Global Scientific JOURNALS

Challenges and Prospects of Women's Movement in Africa:
The Ethiopian Women's Experience[1]

Muhammad Usman Darasa (PhD)

1. Introduction

Women's movements are among the global social movements of contemporary politics. Their collective actions emerged in response to the struggle against inequality, oppression, and/or unmet social, political, economic, or cultural demands (Banaszak, 2006). The movements comprise 'an organized set of constituents pursuing a common and manifold agenda of change over time' (Batliwala 2012:3). Several women's movements have happened throughout African history that in some cases dramatically challenged and changed the fabrics of society in which they operated. These movements took many forms. Some of them are waged either in the form of revolution, pacifism, organization, or association to realize their collective concerns (Motta et al, 2011).

Nonetheless, women and their group activists are still experiencing unfavorable socio-political, economic, legal, structural, and cultural environments that are widely responsible for the failure and weakening of the women's movement in Africa (Aniekwu, 2006: 145; Biseswar, 2011).

Therefore, this essay aims to discuss the challenges women's movements in Africa face when they organize themselves and struggle for their collective agenda, concerns, and rights. Although the challenges that African women's movements face share many features in common, they are not similar since Africa is a continent of many countries and has divergent socio-political contexts. Thus, this essay will critically discuss the issues by focusing on the experience of the women's movement in Ethiopia as a subject of analysis, particularly group activisms, associations, and movements conducted by women.

2. Women's Movement in Africa: An Overview

Women's aspiration to leadership positions in all spheres of the political realm and their participation in the democratic processes of many African countries has been notable (Tripp, 2000: 2-3). However, this has not been translated into an equal representation of women in leadership positions (Kiamba, 2008: 7). The imputes for African women's movements and groups of activists came contextually from women's key role in the struggles for independence as well as from United Nation efforts (Berger, 2015). Although women's voices appear muffled, aside from the institutions that represent them, the work is essential for showing Africa's changing political landscapes (Curry, 2009).

Women's movements share similar concerns that inspired them to struggle for, albeit hardly pursue identical reason and approach due to uneven historical epochs and contextual realities of women across African countries (Baldez, 2003: 253). Some of the reasons that motivate most African women's movements to struggle for, among other things, are the quest for equal treatment, cultural justice, social recognition, political equality, empowerment, socio-economic justice, and legal

---

[1]   Dr. Mohammed Osuman, Samara University, Semera, Ethiopia.   Email: muhammaddarasa2023@gmail.com, Phone number- +251912277901.

protection (Tripp, 2000). For instance, in Nigeria, there have been several protests waged by women's movements due to the distortion of sociopolitical and economic arrangements between men and women (Abdul et al., 2011: 5). Likewise, the Rwandan women's movement initially sought to narrow the gaps between men and women in public sectors, and eventually culminating in gender equality (Newbury and Baldwin, 2000: 2). These are among the few and enlightening women's movements in Africa.

African women's movements have even varied in terms of ideology. This is evident when some movements lobbied for constitutional reforms and new legislation to expand women's rights (Tripp et al, 2009). Others have been revolutionary in their ideologies to dismantle aged socio-political constructions and strengthen their influences to optimize gender sensitivity (Burgess, 2013: 100). Others still have been organized in a form of vibrant association and activism to achieve important gender issues and widen up opportunities for their shared needs and rights.

This affirms that women's movements in Africa are hardly ideological, and rather continue to emerge as practical social movements serving women's rights, leadership, power, health, education, and legal needs. That is why Tripp et al. (2009) argued that African women's movements have never pursued a single organizational ideology and expression, and may be characterized by diversity of interest, forms of expression, and spatial location. Nevertheless, women's movements are still facing challenges, and still need greater attention in Africa.

3. Evolution of Women's Movements in Ethiopia: A Bird's Eye View

Women in Ethiopian history have made noteworthy roles in the overall state-building, development, and democratization maneuvers; however, these roles remain invisible and unrecognized (Habtamu et al, 2004: 19). Before the 1970s revolution, women's organized activities were run mainly by non-governmental bodies such as the Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association, the Ethiopian Officer's Wives Association, and the Ethiopian Female Students' Association (Burgess, 2013: 98). These activists were, however, limited in scope, and pretty much issue of women in cities. Hence, these movements had little or no impact on government policies and laws to change, and benefit women.

