Contribution of Civil Society Organizations to Women's Political Participation in Ethiopia: The Case of Amhara Women's Association

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Abstract

It is crucial that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) connect the government to the public and fill gaps in the policies of governments in a wide range of dimensions. They have been advocating for citizens' rights, including gender equality (GE), through lobbying government institutions and society, exposing government weaknesses, and promoting democratic values. Thus, this study assessed the experience of the Amhara Women's Association (AWA) and its contribution to enhancing women's political participation and gender equality. The study used a case study design and a qualitative research approach. Data was gathered from primary and secondary sources via key informant interviews and document analysis. The main data, which was largely gathered through interviews, was analysed using thematic analysis. The study included 18 key informants (the chairperson of the Amhara Women's Association, members and experts from BOWCYA, and CSOs). The result of the study shows that AWA seeks to play a vital role in promoting gender equality and democracy in the region. This is done by encouraging and empowering women to be active participants and beneficiaries of the country's leadership and democratization process. Despite this, the organization has faced several challenges such as its lack of independence, budgetary constraints, the overlap of duties and rights and government interference. Furthermore, it is crucial to increase the political commitment to empowering women to be active participants in politics. The goal is to enable CSOs to participate more effectively and efficiently by strengthening and/or establishing independent and autonomous organizations. Accordingly, a review of CSO law in 2019 opens up the political arena.

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1. Introduction

Civil society has been defined and interpreted in a variety of ways throughout history. The phrase "civil society" refers to a voluntarily founded associational sphere that exists between the state and the family to preserve or advance societies' interests or ideals (White, 2007). Civil societies groups, whether political, cultural, social, or economic in origin, are non-state, non-profit, and non-violent enterprises through which people collaborate to pursue common aims and beliefs outside of family and clan affiliations (Salamon, 1990; William, 2012). The members of such groups are supposed to be tolerant of differences, have a high level of mutual trust, and seek out compromises (Barron et al., 2001). CSOs comprise both formal and informal organizations governed by law, and work at all levels, from local to national, regional and global. Through CSOs, citizens may engage in policy debates, voice their thoughts and rights collectively, and hold authorities and other stakeholders accountable (ibid).

According to Diamond (1994), nothing has caught the interest of democratic scholars' more than civil society, especially during the third wave of global democracy. The resurgence of civil society/public space, the mobilization of all autonomous groups, and grassroots movements have all played a role in most democratic revolutions. Despite this, experts are debating the link between civic society and democracy. Tusalem (2007), in his study of "the role of civil society in the third and fourth waves of democracy", asserts that there is debate among scholars about whether civil society promotes democracy or democracy promotes civil society participation, as well as the relationship between civil society and institutional performance. And hence, civil society has taken a major place in today's globalization issues (Aart, 2001). For example, Tocqueville (1996) and Warren (2000) agree on the relevance of civil society in the promotion of democracy.

Tusalem (2007) also support this by mentioning its additional relevance in improving institutional performance, which in turn promotes democracy and a strong sense of civic-mindedness. On the other hand, some politicians who are dubious of civil society's influence think that civil society does not always advance democracy (Bermeo & Nords, 2000; Tarrow, 1996). Rather, it was usually characterized as a forum for debate and deliberation for association and institutional collaboration through involvement in a variety

of factors (Edwards, 2009). Civil society engagement in policy, lobbying, human rights protection, and budget procedures can take many forms. These forms include increased access to open data and statistics, as well as actively participating in democratization initiatives. Civil society debates throughout key strategic moments (e.g., planning, yearly reviews, and policy formation), as well as citizen participation in legal oversight bodies like parliamentary standing committees, are some examples. Participation in this process aims to provide public feedback on the ideas collected. Hence, by ensuring fair elections, preserving democracy from threats, influencing public policy, responding to social issues, and empowering citizens, civil society may play a role in the democratization process (Diamond, 1994).

