
Women in Ethiopia

Meron Zeleke Eresso, Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University

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Summary

There are number of Ethiopian women from different historical epochs known for their military prowess or diplomatic skills, renowned as religious figures, and more. Some played a significant role in fighting against the predominant patriarchal value system, including Ye Kake Yewerdewt in the early 19th century. Born in Gurage Zone, she advocated for women's rights and condemned many of the common cultural values and practices in her community, such as polygamy, exclusive property inheritance rights for male children and male family members, and the practice of arranged and forced marriage. Among the Arsi Oromo, women have been actively engaged in sociojudicial decision-making processes, as the case of the *Sinqee* institution, a women-led customary institution for dispute resolution, shows. This reflects the leading role and status women enjoyed in traditional Arsi Oromo society, both within the family and in the wider community.

In Harar, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in eastern Ethiopia, female Muslim scholars have played a significant role in teaching and handing down Islamic learning. One such religious figure was the Harari scholar Ay Amatullāh (1851–1893). Another prominent female religious figure from Arsi area, Sittī Momina (d. 1929), was known for her spiritual practices and healing powers. A shrine in eastern Ethiopia dedicated to Sittī Momina is visited by Muslim and Christian pilgrims from across the country. Despite the significant and multifaceted role played by women in the Ethiopian community, however, there is a paucity of data illustrating the place women had and have in Ethiopia's cultural and historical milieu.

Keywords: women, Ethiopia, gender, history, political participation, African women's history

Background

*Women have been shockingly neglected in Ethiopian social and historical studies.*¹

The strong cultural values in Ethiopia underpin the discriminatory elements pertaining to women's involvement in decision-making at different levels, as can be inferred from common Amharic aphorisms such as “a mother plans for the day; a father plans for the year” and “a woman does not know anything, but gives birth to a knowledgeable child.” The family management roles inscribed in the sayings and in the cultural ethos emphasize men's and women's separate spatial dimensions of existence. Such discriminatory gendered family

management roles are often framed in terms of culturally constructed gendered stereotypes that often lead to the exclusion of women from leadership roles at the family level, hence cultivating men's expectations for the allegiance and subservience of women.²

These stereotypical attitudes toward family management roles have long constituted a cultural barrier to Ethiopian women occupying leadership positions beyond the household. Accordingly, women's leadership is largely absent in Ethiopia.³ Furthermore, such underlying cultural values contribute to the dominant trend of disregarding women's contributions in the public domain, which has further resulted in a paucity of data illustrating historical trends in women's political participation in Ethiopia. Accordingly, there is no exhaustive historical investigation of women in Ethiopia documenting their role as social agents in different historical periods.

Notable Ethiopian Women and Women's Movements From Different Historical Eras

Ethiopia's legendary oral history is traced back to the Solomonic dynasty of the Queen of Sheba. The Solomonic dynasty, which is also known as the House of Solomon, is the ruling imperial house of the Ethiopian Empire, claiming direct lineal descent from King Solomon. One of the early kingdoms in Ethiopia was the 10th-century BCE kingdom of Damot with its capital at Yeha. The famous Aksumite kingdom from the 1st century CE, with its capital at Aksum, was a major power in the Red Sea region and is known for the introduction of Christianity in 4th century CE. The Zagwe dynasty of the 11th–13th centuries, with its capital in Lailebela, was overthrown in 1270 by Yekun Amlak. He reinstated the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopian history, which lasted until 1974 and the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie by the communist military government, the Derg. In 1991 the socialist regime in Ethiopia was defeated by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

In all these historical epochs in Ethiopia, women have been influential in their own right, and in some circumstances they were notable for their relationship to an important man. There were prominent women from different ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds, as can be inferred from the case of women presented in this section. There were a number of women who either directly or indirectly ruled parts of Ethiopia or played a significant role in leading armies, including those women who acted as regents for their minor sons or grandsons. This section presents a brief account of some prominent women in the history of Ethiopia since early times. However, this is not an exhaustive list of all notable Ethiopian women in Ethiopian history, but only a few selected from different historical eras.

Notable Women From Early History Until the 19th Century

One important female figure in Ethiopian history is the legendary Queen of Sheba, whose history goes back to 1,000 years before the birth of Christ. This legendary queen is referred to by a number of names: Saba by the locals, Makeda, and Belqis by Arabs. She has been described as a queen from the coast of Eritrea who ruled the area.⁴ During her visit to Israel she had an affair with King Solomon and had a son called Menelik I, who is associated with

the birth of the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia.⁵ The Queen of Sheba is equally known for proclaiming Judaism the official religion of Ethiopia. The detailed account of the legend of the Queen of Sheba appears in the *Kebra Negast* (Glory of the Kings) written in the 14th century.