During the 1970's revolution against the imperial regime, women fought bravely and critically voiced their concerns for equality and emancipation (Biseswar, 2011: 101-102). It was the pervasiveness of oppression against women that led to the establishment of different women's movements (Burgess, 2013: 99). Yet, during the military regime (1974-1990) Ethiopian women organized an umbrella group activism called the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association. Though it was monolithic, promoting the interests of women was not high on its agenda nor was it designed to influence government policies (Burgess, 2013: 100). It was characterized by undemocratic settings (Kassahun, 2010), where authoritarianism, patriarchal hierarchy and exclusive political culture challenged women's activism, and that formed a serious stumbling block to consensus-building and organizing for change.

Following the ascending of EPRDF to power in 1991, Ethiopian women began to enjoy new constitutional rights (Endalcachew, 2015), and their movements relatively gained optimism for change, unlike previous activisms. They have established, perhaps waged, plenty of movements, organizations, and networks focused on their common issues such as the Women League (WL), Ethiopian Women's Lawyers Association (EWLA), Ethiopian Women's Work Association (EWWA), Women Aid Ethiopia (WAE), Women's Development Initiative Project (WDIP), and Network of Ethiopian Women Associations (NEWA) (Burgess, 2013:102; Biseswar, 2011: 136).

2

These forms of movements are structurally headed under the umbrella of the Women's Affairs Office (WAO), which is answerable to the Prime Minister's Office (Burgess, 2013: 103).

Currently, the Women's League and EWLA are the most popular and influential women's movements in the country which are mobilizing large size of women, pressurizing politicians, and judicial bodies, and pulling scholars and lobbying institutions to correct and eliminate all forms of political, legal, socio-economic and cultural injustices and discriminations against women. They pursue divergent lobbying mechanisms and advocacy roles to address women's concerns and rights. However, what makes all Ethiopian women's movements, associations, and activists similar is that they all persistently face complex challenges to achieve their collective needs and ensure gender equality (Biseswar, 2011). Thus, the pressing challenges facing Ethiopia are critically discussed from internal and external facets as follows.

4. Challenges of Women's Movement in Ethiopia: A Critical Discussion
4.1. Internal Challenges: Inward Looking
4.1.1. Ideological gap and inconsistency

Women's movement needs ideas and efforts from women themselves. It must have ideological consensus, shared concern, and common understanding, as an input, to reduce splinter from within which could lead them to the wrong points of disintegration (Bari, 2005:4). Ethiopian women's movements are mobilizing for collective concerns and rights (Burgess, 2013), but they are negatively influenced by women's different cultural backgrounds, level of education and political outlooks. Because of this difference, Ethiopian women activists could hardly have a common understanding and unanimity about feminist ideology. This also created factions within themselves and challenged women not to have consistent ideological views in their operations (Biseswar, 2011: 212). For instance, it is pervasive to see gerontocracy syndrome in the leadership of women's activism in Ethiopia. This is because old women who assumed leadership positions for a long are not willing to relinquish power to the young and educated ones. This creates ideological schisms and rift between the old and the young activists. Moreover, they lack a clear and strong consensus on the importance of getting organized, forming networks, and creating a critical mass (Biseswar, 2011: 214).

4.1.2. Women's knowledge and commitment gaps

Knowledge is a key to success and helps human beings to understand their environments. Ethiopian women's movements not only lack common understandings to enforce their agenda, but also, they lack knowledge about feminism ideology and their rights (Biseswar, 2011:152). It is rare to see educated women activists who are cognizant of feminism and its related mainstreaming. It is most cases foreign activists and Diasporas are the ones who are taking note of women's discrimination and write about women's socio-political difficulties in Ethiopia (Endale, 2014). This intellectual gap is one of the actual constraints that creates an unequal playing field in politics and to fight for needed changes. It also disregards women's confidence in their ability to participate in politics and collective movements.

