is important to create a social movement. Even in developed countries, such as the U.S. large scale social mobilisation is required to bring about change. This is true whether the struggle is for women's liberation or another issue, such as racial equality. Creating a social movement is even more important in less developed countries that are attempting to make a transition to democracy. My interviewee believes the scattered movement of NGOs will not make a profound and sustainable change (Eshete 2007).

Both women parliamentarians and civil society groups believe that collaboration between civil society and women parliamentarians has not been satisfactory. However, the role played by EWLA, women parliamentarians and the Women's Affairs Office during the debate and consultation for the legislative reform from 2000–2004 has been recognized. Both women parliamentarians and women from the civil society sector have expressed that lack of trust and validation of each other's contribution is a major obstacle. They all believe that collaboration should be enhanced for further effectiveness.

Women have expressed concern that there is not adequate harmony among women civil society groups. Tsegue Woldesenbet, President of the Addis Ababa Women's Association (AWA), believes that women's groups should be able to work with the government, recognizing and applauding its gender-friendly measures or alternately criticising and challenging its failures to protect women's rights. But according to Tsegue, most NGOs feel they have to be critical at all times.¹⁴

¹⁴ According to the President of the Addis Ababa Women's Association, the organization has a membership of over 75,000 women who pay a small membership fee of 25 cents. They have one full time staff in each of the 250 *kebeles* and three full time staff at the *woreda* level. They represent women in various governmental forums and have the capacity to mobilize women as deemed necessary in support of government policy but also to demand government action, for example on issues of violence against women. Governmental houses are available to AWA for a small rental fee. They have taken over some of the properties of the former women's association (REWA). The organization focuses on awareness raising on women's

On the other hand, there is a widely held view among women's NGOs that association such as the AWA and similar ethnic or regional based women's associations are not able to play an independent role because they were created, nurtured and supported by the government. They are also perceived to have been created deliberately to overshadow independent women's organizations. The president of AWA agrees that her association was initially nurtured and supported by the government, but she explains that it has progressively asserted its independence and it is now a position to advocate as freely as any independent organization.

On this point quite a few of my interviewees believe that in countries that are in democratic transition, there should be many forums to give voice to the voiceless, hence women's organizations such as AWA should be encouraged.

For instance, during an interview with the Minister of Women's Affairs Office, the Minister emphasised the importance of mass women's associations. She stated that these groups are organized voluntarily and are independent, although they receive support from the government. She recognised the fact that associations were led by the head of gender bureaus in various regions has been a problem. However, she stressed that this practice is changing. Supporting these membership associations will also be among the roles of the Ministry. The Minister did not comment on the role of professional women's associations or self-initiated women NGOs.

The package adopted by the Ministry entitled "Ethiopian Women's Development and Change Package," is highly promoted by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. It states that there has not been adequate political leadership to facilitate women's participation and recognizes that efforts made by the government to build women's leadership capacity have been weak. The Package states, "Women have been onlookers in the politics of the country since there has not been an adequate enabling environment" (Ethiopian Women Development Package 2007, 16). The Package concludes that civil society organizations in general are weak and not in a position to bring about meaningful change. Educated women have not been able to play leadership roles that contribute to sustainable social transformation. The Package highlights lack of serious support on the part of the government as a major contributing factor, but also points to the lack of coherence and the

rights as well as economic and social services. AWA depends on membership fees for most of its administrative expenses.

scattered efforts of women's organizations. According to the Package, among those that are organized, urban based women's groups are "set up to advance their narrow interests under the guise of the women's question" (Ethiopian Women Development Package 2006, 16).

The Package seems to make a distinction between women's associations and NGOs. It expresses support for mass organizations that are viewed as less independent by groups that are relatively autonomous. It would have been more constructive for the Women's Affairs Ministry to support every effort towards the advancement of women in the fledgling context of women's organizations, instead of emphasizing distinctions among them on the basis of urban vs. rural and mass vs. elite.

3. Establishment of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA)

The Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) was established by a group of women lawyers in 1995. The organization was formally registered with the Ministry of Justice in June 1996 and began formal operation in October of the same year.

Atsedwoine Tekle and I conceptualised the establishment of EWLA. Atsedwoine Tekle was an independent lawyer at the time and had previously been the first female Supreme Court Judge. She was one of the three women who were named by the government to represent women in the Commission. I was also a High Court Judge before joining the Ethiopian Constitution Commission as a researcher.

The idea of establishing an association of women lawyers to work for the promotion of women's rights in Ethiopia grew from discussions we had with various African women lawyers while attending training at the Hague in 1993. Atsedwoine remembers the situation as follows: "We listened to them (women lawyers) eagerly and came back full of enthusiasm. We did not waste much time before sharing the idea of forming a women's rights group with our colleagues, who received the idea gladly" (EWLA 1996).

The adoption of the FDRE Constitution was an additional factor that strengthened our collective conviction, since there was a strong urge to test constitutionally guaranteed rights and to remedy injustices that founders of the Association witnessed as judges and lawyers.

The constitution provides for the equal right to marriage, during marriage and at divorce. It also provides for the prohibition of all forms of Harmful Traditional Practices (HTP). Furthermore, it provides equal rights to nationality, pension, property including the right to land and equal social and economic rights, including health care, education and employment.

In preparation for the formal registration of the Association, we needed to articulate the vision, objective, activities and structure of the organization. This process required several formal and informal meetings and consultations over a one-year period. The meetings mostly took place at our homes. Once we defined the objective and activities of the organization, we mobilized the necessary support and registered the Association. EWLA was registered within three months of submitting an application for registration.¹⁵

After registration EWLA began to hold formal meetings. During the initial meetings Atsedwoine was elected Chair of the organisation, and I was elected Executive Director. Other founding board members of the Association were Aster Gerawork, Rahel Zeryihun, Rahel Alemayehu, Hirut Gebre-Sellassie and Helina Taddesse. Voting members of the Association are composed of women lawyers working in various capacities including judges. The number of voting members has increased over time. EWLA currently has 201 members. Women in other professions and male lawyers can also register as associate members of EWLA, without the voting rights of full members. There are a larger number of associate members and some of them have been actively involved in the work of the Association. EWLA currently has 218 associate members.

As the organisation developed and we identified areas of action, we began to focus the objective of the association into a realizable work program. In the first EWLA activity report, I made the following observation on this point: “The visible denial of access to justice for Ethiopian women impelled us to go for an ambitious program from the start. The absence of vocal women’s advocacy groups to speak against unjust laws and practices and the complete lack of voice of mothers and children finally helped us define our primary engagements” (EWLA 1996).

¹⁵ Given the average time that registration of associations took at that time, this was quick response made possible by the recommendation to relevant authorities on behalf of EWLA by Professor Andreas Eshete.

During this exciting and challenging period we enjoyed critical guidance and substantive support from the late Mr. Kifle Wodajo who was the Chairperson of the Constitution Commission. Mr. Kifle took the responsibility to articulate our broad vision into a project document that we then used to approach our donors for initial funding.¹⁶ Mr. Kifle's contribution was very significant as he continued to provide invaluable guidance and support throughout the establishment and life of the Association until his untimely death in May 2004.

3.1 Time for Action

As inexperienced NGO leaders and fundraisers, we were quite nervous about approaching donors, despite the professionally packaged proposal and the persuasive cause of the organisation. We initially approached the Netherlands Embassy, the Canadian Embassy and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

While the officer in charge of funding at the Netherlands Embassy showed great interest in supporting our program by contributing 80% of the funds, our Canadian donors posed blunt, sceptical questions: "Among yourselves, you may be smart but how will you make sure you make an impact when you go public? What if you fall flat on your faces?" (EWLA 1999).

