Reflections

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Violence against Women from Gender and Cultural Perspectives

The Role of Religion in Violence Against Women

Gender and Islam: How can Violence be Embedded in Religion

Christianity and Gender: First Thoughts

Media and Its Perception on Women

Women’s International Human Rights and Violence Against Women

Panel on ‘End Violence Against Women’

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This issue of Reflections covers the deliberations of the six fora between January and June this year. The underlying theme of those fora was: ‘Violence Against Women’, an issue very much neglected while it should have been of great concern to all Ethiopians. Violence against women, in a similar way as the epidemic of HIV/AIDS, is claiming the lives of girls and women all over the world. This life-sucking threat, unlike HIV/AIDS, has been there since time immemorial and has its roots in the gender inequalities prevalent at all levels, which people have maintained and passed on from one generation to another.

Violence against women is violence committed not just against individuals but also against an entire nation and with great impact on all aspects of life. It is closely linked to the development endeavors of a nation. In the first place, a society that perpetrates violence against its women folk is like a person lifting a huge rock only to drop it on its own feet. Secondly, as development is unthinkable without the prevalence of democracy and human rights, the human rights of women constitute the cornerstone of democracy and human rights in general. The social consequences arising out of violence against the women folk of any given society have been proved to be extensive and devastating. On top of all this, violence against women -- rape in the main -- has become the scourge of women in the era of AIDS, as many men with HIV force women into sex without their consent. The consequence of such acts of rape definitely means death to the woman victim and is tantamount to premeditated murder.

Getting rid of the root causes of violence against women requires a holistic approach and a massive effort by everyone. Though there are many individual efforts undertaken to combat violence against women, a lot more should be done. In Ethiopia, we have only taken the first step forward. We just recently had articles in the Constitution defending the rights of women and a civic movement to end the violence only began recently.

Beginning in November of this year, Panos Ethiopia started implementing a new project aiming at ending violence against women. This project is
implemented in partnership with the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA) and Ethiopian Media Women's Association (EMWA) and addresses two main problems. First on the agenda is sensitizing the population to the need to stop unleashing and/or rationalizing the various forms of violence against women. Secondly, the project also attempts to sensitize law enforcement agencies on the need to implement the laws of the country that unambiguously make violence against women illegal and a crime.

Some of the activities of this project include:

➾ raising the awareness and consciousness of those directly affected; i.e. women in general, where these women are taught how to identify acts that are directed against them or other women as violations of their rights and encouraged to speak out against violence, thus exposing the culprits.

➾ workshops conducted at the grass roots communities’ level, with the aim of discussing the issue of violence (often a taboo in many communities), thereby helping communities identify which acts are considered to be acts of violence and what legal services and help are available within the said area.

➾ The most radical activity undertaken was the organization of public hearing, where the voices of women victims were heard in public. These public hearings (one in Addis Ababa and one in Awassa) broke the silence about the forms of violence committed, endured and accepted. It also exposed the deficiencies of societies and the government and brought to the fore many types of violence committed against women, which many could not believe to exist. Many rural communities in Ethiopia embrace various types of violence against women and even claim to have women who go to the point of saying: “If my husband does not beat me, it means that he does not love me,” and similar other sayings that justify violence. The public hearing did not only provide a sense of relief and liberation for those women who spoke in public, but it also served as a revelation to others who consider violence to be a unique phenomenon only happening to them. It made many women realize the scourge and find solace on common grounds.

➾ Another activity undertaken was consultation with the different law enforcement agencies that are endowed with the power to see justice prevail but fail to do so when it comes to violence against women. Again, one should not ignore the fact that those in the law enforcement agencies are products of the same society that condones violence against women as a justified action. Hence the need for supporting the law enforcement agencies through training.
Areas of the project activities are not confined to those directly affected and their perpetrators, but also focus on involving society at large through the media. The media is a powerful tool in the fight against violence against women. Sensitizing media workers themselves on violence against women so that they may be able to enhance their reporting skills on the issue is one of the activities undertaken by Panos. Another media activity is using the media to reach the public directly. The Voice of Eve is a weekly FM radio programme of Panos that broadcasts educational programmes aimed at ending violence against women. This programme brings together various stakeholders: victims of violence speak out, experts analyze the causes and consequences of violence, religious leaders explain whether or not religions justify some aspects of violence, and policy makers explain their policies.

The six fora between January and June, were aimed at looking into the root causes of violence, because those are the very sources where violence emerges from and are still very much ignored and neglected. Actions and activities on violence often tend to overlook these root causes and, instead, concentrate on patching the wounds. This has been going on for a long time, and it is not rare to hear: “But why doesn’t it work?” It is about using a different approach to make a difference.

The aim of these series of fora on violence against women was thus to analyze the root causes of violence. The January forum was on Violence against Women from Gender and Cultural Perspectives where the link between culture and violence was shown. The resource person for this forum was Dr. Hirut Terefe from the Sociology Department, Addis Ababa University. The forum in February was on: The Role of Religion in Violence Against Women. Dr. Gemetchu Megerssa, also from the Addis Ababa University, was the resource person. The third forum in this series, held in March, dealt with the two main religions prevalent in Ethiopia: Islam and Christianity. Ms. Alemmaya Mulugeta, Panos’ Pastoral Development Programme and Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia co-coordinator, presented on Gender and Islam: How Can Violence be Embedded in Religion? And Mr. Tsegaye Regassa from the Law Department at the Civil Service College presented on Christianity and Gender: First Thoughts. The fourth forum under this theme was on Media and Its Perceptions against Women. At the level of perceptions, the media does contribute a lot, even more than is realized, to gender violence. The resource person for this forum was Ms. Agaredech Jemaneh, also of Addis Ababa University. When analyzing the
perceptions that people hold that guide their actions and interactions with others, what was crucial was to also look at the policy level of what is available to support people in their actions and interactions. Since the theme is violence against women, the topic looked at in this regard was Women’s International Human Rights and how violence is directly linked to the lack of such instruments or their implementation to protect women’s human rights. The resource person at the forum on Human Rights of Women was Ms. Rakeb Messele from the International Organization for Migration.

After looking at what guides people's actions and interactions, it was realized that it is not only their perceptions that should be analyzed. What was realized was that there is also something much more basic and fundamental in nature that deserved analysis, namely, the factors that led to the formation of those perceptions. These factors were then dealt with at the last forum in a form of a panel on End Violence Against Women. At this panel there were four panelists who dealt with four themes. Melakou Tegegn, the Director of Panos, made a presentation on patriarchy; Seblewongel Deneke, Panos' End Violence Against Women’s project coordinator, gave a presentation on femininity; Tezera Getahun, Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia Coordinator, gave a presentation on masculinity, and Alemmaya Mulugeta, also Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia Coordinator, spoke on stereotypes.

With the inclusion of the proceedings of these six fora, we can safely assume that many of the major issues negatively affecting women have been dealt with in this publication of Reflections. However, we cannot claim that this publication alone exhausts the entire issue of violence against women but makes a modest contribution. Needles to say, the main papers and the discussion of the various fora covered in this publication will definitely spark discussion and debate elsewhere.

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Violence Against Women From
Gender and Cultural Perspectives

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Introduction

Gender is an ecology-, culture- and period-specific concept pertaining to relations of power between men and women. In many instances, it has been articulated with regard to the division of labor, the share of private and public space and other resources, and women’s visibility. In other words, its importance has been rooted in the recognition that work, and thereby, men’s and women’s health, status, roles and their sharing of economic resources, depends on society’s cherished norms and sense of priority (Tsehai, 1991:i).

Gender, however, entails all the problems inherent in defining and selecting the cultural particularity. It is considered salient anywhere at any period in history when it comes to defining culture. Also more significantly, who decides on what to do with it has an impact not only on determining the lives of men and women, but also on the overall direction of the development process.

Thus, gender identity is psycho-socially and culturally determined. Gender roles are practiced and activities carried out by men and women, which lead to an economically and socially constructed division of labor. However, we know that personality, behavior, and abilities are the result of differential socialization. Because these socially induced differences result in discriminately rewards, statuses, opportunities and roles, it is necessary to change the social structure that encourages them and the assumptions that perpetuate them.
Socialization is defined as the process by which individuals acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions that enable them to participate as more or less effective members of a group and a society. This is why the socially learned patterns of behavior that differentiate men from women in a given society are referred to as one’s gender role. Gender is then a learned behavior, usually related to one’s sex, but sex status does not necessarily determine gender role. However, the differential treatment we receive through socialization process because of the status of our sex leads to the development of real psychological and personality differences between males and females.

The above views indicate that gender role and behavior and the culturally ascribed status develop the subjective awareness that one is a member of the male or female sex. They create the motivations to conform to the culturally determined expectations and to determine the rights, duties and power relations within the socio-economic system of society. Women’s subordination existing in societies of every degree of complexity is not something that can be changed by rearranging certain tasks and roles in the social system. The potential for change lies in changing the social institutions while at the same time changing cultural assumptions through consciousness raising and involvements by both men and women (Almaz 1991:3).

Culture is often used as a justification or explanation for the past and present subjugation of women to men/violating women's right. We should know cultures vary and include references to different issues (there are more than 300 definitions as found by Clukohone and Krober (1952).

**Definition:** For the purpose of this paper “Culture is the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another” *(Random House Dictionary)*. It can simply be taken as learned, socially acquired traditions and life styles of a society, including their patterned repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting (behaving). This follows the definition of Taylor (1871), the founder of academic Anthropology in the English-speaking world and author of first anthropology textbook. "Culture taken in its wide, ethnographic sense is that whole which includes knowledge, art, belief, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society."
Thus, culture itself as the gender relations that are reflected in it, is socially constructed by women and men in a dynamic process, for no society is static. Social and cultural prescriptions get learnt and are transmitted into human behavior. Such behavior is further molded through religious or political practices and codified or unmodified legal systems. As Sai (1994:77) has commented:

*Culture determines sources of authority and power and defines status. It is the reference for judicature and specifies who and what each member is and how others will react to and deal with her or him. It enhances or retards political stability, economic growth and, [more] importantly, recognition of and respect for an individual’s human rights. Every aspect of the systematic maltreatment of women and girls has a cultural reference, is part of an institutionalized phenomenon. Consequently, amelioration of female gender-determined sufferings and disadvantages will require alterations or banishment of elements of long-established cultural patterns.*

Obviously, this cannot be an easy or a short-term task. For culture acts both as a source of continuity for people over time and as a means by which people can influence their future or manage change on the basis of their past experience. For instance, women’s involvement in childbirth and child rearing ensures they have a fundamental role to play in the transmission of culture and social continuity. Women can also be forced for progress. As we understand it in our community (also all over the world), the exclusion of women from development initiatives has been as obstacle to the success of these initiatives. Throughout history, women’s role and status have changed in accordance with the different circumstances of their societies:

- They have been mobilized in times of war as soldiers or factory workers;
- Given roles and responsibilities formerly considered reserved for men;
- In times of recession and unemployment women have been domesticated and their public and productive roles taken from them.
Thus, periods of relative autonomy are mixed with periods of forceful subjugation, but across societies overall, a general pattern of male superiority over women has been established and reproduced in attitudes, actions and customs. This paper aims at finding answers for the following questions, which every person concerned has to ask herself/himself:

1. What are the roots of these attitudes and actions, which seek to maintain women in a subordinate position in the name of culture?
2. What is the impact/effect of these practices on women and society as a whole?
3. What can be done to improve gender equity/not to violate human rights and ensure that culture is a progressive force for change?

Women have adapted to the needs of men for hundreds of years. A new consciousness is now needed which recognizes that it is time for society also to adapt to the needs of women and to fight violence against women.

**Backgrounds of Attitudes Towards Women**

The inherited idea that women's brains are physically smaller than men's and, therefore, women's inferiority is biological (the West did believe more so than the Third World people), has eventually been disproved by advanced medicine as simply not true. Yet dislodging long-held prejudices is a complex process and scientific evidence alone is not enough. Following the same argument, beliefs that women are naturally more docile, submissive, patient, and tolerant of monotonous or repetitive work are also common. This is despite the evidence that girls are taught submission as they grow and that lack of conformity carries high personal and social costs. Unfortunately much of these teachings are from other women -- usually mothers, elder siblings, close relations and mothers-in-law. Mosses (1993:2) has argued:

*Gender differs from biological sex in important ways. Our biological sex is a given; we are born either male or female. But the way in which we become masculine or feminine is a combination of these basic biological building blocks and the interpretation of our biology by our culture. Every society has different scripts for its members to follow as they learn to act out their feminine or masculine role, as much as every society has*
its own language. From the time that we are tiny babies until we reach old age we learn about and practice the particular ways of being male and female that our society prescribes for us.

Beliefs and attitudes that women’s activities are primarily domestic and secondary are prevalent in most societies. Traditional African Societies always had their share of male biased institutions and customs. However, research shows that there was also a fair degree of autonomy for women in the sphere of agriculture and trade, and income generated was solely theirs. Colonization had a profound impact on these customary practices as confirmed by Boserup (1970):

- Acceptance of men as the breadwinners, and women as non-working;
- Western expectation about family structure and functions;
- Restriction to land and resource ownership and/or limited accesses to and control over resources;
- Women serving community without being paid/ remunerated as well as not being recognized for the works they do, etc.

Thus throughout the world, many of the traditional practices which contribute to women’s subordination are based around family life and constrain women at all stages of their lives. Women’s dependent position in the family means that if they try to become individuals in the public sphere rather than wives, mothers or daughters, they become economically and socially vulnerable. Traditional relations of family life may be oppressive to women, but there is considerable social pressure to conform. The personal and private natures of gender relations make them very difficult to change. For instance, in Arsi, having children is a duty for married women. It is also naturally expected that women should take care of the children as one of their major duties, and they are also expected to socialize their children until they are differentiated by the role they are expected to perform as members of the family, community and society at large. A female informant expressed what it means to be a man and a woman in Arsi. For the Arsi a man is a big person who has higher social position, who is known and knowledgeable, who can lead and govern others, who can think with wider perspectives and one who can control and be loved by others. A woman, on the other hand, is one who can serve a man and who is considered as one of the household objects. When the husband needs/finds it necessary, he can move her
wherever he wants her to be; if he likes her he can keep her at home. She is his object once transferred to him through marriage on payment of bride-wealth and can do anything he wishes to do with her (violate any of her rights as he wishes). Moore (1988:25) rightly expresses the concept of ‘woman’ as constructed through the culturally given definitions of womanhood, which thereby emerge, even if that construction proceeds through conflict and contradiction. The result is a definition of ‘woman’ which is crucially dependent on the activities and associations, which the concept draws to itself.

As the meaning attached to man and woman differs in Arsi, the reception at birth is also different for a girl and a boy. Birth of a girl in Arsi is marked by silence. If it is a boy, the ogeettii - ‘expert’ traditional birth attendant - announces the birth by ululation, but keeps quite if it is a girl child. The silence implies that she is not ‘ours’, she is ‘theirs’, will be married to and labelled so-and-so’s wife. Her children will also be associated with her husband’s gossa so far as the marriage is in accordance to Oromo custom (aadaa Oromo). The Arsi believe that the son will remain in the family and inherit the family’s property, representing his father, and will protect his family in case of the death of the father. This perpetuates the low social status of women in Arsi, which is also true for most communities in Ethiopia.

Even those women who perform the ritual of obaaxxa dhiquu (washing the mother and child) make a clear gender distinction. The bathing takes place in four days for a girl and five/six days for a boy, and ululations are uttered only four times for a girl but five times for a boy. A mother who has given birth to a boy gets respect and gifts such as clothes and good food from her husband. An animal is also slaughtered for her by the husband. She gets gifts from neighbours as well. Relatives of her husband, who live far away, come with gifts and special food, which they call gumaata, for she has given birth to a boy. This, they say, is to acknowledge and show appreciation for a good deed. On the other hand, for a mother who has given birth to a girl, no gift is given, and people keep very quiet in this situation. However, if the husband is kind, he can slaughter a sheep for her but no gumaata or gifts are expected from his relatives at all. This has been also observed among the Waso Borana Oromo of Kenya, where only the closest kin of the family and neighbours bring small gifts. In general, there is a happy atmosphere and occasion of quiet satisfaction rather than noisy jubilation.

The news spreads fast and messages are sent to distant relatives and friends
especially if the baby is male and firstborn (Aguilar, 1998:37; Baxter, 1954:24 and Dhal, 1979a: 116). Asmarom (1973) has noted that women are considered *halaga* - outsiders or strangers - in their clan (*gossa*), neither are they considered members of the *gossa* into which they are married. They are rather bonds between different families. This clearly indicates preference for the male in Arsi. Gemetchu (1994) has confirmed that, in traditional Oromo society, male offspring are preferred to female, in the case of a firstborn child.

As indicated in the case of Arsi, the starting point is parental care and infancy pressure upon African women to bear children, and particularly sons. Preference for sons is wide spread across the globe, presumably stemming from prevalence of patriarchal systems where sons are required to continue the lineage, own property and carry over the name of the family into the future.

Discrimination is continued once a female infant is born:
- Male babies are breast fed longer (North Africa);
- Supplementary feeding is biased towards the male child;
- Favoritism is shown in the use of health care systems: daughters are less often taken than sons for health care;
- Immunization coverage is better for male children, adversely affecting the development of the non-immunized girls to the extent of obstructing labor during childbirth, etc.

**Childhood and Adolescence**

Socialization is the complex learning process through which individuals develop selfhood and acquire the knowledge, skills and motivations required for participation in social life. Although the learning, which occurs in childhood, lays the foundation for future development and is, therefore, especially crucial, socialization is a life long process. The family is the major agent of socialization. However, peers, the school, the mass media and other agents augment these influences. In a society where education is brief, and especially where women are not exposed to formal education, the role of the latter set of influences is ineffective, which is the case in Arsi. Mackie (1983:124) argues: "Socialization is the link between individual and society and may be viewed from each of the following two perspectives. From the point of the individual
interaction with other people, socialization is the means by which human potentialities are actualised. From the point of view of society, socialization explains how commitment to the social order is maintained over time." Hence the educational discrepancies between boys and girls, less investment in educating girls than boys and role expectations, for girls are expected to help their mothers, while boys are expected to go to schools. “Girls do not need formal education to prepare for their roles as mothers and home-makers.”

The role expectation of the society, which values women as wives and mothers, is one of the factors that constrain girls' education in Ethiopia. For instance, it is said that, if a girl has gone to school, Arsi men believe that she has no proper home training from her mother. They say that she talks to other men and reads books, and cannot, therefore, be a good wife. This is one of the reasons men resent getting married to girls who have gone to school, even for a short while. Men usually complain that, if girls are sent to school, they will be married into other ethnic or non-Muslim groups or they will be abducted by anyone whose clan they are not interested in forming alliance with.

Arsi mothers believe that the practice of girls working and helping their mothers from the age of seven to the day of their marriage is more instructive than what girls learn in modern schools. Women also think that sending a girl to school spoils the whole process of their tradition of socializing a girl to be a responsible woman for her household. Women respondents have tried to explain to me that girls who go to school are disobedient even to their mothers. This is probably why education of girls always lags behind that of boys in Arsi and in Ethiopia as a whole. Only about 10 per cent of the girls reach higher levels of education, and dropout rates are usually more for girls than for boys (Gennet, 1990:89; Seyoum, 1990:102; Lakew and Hirut, 1986:4).

All Arsi girls are expected to be virgin at the time of marriage, and the fear of not getting husbands as a consequence of going to school at quite a distance from their homesteads hinders the education of girls. At the same time, because of the attitude of the community towards formal education in general, and for girls' education in particular, girls have no material support and moral assistance to continue their education if sent to school. Thus, girls usually cut their schooling short and get married. There is also a lack of role models. There are very few female educators in Arsi and in government offices, and other influential personalities, who could convince girls to go to school. In fact,
mothers effectively play their role in socializing girls to be good future wives, mothers, and socially accepted women. The possible change of attitude that education brings for women has been hindered, which in turn has affected sustainable development.

The situation under which women are accepting what the tradition sets for them is part of the gendering process in the society. Almaz has clearly explained this by interconnecting gender issues with women's sexuality and behavior in a society as follows:

"The attitude and practices of a given society always incorporate perceptions of women, beauty and sexuality that lead to personal, social and gender role definitions that invariably negate women's physical and psychological identity. Incomprehensibly oppressive forms of bodily mutilations and deformities that prescribe women's sexual functioning, speech, mobility, intellectual possibilities and creative potentials emerge. Pain becomes an essential part of the process that women are required to bear with pride, respectability and compliance" (Almaz, 1997:573).

**Female Genital Mutilation**

FGM/female circumcision is a widespread cultural practice, found mostly in Africa and Asia and from which millions of girls suffer. Two million girls (aged 1-22) a year are at risk of genital mutilation. It is believed 85-114 million girls and women have had some kind of mutilation preformed on them. Across Africa, the prevalence rate ranges from a high of 90% in Ethiopia to a low of 5 percent in Uganda and Zaire.

There are many practices that are harmful but widely accepted. Some, such as female genital mutilation, rape, abduction, early marriage, etc., have been created and nurtured by the society to ensure the sustenance of women’s low status. The National Committee fighting against harmful traditional practices in Ethiopia has been working over a decade since its inception in 1987.

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1 There is also an Inter Africa Committee (IAC) on traditional practices affecting women and children, established in 1984, to unite and strengthen Africans who are working to abolish female genital mutilation and other harmful practices. IAC is composed of representatives of national groups from 20 African countries who are involved in education and training, legal and policy reform, and meeting
baseline survey that has been carried out in 1998 indicates the national level harmful traditional practices, such as milk teeth extraction (89 %), and uvulectomy (84 %) and female genital mutilation (73 %). In Oromia region alone teeth extraction, uvulectomy and female genital mutilation constitute about 87.3 %, 79.3 % and 97.7 %, respectively. Concerning pervasive harmful traditions, the same survey also indicated that early marriage stands out prominently in Tigray and Amhara regions, while marriage by abduction is relatively more common in Oromia and Southern regions. Infibulation is limited to the Afar, Somali, Harari and, to some extent, to Benishangul/Gumuz regions as well as to some zones of Oromia. Such a baseline survey is the first of its kind in Ethiopia (see map of FGM prevalence in Ethiopia). There have been sporadic efforts made to fight harmful traditions in Ethiopia since the Derg Regime. The new government has continued with more efforts, hand in hand with the issuance of a women's policy since 1993. Though there are more organized efforts by international organizations and continental and national committees, the progress towards changing the attitude and belief of the Ethiopian societies in general, and that of the Arsi in particular, has been very slow.

The question raised by almost all those who wrote on the subject is: "Why is a practice as harmful as female genital mutilation still practised today in Africa and adjacent Asian areas?" Tradition alone does not explain the underlying motivation for allowing such a practice to continue. The cultural and social pressures on parents to have their daughters circumcised or mutilated is so great that even the most enlightened and educated do not venture to discard the tradition totally, even when they are against it in principle. From my own experience, even those educated would not let their girls/daughters go without it. They would rather blame grandparents or relatives for doing it on their children without their consent. They are not aware of the physical and psychological damage that female genital mutilation brings to a woman/girl.

Sexuality is a concept that encompasses the physical capacity for sexual feeling and pleasure as personalized and shared meanings attached to sexual behavior and to the formation of sexual and gender identities. As concept superimposed by culture, sexuality becomes a social product, that is, a representation of natural functions in hierarchical social relationships. More generally, sexual
relationships often incorporate power disparities based on age as well as gender. They also incorporate disparities in access to resources. Due to these power disparities women and girls often have little control over what happens to them sexually or to their sexuality and violence against them.

As mentioned earlier the social construction of sexuality is inevitably linked with cultural concepts of masculinity and femininity. What constitute the essence of maleness and femaleness is expressed in sexual norms and ideologies. The bodily transformation is a ritual and symbolic means by which gender is attributed to human beings and FGM probably is a crucial step in shaping girls into adults, into “marriageable femaleness” according to norms to a large extent codified by men. Thus, the physical transformation of the female genital is also intimately linked to the shaping of virility and male identity.

FGM, explained as: “Takes monkey out of the girls” affects the exercise of a healthy sexuality, making it both painful and unfulfilling. It is not difficult to see the long- and short-term effect - physical and psychological damage - for both mothers and daughters. It is also believed that female genital mutilation is necessary to assure family stability and faithfulness of women, since it reduces or entirely extinguishes sexual pleasure for women. Indeed, it may make coitus a painful ordeal. However, the usually appearing forms include one or more of the following:

- Establishing femaleness;
- Representing the rite of passage between the child-and-adult-female state;
- Controlling female sexuality, which is often seen as dangerously powerful;
- Safeguarding the woman’s virginity until marriage;
- Protecting of family honour and ensuring the legitimacy of descendants;
- Necessity for cleanliness or purity;
- Enhancement of man’s pleasure in intercourse;

Early Marriage
This practice is also widespread throughout the developing world in general, and in Ethiopia in particular. Traditional customs may dictate that a woman can be married as soon as she has reached puberty, and she may not even have time to adjust to her own growing womanhood before she becomes a mother, causing many young married girls to suffer from Fistula problems.

- There is a strong link between early marriage and high fertility;
- Young women who bear children before their own bodies are fully matured may suffer permanent damage to their reproductive health/overall health as a result;
- It is also a high risk for mother and child;
- It affects the chances of girls going to school, opportunities for employment, etc.;
- Confines women to the home for caring for underage children at home.
- Chance of bride wealth for parents but denial of the chance to choose her own life partner for a girl;
- May be indicative of further constraints on her ability to decide for other life options;
- Makes her permanently disadvantaged.

*For example:* dowry/bride wealth issues in Asia and Africa, respectively. For Ethiopian experience see NCTPE Baseline Survey 1998).

**Violence Against Women**

From what has been discussed earlier, throughout her life, a woman lives under the shadow of the threat of violence from men, which may take many forms. Violence, as well as the threat of violence, has long been used by men as a means to control women. Whether done individually or collectively, violence against women affects all cultures and countries, irrespective of class, race or religion. It is a result of societal structures in which men dominate and women are relegated to subordinate positions.

Cultural and even religious beliefs may provide a form of acceptance or justification for family violence. *For example:*
° Where a wife is seen as her husband's property to be disposed of as he chooses;
° Where it is believed that a man has a right to sexual services from his wife on demand and where she can be forced to comply, if necessary;
° So much is wife beating taken for granted that it is glorified in some cultures, etc.;
° The threat of violence ensures that women will defer to and comply with men’s decision about sexual behavior or contraceptive use, which greatly limits women’s control over their own fertility.

“Sadly, violence by only a few men may be sufficient to keep many women in fear” (See Hirut, 2001; CERTWID, 2002).

To summarize, there is a disturbing range of gender-based violence, including:

- Physical, sexual, psychological or emotional abuse;
- Sexual slavery and enforced prostitution;
- The practices of female feticide and infanticide;
- Neglect of female children;
- Female genital mutilation;
- Dowry-related violence;
- Rape, defilement of female minors and sexual abuse are obvious violations of a woman’s sexual and reproductive freedoms, but the threat of physical violence can also have devastating effects, reducing women’s ability to protect themselves against unwanted pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.
- Violence against women has also social costs (Involvement in family, work, national wealth, human suffering of women and their children, have impact on future generations - violence is a learned behavior.)
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The discussion started with a question on the origins of culture, customs and traditions. Culture, customs and traditions are said to have many sources, among which religion plays a paramount role. But, what of patriarchy? Isn't it patriarchal ideology that enforces and safeguards and in fact is a system in which such cultures as would privilege men's interests over those of women are created and used as tools to keep that same system intact?

The presenter said that patriarchy developed in connection with the rise of the system of private property, in which men have the rights of ownership to the exclusion of women. Patriarchy is sustained by cultural practices that are in favour of male domination.