Women's movement gaps not only revolve around the lack of a uniform approach, ideological consensus, and knowledge (Baldez, 2003; Aniekwu, 2006) but also about the lack of persistent commitment of women themselves to struggle for change. Vaughan and Tronvoll (2003) explained that few women in positions to lead the associations are not in a position to bravely represent and speak out for other women in Ethiopia. It is rare to see devoted women at present daring to take a strong leadership role and delicately design structures to extend women's movements.

3

4.1.3. Organizational/Structural Limits

Organizational structure and resources are necessary conditions to encourage women's movements (Baldez, 2003: 254). In Ethiopia, the umbrella women's association, Women's Affair Office (WAO), has organizational troubles (Burgess, 2013: 99), let alone encouraging and supporting newly organized women's activism. Many women's associations lack the human and financial resources to bold up their struggles for change (Biseswar, 2011); even their structures are not clear and independent of the ruling party's political organization. That is why Burgess (2013:100) notes that women's associations in Ethiopia work as little more than a token gesture towards the conditions of women within the ruling party's political and institutional structures.

Moreover, the lack of women's organizational linkage with and support from governmental, and non-governmental organizations and media is challenging their movements (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). The absence of merit-based recruitment of women leaders for leadership positions is another challenge to women's movements in Ethiopia. It is often common to see that unqualified women assume leadership positions based on loyalty to the political elite, but they hardly mobilize the critical mass (Biseswar, 2011: 214; Burgess, 2013). All these organizational restraints make women's movement difficult and at times unrealistic to achieve the intended concerns.

4.2. External Challenges: Outward Looking
4.2.1. Politico-legal gaps

Women around the world are less participated, underrepresented in political activities, and have limited participation in decision-making processes (Melesse and Okumo, 2014: 102; Bari, 2005). But the question is why women are so underrepresented and politically neglected, particularly in the Ethiopian context. This is, the paper argues, due to the presence of passive political culture, restrictive state structure, unsound legal formation, and conventional incompatibility in Ethiopia. These issues challenge women and their movements in many ways.

☐ *Passive political culture*

The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women in politics (Bari, 2005: 4). Participatory political culture has the potential to bring substantial policy change in favor of poor and marginalized people, like women. Unlike participatory political culture, passive political culture is the antithesis of democracy which is frequently featured in developing countries, including Ethiopia (Kassahun, 2010; Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003: VI). It limits the active political participation of citizens, but more often women, and violates their fundamental human rights. This political culture further makes women far away from the entire political games and group mobilization maneuvers. Thus, it is not a surprise, that women have turned into passive patriarchal puppets, instead of organizing and mobilizing themselves to get rid of exclusive politics in current Ethiopia.

☐ *"Token" electoral principles and policies*

Women can enjoy their political rights through having political representation and/or active participation in public life (Melesse and Okumo, 2014: 105). Political representation through free and fair elections provides citizens with the chance to vote for their leaders as well as become representatives of their community and exercise decision-making. In Ethiopia, the election is being introduced with the intention of upholding citizens' political rights and the democratization process; however, it is otherwise in practice (Kassahun, 2010). For instance, in almost all the consequent elections conducted in the post-1991 period, the selection and nomination processes within political parties have been biased against women. Women are considered as agents who are

4

instrumentally supposed to play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties (Biseswar, 2011:194).

It is true that political parties are the most important actors in encouraging women's participation and mobilization through election (Ballington, 2012: 7). However, in the Ethiopian case, there are very few parties that encourage women's participation. Many political parties do not yet practice gender equality; nor do they include any proposal concerning women's advancement and participation in their policy platforms (Biseswar, 2011:194). The political parties rarely provide determinant positions and decision-making roles for women in their political structures. This form of electoral principle and process is therefore not only refuting women's political rights but also narrows possible choices for women's activisms, perhaps movements. That is why Burgess (2013: 100) concludes that women's participation in politics remains marginal, and many opportunities for women's movement have returned to a more restricting political culture in Ethiopia.

