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NOTES ON WOMEN'S VISION, WOMEN'S MOVEMENT
AND THE FOOD

THE CASE OF ETHIOPIA

BY

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INTRODUCTION:

This paper treats Women's Vision, Women's Movement and the Food separately.

Issues like improved quality of life for women is given emphasis. The reason for such emphasis is that the whole objective of women's vision is improved life for the women both in rural and urban sector of the country.

The issue of women's movement of pre and post revolution period is examined. When discussing this issue the various mass organizations and the contribution and effects of them towards improvement of the Status of Women have been looked into.

The food and the food shortage problems as well as the definitions of famine, malnutrition or foodshortage are given. In addition, some points that contributes to foodshortage is examined.

Lastly, recommendations and suggestions are included in this paper.

WOMEN'S VISION

Women account nearly half of Ethiopian population. The existing census indicates that there are 22,960,290 women in the country of which almost 85% of them reside in the rural and 15% in the urban sector of the country.

Giving the necessary attention to this big group and providing them with the necessary services is the vision of all women concerned. It is also the wish of the enlightened group that the education, societal and economical life of all women in their respective countries is gaining the attention of the government organ as well as other policy making institutions. This has been the wish of all Ethiopia's educated people in general and the educated women in particular.

During the pre-1974 period, Ethiopian women did not have a forum to express their feelings. In fact, most women were mostly housewives who were not supposed to come out in public and give their voice. In Rural Ethiopia, the women, in addition, to their responsibility in the house, they are to work in the farm. This dual responsibility affects the women's health particularly if the women are pregnant. Thus the death rate is twenty per thousand.

Because conditions of life in the rural Ethiopia is not conducive, the women usually migrate to the urban sector where they assume their life would be easier than that in the country side. However, the urban sector would easily absorb those who have some sort of skill to sell. Since in many instances the rural women do not have any skill to sell, they resort to prostitution and house servants.

Both rural and urban women suffer from male assault and were treated like commodities.

The other neglected area was the labour input in agriculture. Women's labour in agriculture has never been paid and this had

kept the women to become subordinate to men economically.

Because women in Ethiopia did not have any kind of association, except those cultural ones, they have not been in a position to demand the services they lack in their areas nor were they to comment on improvements and expansions of the small existing services.

WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

During the past regime, there were only two women association in the country. These were Ethiopian Women's Welfare Association and Military Wives Association. The first association was raising funds to help the aged and the young and the second association was running a small boarding school in which children whose parents were in the service and were deceased during the boarder conflicts were admitted as students. Other than these two associations the rest are either traditional religious or societal associations.

Ethiopian women did not have an Association of their own at any level. But after the 1974 revolution, "Women have been in the "active vocabulary of people"... The proclamation which established the Revolutionary Ethiopian Women's Association (REWA) in 1981, had made women more "visible" than before". (Alasebu Gebreselassie 1984 p.114).

Quite a number of improvements have been identified. Thus it is necessary to examine some of the steps taken by the government to improve the women status in the country, after 1974.

Status of Women Post-1974.

Politically women were given full right to participate in peasant association. This right includes ownership of land per proclamation of 1974. This had alleviated the status of women enabling them to share equality with their male counterparts.

During the pre-1974 period women labour was unpaid but now they are enjoying "equal pay for equal work."

Membership to REWA is open to women in both rural and urban sectors of the country. This establishment does not only give women the right to be members but also to exercise leadership role in their associations.

The education policy that gave the "right of free education for all" also contributed a lot to the rural people. This policy was followed by the literacy campaign programme where a large number of high school students began teaching both men and women in rural as well as in urban Ethiopia (Legesse Lemma, 1984).

Educating society as a whole is one of the most important steps to be taken to develop a nation. Semeneh emphasizes the importance of education as follows "... the root of democracy is the ability to read and write. When a society is educated, it will have a broad out-look of its own society and world at large. Lack of education affects the social, political and economic participation of both sexes, and their participation in the national reconstruction will be minimal".

Thus, educating women means, enabling them to broaden their focus and also enabling them to participate in the development of a nation. Education will also help women to analyze the traditional culture and to discriminate the good from the bad values.

Traditionally, women were trained to take care of the errands at home; to care for their children and to help the husband at the farmsteads. But at present, women are given equal opportunities in every respect:

- a. Land holding; Women were given land holding rights under the Land Reform Proclamation of March, 1975.
- b. Women were also given the right to join Peasant Association "According to the Peasant Association Proclamation of 1982, any person (Male or Female) who lives by farming in an area of any kebele Peasant Association in his area"

can become a member.

This policy gave full acceptance of women in the political organ. (Alasebu G. Sellassie, 1983, p.22).

c. When Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) was established in 1974 to move the rural farming population from areas affected by the draught, the Commission was given the right to move the people, distribute land to both the small land holding farmers in affected zones and also the nomads who have had no sedentary farming practice. Thus, the policy of the RRC has included women as household heads. This had given women settlers not only to become head of their household but also to practice their leadership in Peasant Associations.

d. Women in Political Leading Positions.

