ORION FORUM

Women and the Path for Peace in Africa: Ethiopia

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Ethiopia today is characterized by growing fragmentation and eruptions of violence since the catastrophic Tigray war. The civil war, which lasted from 2020 to 2022, has claimed more than 500,000 soldiers and 360,000 civilians, making it one of the deadliest conflicts since the end of the Cold War. Beyond the death toll, the military campaign has caused a humanitarian emergency, with widespread brutality, sexual violence against women, and the displacement of civilians seeking refuge both within Ethiopia and in neighboring countries. Despite a ceasefire in 2022, the government continues to face new insurgencies and revolts in many regions. The war, extreme drought, and food inflation have also led to an ongoing famine in the country, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that more than 20 million Ethiopians currently require food assistance. Amid these crises, Ethiopian women have borne a disproportionate burden. The prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence indicates a deeper problem of their marginalization through cultural norms and the political system. Ethiopia's transitional justice and reconciliation process must address the prevalence of gender inequality and recognize the crucial role that women-led civil society organizations (CSOs) and women leaders must play in the post-conflict national dialogue.

Gender Equality in Peace and Security

Gender equality is not only a foundational human right, but it is also instrumental to all dimensions of having a healthy, highly-functioning society. For this reason, it is central to achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), which emphasizes that women and girls represent half of the world's population, and by denying them the opportunity to enjoy equal rights, we are wasting half of the world's human potential to grow to its fullest. A 2023 report measuring the state of gender equality in Africa found that it scored 50.3% out of

100 in the Africa Gender Index, meaning the continent is off track to meet its goals set for SDG 5. For Ethiopia specifically, Target 5.5 of ensuring women's full and effective participation in leadership and decision-making and Target 5.C of adopting sound policies and legislation promoting gender equality are top priorities for an inclusive peacebuilding process.

Evidence from the World Bank, the UN, and experiences across Africa shows that gender equality is not *solely* important for upholding human rights and dignity. Women's full political participation helps governments become more accountable, credible, and responsive to the needs of the entire population, rather than just a select, all-male demographic. According to an Ethiopian gender policy specialist, Hilina Berhanu Degefa, **"The full inclusion of women will make democracy real"** in Ethiopia.

A key finding of the UN Women's Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative was that simply counting the number of women present at negotiations does not increase the likelihood of more peace agreements being reached and carried out. The true difference-maker in women having meaningful participation in peacebuilding is their placement in key positions where they have a real input to shape peacemaking. Despite the proven benefits of involving women in the peacebuilding process, women are often underrepresented at negotiations during reconstruction efforts, constituting less than 10% of peace negotiators globally and only 3% of signatories to peace agreements. In Ethiopia specifically, women were noticeably absent from the peace negotiation process in 2022. The peace deal included no women signatories, and there was just one woman negotiator participating on the government's side. For Ethiopia to achieve enduring peace after the Tigray conflict, women must be recognized as important agents in creating security and reconciliation in postwar reconstruction.

Background

A two-year civil war broke out between the federal and regional governments in the Tigray region of northeastern Ethiopia in November 2020. The Tigray Regional Government was led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which had dominated the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This ethnic federalist political coalition influenced the country until 2019. Hostilities arose between the federal government and the TPLF when the TPLF accused the government of violating the Ethiopian constitution after the federal

government's decision to postpone the August 2020 elections to mid-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In defiance of the federal government, TPLF held its own regional election on 9 September. The federal government deemed the Tigray election illegal and responded by cutting federal funding to the region, which further escalated the tensions.

On November 4, shortly after both sides suspected the other of planning a military attack, the Prime Minister accused Tigrayan troops of attacking a federal military base in the Tigrayan capital, Mekelle, and ordered Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) troops to be on the move. This marked the beginning of a military operation known as the Mekelle Offensive, which rapidly escalated as the ENDF advanced deeper into Tigray and the Tigray Defense Force (TDF) increased its response.