☐ *Patriarchal and restrictive state structure*

Women's historic exclusion from political structures and processes is the result of multiple structural and functional factors that vary in different social contexts across countries (Bari, 2005: 2). Ethiopia's past structures were not built in a way to encourage women and their collective needs, and hardly attempted to alter the cultures and social systems discriminated women (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). Today's Ethiopia is the extension of past authoritarian rules and oppressive principles (Kassahun, 2010). It is this fact Burgess (2014:97) argues that political repression in Ethiopia has led to the closure of spaces for critical voices.

Moreover, many structures within the state are constructed according to patriarchal norms, values, and in some cases lifestyles (Vaughan and Tronvoll, 2003). These constructions, patriarchal structures, remain a daunting challenge for women's movements to build a society that reflects their values, strengths, and aspirations, and thereby reinforces their interest and participation in political processes. Bari (2005: 3) explains that when women enter politics within the patriarchal context of state structures, they are unable to play a role in bringing radical change rather they play political roles on male terms.

☐ *Defective legal principles*

Laws are legal instruments and are expected to treat citizens equally in full-fledged democratic countries. However, in emerging democratic countries, for example, Ethiopia, there have been laws and legal policies indifferent, perhaps painful, for women to actively participate in their socio-political affairs (Melesse and Okumo, 2014: 103). For instance, the unrevised land ownership policies and inequitable family laws within the country's real politics make it difficult for women to enjoy their rights at almost local, regional, and national episodes (Hussein, 2014: 81).

Moreover, the recently revised Criminal Code has remained unknown by much of the women population (Endalcachew, 2015: 86). Women still lack adequate awareness about the existing laws to claim and protect their rights. Beyond these, the inadequate measures that public authorities, organizations, and institutions refrain from discriminating against women disproves the benefits of progressive revision of laws and policies that prohibit discrimination (Hussein, 2014). In a nutshell, the absence of explicit laws banning all forms of injustice against women in Ethiopia would mean that the legal principles are defective and still unable to stop discrimination, let alone uphold women's rights and encourage their movements.

☐ *Legal incompatibility*

5

Ethiopia has ratified a number of regional and international legal conventions to protect women's rights and encourage group actions (Melesse and Okumo, 2014: 116). For instance, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981; the African [Banjul] Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on 15 June 1998; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) on 11 June 1993 (Endalcachew, 2015: 85). However the government has not yet ratified Optional Protocols of these tools for effective implementation and domestication. This evidently denotes unwillingness, perhaps less commitment, of the government to domesticate the conventions and respect women's rights in its national jurisdiction. Consequently, women enjoy fewer rights than they should or infringe upon the rights of women in Ethiopia due to conventional incompatibilities and nominal domestication practices (Biseswar, 2011: 133). Such conventional incompatibility further makes women constitute a visible minority in politics, and ultimately nominalizes legal protection of women and their movements in the country.

4.2.2. Socio-economic Challenges

□ *Poverty*

In Ethiopia, poverty is pervasive, deep, and persistent (Tizita, 2001). It means that many people are deprived of a basic human living standard (Biseswar, 2011:173). Such deprivation is greater for women since they are found at the lower echelons of economic advantage and employment status (Biseswar, 2011: 170). It is this reality that Kodama (2013:12) concludes that women's problems and poverty are closely linked. Poverty challenges Ethiopian women and their movements through a simple logic. It increases women's responsibility to raise children and is more likely to put them to be at an economic disadvantage. It remains difficult for women to participate in group movements while their major concern is survival and trying to meet the basic needs of families (Kodama, 2013). Furthermore, the ruling party's indisposition to recognize women's economic issues as political issues meant to not only mask the real needs of the women's movement but to divert away from demands for radical change (Biseswar, 2011: 142).