The establishment and development of civic institutions are closely tied to the construction and development of a sustainable and stable democratic government system. This is also true of its growth and development. Civil society emerged in the 18th century, driven by political intellectuals like Thomas Paine and George Hegel, who described it as a domain separate from yet parallel to governments (Cerothers, 1999). Beginning from the enlightenment period of 18th century Europe, civil society has grown as an independent entity between the family and the feudal state (Wondwosen, 2009). Over the years civil societies have played a vital role in democratic consolidation and have contributed to democratization, responsible governance, socioeconomic advancement, and human rights advocacy. As a result, building civil society organizations was itself one of the paths to democracy (ibid).

Across the second half of the twentieth century, civil society organizations (CSOs) grew in the Global South. Humanitarian crises, perceived turmoil in international politics, the volatility of culturally diverse societies, globalization's acceleration, and nations' inability to care for their citizens and rule with legitimacy have all been mentioned as factors for the creation of CSOs (Yntiso, 2017). Civil society, which has historically represented a social order of citizenship, has a long history of inquiry, despite a lack of agreement on its definition across disciplines. Since the 1990s, the term "civil society" has been revitalized, the consensus has been established, and the phrase is now understood to refer to a location where social and economic activities are integrated (ibid).

Despite their growing importance, civil society organizations in developing countries are still inadequately understood. Even basic descriptive information on these institutions, such as their number, size, area of activity, revenue sources, and policy framework in which they operate, is difficult to come by. As a result, a comprehensive and representative understanding of civil society's role and importance, especially in developing nations, remains a critical gap in the literature (Ghaus, 2004).

For a public voice to be heard in an organized manner, civic space is crucial. This is because it has the greatest impact on the most vulnerable social groups, such as women. Women constitute more than half of the world's population, 51.2% in ANRS (CSA, 2009), and do two-thirds of all agricultural work, but they are mostly excluded from various systems for a number of reasons. Ethiopia is an example of a country that maintains women in subordinate leadership roles for different reasons such as discriminatory social norms followed by low levels of personal development and patriarchal political culture (Kassa, 2015). In addition, the undemocratic political culture in which the ruling party dominates almost all state activities and decisions affects women's equal representation and participation in politics (ibid).

Women are highly impacted by this, so the issue of women's political participation becomes an essential issue. In principle, there are several normative frameworks about human rights, including women's rights. For instance, all people are born with the same dignity and privileges. They are endowed with reason and integrity and should treat one another with brotherly love (UDHR, Art. 1). As a result, women have the same rights as men to participate in and profit from all aspects of life and should have a voice in all activities that influence their lives. UDHR (Art.2) guarantees all people access to political rights without discrimination based on gender or any other factor. Hence, all citizens have the right to participate in politics and public issues. An equal political right for women achieves not just gender equality, but also various long-term development goals (e.g., SDGs 5, 10 and 16). Furthermore, the equal engagement of women in politics is critical, not only for parity reasons but also for incorporating women's viewpoints, experiences, and interests into policy and decision-making, as well as for accomplishing positive improvements in democracy (GIZ, 2015). According to the UN Women's Annual Report 2012–2013, to achieve

democracy, "Any updated set of international goals should commit to ending violence against women and girls; they should be geared toward providing men and women with equal opportunities, resources, and responsibilities, and women must be able to participate equally in all aspects of life, from the home to the workplace to parliaments."

Ethiopia has progressed since 1991, with the media regaining credibility, professional associations re-forming, an increasing number of national and indigenous NGOs being officially registered with the government, and other organizations awaiting the recognition status offered through the registration process (Dessalegn, 2002). The rate of registration increased considerably further in 1999 (Clark, 2000), but space for civil society contribution has been shrinking, notably in the aftermath of the disputed 2005 election. Moreover, this election has led to a problematic civil society law (Proclamation No 621/2009). In the more recent Proclamation 1113/2019, participation of civil societies was once again allowed.

As a result, a critical analysis of the Amhara Women's Association's (AWA) contribution to political democratization within the context of the challenges of Ethiopia's civil society organizations provides practical evidence for those constraints regarding women's equal participation in politics and the contribution of civil society organizations to fill those gaps. Because, people require civic space to express and act on their interests and views, as well as to manage tensions and differences and find common ground. However, the global trend of shrinking civic space mutes citizens' voices and jeopardizes civil society groups' very existence (Freedom House, 2018). A lack of space[1] to speak out, organize, and take action has impeded democratic progress tremendously with the greatest impact on the most vulnerable populations, such as women. Hence, citizens, civil society actors, and their supporters must design a forceful and cohesive response to protect a common space for engagement, discussion, and action (Front Line Defenders, 2018), especially for voiceless citizens.