A participant added to this that patriarchy is an ideology entwined and built along the pillars of religion and culture, both of which are pro-masculine. What prevails in religion is supported through the creation of patriarchal institutions, such as bureaucracies and legal systems, as well as policies that buttress those institutions. Since entire societies, including their protective and safeguarding mechanisms, such as religion, culture, customs and traditions, are patriarchal, women's positions in them are, by definition, subordinate. In such societies women have no positive role in the creation of culture; any role they play has to do with just following and continuing the culture created by patriarchy. In short, it was said, women do not choose their culture; they are just condemned to it.

Another question raised was on how culture develops, changes and/or is enforced.
Culture is evolutionary and, thus, changes over time. However, many observable changes take place within the lifespan of an individual. For example, when rural families move to urban areas, changes in attitudes, behaviour and cultural practices take place because of exposure to new values, accessibility to education, etc. The changes can take many forms. Certain cultural practices may be altogether discarded, while others are modified or even intensified and expanded. It also appears that moving to urban areas can provide the solution for positive changes and getting rid of negative cultural and customary practices. Changes in lifestyles and having more income and wealth also create a culture of their own, whereby new customs and habits develop and become established into different cultural parameters. But there is also the opposite tendency to resist change and stick rigidly to one's inherited culture. There are particular examples where cultural practices become intensified, as if people were trying to cling tighter to them. The question is: why does culture tend to become rigid when people migrate?

This rigidity could be explained in two ways: one is resistance to what is considered alien -- the 'other' culture -- and the fear that that it may infiltrate one's established life patterns; or it could manifest itself as resistance to any change that is viewed as negative and harmful. The other reason could be that constraint and control mechanisms are so entrenched that one may not easily be able to discard certain cultural habits. And it is usually the elderly who exercise cultural control. So, while the young, usually educated generation may like to stop practicing certain traditional customs, mainly due to changes in their lifestyles, the elderly may resist (or disapprove) and come with their beliefs in the supernatural that when the young do not do this or that, this or that ill-fate will befall them. The result is that the young people find themselves often in a dilemma.

The next issue looked into was that of education in relation to culture, customs and tradition. It was said that education could create the desired positive impact of change in that it enables educated people to discard negative cultural and traditional practices. While this may be true under certain circumstances, what is observed and known from experience is that there are contradictory expectations from the educated. On the one hand, they are under enormous pressure to maintain and conform to their culture, whether positive or negative, while on the other hand, it is also expected of them to bring about change.
One participant shared her experience at this point. The participant, who came from a very traditional community, recalled the question that used to be continuously thrown at her while she was in high school. The question, simple as it may look and coming from her mother, aunts, grandmothers and other relatives, whenever she tried to avoid certain traditional habits or made remarks against them was: 'Is that what you learn in school?' The point here is that society expects education to be administered such that it conforms to existing cultures and traditions. But education is also supposed to be a tool of change. How can these two contradictory expectations reconcile?

The presenter added that education, indeed, is not always a solution, because educated people do not necessarily change or are not willing to change, since societal pressures are too much. Those who are willing to change have to struggle with double or triple identities. On the one hand, in order not to upset the system, they conform to their cultural practices, while, on the other, they struggle to get rid of them. Another point raised here was that educated people do not really extricate themselves out of tradition. Many educated do not necessarily discard cultural practices -- whether they are harmful or not -- either due to too much pressure or because they lack the willpower to do so.

Again, education in and of itself cannot change anything. In fact, in many instances, education is also used as a strong tool to enforce, encourage and expand existing cultural practices. One example is education based on religious curricula. For education to become a tool of change, therefore, other factors need to be considered, e.g. change in curricula, policies, enforcement mechanisms, etc.

The issue of **equality between the sexes in culture** was also delved into. Is there gender equality in culture? The answer was in the negative. There are many cultures and traditions that don't have gender equality embedded in them. So, even though there are so many beautiful policies and UN conventions signed by governments, cultural communities may ignore, or refuse to practice them, and when there is too much pressure, they may even resort to violence, become conservative or fundamentalist in their practices. There are communities that have been able to adapt to changes, but there are also communities that resist and fight against any change, particularly in areas of gender. They do no want to adapt to changes because gender equality is not
seen as part of their cultures. The question is how to change cultures and make them more gender sensitive.

The response to this was that the core of change should not only start with the process of socialization to create a new generation that espouses equality among women and men. It should rather start with the socializers themselves, those who are responsible for procreating (culturally speaking) the new generation. These socializers are grown-up women and men who are already biased in their views because of their immersion in the culture and tradition they are expected to propagate. It is, therefore, crucial for them to change their own outlook first before they can socialize others according to the ways demanded by an ever-changing world.

According to one participant, in order to change cultures, it is important to trace them to their roots. Maybe there is a need for a historical study on this?

The presenter said that there was no study that covers all the cultures of Ethiopia. She added, however, that there were some studies in anthropology where a few cultures have been looked into, though they were not on the origins of discriminatory practices. In fact, it might not be easy to undertake such studies because some of the cultural practices might be impossible to trace back to their roots. For example, in the southern Ethiopian Peoples and Oromia regions abduction is rampant. When the people were asked how the practice of abduction started most responded by saying that it started because of economic problems and the increase in dowry prices. And those who could not afford the dowries resorted to abduction. But, the economic reasons cannot explain everything. In the past, abduction had another reason. For example, there is a lot of early marriage in northern Ethiopia. People say that girls should not have their period in the houses of their parents because people will suspect them of promiscuity, so they get married off early. Very often, however, when such practices as abduction continue from generation to generation, the original reasons behind those acts disappear and new meanings are attached to them so as to fit current perceptions. Beliefs with regard to such practices take deep root when transferred through oral tradition.

Another participant said that knowing the origins of cultural practices might not provide solution to the problems, because many cultural practices change over
time; they are transformed and reinterpreted. So the difficulty still remains of finding quick solutions for those problems existing today.

Then there was a comment on how people should start questioning cultural practices that are violating their rights. People, it was suggested, should become critical and look into the root causes of those practices. But in order to do so, they have to reflect on the things that are considered normal and taken for granted, things people go through daily without asking, because those are the things that direct one's thinking and the subsequent actions. And those things are part of what is labeled 'culture'. People are so used to blindly following actions without even attempting to stop and think about their validity. For example, there are many cultural practices that result in violence, but people never question them. Why is violence still tolerated at a time when consciousness and awareness levels about rights are supposed to be high?

The response to this was that, for one thing, many types of rights violations are still not considered as such. People have their own outlook on what is considered a violation and define it for themselves according to their cultural values. Cultural beliefs protect violators by justifying many of those violations as culturally justified. Since Ethiopia is generally a religious society, based on very traditional outlooks of life, which play a crucial role in the actions and behaviour of people, changes are not easily accepted. Even when changes (in policies, awareness raising, etc.) occur and people are sensitized about what constitutes a violation and what not, because people are bound by their strong, religious, traditional and cultural norms, they refuse to cooperate and adapt. In this way many continue to tolerate and practice negative cultural beliefs that affect their health, rights and living conditions, and this, even when they are highly educated.

Increase in crimes was the other question raised. There is more robbery, rape, abduction, killing, etc now than in the past. How does one explain that? Two reasons were cited:

On the one hand, the increase of crime and violence is caused by the economic problems of the country. On the other hand it is aggravated by resistance to change. Resistance to change can lead to intensification of negative cultural practices. Resistance to change also translates into punishment of those who want to change. Women dressing up in modern wear are blamed for defying
cultural dress codes and are punished (rape itself considered as one form of punishment). Many households where women earn income are subjected to criticism and violence, since women are taking over the place of men. Many see women's empowerment as negative and resort to violence to punish those women who empower themselves.

One participant had the feeling that there is no change, that nothing is moving, and asked what was wrong with the current approach to bring about positive change in the area of culture.

The presenter responded that, no matter what issue one deals with, one could not deal with it in isolation, since it has an impact on whole societies. Neither women nor men can effectively do anything alone. They are both part and parcel of the problems, and they should therefore also be part and parcel of the solutions. In the main, the issue of men and women/gender is about exclusion and inclusion. Women are excluded in certain areas where men are included, while at the same time women are included in other areas where men are excluded. This approach has to change, because the problems of individuals are the problems of groups and the problems of groups are the problems of society as a whole. Men, too, are affected by the way they were brought up. Socialization is not only for girls but also for boys, who are socialized in a tradition and modes of behaviour they may not like. Child marriage, for example, also affects boys negatively in their education. The difference is the magnitude of the negative impact for girls and boys. As they grow up, girls are influenced more negatively than boys, but this does not imply that boys should be excluded from the interventions needed in this area.

There was an example forwarded on how to stop negative cultural practices (for example, female genital mutilation). There are many cultural justifications forwarded for FGM, but the main one is that a girl will be promiscuous without it, an argument that has never been proven. Other reasons may include that the girl will not be a good wife and a good mother, that she cannot deliver babies easily, that she will be unclean, she won't be marriageable, etc. Many women undergo FGM without knowing why. The point is that because there are so many reasons attached to the practice, it might be difficult to eradicate it. There will always be another reason to perpetuate it. The main point here is for the educated ones to take actions by educating the people and make them understand. Another way to stop negative cultural practices is that people
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should start questioning all those practices they have been taking for granted. Eventually it will work.

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The Role of Religion in Violence Against Women

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In studying religion as a phenomenon, perhaps the first question that needs to be asked is whether it is possible to isolate religious behavior from other forms of behavior.

Definitions of Religion

Religion does not have a fixed and universally accepted definition. It is simply based on some intuitive ideas of which behaviors should be considered religions. It is therefore difficult to delimit and define religion in any precise fashion.

There are those who define religion in terms of its content. They define religion as “belief in spiritual beings.” This definition falls far short of being clear, since it is impossible to say which phenomena are spiritual and which ones natural. This problem becomes clear when we consider the observer’s view and the believer's view separately. Therefore, the definition that claims religion to be a belief in spiritual or supernatural beings as opposed to a belief in natural ones does not hold water. This is so because both kinds of beliefs are acquired by means of some kind of socialization and educational process and are, therefore, accepted on the authority of others.

There are others that have defined religion on the basis of what it does. In other words, they have defined it in terms of the function of religious beliefs and religious actions. An aspect of this definition emphasizes the symbolic features of religion, which are usually considered to demarcate the sacred from the profane.

Most 19th century studies of religion focused on the question of the origin and evolution of religious forms. It is in this sense that some formulated the so-
called three basic stages of human intellectual development as magic, religion and science. They claimed each of these stages to be characterized by different kinds of theory of causality and how humans may affect the outcome of events.

Still there were others who tried to define religion as a belief in a diffused impersonal power that emanated from the wonders about and contemplation of the natural world by early humans.

There is also the psychological approach to religion. Freud, for instance, claimed religious beliefs to be projections of the psychic tension, conflicts and complexes. He thus depicted deities and spirits as collective fantasies. Whatever the definition of religion may be it must be clear that religion is an aspect of culture. The major function of culture is to make boundaries between anything and everything, and boundary making is a human condition.

**Boundaries in Human Affairs**

Boundaries are and have always been part of the human condition. They have defined individual territories, group efforts, insiders and outsiders, etc. For those who believe in creation, gender has been one of the major features of human boundaries. Whereas it is true that many boundaries, but particularly gender boundaries, are social constructions, they all remain barriers that must be contended with in any human effort aimed at contributing to the evolution of a more viable future.

In fact, even our present world is a constructed social system, one that has boundaries, structures, members, groups, and rules of legitimization. Many of the social units that some scholars conceptualize as systems are in reality subsystems. Such human classifications as tribes, communities, nation-states and gender do not constitute systems. They are sub-systems dependent on one another.

**Culture-Made Boundaries**

The crossing of any boundary made by culture against the wishes of those that benefit from the existence of such boundaries, or contrary to the rules that
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legitimize such crossing has been the source much turmoil, wars and latent conflicts between the peoples of the world at different levels.

**How does Religion Relate to Boundaries?**

As mentioned earlier, religion is an aspect of culture. It belongs to the category broadly defined as ideology. Ideology refers to a total system of thought, emotions, and attitudes towards such boundaries established by culture. Religion gives meanings to these boundaries and formulates rules and regulations that legitimize the crossing of such boundaries. It is these rules and regulations that become part and parcel of the thoughts, emotions and attitudes of people in everyday life and play a role in directing human action. From this perspective, action can be understood by appreciating the ideology and/or religion, since individuals derive meanings, purposes and motives from them, which they use to direct their actions.

**Does Religion Perpetuate Violence Against Women?**

We have already mentioned the fact that human action is directed and controlled by norms provided by the social system.

The cultural system provides a more general guideline for action by establishing and defining boundaries in the form of beliefs, values, and systems of meanings. The major function of religion is nothing but to defend such established boundaries and definitions.

For questions such as: “why must women endure deprivation, pain and violence?” religion has a range of answers: such beliefs as 'suffering is imposed by God', or 'women are the first sinners who also become the reason for the fall of man', and the like are myths and fables recounted to prevent women from crossing the established definition and boundaries.

Almost in all forms of Christianity and Islam woman generally have no right as a free person, she is always subject to a man -- either her father or her husband. The inferior position of woman in these religions is obvious in the areas of adultery, divorce, dowry, family, inheritance, marriage, prostitution,
widowhood and the like. These are all areas related to sexual functions. This overemphasis upon the sexual function of women naturally involved loss of dignity for woman as a member of society and as a full partner in matrimony.

It is not difficult to notice the subordination of women to men when one reads the Bible. The Bible clearly states that woman is man's property, which he may use in his own defense. (See Genesis 12:12-20, 19:8, 20:2; Jgs 19:24-27). Women apparently were not supposed to eat with men. (See Gn. 18:9; Rt 2:14).

The so-called wisdom literature of the Old Testament exhibits a strain that can only be called misogyny, or hatred of women. In Proverbs 6:24-26; 7:5-27, a warning is given to men, especially young men, against the seductions of the prostitute and the adulteress. In Proverbs 11:12 it reads: “A golden ring in a swine’s snout is a woman fair and foolish. In Proverbs 19:13; 21:9; 25:24; 27:15 is mentioned the monotony of the nagging wife. In the Book of Samuel 19:2, Ben-Sira warns of the danger of wine and women, and the ease with which man is seduced by feminine beauty (Sam. 9:3-9). Here the book describes women as quarrelsome, talkative, malicious, and as deceiving men by their beauty. The same book goes further to explain how envious, drunkards, and promiscuous women are and concludes with the statement that sin began with a woman and because of her we all die (25:24).

Then there is also the New Testament attitude towards women, which is hardly different from the Old Testament. It is true that Jesus was aware of the daily life of the women of his time. He also did show interest in them. This is evident in the Parables. It is true that all the episodes of the Parables clearly reveal the total absence in Jesus of the Old Testament attitude towards women. But even then it was not his teaching that made the difference but his conduct.

The theoretical position of women is not often mentioned outside the discussion of marriage, but there are some important texts. 1st Timothy 2:15, for instance, affirms the idea that “woman will be saved through motherhood. It is obvious that this does not go beyond Old Testament conception of women’s fulfillment. The same book (in Chapter 3) asserts that woman is a full partner with man of the Christian life, but urges that she be cherished because she is the weaker sex. This weakness did not mean merely physical.
In Paul, woman is and ought to be subject to man, and he, in fact, advances a theological argument to show that the subjection of women should be maintained (1 Cor 3:18; 11:3, 7, 10; 14:35; Eph 5:21). The only time he admits the equality of male and female is in 1 Col 11:11-12, when he affirms that in Christ there is no difference between man and woman. This is the only and the clearest statement ever made regarding the dignity of women in the entire book of the New Testament.

Paul believed the subjection of women to be the result of the original curse. With the removal of the curse of sin, he claimed, the subjection of women would also be removed. With these few examples it is not difficult to see the fact that there is no significant change in the conception of women from the time of the Old Testament to that of the New Testament.

**Conclusion**

By way of concluding the discussion as to whether religion violates, and perpetuate violence against, the equality of women, the answer is a big yes! But religion, particularly Christianity and Islam, manages to escape criticism by claiming higher moral grounds. Both religions do this by speaking in the name of the ultimate authority, which is not available for interrogation.

The simple fact about religion, as far as our human experience goes, however, is that religion is an aspect of culture, which makes rules, in the form of norms and values, for the boundaries that culture establishes. In this sense it constitutes ideology.

As part of ideology it distorts the true nature of those relationships that lead to the establishment of those boundaries it sets out to defend. It legitimizes and justifies inequality and violation not only between men and women, but also between all forms of gender relations. It violates, and perpetuates violations of, woman’s natural rights.
Before the discussion and debate started, Melakou took the floor to explain to the participants what course the discussion should follow so as to bring issues into focus. He said that the discussion should not be philosophical or theoretical. The main focus should be on development because of the state the country is in, Ethiopia being one of the most impoverished countries in the world. But the focus on development here should not be made only in economic terms, but should be looked at from various angles and broadly. The point here is that, although most of the blame for underdevelopment falls on the shoulders of the government, the serious weaknesses in civil society should not be ignored. One of the major weaknesses has to do with perception. Just like many things in society, economic development is also very much influenced and encouraged by ideological and other forms of undercurrents that go into the modes of perception. In traditional, and even in modern societies, there are perceptions that perpetuate the oppression of women, perceptions that, in fact, aggravate violence and rationalize this violence in all sorts of ways. The aim of this forum is to look into religion in general and not focus on specific religions such as Christianity or Islam. There are many more religions in the world, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. where women also experience the same types of violence.

After Melakou's clarifications, the presenter used the opportunity to also stress the distinction he made between religion and belief systems, as he put it, Religion with capital 'R' and religion with small 'r'. As he put it, religion is religion when it crosses a boundary. But when religion emanates from a particular culture, it is not religion, rather it is a belief system. Once it crosses a boundary, it becomes religion and it also becomes part of a colonizing structure, which the presenter called 'a silent feature of international relations'.
Then the debate started. The first issue raised was on the **distinction between religion and belief systems**. Specifically, what is the distinction between the two in their degree of perpetuation of the inferiority of women in society?

In response the presenter said that, as far as was known by humanity, religion had always served a purpose. When one speaks about gender inequality perpetuated by religion, one has to look into the details of the religions concerned. Many religions not only influence the relationship between woman and man, legitimizing and justifying inequality between the two, but also influencing all forms of gender relations. This can be shown through the unfair and unjust treatment of women, which one can directly quote in religious writings.

A comment was added at this point about the distinction between religion and belief systems to the effect that belief systems are created everywhere and everyday. People develop their own belief systems. Belief systems are normally controlled by a small group or community and are given all kinds of names, such as 'sects', for example. What has been observed until now is that many of these belief systems apply different rules. Thus, while some may be more disposed to gender equality, others may be less so.

On the other hand, however, there is no religion in the world that positively promotes gender equality. People always say that it all lies in the interpretation given to religion, but no matter how one interprets any religion, there is simply no space for gender equality in religious practices.

At this point objection was raised by one of the participants, who happens to be from the Bahai religious group. The objection was that the Bahai religion was the only religion that has room for gender equality. The presenter then spoke on the powerful way religion is taught and said that it was a serious problem, especially the way it was taught to young children. The teaching of anything to little children is a form of early socialization. When these young children are taught about religious texts the way they are, one can imagine the impact the teachings will have on the level of thinking among those children, because these teachings strongly manipulate their minds. This will definitely affect their relationships with their partners in the future. The presenter also gave an example here of his personal experience as a child. He was taught about religion with fear, so much so that he ended up having nightmares. And this is exactly what is meant by teachings that manipulate the
mind. Religion preaches in such a powerful way that many people are mentally affected by it. This appears to be a serious social problem, and people should be able to not only reflect on this but also on what its impact is on young children. The point here is that, if religion is so powerful, it is good to have the courage to discuss it. The idea is not to tell people to change their religion or get rid of it, but to find ways to deal with its psychological impact.

One participant added to this view of religious impact on young children. She said that she, too, was struggling, as a teacher, about how to interpret religious writings to young children without scaring them. There are stories that openly show women's oppression and subordination, which cannot be used as good examples for today's growing children, at a time when the main aim is to develop a new generation of equal human beings. The participant said that she used a different approach when teaching young children about religious stories. She said that she explained to those children that the religious texts were written a long time ago, and by different people, in different societies and different contexts. The religious stories reflected the reality, the context and the time in which those people lived then. She then compared this to the present situation, where, if people were to write stories, these stories would reflect the culture, ideology and reality of the current time.

The next issue discussed and debated upon had to do with the interpretation of religious writings. One participant said that the majority of Ethiopians, being very religious are thought to be religion-illiterate. And this religious illiteracy causes them to be manipulated, dominated, supervised and directed by others who read and interpret the religious texts for them. The people are thus led into embracing beliefs and engaging in actions that are actually biased, based on the interpreters' understanding of those texts. It is not a new phenomenon to find interpreters ideas and words that don't even exist in the real religious writings. Many interpreters are known for putting something of their own in religious writings, making them part of that religion. The main problem, though, and a serious one too, is that people do not even question this because of their ignorance or lack of knowledge about the original texts. A question that could emerge from this is: ‘Why are people ignorant about their own religious writings?’ As a way of finding an answer to this question, it was suggested that one had to look into the specific contexts people live and work in as well as into their behaviors and actions. Where the majority of the people have no education
and are illiterate, it is obvious that they will depend on others to read and interpret religious texts for them.

Added to the above was that even more serious is the fact that even the educated follow the leads of the interpreters of religious texts. Nowadays, more and more people are educated. There is also more exposure and access to higher education. This should imply that people have educated minds and, thus, should be capable of reading their own materials. This being the case, the question still persists as to why such people are still kept ignorant about the original texts, or why it is that people are still restricted from reading their own religious writings and interpreting them according to their own different levels of understanding.

Or, is it that not everyone is allowed to read the religious texts on his or her own? Why do people need others -- middlemen -- to interpret their religions for them?

The response of the presenter to these questions was that, because religion is institutional, it is religious and when it is religious it tends to be manipulative. Manipulation is usually carried out by those who are in positions of power, and such people are generally priests or gurus.

The presenter also added that the number of religions which have been spreading all over the world and expanding were beyond one’s imagination. This expansion is effected by powerful preachers, who utilize many types of modern communication channels to reach people all over the world. The kind of people going around preaching a certain religion or cause is also another issue. These preachers have charisma and use words effectively. They know how to infiltrate the minds of the illiterate and how to confront the literate. They tell people that hell and heaven are real and that doom is near. They are terrifying. These people interpret religious writings for the 'masses' with a strong self-interest and keep those 'masses' away from even touching those writings. What is amusing is that when they are preaching, they all speak in different directions.

*But what is the actual impact of these terrifying preachings on people?*

The response given to this was that it is known that human beings had always looked for someone to follow. People like to follow leaders. Some leaders might be sincere in teaching their people and looking after their interests, but the majority are powerful with words, and they use those words in order to create
fear in the hearts of their followers. There are people who are mentally affected by this type of preaching. Religious preaching, when powerful, can create psychological trauma in those who literally believe the every word the preachers utter. People expect to see things happening as forecasted by the preachers, and when what the preachers forecast do not come true, one can imagine the psychological impact they have on people. In Ethiopia, as traditional as it is, religion plays a crucial role in many people's day-to-day life, in their activities, actions, behavior and thinking. Even the daily language use is molded by religious verses. Imagine what it does to little children! The question here is: Where can people go to complain? Who should be held accountable for using words wrongly? Who can verify the truth of the writings?

Concerning religious illiteracy, one of the participants shared her experience as follows:

"In Chicago, I brought with me two Amharic translations of the church ceremonies, e.g. what to do when baptizing, etc. to my house. The ceremonies were translated and simplified by Prof. Abraham Demoz. I brought two copies and gave one to the girl who worked with me, because she was very religious. The amusing thing was that she literally refused to touch it. She said: 'No, no, this is a sacred thing and I am not going to read it, it is not for me, I am not clean to use it, I am not supposed to know this, etc.' So, she gave her copy to their spiritual leader."

This is one good instance of people refusing to read their own religious writings even when provided with the opportunity to do so. The reasons for this could be many. Either people (as the woman in our case) literally do not consider themselves worthy to read religious texts, or they had been brought up with such fear that if they ever tried to read the texts by on their own, some doom would befall them.

One participant raised the issue of the **evolution of things and human beings** alike, and of the place and function of things that are ancient and old in people's lives. He said that when one looks back in history, one finds that it has been written around certain concepts and topics. It is also good to look into the contexts in which those holy writings were written, to whom (what type of people) they were given, and for what purpose, etc. The point is that the kind of issues that concern this age and time are different from the ones that were there
2000 years ago. Religion may have served as a kind of therapy at one time and different purposes at others. God's words had been given to people who were at a different level of the evolutionary process.

The confusion nowadays, in this 21st century, is that people are trying to analyze, say, the Bible, which was written 2000 years ago. Because people now live in a different time and a different context, keeping such texts as the Bible static creates more conflicts than understanding. History is continuously being re-written and people can write their own history in terms of social evolution or revolution, as the case may be. What can be observed at present is that, not only are things in the process of change, but people's perceptions of God are also changing. Different concepts, such as gender equality, race relations, education, science and religion, etc. are concepts that developed through time, as part of evolutionary processes. So it should be understood that humanity today is not the same as 2000 years ago.

At this point the presenter added an interesting note for others to reflect on. He said: "Things and human beings have been evolving and changing. Yet, why, for example, has Christianity, which was brought to Ethiopia nearly 2000 years ago, not evolved?"

One participant picked up this question and said that humanity evolves and changes its level of thinking. People today are the products of their evolution. Imagine material things that have undergone changes to fit their own specific time of use. One has to realize that these changes are a direct outcome of the transformations humanity underwent. Humanity has been changing and developing its level of thinking and has attained a high capacity of understanding the existence of practically everything. Human evolution is also accompanied by actions. Therefore, the question raised by the presenter is something really serious to sit back and reflect upon.

Another issue raised was about the relation between the texts of the holy books and the interpretation of those texts and the impacts it has on believers. One participant said that both the texts and their interpretation create gender imbalances in life. Generally both impact women negatively. When it comes to violence against women, interpretations of religious texts have huge impacts, whether domestically or in the public/political sphere. In many societies, religions advance the belief that women are direct properties of their parents,
husbands, etc., who are free to do whatever they please with them. There are so many examples regarding interpretations of religious texts and the position of women in society.

Another participant added here that religion supports and encourages many types of abuse against women. All religious writings were written by men; women were never made religious or spiritual leaders. It is known that many religions are discriminatory towards women and that women are prevented, prohibited, or outright forbidden from participating in many activities. In short, religion is very negative for women, as it perpetuates the unequal relationship between them and men.

But is everything to be blamed on religion? The answer to this question was in the negative. Gender discrimination and inequality do not have their basis only in religion, but also in customs. Gender has a lot to do with power relations that are more based on customs than on religion. Many people don't know anything about holy books or the texts in holy books. They get all their information from interpreters, who themselves might never have read those religious books, but who might have been simply nurtured on them. An example: Phoolan Devi, the famous Indian Bandit Queen, narrated her autobiography, which was released recently. If one looks at the magnitude of violence she had undergone, one will find that it contradicts the belief that religion alone is the culprit when it comes to the subjugation of women. Devi was a victim of customs, not religion. There is thus a question of power relations between women and men, and violence is imbedded in and based on these power relations.

Since it appeared that the problem here was a matter of interpretations, the question raised was: What can be done against misinterpretations? The response was:

- Inform oneself about what the misinterpretations are; (some people are still afraid to read what is actually written);
- Confront the interpreters;
- Deal with those who more or less accept everything.