□ *Hidden economic roles and low social status of wome*n

Ethiopian women suffer from work stereotypes, the gender distribution of labor, and more are occupied in invisible work (Endale, 2014: 103). Although women have been actively participating in agriculture, commercial, undertaking reproduction, and social responsibilities, their misfortunes of living in the shadow of men have hidden from view such highly notable roles and performances (Burgess, 2013: 98; Almaz, 1995). Moreover, gender equality in economic policy in today's Ethiopia seems to be ignored (Biseswar, 2011: 141). All these economic constraints tied with the absence of strong economic initiatives to encourage women are not only decreasing the economic power and role of women but also discouraging women's movements by violating their economic rights and enlarging chances for their group failures.

The subordinate status of women vis-à-vis men is a universal phenomenon, though with a difference in the nature and extent of subordination across countries (Bari, 2005: 5). Women in Ethiopia are more likely to occupy low status in society (Endale, 2014: 101). In spite of their contributions to the well-being of their family and community affairs, women experience low socio-economic status as a whole and hence are marginalized from making decisions (Habtamu et al, 2004: 31). This low and unrecognized status morally undermines women, and ends up putting women's movement in a more fragile position.

4.2.3. Cultural Challenges

6

Culture is a powerful predictor of women's political representation as ideas about women's status and roles in a given society are the basic elements to enhance or constrain women's ability to obtain political positions in public institutions (Melesse and Okumo, 2014: 105). In Ethiopia, women have been socialized on their prescribed roles and responsibilities (Burgess: 2013: 96). This socio-cultural stratification and distortion remain a key pathway to patriarchal control and discrimination. Likewise, the position, empowerment, and movement of women have been culturally hindered by societal attitudes perpetuating inequality affecting all aspects of women's lives (Endalcachew, 2015; Habtamu et al, 2004).

Harmful cultural values and practices such as negative stereotypes, rape, abduction, and early marriage embattled against women are still hostile to their rights and circuitously challenge women's activisms. As Burgess (2013) summarizes, wrong perceptions about women's leadership capacity, low socio-economic status, low level of education, and unmitigated harmful practices are the roots of women's low level of socio-political participation. These situations in due course remain unsolved blockages for women's movements in Ethiopia.

5. Concluding Remarks and Prospects

As a medication to the discussed challenges, the following points are recommended. First, education, the paper argues, remains critical to reducing the challenges to, and in return encourage women's movements in Ethiopia. To this effect, the existing educational policies, curriculums, methodologies, and programs should be reformed in a way to accommodates women's issues and encourages their collective concerns. A pro-women educational policy is needed to motivate women, know their constitutional rights, develop an all-rounded consciousness, and create a sophisticated ideological outlook. This practice will not only benefit women by enriching their knowledge but also optimize their commitment and confidence to struggle for equality and inclusive politics. It enables women to meritoriously organize group networks and activism in addressing their shared concerns.

Second, the incumbent political party shall uphold the culture of public dialogue to deal with women and opposition parties to establish a comprehensive framework that pragmatically authorizes women's political representation in critical positions and decision-making processes. This would be more useful for promoting participatory political culture, reshuffling electoral drawbacks, and dismantling the exclusive state structure. It would also create open spaces and opportunities for women to exercise and reinforce their rights. Regarding defective and incompatible legal instruments, women shall strive to expose legal discrimination and gaps to international communities and supra-national actors for intervention. Likewise, the government should practically domesticate the ratified international instruments, notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women must be implemented, translated into working languages, and applied at national and local levels.

Third, women should strengthen their economic power by searching for plausible means, be it at the local, national, or international level. For instance, they must develop a culture of saving and proper family planning schemes. This would help their activism not to disintegrate because of economic inefficacy. In addition, women should push the government to formulate gender-sensitive economic policies, as well as take their economic issues as part of its political issues. This could be reacted by using private and public media to demystify their historic discriminations and unanswered concerns.

7

Lastly, regarding the cultural prejudices and low social status of women, a practical social protection policy for women must be formulated and structurally executed at local, regional, and federal levels to promote the socio-cultural rights of women. This could improve issues like income status, employment, and the living standard of women in the country. Furthermore, the community through grass-root level structures such as religious leaders, youths, local leaders, and elders ought to be given awareness creation training (short, medium, and long terms) on gender equality and women's issues to create awareness on the equality of men and women. All these recommended points would ultimately encourage women's movements to achieve their objectives in Ethiopia.