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[1]Civic space refers to the institutions, procedures, and legal instruments, as well as the removal of limits, that enable citizens to interact, organize, and act. This is outside the family, state, and market. For civil society to live and thrive, it needs civic space.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Although traditional and religious self-help groups have existed in Ethiopia for a long time, civil society in its current form is a relatively recent phenomenon (Sisay, 2002; Yntiso, 2017). While Ethiopia has a long history of mutual aid organizations and informal community groups, the official nonprofit sector has historically been weak and marred by conflict with the government (Clark, 2000). After Derg took control in 1974, whatever autonomy enjoyed by civil society during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign was severely curtailed. Almost all autonomous professional organizations and interest groups, including traditional associations in rural regions, were shut down or co-opted by state authorities except those specialized in offering emergency help and able to endure governmental persecution. The famines of the 1970s and 1980s, on the other hand, pushed the Derg leadership to open the door to international relief, resulting in an inflow of foreign NGOs that depended heavily on local partners to deliver humanitarian aid (ibid).

However, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia's (FDRE) Constitution of 1995 provides, among other things, everyone's freedom to associate for any cause or purpose (Art. 31). The Amhara Women's Association (AWA) was established in accordance with this constitution and Ethiopian Charity Law 2009 was registered by the Amhara regional state Administrative and Security Affairs Bureau on April 29, 2010, under Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 194/2012, Article 63. (1).

In a democracy, citizens' ability to establish groups for the purpose of pursuing a shared goal is a basic freedom that serves as the foundation for liberty, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law (Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 2004). Civil society comprises self-governing organizations that form a dense, diverse, and pluralistic network (Ghaus, 2004). Women's equality is guaranteed under the EDRE constitution of 1995; however, gender inequities persist, and women lack access to resources and participation at all levels. From rural women's capacity to attain food security to gender-based violence, which leaves them vulnerable to rape, kidnapping, forced marriage, and migration, to a lack of access to land, economic opportunities, and political engagement, these have an influence on women's lives. Besides, only a few women are aware of their legal rights, and law enforcement is still ineffective.

On a national level, the Network of Ethiopia Women Association (NEWA) was established in 2003 and re-registered in 2010 in accordance with Ethiopian charities and societies Proclamation 621/2009. Starting in 1998, it has collaborated with AWA on issues such as economic empowerment, social accountability, reproductive health, HTPs, violence against women and HIV/AIDS prevention, safe motherhood, gender equality, and women's land rights.

The AWA was established in May 1998 as a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental, and volunteer-based civic group and legally registered in 2010 visioning a society that values women's and girls' rights. Women from various social strata in the region, as well as Amhara women from other regions of the country, make up AWA's membership. Its mission is to support women's motivation to participate in and fight for equality in all aspects of life. This will enable them to benefit equally from the fruits of their labour in the end. In addition, they will be able to promote basic values and principles such as gender equity and equality, integrity, transparency, empowerment, fairness, democracy, and accountability.

In terms of its main objectives, it aims to improve women's and girls' economic capacity, empower women and girls in decision-making processes, gradually eliminate socio-cultural factors that prevent women and girls from participating equally in any regional development agenda, eradicate harmful traditional practices that harm women, children, and girls and empower women and girls in all socio-economic rights. AWA attempted to strengthen democracy among its members, but it was unable to act independently of politics. Most women's associations, at the regional level are government-led women's associations beyond their nomenclature such as Tigray Women's Association, Amhara Women's Association, and Oromo Women's Association, etc. have been influenced by the ruling party's interest (Merera, 2003) than for the independent benefit of their members. As a result, it is unfortunate that there are few women's CSOs in the country who can speak out on women's rights and are not independent of the government (EWLA, 2000). Although advocacy groups such as EWLA and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRCO) date back from after 1991, initiate gender discourse in Ethiopia, according to Bahru Zewde (2002), is still in its infancy.

