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A Hidden History: Women's Activism in Ethiopia

By Gemma Burgess¹

Abstract

In Ethiopia a woman's identity is linked to her family and the prescribed gender role as a mother and home-maker, yet throughout Ethiopia's history there are examples of women who have roles that extend beyond the home and family into public, political life. This paper briefly describes this dominant gender identity of Ethiopian women before charting the changes to Ethiopian politics and women's place within them. It discusses how the shift to democratic politics opened new spaces for women's civil society activism. However, more recent political moves towards greater repression of civil society have closed the space for women's public, political activism, leaving the future of women's public role in question.

Key Words: Women's activism, Ethiopia, hidden history

Introduction

Gender relations are always varied and constantly in flux, but there are almost always hegemonic notions of femininity² within particular cultural contexts which shape women's roles and relative positions³. Imbalances in gendered power resulting from ascribed roles and embedded power relations are maintained through everyday practice⁴, and, at their most extreme, maintained through gender related violence. But these power relations and hegemonic notions of femininity and women's place are always challenged and transformed by counter-hegemonic gender relations and behaviours.⁵

In Ethiopia, as demonstrated in this paper, women's place in the public, political sphere may be marginal but it is always present and has increased with changing political systems. As in many countries in Africa and Latin America, the transition to a democratic political system offered new spaces for women's activism in Ethiopia.⁶ This led to the emergence of new roles for women

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² Raewyn W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987)

Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*. (Vol. 1) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005)

³ Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999)

Gill Valentine, "Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography", *The Professional Geographer* 59: 1 (2007): 10–21.

⁴ Lynn Staeheli, Eleonore Kofman, Linda Peake, eds., *Mapping Women, Making Politics: Feminist Perspectives on Political Geography*. (Routledge: London, 2004).

⁵ Raewyn W. Connell, (2005). *Masculinities*. (Vol. 1) (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

⁶ Sonia E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton University Press: New Jersey 1990).

Nicki Craske and Maxine Molyneux, eds., *Gender and the Politics of Rights and Democracy in Latin America* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

in the public sphere, challenging to gender norms, but also shifting away from women's public roles as part of revolutionary, armed and oppositional struggle. Whilst this new space for alternative gender identities in civil society activism was largely urban, as in many other countries, it was significant and led to gender politics reaching the national political agenda, reflecting similar successes across Africa.⁷

The most prominent women's civil society organization, the Ethiopian Women Lawyer's Association (EWLA), used the human rights framework to challenge legislation which discriminated against women and to raise awareness of issues such as violence against women.⁸ However, political repression in Ethiopia has led to the closure of spaces for challenging and critical voices in civil society with direct targeting by the ruling party of civil society organizations, including EWLA. This has created an ambiguous future for women's public and political activism, which is tightly controlled from the centre.

Ethiopia is not a country that has figured very much in international research. Outside of the country, little is known about its political history. In particular, little is written about the place of women in Ethiopian political spheres and the emergence of women's activism in Ethiopia has not been greatly studied. Contributing to work on women's place in African political arenas, this paper outlines Ethiopian women's public and political roles and how they have changed over time in this relatively under researched nation. The contribution women have made to public life in Ethiopia is largely hidden. The paper shows how despite the hegemonic gender identity which places Ethiopian women in the private space of the home; women have participated in public life in different ways over time. However, it also analyses how women's public political roles have changed since the official shift to democratic politics. New spaces opened for civil society activism and women's rights activists began to take advantage of the change in political culture. But the paper also discusses how the opportunities for women's activism have diminished with the return to a more authoritarian and restrictive political culture by the ruling party. This hidden history provides an alternative political history to the male dominated historical narrative that prevails in accounts of Ethiopia's recent political changes.

This paper is based on research conducted in Ethiopia in 2005 which explored women's activism around rights issues, particularly in relation to violence against women. As part of the research, various documentary sources were collected and analysed. Interviews were conducted with members of different women's organizations in the capital Addis Ababa and with policy makers, politicians and members of government departments.

Jane Jaquette, ed., *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1994).

Shirin Rai, *The Gender Politics of Development: Essays in Hope and Despair* (Zed Books: London, 2008).