Another significant female figure in Ethiopian history is Queen Yodit (Judith), described as Yodit Gudut (Yodit the extraordinary).⁶ Yodit is remembered for her attacks on the Aksumite kingdom and on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.⁷ Historical accounts about Yodit are quite diverse and at times contradictory regarding her genealogy, her regal name, and her manner and character. Her name was signified differently and references made to her include *Esato* (the fire), portraying her as ruthless and rebellious. The historical notes of the Arabic writer Ibn Haukal from the 10th century mention a significant female ruler of the vast kingdom of the Habash: "The country of the habasha https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abyssinian_people has been ruled by a woman for many years now: she has killed the king of the *habasha* who was called *Haḍani* [from Ge'ez <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ge%27ez> Until today she rules with complete independence in her own country and the frontier areas of the country of the *Haḍani*, in the southern part of [the country of] the *habashi*."⁸ She is characterized in some historical writings as the archenemy of Christianity and of the monarchy in Ethiopia.

The reign of Emperor Zara Yacob (1434–1434) was a time when female leadership was a reality in Ethiopia. Emperor Zara Yacob appointed his daughters and female relatives to govern most parts of the country, including his nine daughters who were chosen as governors.⁹ Women have been governors in Amhara, Begemidir, Damot Afar, and Shoa.¹⁰ Furthermore, during the time of Ras Michael in Tigray region (1692–1784), more than 10,000 women took part in military campaigns.¹¹

There are notable Ethiopian women who were known for their essential leadership roles and diplomatic skills. Three prominent women— Eleni, Dil Wenbera, and Seble Wengel—made immense contributions to changing the course of Ethiopian history in the 16th century. Empress Eleni Mohammed (d. 1522) was of Hadiya descent, from the southern part of Ethiopia; she joined the Solomonic dynasty through a political marriage to Emperor Zera Yacob (r. 1434–1468). Eleni was baptized around 1445, upon her marriage. She gained more prominence after the death of her husband and is described by historical sources as an astute and self-assured woman. She served as regent between the years 1507 and 1561 and is remembered for her role as co-regent and advisor to three Ethiopian emperors: her husband, his successor Baeda Maryam (r. 1468–1478), and Naod (r. 1490–1505).¹² She played an active role in a palace coup that led to the deposition and execution of Eskinder in 1486. Furthermore, she is known for having sent a diplomatic envoy to the Portuguese to request military support. Historical sources document her great wisdom and sound political judgment. This was a time when there was a growing tension between Muslims and Christians over the monopoly of the Zeila trade route. As a way of avoiding potential conflicts in Ethiopia between local Muslims and Christians, she came up with the policy of appeasement of local Muslims as a way of ensuring and safeguarding the Christian kingdom's share of the caravan trade. Accordingly, she made matrimonial arrangements with the Muslim ruling families of Adal sultanate.¹³ At the same time, she was concerned about the potential danger posed by the Ottoman Turks expanding across the Middle East and along the Red Sea coast. While maintaining the policy of conciliation toward local Muslims, she sent an envoy to King

Emmanuel of Portugal in 1509 declaring her interest in a military alliance against Muslims. This letter has been translated in Sylvia Pankhurst's study on three notable Ethiopian women. Part of the letter reads:

Our very dear and very Christian king of Portugal ... we have heard that the sultan of Cairo assembles a great army to attack your forces to avenge the damage done to him by the captains and men-at-arms you have in India ... Against the assault of such enemies we are prepared to send a good number of men-at-arms who will give assistance in the seaboard areas ... In addition to the above we advise you that if it is agreed to join our forces, we shall have sufficient strength to destroy the enemies of our holy faith ... [But] we could not put an army at the sea where on we have no power. For this reason alliance with you, who thanks god are so powerful in maritime warfare, is necessary to us. If you wish to arm a thousand warship we will provide the necessary food and furnish you with everything for such a force in very great abundance.¹⁴

