

# **Women's Participation in Political Leadership and Decision-Making in Ethiopia: A Research Note**

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## **Introduction**

In many parts of the world, women are either excluded or marginalized from higher level political arrangements. Indeed, the proportion of men elected and appointed as political leaders and decision-makers compared to women in the same positions is highly skewed, with men overwhelmingly dominating the political field across the board. Prior research suggests that the situation in Ethiopia is not different, with women undoubtedly under-represented within different political organizations and institutions. This research note, based mainly on available and relevant books, articles, research papers and other documentary materials, is designed to provide information on the participation of women in Ethiopian politics and government – an issue which has become lately a subject of intense interest among social scientists. The note begins by examining the participation of women in political leadership and decision-making in the world generally and in Africa particularly. It then surveys critically the actual participation of women at the top levels of Ethiopia's political parties and government institutions, followed by a discussion of obstacles to such participation. Finally, it puts forward a conclusion followed by a set of recommendations that will help in the elaboration of measures to overcome existing obstacles and to increase women's participation.

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## **1. An Overview of Women's Participation in Political Leadership and Decision-Making**

### **1.1 The International Situation**

Women constitute half of the world's population and by implication potentially half of the world's electorate. Furthermore, most countries claim that they use democratic methods including multiparty systems, elections and parliamentarism to select political leaders and to make policy decisions. Indeed, in almost all countries, women have, on paper at least, nominal political equality. They have the right to vote, to be eligible for election, and to exercise public functions on equal terms with men. Nonetheless, women constitute a minority in higher levels of political leadership and decision-making bodies that inevitably affect their everyday lives. In simple words, they are relegated to the backseat of politics and government affairs.

One internationally agreed indicator of women's political participation is the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. The record world average of women's representation in national parliaments was reached in 1988 when women representatives accounted for 14.8 % of all parliamentarians. Sixteen years later, in 2004, women made up only 10% of members of national parliaments (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2003 and 2004). This world average indicates a situation in which women are regarded just as a *special interest group* rather than as half of humankind.

Another equally important indicator is the number of women heads of state or government. Only a handful of women have occupied the positions of presidents or prime ministers. From 1990 up to 1999, there were 11 women presidents. In the same decade, there were 16 women prime ministers. The world record of women leaders was 13 in July 2002 when Latvia, Finland, New Zealand, Ireland, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia, Panama, Bangladesh, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal and South Korea had either women presidents or women prime ministers. In 2004, the world women leader count reached 9. Among these leaders, 5 women were heads of state, namely, Maria Gloria Arroyo of Philippines, Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka, Mary McAleese of Ireland, Tarja Halonen of Finland and Vaira Vike-Freiberga of Latvia. In that same year, 4 women were Prime ministers, namely, Yulria Tynioshenko of Ukraine, Luisa Diogo

of Mozambique, Khaleda Zia of Bangladesh and Helen Elizabeth Clark of New Zealand (International Women's Democracy Center 2003).

Finally, the number of women ministers worldwide is around 6 %, with 5 countries (including Sweden and Finland) achieving 30 % women at the ministerial level. Yet, in 48 countries, there are no women ministers. Most of the ministries headed by women are the least influential social welfare areas involving mainly health and social services, and understandably women's affairs (International Women's Democracy Center, 2003). These areas are conventionally considered to reflect major concerns of many women throughout the world. Very few women hold the cabinet positions of foreign affairs (Nkosazane Dlamini-Zuma of South Africa, Laila Freivalds of Sweden, Condoleezza Rice of the United States among others), defense (Leni Bjorklund of Sweden, Kristin Devold of Norway, Michelle Alliot-Marie of France), finance or trade – prominent and pivotal areas for the policy agendas of most if not all governments.

## 1.2. Conditions in Sub-Saharan Africa

The scarcity of women in leadership and decision-making positions is thus an international phenomenon, with men wielding greater political power and thus deliberately monopolizing strategic leadership and decision-making. The circumstance in Sub-Saharan Africa is no different. In terms of women's representation in national parliaments, the average in Sub-Saharan Africa has increased from 11.3 % in 2000 to 15.3 % in 2004 (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004), with a significant variation among countries. Indeed, as of September 2003, Rwanda became the country closest to reach parity between men and women in the legislature with women obtaining 48.8 % in the Lower House and 30 % in the Upper House. Rwanda is ranked number one in the world, followed by Sweden where women currently occupy 45.3 % seats of the parliament.