Although military conflict began between the federal and regional forces, in less than a month, several human rights institutions, including the UN, began to sound the alarm about the inhumane treatment of civilians, mostly ethnic Tigrayans. Preliminary investigations by Amnesty International showed that scores, likely hundreds, of civilians were killed in a massacre in the town of Mai Kadra, with machetes and knives used by local militias and police. In 2021, the US described the war as ethnic cleansing against the Tigrayans, and diaspora groups expressed concerns about the potential for genocide. In March 2021, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights announced a joint investigation with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to investigate alleged abuses and rights violations in Tigray.

Though initially denied by both sides, the US view of the war included evidence of Eritrea's involvement in satellite imagery, intercepted communications, and anecdotal reports from the Tigray region. Ethiopia's Prime Minister admitted that Eritrea had also militarily participated in the war on the side of the Ethiopian government. Following a series of peace and mediation proposals in the following years, Ethiopia and the Tigrayan rebel forces agreed to the termination of hostilities on November 2, 2022, which entered into force the following day.

Challenges Faced by Women

Ethiopia has made significant progress in enacting progressive gender laws and policies, demonstrating its commitment to gender equality. Over the years, the country has ratified

several international and regional frameworks on gender equality and women's empowerment. But despite these remarkable advances, women in Ethiopia have long faced barriers ranging from gender-based norms and violence to unequal access to education and leadership roles. In the words of Hilina Berhanu Degefa, **"What we witnessed during the war is truly an extension of our 'peace-time' reality;"** she further stated that **"war and violence are not confined to the frontlines, especially for us women—they are deeply rooted in the mundane, everyday spaces of people's lives…As an Ethiopian woman, I can confirm that we have never known true peace."**

One of the most influential factors that disproportionately affects women in Ethiopia is that they carry the burden of poverty. This is not only due to the gender-based division of labor and tradition and culture, but also the lack of access to and control over resources as set out in the law. In 2021, over 38.5% of the population lived in poverty (at $3.00 per day), with women comprising the majority of those living in absolute poverty. This is primarily because women are responsible for all household chores, as well as the support they provide in agriculture and livestock production. For reference, in 2021, the agriculture sector employed over 70% of the population, with women contributing 40% to the GDP. However, gender gaps in hourly wages, agricultural productivity, and business sales cost the Ethiopian economy $3.7 billion in lost GDP annually. Furthermore, the state of the environment and the lack of appropriate technology increase women's burdens, reduce their opportunities for income-generating activities, and limit their participation in development sectors.

Gender-based violence (GBV) exacerbates these economic and social inequalities, undermining women's security, livelihoods, and education. Over the two-year conflict, it was estimated that at least 40% to 50% of GBV was committed against women and girls. Furthermore, sexual violence was reported in approximately 80% of cases, and over 90% of cases were committed against underage girls. Refugees and internally displaced women were particularly targeted for this violence. The civil war also normalized violent behavior and eroded the social structure, reducing public outcry even against serious assaults and violence. Beyond sexual and gender-based violence, women have been impacted in many ways by the Tigray conflict, as Hilina Berhanu Degefa states, **"particularly young women who spent those two years of the**

war in hiding or as armed actors–they are dealing with, among others, loss of economic livelihood, interrupted education, high numbers of school dropouts, and a resurgence in early marriage."

Beyond conflict-related violence, school-based GBV, including corporal punishment and sexual harassment by peers and authorities, remains widespread. In 2021, the lifetime prevalence of sexual violence against female students was approximately 48.93%, while the one-year prevalence of gender-based violence among approximately 49.4% of college students was 36.02%. The percentage was even higher among female students at private colleges, where it was reported at 57.7%. Additionally, weak referral systems and restricted response services for victims mean that violence goes unreported or unaddressed.