Our exchange with the young officer from the Canadian CIDA was even more discouraging.

*Skimming through budget he asked, "What do you need cups for?"
I replied, "We need them for coffee."
He responded, "Why do you need to drink coffee?"
I answered, "Why do you need to drink coffee?"*

The Canadians finally agreed to match the funding with a 20% contribution, and they have continued to support the organization in subsequent years. Despite the initial challenges, EWLA now enjoys a cordial and supportive relationship with all its donors, as detailed below. With their generous

¹⁶ Mr. Kifle Wodjao is a highly respected Ethiopian intellectual and distinguished diplomat. He served Africa and his country in different capacities. He was the first Secretary General of the Organization of the African Union and a Foreign Minister of Ethiopia. I had the privilege of working under him at the Constitution Commission. I found him to be committed to democracy, human rights, and social justice. Mr. Kifle prepared EWLA's first project proposal entitled, "Project Funding Proposal, August 1995."

support, we managed to hire essential professional and support staff and rent a modest villa for office space. Our famous logo, a woman lifting up the scales of justice, was painted in bright colours outside the office to attract as much attention as possible.

EWLA's plan of action identified three strategic programs that support one another. Research and Law Reform Advocacy, Legal Aid and Public Education. Within six month of its operation, the organizations' potential was already recognized. In response to our report in July 1996 the Netherlands Ambassador to Ethiopia wrote, "Normally I have no time to see these reports thoroughly, but your report drew my interest from the first to the last page. I am proud that we are supporting your group because your report shows how absolutely necessary your activities are" (Letter from the Netherlands Ambassador 1996).

3.2 EWLA's Programs

a. Research and Law Reform

EWLA began its Research and Law Reform Program by focusing on identifying discriminatory features of some of the laws that affect women's lives the most. Family law was one of the primary areas of focus since it contained various provisions that perpetuated women's subjugation and contradicted the principles enshrined in the 1995 Constitution. Moreover, family law is an important area of law for women in Ethiopia as they suffer from discrimination at home and in their day-to-day lives. Various discriminatory laws negatively affected the interest of women, both in terms of personal relations with the spouse and their financial interests. For example, the family law provisions in the *1960 Civil Code* discriminated between men and women in marriage age. The *Code* provided a marriage age of 18 for boys and 15 for girls. The *Civil Code* also designated the husband as "the head of the family," entitled the husband to choose the common residence, gave the husband the right to manage common property, disallowed divorce until fault was proved, and did not recognize "irregular unions," otherwise known as common law marriages.

The release of EWLA's research findings raised public interest and debate on the issue. In addition to research work, EWLA supported its argument through the voices of its legal aid clients. In pursuing family law reform in 1996, EWLA submitted a family law amendment proposal to the Federal Government and the nine regional states with the hope of achieving uniform

law in all the regional states (Berchi 2000). Of the nine regions only Tigray Regional State acknowledged receipt of EWLA's proposal.

At the end of 1998, the Ministry of Justice released a draft revised family law. Soon after the release of the draft, EWLA published commentary on the draft family law under the title "The Draft Family Law Amendment Fails to Address the Main Concerns of Women" in the daily government newspaper *Addis Zemen*. The article pointed out the shortfalls of the draft and emphasized the need to fully address practical problems faced by women during matrimonial litigation. The Women's Affairs Committee of the House of People's Representatives organized various forums to debate the draft law. Almost all the issues raised in EWLA's commentary were addressed by the debates and incorporated in the *Revised Family Code* adopted in 2000 (Berchi 2000).

Similarly EWLA undertook research to identify discriminatory features of the 1957 *Penal Code* and begin publicizing the shortfalls of the *Code*. The *Code* criminalized abortion under all circumstances, did not recognize or criminalize domestic violence against women or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and the assigned inadequate penalty for rape. EWLA forwarded an elaborate amendment brief to the House of People's Representatives in 2001. After discussion of the issues by various stakeholders, the *Penal Code* was amended in 2004. This amendment included a change in the title of the *Code* to the *Criminal Code*.

EWLA also undertook research on the law of nationality, pensions and employment and initiated public discussion on these issues. Discriminatory features of these laws have also been subsequently amended. Other than research specifically commissioned to advocate for legislative reform, EWLA has also conducted research projects to strengthen public awareness and increase students' researchers' and policy makers' knowledge of the law. Among these was a major research project entitled "Violence Against Women in Addis Ababa" that examined the prevalence of violence against women in Addis Ababa and the response of the criminal justice system.¹⁷ The following table represents data generated by the study.

¹⁷ The research was commissioned in 2003 and was conducted by Original Woldegiorgis, Emebet Kebede and Mellese Damti. The study is published in EWLA's Annual Journal issue number 5, 2004.

Table 6. Crimes of Violence against women reported to the 28 Woreda Police Stations in Addis Ababa from 1999-2000¹⁸

Year	Rape Cases	Assault and Bodily Injury Cases	Attempted Murder Cases	Abduction Cases	Total
1999	326	2,382	48	28	2,784
2000	339	2,372	42	42	2,795
2001	372	3,674	46	39	4,131

The study indicated that incidences of violence against women continue to be under-reported. The figures provide the level of prevalence of reported cases of violence against women only, but actual levels of violence against women are much higher than those reported. The study indicated that improvements have been made in criminal investigations, laying charges and obtaining convictions, but more needs to be done to respond to these challenges. The research concluded that the court environment is not conducive to women clients, in either civil or criminal matters (EWLA 2004.).

EWLA's research and advocacy efforts have been recognized at the national, regional and global levels. The following remarks were made by the UNDP regional gender adviser in a letter addressed to EWLA: "I hope you not only enjoy international support but also appreciate the expectation that you will continue to share your strategies and experiences in advocacy because you have been most effective in that respect" (UNDP 2001).

b. Legal Aid

The Legal Aid Program is one of the most respected and important programs of the organization. It is a groundbreaking service that has brought hope to poor women whose rights have been abused in marital relations, at the community level, or by the state itself. The idea of pro-bono legal aid was not well known or practiced in Ethiopia, except for the sporadic assignments given to members of the Bar Association by the office of Public Defence for lawyers to represent murder case defendants. Parallel to the initiative taken by EWLA, Action Professional Association, and later the Ethiopian Bar Association began to offer pro-bono legal service to poor men and women.

When we started the Legal Aid Program, we were anxious about how many women would show up to seek the legal aid services of our three volunteer

¹⁸ Addis Ababa's residents were estimated at 4 million during the data collection.

lawyers. Our office was new and off the main road. It was not readily accessible to many of the women who were desperate for the service. The first group of Board Members to offer legal aid services were stationed at EWLA's office around three times to respond to various needs of the Association. Most importantly they provided pro-bono legal aid services. Atsedwoine, Original and Aster were very happy to receive clients during the first few months. EWLA quickly discovered that it needed to conduct more publicity to introduce the availability of free legal aid services. With more publicity, the demand for the service increased. At the end of its first year EWLA's service became so popular that it was made available all week, including Saturdays. On average over the years, the number of legal aid users has ranged from 3,000 - 4,000 annually.¹⁹

Original Wolde-Giorgis, who later joined EWLA as a full-time legal aid coordinator, explained the challenges of serving clients with various needs as follows: "When the women begin to come, in large numbers, for all sorts of assistance, and with all sorts of needs, issues and expectations, there arose new aspects and fresh angles to take into account" (EWLA 1992).