Bati Dil Wenbera Mahfuz was another prominent female historical figure in Ethiopian history. Unlike the aforementioned women, Bati Dil Wenbera was a Muslim, the daughter of the 15th-century Adal Sultanate warhead Mahfouz Mohammed (d. 1517) and a wife of Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim Al Ghazi or "Gagn Ahmad" (the left-handed, c. 1506–February 21, 1543). She was known for her extraordinary patriotic zeal.¹⁵ Dil Wenbera induced her husband to seek revenge against the Christian forces who had killed her father. She accompanied her husband on military expeditions, for which she was criticized by the soldiers as a transgression of the traditions that instruct women to stay away from the public sphere. Dil Wenbera delivered two sons, in 1531 and 1533 in Ifat and Tigre, while accompanying her husband on military expeditions.¹⁶ Following the death of her husband, Dil Wenbera fled to Harar. She played a significant role in the fight against the Christian ruler Gelawdeos (1540–1559) who had killed her husband. She is famous for her extraordinary diplomatic skills in negotiating with the Christian powers for the exchange of captives, including her son Muhammad Ahmad. She negotiated a deal to return Minas (r. 1559–1563), the son of King Libna Dingil (r. 1508–1540), who was held hostage by her husband Ahmad Gagn, in exchange for her son.¹⁷ In 1552, Dil Wenbera married Emir Nur Ibn Mujahid with the aim of avenging the death of her husband. In 1559, Ibn Nur was killed and beheaded by Emperor Gelawdewos in Fatagar.

Seble Wengel (1482–1560), the wife of King Lebne Dingil, was known for her diplomatic skills and as a formidable and astute military strategist. Seble Wengel was originally from Tigray. Following the defeat of her husband and persecution by the Muslim forces, she was exiled in the monastery of Debre Damo until the arrival of the Portuguese military mission. Empress Seble Wengel and her brother Bahre Negash Dori welcomed the Portuguese army. She coordinated the cooperation between local and foreign military forces in the fight against the forces of Ahmad Gagn. Seble Wengel is said to have accompanied the Portuguese throughout the campaign. She took part in two major battles, including one that took place in September 1542 in which the Ethiopian and Portuguese Christian forces fought against Ahmad Gagn and the Turkish forces. Upon facing defeat at this first battle, she devised a military strategy of marching to the south and strengthening the Christian army under her son, Emperor Gelawdewos (1540–1559). Accordingly, the Christian forces from the north and south joined arms for the battle that took place in February 1543, the historical Battle of Woina Dega,

where the forces of Ahmad Gragn were defeated. Seble Wengel advised her son Ase Tserse Dengil, who remained in power for 34 years. Galawdewos's reign is also remembered for the considerable role his queen mother, Seble Wengel, played.¹⁸

The Zemene Mesafint (called the Era of the Princess, c. 1769–1855) was a time in Ethiopian history when the country was divided into several regions without a central government, and it was a time when the emperors from the Solomonic dynasty were reduced to puppet leaders whose authority was confined to the capital city, Gondar. In this era several influential women came to the forefront in different parts of the empire. One example is Mintewab (1706–1773), a wife of Emperor Bekaffa (r. 1721–1730), who is remembered for her leadership role. She was the mother of Iyasu II and grandmother of Iyoas I. She was crowned as co-ruler with her young son Iyasu II in 1730. She was also known as Empress Wolete Georigs (her baptismal name). She is known for her architectural contributions and for building significant structures in the historical city of Gondar, including the Church of St. Mary at Gusakuam.

From the 19th century, Empress Tayitu Butul, the wife of Emperor Menelik II (r. 1889–1913), is remembered for her contribution to the fight against colonialism during the first Italian invasion (1895–1896), her significant foreign diplomatic role, her activism for women's rights, and her role in the establishment of the capital city of Addis Ababa. According to Bahiru Zewde,

a woman of exceptional strength of character, Taytu had played an important role in the glorious events of her husband's reign. She was the real founder of Addis Ababa. ... Her active role in the Battle of Adwa, as a strategist as well as a great moral force behind the Ethiopian warriors has come to be enshrined in tradition.¹⁹

Likewise, Count Gleichen noted: "Queen Taitu has the reputation of being a woman of much ability and it is generally understood that the king owes much of his success to her counsels."²⁰ According to estimations made by historians, between 20,000 and 30,000 women participated in the Battle of Adwa alone.²¹ These women played several roles ranging from direct military service to support roles such as nursing and caring for the soldiers, working as advisors, translators, intelligence officers, and many more. During the battle of Adwa, Tayitu led her own troops and the female camp followers.²² After the death of Emperor Menelik II, his daughter Empress Zewditu took over the government and reigned for fourteen years, from 1916 to 1930, as the first woman crowned in Ethiopian history.

The aforementioned women are among those who played a significant role in national politics in the early and later medieval history of Ethiopia. The following sections address women's participation in national politics and leadership from 1930 to the present.

