THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN IN ETHIOPIA: A MISSING PIECE IN THE DEVELOPMENT PUZZLE

*Seyoum Teferra**

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I. Introduction

Writing of women in Africa and Asia sociologist Chester. L. Hunt notes that in most regions of the world the process of development is regarded "as a male project in which women are given only token participation." He goes on to add that, "development represents an effort to bring the male part of the world into the twentieth century, leaving most of the women in the restricted culture of a previous era".[1] Here the term development is to be understood as the progress that a certain given society makes in the socio-economic as well as in the political spheres. One of the

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I. Introduction

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major factors why women's participation in the development process has not been significant in this part of the world may be attributed largely to their under representation at all levels of schooling. Even though today most developing countries regard education as the *sine qua non* for national development,[2] the provision of educational opportunities for women in most of these countries falls far short of the desired. For instance, the total enrollment of girls, aged between 12 and 17 years in 1975 for the following African countries was: Ethiopia 9 percent, Nigeria 14 per cent, and Ghana 38 per cent.[3] These figures indicate that women's education in Africa, and particularly in Ethiopia, has lagged behind to that of men.

The major purpose of this paper, is therefore, to examine briefly the historical past of women's education in Ethiopia at least up to 1974, with a view to identifying some of the main factors that had been operating against the education of women. It will also try to bring into focus the status of women's education in the country so as to create an awareness of the problem. Furthermore, since the search for literature, during the preparation of this paper, has shown that the corpus of research material regarding women's education in Ethiopia to be impressionistic and fragmented at best it is expected to provide a basis for further study on a subject which seems to have been treated so far with benign neglect.

II. A Look into Women's Education in Traditional Ethiopia

In traditional Ethiopia the Orthodox Church,[4] and the mosque were the major institutions that were responsible for the dissemination of education. Even though the role played by these two centers of learning in the development of the nation cannot be underestimated, nevertheless, the participation of women in traditional education had been negligible. According to Samuel Gobat, one of the early European observers of the Ethiopian historical scene, "girls had substantially fewer... educational opportunities than boys."[5] Similarly, Dr. Merab, a keen Georgian observer of Ethiopia, and a long time resident in the country, expressed that at the turn of the twentieth century there was probably ninety percent illiteracy in the whole country, and ..."among the womenfolk, the position," he had written "was even worse, for apart from the princesses those who could read

and write could be counted on the finger tips".[6] The few exceptions, of course, were from the royalty and aristocracy that included ladies like Empress Taitu and Woizero Tschai Darge[7]; and also some mavericks such as woizero Ekuletaw Askale of Gojam[8] who succeeded against great odds in becoming a renowned mistress of "*Kene*"[9] It may be of some interest also to mention here in passing that even before modern education was introduced formally by the government in 1908, it is known that some Ethiopian students had pursued their education abroad. However, Aleme Eshete's study[10] of foreign educated Ethiopians before 1889 does not make a single mention of a woman who was educated abroad during this period; invariably all were men. As far as the education of moslem women was concerned there was no significant difference from that of its counterpart, the church school. It too did not encourage the education of women.[11] It could be said, therefore, if not by a grand design at least by *de facto*, traditional Ethiopian education had virtually remained the exclusive preserve of the male.

At this point it may be worthwhile to consider some of the possible reasons why women had been left out from the mainstream of intellectual life in traditional Ethiopia. First of all, it is important to bear in mind that in traditional Ethiopia there was nothing of what might be called popular education, either for boys or girls, at least as we know it today. The Orthodox Church and the mosque provided education mainly for promoting their respective religious doctrines. The major purpose of church education was to produce members of the clergy.[12] The objective of the Koranic schools was not also fundamentally different; the ultimate aim was to produce devoted and faithful moslems who would promote the islamic region.[13] Both institutions favored boys over girls.[14] Since the major goal of church school was to produce priests and deacons who were to serve the church, and since women were barred from assuming such positions by the pronouncements of St. Paul himself, it is understandable that the church could not have dared to go against the teachings of one of the greatest of the apostles.[15] In fact, this as apostolic pronouncement has found expression in the following traditional saying in Amharic.

የሴት ቀዳሽ Yeset K'eddas[16]
የሎሌ አልቃሽ የለውም Yelole alk'as yellewimm

In English this may be translated to mean, it is unbecoming for a woman to be a priest as it is for a man-servant to be a ceremonial mourner over his master's death.

Also in the case of Islam even though such declaration may not exist, the fact however, remains that moslem women do not participate is congregational prayers , and therefore giving Koranic education for women may have been considered unnecessary.