By far the most painful cases that came to EWLA involved the sexual abuse of children. Aster Gerawork, one of the founders of the Association and a volunteer lawyer with EWLA noted, "I have never believed that the sexual abuse of a three year old could happen until one the day a mother came in with a three-year old child who was unable to stand or sit down". Aster related another disturbing story: "One day I had a male client who insisted on killing his lover who was no longer interested in him, his main reason being that he spent much of his time and resources composing a 47-page love letter to the woman" (EWLA 1992).

Commenting on the legal aid service and the heightened public expectations of EWLA, Hassabkefay, who became an EWLA Board Member shared the following: "When I was a judge I used to hear about the plight of women. Now that I have come to know the hard facts of women's day-to-day lives, I wonder what I would do if I went back to being a judge. I am also concerned about the public expectation from EWLA. People even think that EWLA passes laws. I was rather pleasantly surprised when an Orthodox priest (known to be conservative) whom I met in Shashemene said that EWLA should advocate for a legislation to ban marital rape" (EWLA 1992).

¹⁹ Shemelis Ali has been in charge of helping women fill out the client profile form and served as the record keeper since the establishment of EWLA.

In about 70 to 80% of cases that receive assistance from EWLA are those that are related to marital issues and violence against women. Cases of a matrimonial nature include divorce, partition of common property and maintenance of children. Violence includes rape and assault that may result in death or serious injury. While most of the clients are assisted in the preparation of legal briefs and are coached on how to plead before family arbitration and courts, a few selected cases are fully represented by EWLA's lawyers. The cases that receive full representation are selected by the legal aid committee based on established criteria. These are cases that set precedents in terms of challenging the status quo or those that require constitutional interpretation. Although the target was to represent 40 cases per year, in most years the organization did not meet this goal due to shortage of staff and other competing program obligations.

The efforts of EWLA continue to be greatly appreciated by clients, the general public and donors. In 2001, a political councillor of the Norwegian Embassy said, "EWLA is an organization that is doing an excellent job. The free legal aid support it renders, the research it undertakes on the rights of women and children in this country and the efforts it is making to bring about public attention and discussion on the issues of women are really very important activities" (*Dimtsachin* 2003).

- ***EWLA's Test Cases***

The most famous case represented by EWLA was the case of Aberash Bekele. Aberash was a 14-year old girl who killed a 27-year old man who abducted and raped her in 1996. Aberash became the first woman to radically challenge the culturally accepted practice in the western and southern part of the country, of acquiring a bride through abduction. For that reason EWLA was interested in defending Aberash. After two years of trial, Aberash was acquitted on the ground of self-defence. BBC News reported the situation as follows: "For EWLA the verdict was a triumph. But for Aberash it was a hollow victory, since she remained unable to return home for fear of revenge" (BBC 1999). BBC did a documentary entitled "School Girl Killer" which raised a public protest in UK that forced the Ambassador of Ethiopia to provide a televised explanation on efforts made by the government to fight harmful traditional practices including abductions (informal conversation with the Ambassador).

Unfortunately, Aberash's acquittal did not stop further abductions of girls in Ethiopia and EWLA has not won all of its cases. Below is the more recent

case of Woineshet Zenebe which received coverage in the *Washington Post* in June 2004.

Woineshet Zenebe

Woineshet had an ordinary day like any other 13-year old, going to school, playing with friends and helping her mother with household chores. She had no idea what would happen the night of April 1993 when she went to bed exhausted by the day's activities. Four strangers, who later on were accompanied by two more, dragged her from bed and abducted Woineshet in the middle of the night. She was taken to a house where she had never been before and was raped. The leading abductor was later arrested and was imprisoned. But strangely enough the abductor was released on bail set for 500 birr (about 55 USD). Woineshet's miseries however were far from over, as the abductor was not deterred he committed the same crime against her. This time the abductor made Woineshet stay with him for a month and half during which time she was forced to sign a marriage contract.

Determined not to give up, Woineshet escaped and fled to a neighbour's house, whose owner happened to be a policeman. An arrest warrant was issued against the abductor who later appeared in court charged with repeated forceful abduction. The perpetrator was detained for 8 days and was again released on bail in the amount of 1000 birr. During the trial, the accused claimed that Woineshet has signed a marriage contract with him and as a result all criminal charges against him should be dropped. But, because Woineshet was beaten and threatened to sign the contract, the charges against the abductor and his accomplices proceeded.

Her father brought the case to the attention of EWLA in June 2001. The association tried its best for a retrial of the case. The case in the process received much publicity through the media. As a result of these efforts, the new charge against the abductor includes rape and violation of the privacy of domicile. The principal abductor was sentenced to 10 years and his accomplices were each sentenced to 8 years of imprisonment. Woineshet and EWLA had barely begun celebrating the triumph of justice before a higher court set both the abductor and his accomplices free. The public prosecutors were pushed to appeal but did not succeed in reversing the decision.

EWLA File No.2967/93 E.C

The *Washington Post* made the following comment about Woineshet's case: "The case opens a window on struggle in Africa between deeply held rural and 'tribal' traditions and a quest to establish the rule of law in societies that have long been without it." EWLA in collaboration with its long time supporter Equality Now, an international women's NGO took Woineshet's case to the African Human rights Commission based in Banjul, Gambia.

- ***EWLA's Constitutional Litigation***

Despite encouraging woman's rights guarantees provided in the FDRE Constitution, the inclusion of a provision that permits adjudication of disputes of "personal and family relation" by religious and customary jurisdictions does not provide the best guarantee of women's rights protection on the bases of universally recognised values. Article 34(4) of the constitution provides that "This Constitution does 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 dispute." Although the provision is qualified by the condition that customary and religious jurisdictions will have the power to adjudicate cases only under the agreement of the parties, there are various social and economic factors that push women litigants to submit to customary and religious courts. In the rare event that women assert their right to submit their case to secular courts, religious courts might not allow them to exercise these rights. The following is a test case represented by EWLA.

A Muslim Woman Claimed Her Right Not to Be Forced to Plead before a Religious Court

Kedija lived in a marriage with her husband, in which she gave birth to three children. After her husband's death, his grandchildren from a prior marriage sued Kedija & her children at the Naiba First Instance Shari'a Court, claiming that they are entitled to the inheritance of her husband's house. Kedija and her children, based on their constitutional right of Article 34/5, refused to be judged at the Shari'a Court but rather wanted to take the case to a regular court of law.

Despite her constitutional right, the Naiba First Instance Shari'a Court denied Kedijas's request to be judged by a regular court and gave judgment in favour of the grandchildren. Kedija took her case further to the Shari'a High Court stating that neither she nor her children consented to be judged by the Shari'a court and any decision given without such consent is illegal. Still the High Court reaffirmed the judgment of the first instance Shari'a Court. Kedija took the case to Shari'a Supreme Court and even to the Federal Supreme Court but it was to no avail, both Courts reaffirmed the decision of the lower courts.

EWLA decided to take the case and fully represent Kedija since EWLA strongly believed that there is fundamental error in the interpretation of the Constitution. EWLA took the case to the Council of Constitutional Inquiry. As per Article 83 of the Constitution, the House of Federation decides a constitutional dispute on the basis of suggestions submitted to it by the Council of Constitutional Inquiry. Finally, the House of Federation reversed the previous decisions and judgment was made in favour of Kedija to take her case to a regular court of law.

EWLA 2163/96E.C.