The Women's Movement During the Imperial Regime (1930–1974)

The coronation of Tafari Mekonnen (Emperor Haile Selassie) as *negusa negest* (king of kings) of Ethiopia took place on November 2, 1930. The Ethiopian Women's Charity Organization was established in 1933 with the aim of securing aid from the International Red Cross Association and providing food and basic support to Ethiopian fighters against the Italian invasion.

During this imperial regime, elite women, including the daughters of Emperor Haile Selassie, initiated women's branches of the Ethiopian Red Cross Society and the Ethiopian Patriotic Association.²³ Accordingly, Emperor Haile Selassie's eldest daughter, Princess Tenagnewerq, became the association's honorary president. The main objective for setting up the associations was to use them as political machinery to mobilize women for the Ethio-Italian war. In 1935 the Emperor's other daughter, Princess Tsehai, initiated a women's organization known as the Ethiopian Women's Volunteer Service Association, which was later named the Ethiopian Women's Work Association (EWWA) under the patronage of the princess's mother, Empress Menen.²⁴ This was the first nationwide organization, with about forty branches throughout the country. Around 277 women were incorporated in the list of patriots earning medals from Emperor Haile Selassie I on January 20, 1945.²⁵

The establishment of these associations in no way furthered the political participation of women, as these were very loyal institutions with close ties to the royal family. They were elitist organizations that sided with and were controlled by the state, and they did not bring the women's agenda into national policy or regulations. Zenebe describes the association as at "worst reactionary, and at best philanthropic."²⁶

Another women's organization called the Armed Forces' Wives Association was also founded during the imperial regime, with the core objective of supporting widows and children of soldiers. Furthermore, the Ethiopian Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) was established during the same period. Emperor Haile Selassie's parliament was the first to have female representatives, following the revision of the Constitution in 1955, which allowed the members of the legislature to be elected through universal suffrage. Sinidu Gebru, the only female member of Black Lion, a resistance movement against the Italian occupation, was the first woman elected to the parliament. She served as the vice president of the Upper House Senate and is renowned for her excellent contributions to the parliament.

The rise in the number of educated women in Ethiopia is correlated with the active participation of women in national politics. In the 1960s and 1970s the number of female students in higher academic institutions was on the rise, reaching 356 female students in 1970.²⁷ The mid-1960s marked a militant phase in the student movement in Ethiopia, when male university students initiated a movement aiming to enlighten their fellow female students and to set them free from gendered thinking that excludes women from engagement in politics. This movement was referred to as a "battle against ignorance and exploitation."²⁸

The year 1968 marked a turning point in the mobilization of female university students to the student movement. When the University Women's Club organized a fashion show at Seddest Kilo campus, a group of male students tried to stop it, referring to it "as a manifestation of cultural imperialism," and violent clashes between the students and the military ensued.²⁹ Walleign Makonnen, the renowned student movement leader, wrote a critical article entitled "Message to Our Sisters" in the student newsletter *The Struggle* explaining how such shows reflect Western cultural imperialism and contribute to the exclusion of female students from key roles in politics.³⁰ This theme was addressed by the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA).

Female students joined active opposition parties such as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (referred to as MESON). Following the crackdown on the student movement, some female students left the country and joined overseas student unions, including the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe (ESUE) and the Ethiopian Student Union in North America (ESUNA).

The early the 1970s marked the proliferation of female study groups. The Eleventh Congress of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe took place in 1971 and was organized by the Ethiopian Female Student Association of Europe. Women also had an active presence in the February 1974 uprising against the monarchical regime. This was a time when thousands of women from different walks of life raised their voices in the mass movement that claimed "land to the tiller." This was also a time when women raised issues such as the demand for equal pay for equal work and challenged the monarchy and the deeply entrenched public discourse on gender inequality.

The Women's Movement During the Derg Regime (1974–1991)

In 1974, a Co-coordinating Committee of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia (PMAC), also known as the Derg, overthrew the imperial government and seized power, declaring a socialist state on December 20, 1974. The Derg regime marked a time of increased politicization of women's demands and resulted in the formation of the Women's Coordinating Committee (WCC) in 1975 as part of the Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs (POMOA). Women from both the EPRP and MEISON [joined the committee](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-Ethiopia_Socialist_Movement). Most of the leaders were student movement affiliates who actively networked with women's movements in other countries. The committee set out to mobilize women through Peasant Associations (PAs) and local establishments. Two of their goals were to address women's social, political, and economic problems and to establish women's professional associations. They were instrumental in bringing women's issues to the national agenda and in organizing lectures, seminars, and political education forums for women.³¹