There was also a debate on the religious texts and their re-writing. One participant related to the evolution of religion. She said that it was well known that many religious texts had been continuously re-written since their
original composition. She wondered how a few pages of original texts/writings had been turned into massive, thick documents and elaborated upon. Rewriting is not just literally word for word copying; the person that copies the texts puts something of himself in it. (She stressed 'him', because it has always been men who have been doing the re-writing.) And since it is known how many times and how often in the course of history texts have been re-written, one can imagine the gap between the original texts and the current texts in use. It has already been pointed out that people have developed their levels of understanding and thinking over time due to higher access to more developed and advanced education. If, by chance, these people were to rewrite religious texts, one could imagine the outcome. The rewriting at any given period of religious texts is in a way linked to violence, because the rewritten texts can be deliberately made to fit the moment and be used, in a different way and under different circumstances, as a tool to manipulate others in one's own interest. The problem, though, is that believers do not attempt or dare to question the rewritten texts and their interpretations, because of their own ignorance of the content of the original texts.

The presenter asked here: 'Do you know why they rewrite religion over and over? ' To which he answered that it was because it resisted defeat. 'Every time one tries to disprove it, it rewrites itself' he added. He gave an example on this: 'Let us say] I am a rainmaker and you come to me to stop the rain. You pay me for it and I have thus taken your money. When I fail to stop the rain, and you come back to me, I try to find excuses and faults in you. I will ask you what you did, and when I find the reasons in you, I throw them at you. For example, I will tell you that, because you did not do such and such a thing, or you drank alcohol, etc., that is why it rained. And this is how religion works. When a certain issue is not dealt with and questions are raised about it, they will rewrite the books to make sure the issue is included in it next time. That is why they have increased in volume.'

The next question was: How does patriarchy fit into religion?

The presenter said: 'Religion fits into patriarchy because we live in the world of men. But there are different worlds. Among the Oromo there are four different worlds, four different ways of thinking. There is the world of thinking, which is created by God and ruled by God. There is the world of man, created by man and ruled by man, etc. And this is how it comes to be patriarchy, because,
unfortunately, this world is the world of man. It is not known why, but it can be changed.

A participant added to this that many religions are based on patriarchal ideology, where the patriarch, the man, is in charge. Societies constructed on patriarchal rules will definitely have mechanisms and institutions to safeguard patriarchal interests. Religion is one of those powerful tools. We may be once again confronted with the chicken-and-egg riddle, but still, patriarchy and religion seem to complement each other in many ways.

The impact of religion on development was the following issue raised. One participant said that religion and development are closely linked. Religion, as experienced in traditional societies, such as Ethiopia, has been a constraint to development. It has defined the role of women and told women not to move out of their place. When one looks at religion and the impact it has on each and everyone, it can be clearly stated that there is a problem, a serious one at that. The apathetic state people are in at present, spending more and more time engaged in never-ending religious ceremonies than in investment and development, is serious enough to be taken up by all. What causes people, masses of people, to arrive at such a state of mind? What has made them so apathetic? Here, again, the focus was placed on the interpreters of religion. Interpreters know exactly how to manipulate people into actions they consider worthy for themselves, actions not necessarily benefiting the ‘masses’.

‘What can be done in this state of affairs?’ It was suggested that there were actually a group of people in society who could take up the lead in changing people’s perceptions about religion. They could be rational and look at it objectively. It is the people working in development issues who should understand what the impact of religion is and collectively try to find a way out of the situation people are now in. The main thing here, again, is not to abandon religion, one cannot ever do that, but to steer religious teaching in the direction of helping bring about development. Religion can be used in development through mobilizing people for good causes, by cultivating their mind for their own good and development.

An interesting question raised here with regard to the educated was: ‘Why do the educated dissociate themselves from religion?’ Some may just pay lip service,
while others completely ignore it. Is it because it does not fit in the scheme of things anymore?

The presenter said that the educated discard religion because they have access to knowledge. Those who are educated have broader views and they have the choice of what to believe and what not to believe.

One of the participant added that educated people discard religion because they develop other coping mechanisms to deal with situations. Religion is seen by some as a discipline, just like science, philosophy, etc. When one can draw from other disciplines to give better meanings to one's life, religion is easily discarded, particularly because it is non-verifiable, non-debatable, unaccountable, etc. Many also claim, as already mentioned above, that religion does not fit in today's context anymore. It was meant for a specific time for specific people in a different context and setting. Now that people are more educated, they need to have another religion to hold onto, and that is maybe why there are so many new belief systems appearing, each trying to satisfy the needs of the group of people who invent it. If the old religions had undergone the same evolutionary processes as humanity has undergone, religion as is known historically might not have been discarded. But what is known is that religion tends to remain static, and when it comes into conflict with the current interest of many people, it is simply discarded.

An interesting trend in the debate was the shift to make a link between religion and globalized power relations. A participant said that power relations are not only gender-based within local framework, but also globally based, where powerful countries use various means and technology to advance their own interests. For example, religion is used to infiltrate the minds of the 'masses' in poorer countries. Many examples can be forwarded to support this claim, but the main one is obviously known by many; namely, the fact that religious leaders from Western countries have entered the local communications channels in developing countries, powerfully promoting their own cause, interpreting things with their own Westernised minds and using their own agenda. It should not be surprising to hear the American government, for example, and the religious leaders who have infiltrated the remotest homes of the poor in developing countries, speaking about the same thing. Many people might have seen some of those TV preachers belonging to a religious group in California. They use what is happening in the political arena to mobilize the people behind
their own government's cause. There is a clear relationship between what a
government wants to attain in its foreign policy and how its allies in religious
groups promote its cause.

One participant asked about alternatives. He said that enough had been said
about women's status and role in religion and women being ex-communicated
as the first sinners. There are also gender boundaries that are social
constructions, which are directly or indirectly constructed by religion. But the
main concern here is that the majority of the world communities are followers
of many types of religions. It means that they believe in their respective
religious writings, which they see as the words of their Gods alone. Many have
no choice but to believe in the religious beliefs they are brought upon, even
while aware of their belief's many discrepancies and shortcomings. The
question raised by this participant was: are there other options of religious
beliefs in which there is space for equality of women and men? Or, is it possible
to interpret the religious texts in other ways than what the religious leaders are
telling the people?

The presenter responded to the effect that it is difficult to say for sure whether
there are religions in the world that preach gender equality. He said that people
who believed in any religion in the world were the most helpless and the ones
who deserved sympathy, because they were also the poorest in their societies. It
is poverty that makes the poor more prone to religion because of what they get
out of it. The presenter compared this with buying a lottery. When people buy
lottery tickets, they buy hope. And at the end they see that there is no hope, or
that not everybody will get what is promised on the ticket.

On the question of whether there is an option other than religion, the presenter
said there was. There are many people who are doing without it. The main thing
here is that people cannot or should not impose their religion on others. Every
individual has to reflect within her/himself to think what option she/he has.
Because women are also human beings, they, too, have the options.

An interesting note made by the presenter here was: “Whether we like it or not,
we are going to live with religion. Whether one defends it or not, it is going to
be around. Not because you want it, but because somebody else wants it, and
those who want it have the power to keep it going.”
During the forum some suggestions were forwarded as to what could be done to change the current situation and make people invest more in the development of the country. The suggestions are listed below:

- As thinking human beings, people should look into the texts of religious writings and see what they can take from them that will reflect the value system they believe in. They have to be careful in doing so, however, because religious writings have been used by lots of people all over the world in all kinds of ways to justify all kinds of horrific acts, and not just against women. There are writings in religious books that send certain messages that can be very dangerous.
- If religion does not treat women as equal to men, maybe it is about time for women to develop their own systems of equality based on new rules and regulations.
- This forum is not meant to condemn existing religions or to create new ones. The aim here is to improve the life status of women and men in this country. It is true that religions have been used to oppress women all over the world, particularly so in Ethiopia, but we are not in a dead-end situation. Here the participant used an example to make her point: 'When I was a young girl, I remember that people were not allowed to work for 30 days a month. Today is Michael's day, tomorrow is St. Gabriel's day, and the day after tomorrow is somebody else's day, etc. There were literally 20 working days out of the 365 in the year. But nowadays that is not the case. Nowadays people are working 5 days a week.' This means that something has changed.
- If people want change, they should challenge their religious leaders. Because development and religion are not parallel, it should not imply that people have to start a war against religion. There are religious leaders that are trying to incorporate the changes of the 21st century into their preaching and practices and adapting to them. (maybe to avoid extinction!)
- People should try to maneuver religion the way they have been maneuvered until now by it.
- People want to keep religion, but they want to get rid of some aspects of religion. The truth is that there are some things that have to be profoundly changed.
- Many people say that they want to change but they also say: wait and see. Wait for what and how long? Maybe some believe that evolution will automatically wipe out all that is negative in religion and wait for that, forgetting that, as long as religion can be manipulated and used as a tool
against the 'masses', that day will never come. Others hope for some miracle or wait for someone to do that for them. In a sense, it is women, or those who are the most negatively affected, who have to make that decision. The problem, though, is that there is no homogeneity among women, and some women are victims of religion more than others.

- What is important is the issue of how people see religious interpretations and those interpreting the texts. In order to understand the real texts and how they impact women negatively, it is crucial for people to look into the heart of the matter, how things are socially constructed.

- It is clear that people have been misled by misinterpretations of religious texts, interpretations made on the basis of one-sided views. It is important to develop counter-interpretations of what has been misunderstood by the original interpretations.

- It is also possible to make changes in articles of faith, either by accepting or rejecting the ideas or by agreeing not to accept them.

- The main thing is that people should interpret their religious writings in such a way that they can develop themselves and their country and resist interpretations of texts by third parties who are biased and even subscribe to female subordination. That should not be accepted anymore.

A positive comment was addressed to the forum organizers: ‘This is a groundbreaking forum. People do not dare to talk about religion. And here we are talking about it. We should continue with this fantastic deliberation of improving our thinking and mental state.’

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Gender and Islam: 
How Can Violence Be Embedded In Religion?

By: Ms. Alemmaya Mulugeta 
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Introduction: How can violence be impeded in Islam?

Islam is a religion based on five pillars:
• A belief in one Allah/God and His Messenger, the Prophet Mohammed;
• Provision of alms to the poor (Zeka);
• Five Prayers a day;
• Pilgrimage to the Holy Mecca (Hajj);
• Fasting of the Ramadan season.

Islam is also a blueprint for a social order, based on a set of rules and principles that are eternal, divinely ordained and independent of the will of its followers. Islam is also a worldview, and as such, it manifests the understanding and explanation of social environments in historical conditions where men dominate.

As a way of life, it imposes social rules on its followers (both men and women) as to how to behave and appreciate their respective positions in their societies.

Although the position of Muslim women in a society cannot be entirely be attributed to Islamic dogmas or norms alone, Islamic justifications play an overriding role in sustaining a status quo that often discourages improved status for women. In other words, Islam as an ideology has been used to exacerbate the domination and suppression of women in patriarchal societies.

The practice of Islam

The practice of Islam highly varies from place to place and from time to time, depending on the economic, political and social and, most of all, historical
developments of societies. For many African societies, the history of Islam is one of conversion from their own traditional belief systems. Some societies were said to take up Islam or Christianity when their traditional belief systems were not able to accommodate new changes that were sweeping the world. Others consider Islam as an expression and defense of identity when invaded by such major religions as Christianity (see "The history of Islam Among the Oromo" in Trimminghamm, 1967). Depending on their cause for conversion, therefore, the beliefs and practices of Muslim communities tip one time towards leniency and at other times towards fervency.

**Islamic Boundaries**

The connection between gender and Islam has for long-time attracted the attention of researchers, religious experts and Western travelers and, consequently, is not new to many emerging models of perceiving and explaining it. For example, it is an often overstated argument that "women in many Muslim societies have low status in economic, political and social spheres." The question to why this is so and the mechanism of this subordination, however, is understood differently from different angles. If we start with the oldest assumption, it has been argued that the low status of Muslim women is not a surprise, as Islam has also been part of a long tradition of Mediterranean patriarchy. Another thought that goes contrary to this is the one stated by Ahmed, who says: "We should distinguish between Islam and male tyranny: if we are talking about Islam, the potential of women in Islam is far superior to anything offered by Confucius in China or Aristotlle in Greece, or to what Hindu or Christian civilization offered." Where there is a lot of misery and virtually no rights for women, it is to be attributed to Muslim male tyranny, not Islamic teachings (1994:76). Between the two extreme views, we find other mid-way perspectives, which look into the significance of concepts and meanings. These mid-way views argue that Muslim social order revolves around concepts such as respect (*Izzat*), honor (*Sharafat*) and rebellion (*Nushuz*). The ideal of a female beauty in Islam is obedience, silence and immobility, that is, inertia and passivity (Mernessi, 1996:118). These features have a similar goal at the end and apply to both women and men. However, the lives of those of the female sex revolve around the will of the male sex, while the lives of those of the male sex revolve around the Divine Will. In the final analysis, we see that the concepts are discriminatory to women.
The restrictions, which Muslim societies have placed historically on women's mobility and activities, through purdah or curtain, separating the world of men and women also remarkably affected the women's position in their societies. This remains as it is and is said to have its cause in the concepts.

**Qur'anic concept of modesty**

'Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their ornaments only that which is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their adornments, save to their own husbands and their fathers' (Verse 24:30-1).

The explanation following this verse is that the Qur'anic concept of modesty applies both to men and women; a major focus has been given to women because women are considered to be the main causes of social disorder (fatina) due to their seductiveness and the consequent unlawful intercourse (zina). The peaceful hierarchical relation between God and a man and between a man and a woman will also be interrupted as man submitting to the woman's beauty. This, still intact as it is, has significantly affected the participation of women in public affairs. Women refrain from any economic and political interaction with other men for fear that they might cross the boundaries as has been defined by "Islam."

**How is violence against women imbedded within Islam?**

As mentioned above, rebellion is unacceptable, a deadly sin, and an unforgivable crime. The feminist movements were discouraged because they were thought as imports of the west.

The Sudan Women's Union (SWU) that was promising for many women in Sudan could only last from 1971 to 1983 because of pressure from the Muslim groups and it could only exist within the framework of the fundamentalist interpretation of women's position. Those who could not abide by these religious codes were oppressed and their rights violated. (Wieringa, 1995:183-185). Women's subordination is also mandated by Islam in certain of its legal
and religious texts and by a complex of traditional values for some believers who do not have access to the texts (Ladyslav, 1991:11).

**Shari'ah Law**

Islam in many Muslim societies works through a legal instrument called the *Shari'ah* law. A very recent story in Nigeria's *Daily Monitor* said that a woman convicted of adultery was sentenced to death by stoning by an Islamic court in Nigeria. The paper stated that harsh criminal punishments, such as stoning, amputation and flogging of women have been introduced into the legal codes of Nigeria's majority Muslim northern state over the last two years (*Daily Monitor*, 2002, No. 64). For such countries that violate women's rights and oppress them, the scapegoat is always "Islam says so!"

**Islam and Its Practice in Ethiopia**

The expansion of Islam in Ethiopia reached its peak between the 7th and the 11th centuries, spreading from the northern coast into the hinterland by the individual migrants, traders and preachers.

When Islam met with the traditional beliefs and practices, however, it turned out to be syncretic, localized, and normative and, as such, did not fervently stick to the ideal. In most parts of the country, it has co-existed with *atte*, *wukabi* and *wodaja*, which are traits of the traditional belief systems (Aspen, 1994:229). These traditional rituals had given women opportunities to gather and share experiences, other than providing psychological solace.

As Islam expanded, however, it regained its fervency through the migration of Islamic experts who endeavored to separate religion from tradition and it became the sole determinant of behavior with harsh consequences for women.

Nowadays, in Ethiopia, more than 35% of the total population follows Islam, mainly concentrated in the eastern and southern parts of the country, with small pockets in the north and west.

Unlike in many Muslim states, *Shari'ah* law in Ethiopia has been limited to matters of personal relation and to the administration of religious foundations.
All other aspects of law -- criminal law, common law, and commercial law -- have been codified and incorporated into the new legal procedures.

In the absence of a Shari'ah law, however, any thing written outside the script constitutes the text and justification for the suppression of women, which is often taken from such convictions and givens. It could also hardly be said that the majority of Muslim women, particularly in non-Arab societies, read or understand Qur'an. At times, the religion itself -- the Sufi sect, for example -- uses esoteric language, which is not comprehensible to many of its followers. In the absence of literate women in Islam, therefore, the women highly depend on men for explanations, men who assume religious expertise, albeit on biased grounds. In such circumstances, the manipulation of Islam is evident. I can cite an example from a research work conducted among Muslim women in Kamissie, a south Wollo town dominantly inhabited by Muslims:

_I'm a 25-year old, separated Muslim woman. Five years back, I was married to a man who is a farmer. He lives in Kachur, a nearby Woreda. He is my second husband. My present husband himself was formerly married to a woman, but who ran away. It was after two months of his wife’s abandonment that he married me. I did not have a job when I married him. After five months, his wife came back to him and he let her stay in the house. I was very frustrated and said to him he should choose one of us. However, he refused to do so. He told me that he could marry up to four women as long as he could administer them all. Then I insisted on our divorce, but he refused. I told the case to the kadi, a religious judge who witnessed our marriage. The kadi repeated the same thing that my husband said to me. Therefore, I left my husband without any property (Alemmaya, 2000:54)._

The other story was of a woman who got training in embroidery and could not sell her products in the market place. Below is the story in her own words:

_One time I thought of taking my products to other places for sale. However, my husband was not comfortable with my idea of leaving for other places. In Islam, a woman should not see a man who is not her husband or related to her by blood; we
call such people *hajinnebi*. My husband thought that if I work in the market, then I was likely to speak to men who are *hajinnebi* and he did not like the idea. We know that things change; if you do not have anything to eat then you should not die sitting in the house. Even in the Koran, a woman is allowed to work outside [of her homestead] if she does not have any income and support. If we can get all our needs, we prefer to stay in the house, but is that possible? (Ibid: 92).

**Challenges to change**

Although the resurgence of Islam in the main has to do with its own internal dynamics, rather than factors lying outside it, in most Muslim societies, however, it has been influenced much by outside factors, such as attempts of domination by the West, thereby leading to a struggle to keep its identity intact. One area in which this struggle manifested itself is the emphasis given to women's dressing codes, the most obvious of which is that requiring them to fully cover their bodies, including completely veiling their faces, and other Islamic behaviors that are sometimes imposed on them. Despite the increased efforts made by developmental institutions to increase women's involvement in development projects, a lot remains to change within the body of religious restrictions and manipulations on women, caused by religious fundamentalism.

**Reinterpretation**

The issue of interpretation is also central to many religious discourses. Religions, including Islam, is taken as Divinely ordained and, therefore, unalterable. However, as Geertz said, nothing is alterable as the unalterable (1968, 2). The existing boundaries and interpretation of Islam may have benefited certain groups, while they have done little, if anything, for women. The rush of Afghanistan women to unveil their heads following the fall of the Taliban government and the struggle of "subversive women" in Africa, Asia and Latin America all signify the deep-rooted resentment of women towards this manipulation.
The issue, therefore, to a lesser degree lies in the general dichotomization of the Qur'anic Script, what it entails and what become Islamic norms and practices when interpreted and, to a greater degree, power relations in society. The problem of interpretation and whose interpretation is right lies in the struggle for supremacy, and it can fully be dealt with when we understand the underlying factors. These factors also need to be uncovered from the recesses of history, and history is understood contextually. Knowing one's context is the most important and biggest task in bringing about change.

Conclusions

Where there is a common understanding of both gender and religion as socially conceptualized and constructed features of societies, the task of change will be made easier. Who benefits from a certain constructed code of beliefs tells more about the underlying power relations, which, in turn, assure the sustainability of those relations. The enlightenment of women through education helps a lot to understand the mystifications behind existing practices and can highly contribute towards balancing the power relations between the genders and, hence, result in improved status for women. In all religious scripts, the feature of God is one of equity, justice and safety for all human kind; if not, that perspective is ideology and cannot be Divine, but man-made.

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Christianity and Gender: First Thoughts

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In Ethiopia, it is a truism that gender is un(der)theorized in Christianity. There could be lots of reasons for the un(der)theorization. But to study the place of gender differences in Christianity is a worthwhile pursuit both for the sake of better articulation at the theoretical level and for the sake of a well-thought out action at the practical level. In this piece a brief description of Christianity will be made with a view to shedding some light on the essence and presence of, and the norm and practice relating to, gender in Christianity. Thus, the points of tension between gender and Christianity will be touched upon. The potential, if any, for more accommodation of women in Christianity will be surveyed. Some of the questions that this piece tries to answer directly or indirectly throughout are the following: What does Christianity say about women and men? Are there different rules for the two? Do the rules impose varied or similar obligations? How do women fare in the narrative of Christian scriptures? What is the response of Christianity to the plight of the woman from non-Christian or extra-Christian cultures? Other questions, such as whether violence is legitimate in Christianity and whether the canons of the religion are accessible to women, are also raised. Before tackling these questions, however, one needs to provide a brief description of Christianity first.

Christianity Described

Stated in simple terms, Christianity is the religion of Christians. It is the system of doctrines and precepts taught by Christ, the appellation or proper name given
to Jesus of Nazareth, who, according to Christians, is the one fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of a deliverer, a Messiah (also the anointed one). It is a system of beliefs shared among adherents of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. In spite of doctrinal differences on details, the core values that these varied forms of Christianity subscribe to are similar.

Christianity is a theocentric (or God-centered) religion. It is also a Christocentric (Christ-centered) religion. It is a religion in which God's transcendence and immanence are the all-pervasive themes. God is viewed as transcendent, i.e. surpassing, or superior to, the universe He has made and sustains. As such, He has the attributes of a self-existing, eternal, all-powerful (or omnipotent), moral (or good) Sovereign Creator. In Christianity, God is also viewed as immanent, i.e. pervading the universe He has made. As such, He works in the world and communicates to human beings who inhabit the world He has made. While transcendence makes the Christian God independent of the universe, His immanence makes Him involved in the universe as the one who controls and guides the course of history.²

Christianity subscribes to the idea of a personal God who wills to reveal himself to mankind through various ways, the ultimate form of which is the revelation in Jesus Christ who is said to be "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being" (Heb.1: 4). Hence, the centrality of Christ in the Christian system.

In addition to theo-centricity and Christo-centricity, the centrality of scriptures stands out as the dominant theme in Christianity. The canonized books of the Bible and the dependence on them as authentic modes of God's revelation constitute the distinctive mark of Christianity. These books, composed as they are of what is traditionally known as the Old and New Testaments, are essential to Christianity. Although the most forceful expression of dependence on the scriptures alone is linked directly to the protestant reformation, in which the idea of sola scriptura still resonates, the entire Christendom shares this emphasis on the significance of the scriptures with varied degree of acceptance of what are known as the apocryphal books.³

Christianity is also a religion with much accent on the idea of salvation of humankind through the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The idea of salvation presupposes the fall of human beings into sin, as a consequence of
which their alienation ensued. To overcome the sin-caused alienation and to bring back humankind into communion or fellowship with God, God works in the world through the Gospel. Christianity has its roots in Judaism, the religion of the Jews. In a sense, therefore, one can say that Christianity is Judaism perfected. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1: 26-27).

Human beings are thus endowed with an essential dignity and inherent equality as "artifacts" of God. One also needs to note that Christianity has an essential historicity. Although the God who is at the center of it all is transcendent and the values communicated are trans-cultural, they also operate cross-culturally or in cultures. The fact that Christianity came into a Judaic culture that preceded it made it develop within the Judaic cultural context. And the fact that the Judaic culture, as part of all fallen human culture, has sanctioned, and sometimes still does, gender imbalances, has left a legacy that Christianity has to work on and work in. (The fact that Judaism is a conservative system with regard to women cannot be made more explicit than in the synagogue prayers of the intertestamental period, which goes as follows: "Blessed be thy name, O Lord, for thou hast not made me a woman, a gentile and a slave.")

In short, Christianity is a theocentric religion with Christ, the scriptures, and the idea of salvation at its center. It is also a religion that subscribes to the idea of the fundamental dignity and equality of human beings (both men and women) made by, and in the image and likeness of, God. It is a religion with fundamental historicity working in a setting that is fallen and substandard and is thus faced with the challenge of overcoming gender imbalances in society. In this religion, both men and women are viewed as sinners with a need for salvation. Both can be saved through the grace of God bestowed on them by God through their faith in Jesus Christ. Religious duties/activities in Christendom are similar for both men and women.

In Ethiopia, Christianity has a long history. Although predominantly Orthodox, Ethiopia also has a sizeable community of men and women who profess Christianity of the Catholic and Protestant type. In its practice, one can hardly deny that Christianity is mixed, to some extent, with pre-Christian or non-Christian traditions that the Ethiopian society has been accustomed to. But, how is gender treated in Christianity? More specifically, how are women treated in Christianity? We now turn to these and other related questions.
Some bold propositions are in order: To the extent gender is a social construct, it is very difficult to talk about its presence in the pre-Fall Judeo-Christian narrative. The presence of gender, gender roles, gender imbalances and consequent inequality among women and men starts with the Fall. In fact, in the Biblical narrative, the story of inequality starts with Genesis 3:16 where it says, among other things: "Your [the woman’s] desire will be for your husband, and he [the husband] will rule over you." One can, therefore, note that gender imbalance is a consequence of sin and subsequent human imperfections.

In the post-Fall narrative of the Bible, gender imbalances are clearly noticeable. Nowhere is it clear that a woman is involved as a writer of the God-inspired scriptures (2 Tim 3:16). It is usual and common to see God communicating to human beings in the Biblical narrative. What is uncommon is God communicating to women. It is almost the norm to see that God's commands and exhortations are addressed to the man; it is an exception to see such commands and instructions directly addressed to the woman. This could be explained away by saying that it just so happened that the men got their stories written up. Yet the difference is notable. The commands, however, impose similar responsibilities and obligations both on men and women although in some cases (e.g. adultery) the sanction is harsher on the woman than on the man (See the Book of Deuteronomy for details). The rewards for obedience are the same for both women and men (See Deutronomy 28). Generally, therefore, spiritual duties and opportunities for spiritual blessings are the same for both in the narrative.

Although there appear strong women personalities (such as Rahab, Deborah, Ruth, Esther, Hannah, Abigail, Elisabeth, Mary, Martha, Phoebe, Lydia, etc.) in the narrative, the office of priesthood seemed to be reserved for the men (especially in the Old Testament narrative). It is also noteworthy that the female characters that appear in the narration are mostly ones that take domestic roles (e.g. motherhood). Much is said about the characterization of the women or girls as the source of sexual temptation from which men have to guard themselves with diligent care. But that bespeaks the frailty of the men in their sexuality as well. The role of the woman in the family is huge. Yet, the husband is the head both in the Judaic legacy and in the Christian ideal. Although all
Christians are instructed to submit to one another (see Eph. 5:21), wives are again instructed explicitly to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22) while husbands are instructed to love their wives in sacrificial ways that resemble the ways of Christ (Eph.5: 25-33).

The instructions related to leadership in the Church (as can be gathered from 1 Tim. 3:1-13 and Titus 1: 5-9) all refer to men. Reason: in the context of the 1st century AD--which is when these NT scriptures were laid down--one could hardly have written about having a woman Church leader in mind. Today, there are Bible scholars who argue that the reference made to men in these texts can as well refer to women.

The Christian ideal, which speaks in terms of the restoration of the post-Fall imbalance, is clear to anyone who makes a responsible reading of the Bible. Whether these ideals are met in practice is too obvious to need discussion. But to be fair, that is the goal to which all Christians aspire, albeit programmatically.