One of my interviewees continues to wonder why it was not possible to fight for a secular adjudication of divorce and inheritance issues during the adoption of the Constitution. He points out that Muslim countries such as Turkey, Tunisia and others have taken progressive measures to prevent the violation and restriction of women's rights under the guise of religion (Eshete 2007).

Although how women are treated by the two major religions in Ethiopia, namely Orthodox Christianity and Islam, is a politically sensitive issue, it is crucial that women begin raising questions about this. EWLA conducted research on women's rights and Sharia law in 1998 which was followed by a constructive discussion with Muslim leaders. Other than this specific effort, this subject has not been discussed further. However, there are various issues that need to be discussed regarding women's reproductive rights, property inheritance and property division during divorce. The role of women in public and domestic decision making should also be understood outside of religious frameworks and within the framework of the principle of equality of all citizens before the law.

A related concern that has been raised on various occasions is the delegation of authority to regional governments on matters of "family and personal relation" issues (Article 56 of the constitution).²⁰ The rights of women provided under the constitution and other laws would have been more secure had the family law been under a uniform federal law. The family laws enacted for the federal capital Addis Abeba and the chartered city of Dire Dawa was the first *Revised Family Code*, adopted in 2000. This law has been used as model legislation for other regional states. So far six of the nine federal states have enacted their respective family laws. Except for one incident in the Oromia family law, which was eventually corrected, all other regional states have enacted family laws that are compatible with the constitution.²¹ However, three predominantly Muslim regions (Afar, Somalia and Asosa) have yet to adopt their respective family laws.

²⁰ Ethiopia follows a parliamentary form of government with a federal government structure. Power is shared among the federal and regional states. Powers and duties not explicitly given to either the federal or regional states are considered to be the power of regional governments.

²¹ Oromia is the largest regional state with an estimated population of 35,000,000. In 2003, the Council of the region adopted a family law that indicated tolerance of polygamous marriages. After an intense protest from female members of the council, other female EPRDF members, and a legal briefing from EWLA, the provision was withdrawn. This indicated that regional states may adopt unfavorable regional family laws when and if they feel less accountable to the central government or to the women's movement.

In conclusion, the Legal Aid Program of the organization has achieved much more than seeking remedies for particular clients. Clients have been encouraged to speak about their plight directly to the public in various media outlets including national radio and television. Their stories underscored the challenges of access to justice, and ultimately mobilized public opinion in support of EWLA's agenda on the principle of equal protection of the law and equality before the law.

c. Public Education, Outreach and Relationship with the Media

EWLA runs a public education program that systematically targets different sectors of the society, particularly women. The paralegal program is oriented to giving women and men a basic education on laws and procedures that are likely to affect the lives of women. These frequently include issues such as divorce, domestic violence and rape. Paralegal training is offered to voluntary groups organized under EWLA's six branch offices. EWLA boasts more than 60 women's voluntary committees which are the organizations direct point of contact with grassroots and rural communities. Some of the committees actively assist women members of their communities. The other public education activity targets women government employees and high school girls. In these series of workshops, EWLA raises awareness on women's right and expands its support base.²²

EWLA has also managed to open branch offices in 6 regional states. These offices have been very active and well recognized by the regional government and local communities. Regional offices focus on public awareness raising and provision of legal aid service. They are also critical in disseminating the research findings generated at the head office. Moreover, they provide critical insight on issues facing women at the rural level. Often EWLA is asked to strengthen its branch offices, to open more offices and work in remote rural areas.

EWLA was able to put the issue of women's rights on the public agenda mainly because of the collaboration and support it has enjoyed from both the public and private media. The media has always been interested in EWLA's activities, since the subjects raised by the organization are topical and interesting. Even in a period when the government suspended EWLA,

²² This program was initiated by the late Ayssanew Kassa. He was an Ethiopian-British lawyer who was committed to EWLA's cause and came from the UK to work with EWLA, supported by the British Embassy in Addis Ababa. He was a significant contributor while he worked with EWLA for a year and a half. He fell ill and died on 24 March 2000.

described below, the government media and journalists were quite supportive and actively covered EWLA's campaign to have the suspension lifted. This was unusual as this media often tends to be driven by government interests.

d. EWLA's Thematic Focus

As explained above, EWLA has been primarily focused on issues of spousal relations and child welfare, particularly during divorce. Due to low economic development and the legacy of gender discrimination, the lives of a large majority of women in Ethiopia remain dependent on marriage. Hence, the lack of equality affects women entering marriage, due to early and forced marriage; during marriage, due to unequal power relations between the spouses that used to be supported legally and continue to be supported socially and culturally; and during divorce. Women suffer various disadvantages during divorce. In most cases they remain responsible for minor or even adult unemployed children. They may not have adequate information about the common property or they may not have the necessary resources to properly claim their rights to common property or to pursue an effective and fair decision. For these reasons, since its inception EWLA has focused on family law reform and its implementation.

Another area of EWLA's intervention has been violence against women, including those practices that are condoned by culture and tradition such as early marriage, abduction, and FGM. Although Ethiopian women are far from being free of gender based violence, there is no law that prohibits the practices. Public discussion has also increased due to the activities of EWLA and other organisations. However studies show that still the prevalence of violence against women in Ethiopia is among the highest in the world.

EWLA also took up the issue of participation of women in decision making. The idea of gender and fair sharing of power did not surface for official public debate until EWLA broke the silence by launching a program intended to encourage the participation of women in the 2000 general election. The program was undertaken between 1998 and 1999 and was supported by the German foundation Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). The major activity of the program was organizing regional forums in each of the regional states. The discussion generated a wide debate around women and politics and culminated in a workshop hosted by EWLA in November 2002, with participants from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This project created public conversation on women's participation in politics and decision making. Affirmative action was at the centre of the debate. Inspired by these

discussions, 38 independent women candidates participated in the 2000 elections. Unfortunately none of them were elected to parliament.

The case of women migrant workers was another agenda that engaged EWLA. The Association followed the case of migrant women who provide domestic service under difficult conditions without any form of labor protection mostly in Middle Eastern countries. A significant number of these women were reported to have died, particularly between 1998-2000, and many were exposed to violence by their employers. For instance, the case of Yeshiwork Desta Zewde was a particular concern to EWLA. Yeshiwork was sentenced to death for allegedly killing her employer in Bahrain by the Bahrain High Court in November 1998. EWLA campaigned for fair trial of Yeshiwork's case and the campaign triggered global support on her behalf. EWLA managed to raise funds and send a criminal lawyer to Bahrain. The Ethiopian government retained a lawyer to appeal Yeshiwork's case. The death sentence was finally changed to a life sentence and Yeshiwork is serving the prison term in Bahrain (*Dimtsachin* 2000).

e. Strategy

As described above, EWLA's main strategies for addressing women's rights are research, advocacy and litigation. These three strategies reinforce one another. EWLA has shared its advocacy experience at various national and international forums. Staff and members of the Association generally do not carry out their advocacy according to a particular manual or guideline, rather they are directed by EWLA's commitment and passion to women's rights (Original 2006).

EWLA, in collaboration with the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), prepared the first Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) shadow report from Ethiopia when the Ethiopian government presented the combined 4th and 5th CEDAW reports to the CEDAW committee's 30th session in New York 2003. EWLA and NEWA prepared these reports in order to present an independent assessment on the status of women in Ethiopia.