It was during the Derg regime that the first International Women's Day was celebrated in Ethiopia, on March 8, 1975, with around 700 women taking part in the event. The objective of celebrating this day was to pass on the message that women should have an active stake in the national defense and to teach them about the revolution.³² In September 1980, a total of 1,010 women took part in the celebration of International Women's Day.³³ Post 1976 marked the consolidation of political power of the Derg regime. This was followed by a crackdown on opposition and radical groups, including the WCC. New leaders appointed by the Derg replaced the WCC leaders. The new WCC's initial focus was on the dual oppression of women based on both class and gender.³⁴

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the Derg streamlined women's mobilization and organization as a key strategy of consolidating its power. At this time women were actively involved in productive work, started attending compulsory literacy classes, and started engaging in various state-led associations. The Edgatbehebrat, literally "Development through Cooperation" Campaign, was initiated on December 21, 1974. It aimed to send high school and university students and teachers to the countryside as a way of winning mass support for

the Derg and its philosophy of “Ethiopia Tikdem” (Ethiopia first).³⁵ There were a significant number of women among the *zamachs* (campaigners), including members and sympathizers of the EPRP and the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement. The *Zemecha* (the campaign) was a tool for female campaigners to spread the “woman question” to rural parts of the country. The objective was to set up a nationwide women’s movement, a goal that the Derg considered specious as different actors used the campaign to pursue their respective political agendas. The campaign was officially ended in July 1976.³⁶

The Derg launched the “Red Terror” in November 1977.³⁷ The Red Terror was a movement that targeted anyone that potentially opposed its rule, leading to the executions of thousands of EPRP and MEISON members, including female activists. This repressive rule by the Derg aborted the arising women’s movement by banning the movements and silencing the radical women in society.

The EWWA was among the institutions severely affected by the repressive policy of the Derg regime. Most of its leaders went into exile, while a few were imprisoned. The Derg confiscated the property and businesses of EWWA under its nationalization policy. The other association that existed during the Derg regime was the Ethiopian Mother’s Association (EMA), which had operated underground since its establishment by EPRP members who were part of the Women’s Committee. The EMA is remembered for its resistance to the Derg, mainly through the U-uta campaign it organized during the Red Terror in 1977. During raids by the Derg military, mothers emerged from their houses and made the U-uta calls by screaming and calling on other women in the neighborhood to join them and stop the military from arresting the youth.

One strategy used by the Derg to attain mass support was to organize the community in different associations in which membership was obligatory. The associations targeted different parts of the community, such as peasants (the PAs), Women’s Associations (WAs), and Youth Associations (YAs). Women were less represented in the PAs and other development cooperatives than their male counterparts. Following the administrative restructuring and setting up of the PAs in 1975, the government set up and established the WAs, whereby all women above the age of fifteen residing in the PAs were required to join the respective WAs in their neighborhood.

The Revolutionary Ethiopian Women’s Association (REWA) was established on July 17, 1980. This was a nationwide umbrella women’s association whereby all WAs in the PAs were part of the REWA branches in their respective areas.³⁸ By targeting all women above the age of fifteen, the Derg aimed to indoctrinate young women in its political agenda. Members of REWA were expected to play an active role in various development projects, including handicrafts, retail shops, flour mills, kindergartens, and so forth, run by REWA. This was considered as offering women the opportunity to enter the public sphere by challenging the traditions that confine women to the domestic sphere. Despite such mobilization of women for indoctrination, the number of women in higher political posts was insignificant. In 1984, only one woman was a full member of the Central Committee, and of the 2,000 delegates who attended the Workers’ party of Ethiopia’s (WPE’s) inaugural congress in 1984, only 6 percent were women.³⁹

The 1987 Constitution of the Derg incorporated the rights of women. During the Derg regime, a popular socialist slogan—"Without women there can be no revolution"—gave the impression that women were among the key political actors in shaping national politics. Despite the constitutional rights granted to women, and despite the gender inclusive discourse, in real terms there was no official appointment of women to important positions, including posts in the legislative and administrative sectors.⁴⁰ Of all ministerial positions, there was only one appointed female vice minister in 1987.

As a way of mainstreaming the women's welfare system, the government established a focal unit for women's affairs in some government institutions, including the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Economic Development.⁴¹ Most of the structures set up by the Derg in relation to women's affairs in Ethiopia were ineffectual in empowering women in different socioeconomic domains. They only contributed toward monitoring women's movement in the country and stifling any form of potential radicalism and consciousness. In May 1991, the Derg was defeated by the EPRDF, a coalition of left-wing ethnic rebel groups that overthrew the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WEP).