The question still remains: can the Christian ideal allow the elimination of the imbalances? The answer is "Yes." Reasons for responding in the positive are in order: a) In Christ there is neither "male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal.4.28); b) Jesus taught that everyone has to do to others what he/she would have them do to him/her (Mathew 7:12); c) all are instructed to submit one to another with humility (Eph. 5:22). When one reviews these and other related texts, one quickly realizes that in Christianity it is responsibility rather than right that is given emphasis. And this heightens the potential in the Christian ideal to deal with problems of inequality.

Moreover, one also needs to be reminded that there seems to be a role reversal in the deeds of Jesus himself, where the incident of his cooking for his disciples is intimated in the New Testament (John 21:4-12, esp. verse 9). Cross-gender service is therefore the ideal. It is also important to note that, to be the head or the leader is a matter to be actualized in humble service, for in Christianity, greatness is in humility (Mark 9: 34-35; Mt.20: 26-28). So, even in the family, as long as each discharges his/her responsibility, potential for leadership in service for the woman (as well as for the man) is not far out of sight. (But this could be only a matter of interpretation.) This potential for leadership in service is made all the easier due to the fact that both the woman and the man have their primary responsibility to God, which is to be reflected in the horizontal relationship they will have as between themselves.
Now, to be fair, one cannot be so naive as to say that all the ideals are experientially verified, lived, truths. Is there a substandard treatment of women in Christianity? The answer is "Yes." Does Christianity perpetuate or reinforce this substandard treatment? The answer is: "Ideally, No! But in actual fact, it depends on various factors, among which are: individual peculiarity, strength of the pressure from the pre- and non-Christian cultural context, the interpretive community from which the individual comes, etc." This leads us to another thorny issue: the issue of the identity of the Christian.

At one point or another, one definitely will encounter the problem of the indeterminacy of the Christian identity. This is primarily because the ideals are lived by imperfect humans living in an imperfect world. In addition, the openness of the text to varied interpretations and the reinforcement of gender imbalances and related stereotypes through tendentious interpretations play a great role in intensifying the fluidity of the identity of Christians. So much for Christianity and gender. Now, let us turn to violence in Christianity.

**Violence in Christianity**

Christianity is a peaceful religion. This is close to a cliché. Violence in all its forms is sin. A text that quickly comes to mind is the one in Mathew 7:44, where everyone is instructed not to be violent even on enemies: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The ethics of tolerance, accepting one another, patience, and self-control, which are expected of all Christians (be it men or women), disallows any form of violence (including gender-based ones) on one another. Even in the interaction with the non-Christian individual or community, one is expected to live in peace (Romans 12:18). The Christian values cannot be communicated through force or violence (e.g. see John 18:10-11). But does Christianity attract violence unto itself? Yes. In fact it is a religion that started as a victim of violence. Is the violence directed more to women than men? Not necessarily. Are women affected by violence more than men, especially when the violence is motivated by religion? Most often, yes.

Apart from this, violence might result from an in-house fighting among Christians as individuals or as sects or denominations. Usually schisms or
divisions lead to such a conflict. More often than not, the reason for such schisms that lead to violence is the drift away from the ideals.

Generally and ideally, Christianity is not violent to anyone, including a defector or a 'heretic'. This is a truism. But, as it is the nature of established traditions to be provoked into rage by non-conformity, some Christian traditions might tend to express their rage with violence. Even then, the institutional Christianity (i.e. the Church) does not legitimate violence on the grounds of scriptural propriety. At worst, the Church can excommunicate the particular person dubbed 'heretic', who then might face violence from irritated members and from which violence the Church can hardly protect him/her.

Whenever persecution of Christians arises, the most vulnerable person or group of all will face the biggest trauma. In contemporary Ethiopian society, that women are generally more vulnerable than men is obvious. Consequently, women bear the bigger part of the pain of religious persecution.

Conclusions

That gender as a social construct is only a post-Fall phenomenon has been noted in this piece. That women are not fairly represented in the Biblical narrative has also been made clear. That Christianity, being rooted in pre-existing patriarchal traditions, operates in the context of inherited patriarchy has been stressed as well. Nonetheless, that its salvationist (and reformist/transformist) themes lead to a role reversal in which women fare well has also been underscored. The principle of similar dignity of men and women, which is being restored through the redemptive work of Christ; the principle of equality in responsibility; the principle of mutual submission to one another; all these work toward disallowing all forms of violence against anyone, women included. This is the potential in the Christian ideal. That the practice is gloomier than this has been noted.

Christian texts are susceptible to varied interpretations. One cannot do anything to the inherent indeterminacy of meanings in a text. The best one can do is to allow the proliferation of as many interpretations as one can expect, among which the more "legitimate" ones can stand out. Meanwhile, each mode of interpretation could serve as informative (and as a check) to the other. For this
to work, tolerance is the only hope even in Christianity, a religion with a monopoly over truth. Most definitely, in order to be tolerant and understanding, all Christians, women as well as men, must have direct personal access to the scriptures, which they must read and interpret for themselves. There is hardly any need for an authoritative human interpreter of scriptures than the mind of each Christian man and woman, which presumably is illumined by the Holy Spirit.

Notes

1 Although feminist theology—"the critical theological reflection carried out from a distinctly Christian perspective"—forms a significant part of contemporary Western theological discourse, in Ethiopia, this is far from being the norm. (See Janette. R. Hassey, "Christian Feminism," in Daniel G. Reid, ed., Dictionary of Christianity in America. Downer Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1990, pp.435-436 about feminist theology in the world).


3 The apocryphal books are those books the authenticity, and thus the authority, of which is questioned among some Christian denominations, most notably, the Protestants. It is noteworthy that the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church, for example, subscribes to 81 canonized books of the Scripture, while the Protestant Church subscribes only to the 66 books. For the latter, the 15 books are not of equal authority with the 66, as they have a controversial authenticity.
4 Note that in the Christian creation narrative, human beings were specially created by God. See Genesis 1: 26-27 and Ephesians 2:10.

5 This prayer is quoted in Merril C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey*. B. Wm Eerdmans (n.d.).


8 One needs to realize that, in Ethiopia, there was a strong presence of the Judaic tradition that antedates Christianity.

9 Note, once again, the "equality in being, inequality in functions" thesis proposed by Groothuis. (see note no.6 above.)

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Islam and Christianity on Gender
Discussion and Debate

Moderator: Mr. Melakou Tegegn (Panos Ethiopia)

Before the discussion and debate, Melakou reminded the participants about the sensitivity of the topic and said that, when it came to discussions about the position of women, particularly in relation to religion, people would tend to become sensitive, even emotional. "But this is a reflection session," he said. "People cannot exclude a certain phenomenon without considering their own perceptions of it as an issue. It is very important that these issues should be discussed, because they influence people's actions, behaviour, thinking, etc. Gender is not something abstract, it is about the relations between the two sexes, and in most cases, these relations are determined and informed by the perceptions that prevail in society although these perceptions are not clearly identified. They vary from country to country, from continent to continent and from religion to religion." With these remarks from the moderator, the floor was open for discussion.

The discussion started with a comparison between Muslim women in Ethiopia and Muslim women in other countries. According to one of the participants, Muslim women in Ethiopia are more liberal, because they do not have a strict dress code that forces them to veil themselves, to cite but one example. This, however, was contradicted by another participant, who said that the example given by the previous speaker as a sign of liberalism enjoyed by Ethiopian Muslim women were trivial when compared to the benefits Muslim women in other countries have. Because, Muslim women in Ethiopia are still lagging behind when it comes to claiming their rights, and they have no access to education either.

Another comparison was made between both religions, followed by a question. Both religions are disadvantageous to women, yet both include many rights favorable to women. How could this be explained?
The contradiction could be best explained in terms of cultural influences of male domination in society. For example, Islam has given women the right to education, but due to male cultural influences in society women are denied education.

There was a link made between Christianity and violence in Ethiopia. If the majority of people in Ethiopia are Christians, and Christianity preaches non-violence, how can there be such high levels of violence against women?

The response to this was that violence had nothing to do with religion, but with the culture of male domination, which operates to the disadvantage of women, as mentioned above. An example was given of women in Islam to clarify this point. There is no denial about gender discrimination being at the heart of Islam. In addition, the Islamic democracy plays a major role in the insurance of the low position of women. This is done through the deliberate denial of a role for women in any policy or law formulation or their amendments. Many amendments do take place on the personal status laws in many Islamic countries, but these amendments only take place in laws that do not concern women. No amendments are made in laws that could benefit women. This example shows that women are in fact at the centre of discrimination and oppression, not only in religion, but also through the state. In other words, it is not religion alone that is the culprit.

One participant stressed the important to trace where the origins lie of people's perceptions and behavior. In many rural areas in Ethiopia, the level of gender violence is extremely high, and transmitted from generation to generation. It has nothing to do with Christianity or Islam as mentioned in the examples above. What informs people's perception and behavior is customs. And customs are closely linked and informed by interpretations and re-interpretations of religion.

Following the same trend, another question was posed: what types of violence are punishable by Christianity? The Bible condones violence in one instance (a man can discipline his wife) and protects women in other instances (abuse by others than close relatives). This is a contradiction. So which violence is punishable according to the Bible? Shouldn't violence be punishable in all its types and forms and not be divided into what kinds is acceptable and what is not.
The presenter, Tsegaye, said that religion did not sanction violence, that it was peaceful. People are not condoned for their actions. But, although the Bible, for example, prescribes punishment for certain offences, it does not translate as such in practical life. People are not punished for every offence they commit.

This led to the following question. Why is religion stricter on women than on men? Men and women have responsibilities, as described by religion, to protect their families and to look after them. But the reality in Ethiopia is showing an increase of female-headed households, feminization of poverty, etc, where men easily abandon their families in case of unemployment or other reasons. They can go away freely, but women are severely sanctioned if they do the same.

Tsegaye said that being a strict Muslim or a strict Christian society does not mean that they are genuinely exercising what is in written in their holy books. What is stated in those holy books is different from the many interpretations made of the texts, which usually serve the interests of the interpreters themselves. One has to understand that religious interpretations are made from a given vantage point and they are always based on what the interpreters understand or want from the texts they interpret. This can lead to the oppression of women who are considered as part of men's property and possessions, who do not own resources and have no political power. The truth is that the punishment, for example, for adultery is more serious on women then on men. Women are the victims here not of religious dictates, but cultural domination.

Another participant took up on this point of interpretation and said that people should be very careful not to blame everything on interpretations, because that could be an easy way out. What should be looked into in depth are the core issues, which are that, Islam, Christianity and Judaism do condone discrimination against women, and to some extent, even violence against women. It is very easy to take a certain scripture and use that against any form of discrimination, be that ethnic, class or women. It is true that interpretations do not enhance the situation and that human beings make those interpretations, but that should not keep people from looking into the core of what these religions really do. Interpretations cannot be blamed for all human actions; there must be some shortcomings in the texts too. Otherwise one should wonder why all people interpret texts the same way, since the oppression of women is universal. If it was based on interpretations only, some difference should have been visible, but it is not.
Yet another participant said that it was not a negative stance to blame interpretations. Anything that is coded can be decoded or recoded. That should, in fact, be seen as part of the search for a solution, not a problem.

‘Why are women more vulnerable than men in their relation to religion?’

The response to this was that the source of women’s vulnerability was male supremacy. The world we live in is a male-dominated world where gender power relations are clearly in favor of men. These power relations should not be ignored. There is a close link between religion and patriarchy so much so that, like the chicken-and-egg riddle, no one knows which one came first and which one later. But patriarchy is there, and religion from its beginning has been patriarchal. This patriarchy has created the bias in religion from its origin. All the Gods have sons, not daughters. These origins of religion have left huge scars on human beings, who, at the given time in the evolutionary stage when those religions appeared, were primitive and illiterate. Actually that time-period, the context and the specific instances in which those religions were originated should be clearly understood. The point often raised these days is that the religions of the past do not fit the present anymore. In fact, however, they have been continuously developing survival techniques through various means, such as re-writing themselves and becoming institutionalized. At present people live in an institutionalized patriarchal world where women are systematically excluded from every sphere of public life, including many religions. One should clearly understand, however, that this exclusion of women at present does not imply that women did not play a role in religion in the past or before religion even came into existence. The contrary is in fact true: there are many examples of powerful women in the past and the existence of matrilineal societies. There were also many women who were part of many religions at moments of their initiation. What, then, is to be blamed for the fact that women are not visible anymore? One of the reasons for this could be the continuous rewriting of religious texts, in the process of which women are disappearing and excluded from public life. All texts are becoming monopolized by male domination.

Another participant drew a link between democracy and violence against women. She said that culture and tradition did affect women negatively, and the main problem was the lack of proper policies, or the lack of democracy and
human rights, whether in Islam or Christianity or in any other religion. This is clearly visible at two levels: one is in the texts themselves and the other in the treatment of women in religious surroundings. When one visits a church or a mosque, one can clearly observe the discriminatory nature of the treatment given to women as opposed to men. Women do not receive the right or proper services as those given to men. Other than this visible discrimination, there are many more examples of women being discriminated in religion. Religion supports male supremacy, and many people say and believe that it is the word of God that women and men are not equal, and that God has created women to suffer and serve men. These make women behave in a submissive and subservient fashion. Even educated women believe that they are below men.

This democracy of religion was carried over to the democracy of the state, and one participant commented that a democratic regime should be at the center of ensuring gender equality and respect of rights, because only in a democratic regime can there be genuine democracy and equality between women and men. In states that are ruled through dictatorship, the opposite happens, where women are deprived even of their basic human rights. For example, in many Muslim societies, upon adapting the Shari'ah law, the first thing they do is to attack women by forcing them to get married, preventing them from holding jobs or getting education, isolating them, ordering them to veil themselves and stay inside their houses (examples: Iran, Afghanistan, Northern Nigeria, etc.). What is urgently needed thus for women to be treated equally in society is a democratic government that is separate from religious institutions and that can give democratic and fair ruling over religious rulings that are usually against women.

Another participant picked up this issue and led the discussion in the direction of the issue of the politicization of religion. When religion gets politicized, it can transform itself into fundamentalism. Political Islam or Christianity or any other religion becomes fundamentalist, with an overriding agenda that is mainly political. For example, in Islam, political Islam emerged around the 1920s and followed a certain political direction that is different from that mapped out by original Islam itself. In terms of gender relations it is important to know what contemporary Islam is trying to indoctrinate or how it tries to interpret the Koran differently from what has been intimated in the original texts. There are many countries that follow political Islam (such as Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, or Nigeria). These countries use a discourse completely different from that other
Islamic countries in the world, such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, etc., use. The question here is not what discourse they are using, but what the relationship between the two sexes in these countries is. For example, both the Sudan and Tunisia are Islamic countries but there is a huge difference in the position of women between the two countries as far as Islam is concerned. There is also fundamentalism in Tunisia, but it is not the same as in the Sudan, where women have less rights than in Tunisia.

The comparison between state and religion was linked to the situation in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is a traditional society, where the state actually emerged from religion. Currently, Ethiopian societies are still strongly influenced by religion. When such a state, which emerged from religion, tries to become democratic (meaning adapt philosophies different from the religious ones), it contradicts, and clashes in many ways with, the existing religions. For example, in Ethiopia, it is not only taboo to intervene in religious, cultural or traditional customs, but it is totally forbidden to question them or talk about them. So, people don't question or challenge anything that has to do with these, as if, it appears, driven by fear. Gender equality is also definitely not in the interest of many religions, which are strongly patriarchal. What is observed is that development workers also try not to intervene in or challenge existing cultural and religious practices, even while being aware of their negative impacts. They always have to find ways to incorporate their activities within the confines of those cultural and religious norms and rules, even if it means sure failure. But there are no other options because of lack of religious objectivity from the state. When there would be state support, it would be easier to get rid of harmful and negative customary laws that backtrack the full development of women by pushing the constitution or state laws forward. In many rural areas in Ethiopia, people have never heard about the constitution and practice only customary laws. Regional governments are not strong enough to go against those laws and, thus, condone women's discrimination. Only when the constitution is practiced to its fullest, which would make it very favourable to women, can there be a true gender-democratic society. The point here is that people should question and challenge the very practices that are against the constitution and which are still condoned. In this regard, one of the most critical issues raised was the power of customary laws (which are often discriminatory towards women) over the Constitution of the country (which is very favourable to women). People in Ethiopia are still guided by customary laws and don't look for legal remedies for their problems. This should be dealt with comprehensively, because in Ethiopia,
it is not the Constitution that is a major problem for women, but the customary laws. The Constitution is said to be very considerate to women and the country even has a women's policy. The problem lies with its implementation. There is no one, no police or judge, who defends women when they are violated. This is thus not only a problem of the implementation of the Constitution, but also of its enforcement.

Tsegaye gave some clarifications on what is needed for people to start utilizing the Constitution effectively. He said that most of the Ethiopian laws were formulated in technical language. But there is a collision between modernity and pre-modernity, between the Constitution and customary laws. He said that there are three main problems that hamper implementation:

1. **Lack of a legal culture**: this is the attitude and behavior that would make it difficult to take the laws seriously and try to implement and them. The solution to create this legal culture is literacy. In the end women and men must obey, respect the laws and also take an aggressive stand on their implementation. Because of the lack of this legal culture, customary and traditional laws operate side by side with the legal laws. The kind of legal remedy expected from the modern legal system does not work.

2. Most of the laws in Ethiopia suffer from a **legitimacy crisis**. A legal system is not just composed of rules and regulations that are found in the law books, proclamations, etc. In those rules are encoded legal rights and duties, responsibilities and powers, privileges and so on. But those are not enough. They need legitimacy to be enforced and become operational.

3. **The lack of a structure/institutions** that are supposed to implement these norms and values that are communicated in the laws is another problem. In most places, in most woredas in Ethiopia, the law enforcement institutions are not yet even built.

In summary, people need to build up a positive legal culture in which they not only protect rights and make sure the laws are enforced but they must also become rights-assertive, people who can aggressively claim their rights. In Ethiopia people do not want to or do not know how to claim their rights.

A question raised here was whether there was any hope for rural girls who live in societies that are guided by customary laws that work against the interests of
those girls in many ways? Can these girls go anywhere to claim their legal and Constitutional rights?

Tsegaye said that there was no hope for these girls. The Constitution has guaranteed communities to keep their group rights. Groups and societies are protected by the law and have the right to practice their customary/religious laws. And this is where the problem lies. When state and religion co-exist, pushing gender equality can be very difficult, the balance often tipping towards customary laws.

The role of religion in the development process was also entertained. Development is about realizing social and political advancement among communities, especially the most vulnerable ones, and giving them freedom. No one denies that women are the most marginalized and vulnerable. When one speaks of development, one should assume that everyone is included. Everyone is included indeed, except for women. Where are the women? How can a society develop when half of its population is denied development and when their basic human rights are violated and abused on a daily basis? How can one thus speak of development when the position of women has not improved? Development can only be called as such when it is carried out in its most sincere form, so that all human beings are at an equal level.

One of the participants commented that development and democracy are grand ideas. But, how about the position of women until society develops? Where does this development lead without the participation of women? How can women participate unless they have the necessary awareness? And how can women gain awareness unless they have the chance to be aware? Go to school? But customs have it that families in traditional societies prefer to send their boys to school instead of their girls. And unless these perceptions are changed, how can girls go to school and empower themselves?

Another participant raised some hope for the participants here. He gave three optimistic points to reflect on:

- The last people who saw Christ were women.
- The Methodist Church, a Protestant Church in Britain, always had women preachers. They had for a long time women ministers, and even the president of their church 5 years ago was a woman. It is not thus all
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denominations of Christianity that discriminate against women. Christianity has made a lot of advances.

- A 1995 UN statistics on Botswana, which is a deeply Christian country, showed that the proportion of women in managerial positions was over a third of the population. It is an African country, but 36% of managerial and management positions are held by women.

At the end of the forum some suggestions were forwarded about what could be done to improve the situation and position of women in society:

- People are always afraid to talk about sensitive issues because of fear to face the truth.
- People should develop ways to confront issues that are not true in religion.
- The only way to confront issues that are taboo, such as religion and traditions, is to openly challenge them in public meetings.
- Continuous reflection is very important because it can shorten the time to see changes, instead of waiting for evolution or revolution.
- We need more fora on religion and traditions, because they will help give us insights into issues we are afraid to challenge when alone. In groups it is easier to challenge something.
- In the churches women are in the majority, why don't they take it over?
- It is known that many relationships have problems even though they are guided by religions. People should stop defending their religions at the cost of their relationships, because religion can affect one's life negatively in many ways.
- Individuals should not think that they could not do anything because they are alone: individuals can make big waves.
- Everyone has a duty from a human point view to convince at least one person to stand against violence against women. When we all do so we will have achieved a lot.
- This last suggestion was something to reflect upon for all: "Let us take this message home and talk to at least one person about it."

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I. Introduction

‘Information is power.’ This is the motto of our generation. People need information in their day-to-day life. The types of information they need range from weather forecast to how-to articles, from news about extraordinary and breathtaking events to major political activities, from the death of an individual to the extermination of a whole people, etc. Information helps people to cope with modern civilization.

Awareness creation about different social issues is also made possible through information dissemination. According to Bailie and Winseck (1997:7)

Communication is not just an important resource and commodity, but also a crucial factor in the shaping of perceptions and a constitutive force of society and culture. By providing the means through which we share interpretations and understandings with one another and our respective experiences, communication is culture. Information and communication are also crucial aspects of the political process and citizenship . . ..

One can, therefore, say that, if there were no access to information the social activities of a society would be hampered.

Development and gender issues are highly interwoven. A society's advancement is determined by the outlook it has about women.
Objectives

The objectives of this paper are:
- To show how the media portrays women;
- To recommend measures that will help media workers to approach or entertain gender issues objectively.

Scope of the paper

What do we mean by mass media? Mass media are the means of communication that help to disseminate information from a given source to large number of people. Starting from the town crier (Reflections, no. 1, 1999: 77), which is still used in some parts of Ethiopia, through school textbooks, leaflets, paintings, film, theatre, posters and on line services, all are forms of mass media. Nevertheless, it will be impossible to discuss the effects of all the available means of mass communication in this short presentation. Therefore, this paper focuses on types of media that seek journalistic presentation, such as the radio, newspapers and television.

Issues discussed in the paper

The paper is divided into three sub-topics. The first part deals with the role played by the media in any society. Controlling the public's attention is one point that is discussed very briefly under this sub-topic. Giving the general assessment of the history of the mass media in Ethiopia comes next. Then, women journalists and their role in the media and the depiction of women by the media are followed by recommendations as to what should be done in the future concerning how the media can treat gender issues better.

II. The Role and the Power of the Mass Media

The mass media are instruments that bring people together through information dissemination. Innovations and policies are introduced to consumers through mass media. The mass media shape or influence people's life style.
Given that people are affected by their entire environment and thus affected by notions of masculinity and femininity present in the family, school, church and larger social environment, the task of isolating the effects of the media is a difficult one (Craig, 1992:19).

Not all kinds of mass media are equally effective in bringing about the desired results. Each media has its own characteristics that determine its acceleration and wide coverage of population.

The broadcasting media, i.e. radio and television, but particularly television, are able to provide their audience with a sense of participation, personal access, and "reality" which approximate face-to-face contact. In addition, the two media reach virtually the entire population, including certain groups, such as the very old, the very young, and the less educated, who are not so easily accessible to the other media, and who may be more suggestible. (Klapper, 1965:111).

Some types of media also have a role in inculcating unforgettable messages, that is, messages that have either positive or negative values, in the minds of their audience. "Radio (or other types of purely oral presentation) was found by the experiments . . . to produce greater retention of simple material than does the print among the less educated and less intelligent" (Klapper, Ibid.)

Having said these, the next section reviews some of the activities of women in the history of journalism and evaluates how the media depict women.

A. Gender and Media

In their book The New Majority, Beasley and Kathryn Theus state that a woman founded the first school of journalism in the 19th century in America. Nevertheless, she was harassed and did not get the recognition by her male contemporaries. When more schools of journalism were opened, women were also allowed to join these schools to study journalism. But that didn't bring positive results either. They were not in a position to get employed. It was during and after the two major world wars that women got the opportunity to work in offices by substituting men, because men were supposed to join the armies.
Though women were employed by the media organizations, their duties and responsibilities were restricted. (Beasley, 1988:7). They were supposed to work on women's pages or "other special writing aimed at women readers" (Beasley: 14). By that time, it was not common for women's pages to carry general social and political issues. In other words, issues that were appearing on women's pages were not so serious. Women were simply advised to engage in household chores, such as cooking and childcare, or fashion.

And they were paid less than men. In American history of journalism, sometimes they were only paid one-third of what their male counterparts got paid because "most women are incapable of covering politics and court news" (Beasley: 17)

This attitude was challenged when women like Dorothy Thompson emerged in the 1930s. She was the first woman Pulitzer Prize winner in journalism (Braden, 1994:6).

When we talk about the history of mass media in Ethiopia in this context, we are referring to the history of journalism. The missionaries introduced the "profession" in the closing years of the 19th century. This, in fact, seems a long period when compared to the media history of most of African countries. The first Amharic newspaper, known as A'imiro, was established in 1892 (E. C.). Radio was introduced a year before the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1928 (E. C.). Ethiopian Television started broadcasting in 1957 (E. C.).

The writers for the earlier newspapers were those who were from the church. Mersie Hazen Wolde Kirkos, Yared Gebre Michael are two of the great people who run the profession by taking over from foreigners. During that time stories on moral education, news about the royal family members, international war news, articles that dealt with heroism and national issues were published.

The first woman program producer, W/o Romanework Kassahun had worked for more than 25 years (since 1939 E. C.) for the print and broadcast media. The other woman journalist, considered a pioneer in Ethiopia journalism, was Bizu Wondimagegn. She is considered the pioneer woman journalist even in Africa. Her program mainly focused on rural women and minorities. Her Kemajeet Iske Adebabay, which literally means 'from the domestic to the public sphere, was
popular. W/o Alemseged once informed this writer that, by the time Bizu was producing this program, women's issues were not touched upon in other African countries. Ellene Mekuria, Elleni Fetene, Assegudech Bizuneh, Abaynesh Biru and Almaz Dejene were also senior women journalists who had been working in inconvenient working situations.

During the Derg Regime, the media addressed women's issues from the perspectives of socialist ideology. After 1993, tremendous changes have taken place concerning women's issues. The government has ratified various International Conventions, and based on these International conventions, different local policies have been formulated.

These newly introduced positive measures are assumed to enable the media to go deeper into gender issues. Women are represented by various journalistic genres, i.e. programs, features and news. Many critical rape cases and women's problems have been reported through the mass media. But are these women's programmes effective in bringing about attitudinal changes, attitudes that have for long prohibited women from attaining equal rights with men? Are these policies and rules properly governing the media? These are the key questions that need to be answered. Discriminating against women is a crucial problem in a societal structure where men are dominant.

Violence against women is based on the economic and political powerlessness of women living in patriarchal societies. Understanding violence against women requires an analysis that shows the relationship of violence to the structure of major social institutions. In this sense, stopping violence against women is intricately connected to the liberation of women from oppressive social and economic relations (Anderson, 1988:276).

B. Images of women and men in the media

Misrepresentations and under-representations of women in the media have negative impacts on development process. Generally speaking, even in seemingly trivial areas, the representation of women in the media tends, consciously or otherwise, to project negative images.
For example, examining the visual portrayal of men on television, one study found in commercial television programming a tendency to portray men in terms of close face shots as opposed to full body shots, as was the case for the portrayal of women (Coperland, 1989). The author suggests that this example of "'face-ism' may be a manifestation of deeply rooted cultural myths of men, pictorially represented by their faces, as intellect, and women pictorially represented by their bodies, as heart or emotion" (Craig, 1992:11).

Radio and TV programs, newspaper columns and advertisements are showing us how the society perceives women.