EWLA has also used creative arts and educational forum theaters to raise public awareness. For instance, the forum theater entitled "*Gabichana Fichi*" (Marriage and Divorce) was a critical show to consolidate public support in favor of the family law reform. It was transmitted on national television twice. The other forum theater on rape was entitled "*Difret*." This play, later

converted into a documentary film, was the first show where the public faced the reality of sexual abuse of children.²³

f. Suspension of EWLA

On 22 September 2001, EWLA was suspended by the Ethiopian Ministry of Justice. The suspension was announced on government media without prior formal communication with EWLA. The reason given for the suspension was that “the Association has been found acting beyond its mandate and code of conduct,” without any further clarification as to what the organization did wrong. On 4 September the Ministry sent a letter of suspension dated 31 August 2001 to EWLA. The Ministry also wrote to donor agencies and instructed the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia to freeze EWLA’s accounts.

Upon receiving this letter, the Association called a press briefing during which we explained to the public that officials of the organization were summoned on 9 August 2001 by the Ministry to discuss one of EWLA’s cases.

The case involved a young woman named Hermela who was a victim of repeated violence. EWLA had made public comments about the case.²⁴ The Ministry asked me to officially retract some of the statements that I had made in relation to Hermela’s case, which I refused to do. In the press briefing given by EWLA, we made it clear that the organization did not break any laws. We stated, “EWLA challenges the Ministry to produce any evidence that it has carried out any activity that is outside its objectives or that contravenes any law” (EWLA Press Briefing, 3 September 2001).

Despite the national and international pressure on the government to lift the suspension, the Ministry rejected all the pleas. Two weeks after the suspension, EWLA set up a seven-member defence committee to pursue the case in collaboration with EWLA’s board. Three prominent members of the Ethiopian Bar Association volunteered to represent EWLA (endnote).

²³ The plays were based on true a story and involved the audience in the performance. Ably authored, directed and produced by Mekuria Studio Theatre, the show has been taken to rural parts of the country where it draws an audience of thousands.

²⁴ Hermela was a victim of repeated violence in the hands of a person who claimed to love her for a number of years. The justice system was unable to protect her. EWLA brought the case to media attention, and the story created broad public reaction. Furthermore, I made strong comments on how the justice system failed women.

Subsequently, the Ministry sent a letter to EWLA outlining the activities that the government deemed to be contraventions and demanded that EWLA respond and “act in ways that would render it forgiveness”. EWLA wrote an eight page letter to the Head of the Ministry’s Association Registration Office on 16 October reiterating that the organization had done nothing that warranted its suspension. While the controversy between EWLA and the Ministry continued, the civil society, media and donor agencies continued to put pressure on the government by recounting the difficulties faced by poor women who benefited from EWLA’s legal aid service. In a petition signed on 12 October civic organizations said, “EWLA has been the refuge to women and children who have been victims of abuse bringing up their cases to the attention of the public and the government”. In a petition signed on the same day, women gender activists expressed their concerns saying that, suspending EWLA can be an obstacle to the contribution that women can make through organizing themselves.”²⁵

On 17 October a promising day dawned for EWLA and its supporters when the court decided in a partial lifting of the suspension and the Ministry of Justice wrote to the court for closure of the case. This news came with the suspension of the Minister of Justice from his position. EWLA celebrated the victory and continued the fight for women’s rights.

After the suspension was lifted, various views were expressed by members of the community. An NGO leader said the following: “My first reaction [to EWLA’s suspension] was to pack up and leave this country. If the Ministry of Justice...has the power to close that kind of significant and very important component of civil society, what about those who are less important and less influential?” (*Dimtsachin* 2001)

EWLA’s suspension galvanized governmental and nongovernmental bodies. The Women’s Standing Committee of the House of People’s Representatives requested that the Ministry lift the suspension. The Women’s Affairs office disseminated information on EWLA’s suspension. Several civil society members expressed their concerns in various ways. The Addis Ababa Women’s Association took the initiative to approach the Ministry. The President of the Association stated: “Following the unexpected announcement of EWLA’s suspension in the media, a number of questions were raised at the

²⁵ In addition to these national organizations, Amnesty International, Equality Now, women activists, local and international NGOs have written letters to the Government expressing their concerns. Several other members of the diplomatic community, and even individual government officials lobbied to get the suspension lifted.

grassroots level. Since our Association has its structure well formed at the grassroots level; at the Kebele, Woreda and Zonal level, we were there to discuss the issue and its development at those levels” (*Dimtsachin* 2001).

In her congratulatory statement, the Director of African Center for Gender and Development of the Economic Commission of Africa (ECA) wrote: “EWLA has gained much respect and recognition for the lead role it played to advocate for a gender sensitive legislation, and champion the new family law. Its impact cannot be undermined”. In those challenging 7 weeks, the organization and its members recommitted themselves to stand for principle and justice. It was an experience that helped to strengthen the organization and further enhance EWLA’s credibility.

g. Facilitating Other Women’s Organizations

• *Network of Ethiopian Women’s Association (NEWA)*

Soon after its establishment, EWLA recognized the critical importance of women’s organized struggle to fight for the recognition of women’s rights. Faced with the overwhelming issues confronting women on a day-to-day basis, as well as the insufficient attention given to gender issues at the policy level, we were convinced that there was a need to establish a network of NGOs and associations focused on gender issues and I expressed the importance of taking this initiative at EWLA’s General Assembly Meeting in 2000. EWLA’s suspension strengthened our conviction in having a collective voice.

The idea of establishing a network was circulated and EWLA in collaboration with PACT Ethiopia organized a one-day workshop to deliberate on the idea and to discuss the way forward. At the meeting, various organisations agreed that there was a need to establish a network of women’s organizations. The meeting report reads: “They agreed that women’s concerns are economic, political, social as well as legal and it will be very difficult to make a significant difference by acting independently.” The report further indicates that networking is “key to give greater voice to women’s concerns and to influence policies that affect women’s interests.” The meeting delegated a steering committee to articulate the concept of networking, to set a realistic objective, and to propose structure of the network (EWLA Activity Report 1999-2000).The Committee undertook its assignment diligently by defining the objective, membership, and structure of the network, which was later written up in the form of the organization’s memorandum of association.

Although the Ministry of Justice did not have a clear guideline on registration of networks, in the spirit of a new collaboration with EWLA, the new officials of the Ministry kindly approved the request for the registration of the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA). NEWA was housed at EWLA until it was able to raise funds, hire staff and rent an office. NEWA began formal operation in 2003. An interim director was recruited to define the activities of the organization and to raise funds. The interim director undertook important groundwork that helped to fully launch the NEWA. EWLA continued to chair NEWA.²⁶

In a recent interview the current Director, Saba Gebre-Medhin said that NEWA is facilitating networking among organizations and focusing on its member's capacity building through various trainings. The Director said "with the 8 million birr fund we have obtained from SIDA, we have been able to distribute money among 70 organizations, mainly to work on FGM and on issues of economic empowerment and girls education" (Capital News paper Volume 9 No 430, March 2007).

NEWA is undertaking a commendable task in the area of capacity building and ensuring access to resources for its members. It has also organized various forums that will help to facilitate the empowerment of girls and women's political participation, particularly in preparation for the May 2005 election.

NEWA should further explore consolidating and channelling the collective voices of its members to influence policy at the macro level, with the view to contributing to long term and sustainable change that would positively affect the lives of women.²⁷

- ***Organization Against Gender Based Violence***

On 10 February 2001 EWLA, in partnership with other NGOs and individual activists, organized a rally in which over 1000 women and men marched. Before this event, there were candlelight vigils for three evenings at Meskel Square, the main city square in Addis Ababa. The event was planned in response to some of the gruesome violent crimes committed against women in 2001(March 2001 Issue).