Post-1991 Ethiopia Under the EPRDF (1991–Present)

Women played a significant role in the armed struggle against the Derg regime. Female fighters constituted one-third of all fighters in the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had about 40,000 female liberation fighters. Martha (who is also referred to as Kahsu) is a female fighter who was commander of a TPLF unit in northern Ethiopia. During the armed struggle against the Derg, the TPLF established two schools for women, called "Martha" and "March 8," in 1983, a move that was part of the process of creating the Tigray Women's Association under the control of the TPLF.⁴² The TPLF also formed a separate women's organization in Tigray, the Woman Fighter's Association of Tigray (WFAT). Despite such strong representation of women in the armed struggle to overthrow the Derg, the TPLF has been widely criticized for the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles after the overthrow of the Derg. As Bisewar states, "under EPRDF/TPLF rule (1991–present), women have found themselves submerged under renewed forms of repression, seen their status further deteriorating, and feel robbed of their agency."⁴³

The transition to a democratic political system under the rule of the EPRDF created new spaces for women's activism in Ethiopia. The post-1991 period marked the mushrooming of civil society organizations (CSOs) representing different disadvantaged groups, including women and children. The Ethiopian Women Lawyer's Association (EWLA) was established in 1995 to fight gender-based violence (GBV) and to challenge legislation that discriminates against women. Other CSOs working on women's issues include the Addis Ababa Women's Association (AAWA), the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), and the Organization Against Gender-Based Violence.⁴⁴ NEWA has the goal of advancing women's rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment in Ethiopia. The AAWA's core objective is working toward social, political, and economic empowerment of women in Addis Ababa City.

However, this opening was short-lived as the EPRDF government started putting pressure on those organizations and finally adopted a new constraining law on January 4, 2009.⁴⁵ In post-1991 Ethiopia the rhetoric of state development was used to justify the Ethiopian

regime's severe restrictions on political opposition, civil society, and the media, leaving citizens with few options for political participation other than through the ruling party and its affiliated mass organizations. This brings up a paradox: while women were encouraged and expected to contribute to creating economic growth, they had very limited options for political maneuver.

In 1992 the EPRDF set up Women's Affairs Offices (WAO) throughout the different regional states in the country. This entailed setting up Women's Affairs Bureaus (WABs) at the ministries and regional Women's Affairs Departments (WADs). As was the case for the Derg, such structures best served the interest of the ruling party, mainly in mobilizing mass support and containing potential resistance, and were used to enable the implementation of government directives.

The first National Policy on Ethiopian Women (NPEW) was adopted in September 1993 but was not implemented for another seven years due to the lack of a strategic document. A National Action Plan for Gender Equality (NAPGE) was implemented in 2000 through the collaborative efforts of the WAO and the Donor Group for the Advancement of Women (GAW).

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution of 1995 guaranteed the rights of women, including equality with men in employment, marriage, and acquisition and management of property including land, and equal participation in policy decision-making. Moreover, there were revisions and adoptions of different normative frameworks that directly and indirectly related to the provision of rights for women, including the Revised Family Code (2000), which set new standards for equality between men and women; the Revised Criminal Code (2004), which criminalized domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation, early marriage, abduction, and trafficking in women and minors; the National Plan of Action for Gender Equality (2006-2010); the Women's Change and Development Package (2007); the National Strategy on Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) against Women and Children in Ethiopia (2013); the National Girls Education Strategy (2010); and the Directive to Prevent Gender Based Violence at Schools (2014).

In addition to the provision of enabling normative frameworks, post-1991 Ethiopia witnessed a rise in the number of women in political leadership roles. During the 1995 elections, fifteen (2.74 percent) women were elected to join the House of Representatives out of 547 representatives. In the 2000 elections, the number rose to 42 out of 128, while during the 2005 elections this number increased to 116 out of 546. Likewise, there was a significant change in the degree of women's representation in the regional councils, going up from 5 percent (77) in 1995 to 12.9 percent (244) in 2000 and 12.5 percent (218) in 2005. In 2004/2005, before the 2005 national elections, as an affirmative action to encourage the political participation of women, the EPRDF introduced a quota system allocating 30 percent of positions to women candidates. By the year 2010, women made up 27.8 percent (152 of 547) of the legislative organ while they constituted only 9.7 percent (three of thirty-one) of the executive body of the government. The few women found in government positions were in most circumstances political appointees and party loyalists of the TPLF/EPRDF.⁴⁶

Post-2005 there was a trend of increasingly streamlining gender in grassroots organizations and the mobilization of women in different associations, the two most prominent being the Women's Associations (Yasetchmahiberat) affiliated to the ruling party and the Women's Development Armies. A Women's Development Army consists of a group of twenty-five to

thirty women residing in the same neighborhood. The smaller sub group within the bigger Women's development Army, consists of five women (a group locally referred to as, a one to five network), whereby one model woman takes up the leadership role to gather these women on a weekly basis. The ruling party uses these associations and development armies for political mobilization.