Moreover, another possibility why the participation of women in church schools was negligibly low might have been due to the fact that church education was quite rigorous, and took a long time to complete. Getting higher education in church schools meant leaving one's own village and travelling to a remote and unknown place in search of a master teacher. This involved walking long distances at the risk of at least undergoing hunger and thirst. Having arrived at one's destination, it also meant leading a life of begging and privations.[18] Such hardships were thought to be far too great to bear for women in traditional Ethiopia. In addition, the fact that higher education required from ten to thirty years to complete meant that getting such type of education remained out of reach for many women who were traditionally expected to get married between the ages of ten and fifteen.

Other factors that might have operated against the education of women in traditional Ethiopia, if not overtly at least covertly, may be found rooted in some aspects of Ethiopian tradition. As in most traditional societies of the world, the attitude towards women in most ethnic cultures in Ethiopia is characterized by what has come to be known as "male chauvi-

cepts.[19] The first is that men are more important than women. This value justifies the idea that it is more important for man, the bread winner, to get an education, a job and in general to receive preferential treatments. The second concept is that women exist to please men and from this idea comes the attitude that women should be dependent on men for everything, especially their identities, the social definitions of who they are. This concept further establishes that the woman's place is in the home and as such her major role is to be a wife or a mistress and a mother. In fact, manifestations

of these concepts in the Ethiopian tradition are to be found in the following traditional sayings in Amharic:

ምንም ሴት ብታውቅ Minimm set bittawk
በወንድ ያልቅ bewend yalk[20]

This may roughly be translated into English to mean however knowledgable a woman may be the final decision rests with a man. The next saying in fact unequivocally maintains that a woman's place is the kitchen, while that of a man is the court of law.

ሴት ልጅ በማጀት Setlij bemajet
ወንድ ልጅ በችሎት wend lij becilot[21]

Another saying which specifically cautions against the education of a woman on the grounds that she would develop undesirable habits reads as follows:

ሴት ከተማረች Set Ketemarec
በቅሎ ከጠገበች bek'lo Ket'eggebc
ዐመል አወጣች amel awet't'ac[22]

In English this may be stated as "If a woman is educated or a mule is well fed she will develop a bad habit." In general, therefore, the traditional attitude towards the education of women was not favorable at all. For instance, one widely held traditional view was that an educated woman would not be a good wife to look after the house, and may even resort to wicked ways to kill her husband.[23] There were also other views such as the one given by an Ethiopian gentleman, who on being asked why he did not educate his only daughter answered, "where have I the money to pay a priests or "*debtera*" (a deacon) to educate my daughter and to buy a eunuch to supervise the priest or "debtera".[24] In summing up, it can be said that both by acts of omission and commission most women in traditional Ethiopia had been excluded from getting education, and the fortunate few who did were nothing more than tokens.

III. The participation of Women in Modern Education

Modern or secular education was formally introduced into the country by the government at the turn of the twentieth century, during the reign

of Emperor Menelik II.[25] It is widely held that Menelik had a very tough time trying to convince the general public as well as members of the clergy and the aristocracy as to the benefits of modern education for the development of the country.[26] In fact, the Emperor's keen interest in education is reflected in the following extract taken from 1906 proclamation which explicitly stated, among other things, that henceforth after the age of six boys and girls should attend school,"

> "Hence, as of today, all six-year old
> boys and girls should attend school,"[27]

Nevertheless, despite the above proclamation the education of women did not seem to have made significant breakthroughs in subsequent years. The fact that it did not make considerable advances should not be surprising at all for the traditional attitudes toward the education of women still persisted and had not yet lost their impact. Furthermore, it is said that many parents were quite reluctant to send even their sons, let alone their daughters, to government schools which they regarded as seedbeds for the conversions of their children to Catholicism or Protestantism.[28] However, one notable event that happened, long after Menelik's proclamation regarding the education of women, was the establishment of the first government school for girls in 1931 by Empress Menen.[29]

It may also be interesting to mention, at this point, that since the introduction of modern education into the country the government had been sending abroad a few students from time to time for further education. Nevertheless, as a close examination of one student list, which contained the names of about 144 students that were sent abroad, just before the Italian occupation, to study in European and American Universities, revealed girls constituted only five or six of the total number of students sent abroad.[30]

Nevertheless, not long after the opening of a school for girls, the Italian Invasion interrupted the educational activity, as it did all other activities. After the liberation, however, the educational activity resumed, but still the participation of women at all levels of schooling had remained marginal. As the figures in Table I show between the years 1949 and 1974, the enrolment of girls at the primary level was 11.3 per cent in 1949 and 31.9 per

Table 1

Share of Females in Total Enrollment of Students, by Level, 1949-1972 (Selected Years)