Again the Peasant Association Proclamation of 1982 Art No. 5 states that "... Any person to be elected as a member of the leading organ of any peasant association established at every level shall be a person who meets the criteria" set for election by the government (IBID., p.23). This is a confirmation by the government to elect women for leadership position.

e. Women in Producers Cooperatives

Although the history of producers cooperatives dates back to 1960, the proclamation of 1978 had given the right of membership to both men and women in any of the following

1. Service cooperatives
2. Producers cooperatives (Agricultural and artisan).
3. Thrift and Credit cooperatives
4. Housing cooperatives.

f. Revolutionary Ethiopian Youth Association (REYA)

The other policy that cater the political economic and social needs for young women and men under the age of 30 is the REYA. This association opens the avenue to both boys and girls to inculcate their minds in the new

social order. It also cultivates their minds to exercise leadership roles in their respective areas.

h. The Urban Dwellers Association.

The urban dwellers association is the recent association that serves as an umbrella for administering the urban Highers and kebelles. This is the highest political association in the urban sector where women are equally serving in leadership positions. All the above organizations have opened membership to all Ethiopians both men and women. Thus it's realized that women are participating as members and as leaders in mass organizations. This had opened a way for women to come out of the domestic unpaid labour and begun working in various cooperatives, farm producers cooperatives and in State Farms. Women are getting paid for their labour. Women are now taking active role in paid agricultural jobs particularly in State Farms during the weeding, harvesting and threshing seasons.

This had indicated that women have become more aware of their equality, of their abilities to work for pay and of their membership rights in any mass organizations. Thus the steps taken by the government since 1974 to alleviate the status of women is remarkable. However they still lag behind in many respects.

In education, for example, the enrollment of women in primary and secondary education is as follows:

FEMALE PARTICIPATION OF THE TOTAL STUDENT POPULATION

	1974/79		1985/86	
	Academic Year		Academic Year	
	%	No	%	No.
Primary	32	40,000	39	126,750
Junior Secondary	30	2,139	39	9,912
Senior Secondary	24	585	39	3,421

(Source: Ministry of Education 1979 p.71)

In higher education this number reduces to 8-12%. In the area of agriculture education, the enrollment of women is insignificant.

Although the participation of female students seems to be high, most of those are urban children. Those in rural Ethiopia, the condition of the family makes girls to assist at home. This is due to lack of electricity, water and flour mills. In general not enough time-saving devices are produced. Thus many girls in the rural sector did not have the chance to go to school at the appropriate time. However the Relief and the Rehabilitation Settlement Scheme and the Ministry of Agriculture's Villagization schemes are more organized and it is hoped that residents under both schemes would be in a position to send more girls to school than those who have not yet come under these schemes.

THE FOOD

The major responsibility of women in rural Ethiopia is processing, preserving (in the traditional way) and preparing food. The management of food is entirely the job of the rural women be it at the time of crisis or during good harvest.

In addition to managing the food, the women also work on the home plot which in the past was normally additional fresh food for the family - which normally contains maize, rape seeds, Kale, Potatoes, Tomatoes, etc. The plot is also used "to grow seed for the next season". (Dessalegn Rahmato, 1987, p.84).

Women do exert a lot of labour in the farm and at home to produce enough food for the family. Thus, since the system is subsistence, this would always lead to food shortage in many third world countries.

In almost all third world countries, there is food shortage

because of natural calamities, traditional system of agriculture or socio-economic reasons. In these countries, the agricultural sectors are neither mechanized which will be discussed later in this paper, nor apply chemicals such as pesticides and fertilizers. Thus, since farming is almost labour intensive, the food problem remains, unsolved. Thus shortage of food or famine is the current problem of many third world countries in general and of Ethiopia in particular. It is therefore important to look into the following:

Famine as Opposed to Malnutrition and/or Under-nourishment

Although both famine, malnutrition and undernourishment are used synonymously, some studies have indicated their differences as follows:

"Famine is general hunger affecting large numbers of people in rural areas as a consequence of the non-availability of food for a relatively long time. It is therefore, a socio-economic crisis with profound consequences for the economic and Social fabric of a society". (Mesfin Wolde Mariani, 1984, p.9). The same author further emphasize that neither drought, undernourishment or malnutrition is famine.

Speaking of the famine scenario, Dessalegn States the following:

"The failure of the rains in spring means no harvest to tide peasants over the next season. By the end of the year many peasants' food stock has run out or is dangerously low, and they make ends to meet in various ways, including asset disposal. The failure of the main rains in June and July begins to trigger a trickle or migration from the rural to the urban areas and this is then turned into torrential flood in September and October when the last hope of the peasantry to salvage something out of the extreme situation is dashed with the failure of the rains in the month of August". (Dessalegn Rahmato 1987, p.134).

On the other hand, undernourishment and malnutrition are

cultural rather than economic expression". It is perhaps possible to state that malnutrition and undernourishment in most parts of the world are indicators of social malaise and economic equality". (Mesfin Wolde Mariam, 1984 p.8).

Famine therefore is making people eat wild roots, bark of trees, and anything that appears to be edible, including some poisonous plants and seeds". (Mesfin 1984. p.8).