Despite such affirmative measures, very few women ran for political office or held leadership positions in political parties in the national elections that took place in Ethiopia in 2005, 2010, and 2015.⁴⁷ Women were long marginalized from such positions and key decision-making posts prior to 2018. That year marked a political transformation in Ethiopia following a period of political instability that led to a series of violent protests in different parts of the country and the declaration of consecutive states of emergency.

In April 2018, the newly appointed Prime Minister Dr. Abiy Ahmed took office. He has instituted prominent changes including the release of political prisoners, the setting out of legal, structural, and institutional reforms, the widening of the democratic space, and an end to the military stalemate with Eritrea. This also marked a historic moment in the gendered politics in Ethiopia, where the entrenched patriarchal system has long pushed women to the margins, as discussed previously.

In his inaugural speech on April 2, 2018, Prime Minister Ahmed made a remarkable statement about Ethiopian women, stressing his commitment to empowering Ethiopian women and challenging the strong patriarchal tradition of the Ethiopian state. In his six months in office, in October 2018 he introduced gender parity in the new cabinet, half of the members of which are female. On October 16, 2018, ten ministerial posts were held by women. He assigned women to the top security post, that is, Minister of National Defense, the newly formed Ministry of Peace, the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Revenue, and the Ministry of Higher Education. In announcing his new cabinet, Prime Minister Ahmed stated: "Our women ministers will disprove the old aphorism that women can't lead."

On October 25, 2018, parliament unanimously elected Ethiopia's first female president and head of state, Sahle-Work Zewde, who is the only sitting female head of state in Africa. Moreover, a renowned female women's rights activist was appointed President of the Ethiopian Federal Supreme Court, and a female opposition party leader who had been jailed for years was appointed head of the national Election Commission.

Aspects of Change and Continuity in Women's Representation in National Politics

Women's movements and the overall political participation of women in Ethiopia have witnessed a number of challenges through three consecutive regimes. Under each regime, the initial moves for women's mobilization were initiated by women themselves, but at a later stage they were streamlined and taken over by the state with the expectation that they would align with the state's best interest. The common challenges include lack of autonomy of women's associations, the dearth of women's organizations, systematic discrimination against women, the strict control of CSOs, and the strong inclination and preference for male leadership.

The political reforms in the country initiated in April 2018 have transformed women's engagement in the public sphere by building on a long history of women's involvement in national politics. Women's participation in decision-making is not only their democratic right, but it is also a necessary precondition for safeguarding women's interests and addressing women's pressing everyday socioeconomic problems.

Thus, women's participation in contemporary Ethiopian politics has been gradually increasing and is at a crossroads. The recent progressive moves by the government may potentially have a positive impact in defining the role of women in national politics. As this is a phenomenon in progress, the fruits it will yield are yet to be seen. However, it is irrefutable that women's political empowerment in Ethiopia has emerged as a strong force against the patriarchal world. Unlike earlier trends that sidelined women from decision-making roles in the executive branch, the recent appointments give women the opportunity to influence policy and political agendas by addressing pressing questions and working toward creating a more inclusive society. The reform is planned in such a way that the change will reach the masses. Therefore, an effort is being made to enhance women's political representation at the lowest administrative levels.

However, being appointed to offices does not necessarily guarantee positive outcomes by itself. Hence, the question is whether an increased number of women in politics will translate into the sensible promotion of women's rights, and whether it will open up opportunities to address the structural problems of inequality. One needs to raise the critical question of whether Ethiopian women have agency and whether the appointment of women to leadership positions will translate into creating autonomous forums that enable women's democratic participation.

To sum up, some potential solutions for addressing the challenges pertaining to political participation of women include ensuring the sustainability of recent reforms by amending legal and policy frameworks; sending clear messages on the women's agenda to the wider public; safeguarding the participation of women in the 2020 election as participants, voters, and observes; and critically engaging in the reforms and ensuring that key decision-making roles are sustainably held. Different stakeholders including the government, CSOs, and women associations need to work toward the adoption of a national affirmative action policy that is binding on all political parties participating in the national election.

