

Gendering the Ethiopian Knowledge Diasporas: Addressing Gender Inequality and Inequity in Public Higher Education

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The image of Ethiopian women is characterized by carrying heavy barrels of water; bending under heavy bundles of firewood, crouching over fires in kitchens cooking injera or sitting in the markets/streets with their youngest child clinging on them or at their breast while selling goods. The variety of roles that women play in Ethiopia, including their economic contributions, is as yet little recognized or valued. Like many African women, Ethiopian women have suffered economic, socio-cultural hardship and discrimination over many years. Although they are pillars of Ethiopia, their contributions are measured by their roles as mothers and wives, but not necessarily as a core part of the economic development of the country. Full economic growth of Ethiopia is not possible without the active involvement of women in Ethiopia as well as in the diaspora; although this is yet to be realized. This article will attempt to highlight the multidimensional aspects of gender inequality and inequity that exist in higher education in Ethiopia, despite efforts to mitigate the situation, and will bring to light the potential contribution that mobilizing the Ethiopian female knowledge diaspora can make.

While the murderous Derg regime did much to raise women's profile and reduce gender disparities, the current government established several gender-sensitive policies to narrow the gap between women and men in Ethiopia. The current participation of female students in public universities has increased to 25 percent; however, their graduation rates remain low (Yizengaw 2007). A study by Tesfaye (2007) in 2006 on Debu University shows that 35 percent of enrolling female students were dismissed, which means that of every ten female

students in a regular undergraduate program in 2003/2004, four were lost by the end of the first academic year. This is a clear indication of the failure of the government policies in narrowing the gender gap.

In discussing these issues, one must first analyze and evaluate the state of the underrepresentation of women in higher education in Ethiopia. One of the issues¹ which continues to limit female success in higher education was identified by Tesfaye (2007) as the lack of academic support while attending university. The fact that implementation of the gender-sensitive policies only begins at the university admission stage and does not continue on throughout the students' academic career, sets female students up for failure (Tefaye 2007; Yizengaw 2007). In other words, gender-sensitive policies are not implemented at all levels of education and, in addition, there is inadequate support for those students after enrolment.

The lack of female role models at the university level to set precedents that could reconfigure the worth of Ethiopian women beyond the role of mother and wife, does not make things any easier. In the 2002/2003 academic year the proportion of female faculty in Ethiopian universities stood at 7 percent (Habtamu 2003; MoE-EMIS 2003; Tesfaye 2007). The few women academic who hold positions are largely concentrated in fields considered as typically feminine and in the lower ranks of their faculty (Tefaye 2007; Yizengaw 2007). My research also shows that female academic staff have difficulty balancing their career with societal expectations. As one divorced female academic said "I've been working and earning and raising kids and teaching . . . I don't have much time for research . . . those men, in a sense they do have time because they do have wives, wives to represent them into the society anywhere, wives to look after their kids, wives to do

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everything . . . they do have so many assisting systems . . . this is man's country in every sense." Ethiopian women academics are not only expected to work extra hard to prove their worth in their chosen field, but must uphold the societal expectations of women, which explains the low percentage of academic women.

Ethiopia spends over US\$5.3 million every year in hiring expatriates staff to compensate for the shortage of qualified staff in the country (Ministry of Education 2003). The government's rhetoric regarding the mobilization of the highly skilled diasporas to participate in the development of Ethiopia was not matched by its efforts, although the diaspora community is ready to assist. The Recording and Travel Document Production Department claim 6,539 Ethiopians returned between 2003 and 2008,² of which 2,505 were women (38.4 percent). These numbers do not truly represent either the real flow of Ethiopian returnees or the contributions of the diaspora, because the government still lacks a database to track diasporas activities. The government continues to invest more each year on employing expatriate staff instead of investing more into recruiting its own knowledge diasporas. The government's failure to elevate the status of women in Ethiopia and failure to recognize the power of diasporic women as agents of change, continue to impede the country's progress towards development.

African women in the diaspora have the power to help in gender mainstreaming by providing a precedent for young Ethiopian women to model themselves after; by demonstrating that success does not contravene the female experience. They can serve as something of a circuit-breaker to narrow the gender gap between men and women. In addition, higher education in Ethiopia and Ethiopia as whole need to be better prepared to adjust to the global trends in higher education. One way to prepare for this is by making more effective use of their secret weapon, Ethiopian women in the diaspora. An Ethiopian female academic returnee characterized her experience as follows: "whenever something happened they run to me for consultation. . . . I tend to be, I don't know why, but I tend to be more like a mother . . . they come to cry, talk students can exploit my skills and even if that's the skill I developed from being

a mother." Such empirical evidence reinforces the importance of Ethiopian academic women diasporas.

Gender equality and equity in Ethiopia is not the sole responsibility of women, however; it is also that of men. As much as they are part of the problem, they can be part of the solution. Ethiopian men can contribute in this process by helping women to embrace this change and helping them in this new journey of gender role redefinition, which would also impact how Ethiopian men define their own role in the society. Thus, in order to reduce poverty and bring about sustainable development, both women and men must play a crucial role. Remittances, and hiring expatriates to fill skill gaps are only temporary solutions to the deeply rooted problem of gender inequality in Ethiopia. Gendering higher education, including increased use of highly-skilled diasporic women, is crucial, for the country's development, and can play an important role in achieving gender equality.

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Notes

- ¹ Tesfaye (2007) identified many issues, but lack of academic female staff is the focus here.

² This data was aggregated from only Ethiopian returnees with a different citizenship who applied for the residence and work permit known as the “Yellow

Card.” Thus, there are many Ethiopian returnees who are unaccounted for, unfortunately, this is the only system the government has at this time to track returnees.