Likewise, Mozambique (34 %) and South Africa (32 %) have reached the minimum goal of 30 % recommended by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action. In three countries, namely and in ranking order Seychelles (29.4 %), Namibia (25 %) and Uganda (23 %), women hold more than 23 % of parliamentary seats. In contrast, in the vast majority of countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, women accounted for less than 10 % of parliamentary seats, with Madagascar (3.8 %) and Mauritania (3.7 %) having less than 4 %

women representation. More worryingly, the parliaments of Niger and Guinea-Bissau have no women at all.

Women's slightly enlarged presence in the parliaments of Sub-Saharan Africa was achieved because special measures were put in place by governments and political parties. Such measures include the setting of affirmative-action type mechanisms known as quotas. On the one hand, there are political party quotas. One notable example is the African National Congress of South Africa which has voluntarily adopted a 30 % quota for women as election candidates (Myakayaka-Manzini 2003). On the other hand, there are legislative or constitutional quotas. For instance, "the new constitution of [Rwanda], ratified in May 2003, calls for a minimum of 30 % women in all decision-making posts, and sets aside 30 % of seats in the Chamber of Deputies" (Women Waging Peace 2003:2). Similarly, Uganda has put in place a 30 % reservation mandated by legislation for women in local government.

Since 1975 when Elizabeth Domitien of the Central African Republic became Sub-Saharan Africa's first woman prime minister, few women have attained high level leadership and decision-making. Ruth Perry headed an interim government in Liberia (1996-1997), and Specioza Kazibwe became in 1994 Uganda's vice-president (until she was abruptly removed from office in 2003). It should also be recalled that Mame Madiar Boye was appointed as Senegal's prime minister (2001-2002), that Maria de Sousa acted as Sao Tome and Principe's prime minister after 2002 (until she was removed by a military coup in 2003), that Sylvie Kinigi served as prime minister of Burundi from 1993 up to 1994 as did the late Agathe Uwilingiyimana of Rwanda (until she was assassinated in office). Presently, Luisa Diogo of Mozambique is the lone prime minister in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Lastly, women do not have an adequate representation at the ministerial level. As a matter of fact, in 1999, South Africa had only 3 women out of 27 ministers, while Zimbabwe had only 2 women out of a 24-member cabinet (Tripp 1999:3).

## **2. An Assessment of Women's Participation in Political Leadership and Decision-Making in Ethiopia**

### **2.1. Women as Party Leaders in Ethiopia**

One important facet of women's political participation is their standing in political parties. This is of crucial importance as political parties constitute the platform for selecting and promoting candidates for elections. In Ethiopia, existing political parties can be classified into two categories: ethnically-based parties organized under the umbrella of the ruling coalition known as Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Amhara National Democratic Movement and the Oromo People's Democratic Organization, the Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Front and other affiliated parties), and the multiple opposition parties consisting either of ethnically-defined or ideological (nation wide) parties (Pausewang and Tronvoll 2000:9; Joireman 1997).

**Table 1: Women Members of Political Parties' Executive Committees and Central Committees**

Political Parties	Category	Men Members of the Executive Commit- tee	Women Members of the Executive Commit- tee	Men Members of the Central Commit- tee	Women Members of the Central Committee
Amhara National Democratic Movement	Ruling coalition	8	-	50	6
Oromo People's Democratic Organization	Ruling coalition	14	1	82	3
Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Front	Ruling coalition	8	-	49	-
Oromo National Congress	Opposi- tion	10	1	33	3
Southern Ethiopia Peoples Democratic Union	Opposi- tion	13	-	39	-
All Ethiopian Unity Organization	Opposi- tion	11	1	N.A.	N.A.

Source: Adapted from Emebet et al 2004

In both categories, however, women tend to operate on the margins of key leadership levels and internal party structures. In the case of the EPRDF, women were active as combatants in the military struggle and in supporting roles. They also participated in the program for political mobilization which formed an integral part of the political struggle (Hammond 1990). Yet, after the EPRDF attained political power in 1991, women were left on the sidelines of the coalition's leadership (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2002:112 and 139). In the same vein, "most opposition parties derive their leadership (also often at the same time, the founding members) from the same social pool. Most of the leaders of opposition are middle aged, men, the urban educated professional middle class" (Demissie 2004:12). The percentage of women in the governing bodies of virtually all political parties range between 0 % to a pitiful maximum of 12 % (See Table 1). In short, the awareness of the need to motivate and include more

women in the membership and leadership of political parties is apparently non-existent.