Discussion of the Literature

The role of women in Ethiopian history and in national politics is a theme that has received little attention from researchers. In most historical writings in Ethiopia, history is often approached from an androcentric (male-centered) perspective. There is a forthcoming publication, a handbook on Ethiopian women that is developed with the aim of addressing this observable gap.⁴⁸ The few existing historical writings discussing about women in Ethiopian history often focus on elite women. Furthermore, there is an observable gap of literature in early historical periods and there are some materials on relatively recent, the late 19th and 20th centuries. These works are often biographical in nature and draw on written sources.

There are some historical writings on elite women of the highland parts of Ethiopia mainly focusing on the late 19th and 20th centuries. One of these historical writings is the work by Sergew presenting the case of a woman, a war leader Yodit, or “Esato.” The queen also called the Queen of the Baniyal Hamiwiyah who is believed to have caused so much destruction on the Aksumite kingdom.⁴⁹ The Ethiopianist and feminist Sylvia Pankhurst was the lead founder of the journal the *Ethiopian Observer*. Three subsequent issues of the journal focused on women in Ethiopia, ranging from notable women in Ethiopian history, girls’ education, and women’s life and work in earlier eras, to discussions on changes in the economic, legal, and educational position of Ethiopian women. Sylvia Pankhurst’s history of three notable Ethiopian women (Empress Elleni, Sable Wongel, and Mentwab) is also informative. Chris Rosenfeld’s work focuses on the lives of eight women who lived during the Zemene Mesafint (1769–1855).⁵⁰ She has also written a biographical account of Empress Tayitu Butul and Emperor Menelik.⁵¹ Donald Crummey’s classic work looks at women’s access to and ownership of property in Gonderine Ethiopia and discusses how much the existing patriarchal values influenced women’s subordinate position and role in property transactions.⁵² Bahiru Taflas has addressed the use of arranged marriage as a political weapon to gain loyalty.⁵³

The writing by Tsehai Behane Selassie on female guerrilla fighters addresses the lived experiences of women fighters during the Italian occupation of 1935–1941. Her work gives special attention to four women: Likelsh Beyan, Shewareged Gedel, Shwanesh Abreha, and Kelemewriq Tiruneh.⁵⁴ A very informative and analytical study on rural women in Ethiopia by Helen Pankhurst analyzes how state-driven villagization campaigns have affected gender relations.⁵⁵

There are a number of works on women’s role in the regional separatist movements in the post-1960s period. Jenny Hammond focuses on the role of women fighters in the Tigray People’s Liberation Front.⁵⁶ Likewise, Kuwee Kumsa’s work focuses on women in the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and describes the important role women played as combatants in the OLF.⁵⁷ A number of studies on women in Ethiopia address how patriarchal norms have contributed to the subordinate status of women in society.⁵⁸ Belete’s work provides a bibliographic review on women in Ethiopian history.⁵⁹

Primary Sources

One of the main locations for primary sources is the National Archives and Library of Ethiopia (Wemezekir) located in Addis Ababa, the capital city. It was inaugurated in 1944 by Emperor Haile Selassie. It was restructured in 1999 by proclamation No. 179/1999 as a national institution by the name Ethiopian National Archives and Library Agency. The collections include ancient manuscripts going back to the 14th and 15th centuries as well as important letters exchanged by kings.

Oral accounts are a key source of information on women in Ethiopian history. Given the level of illiteracy among the rural community, which constitutes about 80 percent of the total population, oral narratives have great significance. In addition to oral accounts, the main source of data for social science researchers and historians is the local district government offices and municipality records. Other significant sources in the Ethiopian context are proverbs, poems, and songs. The work of Helen Pankhurst is exemplary in showing the value of poems as potential sources of information.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Eyayu Lulseged drew on contemporary Amharic songs from the 1950s to the 1970s to discuss the popular views of socioeconomic and political developments of the time.⁶¹

For historians interested in gender relations in Ethiopia, there are number of European sources including accounts by travelers, missionaries, and diplomats, for example, the travel account of Mansfield Parkyns.⁶² Parkyns stayed in the country for a relatively long time compared with other travelers, having lived in Tigray for nearly three years where he was associated with the court of Dejazmach Wube, the governor of Tigray (1831–1855). Another exemplary work is Augustus Wylde’s account of northern Ethiopia, which includes information about women’s household and agricultural activity, their reproductive role, and their everyday lives.⁶³

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