²⁶ I approached Selome Tadesse to take up the position of the directorship since that was when she had left her official government position.

²⁷ NEWA has over 35 members. Most of the members are NGOs although the organization is known as the network of associations.

The committee that organized the rally decided to formally register as an NGO working to fight violence against women. The group registered in 2003 under the name 'Organizations against Gender Based Violence' and used one of EWLA's offices until it was able to rent an office independently. One of the aims of the organization is to provide shelter to women victims of violence.

h. Recognition

In 2003, I was one of two recipients of the Hunger Leadership Prize with long time gender activist Sarah Longwe from Zambia. The Hunger Project Prize has been awarded to famous personalities including Nelson Mandela and Bill Clinton. The 2007 Prize was given to the President of Liberia, Serif Johnson. When I received the phone call from New York to inform me that I was one of the candidates for the prize I was not enthusiastic.²⁸

The Hunger Project recognized the contribution made by EWLA to bring women's rights issues to the national agenda, effectively advocating for legislative reform and providing free legal aid services to women. EWLA's resistance to the Ministry of Justice's suspension was also considered a positive example. Eventually I was proud to have achieved the coveted Prize, which was given in recognition of the hard work and the commitment of EWLA's Board Members and its dedicated staff.²⁹

i. Donors

Since its establishment, EWLA has enjoyed the support of several donor agencies without whose support EWLA would not be able to achieve such success. Despite the relative increase of funds over time, EWLA has always operated on a modest budget. EWLA is the first organization in Ethiopia that donors agreed to give basket funding, which allows for the production of joint proposals and joint reporting instead of dealing with multiple reporting requirements. This measure helped to facilitate EWLA's focus on program work. The Norwegian Embassy took the initiative to create a consortium of donors for EWLA. Members of the Consortium have included the Norwegian

²⁸ EWLA's Finance and Administration Head, Mulunesh Haile Mariam was in my office when I received the phone call from New York. She remembers how unimpressed I was by the call mainly because I did not consider this a priority and was unaware of the nature of the Hunger Project Prize. When asked to send my personal and professional experience, my initial reaction was that I had no time.

²⁹ Search Meaza Ashenafi on <http://www.Yahoo.com>

Embassy, Swedish Embassy, Novib, Finland Embassy, Belgium Embassy and the Austrian Development Cooperation.³⁰ Prior to this financial support, EWLA has been supported by several others including the Netherlands Embassy, Canada Embassy, CIDA, Unifem and the U.S Embassy.

j. What were the Secrets of EWLA's Successes?

In this chapter, I have used EWLA as a case study to demonstrate the critical contribution women's independent organizations can make, particularly with regard to catalysing change and mobilizing public opinion. The success of EWLA demonstrates the strength of women's leadership that is dedicated to the pursuit of common goals and the creation and sustenance of a shared vision around the goal of women's rights protection in Ethiopia. EWLA nurtured a less hierarchical, empowering and collaborative model of leadership style that inspired everyone associated with the association to commit themselves to go beyond what their professional duties and jobs required. It is interesting to also note that leaders and founders of EWLA, practiced feminist leadership style highlighted in the first chapter of this study, without necessarily having been exposed to feminist leadership theory. This indicates that gender roles and socialization may have impact on women's leadership as has been argued by authors on feminist leadership. However, it is difficult to argue that all women-led organisations practice feminist leadership style.

Furthermore, EWLA's strength lay in the collective intuition to quickly identify entry points and topical issues as they arose and even pre-empt critical occurrences and design intervention strategies. In most cases EWLA became the spokesperson on women's rights advancing the cause with passion, most importantly using the law as a tool to buttress its claims.

The fact that EWLA stood firm, particularly during the ultimate challenge that it faced during its suspension, increased its credibility in the eyes of women and the general public. EWLA also enjoyed critical support, advice and encouragement from individuals, national and international institutions, as indicated in this chapter. The Association worked hard to establish and nurture as wide a network of support as possible and its engagement with the government continues to be constructive despite strenuous encounters.

³⁰ EWLA was supported by a host of other donors including Netherlands Embassy CIDA, Unifem Belgian Embassy, and DIFD.

k. Challenges

There are various challenges that EWLA faces as an organization within the local enabling environment. Given the disadvantaged economic and social status of women and the various hurdles that limit exercise of their rights, fighting for the protection of women's rights in Ethiopia is not an easy task. However, EWLA was created with the objective of making its own contribution in this environment.

One of the challenges faced by EWLA is securing concrete remedies for its clients. At EWLA's 4th General Assembly meeting Atsedwoine expressed her frustration in this regard: "I am happy that we are able to assist women in a small way by helping them with legal advice but I also know that providing legal advice alone will not solve many of their problems". EWLA has no control over the equitability of decisions given at courts of law or the speed at which the decisions are given, although improvements have been witnessed over time. Women also face other economic and social problems even after their cases are settled. For example, divorced wives in Ethiopia cannot receive any form of alimony. As indicated above, the majority of women in Ethiopia are dependent on their husband's income or on land registered under their husband's name. Upon divorce women are forced to leave the house empty handed except for those small proportion of women who manage to have some form of common property, independent property, business or cash. Considering this as a major challenge, EWLA has recently conducted research work on the issue of post-divorce maintenance with the view to advocating for a law that entitles women to post divorce maintenance (EWLA 2006).

The general environment under which civil society operates may be affected by the overall political situation in the country. Irrespective of the government's intention, it is also quite likely that civic organizations impose restrictions upon themselves unless the leadership is bold enough to advocate for its objectives within the limits of the law. EWLA should continue to do that. Finally, organizations have their own life-cycle of ups and downs. These changes might be related to changes in leadership or other factors. Irrespective of short-term challenges, EWLA should continue making its mark in the struggle for woman's rights in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

Are Women in Formal Leadership Advocating for Gender Friendly Agendas? Views from Civil Society

It has been convincingly argued that women's effective political participation and voice requires them to take part in both formal and informal politics. Women's participation in civil society organizations has given them skills, courage and aspiration to play substantive roles in formal politics (Tripp 2000). The last chapter of this thesis examines the role played by EWLA as a case study in Ethiopia. This section highlights the roles and views of members of civil society, some of whom have also been involved in formal politics, on the opportunities and constraints faced by women in that arena.

Women political theorists believe that in countries where the democratic transition is slow, the absence of progressive parties and the lack of diffusion of power may hinder the effective participation of women. Unless they have an independent voice to articulate their concerns women's participation will remain symbolic. "Inclusion without engendered equality yields only distractive participation" (Brocklehurst 2003). In a context where local communities are empowered, women have a better chance of enhanced participation at the local level. Such participation provides women with the opportunity to gain experience, build a social base, and acquire real power over time. However, as evidenced by the African Gender and Development Index (AGDI) data this will not come automatically, for example women are almost absent in the leadership of community based organizations in Ethiopia despite their critical role at that level.

When it comes to political participation, the most important concern of the women's movement at the global, regional, and national level is the under-representation of women. That is why the Beijing Declaration and Platform Action (BDPA) and other global and regional platforms established the 30% minimum benchmark. With the relative increase in their participation during the 2000 and 2005 election in Ethiopia, the most important issue has become whether women parliamentarians and those in official positions are acting effectively in positions of power.

This section reviews the performance of women leaders in formal politics from the viewpoints of various stakeholders.