## **2.2. Women as Election Candidates in Ethiopia**

The situation of women candidates reflects the situation in the political parties. A very small number of women candidates contested for parliamentary and regional council seats in the 1995 and 2000 elections. In the 1995 elections, there were only 21 women running for the House of Peoples' Representatives (the Lower House) and 92 women running for regional council seats. Out of these, 15 women (71 % of the women candidates) got elected for the House of Peoples' Representatives while 77 women (84 % of the women candidates) got elected for the regional councils (Aspen 1995; Donor Election Unit 1995; Tronvoll and Aadland 1995; Lyons 1996).

According to the data obtained from the National Electoral Board, in the 2000 elections, 92 women run for the House of Peoples' Representatives out of a total of 1,077 candidates, while 277 women run for regional councils out of a total of 2,156 candidates (National Electoral Board 2000b). Out of these women candidates, 42 got elected for the House of Peoples' Representatives, whereas 218 got elected for the regional councils (National Electoral Board 2000c).

**Table 2: Women Candidates Fielded by Political Parties for the 2000 Elections**

Political Parties	Category	Men Candidate s for the House of Peoples' Represent- atives	Women Candidates for the House of Peoples' Represent- atives	Men Candid- ates for Regional Councils	Women Candid- ates for Regional Councils
Amhara National Democratic Movement	Ruling coalition	120	14	244	45
Oromo People's Democratic Organization	Ruling coalition	166	13	485	76
Tigray People's Liberation Front	Ruling coalition	34	4	112	40
Oromo National Congress	Opposi- tion	32	3	41	2
All Amhara People's Organization	Opposi- tion	16	1	28	4
Ethiopian Democratic Party	Opposi- tion	13	2	31	6

Source: Adapted from National Electoral Board 2000b

### **2.3. Women as Parliamentarians in Ethiopia**

“Only 42 (7.69 %) women are represented out of a total of 547 members of the House of Peoples’ Representatives [the Lower House]” (Meron nd:71), well below the average in Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, Ethiopia is number 96 in the world ranking for the representation of women in its Parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2004:3).



Table 3: Gender Composition of the House of Peoples' Representatives in the 2000-2005 Term

Region	Number of Parliamentarians	Number of Men	Number of Men in %	Number of Women	Number of Women in %
Tigrai	38	34	89.47	4	10.53
Afar	8	7	87.5	1	12.5
Amhara	138	124	89.86	14	10.14
Oromia	178	165	92.7	13	7.3
Somali	23	23	100	0	0
Benishangul Gumuz	9	9	100	0	0
Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples	123	117	95.1	6	4.9
Gambella	3	3	100	0	0
Hareri	2	2	100	0	0
Dire Dawa	2	2	100	0	0
Addis Ababa	23	19	82.6	4	17.4
Total	547	505	92.32	42	7.69

Source: Data from the House of Peoples' Representatives

In the House of Federation (the Upper House), women's participation is equally low, and in fact has noticeably decreased. In 1995, women accounted for 8.9 % of the House of Federation with 10 members. In 2000, women's presence declined to 7 members which represents a mere 6.3 % of the total members.

Table 4: Women Members of the House of Federation in both the 1995-2000 and 2000-2005 Terms

Region	Number of Members 1995	Number of Women	Number of Members 2000	Number of Women
Tigray	6	0	6	2
Afar	2	0	2	0
Amhara	17	3	17	1
Oromia	19	2	16	2
Somali	4	0	4	1
Benishangul Gumuz	5	0	5	0
Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples	54	4	55	0
Gambella	4	0	4	0
Hareri	1	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>10 (-1)</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>7 (-1)</b>

Source: Adapted from Meron nd

At the regional council level, there are only 218 woman members out of a total number of 1,755 members (with 86 seats left vacant) of regional councils (Polhemus 2003:11). Yet, a comparison of the gender breakdown of the regional councils elected in 1995 with those elected in 2000 shows an increase from 5 % to 12 % in women members (ibid: 12).