Despite the fact that the aforementioned politicians emphasized the relevance and contentious issues surrounding civil society's involvement in the democratic process, they did not thoroughly examine civil society's experience in Ethiopia, particularly women's organizations. As a result,

this study was conducted to evaluate the practice of AWA as civil society in the enhancement of women's political participation for gender equality and consolidation of the democratic process in Ethiopia, utilizing ANRS as a case study in post-1991 political history.

1.2. Theoretical Framework(S)

This paper is guided by the liberal feminist theory embedding civil societies in its analysis of their views on civil society, particularly their role in democracy.

Liberal Feminism: Among the different types of feminist liberalism, classical-liberal feminism is referred to as it is used for a family of doctrines that range from libertarian feminist doctrines that endorse very restricted (if any) state power to doctrines that endorse more, yet still limited state power, largely unfettered markets, and an expansive understanding of individual rights. The doctrines in this family share the following. They conceive of freedom as freedom from coercive interference; they hold that women, as well as men, have a right to freedom from coercive interference due to their status as self-owners; and they hold that coercive state power is justified only to the extent necessary to protect the right to freedom from coercive interference. Feminists argue that empowering women individually and collectively to shift unequal power relations, unjust structures and institutions, to an instrumental idea focusing on individual rights reduces gender inequality (Batliwala, 2007).

Equity feminists believe that the state is the only morally significant source of oppression of women in societies such as the US. They hold that feminism's political role is to bring an end to laws that limit women's freedom in particular, but also to laws that grant special privileges to women. Some equity feminists see a nonpolitical role for feminism, helping women to benefit from their freedom by developing beneficial character traits or strategies for success. It may also involve navigating their increasing number of choices. Other equity feminists are socially conservative and argue that, while the state should not enforce them, traditional values function as bulwarks against state power and produce independent and self-restraining citizens (Kabeer, 1994).

Cultural libertarian feminists are classical-liberal feminists who assert that the culture of societies like the US is patriarchal and a significant source of oppression of women. They hold that patriarchal culture and the state are complementary systems of oppression. Cultural libertarian feminists hold that much of the oppression women suffer today is not coercive. However, it

should not be met with state remedies but with a nonviolent movement for feminist social change. The work of socialist feminists such as Heidi Hartmann focuses on women's economic issues, including comparable worth, family and medical leave, child care, welfare reform, and health care (Wildman, 2007).

Hence, liberal feminism can help theorize the freedom of women in democratic societies to participate in political leadership and contribute to the process of democratic and gender equality.

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach with a case study design. The information was gathered from both primary and secondary data sources. Purposive sampling was employed to choose respondents based on their experience, knowledge and access to information about the association. This was established during the sampling process, for interviews and secondary data were collected from various published and unpublished papers and reports. The major data collection tool used was an interview, which was used to gather primary data from 18 purposefully selected key informants (leaders from AWA and BoWCYA (six), members of the AWA (10) and from CSOs (two) who are assumed to have basic knowledge about the organization). In parallel to the interview, secondary data was compiled from (AWA and BoWCYA published and unpublished annual and quarterly reports, journal articles and working papers) collected during the second half of 2021. To analyze the data, all steps of thematic analysis were followed (Becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, thematizing and reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Experience of civil societies in Ethiopia in the process of democratization

Empirical evidence provided such as by Kassahun (2002) claims that despite the presence of several NGOs in Ethiopia, their impact on the establishment and consolidation of democratic norms has been relatively limited as "many governments in developing countries have a misconception of CSOs. Generally, CSOs are associated with opposition or maneuvering, especially in a systemic way when they criticize or expose the government's misdeeds or incompetence (Sisay, 2002). In contrast, recent observations have shown that a number of CSOs

are involved in the democratization process. This includes monitoring the democratic process, ensuring the rule of law, protecting human rights as well as ensuring fair elections. These include, for example, EHRCO, EWLA, and Chamber of Commerce. These organizations participate in ensuring the public has access to information about the programs and plans of action of the different parties. They also play a role in the development of a democratic culture, based on dialogue, accommodation and tolerance at the local level of administration (Sisay, 2002).