- ***The Power Game***

Women in leadership roles within and outside of formal politics share the view that despite the commitment and hard work demonstrated by women leaders, society lacks confidence in their leadership abilities. Most of all male members of society and male leaders are not willing to share space. Two former government officials interviewed for this research expressed the view that the few women who assume leadership positions will remain outsiders and will be removed from their offices sooner than they expect. One of the women interviewees expressed the situation as follows: “I have always worked hard and strived to be effective usually beyond the call of professional duty. However, I have realized that my decisions are undermined through back door informal arrangements that I hold no control over.” She stated that women are less prone to accept kickbacks and try to speak the truth but she concluded that this will not serve them well in the political power game. Thus it makes it difficult for women leaders to survive and make a difference, no matter how much they aspire to. Such experiences further discourage other potential women leaders from the outset. The other viable alternative available to them, according to my interviewee, is to espouse absolute loyalty to those that bring them to power (Anonymous Interviewee).

- ***What is the Mandate of Women Leaders?***

Another outstanding question remains the issue of mandate. Are women leaders expected to represent women’s voices? There is no global consensus on this issue. Some women leaders participating in formal politics believe that it is not their duty to represent women’s interests since they represent both male and female constituencies. Other women holding official positions believe that it is the duty of women leaders to represent women and voice their concerns. Most of the women I have interviewed believe that women leaders should represent the interests of women. Particularly civil society leaders believe that this is a must. When I presented this question to Original Wolde-Giorgis, a former political activist and one of the founders of EWLA, she responded with a question, “Who should represent women then? I hope you don’t expect male parliamentarians to do so. You would recall that at one point when a woman Member of Parliament inquired if the views of women were incorporated in a policy document on which parliament was

deliberating, all the male parliamentarians laughed during a televised session of parliament”(Original 2006).

Tsigu Woldesenbet, who has served as President of Addis Ababa Women’s Association for the past eight years, also believes that her organization mobilizes its large membership to vote for women candidates. Consequently, she believes elected women should address women’s concerns as effectively as they can. My other interviewees said that just because a woman is in power does not automatically mean that she is aware of gender issues. She may not have the capacity to analyse and critique gender blind laws, policies and decisions. There is thus a need for capacity building among women leaders.

Selome Taddesse shared her experiences candidly. When she was a political advisor at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington D.C., she expressed concern about a health insurance package that excluded reproductive health. Her views mobilized other female colleagues and they managed to convince the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to improve their health package. However, she said she would not claim that mobilisation was based on any profound gender consciousness. Although she was sympathetic to women and their cause, she believed that her primary duty was to handle her professional responsibilities. For instance, she said she never had qualms about representing the Ethiopian government as the spokesperson during the war with Eritrea. She believed the war was just, and she was busy focusing on her duties, rather than the gender perspective on war and peace (Selome 2007).

- ***How Do We Increase Effectiveness of Women in Decision Making?***

Another important point relates to the challenge of achieving success in women’s agendas and increasing the role of women decision makers. Most of my interviewees recognize the importance of women’s education and capacity building. Measures taken by the Ministry of Education to increase girl’s enrolment and the various measures taken to increase the number of women teachers. The measure of affirmative action applied to increase the number of female students was applauded as a positive development. However, it is also recognized that there are still monumental challenges related to school dropouts. Most of the progress in the increase in girl’s enrolment may be attributed to various other factors. Some of my interviewees believe that one of the elements that facilitated girls’ enrolment may have been the fact that a woman held the position of Minister of Education for 12 years (1993 - 2005).

Most of my interviewees outside of formal politics believe that women in positions of power have not been able to establish a track record for advancing women's cause, whether in the executive or in the legislature.

There is a considerable divergence of opinion regarding why women have not been able to achieve significant success in this area. Most women in elective office, and those in appointed positions, come from the ruling party or are loyal to it. The majority of my interviewees from civil society believe that these women are answerable to the party line on every point, and that they would face the threat of being disfavoured and demoted, even losing their position or their chance at re-nomination, should they diverge from it.

Some of my interviewees, who have been party members or loyal government officials, believe that the ruling party would not reprimand its members for raising gender friendly agendas or for advocating progress towards gender equality. They believe that EPRDF is a party that allows its members to raise a variety of issues, although implementation of proposals may not necessarily follow. In their opinion, it is an unwarranted fear that discourages women from pushing gender friendly agendas.

Zewde Abegaz contests this view. She said that at all levels, including civil society, the ability to advocate is limited, despite the assumption that gender is a soft issue: "Yes everyone can talk about gender in Ethiopia and we have come a long way in establishing policy and legal frameworks, but it is still a challenge to raise an issue that has the potential to destabilize the building blocks of power and social relations." It is undeniable that government has delineated a safe zone for discussions. She said that even among civil society groups, only EWLA that has dared to challenge accepted power relations in all their manifestations. She observed that EWLA has also paid the price for this advocacy facing suspension in 2001 under the accusation that the public statement made by its Director amounted to public incitement against the government. Zewde believes it will be difficult for women holding official positions unless the entire context becomes more tolerant and women are progressively empowered at all levels. In her view, civil society has a crucial role in this struggle (Zewde 2006).

Almost all of my interviewees lamented the unfortunate lack of support for women officials among civil society. They feel it is important to support and encourage women political leaders and those in government if we expect them to deliver on behalf of women. Civil society members should contribute to the capacity building of women politicians, particularly those coming from rural

areas. The fact that women in formal politics do not have an established alliance with independent groups makes them feel that their sole constituency and source of power is their party. Despite various political agendas women should be able to work beyond party lines. After all, most men tend to agree on the issue of gender inequality, regardless of party affiliation.

The lack of confidence is clear among women politicians when it comes to dealing with and working with civil society groups. Women politicians are often suspicious of these groups. Sometimes they are not even clear where they stand. Unfortunately there is also an element of competition among formal politicians and other civil society groups. This view is expressed by one of the members of Parliament that I have interviewed.

There is no easy answer to the question of how women should exercise power and how they should advance the cause of women. If women have fought over the years for women's participation in decision making, with the hope and expectation that women will support their cause once they are in power, then those in power should strive to deliver on these expectations. The performance and effectiveness of women decision makers depends on the entire issue of women's empowerment, including the empowerment of women leaders themselves. Furthermore, the strengthened role of civil society to demand accountability from elected and appointed leaders, including women leaders, is critical. This does not exclude the accountability of women leaders in civil society.

- ***Overall Assessment and the Way Forward***

The subject of women's participation in public decision making is a broad one. As defined in this thesis it includes both the formal and informal participation of women in policy making and governance both at the community level and in formal settings such as the parliament. This thesis argues that women's leadership, participation in formal politics and the organized independent work of women's groups are critical and interrelated. The dynamism of one depends on the others. This is demonstrated by the momentum built between 1997 and 2003, during which time EWLA was actively engaged in research and law reform advocacy that catalysed the agenda for legislative reform. Women parliamentarians and other stakeholders were actively involved in this process and succeeded in obtaining amendments to various laws that negatively discriminated against women.

As we can see from Chapter Two of this study, women's participation in formal politics and community welfare have not been new experiences in Ethiopia. Some women have always been active agents of national welfare and change. However, the commonly shared experience of women across generations is that they have not been recognized and rewarded for their contributions. They have also not been afforded enabling environments to strengthen their capacities and opportunities. This indicates the need for continued struggle by women and flexibility in adopting suitable strategies.