Region	Number of Men Members	Number of Women	Total Number of Members	Opposition or Independent
Tigray	110	42	152	0
Afar	83	2	87	3
Amhara	250	44	294	0
Oromia	467	70	537	2
Somali	166	2	168	15
Benishangul Gumuz	67	13	80	5
Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples	308	38	346	23
Gambella	42	0	55	0
Hareri	29	7	36	0
Total	1522	218	1755	48

Table 5: Composition of the Regional Councils in the 2000-2005 Term  
Source: Adapted from Polhemus 2003

The participation of women in parliamentary committees established on specific areas is by the same token limited as shown by Table 6.

Table 6: Composition of Parliamentary Committees in the 1995-2000 Term

Committees	Number of Members	Number of Women Members
Economic	13	0
Budgeting	13	0
Social	18	0
Defense and security	14	0
Foreign affairs	14	1
Administration	15	0
Law	13	0
Media and culture	15	0
Women's affairs	15	9
Total	130	10

Source: Data from the House of Peoples' Representatives

#### 2.4. Women as Ministers in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, a tiny number of women occupy ministerial and sub-ministerial positions. In fact, at present, in an 18-member cabinet, there is only 1 woman heading a line-ministry – Genet Zewde, the Minister of Education.

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In addition, at the sub-ministerial level, there are only 5 state ministers and 1 deputy-minister<sup>2</sup> (Meron nd: 70-71; Emebet et al 2004:43).

Table 7: Individuals at the Ministerial and Sub-Ministerial Levels in the 2000-2005 Term

Rank	Number of Men	Number of Women
Minister	16	1
With the rank of a minister	5	0
Acting minister	1	0
State minister	12	4
With the rank of a state minister	0	1
Deputy-minister	11	1
With the rank of a deputy-minister	1	0
Total	46	7

Source: Adapted from Emebet et al 2004 and Meron nd

The gender gap in the regional executive branches is even more dramatic as there was not a single woman in five regions (listed in Table 8) after the 1995 elections. The pervasiveness of men's dominance is substantiated by the fact that, since 1995, all regional presidents have been and still are men.

Table 8: Members of Regional Executive Committees in the 1995-2000 Term

Regions	Total Number of Members	Number of Women
Afar	15	0
Amhara	21	0
Gambella	19	0
Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples	21	0
Oromia	21	0

Source: Adapted from Women's Affairs Office and World Bank 1998

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<sup>2</sup> This short list includes Gifti Abassiya (the Head of Women's Affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister with the rank of State Minister), Dr. Mulu Ketsela (formerly State Minister of Finance and Economic Development), Netsanet Asfaw (State Minister of Information), Senkinash Ejegu (State Minister of Energy) and Beserat Gashawtena (Deputy Minister of Labor and Social Affairs).

## **2.5. Some Propositions on Obstacles to Women's Participation in Political Leadership and Decision-Making in Ethiopia**

To explain why women are scarcely represented in Ethiopia's political leadership and decision-making, an array of factors can be suggested. These factors range from political and socio-economic factors to cultural and psychological explanations.

### **2.5.1. Weaknesses of Ethiopian Political Parties**

Most, if not all, of Ethiopia's political parties do not have active women's sections (Jalele nd: 21), and do not employ appropriate strategies to promote women representation (ibid: 262; Vaughan and Tronvoll 2002:112). Furthermore, almost all political parties are weak in the sense that they seem totally unwilling to deal with specific gender issues (as attested by their presentations and general performance during the forums on Gender and Elections organized by Panos Ethiopia). They simply do not try to incorporate a significant number of women into regularized forms of party membership. It follows that the political parties have few women members and activists.

It is thus possible to hypothesize that such political parties are not hospitable to women's participation because parties with a higher proportion of women members and activists would display a correspondingly high proportion of women at higher levels of party leadership who would naturally reinforce women candidates. Hence, in such a scenario, more women could be elected to Parliament. Yet, whatever the case may prove to be, there is the inescapable reality that women, as newcomers to political parties, are bound to have fewer political resources at their disposal, and would find it difficult to catch up with the more politically established or involved men.

