

# Women's Higher Education in Ethiopia Under Three Regimes, 1950-1997

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## Background

A recent World Bank report sums up the condition of the "typical" Ethiopian woman as follows: "She is a victim of her situation, without the capacity to initiate change within the quagmire of her poverty, high fertility, poor health and domestic drudgery" (cited in Ethiopia, NPA, April 1995, pp. 14-15).

Generally speaking, most Ethiopian women live in impoverished subsistence. They are expected to marry early, and bear many children. They lack knowledge of hygiene, nutrition or family planning. They live in conditions of very high maternal, infant and child mortality. Lack of education, high fertility, infant mortality, and generally poor health conditions are inter-related factors constraining women's productivity and welfare. Rural women are over-burdened by a variety of agricultural and non-agricultural tasks outside the home and by back-breaking domestic chores, including carrying firewood and water over long distances.

In urban areas, women lucky enough to have employment are predominantly engaged in low-status, low-skilled, low-income jobs, including domestic service and prostitution.

Ethiopian society is unmistakably patriarchal (Gebreselassie, 1988, p. 1). Women's domestic activities are not as highly remunerative and prestigious as men's activities. They do not occupy jobs of high managerial, administrative, technical, or scientific positions (Zewdie, 1991, p. 89). Women constitute about 50 percent of the total population but only 23 percent of the school population. They suffer high rates of maternal death, and 98 percent have no access to family planning programs (Alaro, 1996).

## Constitutions and Women's Rights under Three Regimes, 1955-Present

The 1987 constitution of the military government (Article 36) stated that "women and men have equal rights," and that "the state shall provide women with special support, particularly in education..." Despite these lofty words, however, little affirmative action was taken on behalf of women (The Constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1987, pp. 30-31).

The first major development with regard to women's issues since the change of government in mid-1991 was the establishment of a Women's Affairs section in the Prime Minister's Office. The 1994 federal constitution of Ethiopia (Article 35) states that "women are entitled to remedial and affirmative measures" (The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1994, pp. 15-16).

Given the weight of patriarchal tradition in the society, however, it will be a long time before the language of the constitutional protection of women's rights is in fact translated into practice.

## Women's Education Under Three Regimes

Traditionally, Ethiopian society saw education as the exclusive preserve of men. The first girls' school was not opened until 1931. In 1967/68, only 29.7% of primary school students, 26.7% of junior secondary students, and 18.3% of senior secondary students were girls (Ministry of Education and Fine Arts, 1968). Significantly, there was no gender breakdown for higher education. In addition, dropout rates were much higher for girls. In 1967/68, although 30.4 percent of all first grade students were female, this percentage in grade twelve was only 14.7. Of the total Ethiopian school population enrolled in all types of school at the beginning of the 1981/82 school year, 64.5 per cent of all students were male and only 35.5 per cent were female. The statistics for university level education in 1981 were even more appalling with an overwhelming 86.6 per cent male student intake, 13.4 per cent female enrolment (Lakew and Hirut, 1986, pp. 4-5).

In 1976 the program for the National Democratic Revolution in Ethiopia affirmed the equality of women. It established the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association [REWA] to prepare women "to occupy their appropriate positions in society" (Eshete, 1991, p. 1). Such public pronouncements, however, were made mostly in order to establish the revolutionary credentials of the new military regime (Berhane-Selassie, 1991). Domination of women continued despite pious socialist declarations (Women's Affairs Office, 1995).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The educational status of women in Ethiopia is among the lowest in the world (Source). There are fewer females than males at every level of the educational system. Their proportion decreases progressively at each level in the pyramidal educational system. In primary schools (grades 1-6), 61.8 % of the students are male, 38.2 % female; in junior secondary schools (grades 7 & 8), 53.6 % are male, and 46.4 % are female; in senior secondary schools (grades 9-12), 54.8 % are male, and 45.2 % are female; in universities, 86.1 % are male and 13.9 % female (Statistical Abstract, 1995, 1996, p. 295). Moreover, girls perform less well, repeat grades more often and represent a higher proportion of school dropouts. In addition, the last years of the military regime which collapsed in 1991 had apparently witnessed a decline in female enrolment rates in higher education (Ethiopia, NPA, 1995, p. 15).