In recent times, Ethiopia's civil society played a critical role in the country's democratization process. One of the current events among many, in which civil society organizations got a chance to actively participate and contribute to the democratic process. This was the 6th National Election held in June 2021. According to expert interviews, civil society groups made a significant contribution to the electoral process by holding public forums, providing voter education training, and deploying domestic observers throughout the country during the aforementioned election. The first round NEBE report confirms this as it indicates roughly 52 CSOs participated in the national election based on NEBE recognition and state legislation (Ethiopia National Election Report, 2021).

3.2. Amhara Women's Association (AWA) experience as a civic organization

The FDRE Constitution (1995) and Ethiopian Charity Law 621/2009 permit any Ethiopian citizen to join any association, which is a basis for the formation of AWA. The population of the region was estimated to be 17,255,000 (8,658,000 male and 8,597,000 female) in 2007, from which 88% of the total population resides in rural areas. AWA is a membership-based organization that was founded in 1998 by a group of volunteer women who wanted to mobilize women to fight for social justice, equality, and fair treatment in the production and distribution of resources. Its goal is to address essential issues that women face in every aspect of their lives. This includes how to use technology, how to be active participants in government policies and initiatives, and so on. Through the agricultural center, the association encourages women to use loans to buy fertilizers and seeds; socially, it raises awareness about the vulnerability and control methods of human illness, such as HIV, AIDS, and TV, caused by early marriage; illegal migration and the negative aspects of human trafficking in general. The association works to

make people active participants in decisions through its motto "decision making from home to national and international levels". As a result, AWA fights for the rights of women in the region, in general, and members in particular because women are sidelined in many ways, males are in most aspects participants and benefactors, such as chairpersons of legal and social organizations such as Edir, Equb, and the decision-making process.

As a result, AWA, which is formed at each administrative level to address these and other women's issues, begins to put women in charge of decision-making in various institutions and organizations. Having developed decision-making experience at the administrative level, leaders of the Women's Associations eventually become leaders of political institutions on parallel levels. However, there is still a gap in appointing women based on their abilities; instead, they are assigned only as chairpersons of the Women, Children, and Youth office and, in some cases, women speakers on councils of people's representatives especially at Zonal and Woreda level (interview with AWA's member). Besides, in Ethiopian politics the ruling party, especially the executive body dominates and controls all government institutions, and the judiciaries are not independent in practice (Melakou, 2010).

3.3. AWA's contribution to the democratic process

Foreign-funded NGOs are imposed by legislation (Pro.621/2009) and are prohibited from promoting human rights and democratization, children's and disability rights, and the efficiency of justice and law enforcement services. This hinders their participation in legislative and policy changes. It is only Ethiopian Charities and Societies that are permitted to work on a broad range of national human rights issues, including the advancement of social, civil, and democratic rights; the promotion of equality among nations, nationalities, and peoples, as well as gender and religious equality; the promotion of disabled and children's rights; conflict resolution and reconciliation; and the improvement of the efficiency of the justice and law enforcement services. Hence, NGOs are unable to focus on human rights and advocacy and are instead restricted to development, care, relief, and rehabilitation. Due to the lack of and inaccessibility of domestic money or grants, locally sponsored human rights groups such as the EHRCO and EWLA, as well as a few regional women's associations such as the Amhara Women's Association, operate in a right-based manner to a limited extent.

Civil organizations are engaged in addressing public issues like poverty, illiteracy, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, environmental degradation, and the repercussions of unlawful people trafficking. For example, AWA's experience shows that they are involved in providing micro-credit programs for women, forming local women's networks and coalitions to encourage women's participation in governance, providing home care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA), fistula, and other problems caused by early marriage. The following are some of AWA's democratic practices.

Women's empowerment and civic education: AWA is involved in awareness-raising programs carried out through civic education dissemination; promoting principles, cultures, and values of democracy; enlightening the public about its constitutional rights, and so on, in order to ensure the realization of women's rights (especially poor and marginalized women's basic rights). More than 10,000 women become part of it (AWA's unpublished report, 2018). Because of tiresome household work burdens, illiteracy, lack of confidence and interest, and norms of patriarchy, most women in the region are not aware of their rights (Afro Barometre, 2021). As a result, with half the population unaware, it is impossible to achieve the democratic interests of the state and the world at large. Women's organizations are better at understanding and speaking loudly about women's rights than others (EWLA's Annual Report, 2001). Following this, AWA has been working to raise awareness and empower women in the region. For example, in collaboration with BoWCYA, more than 150 women took leadership training in 2021.