Women also face critical challenges related to access to nutrition and healthcare, further compounding gender inequalities and limiting their overall well-being. Malnutrition remains prevalent among women, especially adolescent girls and pregnant or breastfeeding mothers. In many parts of the country, boys are expected to consume more food than adolescent girls because they are expected to engage in physically demanding activities such as plowing, chopping wood, and digging holes. Although households may have access to animal products, these are rarely consumed domestically and are typically reserved for religious holidays or sold for income, resulting in limited protein intake for women. The poverty of breastfeeding women makes it extremely difficult for many households to provide protein-rich foods, such as animal products. Menstruating girls do not consume iron-rich foods because society neglects girls' nutrition, and there is a lack of awareness about the importance of iron-rich foods for girls. These nutritional disparities are further exacerbated by poverty and entrenched gender norms, placing women and girls at a consistent disadvantage in meeting their basic health needs.

Women's Participation in State-Led Transitional Justice Efforts

In the wake of the devastating conflict in Tigray, the region is reeling from the destruction and loss caused by the war. Yet, amidst this despair, Ethiopians, including women, have demonstrated resilience, working to provide help and hope to victims. In a conflict pervaded by widespread rape, women recognize that their experiences during the war must be reflected in peace processes. During Ethiopia's post-war recovery, efforts have been made to pursue a

more gender-inclusive society. Women have worked tirelessly to be meaningfully included in the national dialogue and in the creation of a peace agreement by acting as negotiators and mediators. However, gender imbalances in the number of women involved in state-led transitional justice efforts indicate that there is still a political gender gap that keeps women marginalized.

Tigray's post-war recovery requires aiding the dire humanitarian situation, addressing the potential war crimes committed by all sides, and reforming the legal and political institutions that govern the country. This rebuilding requires a transitional justice process that brings reconciliation and prevents future human rights violations. As defined by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), transitional justice concerns how societies create a path forward in a way that confronts past crimes and ensures that violence and human rights abuses can never happen again. Victims must be at the center of this process, and responses must ensure that violations of their rights and dignity are acknowledged and held accountable.

The Pretoria Peace Agreement, establishing a ceasefire in the Tigray region, incorporated a pledge to a "new transitional justice policy" aiming to uncover the truth, provide accountability, offer relief to victims, and foster reconciliation. Although addressing conflict-related gender-based violence during the Tigray war is a key part of accomplishing justice, Ethiopia failed to incorporate gender considerations into its policy. Additionally, until it was reformed in 2024, the original draft of the policy excluded the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs from the list of government offices that could support implementation and ensure gender inclusivity of the process.

In March 2023, the Ministry of Justice launched the Transitional Justice Working Group of Experts (TJ-WGE) to assist with preparing and implementing policy that enables Ethiopia to move towards respecting human rights and peace. The 13-member team, with diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise, includes 4 female experts who play a vital role in formulating gender-sensitive policy. Although this is an improvement from women's almost nonexistent participation in the Pretoria Agreement and the peace brokerage attempt in the Oromia Region, this number is still not enough. The proportion of women's participation in the TJ-WGE team is approximately 31%; however, women account for 51% of the population in

Ethiopia. Although the inclusion of women experts in the initial stages of policy development is a positive development, the decision-making process ultimately continues to be dominated by men and still leaves women underrepresented.

Although more work is needed on equal representation of women within the TJ-WGE, the group provided opportunities for women's voices to shape an inclusive and gender-sensitive transitional justice policy. The group first created a green paper that outlined policy options for transitional justice before conducting 60 regional and national-level consultations to gather feedback on the policy from relevant stakeholders. In order to incorporate women's perspectives into policy development, there were women-only meetings with over 60 attendees from feminist groups, civil society organizations, female university teachers, and women human rights defenders. Additionally, there were consultations designed specifically for conflict-related sexual violence survivors to share their stories and learn how to redress the harm that they faced. There is also a requirement for participants in meetings to be 50% women, and there must be one focus group of solely females during the discussion period. After completing the draft version of the transitional justice policy, it was adopted by the Council of Ministers in April 2024.