### **2.5.2. Ethiopian Women's Perception of Politics**

Ethiopian women have a tendency to perceive politics as a man's world, a domain exclusively constituted by, and for, men. This prevalent *masculine model* of politics puts a stranglehold on the participation of Ethiopian women who either distance themselves from it or leave all forms of political

activity for men (Jalele nd: 21). Also, more alarmingly, the few bold women who got elected or appointed are not able “to share their experience, challenges, and success story” (Meron nd: 77), depriving the mass of Ethiopian women of potential role models who could pave the way for them.

### **2.5.3. Economic Insecurity and Financial Vulnerability of Ethiopian Women**

In Ethiopia, poverty places a heavy burden on women who are denied access to, and control over, financial resources but must disproportionately shoulder household management. This situation is true whether in rural or urban areas. Indeed, “the Ethiopian peasant women are totally dependent on the income of their husbands with whom they labor under harsh conditions. Rural women work a much longer time than men, [spending 13 to 15 hours] in taking care of the children, animals, food processing and marketing” (Hirut 2000:24-25).

Similarly, in urban areas, “the proportion of female workers in such low- or no-skill jobs as seasonal and short-term contractual work is found to be much higher than that of men. As a result, the average salary of women is far less than that of men. Men mostly occupy the high-paying managerial and professional positions” (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs 2004:xiii). All in all, a woman with inadequate or no income has no time and energy to think about, and work for, something that does not address her immediate survival and does not sustain her family for the following days. Had that woman had a secure job and better income, no doubt she would have shown some interest in politics and would even have engaged in an election campaign to occupy some political office (Meron nd: 77).

### **2.5.4. Ethiopian Women’s Lesser Access to Education**

Ethiopian women’s access to educational opportunities is severely limited compared to men from primary to university levels, with profound inequalities in enrollment. “Out of the national Gross Enrollment Rate of 64 % for primary school in 2003/2004, female enrollment constituted only 53.8 % while it was 74.6 % for boys” (ibid:75). The number of female students

decreases as the level of education rises. Indeed, “the national Gross Enrollment Rate for secondary school is 19.3 % and it is 14.3 % and 24 % for girls and boys respectively” (ibid).

### **2.5.5. The Cultural Glass Ceiling**

In Ethiopia, women must deal with a strong cultural perception which suggests that women are inferior to men (ibid:74). This perception amplifies the attitude that women’s proper place has always been and still is the home, and more specifically the kitchen. Women are expected from childhood, and are accordingly brought up, to be good (meaning subservient) housewives and mothers. It also inhibits women’s ability to competently perform political leadership roles and participate in decision-making processes in the face of overt cultural hostility.

## **3. Conclusion and Tentative Recommendations**

The research reported here confirm that, despite their nominal political equality, Ethiopian women’s participation at the pinnacle of leadership and decision-making in political parties and government institutions remains peripheral. This lack of participation of one half of the population clearly limits the diversity of political parties and the effective operation of government, and leads to the perpetuation of policies and practices that do not serve the needs of women and men equally. To increase women’s opportunities to reach higher levels of political leadership and decision-making, the following positive measures (not in order of importance) should be initiated:

1. Ethiopian women should be provided with the necessary education in order to create a much larger pool of women capable of developing professional skills, of competing with men, and of vying confidently for top-level political leadership and decision-making positions.
2. The media should be used to change the society’s perception that women are inferior to men, and also to overcome the negative attitude of women towards politics.

3. A civic education program targeting all Ethiopian women should be organized. This program could make them realize that they can influence electoral processes, political parties, and governmental organizations and by implication the formulation of issues and policies. Furthermore, women running for elected positions, women parliamentarians and women in top government positions should receive some training that could increase their skills and capacity. This implies providing adequate resources and support to local NGOs that are engaged in this line of work generally on a non-partisan basis.

4. Political parties should include a sizable number of women as active members, leaders and election candidates.

5. A national legislation should be provided, setting aside a number of reserved seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives and the House of Federation as well as in the nine regional councils.

6. A program of affirmative action should be worked out, requiring the Ethiopian government to appoint women to 20, 30 or even 40 % of higher level leadership and decision-making positions.

7. More aggressive and policy-relevant research should be conducted (and disseminated) in order to come up with reliable and comparable data and analysis needed to provide a concrete and complete diagnosis of Ethiopian women's situation, to identify all actual and potential obstacles, and to conceive new and innovative ways of overcoming them.



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