⁷ Aili Mari Tripp, Joy Kwesiga, Isabel Casimiro and Alice Mungwa, *African Women's Movements: Changing Political Landscapes* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009).

Aili Mari Tripp, "Women's Movements, Customary Law, and Land Rights in Africa: The Case of Uganda", *African Studies Quarterly* 7 :4 (2004):1-19.

Aili Mari Tripp, "Women's Movements and Challenges to Neopatrimonial Rule: preliminary observations from Africa", *Development and Change* 32 (2001): 33-54.

⁸ Gemma Burgess, "When the Personal becomes Political: Using Legal Reform to Combat Violence Against women in Ethiopia", *Gender, Place & Culture*, First published on: 10 June 2011 (iFirst).
Gemma Burgess, "The Uneven Geography of Participation in the Global Scale: Ethiopian Women Activists at the Global Periphery", *Globalizations* 8: 2 (2011): 163-178.

Gender Relations in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is the second-largest country in Africa, with an estimated population of nearly 79 million and growth rate of 2.6% per year it is one of the poorest countries in the world and ranks 141 in the Human Development Index.⁹ Maternal mortality is high at 673 deaths per 100,000 live births.¹⁰ The total fertility rate (births per woman) 2005-2010 is 5.4; female adult literacy 1997-2007 was 22.8% whilst male adult literacy was 50%. Violence against women in different guises is widespread and FGM is commonly practiced.

Whilst the hegemonic gender identity for Ethiopian women is linked closely to family and home,¹¹ there are many examples throughout Ethiopia's history not only of many nuances to this gender role, but of women whose identity extends beyond the family and home and into the public and political sphere.

Indigenous Groups

There are forms of localised, community-based associations through which women have tried to help each other in times of social and economic difficulties. The *maheber* (a religious association) is one such organisation formed often under the patronage of the local church. *Idir* are formed for mutual help: money is donated and given to those in need, especially on the occasion of a funeral in order to meet the costs involved. However, even community based associations such as these tend to be male-dominated. For example, according to 2004 data from the Addis Ababa City Administration, the presidents of 3567 *idir* are male, and only 54 female.

Imperial Ethiopia and the First National Women's Organizations

The emergence of women's organisations in the modern sense dates back to the early twentieth century. The first nation-wide organisation was the Ethiopian Women Welfare Association, set up in 1935.¹² The Association was founded under the patronage of Empress Menen with membership drawn mainly from the upper echelon of urban society in Addis Ababa. Its activities were limited mainly to raising funds and sponsoring projects for urban women.¹³ It was an organisation of elites and closely aligned to the state and in this sense it was similar to the

⁹ UNDP Country Reports: Ethiopia. 2009. [Online] Available:

http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_ETH.html

¹⁰ Karin Ringheim, Charles Teller, and Erin Sines, *Ethiopia at a Crossroads: Demography, Gender, and Development*. Population Reference Bureau. (2009) Available:

<http://www.prb.org/Publications/PolicyBriefs/ethiopiaccrossroads.aspx>

¹¹ Amith Ben-David, "Culture and Gender in Marital Therapy with Ethiopian Immigrants: A Conversation in Metaphors", *Contemporary Family Therapy* 15: 4 (1994): 327-339.

Donald Crummey, "Women and Landed Property in Gondarine Ethiopia", *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 14: 3 (1981): 444-465.

Allan Hoben, *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1975).

Susana Lastarria-Cornhiel, "Gender and Property rights: Impact of Privatization on Gender and Property rights in Africa", *World Development* 25: 8 (1997): 1317-1333.

Pauline Rose, and Samer Al-Samarrai, "Household Constraints on Schooling by Gender: Empirical Evidence from Ethiopia", *Comparative Education Review* 45 (2001): 36-63.

¹² Emebet Mulugeta, "Trajectories of Women/gender Issues and the Current Status of Gender Mainstreaming in Ethiopia" in Abiye Daniel, ed., *Gender Mainstreaming Experiences from Eastern and Southern Africa* (Organisation for Social Science Research in Easter and Southern Africa: Addis Ababa, 2010): 71-77.