These efforts mark a step forward in recognizing that Ethiopian women have the right to be included in the peace process, and these consultations and discussions allow them to advocate for their rights in the early stages of the transitional justice process. The Head of Inter-Ministerial Task Force Secretariat, Dr. Tadesse Kassa, noticed from the consultations that "whenever they are given the opportunity, whenever they are not overlooked or marginalized, women could really become owners and proactive actors in any policy design process." Furthermore, transitional justice is also tricky in Ethiopia because victims deeply distrust government institutions after the harm done to them. Hilina Berhanu Degefa stated that **"For survivors and for the Tigray community at large, having to engage with these same institutions in this transitional justice work is retraumatizing and deeply unjust."** Although women were able to contribute their perspectives in drafting the policy, these meetings and discussions have been inadequate in redressing women for the massive human rights violations they suffered during the Tigray war.

Women and Grassroots Peacebuilding

Ethiopia's transitional justice policy appoints Civil Society Organizations as key stakeholders in both its design and implementation. The country has a vibrant women's movement with organizations challenging gender inequality and aligning the interests of women and policymakers. Since the Tigray war, women's organizations have been drivers of change by working on issues like violence against women, women's political participation, and women's inclusion in decision-making processes during the transitional justice project. UN Women Ethiopia realizes the key role that women-led CSOs play for peace and security and is awarding grants to support their work in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Among the CSOs strengthened by UN Women Ethiopia is New Millennium Women Empowerment Organization (NMWEO), whose mission is to empower Ethiopian women and girls in decision-making through programs in capacity building, advocacy, and leadership. This organization has launched award-winning programs for the prevention of gender-based violence, which facilitated GBV protection services to survivors, raised awareness of GBV to girls and young women in hard-to-reach areas, and promoted a communal attitude to "Say No to Violence."

Empathy for Life Integrated Development Association (ELiDA) is another organization backed by UN Women for its projects that advocate for women's leadership in peacebuilding and strengthening democratic culture in diverse regions, including Tigray and Amhara. ELiDA's Women Count for Peace Project provides leadership training, grassroots mobilization, and national advocacy to address women's exclusion from formal decision-making in conflict-affected regions like Tigray.

Comparative research shows that women's voices are better heard when they form coalitions and mobilize around a shared agenda. Hilina Berhanu Degefa recognizes that internal fragmentation within the women's rights civic space has become **"even more visible and deepened since the Tigray war. The sector has struggled to genuinely accommodate diversity in membership, voice, leadership, and even in the substance of engagement and the issues it chooses to acknowledge and neglect."** According to the gender policy specialist, advancing women's influence and participation **"would begin with fostering real dialogue around inclusion."**

The Coalition for Women's Voice in the National Dialogue (CWVND) has been a success story in enhancing diversity in women's leverage over peacebuilding initiatives in Ethiopia. CWVND was created in 2022 and currently encompasses over 50 women-led CSOs from Ethiopia that are collectively committed to improving women's participation in the national dialogue. Its mission is to ensure that the needs, positions, and priorities of Ethiopian women are represented in the national consensus for conflict resolution. To realize this aim, CWVND organized consultations with over 3,000 women, and then their priorities were synthesized into a 10-point women's agenda that was shared with the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission. The coalition also trained 151 women as consultation facilitators, enhancing their reputation as key contributors in the national dialogue process.

Policy Recommendations

Closing the political gap

The full and meaningful participation of women in leadership roles is essential for the protection of human rights and the achievement of sustainable, lasting peace. Ethiopia has made remarkable progress in recent years, with more women than ever holding senior government positions, including 38% of seats in Parliament. However, women remain unequally represented in leadership positions at all levels of government and the private sector. Barriers such as cultural stereotypes, inadequate skills development opportunities, and limited access to training and open leadership positions actively hinder women's development in leadership. In light of these significant challenges, Ethiopia must adopt institutional frameworks that recognize women's contributions as an asset and empower them to lead.

