



The challenges and societal consequences of increased female participation at Ethiopian public universities



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ABSTRACT

Ethiopia, while one of the world’s poorest countries, has one of the world’s fastest developing economies. In the last two decades the government has imparted on a public university development programme which has seen 29 new universities built all over the country. This rapid development is often criticised for sacrificing quality for quantity, but has had a notable success in bringing many more Ethiopian women into higher education. The traditional patriarchal nature of Ethiopian society has sometimes struggled to cope with the changes and challenges that are being brought about by an increasingly educated female population. Through key informant analysis of the opinions of 14 experts on Ethiopian development and education this article looks at some of the major changes and challenges that universities are bringing about for female Ethiopians and asks what are the emerging consequences of increased university participation for the lives of Ethiopian women.

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1. Introduction: Ethiopian development, public university expansion and gender equality

Over the last decade Ethiopia’s economic outlook has turned around from being one of the most chronically depressed to one of the fastest growing in the world. The economy has experienced strong and broad based growth over the past decade, averaging 10.6% per year from 2004/05–2011/12 (World Bank, 2013). According to the African Development Bank Group, Ethiopia had the twelfth fastest growing economy in the world in 2013 and its economy grew by 9.7% for the fiscal year 2012/2013 – marking the tenth year in a row of robust growth (AFDB, 2014). The African Lion, as it has come to be known, is now home to Africa’s fastest growing rate of millionaires (Guardian, 2013) and the economic prospects for the country seem set to improve further as foreign investment and development aid from all over the world floods into the continent’s second most populated country (O’Keeffe, 2016).

Ethiopia’s development success is premised on the government’s Agriculture Led Industrialisation Initiative (ADLI) strategy, which aims to use agriculture as the main driving force behind its ambitious economic development plans to turn Ethiopia into a middle income level country by 2025. With 85% of the population living in rural areas and depending on agriculture for their

livelihoods, the agricultural sector accounts for more than 40% of national GDP, 90% of exports, and provides basic needs and income to more than 90% of the poor (OECD, 2010). The ADLI first came to prominence in the Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government’s development strategy in 1994 (OECD, 2010). The ADLI was further rationalised as a strategy for development in the 2002/03–2004/05 Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP). This programme encompassed a broad strategy between the government and donors to increase human development, food security and capacity building. The Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP) carried forward this strategy in the years 2005/06–2009/2010 and placed a greater emphasis on growth in the economy, with a particular emphasis on greater commercialization of agriculture and enhancing private sector development, industry, urban development and a scaling-up of efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (MoFED, 2006). The government strategy for 2010/11–2014/15 further built on the successes of the two previous strategies in the form of the Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) and emphasized the importance of promoting rapid and broad-based economic growth through seven strategic objectives:

- Sustaining equitable economic growth;
- Maintaining growth focused on agriculture and rural areas;
- Developing industry;
- Expanding infrastructure;

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- Enhancing the expansion and quality of social development;
- Building capacity and promoting good governance;
- Promoting empowerment of women and young people (IFAD, 2014).

Central to the government's ADLI plans is the utilisation of higher education to modernise agriculture. As such, over the last two decades the EPRDF has embarked on a rapid expansion of the public university system. This expansion has seen the construction of 29 new public universities across the country, bringing the total number of institutions in the country to 31. Public university expansion has become a symbol of the government's development endeavours, bringing many thousands of people into higher education and opening up many new possibilities for education to contribute to the country's development. In 2010/2011 the public university system was educating approximately 385 000 students (Van Deuren, 2013) with projected estimates from the Ministry of Education putting the current figure in excess of 512 000 (Ministry of Education, 2014). This represents an 800% increase from the 1994 figure when just 9000 new students were enrolling annually at Ethiopian public universities (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Out of the 512,000 students enrolled at Ethiopian public universities, 73.8% are male and 26.2% are female students (Ministry of Education, 2014). This gender imbalance, while stark, is a marked improvement from 2000/2001 when only 14.7% of students enrolled in public universities were female (Tamrat, 2015). While there is a need to improve current gender parity rates, efforts are being made through affirmative action programmes that bring more females into the public university system, placing greater emphasis on female participation at the secondary level and some efforts to lower female attrition rates through pastoral care programmes. The greater emphasis on female participation at Ethiopian universities over the last two decades is slowly bringing about changes in the social roles that female Ethiopians play. In this article I aim to assess the main changes and illuminate their consequences for Ethiopian society.