	Primary Enrollment		Secondary Enrollment		Third Level Enrollment	
Year	Total (M+F)	F (%)	Total (M+F)	F (%)	Total (M+F)	F (%)
1949	51,886	11.3	1,079	NA	-	-
1952	52,015	12.3	1,714	6.4	100	0
1961	224,017	23.8	25,503	14.5	939	6.0
1974	859,831	31.9	190.922	27.9	6474	9.0

Sources: 1. Ethiopia, Ministry of Education, *Yearbook:* 1947-1949, p. 86, *Yearbook* 1951-53, pp. 128,130; 2. UNESCO, *World Survey of Education*, Vol. IV, Higher Education, p. 451; 3. *Statistical Year-book*, 1975, pp. 134, 160, 226; 4. Ministry of Education, School Census 1961, 1974. (As quoted in Legesse Lemma's *Political Economy of Ethiopia;* 1875-1974), Unpublished PHD Dissertation, U.S.A., 1979)

cent in 1974. Similarly, at the secondary level the enrollment in 1952 was 6.4 per cent and in 1974 it had reached 27.9 per cent. At the same time, however, it should be noted too that the Ethiopian educational system was very small in size. For instance, in 1967 it is reported that out of a total of 3.7 million school age children only 350,00 were enrolled in primary schools.[31] Moreover, the participation rate of girls had been characterized by regional disparity. For instance, of the primary school female students en-rolled in the 1964/65 school year four regions namely, Addis Ababa, Eritrea, Shewa and Hararghe; accounted for almost 60 per cent of the total female enrollment (see Table II).

This phenomenon among other things may be a manifestation of the inequality of educational opportunities that existed between urban and rural areas. The high participation group were, of course, concentrated mainly in the highly urbanised areas of Addis Ababa, Eritrea, Shewa and Hararghe.

Table II

Regional Participation Rate of Females in Government Schools - 1964/65

Regions	Grades 1-6 % of Total Female Enrollment	Junior and Senior Secondary % of Total Female Enrollment
Addis Ababa	20.3	47.7
Eritrea	18.7	10.0
Shewa	13.3	7.7
Hararghe	7.3	8.3
Begemdir	6.6	3.8
Tigre	6.2	5.5
Wollo	6.0	3.7
Gojjam	4.9	3.4
Sidamo	3.9	2.1
Kaffa	3.3	1.3
Arussi	2.7	2.6
Wellega	2.7	2.1
Illubabor	1.9	0.8
Bale	0.9	0.5
Gamu Goffa	0.9	0.3

*Source: *School census for Ethiopia*, 1964/65, The Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, Addis Ababa: 1965,

Regarding literacy according to one study (1967), women were far more illiterate than men , in urban areas in the age group ten to fourteen years, about 57 percent of the males were literate, while in the same age group only 16 per cent of the females were literate.[32] Nationwide, according

to a 1967 UNESCO report the illiteracy rate was 82 per cent for all males between the ages of ten and fourteen, and 91 per cent of all women of the same age group.[33] As it is to be expected the participation of women at the tertiary level had been very low, the enrollment figure reaching only as high as nine per cent by 1974 (see Table I). As shown in Table III the total number of women graduates in a period of a decade had been about five hundred or 6.7 per cent of the overall total of Addis Ababa University graduates. Furthermore, examination of the distribution of their fields of specialization over a ten-year period indicates (See Table III) that while over fifty per cent of them graduated in public health and social work, the rest were thinly spread over such fields as medicine, business, arts, education, natural and biological sciences. It may be of interest to note here that the number of female graduates in such fields as technology, law, agriculture and technology was quite insignificant. Even though it may be difficult to substantiate with hard evidence, the pattern of their field of specialization appears to fall within the stereotype classification which has come to be known as "female-prone occupations"[34] that include such occupations as primary school teaching, nursing and typing.

At this juncture, after having considered the status of education of women in Ethiopia, it seems appropriate to have a brief look into their occupational patterns which perhaps is the outcome of their education. Traditionally, women in Ethiopia participated in very aspect of agricultural activity, perhaps with the exception of ploughing, which is said to be a man's task with women always close by to assist and provide meals. They often weed, manure, and assist with harvesting. They also engage themselves in pottery and basket making, and spinning. However, an examination of women's occupations in the modern sector of the economy, shows their participation to be limited. For example, one nation-wide survey, carried out in 1971, regarding the occupational patterns of employment showed, among other things, that 2056 (32.2 per cent) women were employed as professional and technical personnel, 2243 (26.6 per cent) were employed in clerical occupations, 1937 (15.7 per cent) were in service occupations, and 2296 (25 per cent) were in production and related works, including unskilled labor. Furthermore, a breakdown of women's employment, in the public sector, particularly in the industrial services indicated that the level of women's participation to be relatively higher as typists and clearners than as engineers, medical doctors, and University inestructors (see Table IV). Once again, this should not come as a surprise considering their low rate of participation in education.