- To close the political gap between men and women, gender equality issues must be embedded in all layers of mainstream political discourse. Women's leadership in Ethiopia must be promoted not only by increasing the number of women in leadership positions, but also by systematically changing the fundamental framework of politics to ensure that gender equality is a core concern that permeates every policy and debate. Ethiopia should implement nationwide awareness campaigns that transform traditional patriarchal beliefs and standards about women and girls and create a more welcoming societal culture to

advance women to leadership roles.

- Ethiopia should implement capacity-building programs to develop and strengthen the skills, talents, and abilities women need to succeed in decision-making roles. Lack of self-confidence, role models, and limited political knowledge prevent women from pursuing leadership opportunities. Leadership development initiatives empower women to achieve their full potential through leadership skills training, mentoring by other women leaders, and training in gender equality. These programs, which focus on developing communication and problem-solving skills, enhance women's self-confidence and resilience, preparing them to be drivers of change in public life.

Transforming social norms and traditions

Ethiopia has deeply rooted patriarchal norms and traditions that restrict women's access to decision-making, resources, and opportunities. Hilina Berhanu Degefa stated, **"I think the gendered challenges Ethiopian women face are not isolated or exceptional, but rather compared with the experiences of women across the world, owing mainly to the normalized forces of patriarchy and sexism."** These cultural beliefs perpetuate gender inequality and lead to disparities in education, experience, vocational training, and women's disproportionate share of unpaid care and household work. Efforts to challenge these norms often face opposition, particularly in rural areas where traditional authority figures play a predominant role in shaping social attitudes. Transforming these norms requires sustained, community-driven engagement that centers women's voices.

- Engaging men and boys as allies in attaining gender equality is crucial to challenging traditional gender roles and fostering positive social norms. Due to structural and attitudinal constraints, there is a tendency to frame gender issues as women's issues. By taking a holistic approach to gender equality, the government can build the capacity of men and boys across all sectors of the economy to challenge inherent biases and play a powerful role in reducing gender inequalities.

- Ethiopia should invest in public awareness campaigns that shed a positive light on women's contributions to the economy and challenge gender norms and stereotypes that hold women back. These can be creative, motivating, and uplifting campaigns that portray women and girls in a new light.

Investing in civic space

Although women-led CSOs have been powerful agents of change in Ethiopia's transitional justice process, their full potential has been hindered due to attempts to silence civil society. According to Hilina Berhanu Degefa, **"The crackdown on civic space has a layered and particularly harsh impact on women's civil society."** Many of these organizations have not yet recovered from the decade-long suppression under the previous regime. She further stated that **"when new forms of state backlash emerge, such as harassment of civil society leaders, suspensions, and intrusive office inspections, it shrinks an already fragile space even further."** During the war in Tigray, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed created a climate of fear and repression through arrests, intimidation, and obstruction of Ethiopian journalists and civil society leaders. This crackdown has continued with the suspensions of five prominent human rights organizations in November and December 2024, four of which were lifted in March 2025. Degafa observes that the oppressive climate is pushing many women-led organizations into doing only apolitical, government-approved "peace work" rather than working meaningfully on rights-based issues. This makes it difficult for the transitional justice process to bring genuine accountability for past and ongoing abuses.

- Ethiopian authorities must restore freedom of expression and association to the public by reforming restrictive laws and the suspension of CSOs. A safe and open social space is essential for sustainable peacebuilding that fosters women's participation. CSOs must be able to operate without restrictions in order to deliver meaningful accountability, provide documentation of the human rights situation, and mobilize victims during the transitional justice process.

- The international community should condemn restrictions on civil society and call on the authorities to abandon their repressive policies. Furthermore, Ethiopia's international partners should establish mechanisms to monitor the human rights situation, investigate violations, and advocate for victims of human rights violations, including providing justice to victims of conflict-related sexual violence.