Assisting women in asserting their rights: AWA helps women, particularly impoverished and disadvantaged women (who have had their rights infringed), assert and realize their economic (especially land ownership concerns), social, cultural, and political rights. AWA also assists those women by developing cooperation with the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), which provides research-based free legal aid for more than 50 women per year in the region (EWLA, 2015). According to the program manager of AWA, the organization strives to solve challenges of discrimination against women and violations of women's rights at all levels of government, such as the rights of women who divorce their husbands to an equal share of their assets, including land in rural areas, and the rights of elderly women who are mistreated by the community and community elites and defraud their resources and livelihood assets. As a result, AWA is dedicated to achieving justice for the region's most vulnerable women.

*Advancing a free and democratic election process***:** In addition to holding public forums and providing voter education, CSO participation in the electoral process has encouraged and mobilized citizens to participate actively in the election. Only during the 2005 election and the 6th National Election in 2021 did civil society organizations play a significant role in Ethiopia. They have been active in election monitoring, civic education initiatives, and debates and forums between competing political parties. CSOs' engagement in this situation, particularly from 2009 to 2019, was confined to assisting in assuring fair and free elections. Apart from this, CSOs were limited in their ability to contribute to the development of a democratic culture based on dialogue, compromise, accommodation, and tolerance after Proclamation 621/2009 was enacted. This proclamation was revised in 2019. However, the amended CSO statute (Pro.1113/2019) allows for increased participation in the state's democratic process. In the 2005 election in ANRS, AWA, as one of the CSOs, played an instrumental role, particularly in partnership with the teachers' association. They contribute to increasing women's involvement in the area by encouraging women to participate in the election with 1:5 group arrangements. As AWA is not politically independent, it cannot do more for democratization. The association leaders at each administrative level are either political office holders or members of the EPRDF.

3.4. CSO's challenges to meet their organizational objectives

The first issue was reliance on donor financing, which is one of the primary issues listed in Musser's report (2014), Challenges Facing Civil Society Organizations in Africa. Civil societies are frequently challenged with a reliance on donor financing, which affects long-term sustainability, diverts attention away from their aims, and fosters a short-term fund-chasing approach. While the second key difficulty facing civil society in developing countries is the hostile legal environment. Governments are increasingly retaliating against civil society groups with harsh legislation, deeming them foreign-funded agents of opposition and trying to hinder their impact. Having democracy makes it easier for civil society to carry out its activities. However, not having it poses problems, particularly for those involved in lobbying, human rights concerns, and the democratization process. Ethiopia is notorious for its lack of democracy and democratization, as well as its inability to uphold constitutional rights. As a result, civil societies, including AWA, have become concerned about democracy.

Due to the government system's denial of independence and freedom of association, AWA is also challenged with autonomy and government intrusion. According to the chairperson of almost every association in the ANRS was directly or indirectly controlled by a political party since they were part of a regulatory circle. Leaders spend their time working for politicians rather than serving their purpose. Even most works of AWA are reported by BoWCYA and AWA lack concrete reports of each year independently. As a result, the image of associations was ruined, but the public, other than government officials, is still concerned about the country's present political situation.

The longstanding presence of deeply established negative traditional and customary behaviors, lack of personal development in education, technology, communication and information as well as the lack of equal opportunity, participation, and benefit for women to stride forward with their counterparts, are the reasons for Ethiopia's continued backwardness in all domains (unpublished strategic plan of AWA). There are some obstacles to women's rights that are difficult to overcome. Moving against difficulties in an organized manner was essential for women to come out of such development traps. The women of Amhara then agreed to join an association so that they might pool their resources together in order to address their common concerns (ibid).