In Ethiopia, parents, teachers, school administrators, educational planners and students of both sexes generally accept patriarchal views regarding women. Most parents prepare their sons and daughters for different roles, aspirations, expectations (Zewdie, 1991, p. 96).

Gennet Zewdie (1991) cites a 1989 Ministry of Education study that demonstrates that gendered stereotyping runs through the school textbooks and curriculum. "In very many textbooks women are depicted as weak, inferior and dependent, while men are represented as superior, independent and courageous" (p. 97).

The widest gender gap is in higher education, the entry point for elites. This higher education gender gap is critical because it significantly affects women's labor force participation

at the professional level and women's ability to influence public policy and practice. Despite radical regime changes (1974 and 1991), the relative proportion of women in higher education has not changed significantly. One question of interest is : What accounts for the persistence of gender subordination in higher education despite revolutionary political changes at the state level? Possible factors may include patriarchal culture, sexist curricula, teacher attitudes and practices, parental expectations, and "the glass ceiling" in higher education.

### **Objectives and Significance**

1. To expand knowledge of higher education inequality by gender (to collect statistical data, other empirical data, historical and ethnographic materials) during the last two decades (mid-1970s to mid-1990s). The collected data will also serve as a benchmark for future research on women's higher education in Ethiopia.

2. On the basis of the data gathered, to make comparisons between the gendered higher education policies and practices of two successive regimes, military (1974-91), and civilian (1991-present).

3. Using critical and comparative historical approaches, to explore factors affecting women's access to higher education (a) patriarchal structure; b) cultural context; c) institutional context; d) socio-economic factors (women's household responsibilities, early marriage, etc.). In this exploration, I propose to conduct in-depth interviews with women and men who have had experience with the higher education system (Addis Ababa University) as students and/or educators under two successive regimes, military (1974-91), and civilian (1991-present).

4. To contribute to the comparability of the Ethiopian case with similarly situated developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The persistent subordination of women's status in education needs sociological explanation. Yet, there is no study, sociological or otherwise, that focuses on women's education in Ethiopia. The cultural, political, and social features of women's education in Ethiopia have not been subjected to sociological inquiry. In fact, in the words of Negash (1996), "the state of research on Ethiopian education is scanty indeed" (p. 7). Although there is limited general literature on education in Ethiopia, notably Wagaw (1979), it further suffers from lack of special focus on women's education. Wagaw's (1979) otherwise important work makes only six references to women's education.

### **Review of the Literature**

Jacobs (1996) distinguishes three aspects regarding women in higher education: access to higher education; college experiences; and post collegiate outcomes. "Women fare relatively well in the area of access, less so in terms of the college experience, and are particularly

disadvantaged with respect to the outcomes of schooling" (p. 154). This, however, is not true in Ethiopia's case. Access, process, and outcomes are distinct features that need to be explored separately (Jacobs, 1995). My own focus will be on access to higher education as a most basic issue to the question of gender inequality in Ethiopian society. Gender inequality is most pronounced at the level of higher education. My interest is to explain the extreme gender disparity in access to higher education (enrolment and degree completion). I am also interested in a breakdown of gender differentials in access by levels of higher education (two-year, four-year, graduate, and professional). I may also look at extension (continuing) degree programs.

Gender disparities are highest at the tertiary level in developing countries as a whole (Jacobs, 1996). Women's share of enrolment in higher education in selected sub-Saharan African countries (Jacobs, 1996) is very low: Ivory Coast, 19%; Kenya, 28%; Liberia, 24%; Morocco, 37%; Nigeria, 27%; Senegal, 22%; South Africa, 48%; Tanzania, 15%; Zimbabwe, 26%. At only 14%, Ethiopian women's share is lower than the norm for the region.

Theoretical perspectives on access to higher education include: 1. Critical (including feminist, or neomarxist); 2. Status attainment; 3. Comparative historical; 4. Economic model. The last one is not useful for the Ethiopian context where necessary data is easily not available. I also agree with Jacob's (1996) view that "economic calculations contribute to but are not sufficient to explain variation across countries and over time in the share of schooling obtained by women" (Jacobs, 1996, p. 167).

1. Critical approaches: Critical approaches tend to be reproductionist in the sense that their explanation seeks to demonstrate how the educational system reproduces the larger social system based on social stratification and inequality (Stromquist, 1989). But the educational system does not necessarily and always reproduce the larger system. It may have some autonomy and dynamics of its own. "Women's access to higher education [in the US] did not emerge because of the dictates of the captains of industry, but because women successfully demanded a place" (Jacobs, 1996, p. 160).