2. Liberal feminism, higher education and improving the lives of women in Ethiopia

This article draws on the liberal feminist perspective¹ to look at the role of universities in influencing gender equality in Ethiopia and aims to assess the impact of these changes on the lives of women in the country. Primarily, the liberal feminist perspective is the guiding theoretical approach taken as it forms the ideological backbone of the Women in Development (WID) concept approach which has long been the mainstay of equality initiatives taken by international development organisations². While there is much debate on western liberal feminist perspectives representing white western women and not taking into account developing world realities and being too North American/Eurocentric in its thinking (Devetak et al., 2012), it is beyond the scope of this article to address this debate. In addition, liberal feminism has been the most influential in terms of informing the development initiatives (thus far) that encourage and finance Ethiopian development. For

example, Gender Mainstreaming, which draws heavily on liberal feminism and seeks gender equality and empowerment, has become integral to the majority of development organisational policies (Karakoulaki, 2012) and is particularly influential on development initiatives in Ethiopia where the majority of development funding comes from the EU, United Kingdom and United States³.

In general, liberal feminist perspectives see an educational need to strive for equal opportunities and to overcome sexual socialisation and discrimination. Liberal feminist perspectives contend that discrimination against women is fundamentally unfair and that equality for women is in keeping with a just society's need to foster human rights and the ability for individuals to exercise autonomy and self-fulfilment (Tong, 2009). According to this perspective systematic barriers in patriarchal societies reduce women's participation (Withworth, 1994) in the public space in everything from government to education and have a negative impact on women's ability to exercise autonomy and self-fulfilment. Education, long recognised as a key to economic and social development, is central to the quest for greater gender equality world over and in developing countries in particular.

Despite the many obvious barriers that exist to full equality for women in the west, and indeed the many 'hidden' curriculae (Heaton and Lawson, 1996) in education systems that may serve to socialise and entrench gender roles, equality of opportunity in accessing education, and more pertinent to this article in higher education, is one success that has been realised in the west. The OECD estimates that the proportion of women who hold a university-level qualification now equals or exceeds that of men. On average, 59% of all graduates in OECD countries who held a first university degree in 2009 are women; this proportion is below 50% only in China, Japan, Korea and Turkey (OECD, 2012). The successes of achieving access to education in the west are unfortunately not mirrored in the rest of the world. Evidently women in developing countries, while efforts are being made to increase their education participation, still lag far behind the experience of females in the west.

Equality of access to education is fundamental to the future improved prospects of humanity. The systematic denial of basic education rights to females in developing countries is just one of the many ways in which women and girls are held back. In 1990 Amartya Sen wrote in the *New York Review of Books* about the phenomenon of 'missing women' when describing the fact that the proportion of women in Sub-Saharan Africa is lower than what would be expected if women and girls were to die at the same rate as boys and men (Sen, 1990). A decade later the World Bank put the figure of 'missing women' at 6 million for the region, meaning that 6 million more women and girls die disproportionately than men and boys (World Development Report, 2012). It is estimated that 23% of these 'missing' women and girls are never born, 10% die in early childhood, 21% die during their reproductive years and 38% die after the age of 60 (Duflo, 2012). The 'missing women' phenomenon, as glaring as it is, serves to remind us that the women who are not 'missing' are treated very differently from men and boys and lag far behind in the social, economic, educational and political status of their brothers (Duflo, 2012). From the liberal feminist perspective this has its roots in poverty as women have less access to financial resources (Galston and Hoffenberg, 2010) and addressing the lack of equal opportunities, socialisation and

¹ Although there is no one definitive definition of liberal feminism, my working definition for this article is the belief, as which applies particularly to women in a patriarchal society, in individual equality and that everyone should be allowed to live as they choose.

² WID is a development approach that emerged in the 1970s from liberal feminist ideology. It has been highly influential in Western Development Aid initiatives and aims to achieve empowerment and gender equality by paying more attention to 'women's' issues in development.

³ The United States, the United Kingdom and the EU are the three top ODA donors to Ethiopia contributing USD (M) 791, 480 and 221 respectively in 2011.

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