¹³ Helen Pankhurst, *Gender, Development and Identity: an Ethiopian Study* (London: Zed Books, 1992).

formal women's organisations sometimes referred to as 'first lady' organisations found elsewhere in Africa.¹⁴ In 1953 the organisation was chartered and given legal recognition, and at this time it had forty branches throughout the country. Another women's organisation called the Armed Forces' Wives Association was formed in this era with the objective of providing support to widows and the children of soldiers who died in the war. The Ethiopian Young Women's Christian Association was also formed around the same time. These associations were formed to serve the interests of women from a particular sector of society, and they did not have either the capacity or the organisational structure to mobilise the majority of Ethiopian women. Their activities came to an end under the rule of the *Derg*¹⁵ when the regime nationalised all their property.

Military Socialism and the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association

In 1974, after a wave of civil unrest in Addis Ababa led by students, teachers and taxi drivers, power was seized by a 'Co-coordinating Committee' of the Provisional Military Government of Ethiopia (PMAC), also known as the *Derg*. What began as a popular revolution by the people degenerated into a coup by armed forces.¹⁶ On December 20th 1974, a socialist state was declared.¹⁷ Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam became Chairman of PMAC and Head of State. His rise to power came with the removal of the royal dynasty and the political aristocracy linked with the Empire, and also the execution of prominent members of the *Derg* who threatened his power.¹⁸ Thus Mengistu exercised autocratic rule, and the popular exercise of power soon gave way to personal dictatorship.¹⁹

After the institution of socialism, Worker's Parties in many socialist countries gave special attention to the question of women and took practical steps to involve them, and Ethiopia was no exception. Under the *Derg* there was a need to provide a channel for mass participation. In the countryside the Peasant Associations doubled up as territorial administrative units and as work-based units for mass participation.²⁰ In towns there were trade unions and professional associations. There was also a youth organisation, the Revolutionary Ethiopia Youth Association (REYA) for young people of both sexes. In both city and countryside there was a separate association for women. The Revolutionary Ethiopia Women's Association (REWA) was established on July 17, 1980.

REWA represented a more systematic engagement and organisation of women at the grassroots level than ever before. This was a large state organisation, with on paper almost 5 million members. The organisation contributed to the establishment of various development

¹⁴ Aili Mari Tripp, Joy Kwesiga, Isabel Casimiro and Alice Mungwa, *African Women's Movements: Changing Political Landscapes* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2009).

¹⁵ Emebet Mulugeta, "Trajectories of Women/gender Issues and the Current Status of Gender Mainstreaming in Ethiopia" in Abiye Daniel, ed., *Gender Mainstreaming Experiences from Eastern and Southern Africa* (Organisation for Social Science Research in Easter and Southern Africa: Addis Ababa, 2010): 71-77.

¹⁶ Kinfe Abraham, *Ethiopia from Bullets to the Ballot Box: the Bumpy Road to Democracy and the Political Economy of Transition* (The Red Sea Press Inc: New Jersey, 1994).

¹⁷ Edmund J. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia: from Empire to People's Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Kinfe Abraham, *Ethiopia from Bullets to the Ballot Box: the Bumpy Road to Democracy and the Political Economy of Transition* (The Red Sea Press Inc: New Jersey, 1994).

¹⁹ Bahru, Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang, eds., *Ethiopia – The Challenge of Democracy from Below* (Nordic Africa Institute: Norway, 2002).

²⁰ Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

projects such as handicrafts, retail shops, flour mills, and the expansion of kindergarten, aiming to produce a new generation with “revolutionary morale” (REWA 1982:24).