2. Status attainment approaches: Status attainment sees gender as an ascribed characteristic and as a predictor of years of schooling (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Anderson & Hearn, 1992). Greater investment in boys' than girls' education is thus explained by gender inequality. While this approach may be useful in explaining gender differentials in higher education in developing countries, it fails to account for gender parity in, for example, American higher education. Jacobs (1996) concludes that "no attainment studies have attempted to explain why young women trail young men in college graduation in some countries more than in others" (p. 161).

3. Comparative historical approaches: Comparative historical approaches can throw light on gender inequality. Their practitioners tend to focus primarily on culture, class, and politics. To what extent do these factors restrict women's access to higher education? Culturally defined gender roles can impede women's access. Poverty can stand in the way of educational access. Political centralization can bring about educational diffusion for women (Ramirez & Weiss, 1979). Comparative historical approaches over time and across countries can yield useful

insight, although comparability of educational data can be problematic (Behrman & Rosezweig (1994). I intend to use a combination of the critical and historical comparative approaches.

Women's exclusion from participation in education limits their ability to improve their socioeconomic status (Conway and Bourque, 1995, p. 5). Educational reformers see education "as a means to improve women's social and economic status" (Conway and Bourque, 1995, p. 1). Educational institutions can act as powerful agents of social change. At the same time, however, patriarchal cultures and social systems impose constraints on these educational institutions as potential vehicles for women's liberation (Conway and Bourque, 1995, p. 3). Sex bias is often "reflected in the curriculum, texts, facilities, teachers, and administration" (Conway and Bourque, 1995, p. 3). Social stratification along patriarchal lines is deeply entrenched in Ethiopian culture. Religious ideologies (Orthodox Christian, Islamic, Jewish, and animist) impose strict control on women and reinforce patriarchal authority (See Vina Mazumdar for similar patriarchal social stratification in Asia in Conway and Bourque, 1995, p. 16).

There are many barriers to women's full participation in education. These include: grinding physical labor to secure water, food, and shelter (average working day is in the 13- 17 hour range); "cultural anomie" that emerged perhaps since the last years of imperial rule; sexist educational content or curriculum, values, and structures; and the inability of poor girls to attend school because their families depend on them to work at home.

According to Conway and Borque (1995), the educational system is a microcosm of the gender system. "...[T]he persistence of patriarchal cultures and social systems imposes constraints on the educational system as a vehicle for women's liberation" (p. 3). One feminist school of thought observes that sex bias is inherent in the formal school systems, and is reflected in the curriculum, texts, facilities, teachers, and administration. According to Conway and Bourque (1995), women's access to education is also a question of their claim to scarce economic resources. Based on her case study of India, Desai(1995) writes:

Any assessment of the status of women's education has to start with an understanding of the socioeconomic framework, cultural norms, and value system that impinge upon and influence the role expectations and behavior of Indian women (p. 40).

Ethiopian cultural, economic, political, and social institutions serve as obstacles to women's higher education in Ethiopia. Ethiopian educational policy and practice tend to reproduce traditional gender structures and social relations.

In Ethiopia, there is a relationship between the educational systems and the models adopted by successive national political elites: modernization (imperial regime), Marxist-Leninist revolutionary (military regime) and agricultural-based industrialization (current regime). All three models have failed to bring about fundamental change in women's access to higher education. One feature common to all three models is that they are all imported from abroad (West, East, and West again, respectively) and have little relationship to the unique characteristics and needs of Ethiopian society.

In the Ethiopian version of the modernization model (imperial period), the "Victorian wife/mother role of service" was held up in Ethiopian textbooks as the ideal female role. In the Ethiopian version of the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary model (military period), the

subordination of all issues, including gender equity, to class struggle, national unity, and territorial integrity. In the agriculture-led industrialization model (post-1991 period), gender issues are "subsumed" in a call to the primacy of undifferentiated "rural masses". All three models were superimposed upon traditional patriarchal structures and ideologies. Desai (1995) suggests a similar phenomenon for India where liberal reformers "hoped that educated women would work in complementary ways with their partners in ushering in the new society ... but to do so in ways that did not disturb the accepted division of labor in the home" (p. 23). Mazumdar (1995) sums up the dilemma:

Women's education is caught between ... conflicting pressures: on the one hand, nationalist leaders campaigned to promote the education of women, but, on the other, the patriarchal values of existing elites undermined any real commitment to changing gender roles or expanding women's opportunities (p. 21).