Yirbalem is my favourite hairdresser. Whenever I go to the beauty salon where she is working to have my hair done, I see her and her colleagues attentively listening to their radio. When I started dealing with this topic, I asked Yirbalem and two of her colleagues if they would volunteer to discuss the portrayal of women by the media.

"Sure, I can tell you many things," said Yirbalem. "As you see, I enjoy listening to the radio. I have made a habit of it. I also watch TV programs."

Why do you listen to these programs? I asked her.

‘You learn many things from the experiences of others. Except some, I like most of the radio programs. Actually, there is one program that I don't like. [The writer prefers here to skip the name of the program because it is a matter of personal test and has neither been proved nor disproved.] I really hate it. The airtime given to it is too much and the contents are very embarrassing. I feel ashamed when I listen to girls on the telephone speaking sexual words that are not culturally accepted by our societies. I cannot learn any thing from that program. On the other hand, as I said there are various programs that I like very much, especially, 'questions and answers'. It is very useful. In fact, I cannot take notes because of my work situation, but I learn a lot from it. I like programs that deal with children's and women's issues. …Though I cannot help the victims of poverty and social evils, I feel happy when I hear that they found someone who could help them."

I found Yirbalem a good observant. Do you observe anything that discriminates against or misrepresents women? I asked her.
"Advertisements are nonsense. There are so many soap ads. In all of them women are washing and washing." These were the words of Sable.

"Sable is right," said Yirbalem. "Don't ask me about ads. If you do, I have a lot to tell you again. We never saw a woman and a man grinding coffee on a roof in our real life. We see women excessively in all ads... Is it necessary to laugh on each advertising? Girls are laughing and showing us unnatural smiles in every advertisement. Okay! Another point. Why don't they wear normal dresses? To advertise a jerry can, they wear miniskirts; when they advertise biscuits we see them wearing their miniskirts. Another thing is about creams."

Yirbalem is against ads that show girls with long hair. "Are we supposed to see an artificial wig to advertise creams? It has nothing to do with natural beauty. In addition to that, we women do not have long hair. Short hair is nice by itself. So, most of the advertisements that we watch on TV are not compatible with the reality. From all these, I can say that the girls are advertising themselves instead of advertising the goods and cosmetics."

Both young ladies seem gender sensitive. I quote them here because I found an important point that has been pinpointed by many media experts as the major problem of media perception of women.

Advertisements are only one source for the ideas about women that are generated in the mass media and popular culture. Popular music, advice columns, television shows, and other culture material all carry explicit and implicit suggestions regarding the appropriate social roles for women and men. A recent analysis of computer trade magazine shows, for example, that men appear in the illustrations twice as often as do women. In the same magazines, women are over-represented as clerical workers and sex objects, while men are over-represented as managers, experts, and repair technicians. Men are shown primarily in positions of authority, while women are only shown as rejecting computers (Anderson, 1988: 23 -24).

On the 29th of Megabit 1994 (6th April 2002) I heard the following dialogue on a Sunday's weekly program of the Ethiopian radio. The performers were a woman and a man.
A man enters into the house while crying loudly. "Weyine, Weyine, brother...U.u.u."
"What is the matter? What happened to you?" a woman asks.
"Weyine, brother..." the man continues crying.
"What happened to my husband? Why don't you tell me? Please tell me. What did the court say to him?"
"U....U....U... He will be hanged next week."
The woman stops crying and say, "Uffffff! That is very simple. Thanks to God. It is nice that they didn't fine him."

The implication of this joke is that a woman prefers monetary wealth to human beings. But this is not true. In our society women are suffering from different difficulties that arise from backwardness and poverty.

**III. Media's contribution in aggravating violence against women**

Can people be influenced by what they get from the print and broadcasting media? Some people seriously argue that presenting or showing crimes and violence may motivate the audience to be involved in the same action, while others argue that it depends on the family background, on how parents treat and handle their children.

Communication research has also provided some data related to the effects of media-depicted crime and violence on values, attitudes and behaviors.

- Heavy exposure to such fair is apparently not a sufficient or crucial case of delinquency...
- Children who are not members of peer groups, or who are in one way or another neurotic or frustrated, have been found to have heavier appetites for violent media fair and to employ it as a basis for an escapist, hostile and occasionally pathological fantasy . . .(Klapper, 1965:165).

One can deduce from these quotes, that the impact of presentation of crimes on media is very controversial.
Not all rape and criminal cases are reported on the media. Only few are addressed. When some Ethiopians see these cases, they become irritated and highly criticize the media, for they are afraid that those who hear about or watch these types of ill-mannered activities will imitate them. They believe that when more rape cases are reported, more delinquents will appear. On the other hand, many people believe that hearing about or seeing more cases that are criminal does not mean that the number of cases will increase. Instead the broadcasts will serve as fora for people (victims) to speak out their problems. These two controversial positions appear to remain irreconcilable until people become gender-sensitive.

**IV. What should be done?**

Gender-sensitive journalists can play a positive role in reducing violence against women. They can report criminal cases. They can write persuasive articles and educate the public about the negativity of abduction, rape and harmful traditional practices. In order to realize this:

- Study and examine backward attitudes towards women, sexually harassing approaches and outlooks;
- Mind the language use in written and spoken messages;
- Report crimes and violence against women;
- Write follow-up articles;
- Give appropriate space and airtime for programs that deal with women's issues.

Because of cultural influences the women are not always active in politics. For instance, Doris A. Graber (Beasley, 121) made research on how women and men select their news from the media and she found women less interested in politics and can recall only less part of it. Here in Ethiopia "Women are not allowed to discuss with men. They are not ready to debate on such critical issues. This could be over gradually. Women should be told about this problem. "To expose a larger number of students to women's issues a women's news component must be added to general and special topics reporting courses. This should allow for greater discussion of ethical concerns related directly to women and the news …" (Beasley 122)
Bibliography


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The discussion started with a debate on the images of women portrayed in advertisements through the media, because, as was pointed out, in many advertisements, it is women who are seen advertising products. This was looked at from both the positive and negative angles, and many points were raised.

The **negative** points raised were:

- In one advertisement on the Ethiopian TV, two women are seen advertising cosmetic products for long hair. But those women are also portrayed in images of beauty. This image can lead to a certain stereotype where women will be viewed by men as objects of that beauty image. Men will not look at women for their intelligence, but mostly for their beauty, and this can be very harmful to women.
- Very often, the body images of women that are shown are completely irrelevant regarding the products that are advertised.
- A very harmful aspect created by these kinds of advertisement is not only the stereotyping, but the aspiration of a certain ideal women will be aspiring to. Women will aspire to looking just like the model because the advertisers are considered models of beauty.
- There is another advertisement on the Ethiopian TV, of a water tank, which again uses young girls, wearing miniskirts and sitting on the water tank in different positions. The point here is: what is the relevance of the young girls in miniskirts in that advertisement? What are they trying to show and advertise: the water tank or the girls' bodies? The two girls in that particular
advertisement lift the tank up and sit on it, upon which the announcer says
the following: ‘the price of the tank is as light as its weight’. This shows that
the women sitting on the tank are also for sale with and are thus also very
cheap.

Some advertisements are not clear as to what message they are trying to get
across; what is clear is the way they abuse women by portraying more
negative stereotypes of them.

Many advertisements directly provoke violence. The point is what is catchy,
what catches the eye first when one looks at these advertisements? Definitely
not the product that is being advertised.

There is nothing wrong about what is being advertised. The problem is how
those things are presented, such as the women represented sitting in
changing positions while advertising water tanks. What is visibly clear in
these advertisements is the two ways women are portrayed; one is the
stereotyping of women as seductive human beings, while the other is the
concept of beauty and how a perfect woman should look like.

Women are represented in advertisements as seductive, no matter what the
product that is being advertised happens to be. The question that can be
raised here is: ‘How does this translate in practical life?’ When a woman
walks in the streets in a miniskirt, she will be harassed and touched by men,
because they will relate her to the seductive, miniskirt-wearing woman of
the advertisement, who is portrayed as if she were available to everyone. It
is not surprising to hear men who raped women saying that they were
seduced by such women, or, justifying their abusive gestures by saying that
women want it, but pretend and say no, while they actually mean yes. Such
translations of what one sees in the advertisements and how it translates into
practical life should be seriously reflected upon, and, maybe, a link can be
drawn between the increase of violence against women and the way women
are portrayed in the advertisements.

There is this international stereotyping of women as beautiful according to
Western standards. This is further encouraged and enforced through various
means; for example, in how women end up working in the advertisement
business. There are procedures by which they are selected on the basis of
certain criteria, which have to do more with beauty than with intelligence.
Usually the candidates that are selected to work for advertising agencies are
young, pretty, have beautiful hair, perfect bodies, beautiful legs, look great
in miniskirts, etc., because these are the things the companies need to sell
their commodities. And when this perfect sample of beauty is used in the
advertisement, where the model becomes a commodity, what catches the eye first before one realizes what product is being advertised?

The consumer was also questioned:

- A comment related to the above mentioned point where one asked what caught the eyes first was: what do people want to see? For example, a man advertises a very beautiful coat. People have to see the coat. But if they choose to look at other things beside the coat, such as the body, the chest, the looks, etc. of that man, that is up to them.
- Another comment was that the blame should be put on the consumer who wants all these things. The argument always is that it is the consumer who wants sexy models to advertise products, because, then, they will look at those ads. Without those models no one will pay attention to those advertisements.
- The girls who work in the advertisement business should also be questioned. Either they are not aware of the impacts they create because of the way they appear in those advertisements, or they are aware, but have no choice (since it means for many an income and employment), or they do not care (because they enjoy doing it).
- There are different standards and styles of beauty and people should respect and accept those. This was explained further:
  - The concept of beauty that is translated in traditional societies is a Western concept of beauty. People have the right to have their own concepts of beauty. But through globalization, the Western concepts of beauty are imported and accepted as the norm.
  - People should accept that there are many types of beauty. For example, there is a community in Ethiopia where the beauty of women is related to the insertion of a huge clay within the lips. According to that society that is beauty. No one can come from outside and tell them that they are wrong in their perception of beauty.
  - People should define for themselves what beauty is and it should not be set by Western standards.

Advertisements do have some positive sides, too, as noted by some of the participants:
Advertisements do have a positive element. Products should be advertised by companies to show how those products work as well as in to promote their sale. For example, on the beauty products for long hair, they have to use beautiful women to show that their products work (whether it is true or not).

Many young girls are dreaming of professions such as modeling, acting, etc. They are pretty and they know it and they want to show it.

Advertisement is also a profession offering jobs, and people have the right to be employed in whatever sector they please.

Some media institutions have broken the culture of silence on violence against women, especially on domestic violence. These institutions can be used by society. For example, there are programs on TV Africa (Queen Latifa and Jenny Jones), where women speak openly about violence and what they have been through. These women have crossed the border of remaining silent and started to talk about their problems in public. Of course, America has a different culture from that of Ethiopia, but women have come a long way to be so open about their problems. In Ethiopia, women would not be able to do the same. They would never talk about domestic or marital rape, even when they see others in other cultures speaking about them. This in itself, broadcast by the media, should be seen as educational, since it can function as a motivation and encouragement for others to do the same. Such kind of exposure is an advantage for women in countries like Ethiopia.

The media also presents strong women who can be used as role models - for example, women who report on the domestic violence they faced, or women as police officers, doctors, professionals, etc. The media can thus also be used as a source of inspiration by and for women.

At the end of this debate, it was said that advertisements are thus not to be blamed for all that is negative in society. Advertisements are commercial businesses, where people are more concerned about profits and getting people to buy their things than thinking about the gender-sensitivity of their advertisements. The main aim for them is profits, not whether someone out there is offended or not. The point here is that it is up to the consumers to make choices. They should be made aware not to follow any advertisement negatively and not to believe that what they see in advertisements is the average, the norm.
There was a link drawn between the commercials and the images of women by one of the participants who said that, when talking about the media images of women, several aspects could be pointed out. One is the commodification and commercialization of women where women’s images are sold as commodities to enhance the increase in sale of the commodities they advertise. The participant said that this might be one of the insane undercurrents or insane phenomena in the 'developed' West, where women are commercialized for the purpose of making profits. On the other hand, it might also be true that business people portray these women in this fashion and do not see beyond it, because they are not aware of their impact. But the impact is enormous and devastating, because this is connected with power, the power relation between women and men, which is not just abstract, but also connected with the images men have of women and women have of men and of themselves. And these images are in most cases negative and bad. Power is patriarchal and the basis of patriarchy is the serious division between women and men and the images they have of each other. When these images are portrayed and commodified through commercialization, they basically and fundamentally strengthen the prevailing perception about male and female sexuality. The problem is that, because these images are introduced in the West, people see them as signs of modernity, positive, and civilized. Children also watch these advertisements and their young minds are molded from very tender ages of what the images of women and men should look like.

Another participant said along the same line that the commercialization, commodification and dehumanization of women and their bodies are part of the business of the sex industry in the West. She also compared this to the changing perceptions of people in countries like Ethiopia, who follow everything that is Western as positive and good. Even negative images and criminal acts can be beautified in advertisements. She gave an example of how abduction in Ethiopia, the most dreaded nightmare of Ethiopian girls, was romanticized at a commercial on the Ethiopian TV, where a man comes on the scene where a girl is fetching water, breaks her earthen jar and carries her away. The main problem here is that this show was aired over and over again, while the public, who was watching this, did not even utter a word against it. In many Ethiopian dramas women are also portrayed negatively as if they were not good for anything except as commodities for exchange. The question here is, then, when will people start taking things that affect women negatively in a serious manner? Or is there a difference in the place where it is done and how it is done? These
advertisements imply that something negative can be made into something beautiful and positive and become thus an encouragement for people to do it, while in fact it is crime.

On the images women and men have of each other, it was said that those images are often formed based on stereotypes. These can be positive or negative and serve a purpose or have a meaning defined and limited to specific contexts. Women suffer more from negative stereotypes than men, which are often used against them in order to exclude them from certain activities. Stereotypes are found everywhere, but are strongest in schools (where the minds of young children are molded from a very young age), posters, advertisements, dramas, schoolbooks, etc.

There was a question on the role of the media in sensitizing the public on gender issues. What can the media do?

The presenter said that, currently, many of the media channels in Ethiopia have either a column or some airtime on women's issues. For example, newspapers such as The Sun, Ethiopian Herald and Tomar have columns on women. ETV on Saturdays and the FM Radio have airtime. The problem, though, is not on whether there are enough programs sensitizing the public on gender issues, but on the quality of the presenters, the media workers. How gender-sensitive are they in their presentations on issues regarding women? The problem is serious, too, because it is these journalists who often relay the negative stereotypes, either consciously or unconsciously. For example, during the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association's airtime on the FM radio, they were once discussing abduction at a very critical level, where victims of abduction were interviewed. It was very emotional. But at break time the radio broadcast a song glorifying abduction where the singer was singing: ‘let me abduct you . . . ’ This was a serious blow to the program, given the seriousness of the problem. The broadcasters might have done it unconsciously, but it was creating an opposite effect to what was intended by the discussion. This means that there is a serious problem with the awareness level of journalists on gender issues.

A related question was: ‘Is the media in Ethiopia women-friendly?’ Examples were drawn from two neighbouring countries -- Kenya and Uganda. In Kenya, it was said, the media was not women friendly, while in Uganda things were very encouraging.
The presenter said that she could not answer this question objectively. There is a need for a research on this. But, she again stressed that the main problem lay with the journalists. They are not trained and sensitized and unintentionally make mistakes through the use of wrong language and projecting wrong images.

A participant added to this point and said that there were many shortcomings in the media in Ethiopia. It is extremely underdeveloped and not specialized, and the role the media is playing is still not clear, but it is definitely not educative. Issues are only presented when they are hot issues, and as news. It is further very much influenced by stereotypes prevailing in the society. Reporting is never objective, but this may have to do with the background of the media people in Ethiopia, many of whom lack professional training and skills. The media also lack continuity. Most programs are sporadic and eventually disappear. Regarding reporting on issues related to women, there are many biases and shortcomings. The reporting is not objective, due to the internalized stereotypes and lack of proper media reporting skills. It really lacks professionalism. A solution could be to increase the number of women working in the media. The assumption is that, when there are more women working in the media, the images of women will become more positive. But, again, the question here is whether these women will be in decision-making positions.

The presenter said that the number of women in the media had increased indeed, but most of them are employed at lower levels, such as translation or writing columns that do not require high skills, such as the exchange rate, while the main stories were written by men. Though the number of women is increasing, they are not working at higher, decision-making levels, and are not given opportunities to write on or present serious issues.

‘Given that the media is not women-friendly, what kind of strategies could be used in Ethiopia to utilize the media for advocacy work on gender issues?’

According to the presenter, the main problem is that many media people have no clue as to what gender issues are. The first thing to be done thus is to create understanding on this issue.

Some suggestions were advanced as to what could be done to change the media and make them more gender sensitive:
There is a need for a media and communications policy;
Lobby the government to have a cultural policy;
Work with the bureau of culture and information at all levels (micro, meso, macro) to make them aware on gender issues;
There is a need for positive female role models in the government;
There should be a clear clause in the information or media policy against any objectification or negative images of women;
The Women's Affairs Bureau at the Prime Minister's Office should push for the gender agenda in the media policy or code of ethics;
Put some limitations on advertisements, of what is acceptable and what not;
All main programs should be gender-mainstreamed;
Gender-sensitize media people;
Gender education should be incorporated into the school curriculum;
People should boycott programs that are degrading to women;
Media can and should be used positively;
The media should function as a center for social transformation and change.

At the end of the forum, one participant said that the potential of the media to publish or broadcast on gender issues was huge, but that the current amount of time spent, say, on violence against women was very little. There is a need for a comprehensive media policy that would push gender issues to the fore. Currently, some NGOs are involved in filling the gap, such as the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association and Panos. Some NGOs have airtime in some of the regions, such as Ireland Aid, which runs a community radio in Sidama every Saturday on gender issues. There is also the community radio in Gondar, which has a program on and for women. The important thing is to encourage others, but particularly the government, to do the same.
Ms. Rakeb Messele
(Program Coordinator, Counter-trafficking Program, International Organization for Migration)

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Introduction

Universal human rights are said to be inherent in all human beings and therefore ought to be respected. The very term “human rights” indicates both their nature and source: they are rights that individuals have because of the simple fact they are born human. Thus, if all human beings have them simply because they are human, then human rights are held equally by all.

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) defines human rights as universal, inalienable and indivisible. The two covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights further made these human rights standards legally binding. Most countries also recognize most of these rights and have incorporated them in their constitutions, national legislations and laws. They have set a limit and a system of check and balance on the power of the state in order to avoid tyranny and oppression.

2 Ibid.
How, then, should the term ‘women’s international human rights’ be understood? At one level, it can be taken to refer simply to those general international human rights instruments that incorporate the non-discrimination clause. This means that in particular or general contexts, women should be treated the same as men in the protection and promotion of their rights. While this development is valuable, it has not, however, been found adequate to address the subordination of women worldwide. This led to the next level, which is the development of a specialized branch of human rights law that deals exclusively with women. It is thus that the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has been instituted to effect the most important change regarding equality between men and women.

However, the structure and institutions of women’s international human rights law have proven to be more fragile than the other branches of human rights. The sheer number of reservations to fundamental provisions in the instrument by States parties to the Convention and the failure of states to fulfill their obligations under the instrument have further rendered the document almost ineffective.

In order to legitimize international human rights law at the national level, Ethiopia has made the major international human rights treaties that it has ratified part and parcel of the law of land. Its Constitution has further specifically incorporated the non-discrimination clause on different grounds, including sex and gender. However, though the Ethiopian legislation is more or less in conformity with international standards, as in most African societies, Ethiopian society remains not only communal but also hierarchical. As man is culturally believed to be superior to woman and thus considered to be senior in hierarchy, men and women do not hold equal status socially, economically and politically. Thus these standards could not be put into practice because they are found by the particular societies to be inconsistent with their own cultural values and institutions.

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The concern of this paper is thus, first, to raise the question about why women’s human rights are seen as ancillary to international human rights and, then, to examine how the theory of universality of human rights could be given a certain degree of authority to command obedience throughout the whole world, irrespective of cultural practices and tradition. Second, it will analyze how the theory of human rights could grant the best guarantee by setting the minimum conditions necessary for a decent human life for women. It will, finally, propose a coordinated effort to change this attitude using a human rights framework.

Development of international human rights law

Contemporary concern with the international protection of human rights originated in the formative period of the United Nations and arose as a reaction to the atrocities of the Second World War. Although in preceding periods certain attempts had been made, and achievements recorded in this field, they were nevertheless territorially restricted, limited only to some categories of persons, as they also were fragmentary in the substantive scope of the protection afforded. Thus, it is only since the Second World War that we have been faced with an inclination towards comprehensive standard setting on human rights in international law. The development of the international law of human rights at the international level was then followed by the establishment of four regional systems.

K. Vasak, the former Director of the Division of Human Rights and Peace of UNESCO, was the one who originally classified human rights into different categories. The first category was called the “first generation rights,” which derived primarily from the seventeenth and eighteenth century reformist theories and were associated with the English, American and French revolutions. This category corresponds, more or less, to the rights incorporated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and includes the right to life, fair trial, vote, and freedom from arbitrary arrest, among others. These rights are also referred to as “negative rights,” the argument being that they only

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6 The first regional system for the protection of human rights was created within the Council of Europe set up in 1949. The second was established within the Organization of American States (OAS) and a comprehensive instrument was adopted in 1969. A third regional system was further established within the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the substantive and procedural arrangements of which were formulated by the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights in 1981. The Council of the League of Arab States then adopted the Arab Charter on Human Rights in 1994.
require the state to abstain from arbitrary interventions in the quest for human dignity.

The “second generation of rights” has its origins in the early nineteenth-century France, and was, since then, re-emphasized by socialist and various welfare movements and revolutionary struggles. This category corresponds, more or less, to the rights incorporated in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and includes the right to work, education, adequate standard of living, and health care, among others. These rights are referred to as "positive rights," the rationale being that they require states to positively intervene in the quest for human dignity.

The “third generation of rights,” also known as “solidarity rights,” emerged in the last half of the twentieth century. These rights are still in the process of conceptual elaboration and have not yet as such been transformed into binding obligations. With the global problems of maintaining peace, protecting the environment and encouraging development, states realized that the struggle required an international cooperation and consolidation of states. This category includes the right to clean environment, self-determination, economic and social development, participation in the “common heritage of mankind,” and humanitarian disaster relief.

Vasak’s classification theory has been criticized for various reasons. First of all, not all the rights in the two covenants exclusively fit the positive or negative rights’ category. There are civil and political rights that require positive intervention by governments, while some of the socio-economic rights require the mere abstention of political authorities. The writer of this paper is also of the opinion that this classification of rights will only reinforce the argument that alleges that there is a conceptual difference between rights.

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8. Ibid.
Universality and cultural relativism of human rights

The UDHR defines human rights as universal, inalienable and indivisible. Universal means that human rights apply to every single person by virtue of their humanity. The idea of inalienability has been important in negotiations over the priority given to social, religious and cultural practices in relation to human rights. For decades, work to transform practices, which are physically or psychologically damaging to women and that have often been protected under the rubric of religion, tradition or culture, has been particularly difficult, given both the integrity of culture guaranteed by the UDHR and the history of Northern domination in much of the world. The indivisibility of human rights means that none of the rights that are considered to be fundamental human rights is more important than any of the others and, more specifically, that they are inter-related.11

The globalization of fundamental human rights has further led to the drafting and ratification of a number of additional international instruments. As shown above, human rights developed historically as a response to a certain kind of oppression in order to avoid such circumstances in the future and to set up standards and procedures to promote and protect these rights. Given this historical background, most non-Western countries have questioned their universality, arguing that the instruments did not take into account the diverse human cultures.12

Thus, on the one hand, the theory of “universal human rights” contends that irrespective of sex or where human beings might be or in what kind of culture or class they live in, they will come up with basic rights, such as the right to life, equality, and liberty. It argues that the doctrine of human rights is not just a set of arbitrary, culturally relative, conventions, but rather, a normative theory of the organization of social relations in human societies.13

On the other hand, the universality of their application has been debated by the feminism and cultural-relativism theories. They argue that Westernized, cosmopolitans and liberals ought to tolerate certain practices and refrain from criticizing the moral beliefs of other cultures when they disagree with their own, because there is no trans-cultural ground from which they can defend the superiority of their culture’s beliefs and norms over those of other cultures. They further argue that the international human rights law is predominated by white, Westernized men who enjoy racial, gender, social and economic privileges. Those citizens who do not benefit from these privileges were thus treated as second citizens.

However the fact that human rights are constructed at a certain point of time of history and have a certain social and cultural origin does not mean that they are invalid now or may not be applied universally. As long as the ideas, norms and values that these instruments encompass are relevant, applicable to our society and can protect humans from oppression, they should be adopted. Nevertheless, as people’s expectations and concerns are changing constantly, the theory of human rights should also be flexible enough to accommodate such changes, as nothing is eternal, immutable, or infallible. The doctrine of human rights is thus in constant need of extensions, adjustments and revisions.

For instance, African societies are full of traditional cultural practices that reflect different values and beliefs held by particular communities and which may have evolved for generations. Some of these cultural practices are beneficial to the members of the communities, while some are not with regard to specific groups of the communities. Should the cultural practices, which is harmful and violating the basic human rights of a specific group, be used as the empirical basis to develop a materialist philosophical foundation to bring about change in the society? Or should the cultural practices persist in the name of cultural relativism, despite the oppression they are causing?

The Concept of Women’s Human Rights

From a woman’s perspective, even though the three generations of rights have developed from different philosophical influences, the instruments are remarkably similar.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the fact that these instruments provide that the

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, p. 68.
Reflections: Documentation of Panos Ethiopia's Forum on Gender

Rights and freedoms are inherent to all human beings, irrespective of any difference, they are developed on the basis of a typical male-life experience. Thus it is argued that the international legal order privileges a male perspective and fails to accommodate the realities, most pressing risks, problems of, or threats to, women's lives.

From a woman's perspective the human rights documents make the reference to gender difference without really considering the disadvantages faced by women in reality. In a world where distribution of power and goods is structured along gender lines, it will be unlikely that the mere provision of equality will bring a real change in women's status and life in society.15

Furthermore, all of the international human rights instruments focus on the dichotomy between the public and the private life. The public sphere, being the workplace and political world, is traditionally referred to as the domain of man, while the private sphere, being the home and the family, is considered to be that of the woman. By reinforcing the distinction between the two domains and by affording a greater significance to the public sphere, international human rights law neglects to regulate a particular aspect of the woman's life. By so doing, it neglects the value of the woman and her functions in the private sphere. While unpaid labour in the household and violence in the family are pertinent violations of the woman's rights, the international law does not give them due consideration.16

The general international instruments could not thus eradicate gender inequality because they define human rights in a genderless manner and because of the way in which these documents are interpreted and implemented. The need for women's participation in all spheres of society; in both the public and the private domains, and the recognition of inequality and discrimination in the private domain, led to the creation of specific standards for the protection of women's rights.

Recognizing the necessity of a human rights regime that addresses women's issues directly, the UN General Assembly adopted in 1967 the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Based upon the

15 Ibid, pp. 63-64.
16 Ibid, p.70.
Declaration, the Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted in 1979. CEDAW establishes women’s right to non-discrimination on the basis of sex, and affirms equality in international law. It provides that women and men are entitled to the equal enjoyment and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in civil, cultural, economic, political and social fields.

Furthermore, during the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-1985), women from many geographical, racial, religious, cultural and class backgrounds took up organizing to improve the status of women. The UN-sponsored women’s conferences, which took place in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, Beijing in 1995 and New York (Beijing+5) were convened to evaluate the status of women and to formulate strategies for women’s advancement. These conferences were critical venues at which women came together, debated their differences and discovered their commonalities, and gradually began learning to bridge differences to create a global movement. In the late eighties and early nineties, women in diverse countries took up the human rights framework and began developing the analytic and political tools that together constitute the ideas and practices of women’s human rights.