Improving health services

Access to healthcare remains a significant challenge, particularly for women in remote and marginalized areas. Many women face significant barriers, including long distances to clinics, unreliable or nonexistent transportation, unaffordable costs, and a shortage of qualified female healthcare professionals. Maternal and child health, family planning, and gender-based violence response services are often limited or under-resourced, leading to elevated maternal mortality rates and unaddressed contraceptive needs. Addressing these inequalities requires not only expanding infrastructure and health system capacity, but also addressing gender norms and financial conditions that undermine women's autonomy over their own health.

- Expanding community-based health services through the deployment of female health workers is a critical step toward improving women's access to health services, particularly in remote and marginalized areas. Female health workers play a particularly important role in providing maternal care, family planning services, and support for survivors of gender-based violence. Extending this localized care model contributes to better health outcomes for women and girls by reducing geographic barriers and promoting early intervention and education.
- Incorporating gender-based violence response into all levels of the health care system is equally important. Women affected by conflict or displacement often experience increased sexual and gender-based violence but face significant challenges accessing safe, victim-centered services. Health facilities should be equipped with trained female staff, dedicated spaces, and post-violence care kits, as well as clear referral channels for psychological and legal support. Integrating gender-based violence response into the health system and

providing effective support demonstrates a commitment to women's dignity and rights and can help break the cycle of silence and stigma surrounding abuse.

Addressing sexual and gender-based violence

Gender-based violence remains a widespread and deeply entrenched issue for women and girls. Despite the existence of legal frameworks and national strategies aimed at preventing it, it continues to occur in many forms, including domestic violence, sexual assault, early and forced marriage, and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation. Hilina Berhanu Degefa explains the situation, **"In public and private life, there is prevalent interpersonal and heteronormative violence, persistent barriers to education and access to public information, and gendered discrimination in participation in political and decision-making spaces."** Moreover, social stigma, fear of reprisals, and distrust of justice systems prevent victims from reporting abuse, leading to widespread underreporting and limited accountability for perpetrators. In Tigray, in particular, it has been used as a weapon of war, resulting in devastating psychological and physical consequences for victims. Combating gender-based violence in Ethiopia requires sustained investment in victim-centered services, the implementation of protective laws, community education, and the dismantling of harmful norms that perpetuate violence.

- Establishing community-based victim-centered support services should be a stepping stone in combating sexual and gender-based violence. This should include access to medical care, psychosocial support, legal aid, safe shelters, and trained female staff in both urban and rural areas. Mobile outreach units and partnerships with local women's organizations can help provide support to conflict-affected and remote communities. Ensuring these services remain confidential, culturally sensitive, and accessible is critical to empowering victims, encouraging reporting, and breaking the cycle of impunity.

Confronting the lack of accountability for Eritrean soldiers

In a nationwide survey conducted by *Foreign Affairs*, Ethiopians ranked accountability for past violence among the top three things that are necessary to reach lasting peace. For survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and Ethiopian women at large, the lack of justice for the Eritrean troops' crimes in Tigray is a source of anger and frustration in the transitional justice process. Investigations found that the Eritreans used a campaign of sexual slavery in Tigray; however, Ethiopia's national courts have no jurisdiction over them, making it difficult to achieve justice. Hilina Berhanu Degefa shared that the transitional justice process is **"one of the most unfair and upsetting aspects of the post-war response."** She further explains that the lack of accountability of Eritrean soldiers for the harm they committed in Tigray is **"one of the clearest examples where silence and impunity continue."** Without holding these soldiers accountable for the crimes they committed, it will be difficult to achieve truly sustainable peace and reparation for victims.

- CSOs should serve a crucial role in advocating for justice for survivors. Because of state inaction and limitations on its jurisdiction, CSOs must fill in these gaps and help address the impunity that perpetrators are enjoying. Through these local-led efforts, CSOs can provide a space for dialogue and strategizing for justice. These organizations can form roundtables for victims to share their stories and hold information courses for community leaders and legal experts. CSOs should use the insights and findings from these forums to demand impartial investigations and prosecutions for human rights crimes. In this way, CSOs can provide an outlet for Ethiopians to mobilize and collectively pressure for accountability for Eritrean troops.

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