

## **Women's Political Participation in Ethiopia from ancient times to the present**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aimed at memorizing Ethiopian women's political participation from ancient times to the present. There is a pervasive misunderstanding on the history of Ethiopian women's political participation. For more than some there is usual outlying which argues that women have been ostracized in political activity of Ethiopia at all level since ancient times. To prevent such construction of misconception, it is incumbent to memorize Ethiopian women's political participation and reveal the sooth of how Ethiopian women can be an oasis for world women's political consciousness. Markedly, the paper also reminded the role of Ethiopia governments on women's political empowerment in the see-sawing politics. Related with these issues, the paper reviewed secondary documents which stemmed from historical sources. Further, the readers shall notice that owing to exist legerdemain in Ethiopia history, the researcher experienced limitation to identify genuine history versus written legend on Ethiopian women's history of political participation.

**Key words:** Ethiopia, Women, Political Participation, Memory

### **1. Introduction**

It is misunderstood to say that women have been ostracized in political activity of Ethiopia at all levels. Since ancient time, the political and decision making role of women at the higher post have been impressive. For instance, in ancient Ethiopia history, Queen Sheba (Mekada), who was the icon woman in world history, influenced the politics of Abyssinia (Budge, 2000). In mediaeval period, Prince Gudit (Yodit), a Falasha queen, was memorized. Prince Yodit was the founder of the Zagwe dynasty that ruled Ethiopia for several hundred years (Loukeris, 1997; Yamrot, n.d.). In early modern period, Queen Eleni (1450-1522) of Ethiopia performed key political roles. Because of her effective political leadership and diplomatic skills, Queen Eleni was trusted regent for three successive young kings (King Eskender, King Naod and King Libne-Dingel) (Tseday, 2007; Yamrot, n.d.).

During the era of princes (*Zemene Mesafint*) (1769-1855), Prince Workit and Prince Mestayit made decisions on political issues in their provinces to and fro Wollo

(ጥሩካህ ገማታ፣2008). Moreover, Empress Mentewab I (Berhan Mugasa) was the great 18th century women who exerted invaluable influence on the politics of the North Ethiopia (Rita, n.d.). In 1896, Empress Tayetu Betul, consort of Emperor Minilik II, actively advised the government and participated in defending the country from Italian invasion. During Italian occupation (1935-1941), some women fought Italy with giant sentiment of patriotism (Ethiopia Today, 2019).

The legacy has continued. During the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie II, there were active political participant women. During the regime of Derg (committee), around the 1980s, women were active political participant in Workers Party of Ethiopia, Women's Association and women's committee (ibid). After the demise of Derg regime, prominent women politicians, who favor or against Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democracy Front (EPRDF), have come to the political arena. In the regime of EPRDF, women's participation in state politics has been increasing pace (Free Library, 2014; Ethiopia Today, 2019).

Accordingly, one can understand Ethiopian women have played undeniable role on the politics of this country since antique time. However the undemocratic male-dominant political structure which stretches from feudal to developmental democracy has been heinous to appreciate and recognize women's role of decision making and political participation. But this does not mean say that the governments have had not push and initiate women to be active political participant (Bizuneh, 2016). This paper memorized women's active involvement in politics and the roles of government that enabled women to drive themselves upward to political participation.

## **2. Martials and Methods**

This study employed a historical research design. Historical research design seeks not merely to discover the events of the past but also to relate these past happenings to the present and to the future (Mohajan, 2018). By using historical research design, the researcher memorized Ethiopian women's political participation from the regime of emperors to the recent past regime (EPRDF). The study was qualitative research approach. This approach enabled the researcher to find the realities of Ethiopian women's political participation from documents. In this study, data were gathered from secondary sources mainly from books, journals, reports and unpublished written materials. Finally, the collected data analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis

which uses to analyses classification and present themes (patterns) that related to the data (Zagreb, 2012).

## 2. Discussions

### 2.1. Memorizing Ethiopian women's political participation during the emperors' regime and the role of governments

In Ethiopian folk, there is an adage which tells that women cannot do politics however women's political participation is always present and has increased with in changing political systems. For instance during the 15th century, between 1464 and 1468, under the leadership of King Zarayakob, women's engagement in to politics and political positions became reminiscence (Tseday, 2007).

King Zerayakob appointed nine princes and provincial rulers (Meseret, 2010). Two Women, namely Eleni (Helen) and Seblewongel emerged and were involved in directing the political affairs of the state in the 16th century. Queen Eleni was a political adviser of kings. Sabla Wongel, who was the wife of Libne Dingel, was actively engaged in the affairs of state. She carried out invaluable roles of foreign policy to get Portugal military help against Imam Ahmed. In similar way, Bati Del Wanbara, who was the wife of Ahmed Ibn Ibrihim al-Ghazi (1506-1543), closely involved in the political issues. She was confidant political adviser for her husband's work of Islamic-Ethiopia state (Rita, n.d).