In looking at the human rights framework from women’s perspectives, women have shown how current human rights definitions and practices fail to account for the ways in which already recognized human rights abuses often affect women differently because of their gender. This approach acknowledges the importance of the existing concepts and activities, but also points out that there are dimensions within these definitions that are gender-specific and that need to be addressed if the mechanisms, programmes, and the human rights framework itself are to include and reflect the experiences of the female half of the world’s population.

The concept of women’s human rights has not only been instrumental in the formulation of the conceptual challenges and demands levied by women, but has also opened the way for women around the world to ask hard questions.

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17 General Resolution 34/180 of 18 December 1979, entry into force 3 September 1981.
18 Charlotte Bunch (see note 11 above), p. 59.
about the official inattention and general indifference to the widespread discrimination and violence that women experience everyday.

Substantive and procedural content of international women’s human rights instruments

CEDAW remains to be the only international convention that focuses specifically on women’s human rights and contains detailed provisions on gender discrimination. It also provides more specific guarantees with regard to women’s human rights. In addition to the obligation to condemn discrimination against women, the States parties to the Convention undertake, inter alia, “to embody the principle of equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation,” and to adopt laws or other measures, “including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women.”\(^{20}\) The Convention also requires the States parties to take a series of measures in the political, social, economic and cultural realm to advance the enjoyment of equal rights by women in all walks of life.

However, CEDAW did not initially define “discrimination against women” to specifically cover violence against women. Nevertheless, the 1992 General Recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women describes gender-based violence as a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men.\(^{21}\) In December 1993, the UN General Assembly further adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (DEVAW), which elaborated on the definition of gender-based violence and classified it as a critical human rights issue.

The comprehensive manner in which rights are incorporated in CEDAW reinforces the emphasis placed by the international community on the indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights.\(^{22}\) It is thus argued that its provisions establish immediate and direct obligations on States parties. In addition, the Convention does not, \textit{per se}, create new human

\(^{20}\) Art. 2 of CEDAW.

\(^{21}\) General Recommendation No.19 (XI) Violence against Women, adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women at its 206th meeting (11\textsuperscript{th} session, 1992), para 1.

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rights for women. It rather reiterates, in a specific manner, the right of women not to be discriminated against on the basis of sex, and to have the necessary national legal, political and administrative measures in place to be able to fully exercise their human rights.23

Though CEDAW is the second most ratified conventions in the world,24 many have, however, done so by making reservations not to implement certain provisions on political, constitutional, cultural or religious grounds. In addition, till recently, the reporting procedure was the only mechanism available to monitor the compliance of states parties to this Convention. Considering the problem of implementation, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action first declared: “new procedures should also be adopted to strengthen implementation of the commitment to women’s equality and the human rights of women.”25 An optional protocol, which will provide such procedures, was argued to be important, as it would strengthen the implementation of CEDAW by making the rights contained in it justifiable.26 In addition, the specialized nature of the treaty and the expertise of the Committee will encourage women to seek redress for the violations of their human rights.27

The newly adopted Optional Protocol to CEDAW28 thus provides for two procedures: a communication procedure that aims to redress specific grievances, and an inquiry procedure that rather aims to identify broad human rights violations affecting a large population. As for any other international procedures, states parties to the Convention must first ratify, or accede to, the Protocol for the Committee to have competence to receive and consider individual complaints or undertake an inquiry.29 The Protocol is considered to be part of a larger strategy to ensure the full integration of women’s human rights concerns in the international human rights framework. It would allow the Committee to develop a fuller jurisprudence to protect and promote women’s human rights, which may be referred to by other treaty bodies as they seek to

24 CEDAW has been ratified by 169 States as of 10 May 2002.
29 Article 3 of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW.
understand and effectively address violations of women’s rights within their respective mandates. Furthermore, a protocol to a convention that comprehensively incorporates both civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights would constitute an important step towards the actual realization of the principle of indivisibility, interdependence and interrelatedness of all human rights.

Substantive content of the regional women’s human rights instrument

At the regional level, though the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (African Charter) contains provisions that protect women, it is argued that the protection provided under the Charter is only in the context of the family and that outside this arena, there is not much protection afforded to women. There is also the argument that the African Charter has failed to address numerous issues affecting the rights of women, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), inheritance by women and forced marriages.

The OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government affirmed the need to have an additional protocol to the African Charter in July 1995. The Women’s Unit within the OAU and the Legal Counsel of the OAU came up with an integrated Draft Women’s Protocol in September 2000. Though it has not yet been adopted, the Protocol may be considered an African instrument that has gone further than CEDAW.

Article 1 of the Draft Women’s Protocol defines terms such as “discrimination against women,” “harmful practices,” and “violence against women.” The

31 Report of the Secretary-General E/CN.6/1997/5 (see note 27 above) para. 44.
32 Art. 2 provides for equal enjoyment of all rights in the Charter. Art. 3 provides for equality before the law and equal protection, while art. 18 (3) states that discrimination against women should be eliminated and that the rights of women need to be protected.
34 Ibid., p. 42.
35 Art. 1 (d): "Discrimination against women shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction based on sex, or any differential treatment whose objective or effect is to nullify or impair the recognition, enjoyment or the exercise by women, regardless of their marital status, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all spheres of life." Art. 1 (e): "Harmful practices (HPs) shall mean all behaviour, attitudes and/or practices which negatively affect the fundamental rights of women and girls, such as their right to life, health and bodily integrity." Art. 1 (h): "Violence against women shall mean all acts directed against women which cause or could cause them physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including the threat of such acts; or the imposition of arbitrary restrictions on or deprivation of fundamental freedoms in private or public life in peace time and during situations of conflict/war."
definitions of all three terms are wide enough as to cover, for instance, not only the effect of differential treatment but also the objective of such treatment in the definition of discrimination against women.

The Draft Protocol has also gone further by not just applying economic, social and cultural rights to women, but also by recognizing the specific impact they can have on women. It thus provides that States should “create conditions to promote and support the occupation and economic activities dominated by women, in particular, within the informal sector” and “encourage the establishment of a system of protection and social insurance for women working in the informal sector.” It goes beyond the circle of salaried women to require that states “recognize the economic value of the work of women in the home” and to “recognize motherhood and the upbringing of children as a social function for which the state, the private sector and both parents must take responsibility.”

The Draft Protocol, in addition, states that women shall have the right to fully enjoy their right to sustainable development. It also includes other provisions on the right of women to participate in the determination of cultural policies, be involved in management of the environment, and calls on states to “reduce military expenditure significantly in favour of spending on social development, while guaranteeing the effective participation of women in the distribution of these resources.”

In general, the Draft Women’s Protocol addresses most of the problems that women in Africa are facing. The document may be said to fluctuate between setting out general principles and providing detail. On the other hand, it may be said to set out goals that might be difficult to attain by ratifying States. For

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36 Arts.13 (e) and (f) of the Draft Women’s Protocol.
37 Ibid, arts.13 (h) and (l).
38 Art.66 further requires states to take all appropriate measures to (a) ensure that women participate fully at all levels in the conceptualization, decision-making, implementation and evaluation of development policies and programmes; (b) facilitate women’s access to land and guarantee their right to property, whatever their marital status; (c) facilitate women’s access to credit and natural resources through flexible mechanisms; (d) take into account indicators of human development specifically relating to women in the elaboration of development policies and programmes; and (e) ensure that in the implementation of trade and economic policies and programmes, such as globalization, the negative effects on women are minimized.
39 Art.17 (1) of the Draft Women’s Protocol.
40 Art.18 (2)(a).
41 Art.11 (3).
42 Nsibirwa (see note 33 above), p. 51.
this reason, it may not be ratified by a great number of States in the region. This might then result in the Protocol becoming yet another addition to the existing body of human rights instruments meant rather for academic discourse than for practical enforcement.\footnote{Ibid.}

**National legitimacy of International Human Rights Law**

The implementation of human rights does not only depend on the fact that human rights have been made legal at the international and regional levels. The issue of national legitimacy should be given adequate consideration because, in order for each society to accept the doctrine of human rights as a portrayal of its particular concerns and perspectives, it will have to include and represent its aspirations and culture. A ‘margin of appreciation’ should be allowed, where the social, economic, political and cultural circumstances of respective states are considered in the promotion and protection of human rights. However this margin should not be too wide as to allow any state or society to go below certain standards of human rights.\footnote{Rakeb Messele “Women’s Human Rights in Ethiopia: Critical Evaluation of the Impact of Globalization on their Promotion and Protection” (See note 12 above), p. 8.}

By way of legitimizing international human rights law in general, and women’s human rights law in particular, Ethiopia ratified a number of international human rights instruments, including CEDAW.\footnote{Ethiopia has ratified the two Covenants, CEDAW, Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention against Torture and the African Charter.} Furthermore, the 1994 Constitution of Ethiopia provides in art.9 (4) that all international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land. It also provides that the fundamental rights and freedoms recognized by the Constitution shall be interpreted in a manner conforming to the principles of UDHR, International Covenants on human rights and international instruments adopted by Ethiopia (art.13 [2]). Then art.25 states that all persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination on the grounds of sex, to the equal protection of the law. Art.34 provides equal rights to women than men in marriage and family matters. Art.35 goes on elaborating on the equal rights and protection of women. It also specifically prohibits cultural practices and laws that are harmful to women.
In addition, to enhance the status of women, the Government of Ethiopia established a National Program of Action. The Program seeks to expand educational and work opportunities for women, improve women’s access to health care, and educate women about unhealthy, traditional harmful practices, such as early marriage. In 2000, the Parliament adopted a new Family Law, which amended most discriminatory provisions and put in place provisions that more or less protect and promote women’s human rights. Furthermore, the Penal Code is under review by the Ministry of Justice.

Despite all these, the constitutional norms remain to be an abstract superstructure so distant from the daily experience and suffering of women, and the enforcement of the general equality clause and specific provisions that promote and protect women’s rights remains poor. Women in Ethiopia continue to suffer inequality, injustice and subordination. Due to women’s low social, economic and political status in the society, their access to reproductive and productive resources is more limited than that of men. Women thus remain the poorest of the poor. Violence against women is a pervasive social and legal problem. Harmful traditional practices are still prevalent, though a survey undertaken by the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia in 1998 reported a decline in prevalence. Feminization of poverty has led many to migrate in the hope of securing employment abroad, resulting in feminization of migration. This further has led many women into the hands of traffickers who take advantage of their vulnerable situation by making false promises.

What, then, are the obstacles that come in the way of the successful legitimization of women’s human rights law and the effective enforcement of the same?

The gap between the existence of rights and their effective enjoyment derives, first of all, from a lack of commitment by the Government to promoting and protecting those rights, and the failure of the Government to inform women and men alike about them. The lack of appropriate recourse mechanisms at the national and international levels, and inadequate resources at both levels, compound the problem.

Women's full enjoyment of equal rights is also undermined by the discrepancies between some national legislation and international law of human rights. Overly complex administrative procedures, lack of awareness within the judicial
process and inadequate monitoring of the violation of the human rights of all women, coupled with the under-representation of women in the justice system, insufficient information on existing rights and persistent attitudes and practices, perpetuate women's *de facto* inequality. *De facto* inequality is also perpetuated by the lack of enforcement of, *inter alia*, family, civil, penal, labour and commercial laws or codes, or administrative rules and regulations intended to ensure women's full enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Certain cultural practices could further be classified as the major obstacle against the promotion and protection of women’s rights. Culture is constantly contested by those who wish to legitimize their privileges and power while others are challenging the *status quo* in order to redress grievances, realize their dignity and protect their well-being. Despite the physical, emotional and psychological harm that most cultural practices cause to women and girls, the international community has remained passive for long in the name of a distorted vision of multiculturalism. For instance, early marriage is practiced in our country, because particular societies claim that it is their culture and has certain values and moral norms, despite the fact that it is causing harm to a specific group – that of the girl children.

Though we can learn from certain cultural practices, which can serve as norm setters in the respect of human rights, those that harm and discriminate against a specific group of the community should not in any way be tolerated. While the international human rights can be revised and evolved to incorporate cultural practices that promote social cohesiveness and unity, those that harm the physical and psychological health and integrity of specific community members should not be tolerated but abandoned or altered.

As in the case of early marriage, the fact that family members, elders and the community had a different interest to fulfill by giving the girl child to marriage before she is of age should not be a decisive matter. The hazards and indignity that the cultural practice brings to the girl child should rather be given adequate consideration, and due protection should be provided to her. However, where

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the cultural practice has a meaning and fulfils a certain positive function, attempts should be made to reform the people who practice it to give up the harmful practice without giving up the meaningful aspects of their culture.49

As we have seen above, certain cultural practices may be harmful to and a violation of the basic human rights of a specific group of the community. In the case of early marriage, both physical and psychological health, education, reproductive and sexual integrity have to be sacrificed for the benefit of the community, despite the fact that the law provides for the protection of the girl child from this harmful cultural practice. The Ethiopian legislation on minimum age, which is in conformity with international standards, has not been put to practice because the legal provision was found by particular societies to be inconsistent with their own cultural values and institutions. On the other hand, the law could not provide the female child protection from the social pressures in those instances where she decides not to accommodate the family interests.50

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that most customary practices are not implemented by the structures and mechanisms of the state. Therefore, mere legal provisions prohibiting a certain cultural practice may not be enough to eradicate the practice or transform its nature and content. Protection of human rights against harmful cultural practices at the national level is only possible if the particular societies understand the negative effects of the cultural practices and respond towards avoiding the oppression from occurring in the future. The recognition of the oppression for what it is will enable the society to develop a new philosophical foundation to justify and rationalize changes. Legitimizing the standards set down by the international human rights law is thus the only guarantee that can protect and promote the rights and dignity of women and girls.

Thus, though cultural relativism should be a strong philosophical foundation for the revision and modification of international human rights law in order to incorporate the history and circumstances of various societies and cultures, it should not, however, be used as an excuse to justify harmful practices. The theory of universal human rights should grant the best guarantee by setting the minimum conditions necessary for a decent human life. In addition, the theory

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid., p. 20.
of human rights should have a certain degree of authority to command obedience throughout the whole world in order to monitor and control the unchecked power of states or communities.

Therefore, the Ethiopian society in particular, and African societies in general, should not reject the doctrine of universal human rights on the mere excuse that it has a Western historical and cultural origin. They should rather use the oppression caused by harmful cultural practices to bring their culture in conformity with fundamental international human rights standards, because most human rights norms trace back their origin to a form of oppression, for “behind all law is someone’s story – someone whose blood, if you read closely, leaks through the lines.”

Conclusion

It is a fact that there is already significant consensus on most of the international standards of human rights through the very deliberate and settled process by which they have been articulated and adopted over the years, as well as the wide ratification of most international human rights documents. However, some African governments argue that the acceptance of these standards is merely legalistic and fail to consider wider factors such as the culture and the needs and concerns of the people.

One group of scholars argues that the source of all values is the culture and history of a society. This argument holds that there is no such thing as inherent rights. Others argue that human beings have rights just for being born human, irrespective of the culture and the period of time they are born in.

On the one hand, the fact that human rights are constructed at a certain point of time in history and have a certain social and cultural origin does not mean that they are invalid now or may not be applied universally. The level of the development, elaboration and ground of evaluation of the doctrine in recent time has to be considered before we resort to reduce its significance on account of its origin. The attempt to discredit the idea of universal human rights on the

54 Ibid.
grounds that the “white man” developed it should not have any effect on its significance and importance.

On the other hand, however, international human rights law is not only Western-biased, but also male-biased. As a result, their dominant position has ensured that the voice of women, and of Africa, is not considered relevant or valid to the debate or development of human rights law. The views and perspectives of women and African bodies are marginalized to the extent that international literature on human rights and UN bodies does not often cite the jurisprudence and statements of women or African institutions. The international community, the UN, regional bodies and writers must thus be more willing to draw upon African and women/feminist material in their discussion and development of human rights law.\(^{55}\)

In relation to human rights provisions, regional and international instruments can only be enforced and be effective where they are ratified and the States parties to the instruments recognize the competence of the respective enforcement bodies. Thus both international and regional communities should urge their member states to ratify all instruments that are relevant to the protection and promotion of women and girls. Furthermore, the international and regional community should take a firm stand on any limiting reservations to human rights treaties, which tend to defeat their purpose and object. States parties should also “regularly review such reservations with a view to withdrawing them.”\(^{56}\)

However, the international, regional and national communities should use the non-discrimination clause and women’s rights framework more generally, to ensure that it is not only used by states that have ratified specific instruments, but to also use it as an authoritative interpretation of the international human rights law.

The idea of human rights is not a constant standard bound not to change but a living intellectual tradition, which can be revised and evaluated where the circumstances require it. The doctrine of human rights may someday form a


\(^{56}\) Rakeb Messele, LLM Thesis (See note 47 above), p.51.
standard of values and norms governing the entire global community. For this to occur, cross-cultural legitimacy of the international system of human rights is essential. Since we already have an international system of human rights law and institutions, it can be proposed that the norms and values be sought to be legitimized by the various societies with different cultures in the world, while the theory of human rights must be developed in such a way as to include and represent the concerns and aspiration of all peoples. The rights can become consistent with different cultures through awareness raising, training and civic education. While the respect for personal and cultural self-determination can in this way be promoted and legitimized, cultural practices that harm or cause grievances among specific groups should be eradicated or altered by rejecting the harmful practice while safeguarding its meaningful and fulfilling function. The motto should thus be “Give up the harmful practices, not the culture.”

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57 UNHCHR (see note 47 above).
Women’s International Human Rights and Violence Against Women
Discussion and Debate

Moderator: Ms. Indra Biseswar (Panos Ethiopia)

The discussion started with a question followed by a comment: shouldn't the fact that Ethiopia was one of the last countries to ratify the African Charter on Human and People's Rights have been mentioned? It is noteworthy to mention this because of Ethiopia’s position as the country where the Headquarters of the OAU and ECA are stationed. It should have been expected of Ethiopia to be one of the first to sign that Charter, but instead, it was not only one of the last countries to ratify but it even waited till the last minute to do so. This should be seen as an irony, particularly when compared to the fact that Ethiopia was one of the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The fact that the United States still has not signed the CEDAW, while at the same time posing as the champion of human rights, was also mentioned.

The following point raised was with regard to the position of the Ethiopian government on Human Rights. Given the bleak picture painted by the presenter with regard to the Ethiopian government’s lack of action on the subject, is there any room for hope? Are there any advocates (particularly within the government) who can do something?

Two responses were given to this question, one by the presenter and another by one of the participants of the forum:

- First the presenter: It should not be denied that the government has done some work on human rights, such as the ratification of international conventions, the inclusion of anti-discriminatory and equality clauses in the constitution, the amendment of the family law (even though it is only at the federal level) and establishing a women’s affairs office at the PMO. But these are not considered to be enough, because they constitute just the formal/legal framework. Nothing has been done to make them practical so
that they can reach the grassroots level and change the status and life of women at that level.

- The participant's response was one that challenged both the person who asked the question and the response given by the presenter. According to this participant, the government is doing a lot on the ground to change the status of women in Ethiopia. For example, the Federal Parliament's Women’s Committee has been working towards promoting the rights of women and they have undertaken some measures to promote the Family Law, which has been adopted at the Federal level. (It should be noted here that this amended family law is only adopted in two cities: Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. The other regions in the country have not adopted it yet and a lot of work needs to be done to have them adopt the same.) The women’s Affairs Committee, along with the National Committee on Traditional Practices (NCTP), has also undertaken some cooperative measures to undertake legal literacy and promote existing legislative framework at community level. As far as the harmful traditional practices are concerned, some measures have been taken, with the establishment of linkages between civil society and the government working towards the promotion of women’s rights in terms of protecting their legal rights in the areas of early marriage, abduction, FGM, etc. And there are many more activities undertaken at the grassroots level in collaboration with civil society, some NGOs and the government's women's machinery.

The next issue raised was on cultural relativism. A link was drawn between cultural relativism and the International Declaration of Human rights. There are so many cultures in the world that are accepted even when they are against the very values embodied in the International Human Rights Convention, such as honor killings, etc. How can these be tolerated nowadays in an international, global world order? Shouldn’t Human Rights be universal without exceptions?

The presenter explained the historical development of the Human Rights Convention and its shortcomings that gave rise to cultural relativism. The International Human Rights Convention developed as a reaction to what had happened during the Second World War. This means that it has a historical background with specific consequences, and this by itself reflects its failure to adhere to the historical background and the ways of life of non-Western countries. This was brought to the surface by African and women scholars, who had been debating the universality of human rights. Cultural relativism has been
used, unfortunately, by many African countries in the course of their human rights violations and is a reaction to international pressures by the international community on those countries to change specific cultural practices that violate human rights. African governments always end up claiming that this is the way things are done within their societies, because of their culture, where culture is used to justify human rights violations. This shows how cultural relativism can be used as a very unreasonable excuse for many African countries not to abide by international standards and not to implement human rights at the national level according to the international standards.

The relationship between the constitution and culture was also delved into. Which is more powerful, the constitution or culture? People are clearly aware of the situation in which, day after day, women are not just battered, beaten and raped, but literally tortured in all kinds of very cruel, inhuman ways. But the world remains silent. These tortures of women are accepted by society, hidden behind cultural curtains. When the same thing happened to men, the international Human Rights Convention was established to protect them from those cruelties. But with women, the tortures still continue by the very men, who have their rights protected against those kinds of torture. And, why not? Everything is accepted in the name of culture. The questions that need to be raised are: ‘Why can’t there be the same system of justice for women as for men?’ Why are the root causes not tackled when trying to bring justice for women? The root problems that serve to perpetuate the violation of women’s human rights are known to everyone but, still, there is no intervention. What can be done to protect women’s rights?

Added to this, it was said that there is more to the problem than just taking care of the implementation of women’s human rights laws. There is a lack of will power. For example, in Ethiopia, there is an excellent constitution, and the government has signed and ratified many international conventions and treaties with regard to women’s rights, but, as has been the case for some time now, when governments come back home after signing those conventions, they refrain from intervening in the cultures of societies, many of which cruelly violate women’s rights. It reminds us of the saying “Far from my bed show.” What can be done to make a government comply with the constitutional and legal rights of women? The respect of the human rights of women should be above the cultural values of societies, because those are the ones that condone
and facilitate the cruel violation of women’s rights. Why is the government, in the case of Ethiopia, not intervening?

The presenter responded that, in certain instances, cultural practices were indeed more powerful than the State. A good example is early marriage. In the laws it is clearly stated that early marriage is prohibited, it is even a crime, on the basis of which a person who undertakes to marry an under-aged girl will be penalized. But no one is ever penalized. Once the marriage takes place, it becomes the private affair of the parties involved, and not intervened into by the state. It is still widely practiced. This shows that some cultural practices are above the mechanism and the structure of the government itself.

It was also argued that the government to some extent does not confront those kinds of cultural practices because they do not have the will power, the resources and the mechanisms to combat them. This is observed everywhere. FGM, early marriage, abduction, rape, etc. are practiced in most of Ethiopian societies. There are quite a number of cultural practices regarding which the government remains passive, despite the fact that it has provided within its own Constitution that such practices are illegal and some even considered a crime.

‘But the Constitution can alter culture!’ someone intervened. A good example is what recently happened in Kenya, where they came up with a national law banning FGM. All those practicing, or caught trying, FGM on young girls are subject to imprisonment, even parents and traditional practitioners. This implies that maybe there is a way out for the law somehow to do something of the like when there is pressure. Obviously it was the pressure from civic and women's groups that made not only the law become a reality, but also the development of a follow-up and implementation mechanism to make it practical, as in the case of Kenya. This could also be done in Ethiopia.

This led to another issue -- the role of a secular state. It was said that except for the governments of the Sudan and Iran, all governments throughout the world claim to be secular. By definition, a secular state must break itself from all sorts of cultural power associated with religion, tradition, etc. In a secular state there is the prevalence of the law that protects the rights of the individual as those of collective. And this is where the hypocrisy of most government comes. Definitely patriarchal cultural constructions are a serious problem. And, in some cases, they may pose to be more powerful then the government itself.
The role of a secular government is not to worship patriarchal power, to bow to such kinds of cultural or traditional values and practices but to change them. And this can be done through education in schools or the media. There also has to be a massive civic education program to change the mentality of the people to minimize cultural influences on the behavior of people, which affect and violate the rights of women. This is very important because it is related to the very issue of eradicating poverty and bringing about development, which are closely linked with the attitude of individuals and society as a whole on gender. When a society has a better understanding of gender relations that is when you can speak about and have human development. The role of the state is thus not to worship what prevails, but to change it through education, either formally or informally, because at the end of the day, what is called civil society cannot just emerge from nowhere. Even if there is a very industrialized society, it does not imply the presence of a civil society. What makes an individual a citizen is the level his/her knowledgeability. There are individuals as subjects without freedom and there are individuals who are citizens with freedom. And this is the kind of transformation needed in Ethiopia. As long as individuals or subjects do not liberate themselves through education and attain freedom, it is impossible to have civil society at the end of the day. Knowledgeability plays a role, a secular state plays a role, but at the same time, some kind of cultural deconstruction at the level of the individual, particularly when it comes to gender relations, is pivotal. An individual, who entertains that women are inferior to him, can never be a citizen. The dialogue is no longer about the emancipation of women alone, but about human emancipation. It is not only women but also men who should emancipate themselves. If women live under slavery, the slave driver himself is a slave.

One participant added here that culture, indeed, was powerful. But what is more powerful than culture is the media. And the media can certainly bring about changes. People are picking up other cultural values that are worse than those we know precisely because of what they hear and watch and read on the media. So, why can’t the media be used to bring about positive changes in people’s attitudes?

The presenter added here that, to bring about changes, various mechanisms could be applied, such as education (civic, formal and informal), media and
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socialization. When young children are taught about human rights from tender ages, it will definitely benefit society at large. Of course, the schools are criticized that they lack human rights and civic education in their curricula. But then, again, they lack many things, such as gender education. Maybe NGOs should push for civic education to be included in the curricula.

Speaking of culture, it was said, women are known to be the custodians of culture, the ones who pass the culture through socialization from one generation to another. But culture is a problem. ‘How can one differentiate between what is harmful within a culture and what not?’

The presenter used here an example to respond to this question: in Kenya, there was an organization that was trying to combat FGM in a society where FGM was celebrated as part of a culture when a girl attains puberty. Reaching puberty is a good reason for celebration and a big feast is organized. The organization intervened in this process and taught that society about the harmful impacts of the practice of FGM. And they succeeded in convincing that society to stop practicing FGM. Why did this one work in particular and not others? As is known, many organizations are said to be doing the same or trying to do the same, but with no success? Why? Because, they might be using an approach that does not work, such as informing and telling the society that a certain culture is bad and telling it to just stop it, without giving consideration to other factors. This often leads to a problem of credibility in which such organizations are not taken seriously. People would often be very attentive during the training programs, but when the trainers leave, the practice would continue. But this new approach by this particular organization in Kenya was different. It informed the people about the harmful impacts of FGM and they also told them to continue practicing their culture while removing the harmful part of it. When the organization left that society, people stopped practicing FGM, but they continued celebrating their ceremonies when girls reach puberty. This shows that it is possible to separate the harmful from the good in culture.