The following are some of the most typical AWA challenges:

Governmental misunderstanding: The government in Ethiopia views the engagement of CSOs including AWA in the democratic process and promoting rights as political opposition or manipulation until 2019. To criticize or expose the government's faults or inefficiency is particularly valid. Due to lack of information on human rights, lack of self-confidence, lack of true democracy and even constitutionalism, as well as lack of the rule of law in the state, such misunderstanding has been obvious among local government employees at lower administrative levels. Because there is less accountability and transparency, which lead to prevalence of corruption, human rights are being infringed, and constitutional norms, particularly the rights of associations, are being violated by the government[2]. Therefore, the government misunderstands the role of civil society, including AWA. It is due to a fear that these tasks might be taken over by a thriving civil society. This difficulty has existed since the enactment of CHs legislation Pro.

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[2]Emphasis given by members of the association during the interview time

621/2009, until the amendment of the law following the political reform of 2019 and the enactment of revised law Pro.1113/2019.

Interference by the government in the activities of AWA: Prior to the 2018 political reform, the government occasionally interfered directly or indirectly in the operations of CSOs such as AWA or influenced their democratization projects. This makes it more challenging for them to make sound judgments and attain their objectives. In the ANRS, associations are formed based on the government's interests. It is entirely oriented by the government, and it serves as a vehicle to extend the government's influence. Any AWA action was construed politically. If there were missed methods by government leaders, they were immediately removed from their positions, and if this continued, the association would be banned entirely for unlawful reasons. The key issue that erodes members' faith in the organization and government is political independence and the government's use of force to achieve hegemony. Since the formation of the association, members have stated that the current chairpersons and members of the Board of Directors for the association at each level are elected officeholders[3]. This resulted in pending political change; the government interfered heavily in the work of the organization.

The election methods of the organization leaders were also mentioned as a frequent difficulty. The purpose of the assignment was not to enhance association practices, but rather to administer government interests in the name of the association by its members. These applicants lack appropriate ethics, educational capacity, and devotion, as well as those who see the association and leadership role as a stepping stone to a better job. Being a member of the ruling party earned one a leadership position rather than acceptance or qualification. Such leaders spend their time working for politicians rather than the organization's goals and are heavily influenced by politics.

Scarcity of resources: Apart from yearly donations from volunteers and proposals for programs to raise funds from other G/NGOs, Global Funds, and most likely WB, UNICEF, AWA has no formal source of revenue. There is now no major domestic (regional or national) financial support for AWA's work, and it is unrealistic to anticipate that this will change very soon. As a result of the shortage of resources and the effort to get operational financing from outside sources, AWA is vulnerable. There is little or no social history of supporting such groups, due to

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[3]For example in the present chairperson of the board is the vice-speaker of the regional council and all committees of the association in the region are top political office holders (almost all are cabinets)

lack of/misunderstanding of the association's job and the perception of it as a political rung of the government. This perception is a result of criticism, particularly from supporters of opposition parties. Hence, reliance on the government has a direct or indirect impact on the association's actions.

In general, various indices were used to analyze the contribution of civil society to the consolidation of democracy. Ensuring legitimate elections, safeguarding democracy, influencing public policy and responding to social interests/empowering individuals are some of these. Since AWA is not apolitical, none of these was done independently of the government. Leaders of the association were under no obligation to force their members and other women to vote for the current regime's party rather than standing for democratic elections. Additionally, the association cannot be protected from democratic threats because many of them are manufactured by the government. If an association tries to do so, members get penalized for some unknown reasons.

In order to influence public policy, AWA attempted to emphasize basic difficulties faced by women, such as land management, human trafficking, and child labor. It also contributed to amended proclamations that provide some relief for women. Land conflicts were a major cause of conflict in ANRS, which exposed women to be the most vulnerable in society, followed by children and the elderly without relatives. In this regard, when the regional government took substantial steps, (such as registering land in an electronic system and recruiting specialists in each local *kebele* administration) to safeguard vulnerable communities and solve problems, AWA was a key player in bringing about these changes.

3.5. Opportunities

The FDRE Constitution affirms women's equal rights with males in the political, social, economic, and cultural arenas in order to increase women's involvement. This opportunity enables women to have the right to participate in public affairs, both directly and through freely elected representatives; the right to vote and be elected to any level of government officials; and the right to join any political party, labor union, trade organization, employer, or professional association of their choice. Ethiopia's government has stated its commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in the constitution and national policies. The government stipulates

women's rights in its constitution, issues the national women's policy, and issues a National Action Plan for Gender Equality. This plan implements mainstreaming in Ethiopia and its regions at various levels. Following these constitutional provisions and other supplemental legislations; therefore, it is important to pave the way for AWA and other civil society organizations to realize their objectives in a legal and legitimate way in principle.