The *Derg* at least to a degree put women on the agenda, in the Constitution, and in jobs within its institutions, although not many women came to higher posts. One achievement was that it facilitated the spread of literacy campaigns to some people in the country. It has been argued, however, that the degree to which women benefited from the association was limited, as it separated them from mainstream political life.²¹ It has been argued that limited benefits were gained by women from REWA, either from the membership fees of 25 cents a month, or the other activities.²²

Initially REWA was welcomed; interviewees said that organising was considered a path to development. However, in interviews during the fieldwork and from written sources commenting on the organization, most agree that the association was abused. REWA organized women to serve government policies, many of which were suspect, oppressive and did not benefit women. From interview discussions during the research, it was suggested that one consequence of this appeared to be that some women are afraid to organize and were skeptical and suspicious of associations. REWA was regarded as a politicized organization, merely used to encompass women into the political structure and act as part of the mechanism for ensuring support, or at least preventing dissent, from the masses. Women in effect had little or no impact on government policies, laws and regulations.

Mengistu’s call in 1977 for a ‘Red Terror’ to combat what he referred to as the counter-revolutionaries was followed by some of the regime’s most repugnant acts of violence.²³ It is conservatively estimated that 100 000 educated Ethiopians were killed while several hundreds of thousands more were forced to flee the country.²⁴ Unlawful killing, torture, imprisonment, illegal searches, arbitrary arrest and general derogation from basic freedoms and liberties were common place throughout the reign of the *Derg* and with disregard for the due process of law, the *Derg* reigned for seventeen years during which time the country registered its worst human rights record.²⁵

Opposition Against the *Derg*: Women in Armed Struggle

The horrors of years of genocide, political repression, plunder and corruption under the *Derg* led to widespread opposition in different parts of the country. Long years of armed struggle ensued, and the call for a civilian government that could guarantee democratic rights became the beacon of this movement.²⁶ Opposition groups eventually united to form the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This armed force entered Addis Ababa in 1991 and the rule of the *Derg* came to an end.

Women in Ethiopia have not only been involved in organizations and different forms of peaceful activism, but also in active military organization. Approximately 3-4% of *Derg* soldiers were female and although women only formed a small percentage of the *Derg* army, because it

²¹ Ibid. Pp. 138.

²² Ibid. Pp. 139.

²³ Fred Halliday, and Maxine Molyneux, *The Ethiopian Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981).

²⁴ Kinfu Abraham, *Ethiopia from Bullets to the Ballot Box: the Bumpy Road to Democracy and the Political Economy of Transition* (The Red Sea Press Inc: New Jersey, 1994).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Siegfried Pausewang and Abebe Zegeye, eds., *Ethiopia in Change: Peasantry, Nationalism and Democracy* (London: British Academic Press, 1994).

was so large, between 13 350 and 17 800 women were demobilized at the end of the *Derg* regime.²⁷ In 1975, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was founded in opposition to Mengistu's *Derg* military dictatorship. Women members of what became the EPRDF were involved in the armed, political and propaganda struggle against the *Derg* regime. Combined opposition forces headed by the TPLF overthrew the *Derg* in 1991. One-third of the troops of the TPLF, some 40,000, were women.²⁸

There is therefore a strong history of women's involvement in Tigrayan military struggle and grassroots development practices when Tigray was an autonomous rebel-held area. Tigrayan forces have dominated in the current EPRDF government. It is possible that this initially created a political climate in which women's organisations are more acceptable.

Official Democracy: the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

As the opposition entered Addis Ababa in 1991, a shift to an officially democratic political structure began in Ethiopia. In July 1991, a transitional charter was endorsed at a national conference which gave the EPRDF-dominated legislature a four-year interim rule. They have remained in power since. The conference undertook to establish a multi-party electoral system. The charter expressed a broad commitment to democratic rights, including the rights of the different nations in Ethiopia to self-determination, up to and including secession should they wish it.²⁹ Socialist policies were abandoned. In 1992 economic reforms began, demarcated mainly along linguistic-ethnic lines.