One participant shared some of his views on the Human Rights discourse. He said that the dominant discourse on human rights was Western and referred to within a patriarchal context. There is no mention of women’s rights, because the exclusion of women’s rights has been systematic and deliberate. It is important
to stress the contradictions that emerge in the dominant discourse. For example, the United States claims to be a champion of democracy and human rights, but when it comes to women’s rights, the US was one of the very few countries that opposed, at the Vienna Earth Summit, the proposition that upheld the rights of women as human rights. And this contradicts the very standard the US is trying to see applied globally. What is also known, and against the very basic human rights of women, are the new policies of the current government, which are anti-women’s reproductive rights. Within the first day of commencing office, president Bush came up with a new government policy that affects the reproductive health rights of women not only in America, but also globally, by withdrawing funds for reproductive health workers.

One question concerned the place of patriarchy in this call for equality. Patriarchy is based on power relations and on the unequal relationship between women and men. When there is a call for the respect and recognition of women’s human rights and the equal rights of women and men, it implies an equal treatment of both women and men. Where will patriarchy fit in this? What will happen to patriarchy in this call for equal human rights for women and men? Will it change, transform or cease to exist?

The presenter said that if, in case, equality between women and men was achieved, patriarchy would have no stand in a society where equality prevails, because patriarchy is a system of hierarchy where men are believed to be senior in the hierarchy and women inferior. If equality is attained, it is assumed that there will also be equality in the hierarchy. When there is equality, there is no need for hierarchy. Equality will mainly rely on the capacity of people, on the intellectual performance of people, rather than on the gender or sex of the individual. So, patriarchy will have no place. The system of hierarchy will remain, though, because, depending on the capacity of people, someone will be at the top. By agreement, either women or men can take the lead in decision-making, but it won’t be patriarchy as such, because it won’t benefit only men.

A woman political candidate shared her experience about the time when ran for office during the elections in Ethiopia. She said that while she was running her campaign, within a week or two she was presented with about 20 letters of misconduct and charges of this and that sort. Obviously those were meant to discourage her from continuing. She said that this way of charging her with misconduct to stop her from campaigning were completely against the articles
of the Constitution. Then she capped her experience sharing with the following question: ‘Does having the laws in the Constitution guarantee their implementation?’

The presenter answered in the negative. Though there are many good provisions in the Constitution (many of which conform to international standards), it is very difficult to implement and exercise those rights in practice. They have remained on paper. Why are they not implemented? Because there are far too many obstacles preventing their successful implementation, such as the gaps between the existing rights and the capacity and even the willingness of the government to implement those rights. What is also a serious problem is the lack of mechanisms available for people to claim those rights.

What followed was a question: 'If the law cannot protect a woman from a bully on the street, what is the point of having a law? If a rape victim cannot report her case to the police, what is the point of having a law? The speaker continues to say that women constitute more than half of the population of a given society and, yet, their rights are not even recognized let alone protected.'

One of the participants said having a law assumes the parallel existence of a mechanism and structure to enforce and implement that law. He explained the introduction of laws in Africa and said that, obviously African governments competed in the international arena to be the champions of the most progressive laws, while at the same time forgetting about them when in their own countries. When the African Human and Peoples Rights Charter was established in 1987, the irony was that, at that point in time, there were African governments ruled by people like Mengistu in Ethiopia, Mobutu in Congo, Eyadema in Togo, as well as so many other civilian and military dictators. And these dictators met in 1987 to provide this African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, obviously to cover the daily and cruel human rights abuses they exposed the people to in their respective countries. But this act should actually not be surprising. If one looks at the literature on the charters or resolutions and decisions made by African leaders since 1963, for instance, it cannot be denied that the OAU has been the most revolutionary continental organization in the world. They have the best of the best and the most fantastic radical laws, resolutions and charters. The problem, however, is that they remained on paper, with no one to implement them. Why? Because of lack of
A link was drawn between poverty and human rights. When people are poor, they have other priority concerns than human rights. Is Human Rights an issue of the poor?

The presenter said that human rights included everything, the right to shelter, food, education, health, etc. There is nothing that is not included in human rights. For example, the rights of rural women include their access to resources in order to provide for themselves, their families and their societies. So human rights discourse is about the rights of every woman in every country.

Another opinion forwarded on this was that poverty and women’s oppression were indeed very much related, but poverty was not the main cause for women’s oppression. Whether in Western or Third World countries, there are always violations of women’s human rights, because of the belief that men are superior to women. This is the way people think and how they are brought up. Women are oppressed and violated, especially within the familial context, and they cannot evade those circumstances because they don’t have the resources to sustain themselves or their children. So they remain within the oppressive situation. It is thus not poverty only that is the culprit, but also lack of education, access to resources, self-esteem and assertiveness. The family, society, attitudes, behavior and culture, all have to be taken to account. A woman may know her rights, but as mentioned here above, there is no system for her to go and claim those rights, since society and the family is not ready to let her do so and the legal mechanisms are not available to protect her in case she does so.

A participant added here that women’s oppression are very much related to poverty and the fact that most women do not have the means to redress the human rights violations that occurs to them. Poverty may prevent women from claiming their rights, since it costs money to start a legal procedure. Many women are poor, and the Ethiopian Women’s Lawyers Association is the only organization providing free legal services to the poorest of the poor. But there
are many more women who are poor and cannot claim their rights for economic reasons.

The presenter said that the problem, not only here in Ethiopia, but also at the international level, was that emphasis is given to the civil and social rights of people, which include the right to life, the right not to be tortured, the right not to be arbitrarily detained, the right to vote, etc., while other rights, such as their socio-economic rights, are ignored. In poor countries like Ethiopia, it is very important that these rights are also addressed, since they include rights to employment, education, healthcare, food, shelter, etc.

The following question was raised: ‘Is women’s liberation possible in circumstances where other forms of oppression prevail, such as class oppression, national oppression, religious oppression, etc.?’

The presenter said that women’s movement could not be separated from other kinds of movement, because women do not form a homogeneous group. They are part of ethnic groups, class groups, racial groups, etc. Women thus suffer double to triple victimization. On the one hand, because of their gender (being a girl or a woman suffices to be violated) and on the other hand, because of their group identity: being of certain ethnic origin, religious group, being prisoner, or migrant or refugee, etc. So, when one talks about women’s liberation, all these differences are brought under one theory. One cannot go without the other.

Another question raised was: ‘What actually led to the call for the inclusion of women’s rights as human rights?’ The history of the development of human rights is related to the atrocities committed during the world wars on men. But what about women? Whatever was done to women was not recognized at that stage yet as a problem.

The presenter said that when one looks at the background of the international human rights instrument, which did not give enough account to women’s lives and perspectives, one finds that it gave rise to the development of a very specific branch of human rights. This branch was a response to the lack in the main international human rights instrument, which could not make the necessary changes, especially for women who could not use the mechanisms and procedures to redress their human rights violations, whereas men were benefiting from it. And this is what brought about the development of the
international women’s human rights question, which led to the convention, and then to the movement, then to the UN decade of women, etc.

The following questions were raised:

- **What can be done to change the situation?** For example, how can the judicial system be made more efficient? The way things stand now, any case taken to court takes a very long time to resolve.

- There are many shortcomings in the current legal system. For example, rape is only considered rape when committed against a virgin. When committed on non-virgin women, it is not rape. Rape in marriage is also not recognized. So there is a conceptual problem, whether this is intentional or unintentional, it is not known. **What can be done to avert these?**

The responses given were:

- **If you confront the people in the judiciary on why they don’t render decisions on short periods of time and more efficiently, they will tell you that they do not have enough staff, resources, enough qualified people within the system. NGOs should try to build the capacity of the judicial system:** for example, the British council is doing something on building the capacity of the judicial system, specifically with regard to violence against women, and it is the same thing for the police and prosecutors.

- **The whole system needs to be revised on how to protect and promote human rights.** Promotion is not just putting the articles in a document, whether it is the constitution or the specific legislations. It is also about implementation. And implementation includes effective mechanisms, effective rules and regulations and effective personnel within the judicial system. So it involves the whole system. Having a legal system is not an end by itself. It may be the easiest thing to do, since it may include copying from other documents, and that does not require much. What is required is a lot of resources, intellectuals, personnel, etc. for implementation, and these are what are lacking, making the legal system lag behind with cases. As mentioned before, there are many good provisions in the legal system, but those are not enough. There is an urgent need for their implementation, and the question that should be raised here is: is there a will power and capacity on the part of the government to implement the laws?

- **People working in the judicial system, including the police and prosecutors, all come from the same society with the same cultural biases.** They also need training.
A second set of questions raised were:

- *Given the biases of the International human rights instruments, such as male bias, or Western bias, what can be done for their implementation?*
- Ethiopia has ratified many international conventions, such as CEDAW, but when it comes to implementation, there is a lack of enforcement and follow-up mechanisms. *What can human rights organizations, such as EWLA, APAP, and others do in this regard?*

The responses to these were:

- Governments should be held accountable for the things they promise to do about are not doing.
- Maybe the focus should not be on the government alone but also on the role of NGOs and civil society. Civil society and NGOs can truly do and achieve a lot. They can raise awareness by educating people and building the capacity of the government personnel themselves, because, often, the government complains that it does not have the capacity to bring about the necessary changes.
- There should not be much expectation from the government when it comes to human rights issues. Human rights are too much politicized, and whenever the issue of human rights violations is raised, governments become offended. So NGOs should fill the gap where the government fails to provide for human rights promotion and protection.
- If we mean to rely only on the government, there is no room for optimism. But as long as violence against women is concerned, the government alone is not to be blamed. After all, government leaders just do not drop from the sky. They emerge from the society, with all its prejudices, anti-women attitudes and ethics. The issue is that they have the responsibility and they do not execute that responsibility. But again, individuals also violate women’s rights. They also emerge from that society. We should not blame the government for everything; we ourselves are to blame too.
- Even though we always blame the government of what they are doing and what they are not doing, it is also the concern of civil society and each individual on how to change women’s lives. Even if the provisions are there, society might not accept them and may not believe in the legal system and human rights standards of the government.
- Given the development level and resources of our government, we should not expect much of raising awareness about human rights from that end.
Because, when one starts raising awareness about human rights, one also starts asking for quite a number of things the government cannot provide for. It is the same thing in other Western and democratic countries. They have faced the same history, and it was civil society groups and NGOs and different movements that brought about the same changes we are after.

- The working environment may not be conducive for NGOs, and, maybe, that is one of the reasons why there are not so many NGOs in Ethiopia. That should also be taken into account. There is a need for more NGOs to confront harmful cultural practices.
- Ethiopia has few NGOs and their activities are limited to certain areas. But what about the role of women’s affairs offices? They have the structure all over the country and they are the ones who are responsible to really protect the rights of women and monitor the implementation of the constitution and different international conventions.
- NGOs have an important role to play in this respect. Nowadays they have transformed shifted gear from their usual service delivery activities. In the past, poverty was understood as lack of resources and lack of services and the focus of NGOs had been on providing the structures, such as schools, health facilities, etc., to combat poverty. Now many NGOs have moved away from this service-delivery approach to a rights-delivery approach. They consider the denial of rights as one of the causes of poverty. NGOs are contributing their share, although in limited areas of activities, along this line. Unless the whole system is changed, it is difficult to be optimistic about the protection of women’s rights.
- But we need more focus from NGOs. In many African countries, there are many NGOs working on women’s issues and human rights issues, but in Ethiopia there are not many such NGOs. Maybe the environment is not so conducive and it might not be so easy to work on women’s human rights, but there is a major need in the field.
- There are quite a lot of NGOs who work in the field of education and human rights education, such as paralegal training of women in many rural areas. What should be stressed here is not who can do more and who can do what, but in situations like in Ethiopia, what is needed is a comprehensive approach encompasses everything.
- There is a huge need to emphasize the educational aspect of the problem. Everyone, including children, should be educated.
- The lack of structures and mechanisms at the government level could also be a constraint to what one educates about how to claim rights. Civil society
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can be educated, but where will they go? Where will they take their concerns if out there, at the top, nothing has changed? There is no structure available to cope with and accommodate the changed attitude of civil society in their attempt to claim their legal rights. So it has to be an all-encompassing change at all levels.

- The efforts undertaken by NGOs and civil society should be done together, for which networking and collaboration is very important. For example, EWLA (Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association) provides legal aid services, but this might not be enough. Women also look for counseling services and shelter in case of serious abuse. These should be integrated within different organizations, which should work together in this effort.
- NGOs in the area of human rights education have to work hard in the protection and promotion of human rights. Some NGOs working in the field have contributed and made a big difference in society in this respect. The issue of women’s human rights has to be raised. It is about time society reflects about women’s rights in all fields, whether political, economic, social, cultural, etc. So the role of NGOs is quite big, especially for women’s rights. If one asks for the promotion of one’s rights, you need more resources to protect the victims. This is where NGOs can work together.

There was an experience sharing by a representative of the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) on its activities on human rights. EWLA provides civic education on empowering women in Ethiopia and creating legal awareness. This legal awareness-creation takes place through public education programs combined with legal aid services. The public education program begins with awareness-raising on the national laws, because women should be aware of their rights and freedoms that are clearly stated in the constitution and other lower legislation, such as the Family Law and the Penal Law. The training also intends to change the attitudes of women. EWLA is also engaged in paralegal training for groups that can influence decisions communities, such as the elderly, religious leaders, and others who are working in and with the community directly. In addition to that, EWLA uses different means to educate and inform women about their rights, such as magazines and the media, both government and private. But the public education program is not an end by itself. EWLA has to integrate their programs with other components, such as legal aid service. Knowing about one’s rights has consequences, and women need to be protected once they are violated and when they come claiming their
rights. One thing worth mentioning is the changes that are observed these days. When going back into the history of EWLA 6 years ago, women were not forthcoming with their problems but were using other intermediaries to solve their problems. Nowadays many women come to EWLA on their own looking for legal advice. One of the things EWLA also does is to encourage women to come forward and seek information and advice on legal issues.

The last issue raised was on the hypocrisy within organizations. People are talking about the state and what can be changed and improved there, but everyone is playing a role in development, and everyone at this forum is linked to an organization. How can people play a role in change and in development if they themselves don’t function accordingly? This, of course, led to the issue of how well people can gender-mainstream the operations within their own organizations. Issues of human rights can be picked up and addressed to other groups, but how prepared are the people who are addressing those human rights issues to others to address them to themselves? If people don’t do what they preach, how convincing can they be to others? The suggestion made here was: ‘Let us look into our own contributions to human rights in our own environments.’

Final questions and food for thought: To what extent are rights respected within an organization and, also, to what extent are the rights of organizations respected within a country? Organizations may claim to protect and promote the human rights of others elsewhere, but the situation within the organizations might not be encouraging. How many have ever thought about their rights at their workplaces? How many have ever protested when their rights were violated in the workplaces? People should reflect within themselves and ask whether they are aware on how to claim their rights.
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Panel on 'End Violence Against Women'

Moderator: Ms. Indra Biseswar (Panos Ethiopia)

Proceedings:

The moderator opened the forum with a brief background of the last five fora that were held from January 2002 to May 2002 on the theme of Violence Against Women. She said that the aim of the five fora was to look at the root causes of violence, whereby the link between the general perceptions people have of violence, and the outcomes of violent behavior, were clearly drawn. The five successive fora discussed the factors that guide people's actions and interactions and form the basis of their attitudes and behaviors. The topics the fora covered were: 'Culture'; 'Religion'; 'Christianity and Islam'; 'Media'; and the 'Human Rights of Women'. All these issues were looked at from a gender perspective, whereby the link with gender violence was accentuated. With the various perceptions people have that guide their actions and interactions, and violence being on the increase now, it was considered that the moment was ripe for reflecting upon and thoroughly analyzing the issues.

As can be noted, these topics of culture, religion, media and human rights do have a lot in common. They form people’s perceptions about gender relations and guide them in their attitudes, and behaviors and actions and interactions with their fellow human beings through norms and values attached to them. But, one cannot help to feel as if something is missing! After reflecting deeper on these issues, what was realized was that something was missing. It was realized that the issues raised did not constitute the main underlying causes of violence against women, but they were, in their turn, a direct outcome of other, deep-rooted factors. And it is these factors, which should be kept in mind when talking about gender violence, that this forum dealt with.

The panelists were introduced: Melakou Tegegn (Director, Panos Ethiopia); Alemmaya Mulugeta and Tezera Getahun (Coordinators of the Pastoral Development Programme of Panos Ethiopia and of the Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia); and Seblewongel Deneke (Coordinator of Panos’ End Violence Against Women Programme). The panelists were given the floor to talk about
Melakou spoke on patriarchy, Seblewongel on femininity, Tezera on masculinity and Alammeya on stereotypes.

**Question:** Could you tell the forum about the factor you have in mind, what it includes and how violence is directly or indirectly linked to it?

**Melakou:** In a nutshell it is impossible to understand the causes of violence against women and the degrading positions of women in general without understanding patriarchy, because patriarchy by definition is power relations between women and men, where power does not refer here to political power only, but to power at all levels, including at the domestic, social and economic levels. The problems are not these power relations per se, but what people believe and accept about them, mainly as permanent, even divine. Patriarchy affirms the following:

→ The dominance of men and the subordination of women in all aspects of life (which is the most fundamental problem for development);
→ The exploitation of women, which is manifested in the process of accumulation [including capital accumulation]. This accumulation is clearly reflected in the domestic labor of women and in trafficking, a current phenomenon they are subjected to.

These two categories of subordination and economic exploitation that affect and degrade women, are rationalized and sanctioned by patriarchy. Women are vulnerable to these forms of exploitation for reasons of being powerless in the various dimensions of life, and these, in turn, perpetuate their subordination, exploitation and violence against them at other levels.

Patriarchy thus not only affirms gender inequality, it also rationalizes it. This rationalization is not done in an open and blunt way, but is very subtle and disguised in many forms. These disguises are constructions, ideological or sociological, that rationalize the given status quo, with the aim of maintaining it, reproducing it, and making it stronger. Patriarchy, as an ideological
construction, rationalizes the subordination of women and their domination by men for the purpose of setting up inequalities between the two and the exploitation of the former. But these inequalities and the subordination and exploitation of women are also rationalized through other ideologies, which could be political. In sum, the main social values that society upholds, or the values that prevail in a given society, are informed by these prevailing ideologies, or religions, cultures, or traditions and so on. An in-depth analysis of all these constructions can easily reveal how the exploitation and subordination of women works.

Another way of rationalizing the gender inequality and exploitation of women is the outright violence that is unleashed against them. This violence is further rationalized with direct or indirect reference to religious constructions and social, cultural and traditional values.

Examples:
- Wife-beating is practically universal and rationalized by traditional and cultural norms;
- Female genital mutilation is rationalized by the same values;
- Rape, for example in Ethiopia, is seen as a culture, and there are many people who wonder: ‘what is wrong with it?’
- Abduction is rationalized, by some people in some areas, with the excuse that ‘It is our custom, tradition, culture!’

These are the rationalizations advanced for violence committed against women with reference either to culture, religion or ideologies. The outcome is that, at the end of the day, they perpetrate, strengthen and reproduce the enslavement of women.

To reiterate what has already been said at the beginning, patriarchy is the system of the power relations between women and men affirming quite substantive areas of dominance of men and the subordination and exploitation of women at every level and perpetuated, indirectly, by ideological or cultural rationalizations on the one hand, and by the direct use of violence on the other.

**Question:** What constitutes femininity, and how is femininity linked to violence?
Invited Organizations and People

Seblewongel: Femininity is defined in the dictionary as having qualities that are traditionally considered suitable to or characteristic of a woman. The emphasis here is on ‘traditionally prescribed’, because this implies that it is not natural or God-given, but socially constructed. Femininity, and what it includes, might differ from culture to culture and from community to community, but generally there are some similarities observed in the norms prescribed for women.

When a woman is said to be feminine, several things are associated with it. Being feminine implies that a woman has certain internalized characteristics, such as: patience, discreetness, submissiveness, subservience, obedience, tenderness, passion, passivity, silence, etc. Other than these internalized characteristics, it also implies that the feminine woman conforms to certain expected behaviors and attitudes in her actions and interactions with others, such as: taking care of her household chores, children and family, pleasing her husband sexually, being economically dependent on her husband, being domesticated, obeying and following her husband or boss without questioning, etc. These are the things that are prescribed by society to women as to what and how they should behave and act. It does not mean that all women are tender or loving or don’t have the capacity to take care of themselves, or are mere dependents. But generally, when a woman is said to be feminine, these are the characteristics that come to mind.

These characteristics that are prescribed for women as part of their femininity start being inculcated in them from the time they are young. They are taught, through socialization, by their parents, relatives, schools, communities, etc., on how to be feminine or female. While still young, children learn a lot also from their environment through observation. It is said that children learn more from observation of what they see than from lessons taught to them in formal or informal situations. The behavior of grown-ups around children is a form of socialization through observation. Young girls and boys observe the relationship between their parents and see their behaviors as appropriate for women and men to be imitated and internalized. If boys, for example, see their fathers beating up their mothers, they will internalize that as a norm and do the same to their own wives in the future. If girls see their mothers being beaten up, but remaining silent in that abusive relationship, because it is considered to be a norm, they will also grow up to behave and respond accordingly in the same kind of abusive relationship with their husbands in the future and refrain from
challenging that relationship.

To come to the question of how femininity is linked to violence, it is exactly the characteristics prescribed for women that are used justify, promote, encourage and violence. For example, an illiterate woman is seen as backward, and is beaten for her ignorance, something that is actually not her fault but society’s for not sending her to school in the first place. An obedient, submissive woman will do anything her parents or husband tells her to, even when it means mutilation or. Feminine characteristics are actually put in place or created to supplement the masculine ones. Women are, therefore, obedient to the male, and they are supposed to entertain whatever the male suggests or demands, where the male expects the female character to address his every need in accordance with the characteristics or qualities ascribed to her. Women, by complying with these, are reinforcing that way of thinking in the male.

Femininity and masculinity are created as ‘complementary’ poles to sustain patriarchy. They are meant to ‘complement’ each other in opposing ways; for example, the powerful against the powerless, the dominant against the subordinate, the oppressor against the oppressed, the violator against the victim, etc. Both cannot have the same power and privileges. One has to be there to serve the other in order for the other to enjoy his privileges. That is how patriarchy operates, just as other systems of such power relations do.

Masculinity constitutes the direct link with the preservation of the status quo of patriarchal values and systems, while femininity is created to serve the needs of patriarchy and masculinity. Violence is one of the main weapons of masculinity to keep femininity in its place and prevent it from rising up and demanding the elimination of its subordinate status. Women have been taken advantage of for centuries through these prescribed feminine characteristics and roles. For instance, in cases of abuse, such as FGM, early marriage, abduction, domestic violence, etc., cultural values and norms prescribe to women to accept them without questioning.

**Question: What is masculinity and what are its manifestations? And how does masculinity promote violence?**

**Tezera:** Masculinity is a sociological term just like femininity. It is directly linked to and derived from patriarchy and based on the notion of male
superiority, where gender roles are strictly based on sex differences. It could be explained as a support for the base of patriarchy, in which the two poles of masculinity and femininity were created. Masculinity can be seen at two levels; one is the personal/private level that is related to people’s ways of life, behaviors and attitudes, while the other is the public, where society is organized along institutionalized masculine lines of thinking and behaving and where masculinity is directly linked to patriarchy and, thus, male dominance.

The central idea of masculine ideology is that: "males act in the ways they do, not because of their male-role identity, or their level of masculine traits, but because of the conception of masculinity they have internalized from their culture." This clearly implies that masculinity is a social and cultural construction made to fit patriarchal ideology, not something natural or God given. Many studies done on this have showed that there is practically no evidence that men are naturally or biologically more aggressive than women. Such beliefs are actually used as excuses for men for not wanting to be held responsible for their violent behaviors and actions.

To be masculine is to have a particular psychological identity, social role, cultural script and place in the labor force. The construction process of masculinity begins when sons and boys are fiercely discouraged to reveal their feelings of fear, worry, hurt or vulnerability. The widely spread assumption is that sons/boys should not be sissy by losing their masculinity.

Some of the characteristics ascribed to masculinity are:*  
- No sissies: don't be female, do not cry, etc.;  
- Be successful: men are trained to be "success material";  
- Be aggressive: from childhood, boys are encouraged to be tough and not to run away;  
- Be competitive: sport emphasizes these values and, in some cultures, military training reinforces them;  
- Be self-reliant: men are supposed to be confident, independent and autonomous.

* Sources:  
These very characteristics are linked to the outburst of violent behavior among men.

In order to show how masculinity is linked to violence, four characteristics are used here as an example:

- **"No Sissy Stuff"**
  Teach men to avoid behavior, in any manner, which can be even vaguely labeled or perceived as feminine. Compulsory heterosexuality, the pressure to have female sexual partners and to have sex more often, becomes a way to confirm one's manhood. As a result, the motivation for all male violence is related to males attempting to reinforce and render incontestable their heterosexual masculinity. They think drinking alcohol will bring them to the level of “REAL MANHOOD!”

- **"Be a Big Wheel"**
  Strive for dominance, power, wealth and success. This happens in workplaces or playing fields (sport, athletics, etc). True masculine men ought to be physically superior to women. Thus, ‘real men’ think that they could get what they wish from women without any conditionality or consensus.

- **"Be a sturdy oak"**
  ‘Real men’ are expected to be independent, controlled and unemotional as well as to reveal no vulnerabilities. They take over their wives and children at home, because, in their view, women are a weak sex and therefore need their protection.

- **"Give'em Hell"**
  ‘Real men’ are supposed to be risk takers, to be daring; and to be aggressive. A ‘real man’ does not ‘stand down’ if his dignity or manhood has been disrespected, and, certainly, one could not expect any insult to his girlfriend or mother to go unchecked.
Question: What are gender stereotypes and how are they reinforced? What are their effects?

Alemmaya: Gender stereotypes are:
- fixed ways of thinking about people that put them into categories and do not allow for individual variation. They apply to beliefs, traits, attitudes and behaviors;
- generalizations about a person or group of persons can serve as shortcuts to a kind of thinking that provides rich and distinctive information about individuals who are not personally known.

Gender stereotypes are socially shared beliefs that certain qualities can be assigned to individuals, based on their membership in the female or male half of the human race. In almost all societies, there is consensus among people that certain characteristics are feminine and others masculine. These could be classified into two: instrumentality, which is an orientation to action, and expressiveness, which is an orientation towards emotion and relationships. Generally, stereotypes about women and men are derived from their expected gender roles in their given communities and societies. Some stereotyped gender roles for women include the beliefs that they are tactful, need security and easily express tender feelings, while those for men include the belief that they are aggressive, independent, dominant, active and capable of making decisions easily.

Regarding the ways in which gender stereotypes are promoted and reinforced, the following ways can be cited:

1. Media
The media is the most influential and major contributor to the spread of gender stereotyping. Many people draw stereotypes from what they get from the media. This is evidenced in the impact the media has on people’s thinking. For example, how many people haven’t tried hard to fit into what they have seen to be the perfect images of women and men on TV, or what they have read in magazines, or seen in advertisements? Advertisements also contribute to stereotyping of certain products to be used by the two sexes, because they associate those items with the respective sexes, as the case may be.
2. **Socialization of children within the family.**

This is also another influential sphere, where children at an early age are taught or cultivated about how to be a man and how to be a woman. Socialization is one of the major contributors to the upholding, strengthening, encouraging and continuation of stereotypes. Parents, who have come through similar socialization processes of gender specificity, try to mould their children in the same ways they were brought up, without giving them a second thought. And these are still happening, despite the economic and cultural transformation society has undergone through the ages.

3. **Traditional values and practices**

In many traditional societies, the roles of girls and boys, when they become women and men, is inculcated in their minds through different rites of passage. Rites of passage are certain rituals and ceremonies performed to and for young girls and boys when they reach a certain stage in life, such as puberty or adolescence. When the rite of passage is performed, it is expected of boys and girls from that time onwards to behave and act in certain ways. Examples of rites of passage are: the scarification among the Nuer boys; grade and age system of the Borena for boys; and genital mutilation of girls among many Muslim societies. These rites initiate and define the expected roles of men and women, whereby wedding gifts, stigma and gossip form part of the very powerful way in which certain stereotypes are reinforced and remain unchallenged.