In the era of princes, (*Zemene Mesafint*) Empress Mennen I, the mother of Ras Ali II was the most prominent figure of the state. She had a decisive role in running Ethiopian empire (Sheldon, 2016). During the reign of Menilik II (1889-1913) Empress Taytu, who was half Amhara and half Oromo descent, was an active political figure of the time equally with the Emperor (Minale, 2001; Rita, n.d.). Empress Taytu was both conservative politician and political adviser. Unlike her husband, she was conservative since she resisted those who want to modernize Ethiopia in Western style. On the other hand, she was succeed political advisor in foreign relation issues. She was wise women who assisted the king to take hand over Italy, both in politics and war. She was among the prima who understood the conspiracy of Wuchale Treaty. She was war leader who commanded a force of cannoneers at Adwa which resulted in a humiliating defeat for Italy in 1896. (Prouty, 1986).

From 1917 - 1929, for the first time in history of Ethiopia, the daughter of Menilik II, Zewuditu officially became Empress with Regent Haile Selassie I through the support of the nobility (Meseret, 2010). In Ethiopia, women, who have been directly or indirectly

taken part in war during Italian occupation, took as influential in political issues of the then. For instance, during the Italian occupation (1936-1941) Miss (*Woizerit Hoy*) Kebedech Seyoum, Shewareged Gedle and Bitewish Belay were part of politicking and patriot fighters (Tsehai, 1979). Princess Romanworq, the child of Emperor Haile Selassie, was also active in Ethiopia political issues and participated in the battlefield against Italy during the Italo-Ethiopian occupation (Tseday, 2007).

In the regime of emperor Haile\_Selassie I, the first nationwide association, the Ethiopian Welfare Association sat up in 1935 (Abiye, 2010) to empower women in education and economy. The association was founded under the patronage of the Empress Menen II with membership drawn primarily from the upper level of urban society in Addis Ababa. Even though, this association had not direct political influence, it enhanced women's self-esteem, confidence and it prepared women for political careers. Following this, a woman who summoned Sindu Gebru became member of the chamber of deputies (lower parliament) in 1950s (Van, 2007). She had been vice president of the chamber of deputies since 1956 for four years. She was the secretary general of the Ministry of Social Affairs. Here we also nota-bene that Sindu Gebru was politically active since 1930s. She was a leading woman who adamantly opposed the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (Sheldon, 2016).

Significantly, from 1960 to 1980, Ethiopian women were taking part in active political participation. Ethiopian women actively engaged in politics through the Student Union. They took part in demonstrations and campaigns. All the more, they called themselves reform seekers (Balsvik, 1985). For example at the time of Student Movement (1960-1974) of Ethiopia, women, such as, Marta Mebrahtu, played great role in the political arena of Ethiopia (Darch, 1976). She struggled the feudalists who oppressed women in political, cultural and social issues.

## **2.2. Memorizing Ethiopian women's political participation from Derg to EPRDF regime and the role of governments**

In the era of Derg Regime (1974-1987), women status has started getting momentous attention. In 1975, the Derg established Provisional Office for Mass Organization Affairs. Within this organization a woman's committee was sat up to promote woman political and economical question (Indrawatie, 2011). During the Derg regime, Revolutionary Ethiopian's Women Association (REWA) was institutionalized. This association was established on July 17, 1980. REWA represented a more systematic

engagement and association of women at the grassroots than ever before. This was a large state association, with on the paper almost 5 million members. The association contributed to the establishment of various development projects and initiated women to be active political participants at grass-root level, although not many women came to more upright posts to be decision maker (Burgess, 2013). In addition to this, the 1987 constitution of the Derg regime was the first to enshrine the rights of women into law. This constitution played undeniable role on the promotion of women's ability of making political issues (Indrawatie, 2008).

In the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, women's political participation was more characterized by their involvement in struggle against the Derg with in the front of Eritrean People Liberation and Tigrean People's Liberation Front. One-third of the troops of Tigrean People's Liberation Front, some 40,000, were women (Meseret, 2010; Free Library, 2014).

After the 1990s, the transition from feudal and dictator political system to a weakly democratic political system offered moderate spaces for women in Ethiopia. In the political front, the Ethiopian government, EPRDF encourages women to take full part in the political life and in decision making by recognizing gender equality in political and economic issues (Tom, 2014). Parallel to this, a number of women's civil-society organizations have emerged in Ethiopia (Gemma, 2013).

It is clearly known that Ethiopia has ratified and adopted the United Nation Charter on Human Rights and other convention, like Convention on the Political Rights of Women in 1969 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1981( Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.). Considering to this in 1992, the Ethiopian government has established Women's Affairs Office within the prime minster office, and the office was headed by a woman with the rank of minister (Michiko, 2006). Related with this, under the roof of FDRE, various structures Women's Association are formed and they have worked to maintain social, economic and political benefit of women and its members (Forum for Social studies & Atos Consulting, 2012).