The present political climate in Ethiopia and its administration intends to reform all main government institutions and eliminate articles and clauses that protect the regime from critics and opponents. Ethiopia overturned its oppressive civil society law in 2019 and established new laws aimed at resolving past limits in the sector, among other things. Mainly, Ethiopia provides the potential to broaden the democratic space in contrast to where it was before the political opening that occurred in April 2018. In his inaugural address on April 3, 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed (PhD) emphasized the importance of democracy, freedom, and the rule of law in implementing the foundations of the state-society interaction, including peaceful and armed resistance. The network of legal and administrative directives, laws, and policy frameworks that are being scrutinized by independent and open-minded professionals in their disciplines is reassuring.

4. Conclusion and the way forward

Democracy entails public engagement in both policymaking and implementation, including participation by disadvantaged socioeconomic groups. A thriving civil society will play a part in this process, complementing and occasionally counteracting the state. CSOs guarantee that citizens have the ability to voice their opinions, engage in communication with policymakers and influence public policy through promoting and safeguarding civil rights. CSOs act as watchdogs of state performance by demanding accountability in the allocation and administration of state resources after policies have been chosen. CSOs can relieve the state's burden and decrease resource concentration by executing some of its governance duties.

However, there are measures that have demonstrated that civil society actors and their partners can both defend and benefit from narrowing civic space. Civic space can be protected, if not expanded if citizens are mobilized to defend their fundamental freedoms; if robust and diverse civil society actors form strong alliances; if the government shows the political will to provide

legal and political spaces; and if institutions uphold civic space norms and accountability while respecting and defending citizens' freedoms. Strong civil societies are more likely to have more political representation. This allows collective groups to resist unpopular state policies and put pressure on state institutions when they make mistakes. By now, it is obvious that democratic administration cannot succeed or emerge without the active and dedicated engagement of civic organizations.

Civic groups in Ethiopia are still in their infancy, necessitating concerted efforts in the future. It doesn't rule out the possibility of civil society bringing democracy to governments that are not democratic. Civil society can push the government to implement democracy in the state on behalf of the whole society through popular resentment and demonstration. In Ethiopia, popular protests during the previous two and three years have resulted in significant state reforms without changes to the leadership. This includes legislative and administrative improvements in democratic institutions. Hence AWA as a CSO have learnt to take the opportunity and play its part in bringing change towards democratization through devising strategies and promoting gender equality in the socio-economic and political system.

Any strategy to defend national security, create economic growth, maintain social peace, or develop democracy needs to include civic space as a key component. However, many leaders use these goals as an excuse to limit rather than increase civic space. In many cases, civil society's ability including AWA, to effectively protect civic space is hindered by poor accountability and transparency systems and a shift in the democratic narrative. AWA should be the voice of the voiceless by working to be independent and stand for women's rights.

Civil society actors, especially women's organizations like AWA, need to be engaged in transformative and feminist leadership that embodies the core principles and values of human rights, gender equality, participation, consultation, and respect for the dignity of all people; they must be inclusive and allow for leadership transformation.

Political violence, fierce persecution, and increased government control over social life make it impossible for independent women civil society organizations to emerge and function well. Hence, women CSOs such as AWA need to be encouraged by the political system of the government and strengthen programs and initiatives with a democratic system.

When institutions enjoy the complete support of civil societies, they are able to uphold the democratic government's principles through evaluating their goals and focusing their efforts and resources on establishing and sustaining their legitimacy and by being dynamic. In order to consolidate democracy, individuals should have the authority to examine and assess whether the government is pursuing the goals of liberty and equality in accordance with the rule of law. Hence, CSOs like AWA need to have laws and regulations that practically allow individuals to come together to promote volunteering and charitable donations on the one hand, and allow giving the democratization process and constitutionalization top priority for effective implementation of democratic ideals, on the other hand.

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