What is important to note here is that not all traditional values and practices are full of stereotypes and, also, that not all stereotypes are negative.

4. **Unwillingness to obtain all information needed in order to make fair judgments about people or situations.**

Because stereotypes are generalizations, they emerge out of hearsays or realities that are area and time specific. The problem is that once they are established, people refuse to alter them and resist in acknowledging the current changed realities so as to develop new and balanced opinions accordingly.

Stereotypes do have different effects:

- **Prejudice:**
  Prejudice is a negative attitude directed towards people because they are members of a specific social group. Examples of prejudices: "Girls who go out
to a restaurant or a show in the night are prostitutes; girls would be spoilt if they are allowed to go to distant places for schooling.

- **Discrimination:**
  Discrimination is a negative attitude or action towards members of a specific social group. Some policies, for example, discriminate against certain groups.

- **Violence:**
  Boys are not born violent or with an unhealthy attitude towards girls. They learn these attitudes and behaviors through those stereotypes that society assumes to be right or wrong for men and women. Women and men can do anything they like, but it becomes a problem when they are told what they can do and what they should not in order to fit in. These beliefs take deny the personal choices of individuals in determining their interests.

**Discussion and Debate on Question No. 1**

After the four panelists, the participants of the forum were asked to reflect on the issues that were raised by the panelists.

One participant started by saying that violence was an indication of weakness, not strength. It is weakness because there is lack of capacity, on the part of the individual acting violently, to control it. And this is found not only in men, but also in women. The participant added that domestic violence was perpetrated not only by men, but women also violated other women’s rights. Servants or maids are often beaten up by women.

The first question raised was on whether some laws and the educational system had something to do with the issues raised?

Melakou responded to this question as follows:

Both education and laws are directly or indirectly linked to violence. Both education and laws are part of what is referred to as ideology and other forms of social constructions that rationalize the inequality between the two sexes. Regarding education, when one compares the school curricula in Western countries and the ones in Ethiopia, one sees that there is no gender education in Ethiopian school curricula, while in the West gender is included. The individual who has been exposed to gender education is different from that who has not.

When it comes to gender, however, patriarchal mentality and how people really react to it has nothing to do with whether a person is a PhD holder or not. One
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can be a PhD holder and be absolutely ignorant when it comes to gender. Many Ethiopians with higher education living abroad do not even go to the kitchen and wash dishes. In such cases, the level of education is not of concern. What is important is whether that person is humane or not. If a person does not share in domestic responsibilities, that person may be educated (in the formal sense), but certainly not enlightened when it comes to gender relations. So, without a gender curriculum, what kind of education is one talking about? Because what is essential in the end is awareness about gender. Melakou gave an example of what actually goes into the school curriculum here: 'My child once brought from school a passage about family, which stated that the man was the head of the household and the woman the housewife. I wrote an official letter of complaint to the director of the school to please not teach my child such rubbish, but there was no reply.' If this is what children are still being taught in schools, one can imagine what kind of people are created for tomorrow.

Melakou gave an example on this kind of people being created in the absence of gender education: He said that, in Togo, the 'Truth and Reconciliation' practice of South Africa was imitated. They had a televised discussion where the President, Eyadema, also took part. That discussion was supposed to be open and confessional. In one episode of this TV program, one of the ministers complained openly, live on TV, that the president, while on a trip to Europe, always and without exception, borrowed his [the minister's] wife. The reaction of the president on this then was: 'Oh, that was a small mistake, yes, yes, yes.' Hearing this live on TV one can imagine what kind of people there are in power in Africa. This proves that education has a lot to do with the mentality of people regarding gender, how gender is constructed in people’s minds, and this in turn has a huge impact when it comes to violence.

On the other hand, gender construction in people’s minds may have nothing to do with education. There are people with little or no education who are very gender-sensitive.

What applies to education also applies to the laws. Not many African countries have gender-sensitive laws that protect the rights of women, except for South Africa, Tunisia and, now, Ethiopia. To take but one example, the Islamic regime in the Sudan officially rejected the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which is an important international instrument for the protection of women's rights. The Sudan is one of the worst
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places for women to live in. Violence against women is tremendous, and the government openly rejects CEDAW! The law is very much on the side of patriarchy and violence. The law, in this particular case, is clearly linked to violence.

A comment was made by one of the participants on the educational system and how it reinforces feminine stereotypes against girls. She said that, even though gender education is now widely being acknowledged as an urgent need, not much is being done about it. Gender education should not only be included in school curricula but it should start from home, where children are brought up and socialized. Families constitute communities and societies, and in order to change society, one has to start within the families. Society is very biased and prejudiced in its treatment of girls and boys starting from their birth, where even the color of the clothes girls and boys are supposed to wear is predetermined.

Another comment added to this was that stereotypes perpetrated against girls in schools were the worst things. Teachers openly treat girls discriminately and do not allow them any space. It is often expected of girls to sit quietly and not run around like boys. They are even expected to serve tea or help in cleaning the classrooms, as an extension of the tasks they are already doing at home. Worst of all are the textbooks and school curricula, where women are and remain to be portrayed in traditional roles, even while the reality proves the opposite. In the selection of subjects for study, again girls are still directed to the soft sector, such as social science, home economics, language, etc., because of the roles expected of them. If this continues unchallenged, one can imagine what the society of tomorrow will look like. It will be exactly the same as today!

A third comment was that violence is not an end in itself, but a means to something else. Men perpetuate violence against women to protect certain interests, which can be divided in two: 1) economic: the exploitation of the labor of women and to suppress their rights; 2) sexual and reproductive.

One participant picked up on this point and said that, when talking about violence against women, what needs to be taken note of is the notion people have of sexuality. The participant gave an example: ask any Ethiopian what she/he thinks about homosexuality and one will come across the weirdest responses and beliefs. The responses actually show the repressive attitude about
of sexuality among Ethiopians, which is based on an implicit fear of female sexuality, which finds its expression through arrogance, where a man tries to prove his masculinity and sexual strength seen in terms of heterosexuality and masculine virility clean from any kind of homosexuality. Thus, violence, it appears, is exercised towards this end.

Another participant linked this fear of female sexuality to practices of FGM.

A participant said that, in order to combat gender violence, it was crucial to get the support of men. This can be done through gender education, but there still is a problem. Gender education alone does not solve the problem. For instance, when men are asked to think about their sisters, daughters and mothers, they understand the problem easily. But when they are asked to think of their wives, they seem to refrain from getting involved or do not change their attitudes. A concrete example was given. There was a bill in the parliament in Kenya in the 90s to be ratified. The problem was that all the male parliamentarians refused to sign it, and said instead: ‘are you kidding, where is my masculinity when I cannot beat my wife!’ But when they were told that the Bill was about their daughters as well they supported it. This shows that many men do not want to change the status quo when it comes to their partners and wives, but they do want to protect their daughters. The point is that to know and use such vulnerable spots in men helps, however little.

Melakou was asked about the origin and nature of patriarchy, and what in patriarchy actually caused people to go violent against women. People have been trying to explain the reasons of why men are violent against women in terms only of patriarchy. But that is not enough. In order to root out the problem, it is crucial to go deeper and look for those factors rooted in patriarchy that may be the causes for the perpetration of violence against women.

Melakou responded that he believed patriarchy emerged with the division of society into classes and with the emergence of the family, private property and the state. And these are where the origins of inequality and patriarchy are located. It is true that patriarchy has passed through various stages of evolution. At the current stage, with the globalization of the market, patriarchy is ever more present, but in different and refined guises. The segregation of women is still alive though more subtle. It is not as blunt and brutal as it is, say, in the
You have to think twice before you realize that a specific situation can be degrading to women.

Gender is not the only form of social relationship. There are other forms of social relationships, such as class, to mention but one. Is there any relationship between patriarchy and such other forms of social relationship?

Melakou said that patriarchy is connected to social systems. Among some schools of thought the argument is that capital accumulation is very much connected with the subordination and exploitation of women. During the industrial revolution, one of the phenomena of capital accumulation was the disengagement of women from the household and their entering into the production system. This was mainly because of the extreme low level of wages paid to women and children compared to those paid to men. What happened during the industrial revolution was that labor was simplified for the first time due to the discovery of the steam engine and the use of machines in the process of production. Compared to the previous forms of production, where there was a need of strong muscular power to work in the fields or mines, this was a huge advance, since the capitalist mode of production was not in need any more of that kind of labor. Labor was, indeed, simplified, but at the same time it became very laborious, tedious and monotonous, where, in most cases, it involved sitting in one place on an assembly line and perform routine work. There was no need of energy and muscles. And it is in these areas women and children were employed because their labor was cheap. So capital accumulation here is directly related with the exploitation of women, though it appears on the surface that women had been liberated from domestic bondage.

At this point the moderator intervened. She said that the discussions were leading to the visibility of the link between patriarchy as a social construction, divided between private and public life and institutionalized, where educational and legal systems played major roles. Patriarchy is further upheld through religion, customs, culture and traditions and translated into the two opposite poles of masculinity and femininity, which, in their turn, help perpetuate it. Stereotypes are put in place again to uphold this polarity between femininity and masculinity. It is a like a vicious cycle. The moderator then asked: What needs to be done with patriarchy, femininity, masculinity and stereotypes
in order to stop gender violence? What needs to be changed, modified, or altogether abandoned to bring about the desired changes?

Melakou: The issue here is not whether one wants to change or get rid of patriarchy, it has to go. That is what the struggle for gender equality is all about. As far as patriarchy is concerned, what should be done should reflect the reality on the ground. But, what is this reality? The reality is that patriarchy is a social construction, and, as is the case with any social construction, there is no way that it cannot be deconstructed. It can be changed, because it is a human creation. Anything created by humans can be changed any time. What is needed for this change? In order to change patriarchy, it is crucial to be prepared, because change won’t come by simply sitting around and discussing it. It includes several factors at several levels, including society at large.

There are three ways patriarchy can be changed:

- **One way is to promulgate laws and take action on their basis** if a democratic society is to be built. By definition, democracy implies a society composed of citizens enjoying their liberty, freedom and so forth. The very definition of a citizen implies an individual that is knowledgeable and informed, particularly in this age of globalization. But being knowledgeable and informed is not enough. It is also essential for the law to stand on the side of those wronged and marginalized, such as women, and this is directly linked to the implementation and putting into practice of the articles in the constitution. The problem, though, is that patriarchy cannot be dismantled by law alone. One cannot bring a law between a woman and her husband. It is impossible. The Cuban case can be cited here as an example. The Cuban government came up with a law in 1992, unprecedented in human history. That law stated that if a man was not willing to take part in domestic work, his wife had the right to take him to court. The question here is, which wife would drag her husband to court because he refused to do the dishes? The law is thus not sufficient by itself to change patriarchy.

- **Patriarchy can be destroyed through massive education** both at the level of civil society (civic education) and in the schools. This is why gender education in schools curricula is so crucial. That important component is needed at the primary school level, before children start social interaction between the two sexes, not when people have matured and go for higher education, because it will be too late by then. They have already formed their perceptions about the opposite sex. Massive civic education is also
crucial, especially in traditional societies like Ethiopia, where religion and cultural norms influence behaviors and attitudes. The media, the government and NGOs can play a big role in this.

- A third way of changing patriarchy is through the socialization of young children. When nurturing children, one has to realize that it is not just the quantitative aspects that should be looked at, such as family planning (avoid having too many children one cannot support), but also the qualitative aspects. It is important to look at the quality of the person that is brought into the world. Babies are nice, but the chance is that they can grow up into monsters that will commit violence against women. So, in nurturing children, the quantitative aspects need to be accompanied by the qualitative aspects in order to bring human beings into this world.

Seblewongel: What can be done to change femininity? There are good feminine characteristics and bad ones, such as the ones that make women oppressed and subordinated. It is crucial to look at the bad ones and rid society of those characteristics that disadvantage girls and women. To add to what Melakou said, though schools are seen as the breeding grounds for many forms of oppression and subordination of women, the homes are the bases where something can be done to combat both. People bring babies into the world and are also responsible for the outcomes. When children grow up and leave the house, they will be doing whatever they like to do, parents have a responsibility to lay down for their children a good and strong base. It starts when raising and socializing one’s children. People have to change their stereotypical outlooks and even challenge the pre-selected blue colors for boys and pink for girls. The unequal treatment of girls and boys starts within the family. If the boy is given money to do things and the girl is not, she will not be able to build her confidence. Even if one does not have kids, one can and should learn to treat one's brothers or sisters and cousins equally.

The problem in Ethiopia is that opportunities for girls are limited, and when these girls grow up, they do not know any alternatives and thus continue to live under subordinate situations.

Tezera: Of course, after patriarchy is dismantled, there is no place for masculinity and femininity. The only way to end or stop violence is not only for men to take a stand against masculine trends of actions and interactions, but it should involve society at large as well, especially the socializing institutions,
such as families, schools, religious places, etc., to develop new ways of socializing young boys and girls. What is needed in this process is, of course, a cultural revolution in attitudes and behaviors in which virtually all men will come to believe that to be violent is shameful and unmanly.

Alemmaya: Stereotypes can be altered and changed. They can be monitored through self-awareness and self-regulation, and the negative impacts can be reduced through social contacts and exposures, which can reveal the changing realities on the ground.

There are different opinions about stereotypes. One of them is that stereotypes are inevitable. Another is that people, willfully or otherwise, will continuously develop stereotypes, as in a biological process. Whatever the opinions, what is generally known is that children learn specific gender role stereotyping from their families, their peers, the media, and in other situations. These stereotypes are further reinforced on a continuous basis through different initiation rites (rights of passage), movies, magazines, schools, etc. throughout their lives. Parents can play a big role in socializing their children in a manner that does not contribute to the cultivation of violence. Building a sense of self-confidence and self-sufficiency in girls could help them a lot in finding healthy ways to cope with situations.

Education is paramount in the eradication of stereotypes at two levels:

- It improves the economic and social status of girls and women and reinforces new ways of thinking about capacities, skills and knowledge;
- It helps women to become aware of (negative) stereotypes and prevent their minds from being molded through them.

Other important ways to get rid of negative stereotypes are:

- Social contacts and exposure are excellent ways of getting rid of stereotypes that harm women;
- Stereotypes can also be altered through group formation and forums;
- The media can play very constructive roles in facilitating positive images of women.
Discussion and Debate on Question No. 2

After the panelists spoke on how patriarchy, masculinity, femininity and stereotypes could be changed, a comment was made by one of the participants to the effect that, what is being overlooked is the process of evolution itself. Evolutionary changes do occur, including concepts and the level of understanding of those concepts. These evolutionary changes though are long-term and slow processes. But there are factors that speed up changes, such as natural disasters (droughts, famine), conflicts and wars (refugees, displacement, female-headed households), demographic factors, etc. During such situation, the strict division between femininity and masculinity tends to fade and sometimes remain as such even after the critical situation is over. This should be kept in mind when thinking about alternatives.

Another participant gave an example of how intermarriage could dilute patriarchy and masculinity. In America there are some Ethiopians who get married to Americans (non-Ethiopians). Once there was such a person who was going to get married to an American woman. An Ethiopian friend approached another Ethiopian friend and asked him: ‘Is he going to get married to a white woman?’ The first friend said ‘Yes.’ The second friend asked him whether he was sure of it. The first friend then asked him: ‘What is the problem?’ The second friend said: ‘You know, he can’t even beat her!’

A third participant said that the places where stereotypes were strongest were also the best places to get rid of them. And these places are schools and homes. Change is very practical. For example, there are lots of nawur naw’s (taboos) guiding the behaviors, actions and interactions of women and men in Ethiopia. These taboos are very strong stereotypes against girls and boys found in practically every household. The problem is that they remain unchallenged for generations and do not change together with the reality. It is about time that people started reflecting on this. Stereotypes guide everyone’s households, lives and interactions with others. Even while thinking and speaking in one’s own language one is confronted with so many stereotypes. Stereotypes are one of the easiest things to get rid of, provided there is will power.

A comment made here was that all the solutions forwarded were radical solutions, but not really practical. Masculinity and femininity are difficult and
die-hard issues, which may not be easy to get rid of, not even in another five generations.

On the optimistic side, one participant said patriarchy, masculinity and femininity could be diluted, because where there is gender equality there is no place for them. Evidence is found among the many nations where gender equality is fast becoming a reality and women are coming up to the front and receiving equal treatment. Even at the household level change is visible in the relationship between wives and husbands. So there is a kind of dilution in those places at least of the hard core patriarchal, masculine and feminine values. There is also a breakthrough in the public sphere, in which, for example, women have started vying for political or economic leadership.

‘How can one change femininity and masculinity?’ In order to change femininity and masculinity it was said that it was important to look at what could be changed and what could not be changed and why. Femininity and masculinity can be separated at two levels: the biological level and the socially level. Characteristics that are biologically determined cannot be changed, while characteristics that are socially learned, such as aggression or submissiveness, can be altered. On the other hand, there are also the institutionalized forms of femininity and masculinity, which are also social constructions, but might need a lengthy process to change. Overall, change is possible.

Here the moderator raised the last question to the panelists:

When we were talking about the topics of the last 5 fora, such as religion, culture, media and human rights, we have seen that the core issues were the issues now being raised at this forum. The important thing now is to reflect on what one can do as an individual to change patriarchy, stereotypes, femininity and masculinity, the very issues that guide everyone’s day-to-day actions, behaviors and attitudes. The importance of early socialization of children, the need of civic education, and the need for more reflections, is stressed again and again, but How can you change things? Is it practical, feasible and possible? Where would you start as an individual? Is there any hope?

Melakou: As an individual there are plenty of things I can do. When we talk about the role of individuals, one thing that comes to mind is the hypocrisy people, particularly of men, but also of women, on gender issues, who absorb
everything but do not communicate it or pass it on. For example, Sheila Rowbotham, a British writer, confirmed in her book about many Bolshevik men during the Bolshevik revolution, who spoke very radically, and even violently, about the rights of women in mass meetings. But when these men went back home, they beat up their wives because their wives had attended those meetings! And this is the kind of hypocrisy people have to relinquish, if emancipation of human kind and the rights of women is to be a reality.

The primary thing for individuals is to realize that knowledge is a responsibility. It is not a mere intellectual exercise. The more a person knows the more the responsibility. Anyone who knows about the inequality between the sexes has a responsibility to transmit that knowledge to another person, wherever they go. They have to try to teach people and to send across messages and not keep them for themselves. Let us take Ethiopia as an example. As far is observed, an Ethiopian by definition is a non-communicative person. People here only talk with very close friends. Otherwise, when it comes to the family, people do not even transmit messages and information to close family members, especially children, the ones that should be taught. In this respect communication is virtually absent. This culture should be changed. Whether people like it or not, once you know, you have a responsibility to transmit your knowledge and break the culture of non-communication. Ideas should be popularized, and one of the best ways of doing it is to talk to people. People like to popularize gossips or political ideas, but when it comes to popularizing humane ideas, people do not speak. And this is what can be done at the individual level.

Seblewongel: Women can change negative feminine traits within themselves. They should critically look within their own behavior, attitudes, actions and interactions with others, level of thinking, perceptions they hold, etc., and challenge those that are actually directly or indirectly degrading to them. They could do this by starting to challenge the very issues that oppress them, such as early marriage, FGM, etc., and stop accepting and doing things without questioning them. They should get rid of certain female learned characteristics, such as submissiveness, docility, subservience, etc. Women have never been taught to challenge things and this has led to their subordination and oppression. They should stop taking things for granted. So, unless women change themselves, they cannot expect things to change by themselves or others to change things for them.
Tezera: To be practical in our approach to changing current masculine attitudes and behavior, the thing to do is obviously to start targeting men. This could be done perhaps through training and running workshops, with the aim to organize men in groups of “men against violence.” This cannot be an end by itself, as there is a serious need of internalizing issues, especially ones that require changes in cultural attitudes and behavior. Meanwhile, what men can do with their own behavior is to develop, or at least start initiating, changes in their own patterns of outlook towards women. They should start questioning their own masculine thinking and actions and change or try to change them.

At this point Tezera related his own personal experience. He said that he had started to challenge not only his close friends, but also other men in his community, about the perceptions they have of women. He is very proud that, as an individual, he has been able to make a big difference in his surrounding. And this is what many men can do. The important thing is to believe that what one is doing is also the right thing to do in order to create a peaceful society based on gender equality.

Alemmaya: Stereotypes are closely linked to societal definitions of what femininity and masculinity include. As mentioned before, society is constituted of individual households, and the first place where change should start is within the family. How to go about that? Parents should think twice before restricting their daughters and sons to certain activities. Often, parents do not ask sons to go and bring them a glass of water, or daughters are not easily asked to go to the shop. Within the division of household chores, girls and boys are again limited to certain activities, such as killing a chicken (meant to be done by boys), or cooking (meant for girls). These stereotypes can easily be done away with if parents and relatives are concerned about change. Of course, for parents to act as agents of change it requires that they change themselves first. It is hard but it can be done if there is sincerity involved.

Discussion and Debate on Question No. 3

One participant added his views on the issue of hypocrisy mentioned by Melakou. The participant said that many people, when speaking in public about gender issues and gender imbalances, tried to defend the position of women and appeared very liberal. But when it comes to practice, for example in their social interactions, relationships and partnerships with their wives, they fail apply
what they preach. People only talk about women’s rights instead of practicing them. He suggested for people to put to practice what they preach and establish good relationships with their spouses, because that is what will be observed and learned by their children.

Some skepticism was expressed at this point: there are many conferences, meetings and activities these days on violence against women. Yet that there is no behavioral change and this is a big problem, not only at the grassroots level, but also at the top, among the policy makers and implementers. What is the cause for the failure to tackle the problem and what can be done about it?

The response to this question was: indeed there are many activities recently initiated on violence against women, such as the white ribbon campaign, the public hearings, the zero tolerance campaign, etc. And it is true that there still is no behavioral change. And this is exactly what the forum intends to address. By raising issues such as culture, customs, religion, masculinity, patriarchy, femininity, etc. the idea is to go into what guides people’s behavior and attitudes in order to change it. Violence is often dealt with in all its forms, but the root causes remain unchallenged or untouched, as if they were taboo, while they are what constitute the basis of all forms of violence. Therefore, it is important to look at what constitutes the basis of the perceptions of religion, culture, customs, and traditions that guide people’s actions. And this forum is looking at the core issues or factors that guide those perceptions. These things need to be critically looked at by everyone if change is desired.

Melakou also responded to this question with an example from the Sudan. The British introduced a law in the Sudan in 1946 abolishing FGM. Despite this law the practice continued. By 1970 it was a huge problem, and there were many conferences conducted on the theme among people who worked on gender issues, government practitioners, etc. But what impact was there on society? Nothing has changed, because these conferences were not complemented by civic action at the grassroots level, and that is where the main work was supposed to be. But those who work on at the grassroots level should know what to do before they set out to teach others. This is what is referred to as an informed, knowledgeable action that can change the situation on the ground. And this is what was lacking in the Sudan and in Ethiopia, too. Perceptions about gender at the grassroots level are very weak. And this is what the gender forum is trying to enhance by making deeper reflections among those who work
on violence against women, so that this will strengthen their tools of analysis and help their work on the ground.

Another reason advanced by Melakou as to why, despite so many actions, nothing has changed was around the leadership of the country. The quality of leadership is crucial to gain support for an issue. And this quality is linked to their attitudes and behaviors. When it comes to the attitudes of policy makers and officials in many African countries, it is important to look at their background for, after all, these people do not drop from the sky. They emerge from the same society. And if that society is filthy, they emerge from that filth. It does not matter whether they are political leaders, decision makers etc., because since they emerged from that society, they are still with the values, cultures, mentalities and traditions of that society. When it comes to gender particularly, many share the prevailing perspectives of the society. So, when education is referred to as an important tool for society in order to change, this is also meant for the decision makers and policy makers. There are many examples of how decision makers also practice discriminatory practices against women, whereas they are supposed to set positive examples.

In many African countries it is the same. This implies that leaders also need gender education, because they emerge from societies that are guided by gender biases. For example, we have already heard what Eyadema of Togo said. The President of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi, declared publicly last year that women should not be disappointed if they cannot achieve much because of their “smaller brains.” About two months ago, the same President Moi literally stopped the parliament from deciding that the Kenyan detachment in the East African Parliament should necessarily include women. And these are policy makers, the kinds of people in leadership in Africa who are very powerful as heads of their countries. They emerged from their societies, and it is only by changing society and, with that, the behavior of people on the ground, that there will be no people like these leaders ruling Africa in future generations.

To the skepticism about so many conferences and yet no attitude change, another response given was that any social experiment must start with optimism, for that was the only hope there was. If one compares the magnitude of the social problems in Ethiopia with that of neighboring countries, the first impression one gets is to pack up and leave, because it is completely hopeless. But if one reaches that level, then there is nothing to be done. The point is that, unless people act, the situation cannot be changed. So, people act and do
something and that should be the base for their hope and optimism. The other point is that Ethiopians are probably the most patriotic people in the world. They love their country. Would it be possible to convert that patriotism to a kind of social consciousness so that it can be used to love the next person, including women? It is possible. It is the people at the forefront now who have to do away with pessimism and show to the young generation that there is light at the end of the tunnel.

On the question of whether there is hope, one participant answered in the positive. Things are changing. She tried to illustrate her point with the following example: ‘I went to the South. Ethiopians are very fond of kitfo and qoch’o (false banana roots made into a kind of bread), and preparing qoch’o is the hardest thing one can imagine. It used to be exclusively women’s jobs to prepare qoch’o. Nowadays, I have heard that boys have started to do the job. So there is change.’

Another participant said that the issue of violence had been there with us for centuries, but people never talked about it. For her, discussing the issue and talking about it is a change in itself. Change takes time, especially since an entire society needs to be changed. But it is a lengthy process and needs to be done in a systematic way.

At the end of the forum, one participant from the British Council raised the following issue, using the opportunity to advocate for her cause. She said that, although many were working on violence against women, the problem of domestic violence was very much neglected. The British Council is trying to stage its own Ethiopian zero-tolerance campaign before the end of the Ethiopian year (September 2002) that was initiated for the first time in Edinburgh (Scotland) and has now spread worldwide. They have trained about 30 women from government institutions, NGOs, etc. with specific ideas on the zero-tolerance campaign. So far they have composed a drama and a song. There will be posters, pamphlets, leaflets, panels and even a TV discussion. The idea is to carry out this campaign for 10 consecutive days, with the involvement of the media and the participation of everyone interested and concerned, in order to make a difference and change things.

But someone commented that in Ethiopia, the campaign might not have the same degree of impact as in Edinburgh, because when they go for zero-
tolerance in Edinburgh, they may not be lacking bread. The problem in Ethiopia is the extreme poverty that pushes girls and women to accept everything. If a maid is beaten up, and, with her zero tolerance in mind, she leaves the house, where will she go? She will end up on the streets, without shelter and food. This implies that, when initiating any campaign, situational analysis at the grassroots level should be carried out and the reality in the country (economic problems, poverty, etc.) should be taken into consideration.

Another participant added that, in any such interventions and activities, it is crucial to join hands and network. Networking for those working on similar issues is very crucial. Besides, it is the only way to make a difference, because the impact will be bigger when people act in a unified manner.

At the end of the forum one of the participants gave the others something to think about when going home. She said that people always talked about violence as something far from their lives. It is seen as something always happening to other women, not to them. But it could happen to anyone at any time. Keeping this in mind may serve as a tool to help others who are affected and prevent the problem before it gets to you.

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