In 1993, the government of FDRE, EPRDF issued the national Ethiopian policy on women. Due to women's disadvantage position in the society, the aim of the policy is to institutionalize the political and socio-economic rights of women by establishing appropriate structure in government institutions and enable women to hold public office and participate in the decision making process at all levels. In short, the policy focuses on gender equality and women empowerment (Michiko, 2006).

In 1995, EPRDF adopted FDRE constitution. The 1995 FDRE constitution writes is-of right and equality of women. For instance Article 25 of the FDRE constitution guarantees all persons equality before the law, and prohibits any discrimination on the ground of gender. Article 35 also states that principles of equality of access to economic and political opportunities by consider women (FDRE constitution, 1995). In similar year, Ethiopian Women Lawyer Associations was founded to promote the economic, political and social rights of women. Meaza Ashenafi, who has been active political participant and women's rights advocate of the country, was the executive director of that Associations (Gemma, 2013). Further, a new family law recently instituted focusing on the advancement of women, affirmative action, provision for higher education, employment and promotion in the workplace (Taddesse et al., 2013).

Following this, women have been participated in the political space. For instance, in 1995, out of 547 seats in the House of People's Representative 1.7% was occupied by women and the number of women in the House of People's Representative was 15. At that time the federal council had seven women among its 128 members and at the Woreda/district council the number of women in office has reached 8 % ( National Election Board of Ethiopia [NEBE] report on the 1995, 2000 and 2005).

Since 2000, the numbers of women at federal, regional, city council, Woreda/district council and *kebele* administrative have been increasing (ibid). In 2000, in Ethiopian House of People Representatives out of 547 seats 42(7.68%) was held by women (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency [SIDA], 2003). In 2005 out of 547 seats, the numbers of women in House of People Representatives were 117 and in percent 21.4 (NEBE report on the 1995, 2000 and 2005). In 2010 women held 152(27.8%) seats out of 547 seats in House of People Representative and made up of 10% to 13% of the cabinet ministers (Oxford Committee for Famine Relief [OXFAM], 2012; Jones, Gupta & Bekele, 2015). In 2015 out of 547 seats, 212(38.8%) seats were held by women in House of People Representatives (Inter-Parliamentary, 2016).

In 2000, at regional councils 244 were women (12.9%) out of 1891. At the lowest level Woreda/district councils, 6.6% were women among 70,430 council members. At the lowest administrative unit, *kebele*, 13.9% of women were constituted out of 928,288 elected officials (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.). In 2005 from 1957 seats of regional and city council (only Addis Ababa in this case) women hold 26 percent (Wabekbon, 2006). After 2010 women's representation in regional councils has come to above 30%. Moreover in and the post 2010 many Woredas and *Kebeles* councils attempt to

compromise 50% women as members of the councils (Jones & et al., 2015). Thus, this led to the emergence of new roles for women in the public sphere and challenging to gender norms.

2005 was a year of two incidents. In 2005, Ethiopia got the first woman political party leader who is called Birtukan Midekssa. Birtukan, who led Coalition for Unity and Democracy party, is ever memorized strong woman in Ethiopian politics history (Alemayehu, 2011). On the other hand in this year, Women's Affairs Office has been upgraded to Women's Affairs Ministry. The Ministry has owned five years national plan and tries to implement it. Further, it has identified 7 thematic areas, such as economic empowerment, protection of the environment, promoting opportunity for education, reduction of violence against women, decision-making and political participation. Regional Women's Affairs Bureaus were also formed in the entire region and administrative Zone. Women's Desk Offices at Zone and City level also formed to achieve women political, social and economic empowerment. In addition to this at regional and lower administrative levels, there is Bureau of Women, Children and Youth Affairs which is responsible for mainstreaming and ensuring women's rights (Ethiopia Joint Flagship Program on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, 2013).

In sooth speaking, even if EPRDF is brutal in Ethiopian politics, it is appreciable dealing with women's political empowerment. EPRDF is not only to recognize women's right in legislation but also practices and changes the custom. In support of this, it has given considerable value for women in its Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). Increasing women's participation in politics, social sector and achieving equal benefits for women from economic growth is the objective of GTP (Ethiopia Joint Flagship Program on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, 2013).

Particularly, after 2018, following the coming of Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (PhD), women's political participation has been increasing in alarming rate. The Prime Minister is rewarding women's contributions to the nation's progress. Dr Abiy has appointed more than eight women in the ministerial position. Now, Women is holding key positions, like, defense, trade, transport, and the newly established ministry of peace (Lhatif, 2018 & Ethiopia, 2019).

However, the 2012 Global Gender Gap Report ranks Ethiopia 118th out of 135 countries, this indicated the existence of significant gender disparity in the country. It ushered Ethiopian women are still economically, socially and politically disadvantaged and

they are not decision makers in government offices (Ethiopia Joint Flagship Program on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, 2013).

### 3. Conclusion

Ethiopian women may have been discriminated in culture and economy however this does not imply they have null role in the political issues of the country. In the political construction or deconstruction of the country, women's hands are as long as men. Ethiopian women have reshaped and transformed the see-sawing politics of Ethiopia.

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