When analyzing the above, famine was the scenario that prevailed in northern Ethiopia in 1974 where a large number of people were wiped out. During this crisis quite a large number of rural women participated in the management of the situation. As indicated by Dessalegn, women play active role in the preparation and allocation of food. Culturally, men and boys are allocated more food than the women and the girls in the family. Then during the crisis this tradition was well observed by the women in Wollo and thus feeding the men and the boys more is meant to have "some one to help farm the land" and also guarantee assistance for the family. In addition to managing food, women also take care of the young children when the men migrate to the cities in search of employment. Thus women played important roles at the time of crisis with clear division of labour which meant that the women always honor her responsibility of the family. In case food is not available, the women carry the young and beg for food (Dessalegn 1987, p. 183-84).

Other Causes for Food Shortage

Apart from drought, famine and other natural calamities, there are a number of reasons that affect the availability of food in rural Ethiopia.

Traditional Farming Equipment

Ploughing and sowing is the responsibility of men but they use the crude plough and animal power. It is after the fields are sown that the share of the women labour comes.

Thus women spend their whole day service in weeding the fields so the weeding the fields so the weeds do not affect the production. In many instances chemical are not used to remove the weeds. This is done totally by hand in the same crude way.

During harvest too everything is handled by human labour with the help of few farm equipment and household utencils. all these contribute to waste quite a good amount of production.

Wastage of Production;

During harvest, the system used to clean the grain is by threshing use, animal comes and convinving after these. This method does not clean all the grain up to the needed standard, thus it leaves quite an amount of grain uncleaned. This also means loss of food product.

Storage

The rural people storage system is not free from pest and rodents due to the traditional way of preparing the storage from mud or cow dung. This would expose the grain to be eaten up by rodent and pests and hence a certain amount is wasted in that manner.

Knowledge of Balanced Diet

Quite a number of rural people depend mostly on cereals, grains and pulses for food. Those engaged in non-sedantary agriculture depend on milk and meat. Thus the use of vegetables and fruits are known in very few areas. This kind of food would mean additional product to the crop that people store after harvest. Besides, since vegetables grow easily with some water, it could be harvested several times in one harvest year.

Knowledge of Preserving

Preserving fruits and vegetables is not known in rural Ethiopia at all. This is a very important knowledge to acquire by the rural residents not only to serve as additional

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food but it could serve as nutritious and valuable food for the family which can be kept much longer than the fresh way of keeping food.

Knowledge of Edible Berries and Fruits.

Not many berries and fruits are known to the rural family.

In many instances, the edible berries and fruits decay on the ground. These could be additional food to the family and the society at large had the nutrition value been known.

In order to overcome food shortage, it is important to acquire knowledge of how to tackle each of the above areas. This could also be supplemented by proper training and support from the government by issuing policies that regulate the rural life in general and issues pertaining to women in particular.

Education.

The number of educated women as revealed is still very small. This is a very critical issue given the fact that women constitute more than 50% of the population and if equipped with proper training and skills, they can have significant impact on development.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As could be summarized from the foregoing discussions the post revolution policies embraced the masses in general and were particularly geared towards the development of woman. The policies were directed at both men and women. A number of policy measures were directed at addressing issues. Commendable as these initiatives are, they are far from sufficient. If the plight of women is to be overcome, the following measures have to be considered.

a. Government Organ-

Although policies have bearing on women issues, they have been undertaken, the implementation leaves much to be desired. Therefore, the establishment of government organ to handle women issues is very important.

b. Human Resources.

In all respect be it at schools or at work, the extent of women participation is low. Concrete policy measures have to be taken to ameliorate these situations.

c. Women Policy Makers.

Even though there are no policies barring women from obtaining higher education, as indicated in the paper, availability of women in top hierarchy posts is very low. It is important to encourage more women to top policy levels because there may be more understanding sympathetic and concerned about issues and problems related to women than men policy makers.

d. Education.

The number of educated women as revealed in this paper is very small. This is a very critical issue given the fact that women constitute more than 50% of the population and if equipped with proper training and skills, they can have significant impact on development.

e. Identification of the Need for Women

It is always important to identify by rigorous research

the need of women at the grassroot level so it can be used as input at policy making level. At present practically all women at the grassroot level are preoccupied with home making, child care and other family related concerns.

Such women could advance in the social hierarchy if given the opportunity to get the proper education and skills.

Therefore, the government organs should be aiming towards educating women at the grassroot level thereby opening avenues for growth for some as well as equipping with skills that would be more appropriate for their use in the school area.

- f. Although advantages and disadvantages of both the settlement and villagization projects need to be studied further, in the meantime, these programmes could be used as sample areas to study further whether the relevant policy implementations are operating effectively or not.

g. Agricultural Education.

The training of more women in agriculture is very important since more than 85% of rural women are to be served and the very small enrollment of the agricultural colleges education need to be improved.

- h. Extension workers with high level of education must be available to help the rural women to train themselves to acquire and use time gaining desires.
- i. Training of modern packing, preserving and storing of food must be introduced to the rural people. In order to do that extension workers with high level of education must be available to help the rural women to improve their diet.

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