Table III

Female Graduates* with Diploma and Degree from Addis Ababa University over a Ten-Year Period 1963/64-1972/73**

Fields of Specialization	63/64	64/65	65/66	66/67	67/68	68/69	69/70	70/71	71/72	72/73	Female Total	Total No. of Graduates	% of Female Graduates
Agriculture	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	3	427	0.7
Arts	2	-	5	5	2	2	4	1	8	5	34	407	8.4
Business	-	-	-	2	-	1	4	13	11	10	41	486	8.3
Education	1	-	1	1	6	8	17	34	26	16	110	3321	3.8
Law	-	-	1	-	1	-	1	1	1	-	5	1202	0.4
Medicine	-	1	-	-	2	-	1	1	2	4	11	126	9.0
Public Health	-	-	24	32	37	47	44	31	29	12	256	786	30.3
Science	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	1	1	4	8	264	3.3
Social Work	4	-	3	1	7	7	1	4	7	8	42	156	27.0
Technology	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	459	0.4
Theology	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0	53	0.0
Overall Total	8	1	35	41	56	66	72	86	85	62	512	7687	

*Graduates from the Extension Program and foreigners not included.

**Source: office of the Registrar, *Student Data*. 1962-1973, Haile Selassie I University, 1973.

TABLE IV

The Number of Ethiopian Women Employed in Reporting Establishments, Classified by occupation and Sex (Public Sector - Industry Services) 1971

Type of Occupations	Number Employed	
	Male	Female
Civil Engineers	175	1
Medical Doctors	200	14
Professional Nurses	496	149
Economists	58	1
Accountants	455	5
Lawyers	514	-
Judges	1,406	-
University and Higher Education Teachers	368	38
Secondary School Teachers	1,713	157
Primary School Teachers	6,709	694
Social Workers	267	48
Stenographers, Typists and Teletypists	597	847
Telephone and Telegraph Operators	75	73
Cooks	191	89
Maids and Related Housekeeping Service Workers	29	60
Charworkers, Cleaners and Related Workers	595	743
Motor Vehicle Mechanics	337	8

Source: Ministry of National Community Development and Social Affairs, *A Survey of the Occupational Pattern of Employment in Ethiopia*, The Manpower Research Statistics Section, Addis Ababa, 1971, pp. 88-101.

IV. A Final Note

So far an attempt has been made to look into the status of women's education from a historical perspective. Religious outlooks and certain traditional attitudes such as "sexism" appear to have operated against the participation of women in education in Ethiopia. These factors seem to affect the education of women particularly in rural Ethiopia even today. In as much as women constitute at least one half of the total population of the nation, the question of women's education can no longer be ignored, and their involvement in the development process should not be let to be marginal. After all, a developing country like Ethiopia, cannot afford the luxury of not using the brainpower, and talent of both sexes in the productive labor. Moreover, its chould be realized that the question of the emancipation of women, is inextricably linked with their education, and in fact their freedom could be said tobe a function of their level of participation in education. Besides, as Gustav Geiger, the Swedish Sociologist, remarkably put it, "The position of women in a society provides an exact measure of the development of that society."[35] In short, progress necessities that the emancipation of women in Ethiopia and elsewhere in the world be regarded as an idea whose time has come and as such the education of women can no longer be considered as a missing piece in the development puzzle.

More often that not, attitudes entrenched in religion and the past seem to die hard. The condition of women's education in Ethiopia, as already discussed in this paper, seem to have been affected through the ages by these factors. Their impact on women's education appears to be felt even to this day particularly in the rural parts of the country. Therefore, before leaving the subject, it becomes imperative to come up with some suggestions as to how the problem of women's education can be tackled in the future. But at the same time, it should be noted though, that the ideas forwarded hereunder are by no means prescriptive, but merely suggestions.

1. First and foremost the policy of democritizing the educational system in Ethiopia need to focus on the expansion of the school system in order to enable more and more children of both sexes to have equal educational opportunities to attend school. If this can be achieved it may be possible to consider the establishment of a quota sysem at least in the primary schools, that will favor more rural girls to get admission into schools.

2. There has to be various kinds of legislation which will help to promote the rights of women particularly regarding early marriages of girls and women's employment opportunities.

3. Popular organizations such as women's and youths' associations have to encourage especially parents in rural areas to send their daughters to school.

4. Extensive research studies have to be undertaken regarding the participation of women in education as well as in other development-oriented activities.

5. Trainings have to be given particularly to rural women in such fields as agriculture, animal husbandry, midwifery, health and nutrition as well as child-care.

6. The establishment of child-care centers and kindergartens need to be encouraged, in order to relieve women from baby-sitting, so that they will have the opportunities to go to school.

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