In August 1995, the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) was proclaimed, a series of elections followed, and the Constitution of the second republic was inaugurated. The Constitution provides for the establishment of a federal state structure with federal, regional, and local governments, elected democratically by citizens. It also provides for the separation of legislative, judicial, and executive powers.³⁰ It has laid out basic democratic principles for the independence of the judiciary, for popular participation in government and for transparency and accountability in its activities. The new Ethiopian Constitution is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and officially gives full recognition to the rights and liberties of people and individuals.³¹

Soon after the downfall of the *Derg* in 1991 the Transitional Government of Ethiopia was introduced with a new political and socio-economic orientation. This new government endorsed a National Policy on women and set up a structure of Women's Affairs Offices (WAO). The WAO at the highest level is affiliated to the Prime Minister's Office. There are WAO within each government department at federal level. In addition, the decentralized state has also allowed the establishment of regional women's bureau and has given them a constitutional mandate. However, like the government-led initiatives under the *Derg* discussed above, the Women's Affairs Offices were not regarded by activists interviewed in this research as being particularly effective. They

²⁷ Angela Veale "From Child-Soldier to Ex-Fighter: Female Fighters, Demobilisation and Reintegration in Ethiopia" ISN Monograph Series No. 85 (2003).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jenny Hammond, 1999. *Fire from the Ashes: A Chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991*. The Red Sea Press Inc.

³⁰ Biseswar Ashagrey. 2004. Laws on Gender: A Review of the Constitution, National Women's Policy and International Conventions. *Reflections* 10: 9-21.

³¹ Jenny Hammond, *Fire from the Ashes: A Chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975-1991* (The Red Sea Press Inc: New Jersey, 1999).

were described as lacking sufficient or qualified staff with inadequate budgets and resources, sometimes struggling to even obtain office space and facilities. They were described by women activists who were interviewed as little more than a token gesture towards the consideration of women within the EPRDF's political and institutional structure.

Women's Civil Society Organizations in the FDRE

Since the transition to an officially democratic political regime, a number of women's civil society organizations have emerged in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) was the first and most well-known of these groups. Others include the Addis Ababa Women's Association (AWA), the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA) which has twenty member organizations, and the Organization Against Gender-Based Violence.

In considering what constitutes a women's movement, some are easily identifiable as movements, with clear leadership, membership and political programmes, whilst others are more diffuse forms of political activity and Molyneux concludes that:

To speak of a movement, then, implies a social or political phenomenon of some significance, that significance being given both by its numerical strength but also by its capacity to effect change in some way or another, whether this is expressed in legal cultural, social or political terms. A women's movement does not have to have a single organizational expression, and may be characterised by a diversity of interests, forms of expression and spatial location.³²

It is argued here that the Ethiopian case can be referred to as a women's movement, albeit one that is in its infancy and still emerging. Whilst it is a movement of a relatively small number of organizations and activists, it is a significant sector of the developing Ethiopian civil society. The next section introduces EWLA, Ethiopia's first civil society group.

The Ethiopian Women Lawyer's Association (EWLA)

EWLA is a non-profit making advocacy group founded by a group of women lawyers in 1995 to defend women's rights through the legal system, to raise public awareness about the plight of women, and to work for reforms promoting gender equality. Membership has been extended to women and men in other professions beyond the legal field, and there are around 300 professional members. Based with its headquarters in Addis Ababa, EWLA also has six branch offices at regional level. The stated mission of EWLA is:

The promotion of the economic, political, social rights of women and to that end to assist them to secure in particular full protection of their rights under the FDRE Constitution and the relevant human right conventions. (*Dimtsachen* April-June 2004³³)

³² Maxine Molyneux, *Women's Movements in International Perspective: Latin America and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 144

³³ A EWLA publication.

EWLA is a legal organization, but its aims are explicitly related to women's rights. EWLA's three key areas of activity are research and law reform advocacy, legal aid services, and public education. As one member explained:

There is so much that we do. EWLA presents papers, does research, legal aid, goes to court, so much work. Not just in Addis but the regional offices also really do a very good job. They do so well that they are considered as stakeholders in other issues, they are summoned everywhere. When the regional family laws were made in Amhara, the South and Oromia, especially in the South and Amhara they participated and did good work. The regional offices have their own magazines, they write about the issues that affect them around there. Lobbying, research; training, going to court, EWLA does it all.³⁴

EWLA has a whole range of activities and work with many different groups. Not only do members provide legal aid to poor women and conduct research, but they also work on awareness-raising through various training initiatives as part of their efforts to educate different groups about violence and women's rights. A EWLA member and former chairwoman of the organization recounted one such project:

EWLA works closely with the government, for example on violence against women with the police. During my time at EWLA I set up the police focal women initiative in Addis Ababa. In each police station, after convincing the high level officials, 20 women from each sub-city were chosen and given 15 days training, on the constitution, legal rights etc. Then they were assigned to a police station. The idea is that victims get better treatment. We hold monthly meetings with the women to review and to see if they have managed to convince their bosses about the importance of gender. In part it is capacity building as it is good for victims but also raises the awareness of the police.³⁵

Various members of EWLA have been awarded prizes for the work they carry out. The previous Executive Directress, Meaza Ashenafi, won the 2003 Hunger Project African Leadership Prize. The Hunger Project awarding committee said:

Mrs. Meaza Ashenafi's organisation has led the change for women's rights across the political spectrum and across the nation. She has championed women's rights in the areas of domestic violence, sexual abuse, family law, economic and land rights. (*Dimtsachen* 2004: 14).

EWLA has been the most significant civil society actor involved in pressing for legal change. Since its establishment, EWLA has commissioned thirteen pieces of research covering most of the laws that affect women and their rights. Under the research and law reform advocacy programme, EWLA conducted an inventory of laws that discriminated against women in light of the Constitution and other human rights conventions to which Ethiopia is party.

³⁴ Interview with EWLA Member A, 2005.

³⁵ Interview with EWLA Member B, 2005.

Research by EWLA focused on issues such as 'Harmful Traditional Practices' (HTPs), and the implications of the federal revised Family Law on the rights of women. EWLA submitted a draft amendment of the Family Law to the federal and regional legislative bodies in 1996, but it was not until July 2000 that a new Family Law was finally enacted. Dessalegn Rahmato, in his 2002 article, "Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia" has noted that, "While the organization did not succeed in getting all its recommendations accepted by Parliament, the new law that was passed by the legislature provides significant improvements for women on the earlier one."³⁶ Many interviewees commented that it is to the credit of EWLA that the reform of the Family Law became a public issue and that the government felt compelled to revisit the legislation.³⁷ EWLA also played a key role in getting the revision of the Penal Code onto the political agenda through their lobbying and awareness-raising.

In collaboration with the Network of Ethiopian Women's Associations (NEWA), EWLA produced the first ever Shadow Report on government compliance with CEDAW. The Shadow Report was produced to provide an alternative source of information and evaluation to the UN monitoring committee. EWLA wanted to be able to use the report itself for advocacy and awareness-raising activities, and to alert the government on areas of discrepancy in compliance that needed to be addressed before the next reporting period.

One of EWLA's central activities is the legal aid programme. It provides a wide variety of legal advice and counselling to women, including court representation by EWLA lawyers working on a voluntary basis. The service is offered free of charge. Most of the women EWLA helps are from poor and disadvantaged social backgrounds. Many of the women who came seeking EWLA heard about the organization either through EWLA's public education programme transmitted over the broadcast media, through word-of-mouth, or through the organization's advertising campaign.³⁸

In commenting on what they perceive as EWLA's most significant achievements, members posited that revision of various laws has been a real success. Although most highlighted this as a key achievement, they also pointed out that all aspects of the organization's work were important and linked together. For example one former leader of the organization said:

Our biggest success has been the revision of laws, especially the family and penal laws. However all work of the organisation contributes, the advocacy, the research on violence against women. For example the legal aid is where we discover the problems in the first place. Also the legal aid has changed the lives of the women and has concrete results. But it doesn't change the root cause of the problem. Having good laws and being able to enforce them is most important. We work at different levels, at the policy level, with leaders, with different groups.³⁹

Through their efforts, legal reforms have come onto the agenda and been implemented. Members made the voicing of concerns for women an acceptable political activity. Through their encouragement, organizational and financial assistance, other organizations focusing on issues relating to women have been established. One EWLA member and lawyer pointed out the way EWLA stands out above other groups:

³⁶ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia." In *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, edited by Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang. (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. 2002): 112.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dessalegn Rahmato, "Civil Society Organizations in Ethiopia." In *Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below*, edited by Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang. (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet. 2002): 111.

³⁹ Interview with EWLA Member C, 2005.