Three schools of thought regarding improvement of women's social status have formed attitudes toward women's education. One (Desai, 1995) assumes that access to formal education is a prerequisite for improving women's status (some types of schooling are more "status giving" than others). "The denial of access to education is the denial of access to status and power" (Desai, p. 25). The second assumes scientific and technological education will integrate women into the development process. The third argues for women's participation in the development process as educated decision makers, teachers, planners and administrators (Mazumdar, 1995, p. 15).

Conway and Borque (1995) perceive educational institutions as powerful agents of change, and education as a means to improve women's social and economic status. But such a perception cannot be assumed. Education could serve as agent of social conservation as much as agent of social change. It depends on the type and objectives of education. Citing the case of Pakistan, Mazumdar (1995) argues to the contrary:

For poor women in urban settings the absence of any self-employment training in formal education prevents women from developing the economic base that they need to escape from dependence. Hence, the formal system fails to attract or retain large numbers of female students...(p. 18).

Based on data from India, Desai (1995) concludes that "education per se has not generated social change" (p. 27).

## **Methods**

This project will use archives, government documents, existing sources, and ethnographic data. Ethnographic research has two components: participant observations, and open-ended in-depth interviews with a selective number of cases. I will use both data methods. Ethnographic data will consist of interviews with male and female students, teachers, administrators, and Ministry of Education officials covering: (1) military period (1974-91); (2) civilian period (1991-

present).

As an Ethiopian, I have the insider's knowledge of Ethiopian society and culture, its peoples and institutions. Because I did all my pre-university education there, I have first-hand knowledge of both traditional and modern educational systems in Ethiopia. I have continuously kept contact with developments in Ethiopia ever since I came to the U.S. three decades ago. Over the last ten years, I have spent several weeks every year in Ethiopia primarily following issues of literacy and education. I have made casual observations of educational processes and discussed education issues with teachers, students, and education officials at every opportunity. These visits and encounters have given me invaluable insights into the educational situation in Ethiopia. Last summer I conducted an ethnographic study of literacy and its social context (including interviews of male and female literacy graduates) in Ethiopia supported by a PSC/CUNY grant. Gender was one of my variables in that study.

In the course of my own research on adult literacy in Ethiopia, I became interested in issues of education in general and women's education in particular, alarmed by the dearth of literature on the subject. My field work on adult literacy in Ethiopia has a special focus on women. Thus, in addition to my interest in the related issue of literacy, I became especially interested in issues of women's education,

My previous research led to my current interest on women's education. Last semester, my Sociology of Developing Countries course focused on women's education. I used Conway and Bourque's edited work, The Politics of Women's Education: Perspectives from Asia, Africa and Latin America (1006), and Kelly and Elliot's edited book, Women's Education in the Third World: Comparative Perspectives (1982) as textbooks. Thus, I have developed familiarity with the literature on my proposed project.

I will also use intensive, in-depth, open-ended interviews with a select number of male and female students, teachers, university administrators, and Ministry of Education officials.

With this ethnographic research, I can subject the sociological context of higher education to a fuller and more informed investigation. This method will give me direct interaction and the benefits of insight and follow-up that come with it. My proposed study will also serve as a benchmark for future research on women's higher education in Ethiopia. Quantitative data on higher education will give a breakdown of students by type of school, age, sex, grade, etc. Qualitative data will yield a more complex and nuanced picture of the higher education landscape.

I will select Addis Ababa University (AAU), the oldest and premier institution of higher education in Ethiopia. It is still difficult to do research in Ethiopia but I do not expect any problems. The minister for women's affairs (Prime Minister's Office) an education officer (USAID) have expressed positive interest in my proposed project. I will obtain from AAU a roster of current male and female students and alumni going back ten years. I will make a random sample for potential interviewees. I will interview students and alumni, male and female, in equal numbers, in representative levels, i.e., freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and those in professional schools (law, medicine, etc). A similar but smaller sample method will be used for faculty, administrators, and Ministry of education officials.

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