Data gathered for this study further demonstrates that there should be strong collaboration between institutions that are established to advance democracy, human rights and public welfare, including those that advance the cause of women and the women's independent movement. Formal institutions have the political power to make decisions. Independent women's organizations have the skill and flexibility to advocate, without being limited by some of the constraints faced by formal institutions. However, legislation, regulations and internal codes of conduct also limit the work of civil society groups. My findings highlight the need to create strategic alliances between civil society groups and formal institutions, such as the Women's Affairs Ministry and women parliamentarians, to avoid fragmentation. These alliances are imperative for achieving a consolidated impact.

While emphasizing the importance of collaboration, it is also critical to examine the vision, capacity, respective responsibilities, opportunities and pitfalls facing the various actors, particularly women leaders.

It is appropriate to recognize the political will shown by the EFDRE government in terms of providing the necessary legal and policy framework to help advance the cause of women in Ethiopia. As we have seen from interviewees in this study, views vary on the amount of credit that should go to the government in this regard. Some are of the opinion that the role of government is to create laws and policies beyond which women should take the responsibility to fight and demand for their rights. Alternately, others argue that enacting laws and developing broad policy statements is not sufficient. Instead, the government should commit itself to delivering policy objectives and establishing effective institutional strategies which include adequate and competent human resources and funding to support these initiatives. Moreover, an action plan with measurable indicators should be developed for regular tracking. However, due to the nature of the struggle, even in cases where the government has both the good will and the required institutional, financial and monitoring mechanisms, women's groups have to

be vigilant. Setbacks are inevitable if women's organised independent voices are weakened.

In Ethiopia, the establishment of an independent Ministry for Women's Affairs and the adoptions of a National Action Plan with measurable indicators is encouraging. While it is important that the government and donor countries continue to supply institutional and financial resources, it is also imperative that the independent women's movement fully participates in the realization of national and international commitments made by the government, particularly through their catalysing and advocacy niche.

It is not realistic to present Ethiopian civil society groups, particularly women's groups, as dynamic and vibrant. Chapter Four highlights the relative young age and small number of advocacy NGOs, despite increased interest of some of the NGOs that initially provided social and economic services in the area of women's legal and human rights. Civil society groups should have a clear vision, and should be assertive enough to advance their agendas. Most importantly they should be able and willing to collaborate with each other and work around strategies to influence government policies positively.

The parliament has special responsibility to create an enabling environment. The space and enabling environment for civil society operation should be expanded to meet the standards set by the Constitution and other international conventions pertaining to freedom of association. Careful consideration should be made to ensure that subordinate laws and administrative regulations will not systematically infringe upon freedom of association. One measure that has been long awaited in this regard is the adoption of civil society legislation. The content of the legislation should measure up to the standards set by the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which Ethiopia has ratified and domesticated.

The support extended by bilateral and multilateral institutions is critically important to support the work of civil society groups in Ethiopia. The EU Civil Society Fund, from which various organizations are benefiting, is one of the best practices in this regard. The Ethiopian Ministry of Capacity Building should get involved in supporting and expanding the space and capacity of civil society organizations, as they are critical actors in the movement towards democracy and good governance. To be more specific, organizations such as EWLA should hold to their vision and reinvigorate their dynamism. Networks like NEWA should strive to locate their niche and build a collective bridge so that they can broaden their influence.

The issue of women in formal politics is complex. As we have seen in Chapter Four, women in parliament believe that they are doing their best to discharge their mandate as parliamentarians and to contribute to the agenda of women's advancement. On the other hand, opposition members of Parliament and women in civil society believe that despite the increase in the number of women in Parliament, they have not been able to prove their influence except during the law reform deliberation spearheaded by civil society groups.

As indicated by interviewees during this study, there are various factors that affect the impact and effectiveness of women leaders, not only in Ethiopia but also elsewhere in the world. The issue of political skill, lack of access to core decision making opportunities, of balancing political loyalty with gender agendas, and of overall opportunities for capacity building are all factors that come into play.

Thus far, most women members of Parliament and other women decision makers come from the ruling party. Hence it is imperative that the ruling party seriously reflect on how much more space women politicians should have to advance the cause of women. Candid dialogue, stocktaking and encouragement may also be helpful in removing unwarranted fears that limit the effectiveness of women politicians.

When women politicians are vocal and effective, they will be role models for many young women. Regrettably, our young women currently do not have many role models to look up to.

Alliance building among women in formal politics and civil society will be useful to enhance the confidence and effectiveness of both groups. Eventually, there should be various avenues for women to enter into politics. We need to cultivate the culture and expand the political space for members of civil society to join politics as independent candidates, party members, or even to form women's political parties. If the government believes in the role of women as leaders, all potentially innovative avenues should be encouraged and fostered.

While this research is largely focused on mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness of women actors in both formal and informal settings, deliberate steps to bring women to decision making positions must also be pursued. The decision taken by EPRDF to increase the number of women represented in the Federal Parliament to the benchmark of 30% is encouraging. The political will shown by regional councils such as the Tigray and Oromia council where

women council members have increased by close to 50% is even more inspiring. However, this principle of fair representation should be reflected at all levels of party structures and executive branches of federal, regional and local governments.

Finally as opposition parties are struggling to find space and consolidate the opportunity for political struggle, they should make their unwavering commitment to gender issues and women's equality clear by articulating how they plan to improve the economic, social and political status of Ethiopian women. Even though they are not the party in power, we still want to hear their views on gender equality.

“We must begin to understand that a revolution entails not only the willingness to lay our lives on the front line and get killed. To die for the revolution is a one-shot deal; to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns.”

Francis Beal
Feminist, Peace & Justice Political Activist

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Annex

Interview Participants

No.	Name	Title	Date of interview	Remark
1	Ms. Selome Tadesse	Independent consultant	December 23, 2006	Former Director General of Ethiopian Radio and Television and Government Spokesperson
2	Ms. Original Wolde-Giorgis	Independent consultant	December 25, 2006	One of the Founders of EWLA and a prominent women's rights activist.
3	Netsanet Mengistu	Executive Director of local NGO called Progynist	December 26, 2006	Former political prisoner.
4	Ms. Zewde Abegaz	UNICEF, Section Chief, Women and Child Protection Section	December 27, 2006	An outspoken and prominent gender activist
5	Bahru Zewde	Executive Director of Forum for Social Studies	December 27, 2006	A distinguished historian and author of several books on Ethiopian history.
6	Tsigue Woldesenbet	President of Addis Ababa Women's Association	January 3, 2007	Previously a teacher and a political activist

7.	Ms. Gifty Abasiya	Chairperson of the Women's Standing Committee. Member of EPRDF	January 3, 2007	Former Head of the Women's Affairs Office
8.	Dr. Zewde Gebre-Sellassie	Consultant	January 4, 2007	Distinguished civil servant, historian and diplomat.
9.	Prof. Andreas Eshete	President of Addis Ababa University	January 5, 2007	Distinguished intellectual
10.	Ms. Meselech Wodajo	Member of Parliament. Member of the women's Standing Committee	January 5, 2007	She is serving a second term in parliament.
11.	Dr. Muluaem Tarekegn	Member of parliament from the opposition CUD	January 10, 2007	She has defected to Sweden to seek political asylum.
12.	Mr. Tefera Wallwa	Minster of Capacity Building	January 11, 2007	Among the key actors in the ruling party (EPRDF)
13.	Ms. Hirut Delebo	Minster of Women's Affairs	January 23, 2007	The first woman to be appointed to the newly established Ministry
14.	Ms. Auba Mohamed	Deputy Minster of Women's Affairs Office	January 23, 2007	