The difference between EWLA and other organizations is that EWLA are highly visible, highly public, very passionate, and very vocal in speaking about women. And things such as violence are given a human face because we do legal aid, we even present the women themselves, on TV or on radio they speak about violence and we use that to stir up society. And we have branches in other parts of the country, we have committees in various parts of country, we do research, we do public work and education, we do legal aid so we are highly visible, highly publicised, very vocal and passionate.⁴⁰

The development of EWLA shows how the transition to democratic politics opened spaces for civil society activism to emerge. This led to new actors being able to engage in the nascent Ethiopian civil society, and this group of women were at the forefront of this shift. The new political arena, with a commitment to democracy and a Constitution based around universal human rights, gave these women a platform for the first time to engage in rights based activism. The new political context gave them both space and legitimacy for their work on women's rights and legal change.

However, more recently the Ethiopian political context has changed again, with a shift away from democratic reforms to a more restrictive and authoritarian political culture. This has had profound effects on EWLA and their ability to continue their work. As party political opposition has developed and begun to threaten the long term ruling party's hold on power, the space for civil society activism has been narrowed. What is interesting is that one area of civil society activism that has been heavily restricted by new legislation is women's rights activism. The work of EWLA is no longer seen as an acceptable civil society activity, but has been repositioned as a political threat.

Ethiopian Democracy Today

The EPRDF have now been in power for over a decade and observations have been made of how the ruling powers have put democracy into practice. It seems that the new regime has not lived up to its promises:

Political reality and the fear of losing power continue to override idealism in a country bereft of human resources, government infrastructure, communications, and political will. Even if the latter were firmly in place, the central and national bureaucracies and the police can, and do, find many ways to defeat constitutional restraints; perhaps because the EPRDF sponsors a parallel system of governance through party activists, for whom retention of state power takes precedence over the rule of law. There is thus a major contradiction between the EPRDF's rhetoric of democracy and constitutionalism and its actions.⁴¹

The elections of May 2000 were the first fully contested elections that the country had experienced. Reflecting on the research findings of the team who monitored the election process:

⁴⁰ Interview with EWLA Member D, 2005.

⁴¹ Harold G. Marcus, *A history of Ethiopia: Updated Edition* (California: California University Press, 2002): 243.

To those accustomed to the uninflected authoritarianism that has been Ethiopia's fate in the past, it may well seem remarkable that they could have taken place at all... To those accustomed to states, even in Africa, with better recent traditions of electoral democracy, they fall so far short of the standard required as to amount to little more than a travesty.⁴²

In May 2005 (during one period of the fieldwork for this research), further national elections were held, this time contested by stronger opposition parties than in 2000. The elections of 2005 were an opportunity for direct political action and open opposition to the government. Whilst there were constant accusations by opposition parties of undemocratic practice by the ruling EPRDF, it was undeniable that significant changes were made. Opposition members were permitted to air their views on television, political debates between party members were broadcast on TV and radio. Posters were produced, broadcasting made through the streets, and the opposition party sign of fingers held up in a 'V' sign became a common greeting on the streets of Addis. As the elections approached, public rallying became more intense. Just before the elections, two public rallies were held in Meskel Square, one day for the EPRDF, another for the opposition. Despite up to a reported 4 million people turning up for the opposition party rally, it passed peacefully, with a large police presence but without curtailment. The sense of optimism and hope for democracy before the elections was tangible.

However, since the 2005 national elections, the situation has been very different. Almost immediately after the voting PM Meles Zenawi passed a ban on all public gathering and demonstrating. The EPRDF claimed an immediate victory, despite counting of votes not having finished. It was apparent that the region of Addis had been lost to the opposition, as had many other major urban areas. There began to be an outcry about the government's response to the election results. Heavy-handed response by government forces to the public protest that followed the elections left several people dead and hundreds rounded up, arrested and detained,. Although the government acknowledged that the opposition had won over one hundred seats in parliament, it was largely felt by the opposition and their supporters that they had been cheated of victory in a highly undemocratic way. Western donors threatened to withhold \$375m in direct aid to the Ethiopian government, as eighty Ethiopian journalists and opposition leaders appeared in court. In January 2006, Human Rights Watch reported that the Ethiopian government was still violently suppressing any form of protest and punishing suspected opposition supporters, particularly in rural areas out of sight of international observers. The unrest continued long after the May 2005 elections.⁴³ Thirty five members of the opposition who were arrested just after the elections accused of trying to overthrow the government were sentenced to life imprisonment in July 2007 although the prosecution attempted to have the sentence increased to execution. One conclusion drawn from analysis of the elections was that:

Ethiopian political culture is not yet free from its historical heritage of authoritarianism, elite rule, and patronage.... The political system has been reconstituted anew as one of neo-patrimonial governance reverting to old modes

⁴² Christopher Clapham, in Pausewang, Siegfried, Kjetil Tronvoll, Lovise Aalen, eds., *Ethiopia since the Derg: A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance* (London: Zed Books, 2002): xvii

⁴³ Jon Abbink, "Interpreting Ethiopian Elections in their Context – A reply to Tobias Hagmann", *African Affairs* September (2006): 613-620.

and techniques of control and an ideology of power as a commodity possessed by a new elite at the centre.⁴⁴

This shift back towards a repressive political regime has had consequences for civil society organizations, including women's organizations.⁴⁵ A new law was passed, the Proclamation for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies, which classifies civil society organisations (CSOs) whose contributions from abroad make up more than 10 per cent of their budget as 'international' NGOs. The law identifies areas such NGOs cannot work on, one of them being gender. This places EWLA in a very precarious position. EWLA's funds raised during the grace period given for societies and charities to reregister according to the Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009 were confiscated. EWLA's request to the Federal High Court Eleventh Civil Bench to release 8.6 million Birr that is being blocked by the Ethiopian Charities & Societies Agency (ECSA) Board was denied on October 28, 2011.⁴⁶ In 2010, the Director of EWLA fled Ethiopia due to fear of government retaliation after she opposed the CSO law and gave evidence to the US State Department's 2008 Human Rights Report on Ethiopia.⁴⁷

Women's civil society organisations, with EWLA being the most prominent, have clearly been targeted by this new restrictive legislation. Unlike groups which had developed into party political opposition groups targeted by the new repressive law, EWLA made no claims for engagement in party politics. However, the group has been repositioned as a political threat by the ruling party, perhaps for its outspoken critique of existing legislation and questioning of the ruling regime's commitment to the protection of women's rights which has gained an international profile.

In a country with a strong traditional, patriarchal culture, the members of EWLA transformed women's engagement in the public sphere. Whilst this was building on a longer history of women's involvement in public life, albeit quite minimal, there was a significant change with the advent of officially democratic politics. The opening up of political space for civil society activism and the voices of others outside of the ruling regime created opportunities for a new type of activism based around rights that women were able and willing to take advantage of. But in doing so they eventually became redesignated as political actors by the ruling party and perceived differently as a political threat. In the shift back away from democratic politics, EWLA became part of the perceived challenge of opposition party politics. The response from the ruling regime has been to once again close the space for civil society activism and the rights based work undertaken by the organisation.

This paper has traced out the little told history of women's political activism in Ethiopia. Despite hegemonic gender discourses which place Ethiopian women in the private sphere of the home, there is a long history of women's presence in the public, political sphere. More recently, the transition to a democratic political regime opened new spaces for women's political activism and organizations to flourish, providing the opportunity for organizations such as EWLA to emerge, challenging dominant gender roles and relations. However, after a new period of political repression, this space for women in the public sphere of Ethiopian civil society has been closed. It is not clear what the future holds from women's public, political activism in Ethiopia.

⁴⁴ Ibid.: 194.

⁴⁵ Gemma Burgess, "The Uneven Geography of Participation in the Global Scale: Ethiopian Women Activists at the Global Periphery", *Globalizations* 8:2 (2011): 163-178.

⁴⁶ Eden Sahle, "Woyanne Confiscates 8.6 million Birr from Ethiopian Lawyers Group", *EthiopianReview.com* | November 16th (2011) <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/articles/36378>

⁴⁷ Ibid.