References

Abdul et al. (2011). Analysis of the history, organizations, and challenges of feminism in Nigeria. NP: Fundación Mujeres.

Almaz Haileselassie. (1995). Gender and development: Gender dynamism and institutional forms for the formation of gender perspective. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.

Aniekwu, N. (2006). Converging constructions: A historical perspective on sexuality and feminism in post-colonial Africa, African Sociological Review, Vol-10, No-1, PP. 143-160.

Baldez, L. (2003). Women's movement and democratic transition in Chile, Brazil, East Germany and Poland, A Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco, May 12.

Ballington, J. (2012). Empowering women for stronger political parties. A guidebook to promote women's political participation. NP: United Nations Development Program.

Banaszak, L. (2006). Women's movements and women in movements: Influencing American democracy from the "outside"? A Paper Presented at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting held in Chicago, April 20-23.

Bari, F. (2005). Women's political participation: Issues and challenges. Bangkok: United Nations, Division for the Advancement of Women.

Batliwala, S. (2012). Changing their world: Concepts and practices of womenism, Toronto: Association for Women's Rights in Development.

Berger, I. (2015). Decolonizing women's activism: Africa in the transformation of international women's movements, State University of New York, Albany available at: http://wasi.alexanderstreet.com/help/view/decolonizing_womens_activism_africa_in_the _transformation_of_international_womens_movements,

Biseswar, I. (2011). The role of educated/intellectual women in Ethiopia in the process of change and transformation towards gender equality 1974-2005. A Dissertation Paper, Department of Sociology, University of South Africa.

Burgess, G. (2013). A hidden history: Women's activism in Ethiopia. Journal of International Women's Studies, Vol 14, Iss 3, Article 7, pp-96-107.

Curry, D. (2009). Women on the move: Mobilizing for a better Africa. NP: H-Women, Holly S. Hurl-Burt

Dejen Aredo. (1997). The role of women in rural development in Ethiopia: A Paper Presented on Gender and Development Workshop at Bahirdar, March 17-26.

Endalcachew Bayeh. (2015). Human rights in Ethiopia: An assessment on the law and practice of women's rights. Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 83-87.

Endale Alemu. (2014). Factors that affect women's participation in leadership and decision-making position, Asian Journal of Humanity, Art and Literature, Vol-1, No 2. PP 97-118

Habtamu Wondimu et al. (2004). Gender and cross-cultural dynamics in Ethiopia: The Case of Eleven Ethnic Groups. Addis Ababa: CERTWID.

Hussein Ahmed. (2014). Woman's right to and control over rural land in Ethiopia, Global Journal of Current Research Vol. 2 No. 4. PP-81-93.

Kassahun Alemo. (2010). The Ethiopian transition in a regional perspective. Election Processes, Liberation Movements and Democratic Change in Africa. A Conference was conducted in Maputo, April 8-11.

Kiamba, J. (2008). Women and leadership positions: Social and cultural barriers to success. NP: Wagadu, Vol- 6, ISSN: 1545-6196.

Kodama, Y. (2013). Relationship between young women and parents in rural Ethiopia. Chiba: Institute of Developing Economies, JERTO.

Melesse Asfaw and Okumo, O. (2014). Assessment of gender equality in Ethiopia: The position of Ethiopian women's political representation, Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization, Vol-28, PP- 24-59.

Motta et al. (2011). Feminism, women's movements and women in the movement, Interface: a Journal for and about social movements, Vol-3, No-2, PP- 1-32.

Newbury, C. and Baldwin, H. (2000). Aftermath: women's organizations in post-conflict Rwanda. Washington: U.S Agency for International Development.

Tripp et al. (2009). African women's movements: Transforming political landscapes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tripp, A. (2000). Women's movements, customary law, and land rights in Africa: The case of Uganda, African Studies Quarterly available at: http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i4a1.htm,

Vaughan, S. and Tronvoll, K. (2003). Ethiopia: Structures and relations of power. Stockholm: SIDA.